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The Emotions of Climate Extreme Events: Democratic (Dis)Connect, Denial, and Care

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Abstract

Among the growing challenges facing liberal representative democracies, the increasing frequency and intensity of climate extremes—such as floods and wildfires—are particularly significant. While these events can shape emotions and democratic engagement in complex and contradictory ways, the affective mechanisms linking climate extremes to democratic (dis)connection remain underexplored, as climate-related emotions are often treated as psychological phenomena within a depoliticised environmental context. Drawing on a theoretical literature review at the intersection of democratic theory, political ecology, disaster studies, ecofeminist scholarship on care, and climate-emotions research, this article identifies an agenda for analysing these affective dynamics. It focuses on denial and care as different affects through which climate extremes may shape democratic disconnection. While climate extreme events can disrupt denial, they may also deepen disconnection, particularly where authoritarian tendencies exist. Care, however, can foster political (re)connection through collective responsibility, mutual recognition, and attentiveness to shared vulnerability. Yet, care is not inherently democratic: its effects depend on how it is organised, whose needs and voices are recognised, and the broader social and political conditions in which it emerges.

Keywords

affect; care; climate extreme event; democratic disconnect; denial; emotion

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1. Introduction

Climate modelling predicts that climate extreme events, including floods, heatwaves, droughts, and wildfires, will become more frequent and intense in the coming years (IPCC, 2021). While these predictions have long been a lived reality in many parts of the world, this dynamic is now also materialising with increasing speed in liberal democracies that were previously less exposed (Rousi et al., 2022). The intense and successive wildfires and heatwaves in Europe in the summer of 2026 are a timely example of these fast-evolving dynamics (World Weather Attribution, 2026). Climate extremes result in "widespread impacts to ecosystems, people, and infrastructure" (IPCC, 2021) and trigger collective emotions in affected communities, including anxiety, grief, anger, care, or hope. These emotions are part of the broader "climate-emotions" literature, i.e., the emotions experienced in relation to climate and ecological crises, which is receiving increasing scholarly attention (Neckel & Hasenfratz, 2021; Pihkala, 2022).

While research has begun documenting the significance of climate-emotions for individuals and society, including those experienced in the wake of climate extreme events (e.g., O'Connell et al., 2017; Rushton et al., 2022; Whittle et al., 2012), this work has rarely been brought into dialogue with the scholarship on democracy and democratic (dis)connect (see Knops & Silberzahn, 2026). We define democratic disconnect as the weakening of citizens' connections to democratic institutions and representations—the practices of political participation and the legitimacy of elected governments—and as a form of withdrawal from collective action, beyond the realm of existing institutions. We understand this disconnect as institutional, behavioural, and affective (Castiglione, 2024). While it is reflected in declining trust and participation, which capture its institutional and behavioural manifestations (Foa & Mounk, 2016), this article focuses on its affective dimensions: how emotions shape citizens' sense of (dis)connection, belonging, exclusion, and (dis)engagement with democratic practices, within and beyond formal institutions, in the context of climate extremes. Drawing on feminist and affect scholar Sara Ahmed (2004, 2014), we use affect and emotions as umbrella terms and in a performative way to focus on "what emotions do." This approach is common among scholars of climate-emotions and ecological emotions, who consider these notions as overlapping rather than neatly distinct concepts.

Environmental political theory has long examined the "environment–democracy" nexus (Pickering et al., 2020), i.e., the tensions and trade-offs between environmental objectives and democratic values. Specifically, scholars have asked whether environmental crises such as climate change exacerbate the limits of representative liberal democracy and deepen the disconnect between institutions and citizens, and under what conditions new forms of environmental and ecological democracies may emerge. At the same time, a growing body of work has discussed the emotional dimensions of climate change and climate extreme events (Tschakert et al., 2024; Vasileiadou & Botzen, 2014; Wang et al., 2018), but less is known about the link between these emotions and democratic (dis)connect. We argue that understanding this link is crucial because increasingly frequent and intense climate extreme events are exposing the limits of existing democratic institutions and the weakness of their adaptive capacity (Holloway & Manwaring, 2023). Moreover, given the well-documented political implications of emotions, the affective dimensions linked to climate extremes may both exacerbate these democratic limits and create new opportunities for democratic connection and engagement.

