



RETOOL

Strengthening Democratic
Governance For Climate Transitions

Policy Brief | July 2026

Keeping Climate Commitments under Parliamentary Control: Strengthening national parliaments for climate governance in the European Union

By Aron Buzogány, Vlad Surdea-Hernea, Alice Brawley-Chesworth and Maiu Lauring



Funded by
the European Union

Key Messages

- National parliaments have increasingly given more attention to climate change. Our research shows that climate-related statements made by MPs rose from less than 2% of parliamentary debate in the early 2000s to between 10% and 12% by 2020. Yet, at the same time, the tone and depth of debate still vary widely across Europe, as does the actual parliamentary capacity to scrutinize the implementation of any climate policy.
- Parliaments are responding to the climate crisis through at least four forms of democratic innovation. Commitment mechanisms translate long-term objectives into framework laws, emission budgets and sectoral targets. Oversight mechanisms extend scrutiny beyond the adoption of legislation. Information mechanisms provide expertise independent of the executive. Participatory mechanisms create routes for citizens to place issues on the parliamentary agenda between elections.
- Critically, the adoption of measures designed to tackle climate change remains uneven. Eleven EU member states have adopted comprehensive climate framework laws, while a further eight have weaker or partial frameworks and another eight have none. However, only five of the eleven comprehensive laws actually provide differentiated targets by sector. Seven member states use overall emission budgets, but only five include green-budgeting provisions in their national climate-framework architecture. Finally, eighteen member states have established climate advisory bodies, although their mandates and resources vary considerably.^[1]
- We propose seven action points for national parliaments and the institutions that support them:
 - Build a connected portfolio of parliamentary climate innovations.
 - Translate long-term targets into traceable commitments.
 - Make climate scrutiny part of the ordinary parliamentary cycle.
 - Secure independent analytical capacity.
 - Give citizen input a visible parliamentary pathway.
 - Align accountability with administrative authority.
 - Support parliamentary peer learning through EU institutions, bilateral contacts between parliaments and inter-parliamentary networks.

The central lesson is that, ultimately, democratic innovations attempted within parliaments have the greatest prospect of strengthening climate democracy only when they become part of everyday parliamentary work and retain support across political divisions.

1. Introduction

National parliaments are at the intersection where long-term climate commitments meet the short horizons of electoral politics. They are the main actors responsible for adopting ambitious climate legislation and for scrutinizing government action, while also providing a public arena for competing interests. The climate transition places unusual demands on these functions because parliaments must monitor policies whose effects unfold over decades, while remaining responsive to current electorates.

Against this backdrop, we examined how national parliaments across the European Union have adapted to these demands through a comparative mapping of all EU member states and case studies of Austria, Estonia and Ireland (for details, see [1]). The mapping covers parliamentary discourse, climate laws, institutional

resources and procedural innovation, while the case studies draw, in depth, on documents and interviews to examine how selected mechanisms operate in practice.

This policy brief presents the main findings and draws some lessons for strengthening representative democratic institutions by considering several institutional models, whose effects depend on sustained political commitment and careful integration into established parliamentary processes.

Parliamentary climate innovation refers to new practices, procedures, technologies or institutional arrangements that are adopted by representative institutions for climate governance. These innovations do not have to be entirely novel, but are new to a particular institution or policy area. Our analysis distinguishes four functional routes ^{[1][2]}.

Route	Democratic problem	Illustrative mechanisms
Commitment	Long-term objectives can lose force across electoral cycles	Climate framework laws, interim emission budgets and sectoral ceilings
Oversight	Scrutiny often centres on law adoption, with limited attention to implementation	Post-legislative review, committee hearings and green-budget analysis
Information	Executives hold greater administrative and technical capacity	Climate advisory bodies, parliamentary research services and budget offices
Participation	Elections provide limited opportunities for continuing citizen input	Digital initiatives, e-petitions and deliberative forums

2. Key findings from across the European Union

First, **climate change has moved from the margins of parliamentary debate into its mainstream**. In most countries included in our analysis, climate-related statements increased from between 1% and 2% of parliamentary discourse in the early 2000s to between 10% and 12% by 2020. National patterns converged around this higher level after 2018, although the tone continued to differ as several Central and Eastern European parliaments combined high salience with increasingly negative or sceptical framing after 2020^[1].

