



Analytical Briefing on Climate Ambition and Sustainability Action

June 2019

Issue No. 1

The Agenda of Climate Change and Electoral Politics Where are we heading?

Message from **R. K. Pachauri**

Knowledge and public opinion

The influence of knowledge on decisions at the policy level and among the public has a long history. This can be seen from various developments, such as the rivers being cleaned in North America and Europe, introduction of unleaded gasoline in most countries and the banning of DDT (dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane). All of these were based on an understanding of health related impacts of existing unsustainable practices provided by scientists and researchers. Yet, knowledge can be distorted in a deliberate manner to serve the interests of power brokers and those with wealth and unhealthy control over public opinion and debate in the public domain. The current impact of social media notwithstanding, there is now reason for hope that in the ultimate analysis knowledge and awareness of what lies in the interests of human society may actually prevail over dogma, inbuilt inertia in thinking and the power of vested interests. If we look at the just concluded elections for the European Parliament, we find that firstly the voting percentage has increased dramatically across all 28 nations that voted, which clearly demonstrates that people see the benefits of exercising their democratic franchise to influence policy at a regional level. Secondly, while the results reflect an expression of concerns and priorities at the national and local levels, such as the frustration with failure to reach an agreement with Brexit in the United Kingdom, populist and right wing parties have performed at a level lower than expected. It is in fact the green parties all across west Europe which have gained substantially. Their relevance and the support they have received in these elections is the result of awareness on the scientific assessments on climate change brought out over thirty years by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and its translation into public protest, including the growing movement by schoolchildren to demonstrate outside their classes every Friday. The fact that youth are now deeply concerned about future risks of climate change strikes an emotional chord among many people even though there is a large scale effort to sow doubts in the minds of the public on the scientific facts related to human induced climate change. Grassroots action, particularly initiated through the power of youth, would, therefore, provide the key for political action. This is where the POP (Protect Our Planet) Movement launched on Earth Day in 2016 provides hope for a rapid move away from fossil fuels towards a low-carbon economy, which would be able to keep temperature increase to 1.5 degrees C by the end of this century, thereby limiting the risks from climate change impacts. Interestingly, while in Europe and other functioning democracies grassroots action and demonstration of protest against the existing situation is obviously the trigger for political action, there is the distinctly different case of China, which has also undertaken major steps to decarbonise its economy. But that would require a discussion on another occasion with all the apparent contradictions and intellectual fascination that it carries. The Analytical Brief on Climate Ambition and Sustainability Action—jointly brought out by the World Sustainable Development Forum and Protect our Planet Movement—seeks to highlight a topical issue relevant to the realization of the sustainable development goals and ambitious climate actions. The topic of the current issue of CASA is on electoral politics and the issue of climate change.



The Agenda of Climate Change and Electoral Politics

Where are we heading?

Heena Makhija and Shailly Kedia

Key messages >>>

- Climate change is a common and converging partisan issue in electoral politics in India, a major player in climate change from the Global South.
- Climate change is at the risk of becoming a polarizing issue in electoral politics in the Global North as seen from recent experiences in Australia and the United States.
- Rise of Green Parties in Europe even as opposition parties from recent experiences in Sweden and Germany brings hope for the future.
- Even in the presence of climate denialism, climate change is taken as a serious issue by opposition parties, leaders and sub-national governments.
- Momentum from citizens and youth movements around the world will continue to grow.

India

This month saw the comeback of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a right-wing political party, in India which is the world's largest electoral democracy. Climate change as an agenda for political parties may not have been at the forefront, but it has been acquiring the political visibility as seen in the manifestoes of the two largest political parties BJP and the Indian National Congress. The [manifesto of the right-wing BJP party](#) talks of India influencing and championing the global issue of climate change.

Australia

Climate change was pitted as a major issue and a deciding variable in the recently concluded elections in Australia. From the [increasing sea temperatures and ocean acidification killing the Great Barrier Reef](#), to droughts, floods, extreme precipitation events, heatwaves and wildfires, the risks to the population and the need for stringent policies to counter the effects of climate change was a major political agenda in these elections. On the economic front, being the [world's largest coal exporter](#), and coal being the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions, Australia exercises outsized influence in the climate stakes. However, in a result that stunned most analysts and the world, Australians shrugged of genuine environmental concerns and re-elected the climate sceptic [conservative coalition](#) to power.

A key question

A key question from the experience of the recent election results from these two democracies is whether climate change will evolve as an issue which results in polarization across party lines as in case of Australia or a common-partisan issue in electoral politics as in case of India.

Climate change as a global issue

Internationally, the climate change as an issue gained momentum with the establishment of the

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 1988 and eventually leading to an international climate change regime for multilateral action anchored in a framework and protocol approach anchored in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the latest agreement of which is the Paris climate agreement. However, the failure of get global consensus, often with major powers such as Canada and the United States not ratifying or pulling out of the treaties, proved to be a major hindrance in implementation of climate agreements.