In Section 2, we review part of the scholarship on affect and democratic disconnect alongside research on climate extreme events and emotions. We identify a gap at the intersection of these bodies of literature. While climate extremes are known to shape emotions and democratic engagement in complex and at times ambivalent ways, the affective mechanisms linking climate extremes to democratic (dis)engagement remain underexplored. We argue that this gap reflects the tendency to treat climate-related emotions as psychological rather than political phenomena (Davidson, 2024; Knops & Silberzahn, 2025, 2026), within a depoliticised context of techno-managerial environmental governance (Swyngedouw, 2011). In this article, we understand politicisation and depoliticisation in broad terms (see also Kenis & Lievens, 2015; Knops, 2025), beyond elected governments and institutions, to refer to practices and discourses that reveal (politicisation) or obscure (depoliticisation) inequalities, conflict and power differentials, thereby fostering or undermining individual and collective political agency. In Section 3, we examine denial as a key affect of depoliticised environments, showing how climate extreme events may temporarily disrupt denial, while also deepening democratic disconnects. We treat these events as potential moments of politicisation and focus on the role of their affective dimensions therein. In Section 4, we turn to care as a potentially politicizing affect and practice, exploring how it may foster democratic engagement and responsibility amid increasingly frequent and intense climate extremes. In Section 5, we nuance this argument by showing that care's political effects depend on how it is organised, whose needs are recognised, and the social and political conditions under which it operates.

2. Affect, Democratic (Dis)connection, and Climate Extreme Events

We bring together research on affect and democratic (dis)connect (Castiglione, 2024; Foa & Mounk, 2016) and the emerging literature linking emotions to climate extreme events. We argue that these events should not only be understood as a source of institutional distrust, but also as affective and political moments that can reshape democratic engagement both within and beyond formal institutions.

Political science has increasingly examined the relationship between democratic (dis)connect and emotions. Foa and Mounk (2016), for example, drawing on World Values Survey data across Western democracies, document a generational decline in attachment to democratic institutions, with younger citizens becoming more cynical about the value of democracy and more open to authoritarian alternatives. Castiglione (2024) understands this alienation as a weakening of trust, identification, and shared purpose that sustains democratic engagement. Sullivan (2021), drawing on interviews with UKIP supporters and non-voters in pre-Brexit England, shows how resentment, shame, and nostalgia become political practices that build up over time, fostering habitual disengagement and reactionary orientations among citizens who feel unheard and abandoned. Other research shows, in a similar vein, that sadness and depression—distinct from anger or fear—undermine democratic participation by reducing motivation, political efficacy, and trust in institutions, lowering participation and turnout (Landwehr & Ojeda, 2021; Ojeda, 2015). Because this withdrawal tends to benefit those already in power, there may be a strategic interest in fostering such sadness rather than alleviating it, making affectively induced demobilisation a potential tool of political destabilisation (Ojeda, 2022). Extending these insights to climate politics, Durnova et al. (2025) argue that recognising emotions in politics—shaped by power, values, and the interplay of reason and affect—is central to understanding polarised climate policy-making and gaps in communication between citizens and institutions.

These accounts suggest that negative affects manifesting as feelings of abandonment, powerlessness, and distrust, tend to deepen democratic (dis)connect. However, other researchers nuance this argument by showing that negative affects towards democratic institutions do not always produce disengagement (Capelos & Demertzis, 2018). Analysing focus groups with Yellow Vests activists, Youth for Climate participants, and socially disadvantaged citizens in Belgium, Celis et al. (2021) find that resentful affectivity—a complex blend of anger, fear, and feelings of unfairness—coexists with residual hope in democratic institutions, confronting citizens with what they call a "democratic dilemma."