Greater attention therefore creates demand for institutional innovation, although supportive debate and effective policy require more. Eleven member states have comprehensive climate framework laws, eight have weaker or partial versions, and eight have none. Five of the eleven comprehensive laws assign distinct targets to economic sectors, while seven member states use overall emission budgets. Long-term ambition is consequently often separated from the interim milestones needed for regular accountability^{[1][3]}.

Second, **legal commitments do not ensure implementation**, as climate-policy output varies even among active climate legislatures and many member states have adopted fewer than thirty climate policies. The gap

between law adoption and policy output points to differences in administrative capacity and coordination, which require sustained political attention^[1].

Third, parliaments differ substantially in the **resources and expertise** available for climate scrutiny. Eighteen member states have a climate advisory body, although the existence of a council alone cannot establish its independence or influence. Comparable evidence on analytical quality is also scarce, while formal green-budgeting provisions within national climate-framework architecture appear in only five member states under the classification used in our report^{[1][4]}. The report's budget-and-staff-based institutional-capacity index also bears no simple relationship to climate-policy output, suggesting that organisational practice influences how resources are used^[1].

Finally, the **four forms of parliamentary innovation are complementary** because each addresses a different democratic weakness and requires a defined route into parliamentary decisions. Investment in one route alone leaves gaps elsewhere, since commitment mechanisms need scrutiny and participatory mechanisms need follow-up^[1].



3. Parliamentary responses to climate change

Estonia: Opening the agenda through digital participation

Estonia's citizens' initiative platform, rahvaalgatus.ee, lowers barriers to parliamentary participation through digital infrastructure because citizens and permanent residents aged sixteen or older can submit an initiative after collecting 1,000 signatures. Secure digital signatures, a short co-creation period and public committee replies have made the platform an established route for placing climate concerns on the parliamentary agenda^[1].

Its strongest effects concern agenda-setting and public debate, with civic capacity developing through use of the platform. Yet the report estimates that only between 5% and 10% of initiatives resulted in a direct legislative decision, and later outcomes are often difficult to trace. Dependence on private donations and ad hoc public allocations further shows why accessible participation requires stable support and a clear route to parliamentary follow-up.

Austria: Building climate expertise into budget scrutiny

Austria's Parliamentary Budget Office was established in 2012 to strengthen independent fiscal analysis and has since acquired climate competence

through parliamentary demand and external expert networks. Its economists now assess carbon-pricing measures, distributional effects and the plausibility of government claims, which strengthens parliament's capacity to assess executive information^[1].

Its analysis of Austria's 2022 eco-social tax reform identified areas where government disclosure was insufficient for parliament to evaluate environmental performance against stated objectives. Although this work benefits from a small impartial team with cross-party support, the absence of a comprehensive statutory mandate leaves the office dependent on government cooperation for information.

Ireland: Creating cumulative pressure for climate policy implementation

Ireland's 2021 Climate Act amendments combined emission budgets and sectoral ceilings with reporting duties, independent advice and parliamentary appearances by ministers and relevant senior officials. Interviews with civil servants, elected officials and civil society actors found that each accountability mechanism had limited force on its own, while political attention and established departmental priorities remained decisive^[1].

However, these mechanisms create

recurring occasions on which inaction can be questioned, as progress reports, advisory reviews, committee hearings and parliamentary questions can return climate performance to the political agenda. Their cumulative effect may increase the cost of delay, while the tension between long-term commitments and current electoral priorities remains.

Across the cases discussed here, parliamentary innovation works through practice as much as design and is strongest when new functions enter established parliamentary routines that feed into decisions for which political actors remain accountable.



4. Conclusions and policy recommendations

National parliaments are innovating at different speeds, with substantial gaps in framework legislation, interim accountability, green-budget integration and independent expertise. The cases discussed above indicate that political support and integration into routine parliamentary practice shape the contribution of each mechanism, whereas isolated reforms address only part of the problem. Connected institutional portfolios can make delay visible and give citizen input a recognised answer. They can also support contestation with independent evidence.

We therefore recommend the following action points to strengthen the capacity of representative institutions to make and monitor climate decisions:

1. **Build a connected portfolio of parliamentary climate innovations.** National parliaments should assess their weaknesses across commitment, oversight, information and participation, then connect mechanisms so that framework laws receive scrutiny and participation platforms have a defined route into committee work ^[1].
2. **Translate long-term targets into traceable commitments.** Governments and parliaments should strengthen framework

laws through interim emission budgets, sectoral responsibilities and scheduled review, and ministers should publicly explain missed or revised targets with comparable evidence^{[1][3]}.

