

The Climate Show – Episode 41

Transcript

00:00:04 Linnéa Nordlander

Hi, and welcome to the Climate Show, a podcast that explores the law and politics of climate change. This podcast is brought to you by the University of Copenhagen.

00:00:16 Beatriz Martinez Romera

Hi, we are Beatriz Martinez,

00:00:18 Linnéa Nordlander

And Linnéa Nordlander.

00:00:19 Beatriz Martinez Romera

And we are your host at the Climate Show.

00:00:24 Beatriz Martinez Romera

Welcome to the Climate Show. In today's episode, we discuss how nationalism can intensify climate polarization, shape the space for democratic deliberation, and what this means for the prospects of effective climate governance.

00:00:38 Linnéa Nordlander

Climate change is often presented as a global challenge requiring international cooperation. Yet in domestic politics, climate policy is increasingly debated through national narratives, who we are, what our national interests are, and which futures are seen as legitimate or threatening. To discuss this, we are joined by Professor Robert Schertzer from the University of Toronto.

00:01:02 Linnéa Nordlander

He is the founding co-editor of The State of Nationalism, which is an online open access portal on nationalism studies, and he has been working for the government of Canada in social policy, intergovernmental relations, and immigration reform.

00:01:15 Beatriz Martinez Romera

Drawing on a systematic study of speeches by presidential candidates in recent US election campaigns, his work shows that nationalistic rhetoric is one of the key frames through which climate change is articulated across the political spectrum. One of the important points that Robert brings into this conversation is that we ignore the connection between nationalism, polarization and climate policy at our pairing. Enjoy the show.

00:01:47 Beatriz Martinez Romera

In today's episode, we turn to the question of why has climate policy become so polarized in many liberal democracies? The disagreement about climate action is no longer about scientific evidence, choice of policy instruments or economic cost. It is also about identity, belonging and comparing visions of the nation.

00:02:05 Beatriz Martinez Romera

To discuss this, I am delighted to be joined by Professor Robert Schertzer from the University of Toronto. Robert is associate professor and associate chair of political science, and he examines federalism, constitutional law and national identity. He's currently delving into the theme of this podcast, how nationalism shapes climate policy in liberal democracies.

00:02:25 Beatriz Martinez Romera

Robert, thank you so much for joining us this morning at the Climate Breakfast with your talk on nationalism, polarization and climate policy. And welcome now to the Climate Show. It is a pleasure to have you here with us.

00:02:36 Robert Schertzer

Thanks so much. It's great to be here. I really enjoyed the seminar this morning. I thought it was a really good conversation, and I always love to chat about my work.

00:02:44 Robert Schertzer

And I should say today my work is with myself and my colleague Eric Taylor-Woods at Leeds University that I want to talk about.

00:02:50 Beatriz Martinez Romera

Thank you so much. It was really, really good. To begin with, could you tell us a little about why is the relationship between nationalism and climate policy relevant? Why it is important to look into climate change through the lenses of nationalism.

00:03:06 Robert Schertzer

I think the key starting point is that climate change is no longer debated purely as a technical or scientific issue. I think it's increasingly being debated through the lens of national identity and national interest. When politicians talk about climate policy, they're not just asking like what policies work or what the science says. They're really asking often like what this means for our country, for our people. What does it mean for our future as a nation?

00:03:37 Robert Schertzer

And in my work with Eric, what we're doing is looking at how nationalist actors use those ideas when they talk about climate policy. And what we found is that really often they frame climate policy through this referent of the nation and the nation state rather than the planet. They don't talk about it as a global level issue so much. They talk about what it means for people. Climate politics has become in many ways a debate about the very nation itself.

00:04:03 Beatriz Martinez Romera

And when we hear the word nationalism, many people may think of right-wing politics and anti-globalization or international law. But your work suggests that nationalistic

rhetoric appears across the political spectrum. Could you explain what you mean by nationalism in these other contexts?

00:04:23 Robert Schertzer

Yeah, so I think it's really important to stress that nationalism isn't just confined to the political right. We tend to think of it that way, right? We tend to associate nationalism with anti-immigrant politics, with anti-globalist politics, often far right and populism, right? But in reality, nationalism is a much broader ideology and phenomenon. In fact, we often say it's core to organizing modern politics. It's how we think about the world today.