A second strand of literature relevant to our argument examines the emotional dimensions of climate extreme events but largely without connecting these to questions of democratic (dis)connect. While research on climate-emotions has expanded rapidly in recent years (Albrecht, 2020; Neckel & Hasenfratz, 2021; Pihkala, 2022), much of the work that focuses on emotions and climate extremes draws primarily on disaster psychology, which tends to treat emotional responses as individual psychological reactions to trauma rather than collective and political practices. Studies document, for instance, the intense emotions that climate extreme events generate—fear, shock, distress, grief, eco-anxiety—and their effects on individual well-being (Clayton et al., 2017; Grimm et al., 2012; Walinski et al., 2023). Grimm et al. (2012) draw on survivor interviews across multiple European disaster types, including floods, fires, and earthquakes, to show that disasters trigger intense emotions in the moment, most commonly fear, panic, and dissociation. Whittle et al. (2012) discuss how flooding in the UK also sustains and compounds emotional distress through the drawn-out demands of recovery, such as dealing with insurers, builders, and disrupted family life. While these studies mainly focus on the impact of disasters on individual lives, these events evidently have collective and socio-political dimensions which may also be approached via emotions.

Studies in political science have indeed pointed out how climate extreme events may generate shifts in democratic engagement through new forms of ecological consciousness, solidarity, and political engagement. The anger triggered by perceived government failure, the disruption of affective ties to loved landscapes, and a sense of shared vulnerability that disasters produce can generate possibilities for democratic re-engagement (Povitkina et al., 2025; Vasileiadou & Botzen, 2014; Visconti, 2022). As Ribeiro and Silva (2021) describe, these events may foster an ecological awareness born of disaster, acting as biographical "turning points" that offer opportunities for political engagement—though not necessarily vis-à-vis democratic institutions. Simultaneously, climate extremes can generate feelings of loss, abandonment, and exclusion that further erode citizens' relationships to democratic institutions, particularly when state responses are perceived as inadequate, discriminatory, or corrupt (Jansesberger, 2024; Tschakert et al., 2024). When disasters unfold amid existing inequality and injustice, the emotional aftermath can reinforce rather than challenge political marginalisation (Carlin et al., 2014). For instance, military deployment to restore order after disasters can generate short-term feelings of security for certain groups, improving perceptions of institutional reliability while also increasing support for non-democratic and authoritarian interventions (Carlin et al., 2014; Cisterna et al., 2022).

However, experiencing climate extreme events may distance citizens from democratic institutions without producing a broader democratic disconnect, since it can open opportunities for extra-institutional democratic engagement. Povitkina et al. (2025), for instance, find that natural disasters are associated with increases in civil society participation, political mobilisation, and freedom of expression, which they understand as a combination of contestation of existing governments and the use of alternative sources of information. Khurana et al. (2022) similarly show that flood incidents, while inducing non-democratic

behaviour from governments, also drive citizens to demand more democracy. A decline in institutional trust or participation should therefore not automatically be read as a broader withdrawal from democratic life. We thus distinguish institutional democratic disconnect, characterised by weakened trust and participation in formal institutions (e.g., voting, political organisations), from broader forms of democratic disconnect, which include withdrawal from extra-institutional engagement—i.e., protest, mutual aid, collective action (Albareda & Müller, 2025).

In this context, the link between democratic disconnection, emotions, and climate extreme events needs to be further researched empirically and theoretically. This lack of understanding, we argue, is partially attributable to the broader context of environmental depoliticisation in which these events unfold. Indeed, critical scholars have long warned that environmental issues are frequently depoliticised, i.e., treating climate change as a technical challenge rather than a political issue, obscuring questions of power, justice, and democratic contestation (Kenis & Lievens, 2015; Machin, 2020; Swyngedouw, 2011). This tendency extends to climate extreme events themselves, which continue to be approached predominantly through the lenses of risk management, short-term adaptation, and emergency disaster response (Boudet et al., 2020; Hai & Perlman, 2022; Wappenhans et al., 2024). At the same time, emotions, whether linked to climate extreme events or environmental issues more broadly, may risk exacerbating this depoliticisation through dominant framings that focus heavily on individualization to the detriment of more collective and structural framings (Davidson, 2024; Knops & Silberzahn, 2025). Yet climate extreme events generate collective affective responses and practices—including care, solidarity, and feelings of shared vulnerability—which remain comparatively neglected despite their democratic implications. Understanding how such practices emerge, whose needs they recognise, and how they interact with broader socio-political narratives and structures is crucial for explaining when climate extreme events foster or undermine democratic engagement, institutional or extra-institutional. The remainder of this article discusses denial as a case that sits at the nexus of affect, climate extremes and democratic (dis)connect, before turning to practices of care to further explore this relationship.

