

Climate Governance, Democratic Accountability, and State Capacity: A Comparative Institutional Analysis of the European Union and South Korea

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ABSTRACT

Climate governance has become a central test of democratic state capacity, institutional coordination, and policy legitimacy. This article examines how different institutional configurations shape climate policy implementation, public accountability, and governance resilience through a comparative analysis of the European Union and South Korea. While both systems have adopted ambitious carbon neutrality commitments, their governance architectures differ substantially. The European Union relies on multi-level legal-regulatory governance, supranational enforcement, carbon market integration, and negotiated policy coordination among member states. South Korea relies more heavily on developmental-state legacies, centralized administrative planning, industrial policy, and executive-led green transition strategies. Drawing on comparative institutional analysis, public policy theory, climate governance scholarship, and international governance indicators, this study demonstrates that climate policy effectiveness depends not only on formal targets but also on institutional enforcement capacity, social legitimacy, distributive fairness, and bureaucratic coordination. The findings reveal that the European Union possesses stronger legal accountability and regulatory institutionalization but faces coordination fragmentation across member states. South Korea demonstrates faster centralized policy mobilization but encounters challenges involving industrial dependency, civic contestation, and implementation credibility. The article contributes to politics and governance scholarship by advancing a comparative framework linking climate policy design,

institutional accountability, state capacity, and democratic legitimacy.

Keywords: climate governance; democratic accountability; state capacity; European Union; South Korea; public policy; carbon neutrality; institutional reform; environmental governance; political economy

INTRODUCTION

Climate change has transformed from an environmental policy concern into a fundamental governance challenge involving democratic legitimacy, state capacity, institutional coordination, political economy, and global justice. Contemporary governments are increasingly required to manage climate risks while maintaining economic competitiveness, social cohesion, energy security, and democratic accountability. The OECD's *Climate Action Monitor 2024* reports that global greenhouse gas emissions continued to rise in 2023 and that current emissions would need to decline sharply by 2030 to remain consistent with Paris Agreement temperature goals (OECD, 2024). The World Bank similarly notes that carbon pricing systems have expanded internationally, with 75 carbon taxes and emissions trading systems operating globally, but policy coverage and implementation remain uneven (World Bank, 2024). These findings indicate that climate governance is not merely a matter of adopting targets; it is a problem of institutional capacity, regulatory enforcement, political legitimacy, and distributive management.

The governance problem is intensified by widening political polarization, uneven development, and declining trust in public institutions. UNDP's *Human Development Report 2023/2024* emphasizes that global cooperation is increasingly constrained by polarization and unequal development progress (UNDP, 2024). Climate policy therefore operates within a difficult political environment: governments must accelerate decarbonization while addressing social resistance, industrial transition costs, and concerns about fairness. In this context, climate governance becomes a democratic test of whether institutions can produce long-term collective goods under short-term electoral, economic, and geopolitical pressures.

This article examines these issues through a comparative institutional analysis of the European Union and South Korea. These cases are selected because both have made formal carbon neutrality commitments and developed advanced climate policy frameworks, yet they represent contrasting governance systems. The European Union is a multi-level regulatory polity characterized by supranational law, negotiated policy coordination, emissions trading, judicial enforceability, and differentiated member-state implementation. South Korea is a centralized democratic state with strong developmental-state legacies, export-oriented industrial structures, and executive-led climate policy planning. This comparison enables the study to examine how different institutional arrangements mediate the relationship between climate ambition and governance outcomes.

The European Union has positioned itself as a global climate governance leader through the European Green Deal, the European Climate Law, the Fit for 55 package, the EU Emissions Trading System, and the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism. Its climate governance model reflects legal

institutionalization, regulatory standard-setting, and market-based decarbonization. However, the EU also faces coordination problems due to variation among member states in energy systems, fiscal capacity, industrial dependence, public opinion, and administrative capability. Climate governance in the EU is therefore both legally robust and politically fragmented.

South Korea's climate governance has developed through a different institutional pathway. The country has adopted a 2050 carbon neutrality target, expanded emissions trading, promoted green industrial policy, and invested in renewable energy and technological innovation. Yet South Korea's economy remains deeply connected to energy-intensive sectors including steel, petrochemicals, automobiles, shipbuilding, and semiconductors. Its climate governance therefore reflects a political economy tension between decarbonization, export competitiveness, energy security, and industrial transformation. While centralized administrative coordination can accelerate policy mobilization, it can also limit participatory deliberation and generate legitimacy challenges.