00:04:52 Robert Schertzer

In the US, a lot of our research focuses on the US of late. And in the US context, for example, what we see is the political right. They do tend to draw on a more exclusive or sometimes we call it ethnic understanding of what it means to be an American, whereas the left tends to draw on a more inclusive or civic or patriotic understanding of what it means to be American. But they're both still nationalists and they're both still making claims about who belongs as an American, you know, what American history is, who defines the nation, what its purpose is. In this regard, I really think that's how we can think about nationalism as not just a right-wing issue, but both sides of the issue.

00:05:36 Beatriz Martinez Romera

Could you give us an example of how climate change is framed as a question of national identity or national interest by both left and right?

00:05:44 Robert Schertzer

Yeah, for sure. It's often a bit esoteric for people, right? So, what am I talking about? So, you know, I think the clearest example really does come from, in our research, how we showed how different US presidential candidates over the past few elections talk about climate change.

00:05:58 Robert Schertzer

On the right, so particularly in Donald Trump's rhetoric, climate policy is framed largely as the threat to the American nation. He talks about climate action as a threat to

Americans' jobs. You know, he talks about international agreements like the Paris Climate Accord as a threat to America's sovereignty. He talks about the pro-climate agenda as taking away American strength, right?

00:06:23 Robert Schertzer

For him, international agreements like the Paris Climate Accord are seen as constraining American power, benefiting other countries. Even he often talks about them as specifically un-American.

00:06:33 Robert Schertzer

But on the left, Biden and Clinton, it's fundamentally differently framed. Climate change for them is the threat, right? And they specifically talk about it not in this existential global threat, they talk about it as a threat to the American people, right? They want to take climate action to protect America's citizens, right? To grow the American economy and to restore.

00:06:54 Robert Schertzer

This is a really big part of their rhetoric, how they want to restore American leadership on the global stage. So, they talk about international stuff, but they talk about it through the referent of America leading the globe.

00:07:05 Robert Schertzer

Both sides use nationalism like this, right? But they tell different stories about who America is and what's in its interests. Both sides ask what climate change means, but they ask what it means for the nation. And they answer those questions really differently.

00:07:21 Beatriz Martinez Romera

And how does this affect the way climate policy is debated?

00:07:26 Robert Schertzer

So, this, I think, gets to the core of the argument of the work I've been doing over the last few years. Polarization, right? We all understand that there's a climate debate. We've all heard this. But the debate isn't so much about the science of climate change anymore. It's about what we do, right? And a lot of polling shows this. Even Americans are less skeptical that climate change is happening, but they diverge on what they're supposed to do.

00:07:49 Robert Schertzer

But this polarization that we're seeing isn't just about policy. It's increasingly about disagreements about who we are as a nation, right? And what we need to do going forward. The climate debate becomes not what policy is best, what does the evidence say? The climate debate becomes what kind of country or nation do we want to be? And once you get to that point, political opponents aren't just wrong, right? They're threats to the nation itself. And so, the climate debate becomes one about identity conflict, not just about policy disagreements based on rational evidence.

00:08:25 Beatriz Martinez Romera

And will you say that this is mostly about the energy transition or other climate policy areas?

00:08:32 Robert Schertzer

Definitely about the energy transition increasingly. So, as I was saying, there's not as much debate any longer on the science of climate change. There's still sceptical things are brought up, right? But it's really about, and particularly in the US, we saw a debate between the energy transition about whether we should continue to expand on fossil fuels, right, or whether we should turn towards green energy.

00:08:53 Robert Schertzer

And here the association of, for example, in America, expanding fossil fuels, the oil and gas sector as an American tradition is core to the rhetoric of Donald Trump and the right, whereas the need to rise to the challenge in particular and develop the green economy and really, you know, to pull some of Biden or Clinton or Harris's rhetoric to rise to the ingenious elements of American leadership in the world and be a green energy superpower, right? It's really about that transition of what we do going forward.

00:09:23 Beatriz Martinez Romera

So, we know that climate policy requires long-term planning, redistribution, behavioural changes and of course international cooperation. Do you consider these key features that are particularly vulnerable to this nationalist polarization, this term that you use.

