Climate Change Presents Fundamental Challenges for Political Democracy

Peter Cannavò, Hamilton College

Stability has been a theme of political theory at least since Aristotle, who analyzed causes of – and cures for – instability in different types of government. Over two thousand years later, political philosopher John Rawls inquired how "a stable and just society of free and equal citizens" could "exist over time." Many theorists have identified not only good institutions but also stable natural systems as essential for lasting, healthy political communities. Aristotle maintained that a city should rely on enduring natural conditions that, among other things, ensure human health, promote agricultural productivity, and enable survival in case of military siege. Machiavelli, Rousseau, and Montesquieu all discussed the importance of long-term environmental factors such as geographic location, soil fertility, and climate in shaping and sustaining political communities. Most recently, political theorist Breena Holland has written about how environmental stability enables sound political functioning and democratic values.

Global climate has been relatively stable and hospitable during the current geological era, which began about 11,500 years ago at the end of the last major ice age. Civilization grew within that hospitable and relatively stable climate, which has provided a "safe operating space" for humanity, in the words of Johan Rockström, Will Steffen, and other climate and resiliency experts.

But now climate change is destabilizing temperatures and weather patterns, seasonal cycles, sea levels, coastlines, glaciers, agricultural zones, water availability, and drought cycles. These changes will profoundly impact human health and security by affecting agriculture, natural resources, built environments, and infrastructure. Abrupt shifts could make many existing communities uninhabitable. And impacts on political democracy may be just as serious.

Unstable Climate Creates New Challenges for Democracy

A healthy democracy depends not only on good laws and institutions, but also on enduring networks that foster long-term trust, accountability, and predictability among citizens. Even in an age of electronic media, these social and political networks develop within shared, stable territories and physical places. Climate instability severely disrupts shared geographic spaces and the relationships that develop in them.

Hurricane Katrina, for example, wrought devastation and displaced some 1.5 million people – and the damage was not just physical. The mega storm also shredded longstanding social networks in New Orleans, a city with an unusually stable population. Though New Orleans experienced a flowering of civic engagement as it sought to rebuild, neighborhoods like the Lower Ninth Ward have not fully recovered, either physically or socially.

Displaced persons not only lose their own communities and social networks; they may also be unwelcome elsewhere due to close-mindedness, racism, or xenophobia, as happened to many of those displaced by Katrina. Such displacements followed by rejection are likely to spread as climate-related disasters increase in frequency, often forcing people to abandon their home countries and cross international borders. Political identities and memberships will be torn apart, along with social networks – as displaced people face losses that are profoundly disempowering.

Climate Instability Undermines Civic Projects

As climate instability makes more and more places uninhabitable – particularly coastal and drought- or fire-prone areas – it will also threaten the civic memory that knits generations together in a democratic community. As Richard Dagger tells us, civic memory involves connections with the past and the promise of

remembrance in the future. When climate change disrupts places, it undermines people's very ability to have civic memory. What a person accomplishes for his or her city or town may very well be ruined or erased in a few years or decades. The challenge of climate change can inspire heroic efforts to save one's place, as it did for some residents of New Orleans. But at a certain point – for example, when a coastal community or island is overwhelmed by storm surges and rising sea levels – such efforts seem increasingly futile, especially if projects have a long time horizon. Individuals and communities can be forced into reactive, emergency modes, as they just try to adjust or survive and find themselves unable to pursue long-term projects.

Democracy Relies on Environmental Stability

Perhaps most seriously, natural disasters associated with climate change create perilous states of emergency. Individuals can lose their personal possessions, livelihoods, and political voices and become dependent on emergency management and aid agencies or end up in brutal, inhospitable shelters, as happened to many victims of Katrina sent to the New Orleans Superdome.

Democracy rests on citizens' ability to make political decisions free from economic and political domination by others. Yet Holland has written that environmentally displaced persons can end up being "cogs in a machine to be shuttled along helplessly in the wake of climate-related disasters." Most ominously, the emergency measures triggered by environmental disasters and the associated civil insecurity can create openings for ever-more centralized and strict rule and, ultimately, authoritarianism.

How well is American democracy doing in the face of the rising threats from global climate change?   The answers right now are far from reassuring. Under the banner of populism the current administration of U.S. President Donald Trump is dismantling federal policies to delay and cope with climate change and undercutting the entire environmental regulatory apparatus. If today's leaders who claim to be populists were truly serious about defending political democracy from the so-called administrative state, they would be making every effort to prevent catastrophic global warming. And they would be strengthening capacities to adapt to climate-induced changes that are now inevitable. Instead, leaders like President Donald Trump are worsening environmental instability and undercutting the very democratic values and capabilities needed to cope with it.

Read more in Peter Cannavò, "In the Wake of Katrina: Climate Change and the Coming Crisis of Displacement," in *Political Theory and Global Climate Change*, (Steven J. Vanderheiden and John Barry, eds), (MIT Press, 2008); Peter Cannavò, *The Working Landscape: Founding, Preservation, and the Politics of Place*, (MIT Press, 2007).