

# Introduction

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and Erika Weinthal, Editors

Issue 21-2 of *Global Environmental Politics* is notable for exemplifying the wide variety of research topics addressed by the GEP community, including articles on climate politics, the sustainable development goals (SDGs), plastics and the circular economy, ecosystem services, global shipping, and global resource development. Distinct themes emerge across these diverse articles as the authors explore dynamics of framing and representation, transparency, and disclosure.

Conceptual framings have been central to the study of global environmental politics and governance. In the first article, “The Practical Fit of Concepts: Ecosystem Services and the Value of Nature,” Hayley Stevenson and coauthors ask why some concepts have more impact than others when it comes to global environmental governance. Through an analysis of the concept of ecosystem services, they argue that despite gaining rhetorical traction when it comes to biodiversity conservation, the concept of ecosystem services has yet to fundamentally change governance practices regarding how humans interact with nature, because of its lack of practical fitness. The authors push for a broader understanding that includes not only normative but also practical fitness if there is to be institutional uptake and actionable programming of different concepts.

Similar to the importance of ideas and concepts in global environmental politics, Henrike Knappe and Oscar Schmidt focus on representation in their article, “Making Representations: The SDG Process and Major Groups’ Images of the Future.” Here, they examine the process of representation by different civil society actors during the SDG process. In so doing, they shed light on linkages between representational practices and future orientation of two groups—farmers and children and youth—during the formulation process of the SDGs. Their article contributes to the literature on civil society representation in GEP, especially within intergovernmental forms.

Since the Paris Agreement was signed in 2015, the importance of national climate policy in global climate politics has never been more apparent. Articles by Kai Schultz and by Justin Leinaweaver and Robert Thomson explore different aspects of these crucial politics. Schultz delves into the electoral politics of climate policy and how partisan electoral competition influences the timing and stringency of climate policy. Through a quantitative analysis of climate policy making in

twenty-nine democracies between 1990 and 2016, he finds that “soft” policies that do not impose significant costs are increasingly introduced as elections near, but that left-leaning governments tend to pursue harder policies in the run-up to elections. The findings about the relationship between elections and climate policy making may also speak to the political dynamics around the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) of the Paris Agreement, as countries assess and renew their NDCs. Leinawever and Thomson take the form and content of the NDCs as the target of their analysis. The article provides a framework for comparing NDCs, categorizing how they can serve as signals about commitment to international/domestic audiences and/or negotiating stances. Taking the NDCs seriously as political documents allows for systematic analysis of how their content varies across the international community and over time.

Next, René Poulsen et al. look critically at the EU’s Monitoring, Reporting, and Verification regulation—which mandates the disclosure of greenhouse gas emissions—by demonstrating its limited effects on the full global value chains of shipping. Despite the intention of disclosure to incentivize ship owners and managers by reducing fuel costs and emissions, the regulation fails to address the complex power dynamics along value chains, especially the influence and commercial priorities of oil majors. They ultimately argue that incentives and regulation must target not only emitters, like shipowners, directly, but also the incentive structure and demand on emitters, such as from global buyers or other influential actors along the value chain.

Alice Mah’s article, “Future-Proofing Capitalism: The Paradox of the Circular Economy for Plastics,” is a second cautionary tale on how power dynamics along global value chains can thwart environmental policy agendas. Mah shows how the rise of the circular economy as a sustainable business model for plastics met resistance from coordinated corporate action along the value chain. It highlights two dominant strategies employed in these efforts: containment of the circular economy discourse and the promotion of risky chemical recycling technologies.

Lastly, Deanna Kemp and John R. Owen’s research note, “Public–Private Inquiries: Institutional Intermediaries and the Transparency Nexus in Global Resource Development,” identifies a largely untapped source of rich data on extractive industries. Privately commissioned public inquiries—in which private companies commission studies but relinquish control of the process and publicly release their findings—are a persistent practice in the global mining sector. The relative autonomy of these inquiries compared to internal corporate governance means the data presents opportunities to analyze connections between local realities and global debates, such as on the environmental impact of mining. The authors identify several research questions that can leverage this data.