3. Institutionalised Denial: Emotions, Material Interests, and Political Inaction in the Face of Climate Extremes

Researchers have documented the material and political-economy drivers for political inaction in response to accelerating climate change, through concepts such as carbon-democracy (Mitchell, 2009) and fossil-capitalism (Malm, 2013). However, a materialist reading alone does not explain how inaction is maintained in the context of increasing climate extreme events, particularly in liberal representative democracies that have become highly aware of environmental change. While this paradox is often explained through an information deficit hypothesis (Suldovsky, 2017), which argues that inaction stems from a lack of adequate information, an affective reading centred on denial offers a different perspective. By sustaining affective disconnection from shared environmental threats, denial erodes the conditions of collective political life on which democratic engagement depends, allowing the depoliticised environmental status quo to be maintained.

Denial, understood as a socially and culturally constructed practice of quietism and numbness, involves emotions such as fear, hope, and anxiety (Norgaard, 2011). It describes the multiple ways in which societies navigate the gap between climate knowledge and its disconnection from everyday political, social, and

private life. However, these affective disconnections are neither politically neutral nor separable from material conditions and socio-political structures. Silberzahn (2022) explains how our socio-political relations to climate change are shaped by broader processes of (de)sensitization that are linked to deep-seated power structures which have historically (de)legitimized the expression of emotions and take place via certain "de-sensitization" apparatuses (such as the individual car). In other words: how we feel about climate change is embedded in macro-level structures, sustained by capitalist and neoliberal ideologies, which sometimes encourage affective responses, such as optimism or affective disconnection in the form of denial. It is therefore not simply a lack of knowledge or concern that allows us to ignore the contradictions and threats posed by the climate crisis, but a collectively shaped affective dissonance, which is actively produced and maintained through social and ideological processes, and which has political objectives. Drecker (2025) further shows how such affective dissonance is mobilised by political groups seeking to protect identity and power, as denial helps to maintain ordinary lives and structural conditions unchanged.

From this perspective, denial can be understood as a specific affective register of democratic disconnect through which withdrawal becomes normalised, naturalised, and reproduced over time, even amid mounting material evidence. Denial therefore helps to explain why disconnection persists and resists climate disruption. In her sociological work, Norgaard (2011) draws on Cohen's (2001) three types of denial—literal, interpretative, and implicatory—to develop the concept of "socially organised denial", showing how a Norwegian community maintained ordinary life despite high levels of climate awareness. Building on Oreskes and Conway's (2010) account of the organised network behind climate doubt-mongering, Brulle (2020) extends this to the institutional scale, illustrating how opposition to climate action is structurally organised across corporations, think tanks, trade associations, philanthropic foundations, media outlets, and political actors. Institutionalised denial can thus be understood as the failure to translate available information into adequate political action, which is often sustained by actors with a structural interest in preserving the status quo.

In this light, one could expect that climate extreme events—and their lived, material, and affective experiences—may act as moments of rupture in denial, disrupting ordinary life and, as such, open spaces for democratic engagement. Yet, such heightened awareness is typically "positive but quite short-lived," often fading within a few months (Crellin & MacNeil, 2023; Shao & Hao, 2024). Moreover, feelings of abandonment, anger, and injustice that follow climate extremes may expose institutional failures and foster democratic engagement, while also deepening withdrawal and distrust. Sociological and political research has shown that in some communities, climate extreme events reinforce rather than undermine "socially organized denial" (Norgaard, 2011), where residents anchor their understanding in past experiences and rely on previous resilience to disasters to project continuity, and discount scientific predictions of change (Bowden et al., 2019). In her ethnographic study of communities affected by California's 2018 fires, Boutié (2024) shows how oblivion shaped post-fire community recovery, unveiling a structural tension between a desire to forget and the need to recognize climate change's escalation. Similarly, technologies like air conditioning can enable sensory denial by physically and emotionally insulating individuals from the direct discomfort of extreme heat and disconnecting them from shared global climate threats, leaving those sheltered by such technologies unable to perceive the disruption felt by those without access (Bosca, 2023).