Existing climate governance literature offers valuable insights but remains incomplete. Ostrom (2010) emphasizes polycentric governance and the importance of multiple decision-making centers in managing climate change. Jordan et al. (2018) examine climate policy integration and institutional coordination across governance levels. Meadowcroft (2009) argues that climate transition requires long-term political steering and democratic legitimacy. Newell and Paterson (2010) analyze the political economy of climate capitalism and market-based governance. Bäckstrand and Kuyper (2017) highlight democratic accountability in global climate governance. While previous studies emphasize institutional complexity, other scholars argue that climate policy success depends on state capacity, industrial coalitions, and distributive legitimacy (Meckling & Allan, 2020; Roberts & Geels, 2019).

However, current governance literature fails to sufficiently explain how different institutional architectures convert climate targets into politically legitimate implementation. Existing scholarship often focuses on policy ambition, emissions pathways, or international commitments, while paying less attention to the institutional mechanisms through which climate policies become enforceable, socially accepted, and administratively durable. There is also a comparative gap between multi-level regulatory climate governance and centralized developmental climate governance. Furthermore, climate governance studies frequently under-theorize democratic accountability, especially where policies impose uneven costs on households, workers, regions, and industrial sectors.

This article addresses these gaps by developing a comparative institutional argument: climate governance effectiveness depends on the interaction between legal enforceability, bureaucratic coordination, distributive legitimacy, and political accountability. The study argues that the European Union demonstrates strong regulatory institutionalization but struggles with coordination heterogeneity, while South Korea demonstrates centralized mobilization capacity but faces legitimacy and implementation risks arising from industrial dependence and limited deliberative inclusion.

The novelty of this article lies in integrating climate governance analysis with comparative state

capacity theory and democratic accountability scholarship. Rather than treating climate governance as a technical policy field, this study conceptualizes it as a politically contested institutional process through which states and governance systems allocate transition costs, define public authority, regulate markets, and construct legitimacy.

The analytical framework developed here proposes the following relationship: climate policy commitment → institutional enforcement capacity → bureaucratic coordination → distributive legitimacy → democratic accountability → climate governance resilience. This framework highlights that climate governance outcomes emerge not simply from policy targets but from the institutional mechanisms that make those targets credible, legitimate, and implementable.

The research objective of this article is to explain how different institutional configurations shape the implementation, legitimacy, and resilience of climate governance in the European Union and South Korea.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative institutional analysis combining public policy analysis, political economy interpretation, and climate governance evaluation to examine how institutional configurations shape climate policy implementation and democratic accountability in the European Union and South Korea. The research design compares two advanced democratic governance systems that share formal carbon neutrality commitments, developed administrative capacity, participation in global climate regimes, and use of market-based and regulatory instruments, yet differ substantially in political structure, institutional scale, policy coordination, industrial organization, and legal accountability. The European Union is treated as a multi-level regulatory governance system in which supranational law, member-state implementation, market mechanisms, and judicial oversight interact to produce climate policy outcomes. South Korea is treated as a centralized democratic developmental state in which executive planning, bureaucratic coordination, industrial policy, and export-oriented economic structures shape decarbonization strategy. This design allows the study to evaluate how institutional variation affects policy credibility, administrative implementation, distributive legitimacy, and democratic resilience.

The empirical basis of the article consists of international governance reports, climate policy documents, legal frameworks, emissions trading system materials, national carbon neutrality strategies, OECD and World Bank climate governance data, UNDP development analysis, European Union policy documents, South Korean climate legislation, and peer-reviewed research on climate politics, environmental governance, and comparative political economy. The analysis applies institutional process tracing, cross-case policy comparison, interpretive policy analysis, and triangulation across governmental, international, and scholarly sources. Key analytical variables include legal enforceability, bureaucratic coordination, carbon pricing design, industrial transition capacity, public accountability, distributive fairness, and policy resilience. The study does not fabricate interviews or primary survey data; it relies on verifiable public documents, institutional evidence, and established scholarly analysis. Its limitations include the rapidly

evolving nature of climate policy, the institutional complexity of the EU as a non-state polity, and the difficulty of attributing emissions outcomes to single governance mechanisms. Nevertheless, the comparison provides analytically significant insight into how climate governance is mediated by institutional design, political economy, and democratic accountability.

