

Necessary but not Sustainable? The Limits of Democracy in Achieving Environmental Sustainability

Marina Povitkina

Göteborg Studies in Politics 155

2018

Avhandlingen baseras på följande delstudier:

Povitkina, Marina (2018) The limits of democracy in tackling climate change, *Environmental Politics*, 27(3):411–432

Lægreid, Ole Martin and Povitkina, Marina (2018) Do Political Institutions Moderate GDP-CO₂ relationship? *Ecological Economics* 145(March 2018): 441-450

Ahlbom Persson, Tove and Povitkina, Marina (2017) “Gimme Shelter”: the Role of Democracy and Institutional Quality in Disaster Preparedness. *Political Research Quarterly* 70(4): 833–847

Povitkina, Marina, Boräng, Frida, and Jagers, Sverker (2017) In Light of Democracy and Corruption: Institutional Determinants of Electricity Provision. Unpublished manuscript

Povitkina, Marina, Bolkvadze, Ketevan (2018) Fresh Pipes with Dirty Water: How Quality of Government Shapes the Provision of Public Goods in Democracies. Unpublished manuscript

Akademisk avhandling för filosofie doktorsexamen i statsvetenskap som med tillstånd av samhällsvetenskapliga fakultetsnämnden vid Göteborgs universitet framlägges till offentlig granskning fredagen den 25 maj 2018, kl. 11.15 i Torgny Segerstedtssalen, Universitetets huvudbyggnad, Vasaparken 1, Göteborg.



DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

Povitkina, Marina. 2018. *Necessary but not Sustainable? The Limits of Democracy in Achieving Environmental Sustainability*. Göteborg Studies in Politics 155, edited by Bo Rothstein, Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg, Box 711, 405 30 Göteborg, Sweden. ISBN 978-91-984402-4-9 (print), ISBN 978-91-984402-5-6 (pdf), ISSN 0346-5942.

Abstract

The world today faces a number of environmental problems that are both severe and urgent. Finding effective solutions is one of the top priorities for the international community, with at least half of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals relating either directly or indirectly to reaching environmental sustainability. The question is: *How to reach these goals?* Environmental problems pose a complex dilemma for decision-makers. They have low visibility, a slow response time to policy interventions and often require multi-pronged policy solutions that are sufficiently funded, supported and rigorously enforced. Yet, they are rarely the first priority for voters. Solutions to environmental problems therefore rely on long-term vision and commitments, appropriate expertise, as well as institutions that can secure compliance from all the relevant actors.

This dissertation looks at the political institutions that, it is argued, make countries more likely to commit to and reach environmental sustainability goals. It revisits previous findings indicating that democratic institutions are more conducive to securing strong environmental performance. Democracy, which shapes the rules of preference aggregation and thus influences environmental decision-making and policy adoption, does not necessarily guarantee that these policies will be successfully implemented. This dissertation argues that the performance of democracies in achieving environmental sustainability depends on the quality of government, which, broadly, encompasses the absence of corruption, high rule of law and high bureaucratic capacity. Quality of government shapes the implementation of public policies, but it may also affect the incentives of decision-makers in environmental policy-making. This dissertation hypothesizes that democracy and quality of government interact in the production of environmental sustainability outcomes.

The five articles included in the dissertation test this overarching hypothesis on four key Sustainable Development Goals related to environmental sustainability: the reduction of CO₂ emissions to avert climate change, preparedness for natural disasters that may arise as a result of climate change, the provision of energy, and the provision of clean water. The results are consistent across the studies and show that more democracy is only beneficial for environmental sustainability outcomes when high quality of government is in place. However, when quality of government is low, democracies tend to underperform, doing no better or doing even worse than authoritarian regimes. Corruption, weak public administration, and lack of rule of law undermine incentives for and the credibility of policy efforts, and obstruct the implementation of public policies related to environmental sustainability, thus limiting democratic governments' ability to act in the long-term interests of the public.

Keywords: democracy, quality of government, environmental sustainability