00:09:40 Robert Schertzer

Yes, so first on nationalist polarization, right? This is largely what Woods, and I have started to find in our work here. That what we mean is the left and the right are both using nationalism when they talk about climate policy and other policy issues, but they're using it different. We're having polarization on what the nation is, who is a member, what its history, where its place in the world is. We're having not just political or partisan polarization, but nationalist polarization on what it means to be an American or a Canadian. And this form, this dynamic, absolutely gets in the way of long-term planning and elements of climate policy. I think this gets to what climate policy is.

00:10:17 Robert Schertzer

One of my own scholars at the University of Toronto was part of a team that coined it as a super wicked policy problem, right? We can think about climate change as this way. It has all these characteristics that you just mentioned. Long-term horizons, uncertainty, there's a distributional element, you need coordinated action, but there's no one to coordinate it and has a really strong moral dimension.

00:10:38 Robert Schertzer

We often don't pay attention to that last bit when it comes to climate policy and long-term planning. Since these kinds of policy problems force societies to answer really difficult questions about responsibility, sacrifice, obligation. It's precisely these points, sacrifice, obligation, long-term time horizons, where nationalism can be a pressure point.

00:11:01 Robert Schertzer

Decisions about like who pays, you know, whose livelihoods are going to be protected, how much autonomy does a state get, right, in international cooperation negotiations, these aren't technical issues. They're not economic issues. There are questions about

who we are as national communities when they come to these questions and what we owe others inside our community and other nations, right?

00:11:23 Robert Schertzer

And in our research, what we found is political actors talk about climate change policy in that way. They don't talk about it as an international collaborative issue that requires long-term thinking. They talk about it as our nation is impacted in this way and our interests require these kinds of actions, whether it's scepticism or activism.

00:11:43 Beatriz Martinez Romera

We definitely see that in a lot of the work that we do at CLIMA and in international negotiations. But going back, as you said, your empirical work focuses on recent US presidential campaigns. What makes the US a particularly important or revealing case for studying climate polarization? And do you think that these dynamics that you have identified are also visible in other liberal democracies, for example, Canada or maybe countries in the European Union?

00:12:12 Robert Schertzer

Yeah, absolutely. So, we started work with the US because it's a useful case, right? You start where you can think you're going to find things, right? So, we thought, you know, the dynamics of nationalist polarization would be particularly apparent there. That's because we already have some strong partisan polarization. It's a two-party system. And there is, we know from a lot of work, really deep divisions that are historically rooted in American society.

00:12:37 Robert Schertzer

So that makes it ripe for investigation. And we thought it was a place where we might see this mechanism at work, kind of a pilot case, right? But I don't think what we found in our research on the US is actually unique to it in any way. We're seeing similar dynamics in Europe. We definitely are seeing them emerge in Canada, quite surprisingly. Right now, around specifically regional and resource politics.

00:13:00 Robert Schertzer

So, we have quite a bit of petro-nationalism rising in the western provinces in Canada. And it's actually coming into conflict with green activism in the eastern parts of the country in Quebec. And this is layered on autonomy issues. And so, it's actually becoming very, very, very hot in Canada right now. And I think so, we might call the US the kind of extreme or easy case where we see this, but I think we explored it because we think it reveals broader dynamics that we see elsewhere.

00:13:26 Beatriz Martinez Romera

In Europe, we are seeing a pushback against parts of the green transition, including issues of agriculture, energy prices, the whole issue about a competitive economy, industrial policy. Will you see this as part of a similar pattern of nationalist polarization? And are there differences between systems that are more on the federal side and more unitary systems on how nationalism shapes climate policy debates?

00:13:55 Robert Schertzer

Great questions. I'm also a scholar of federalism, so I always can talk about federalism. You can do a whole podcast on that if you want.

00:14:00 Beatriz Martinez Romera

Oh, you just commit yourself to that.

00:14:03 Robert Schertzer

Yeah, I think we're seeing very similar. I really do think we're seeing similar dynamics in Europe. Even if they play with somewhat differently, they're not exactly the same, right. Context matters. But what is striking, I think, is how often pushback against climate policy is framed in explicitly national terms.

00:14:19 Robert Schertzer

So, it's not, again, not just a disagreement over policy design, right? But rather as a defence of like national livelihoods or national sovereignty. You can see this pretty clearly in protest by farmers across countries like France and Germany where

environmental regulations are framed, not as a problem for economic livelihoods, but as threats to their national ways of life as farmers.