Findings and Discussion

1. Institutional Architecture and Climate Policy Credibility

The first major finding is that climate policy credibility depends heavily on institutional architecture. The European Union's climate governance model is built around legal institutionalization, binding targets, regulatory packages, market mechanisms, and supranational oversight. The European Climate Law legally embeds the objective of climate neutrality by 2050 and sets intermediate emissions reduction obligations. The Fit for 55 package further operationalizes this ambition through reforms in emissions trading, renewable energy, energy efficiency, land use, transport regulation, and border carbon adjustment. This institutional architecture gives EU climate policy a relatively high degree of legal credibility because climate commitments are not merely executive declarations but are embedded in supranational legal and regulatory frameworks.

South Korea's climate governance also includes formal carbon neutrality commitments and statutory climate frameworks, yet its credibility rests more heavily on executive planning and bureaucratic implementation than supranational legal enforcement. The country has established carbon neutrality strategies, a national emissions trading system, green growth legislation, and sectoral transition planning. However, South Korea's implementation credibility remains affected by industrial dependence on carbon-intensive sectors and periodic tensions between climate ambition, energy security, and export competitiveness.

The comparison demonstrates that climate targets become politically meaningful only when supported by institutional mechanisms that transform long-term objectives into enforceable policy pathways. The EU's strength lies in regulatory institutionalization: legal mandates, policy packages, judicial review, and member-state reporting mechanisms make climate commitments difficult to reverse. South Korea's strength lies in centralized mobilization: executive agencies can coordinate industrial policy and technological investment more rapidly than fragmented multi-level systems.

However, both models face weaknesses. The EU's climate governance can suffer from implementation variation among member states. National governments differ in administrative capacity, energy dependence, fiscal resources, and political willingness. South Korea's governance can suffer from insufficient deliberative legitimacy when climate policy is perceived as technocratic or overly aligned with industrial competitiveness.

Theoretically, these findings support institutionalist arguments that policy credibility is produced through rules, enforcement mechanisms, and administrative routines rather than through targets alone. They also challenge policy literature that treats climate ambition as equivalent to climate effectiveness. The comparative evidence suggests that ambition without enforceability produces symbolic governance, while enforceability without legitimacy risks political backlash.

2. Carbon Pricing, Market Governance, and Political Economy

The second finding concerns the political economy of carbon pricing. Both the European Union and South Korea operate emissions trading systems, yet the institutional meaning and political function of carbon pricing differ between the two cases. The EU Emissions Trading System is one of the most developed carbon markets globally and functions as a central pillar of the EU's climate policy architecture. It regulates emissions across major sectors and has been progressively strengthened through cap reductions, market stability mechanisms, and expansion into new policy domains.

South Korea's emissions trading system is also institutionally significant, particularly as one of Asia's major carbon pricing mechanisms. Yet its operation is shaped by the political economy of industrial competitiveness. Heavy industry occupies a central position in South Korea's export economy, and policy design has often reflected concerns about cost burdens, energy prices, and competitiveness. As a result, carbon pricing functions not only as an environmental instrument but as a negotiated political compromise between climate ambition and industrial policy.

The World Bank reports that global carbon pricing revenues exceeded USD 100 billion in 2023, indicating the growing fiscal and regulatory importance of carbon pricing instruments (World Bank, 2024). Yet carbon pricing alone does not guarantee transformative decarbonization. Its effectiveness depends on sectoral coverage, price stability, allocation rules, revenue recycling, administrative enforcement, and political legitimacy.

The EU model demonstrates the strength of regulatory market governance when carbon pricing is embedded within a broader legal-policy system. Carbon pricing is supported by renewable energy targets, energy efficiency rules, industrial transition funds, and border adjustment mechanisms. South Korea's model demonstrates the importance of aligning carbon pricing with industrial transformation strategies. Without credible support for technological transition and employment adjustment, carbon pricing may face resistance from firms, workers, and regional economies.

The comparative evidence indicates that carbon pricing is not a politically neutral instrument. It redistributes costs, reshapes industrial incentives, and generates distributive conflicts. Theoretical approaches that frame carbon pricing primarily as an economic efficiency mechanism therefore remain incomplete. Political economy analysis reveals that carbon pricing must be governed through institutions capable of managing conflict, compensation, and transition justice.

3. Bureaucratic Coordination and State Capacity

The third finding is that bureaucratic coordination is central to climate governance effectiveness. Climate policy requires coordination across energy, transport, industry, finance, agriculture, housing, trade, and social policy. Fragmented administration can undermine implementation even when formal targets are ambitious.