The capacity of climate extreme events to challenge denial depends not only on their material intensity but also on how they are socially, culturally, and politically interpreted (Landrum & Shibo, 2025). Such events

might make climate change more tangible, but do not automatically generate political engagement. Floods, for instance, can trigger strong emotional responses without increasing concern about climate change, particularly when understood as a "normal part of existence" and absorbed into local narratives of resilience and continuity (Bowden et al., 2019). Extreme heat may similarly heighten the salience of climate change in the media and public debate, only for attention to fade once temperatures return to seasonal averages, with coverage often centred on immediate impacts rather than structural causes, political responsibility or long-term solutions. Although climate extremes may temporarily encourage attribution to climate change, these shifts are shaped by the broader socio-political context, which includes electoral dynamics, polarisation and competing narratives (Roxburgh et al., 2019). For example, coverage of the 2022 UK heatwaves foregrounded immediate impacts while giving limited attention to climate solutions or structural responses (Hopke & Wozniak, 2025). The widespread wildfires across Europe in summer 2026 also illustrate that despite media attention to evacuations, destruction, and emergency response, it remains uncertain whether this attention will translate into sustained debate about political responsibilities, structural change, and democratic (dis)engagement (Specht, 2026).

These patterns indicate that the political significance of climate extreme events depends on how causation, responsibility, and possible responses are attributed. Abstract information about the economic costs of disasters may have limited effects on public perceptions unless connected to tangible experiences in people's immediate environments (Shao & Hao, 2024), yet these experiences are socially differentiated, as climate extremes affect groups with unequal exposure, vulnerability, and capacity to recover. Cultural associations also shape interpretation: in Australia, for instance, people more readily associate global warming with "hotter, drier conditions" than with extreme rainfall (Crellin & MacNeil, 2023). Moreover, in the immediate aftermath of a flood, the practical demands of rebuilding, managing insurance, and restoring everyday life may leave little space for reflecting on long-term climate causation (McLennan et al., 2017). Overall, framing climate extreme events around individual resilience, emergency management, or risk mitigation, may reproduce depoliticised forms of environmental governance, restricting opportunities for democratic engagement. Climate extremes can therefore create openings for democratic reconnection, but may also reinforce denial, withdrawal, and mistrust when their structural causes and political responsibilities remain obscured.

Finally, authoritarian and populist political formations have, in certain contexts, been observed to reinforce and weaponize climate-denial (Brulle, 2014; McCarthy, 2019). Some leaders deploy "science-related populism," portraying scientists and environmentalists as out-of-touch elites whose findings conflict with ordinary people's common sense and economic interests (Kim et al., 2025; Meyer, 2024). Climate science is cast as a threat to national sovereignty or traditional ways of life, and "comforting narratives" are being mobilised to justify inaction and deregulation (Meyer, 2024) and engage powerful emotions, such as fear, resentment, and discontent, in ways that make denial feel psychologically protective rather than politically motivated (Kim et al., 2025; McCarthy, 2019). By offering stories that preserve a sense of stability and identity in times of distress, these appeals may encourage followers to discount distressing information about climate change in favour of more reassuring interpretations (Meyer, 2024). Scholars further note that denial is sometimes bound up with the defence of identities, such as masculine hegemony or national pride, where environmentalism is framed as a cultural or personal threat (Jylhä et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2025). Denial is therefore related to climate extreme events and to democratic disconnects in ambivalent ways; the emotions they generate do not straightforwardly create openings for democratic reconnection, because

this process can be absorbed, redirected, or weaponised by the political narratives that sustain it. This ambivalence invites critical reflection on alternative affective practices that can nurture democratic re-engagement, understood in a broad sense, in times of increasingly frequent and intense climate extreme events. The following section turns to practices of care, asking whether and how they can transform affective experiences into collective and democratic action.