00:14:42 Robert Schertzer

We see it in energy debates as well, where governments, you know, are emphasizing protection, national competitiveness, really to reduce dependence on external actors. And I think, as you know, that's a really important point that we can't lose sight of institutional context really matters, right? Especially in federal or like if we talk about highly decentralized systems, right?

00:15:03 Robert Schertzer

When federal systems, climate politics really does often map on to regional political economies. So different regions, you know, have different stakes in fossil fuel extraction. You see this in Canada, right, in agriculture, in industrial basis, right, or in service economies. They all have different economic interests.

00:15:22 Robert Schertzer

And that I think if we go back to, go back a little bit, that produces strong center periphery dynamics, right? And so, where regions see climate policy as something imposed from the center that threatens their regional way of life, right? And they have some political levers and autonomy that really drives some of this element of nationalist polarization. This is literally what we're seeing in Canada right now.

00:15:44 Robert Schertzer

And I think then, you know, we can't just think about nationalist polarization as Woods and I have pitched it as something happening between parties at the national scale. It definitely can get even potentially more dangerous when it's layered in federal systems where people are saying my nation, right, my region is being jeopardized by a center, right, which is pushing a climate agenda that endangers my way of life. And that in particular, I think could be a dangerous dynamic emerging.

00:16:11 Beatriz Martinez Romera

So, tapping into this idea of the center-periphery, you argue that nationalist polarization, this process basically can constrain the space for deliberation could, for

instance, participatory processes, citizen assemblies, just transition mechanisms, regional consultations help to broaden the sense of who is included in climate policy to counterbalance this phenomenon?

00:16:36 Robert Schertzer

Yeah, that's a great question. I also do a bit of work on deliberative democracy, right, in particular the role courts can play, right? My first book was on this in particular. I definitely think deliberative processes can help, but only to an extent.

00:16:48 Robert Schertzer

And this is, you know, I think citizens assemblies, you know, processes like this. They certainly can broaden the sense of who is included in the decision-making process and build from the grassroots up, but they always operate in a wider political context. And I think we have to keep our eyes on this, right? If elites are continuing to frame the climate debate in highly polarized ways, right, and particular in tapping into identity issues when doing so. This is a broader challenge for these kinds of deliberative processes, right?

00:17:17 Robert Schertzer

So what we need to do, I think, is use them and use other mechanisms to try and build a shared narrative that can cut across competing partisan visions of the nation and what's in its interest when it comes to climate policy, right? I think, you know, deliberation can help, but it can't fully escape that politicized and polarized identity politics we're finding ourselves in. And what we have to do is try and find mechanisms to build a shared understanding so that we can get to deliberating.

00:17:45 Beatriz Martinez Romera

Climate policy is often framed in terms of justice. So, I wanted to ask, how does nationalist polarization interact with climate justice debates? And does nationalist framing risk narrowing solidarity of the national community at the expense of global responsibility?

00:18:03 Robert Schertzer

Yeah, so this is a great, I think this is also kind of gets to the crux of what we're trying to focus on in our work and their implications, right? So, I think the tension here is really between, as you say, the global nature of the policy problem, right? And then the national lens through which we're finding most people seem to talk and understand it. The very first thing I say often, I said it in the talk today, climate change is the definition of a transnational problem.

00:18:27 Robert Schertzer

It raises questions about obligations that cut across borders, across generations, across vastly unique societies, right? So, questions of justice, right, in this sense, inherently have an international or transnational intergenerational issue. But what's happening, I think, is these questions of justice are actually getting reframed by political actors to be about questions of national responsibility. What do we owe our citizens, national interest and national priority? And I think here nationalism, you know, the way I talk about this can push us in two directions.

00:19:01 Robert Schertzer

On one hand, if the left and right are drawing on competing nationalist visions about who we are as a country, this actually, as you say, can kind of narrow the bounds of what's considered just. It shapes who gets access to these things within the nation. It excludes groups and includes group within the nation itself about the we, right?

00:19:22 Robert Schertzer

But the other side of this is that nationalism can be a pretty powerful resource to mobilize people. So, it can be a powerful resource to build domestic solidarity, which I think is kind of the precondition for climate action. We need to all agree that we need to do something and then we can act. And most international climate cooperation doesn't emerge in a vacuum.