The European Union demonstrates a complex form of multi-level coordination. Supranational institutions set legal frameworks and regulatory targets, while member states implement policies through national energy and climate plans. This creates both strength and vulnerability. The strength lies in regulatory integration and cross-border policy coordination. The vulnerability lies in uneven implementation and political bargaining among member states. Climate governance in the EU therefore depends on continuous negotiation between supranational authority and national sovereignty.

South Korea demonstrates a more centralized coordination model. Executive agencies can align climate strategy with industrial policy, technology investment, and infrastructure planning. This allows faster administrative mobilization and more coherent policy direction. However, centralized coordination may also limit transparency, reduce participatory input, and concentrate decision-making authority within bureaucratic and executive institutions.

The comparison reveals that state capacity is not a single-dimensional variable. The EU possesses strong legal-regulatory capacity but faces coordination complexity. South Korea possesses strong executive-bureaucratic capacity but faces legitimacy and industrial transition constraints. Effective climate governance requires combining regulatory authority, administrative coordination, fiscal capacity, technical expertise, and democratic responsiveness.

This finding contributes to public administration scholarship by showing that climate governance requires whole-of-government coordination. Traditional sectoral bureaucracy is poorly suited to climate transition because climate risks are cross-sectoral and long-term. Institutional reform must therefore strengthen inter-ministerial coordination, policy integration, and accountability across administrative levels.

4. Democratic Accountability, Social Legitimacy, and Just Transition

The fourth finding concerns democratic accountability and social legitimacy. Climate governance imposes uneven costs across regions, industries, income groups, and generations. Policies that appear technically rational may become politically fragile if they are perceived as unfair or exclusionary.

The European Union has increasingly recognized this problem through the Just Transition Mechanism, Social Climate Fund, and redistributive instruments designed to support affected regions and vulnerable households. These mechanisms reflect an understanding that climate policy legitimacy depends on distributive fairness. However, implementation remains uneven, and member states differ in their capacity to deliver social compensation and regional transition support.

South Korea faces a different legitimacy challenge. Its industrial structure creates concentrated

transition risks in sectors such as steel, petrochemicals, automobiles, and energy-intensive manufacturing. Climate policy therefore requires negotiated transformation involving firms, workers, local governments, and civil society. If decarbonization is framed primarily as a technological modernization strategy, it may fail to address labor vulnerability, regional inequality, and democratic participation.

The comparative evidence indicates that climate governance must be understood as democratic governance. Public participation, transparency, compensation, and accountability are not secondary to climate effectiveness; they are conditions of durable implementation. This supports deliberative democratic theory, which argues that legitimate collective decisions require meaningful public reasoning and institutional responsiveness.

The findings also align with climate justice scholarship emphasizing that transition policies must address unequal exposure to climate risk and unequal capacity to bear transition costs. Without justice-oriented governance, climate policy may generate backlash, populist mobilization, or policy reversal.

Table 1. Comparative Matrix of Governance Variables, Institutional Mechanisms, and Political Outcomes

Variable	European Union	South Korea	Empirical/Institutional Evidence	Analytical Interpretation
Climate Governance Model	Multi-level legal-regulatory governance	Centralized developmental-state governance	European Climate Law; Korean carbon neutrality legislation	Institutional design shapes implementation credibility
Policy Coordination	Supranational regulation with member-state implementation	Executive-led national coordination	EU Green Deal; Korean Green New Deal and carbon neutrality plans	EU gains legal depth but faces coordination fragmentation; Korea gains speed but faces legitimacy risks
Carbon Pricing	Mature emissions trading system with regulatory integration	National emissions trading system shaped by industrial policy	EU ETS; Korea ETS; World Bank carbon pricing data	Carbon pricing effectiveness depends on political economy and enforcement
Democratic Accountability	Judicial review, parliament	Electoral accountability,	EU governance procedures; Korean climate	Accountability is stronger

bility	ary scrutiny, public consultation, multi-level reporting	administrative planning, civic consultation mechanisms	governance institutions	when participation and legal contestability are institutionalized
Industrial Transition	Green industrial regulation and transition funding	Export-oriented green industrial transformation	EU Transition Mechanism; Korean industrial decarbonization strategies	Transition legitimacy depends on compensation and sectoral adaptation
State Capacity	Strong regulatory capacity but uneven national implementation	Strong bureaucratic coordination but industrial dependency	OECD climate governance assessments; national policy documents	Different forms of capacity generate different policy strengths and weaknesses
Social Legitimacy	Supported by just transition instruments but challenged by member-state inequality	Challenged by labor, regional, and industrial transition costs	Climate justice and public policy literature	Legitimacy requires fair distribution of transition burdens
Governance Resilience	High legal durability, moderate political fragmentation	High administrative mobilization, moderate legitimacy vulnerability	Comparative institutional evidence	Resilience depends on enforcement, participation, and adaptive capacity