4. The Political Potential of Care as Democratic Affect and Practice in Climate Extreme Events

Care encompasses practices through which we maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible (Tronto, 1993; Tronto & Fisher, 1990), involving attentiveness, responsibility, and responsiveness to those cared for (Tronto, 2013). It encompasses two intertwined dimensions: care as affect—the capacity to be moved by others' suffering or environmental degradation—and care as practice—the ongoing, often laborious work of maintaining and repairing the relations that sustain life (Puig de La Bellacasa, 2017; Silberzahn, 2024). In the context of the climate crisis, Carr (2023) describes care as the slow, embodied work of keeping worlds liveable under conditions of increasing disruption, while Puig de La Bellacasa (2012) focuses on "thinking with care" as attending to neglected things, partial connections and the consequences of inaction.

Building on these accounts, we approach care as a sensory, embodied, and relational practice that can redistribute responsibility, build collective obligation, and challenge the depoliticisation of climate events—conceived as a multi-scalar process. Micro-level care, often spontaneous and informal, generates demands upon the institutional contexts that shape it; institutional care, in turn, is only meaningful when responsive to the situated knowledge grassroots practices produce. Drawing on Tronto's (2013) caring democracy and Nguyen et al.'s (2017) care as a political ideal, we treat this relationship as mutually constitutive. Bottom-up care creates conditions for political claims-making, while institutional transformation is necessary to prevent such practices from being exploited or left to reproduce existing inequalities.

Care as sensory and embodied practice manifests in multiple ways relevant to its political potential in the context of climate extremes. First, care can offer embodied, sensorial involvement with the rhythms of more-than-human worlds, opening up an experience of time that challenges the productivist, future-oriented temporality characteristic of techno-managerial environmental governance. Puig de La Bellacasa (2015), for example, develops an idea of "care time" by discussing the time to repair, support and maintain life through conceptual and historical readings of soil. Kenner (2021) examines the care practices of asthma sufferers navigating unbreathable atmospheres, raising the possibility that embodied attunement to environmental harm can become a foundation for political awareness, even when it begins as an individual practice. In the context of climate extremes, care can manifest as sensory and embodied attentiveness to damaged environments and disrupted lives, from overflowing rivers to ash-covered forests. Sturman et al. (2026) show how Australian communities' embodied witnessing of animal suffering during the Black Summer fires—hearing and seeing wildlife burn—catalysed spontaneous collective mobilisation to care for wild and domesticated animals abandoned by formal disaster responses. Such attunement, likely to become more common as climate extremes intensify, can challenge the sensory denial enabled by technologies, and the broader structures of environmental depoliticisation that sustain affective disconnection.

Second, care as relational practice may counter the erosion of social ties and mutual recognition, creating conditions for redistributing care responsibilities, building collective obligation, and fostering democratic (re)connection. After climate extreme events such as floods, fires, and heatwaves, care manifests as mutual aid and informal support through spontaneous networks of assistance (see Carr, 2023). Atkinson et al. (2018) discuss how, when state and market-led responses to climate change fail, local groups offer alternative governance pathways by building trust through reciprocal encounters. As widely documented by French regional and local press, the 2026 Gironde wildfires gave way to citizen-led emergency governance: as firefighting capacities were stretched thin, farmers, residents, and volunteers mobilised equipment and logistical support for evacuees (Cabot & Gogé, 2026). Care can also catalyse collective action and restorative justice (Lizarralde et al., 2025). In her ethnographic study of Puerto Rican disaster managers after Hurricane María, Jahn (2025) shows how care took horizontal forms—cash assistance, community events, legal advocacy, deep listening, challenging institutional notions of deservingness and privilege. Similarly, Sims et al. (2009) find that after the Hull floods in the UK, residents cared for each other in the absence of much local authority support, revealing care relations rooted in longstanding place attachment and exposing the limits of formal institutional response. Where democratic disconnect manifests as eroded shared purpose and collective belonging, as Sullivan (2021) and Castiglione (2024) describe, these examples illustrate how care as relational practice can help rebuild the social ties through which collective life is sustained. More fundamentally, they reveal an affective connective tissue that "constitutes a feeling with, rather than a feeling for others" (Hobart & Kneese, 2020, p. 2 as cited in Jahn, 2025, p. 32), highlighting care's democratic potential to reshape relationships, obligations, and power within liberal democratic structures.

