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Climate Politics in the U.S.

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Introduction

Climate politics in the United States is a study in paradox. The country that commercialized shale gas and solar finance, that incubated battery breakthroughs and venture-scale climate tech, has also been the stage for some of the world's most entrenched political battles over decarbonization. This book, *Climate Politics in the U.S.: Policy Battles, State Innovation, and the Road to Decarbonization*, surveys those conflicts and the openings they create. It asks why progress so often arrives in bursts—through court-tested regulations, patchwork state laws, and sporadic federal deals—and how advocates and policymakers can convert fleeting opportunities into durable change.

The terrain is unusually complex. U.S. institutions fragment authority across federal, state, and local governments; they empower courts to shape the contours of agency action; and they reward veto points that interest groups skillfully exploit. Yet this same fragmentation fuels experimentation. When Congress stalls, states write clean energy standards, cities adopt building codes and transit plans, and federal agencies pilot programs that later scale. Breakthroughs in one venue—say, a state zero-emission vehicle rule or a federal loan guarantee—can reset expectations and markets nationwide. The result is not a linear march but a braided stream of advances, setbacks, and sideways moves that together define the country's climate trajectory.

This book takes a panoramic view of those dynamics. It traces the evolution of federal legislation and executive action alongside the quiet but decisive rulemakings that determine power plant emissions, vehicle standards, methane controls, and transmission planning. It examines the structural hurdles that repeatedly slow the transition: polarized parties and media ecosystems, the influence of incumbent industries, permitting and siting logjams, and the constraints of aging grid architecture. At the same time, it highlights the levers that are working—falling technology costs, state clean electricity and zero-emission vehicle mandates, targeted industrial policy, and new forms of climate finance—and shows how these levers can be pulled in concert rather than in isolation.

State innovation receives particular attention. From California's vehicle authority to Midwestern utility securitization, from regional transmission initiatives to community-driven resilience planning in coastal and tribal communities, states have functioned as both laboratories and launchpads. Their policies do more than cut emissions within state lines; they shape national markets, inform federal standards, and clarify what is politically and technically feasible. The lessons are practical: align consumer benefits with climate outcomes, sequence policies to build durable coalitions, and embed justice and workforce strategies from the outset so that the transition is not only fast

but fair.

Powerful interests—fossil fuel producers, utilities, labor unions, manufacturers, financial institutions—are not monolithic actors but shifting coalitions. Their strategies range from outright opposition to negotiated transition plans that protect ratepayers and workers. Understanding how lobbying, campaign finance, regulatory proceedings, and litigation interact is essential to crafting credible strategies. Equally essential is the force of organized publics: environmental justice groups, youth movements, frontline communities, and pragmatic local leaders who frame climate action around health, jobs, reliability, and affordability. Where these currents converge, breakthroughs happen.

The chapters that follow blend case studies and policy analysis into a strategic guide. They map the venues where decisions are actually made—public utility commissions, grid operators, statehouses, federal agencies, and courts—and outline playbooks for each: how to design rules that survive legal scrutiny, how to build pro-growth transmission and siting coalitions, how to accelerate clean industry while backstopping communities in transition, and how to turn episodic federal investments into durable market transformation. Throughout, the goal is not to choose a single “silver bullet,” but to show how standards, incentives, finance, and movement energy can be sequenced and stacked to close the gap between ambition and outcomes.

Ultimately, decarbonization in the U.S. will be decided less by declarations than by the gritty details of governance: who shows up at which docket, which narrative persuades the median lawmaker or commissioner, which investments reach communities that have historically been left out, and how quickly institutions can learn and adapt. The path to a stable climate runs through these specifics. By illuminating the obstacles and the openings—and by translating them into practical strategies—this book aims to equip readers to navigate, and shape, the next decisive decade.

CHAPTER ONE: The Landscape: Why U.S. Climate Politics Are Different

The United States, for all its global influence and technological prowess, navigates the climate crisis through a political system unlike almost any other. While many nations can pivot with relative agility to enact sweeping climate policies, the U.S. often appears to move in fits and starts, a process that can be baffling to outside observers and frustrating for those within its borders. This distinctiveness isn't accidental; it's a direct consequence of the nation's foundational institutional design, a complex web of separated powers, federalism, and a deeply ingrained culture of checks and balances.