The table demonstrates that climate governance variation is produced by institutional design, not merely by policy ambition. The EU and South Korea both pursue carbon neutrality, but they convert ambition into implementation through different mechanisms. The EU's governance model institutionalizes climate policy through law, regulation, market governance, and supranational oversight. South Korea's model mobilizes climate policy through centralized planning, industrial strategy, and bureaucratic coordination. The broader implication is that climate governance must be evaluated through a multidimensional framework incorporating legality, capacity, legitimacy, distributive fairness, and democratic accountability.

Governance Propositions

Proposition 1: Climate policy credibility increases when long-term targets are embedded in enforceable legal and administrative institutions.

The comparison demonstrates that carbon neutrality commitments are more durable when supported by statutory obligations, regulatory instruments, monitoring procedures, and institutional accountability. Symbolic targets without enforcement mechanisms are unlikely to produce resilient governance outcomes.

Proposition 2: Bureaucratic coordination mediates the relationship between climate ambition and implementation effectiveness.

Climate policy requires cross-sectoral coordination across energy, industry, transport, finance, agriculture, and social policy. Systems with strong coordination capacity are better positioned to translate policy ambition into administrative action, but coordination must be balanced with transparency and democratic oversight.

Proposition 3: Carbon pricing becomes politically sustainable only when integrated with distributive compensation and industrial transition policy.

Carbon markets and taxes generate economic incentives, but they also produce social and sectoral costs. Their legitimacy depends on revenue recycling, support for vulnerable households, regional transition funds, and credible industrial adjustment strategies.

Proposition 4: Democratic accountability is a condition of climate governance resilience.

Climate governance cannot rely solely on expert authority or technocratic planning. Public participation, legal contestability, transparency, and just transition mechanisms strengthen legitimacy and reduce the risk of backlash or policy reversal.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined how institutional configurations shape climate governance implementation, legitimacy, and resilience through a comparative analysis of the European Union and South Korea. The central finding is that climate governance effectiveness depends not only on formal policy ambition but on the institutional mechanisms that make climate commitments enforceable, coordinated, socially legitimate, and democratically accountable.

The European Union demonstrates the strengths of multi-level legal-regulatory governance. Its climate policy framework benefits from legal institutionalization, supranational oversight, carbon market integration, and just transition instruments. Yet the EU also faces coordination fragmentation, uneven member-state implementation, and political contestation over distributive costs. South Korea demonstrates the strengths of centralized developmental governance. Its state capacity enables rapid policy mobilization, industrial strategy, and administrative coordination.

Yet its climate governance remains constrained by carbon-intensive industrial structures, legitimacy challenges, and the need for deeper participatory accountability.

The theoretical contribution of this article lies in connecting climate governance scholarship with comparative institutionalism, state capacity theory, and democratic accountability. The study shows that climate governance is not simply an environmental policy domain but a core arena of contemporary political authority. It involves the allocation of costs, restructuring of markets, transformation of bureaucracies, and redefinition of democratic legitimacy.

Empirically, the article contributes by comparing two advanced but institutionally distinct climate governance systems. The analysis demonstrates that different governance architectures produce different strengths and vulnerabilities. Legal-regulatory systems may produce durability but face coordination complexity. Centralized developmental systems may produce speed but face legitimacy risks. Effective climate governance requires combining legal enforceability, administrative coordination, industrial transition capacity, and democratic legitimacy.

The policy implications are clear. Governments should avoid treating climate transition as a purely technical decarbonization project. Climate policy must be institutionally embedded, socially negotiated, and democratically accountable. Carbon pricing should be paired with compensation and industrial transition strategies. Climate targets should be supported by legal enforcement and transparent monitoring. Public participation should be treated as a governance resource rather than an administrative obstacle.

The study has limitations. It focuses on two advanced governance systems and therefore cannot fully represent climate governance challenges in lower-income or institutionally fragile contexts. Future research should examine climate governance in federal systems, emerging economies, small island states, and authoritarian or hybrid regimes. Further research should also analyze how artificial intelligence, climate risk modeling, and green industrial competition reshape future climate governance.

Ultimately, this article demonstrates that climate governance is a decisive test of democratic state capacity. The challenge is not only whether states can decarbonize, but whether they can do so through institutions that are legitimate, accountable, fair, and resilient.

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