Role of the state machinery

In recent times when we are witnessing climate marches across the world with grassroots activism and common citizens taking the lead to counter the perils of climate change, it's important to see how political parties disseminate and communicate the agenda of climate change to their constituents. Eventually, it is the state machinery along with elected governments who are responsible for policy making on climate change domestically as well as for international climate negotiations which will bear implications for generations to come.

Green politics in Europe

Known for propagating "Green Politics" that preaches environmentalism and social justice, political parties have succeeded in garnering public support for their progressive and sustainable policies. The rise of Green Parties in Europe is an evidence of this phenomena. Sweden, in 2014, saw the [Green Party form the government together with the Social Democrats](#) and became the sixth largest party during 2018 elections. Similarly, in Germany, the Green Party has now become a part of Germany's mainstream center-left, with significant vote-share during the 2018 elections in states like [Bavaria](#) and Hesse. In [national polls](#), the Green Party is ranked second with seats in [14](#) of Germany's 16 state legislatures.

European Union election

For the EU elections this year, climate change has been a pertinent issue for all major political parties. The Labour party devoted [an entire page](#) of its manifesto to “*tackling climate change and protecting our planet*” – highlighting its commitment to the Paris agreement, and reinstating EU’s pledge “to commit to 60% of the UK’s energy supply from renewable or low-carbon sources by 2030, and net zero carbon emissions by 2050 at the latest”.

Climate denialism

While climate change has emerged as a prominent political agenda, the rise of the big-business supporting far-right parties in national politics has led to a downward spiral towards a denial-centric and skeptic-centric conservative approach to climate change. Climate skepticism works on spreading misinformation by arguing that climate change is not a threat and indiscriminate expansion of heavy industries would lead to greater employment and development. No doubt such line of argument that portrays sustainable development as an enemy of economic growth will prove to be a death knell for the planet. The conservatives in Australia successfully [pitted economic growth against climate](#) measures making cost the dominant issue. [One study using an economic model](#) which was highlighted by the conservatives showed that the economic cost of 45 percent reduction in carbon emissions as proposed by Labour Party would amount to 167,000 jobs and 264 billion Australian dollars. The United States under the leadership of President Donald Trump boosted by powerful [industry lobbies](#) is also making an alarming shift towards climate denial with Trump making [ludicrous claims](#) such as

climate change being a Chinese made phenomenon. Moreover, Trump’s future policy plans of [rolling back domestic climate-related funding](#) and withdrawal from the Paris Agreement threaten to have widespread implications for international climate change regime.

All is not lost

But all is not lost. Opposition party leaders are constantly building pressure on the governments to take measures to counter climate change. In the US, the [Green New Deal](#), the brainchild of Democratic Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to spur massive mobilization for climate action is an example of that.

What does the future hold?

While the rampant global rise of business minded and climate sceptic right-wing parties, especially in the Global North, is not conducive for climate change advocates, yet the increasing influence of opposition parties and individual politicians builds a degree of hope. Simultaneously, the common citizens, particularly the youth across the world are waking up to the reality of climate emergency and joining movements to lobby for immediate need for climate action for saving the planet. In October 2018, the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change \(IPCC\)](#) once again warned of the dire consequences of continued global warming, indicating that the world has just 12 years left to tackle the damage caused by climate change. Climate change is but a harsh reality facing the world and its time that incumbent and opposition parties indulge in urgent sustained action to save the earth from a destructive future.

Photo credits: The potential future effects of global climate change include more frequent wildfires, longer periods of drought in some regions and an increase in the number, duration and intensity of tropical storms. Credit: Left - Mellimage/Shutterstock.com, center - Montree Hanlue/Shutterstock.com.
<https://climate.nasa.gov/effects/>

Analytical Brief on Climate Ambition and Sustainability Action

The analytical brief series, brought out jointly by the World Sustainable Development Forum and the Protect our Planet Movement, seeks to highlight a topical issue relevant to the realization of the sustainable development goals and ambitious climate actions.

About WSDF

The World Sustainable Development Forum (WSDF) is a not-for-profit organization incorporated separately in Europe, Norway and the U.S. Its North American arm WSDF-NA, headquartered in Washington, DC carries 501c3 tax exempt status. WSDF is a global initiative to promote and mobilize global action for effective implementation of both the Paris agreement on climate change and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the UN General Assembly. WSDF's relevance and role lies in acting as a facilitator for helping with implementation of actions required under these two sets of agreements.



About POP Movement

Protect our Planet (POP) Movement believes that the impacts of climate change will not affect a single country but the planet, in its entirety. POP believes that the power of the youth of the world will unite and to address this challenge. POP believes that the time to act is now and that knowledge is the true currency of changing the future.