Third, care can operate as a political reframing that challenges the systematic depoliticisation of climate change. In the context of climate extreme events, depoliticisation is reinforced when disasters are naturalised, when risk is managed through techno-managerial logics, and when institutional denial obscures responsibility for the social and political conditions that make some populations more exposed than others. Care can interrupt this logic, raising the fundamentally political questions across human and non-human worlds of who cares, for whom, under what conditions, and at whose expense (Puig de La Bellacasa, 2012; Silberzahn, 2024). It politicises inequality by linking embodied suffering to unequal structures of power, neglect, and responsibility. Rather than reducing environments to objects of control or extraction, care foregrounds interdependence, reciprocity, and the conditions under which life is made possible, making the institutional, colonial, and racialised processes that produce harm and uneven protection visible (see Sturman et al., 2026). Climate extreme events thus become not merely moments of environmental disruption, but sites of political contestation over justice, accountability, and democratic conflict where care can operate as a democratic affect of reconnection (see also Puig de La Bellacasa, 2017). This reframing is particularly important in the context of climate extremes that are shaped by colonial legacies, racial inequality, and governmental responsibility, which, as Jahn (2025) shows, are obscured when disasters are merely treated as "natural."

5. Between Co-Optation and Emancipation: Caring for Care's Democratic Potential

The dimensions of care, as a sensory and embodied process, relational practice, and political reframing, carry a democratic potential in the context of climate extreme events. Yet this potential is not inherently democratic; it can be co-opted, instrumentalised, and reproduce the inequalities it seeks to challenge, which ultimately undermines democratic life.

Care as an affective disposition may produce excessive emotional investment leading to eco-paralysis, encompassing overwhelm or apathy in the face of ecological destruction. While cultivating compassion as a driver of critical hope may mitigate this paralysis (Börner, 2023), care's democratic potential is further undermined by the unequal distribution of care itself. As a relational practice, it has been criticised for reproducing racial, class, and gendered inequalities (Lawson, 2007) and for being undervalued and exploited under neoliberalism (Federici, 2012; Hartman, 2016). Alonso Moro et al. (2025), for example, show how social workers, particularly women, face a surge in professional and domestic care obligations when institutional support fails, highlighting the gendered dimensions of care work. The sensory attentiveness care cultivates can also be unevenly distributed as those sufficiently sheltered from climate extreme events by technology may fail to perceive or feel the disruption experienced by those without such access (Bosca, 2023). Similarly, when care manifests as volunteer aid in affected communities, it may paradoxically reinforce a situation where structural responsibilities remain insufficiently pointed out because it relies on individuals and their free time to sustain recovery efforts (see Carr, 2023). The emotional dimensions of disaster recovery are similarly uneven and rarely matched by institutional recognition of these affective needs, leaving individuals to negotiate loss alone (Morrice, 2013).

This risk becomes explicit when care as political reframing is co-opted to support exclusionary politics. Disasters can intensify internal solidarity while simultaneously drawing boundaries around whose suffering counts, which environments are worth protecting, and whose vulnerability is recognised as legitimate. Care and solidarity mobilised after climate extreme events can therefore reinforce colonial and racialised logics, rendering marginalised groups passive and dependent while casting others as rescuers (Hutchison, 2014). This risk is particularly acute under authoritarian and far-right politics, where rhetoric of protection and care can be weaponised to legitimise coercive intervention, border enforcement, or the scapegoating of minorities as threats to the community being cared for (see McCarthy, 2019).