At the heart of this unique landscape is American federalism, a system that divides authority between the federal government and individual states, and further fragments it down to local municipalities. This means that while Washington D.C. may set broad environmental standards, a significant portion of the power over energy, infrastructure, and regulation rests with state and local governments. The result is a patchwork of policies that can vary wildly from one state to the next, creating a dynamic and often contradictory national approach to climate change. This fragmented authority provides both challenges and opportunities. On one hand, it can lead to inconsistent enforcement and a "race to the bottom" where states might lower environmental standards to attract business. On the other, it fosters experimentation and allows states to become laboratories for innovative climate solutions when federal action stalls.

Historically, the U.S. environmental policy framework has evolved through layers, with foundational laws from the 1960s and 1970s, such as the Clean Air Act, shaping the basic contours of the "green state." These early efforts primarily focused on visible forms of pollution and public health, reflecting the concerns of the era. The establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1970, a consolidation of environmental programs from various agencies, marked a significant step toward a more unified federal approach. However, even with the EPA, governmental authority on environmental issues remains highly fragmented, with virtually all federal executive departments holding some environmental authority. This administrative fragmentation, along with the separation of powers between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, means that climate policy is rarely a straightforward affair.

The legislative process itself, particularly at the federal level, often appears to be in a state of perpetual gridlock when it comes to comprehensive climate change legislation. The U.S. Congress has seen few new laws or significant revisions to established environmental statutes in recent decades. This inertia can be attributed to

several factors, including the deep partisan divisions on climate issues, where Democrats generally favor stronger regulations and Republicans often express concerns about economic impacts. This ideological chasm can make it incredibly difficult to build the consensus needed to pass sweeping national legislation. Instead, progress often relies on sporadic federal deals, executive actions, and the ingenuity of state and local initiatives.

The ebb and flow of federal climate policy are also heavily influenced by presidential administrations. A change in leadership can lead to dramatic shifts, as seen in the oscillations between active and passive climate policies over the past two decades. When climate proponents control the presidency, they can mobilize existing governmental capacity to prioritize climate change across the executive branch. Conversely, opponents can quickly dismantle policy mandates and routines, sometimes reversing course on international agreements and weakening domestic protections. For instance, the Trump administration's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and its efforts to roll back environmental regulations demonstrated how quickly federal priorities can shift. These reversals can create uncertainty and fragment the national climate strategy, even leading to a reduction in the collection of crucial environmental data.

This inherent instability and the vulnerability of federal action to political opposition and legal challenges mean that total reliance on executive action has its drawbacks. Courts play a significant role in shaping the boundaries of agency action, often becoming arbiters in disputes over environmental regulations. For example, the Supreme Court's decisions have influenced the EPA's authority to regulate greenhouse gas emissions, sometimes limiting its power. This constant back-and-forth between branches of government and different levels of government defines the highly contested nature of U.S. climate policy.

Despite these federal challenges, a robust and often overlooked aspect of U.S. climate politics is the leadership demonstrated by subnational governments. States, cities, and even local communities have stepped up to fill the void created by federal inaction. From setting ambitious renewable energy standards to adopting building codes and transit plans, these local and state efforts are crucial for driving climate action in the country. While state policy actions are highly variable and not always sufficient to meet national goals, they demonstrate that climate action can and does happen outside of Washington D.C. This distributed approach, sometimes called "new climate federalism," proposes a framework for all levels of government to collaborate, with federal action setting national targets and supporting subnational efforts, while states and localities implement strategies reflecting their specific circumstances.

The engagement of the public also plays a complex role in this fragmented landscape. While there is broad public support for many climate-friendly policies, such as investing in renewable energy and regulating carbon dioxide as a pollutant, opinions

can be highly polarized along partisan lines. This polarization, often fueled by media narratives and interest group mobilizations, can make it difficult to build sustained political will for comprehensive climate action. Concerns about energy costs, agricultural impacts, and land use further shape how climate policy is debated across different demographic and geographic areas. Yet, the increasing visibility and tangible impacts of climate change, such as air pollution, heat islands, and flooding in urban areas, can make climate action feel more immediate and tangible for many.

Ultimately, the distinctive nature of U.S. climate politics lies in its constant negotiation between conflicting interests, fragmented authority, and varying levels of political will. It's a system that rarely delivers a single, monolithic solution, but instead relies on a braided stream of advances and setbacks. Understanding this landscape—its institutional quirks, its historical precedents, and its capacity for both gridlock and innovation—is the essential first step toward comprehending the past and anticipating the future of climate action in the United States.

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