3. **Make climate scrutiny part of the ordinary parliamentary cycle.**

Parliamentary budget committees should link climate oversight to annual budgets and implementation reports, including regular hearings and post-legislative review. Parliamentary analytical services should assess climate effects alongside the fiscal consequences of expenditure^{[1][5]}
[6].

4. **Secure independent analytical capacity.**

National parliaments should guarantee analytical services predictable resources and safeguards for independence, while governments provide reliable access to executive data. These services should publish transparent methods and serve all political groups, and smaller parliaments can rely on skilled generalists linked to external expert networks^[1].

5. **Give citizen input a visible parliamentary pathway.**

National parliaments should require time-bound committee handling and reasoned public replies, followed by continued outcome tracking. Stable funding should

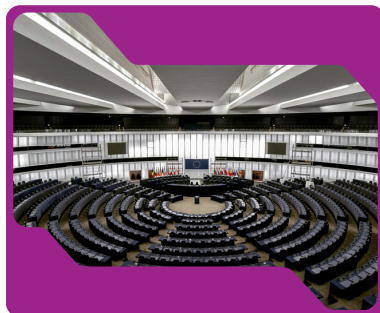
protect co-creation support and low entry thresholds. Parliaments should consider whether initiatives with exceptional support need further deliberation or explanation^{[1][7]}.

6. **Align accountability with administrative authority.**

Parliamentary committees should identify which minister or department controls the relevant policy instruments, and national governments should coordinate shared responsibilities. Emission budgets and independent reviews should operate alongside committee hearings and public progress reports. Accountability loses force when questions reach institutions without authority to act^{[1][8]}.

7. **Support parliamentary peer learning.**

EU institutions and inter-parliamentary networks should facilitate staff exchanges and shared analytical methods so that cooperation strengthens capacity where national resources remain limited^[1].



References:

- [1] Buzogány, A., Surdea-Hernea, V., Brawley-Chesworth, A. & Luring, M. (2025). *Representative Democratic Institutions and Innovations at National Level*. RETOOL. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17527008>
- [2] Brawley-Chesworth, A., Moore, B., Torney, D. & Oberthür, S. (2024). *D2.1 Analytical Framework*. RETOOL. <https://retoolproject.eu/publications/deliverables>
- [3] Averchenkova, A., Higham, C., Chan, T. & Keuschnigg, I. (2024). *Impacts of Climate Framework Laws. Lessons from Germany, Ireland and New Zealand*. Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment, London School of Economics and Political Science. <https://www.lse.ac.uk/granthaminstitute/publication/impacts-of-climate-framework-laws/>
- [4] Evans, N., Kocher, D., Kögel, N. & Duwe, M. (2023). *The landscape of national climate framework laws in Europe. A status update*. Ecologic Institute. <https://www.ecologic.eu/19399>
- [5] de Vrieze, F. & Norton, P. (2020). The significance of post-legislative scrutiny. *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 26(3), 349-361. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13572334.2020.1780008>
- [6] Fasone, C. (2021). Do independent fiscal institutions enhance parliamentary accountability in the Eurozone? *Politics and Governance*, 9(3), 135-144. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v9i3.4244>
- [7] Vooglaid, K. M. & Randma-Liiv, T. (2022). The Estonian Citizens' Initiative Portal. Drivers and barriers of institutionalized e-participation. In T. Randma-Liiv & V. Lember, eds., *Engaging Citizens in Policy Making. e-Participation Practices in Europe*, pp. 104-119. Edward Elgar. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800374362.00014>
- [8] Higham, C., Averchenkova, A., Setzer, J. & Koehl, A. (2021). *Accountability mechanisms in climate change framework laws*. Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment, London School of Economics and Political Science.

Images: unsplash

About the authors:

Aron Buzogány is Associate Professor at the Institute of Forest, Environmental and Natural Resource Policy at BOKU University. His research focuses on European environmental and energy politics, public administration and democratic innovation. He leads BOKU's work in the RETOOL project.

Vlad Surdea-Hernea is a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute of Forest, Environmental and Natural Resource Policy at BOKU University. His research examines climate policy, political behaviour and the long-term effects of political institutions.

Alice Brawley-Chesworth is a postdoctoral researcher in environmental policy and politics at Dublin City University's School of Law and Government. Her research focuses on climate policy, institutional change, infrastructure and social justice.

Maiu Lauring is an analyst at the Praxis Centre for Policy Studies, where she works on civil society and governance. Her work includes public participation, democratic innovation and the development of citizen engagement processes.