These risks of co-optation and instrumentalisation make it essential to attend critically to the conditions under which care's potential for democratic connection can be realised. This process begins with asking who bears the burden of care practices and under what conditions, which points to the need for equitable distribution of care responsibilities and for institutional recognition of care work. Subsequently, care's democratic potential depends on its inclusivity and whether it extends beyond the boundaries of the nation, current generations, and humans to recognise the interdependencies that connect human and more-than-human worlds across time and space (Serafini, 2021; Silberzahn, 2024). Finally, care requires democratic accountability across scales. The risks of co-optation and instrumentalisation are exacerbated when institutions claim to care without being responsive to those who bear its burdens, or when grassroots practices are absorbed into managerial frameworks that strip them off of their political content (see Carr, 2023). Realising care's democratic potential therefore requires a voice for those who bear its burdens and institutional structures that are transformed to be responsive to that voice. As Murphy (2015) shows, even well-intentioned care projects can serve colonising purposes when they override the situated knowledges and self-defined needs of the communities they claim to serve.

6. Conclusion

In a context of environmental depoliticisation—the practices through which environmental issues are stripped off of their politically unequal and conflictual dimensions—this article makes two contributions.

First, it develops a research agenda at the intersection of political science literature on democratic disconnect, emotions, and studies on climate extreme events. Second, it argues that the lived and affective experiences of climate extremes hold potential for democratic (re)connection but that this relationship operates in ambivalent ways.

Our literature review highlights three important aspects of this relationship. First, climate extreme events and their emotions must be situated within the context of institutionalized denial, as a socially constructed practice that temporarily shelters individuals from the causes and consequences of climate change, and should be examined in relation to democratic disconnect, understood not only as estrangement from formal institutions but also disconnection from collective responsibility, political agency, and meaningful avenues for action. The affective experiences triggered by climate extremes may create openings out of denial and toward reconnection, but they may also reinforce democratic disconnect by fostering apathy, withdrawal, and mistrust. The review also stresses the importance of how climate extreme events are framed—by media and publics—and the ensuing processes of blame, causal attribution, and identification of political responsibility. Further research should focus on the political narratives that circulate around, and are sometimes weaponized, during climate extreme events. Overall, against the expectation that climate extreme events may act as de facto instances of politicisation by turning climate change into a tangible experience, we find that they may reinforce the existing dominance of depoliticised eco-managerial politics and risk-management culture, institutionalized denial, thereby reproducing the conditions of disconnection they might otherwise help to unsettle.

In this context, we situate care as a democratic affect of (re)connection in the face of increasingly frequent climate extreme events. As a sensory and embodied practice, care can counter the affective disconnection sustained by denial, attuning individuals and communities to the material conditions of their shared world in ways that make the consequences of climate change tangible and politically legible. As a relational practice, it redistributes responsibility and rebuilds collective bonds, challenging the idea of the autonomous citizen. As a political reframing, care can open spaces for democratic contestation that depoliticised governance forecloses, revealing power relations, inequalities, and colonial legacies underlying whose vulnerability is recognised and whose care work is valued. Care is thus not merely ethical but a practice reconnecting affective, relational, and political ties eroded by neoliberal democracy.

Yet, as we also discuss, care's democratic potential depends on how it is organised, whose needs and voices are recognised, and whether existing inequalities are challenged or reproduced. The same care practices that build solidarity in the aftermath of climate extreme events can also reinforce nationalist and exclusionary logics, exploit already marginalised groups, or reproduce colonial relations of dependency. Understanding the specific conditions under which care may act as a moment of democratic reconnection is therefore central to research which attempts to bring together climate extremes, emotions, and democratic engagement.

Finally, our article also presents future research directions. To investigate the politicizing potential of climate extreme events and their emotions, and specifically in relation to democratic disconnects, careful empirical research is essential. Future empirical work should attend to the collective, relational, and contested dimensions of climate extreme emotions—asking not only how people feel, but what caused these feelings in the first place, how they travel, get organized, and sometimes become the grounds for democratic renewal.

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