00:19:43 Robert Schertzer

We focus on the international focus on COP, we focus on global governance, but it's built on nation states first and foremost agreeing amongst themselves what they're going to do and then coming as a group to agree what to do with nation states, right? We still live in a world of states and we're going to live in a world of states for some time,

right? And so in this sense, I think nationalism, while nationalism inhibits global climate action, it can also be a tool, right? And it can enable action, particularly if we can align climate policies with national interests, right? I think that's, there is there, I think, a balance that can be found. Hopefully, I'm an optimist. I always believe that there's some element of optimism there for that.

00:20:26 Beatriz Martinez Romera

I think I have just a final question. If you can maybe elaborate on what do you think are the implications of your findings for climate law and governance and what should policymakers take from your research? What would you recommend to political leaders who wants to build support for climate policy? And maybe also what should researchers working on climate governance and climate law pay more attention to in the coming years?

00:20:53 Robert Schertzer

Oh, that's a good question. First of all, I would warn a policymaker about listening anything I say, right? But more, really, what I would say is I think the takeaway, I myself worked in public policy for a long time before I came to academia. And I think probably my message would be that public policymakers probably shouldn't ignore nationalism.

00:21:14 Robert Schertzer

I think we ignore it at our peril. It can be a lever that we can actually tap into to drive collective action. It's politicians have figured this out. That's certainly what they're doing and using it. That's what our findings are showing, that they're largely using a nationalist frame when they talk about policy action. They're not talking about it in an esoteric or sense of focusing on the action itself, but what it means for us as a nation.

00:21:35 Robert Schertzer

And so I think policymakers probably do need to engage with this as a tool. You might think about that inherently. I worked in immigration policy when I worked in government. We think about that, what immigration policy means for the nation and what that national community is and citizenship policy there, it's part and parcel of how we actually think about policy. I don't think in climate change policy we necessarily lean that way, but I think our findings are showing that we could engage with it if very carefully, right?

00:21:59 Robert Schertzer

And I will say that very carefully because nationalism has two sides always, right. I think the way you could do it carefully is to try and understand how climate policy and climate action could actually resonate with what are our national values, for example, or connect people's sense of their identity and how we can build a common shared purpose as a nation to actually make progress. And we see some of this happening for sure.

00:22:24 Robert Schertzer

Same thing for researchers, not just policy makers. I think we've actually not paid enough attention. I'm a nationalism scholar. I see nationalism everywhere, right? So of course, I say you should pay attention to this. You should certainly read my research, right? You know, but I think, you know, really I think as researchers, what we've probably done is paid too much attention to climate governance regulations and national agreements and taking things as fact, law is a reality.

00:22:50 Robert Schertzer

When what's actually happening, I think, is if we move beyond these kind of institutionalist or economic explanations for what's happening, focus more on narratives and identity framing about how this policy problem is actually presented to the people, we probably can get some levers to understand what's happening out in the world and why people are disagreeing still on something that requires urgent action. I think the way I'd probably say it is we need to study the stories that shape how people engage with climate policy.

00:23:20 Beatriz Martinez Romera

And before we finish, is there anything else you would like to raise before we wrap up?

00:23:24 Robert Schertzer

No, that's great. Thanks for having me. I think, you know, I'll do the key message thing, right? I think I would say is, you know, climate politics is not just about climate change, right? I think it's largely about identity and belonging, about the stories we tell ourselves as a nation, what shapes our interests and how we engage with it. And that, if we want

to make action, it's largely about, the competing visions of the future. Climate governance is ultimately shaped by how people imagine the nation and their place within it. And this is largely what Eric Woods and I have argued in our work in the last few years.

00:23:58 Beatriz Martinez Romera

Robert, thank you so much for joining us this morning and for joining us here at the Climate Show. It has been a fascinating conversation. Very, very interesting.

00:24:06 Beatriz Martinez Romera

And to our listeners, thank you for joining us too. This episode was inspired by the CLIMA Climate Breakfast Seminar with Professor Robert Schertzer on nationalism, polarization and climate policy. Thank you so much for listening. We look forward to welcoming you again in the next episode.

00:24:27 Linnéa Nordlander

Thank you for listening to this episode of The Climate Show. If you would like to read more about Professor Robert Schertzer's work, please check out the information in the show notes. Stay tuned for our next episode.