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The republican sustainable state as a framework for democratizing sustainable consumption governance

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to debates on the need and potential for transforming the democratic state under conditions of planetary crisis by examining the underexplored field of sustainable consumption governance. While demand-side mitigation has gained prominence in climate policy, its democratic dimension remains poorly theorized and undervalued. Most existing strategies reflect the dominance of a liberal state paradigm—centered on market mechanisms, individual responsibility, and behavioral nudging—while failing to address broader questions of democratic legitimacy, justice, and collective agency. In response, the article develops a normative and institutional entry point to this debate grounded in green republicanism, a political theory that redefines freedom as non-domination and situates sustainability within the pursuit of the ecological common good. Through this lens, we assess how liberal democracies must reimagine democratic processes and state capacities if they are to facilitate lifestyle change that is socially just, ecologically sufficient, and democratically legitimate. Drawing on the consumption corridors concept, we then use green republicanism to imagine what implementation pathways democratic consumption governance, rooted in impactful participatory and deliberative mechanisms and strengthened provisioning systems, could look like. While acknowledging critiques—such as concerns about paternalism, representation, and feasibility—we contend that a republican reorientation of the state would be necessary for overcoming the democratic and sustainability deficits of current consumption policy.

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Introduction: sustainable consumption and the democratic state – toward a republican turn in demand-side governance

This article contributes to current debates on the need and potential for transforming the state in response to socio-ecological crises by focusing on a domain that remains underexplored in the literature on the sustainable state: the governance of consumption and lifestyle change. It engages with recent calls to examine how state institutions, practices, and identities must evolve to address sustainability challenges not only through technological and infrastructural means, but also through the cultivation of democratic legitimacy, social justice, and ecological responsibility (Bornemann, Christen, and Burger 2025; Hausknost and Hammond 2020). In particular, the article interrogates how sustainable consumption policy—often treated as a technical or behavioral field of intervention—reveals deeper tensions in the normative and functional orientation of the liberal-democratic state under conditions of planetary crisis. By outlining a “republican sustainable state” (RSS), it develops a normative-institutional specification of the state capacities and institutional dimensions required to support, enable, and actively promote more progressive sustainable consumption governance in a democratically legitimate way.

Over the past decade, demand-side strategies have gained increasing traction in climate and sustainability governance. High-level frameworks such as the European Green Deal and the Sixth

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Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) have emphasized the importance of lifestyle and consumption-related changes to achieve mitigation targets in the short- and medium-term (European Commission 2019; IPCC 2022). Building upon earlier policy instruments—ranging from eco-labeling and consumer education to household energy-efficiency improvements (Cohen 2010)—the concept of “demand-side mitigation” now consolidates diverse research and policy agendas aimed at reducing final energy demand and reshaping consumption patterns through behavioral, infrastructural, and systemic interventions (Creutzig et al. 2018; Mundaca, Ürge-Vorsatz, and Wilson 2019; Roy et al. 2021).

Concurrently, a diverse array of alternative policy frameworks has emerged that critique prevailing consumption models and systems. These include, among others, consumption corridors (Fuchs, Sahakian, et al. 2021), well-being economies (Fioramonti et al. 2022), degrowth (Kallis et al. 2020), the Doughnut Economy (Raworth 2017), and proposals for universal basic services (Coote and Percy 2020). Though differing in scope and emphasis, these approaches share a commitment to integrating ecological boundaries with social foundations, while identifying structural barriers to transformation within current economic and political systems. Importantly, they tend to advance a comprehensive understanding of sustainability, one that moves beyond emissions reduction to encompass social justice, equity, inclusion, and participatory governance – cornerstones of modern democratic institutions (Koch and Fritz 2014; Lorek and Fuchs 2013).

Despite these developments, the role of democracy within the governance of sustainable consumption and lifestyle change remains undertheorized and underexamined. While it is commonly asserted that “sustainability transitions must be organized democratically,” societal discourse in many European countries treats democratic principles and mechanisms as normative aspirations or procedural adjuncts, rather than as constitutive dimensions of sustainability governance (Eckersley 2004; Pickering, Bäckstrand, and Schlosberg 2020). In the specific domain of demand-side governance, liberal-democratic states have largely approached behavioral change through mechanisms of market systems, choice architecture, and informational steering, often relegating deeper questions of collective will-formation, legitimacy, and democratic control to the background (Gumbert 2022; Isenhour 2019).

This article takes this democratic deficit as a central point of departure. We argue that contemporary sustainable consumption governance reflects the dominant paradigm of the liberal “sustainable” state—characterized, in the consumption and lifestyle domain, by individualization, responsabilization, and preference for non-coercive instruments (Blühdorn 2020; Maniates 2001).¹ In doing so, it neglects not only questions of power and politics (Fuchs et al. 2016; Isenhour 2019) but also the institutional and normative capacities of the state to facilitate collective forms of preference transformation, public engagement, and democratic legitimacy (Bohn 2025; Gumbert 2022). In light of the current “return of the state” in sustainability debates—fueled by mounting socio-ecological crises, limitations of global governance, and renewed interest in statist capacity (Bornemann, Christen, and Burger 2025; Hausknost 2020)—we suggest that a republican transformation of the state would be needed. Our perspective is not concerned with marginal behavioral tweaks within largely unchanged market infrastructures. It targets a democratic governance model for consumption: institutionalized collective will-formation over contested limits, constitutional/legal embedding of sustainability obligations, and a restructuring of provisioning systems that shape which consumption options are socially produced in the first place.

The article pursues its objectives in three steps. First, it contends that democracy must be understood as a constitutive condition of governing contested limits, rather than a procedural constraint. Against this background, we critically review how democratic concerns are addressed in the literature on sustainable consumption and demand-side mitigation and briefly examine liberal trajectories in consumption policy to support the democratic deficit thesis. Second, the article introduces and discusses green republicanism as a comprehensive theoretical lens on the sustainable state and a coherent framework that could enable more democratically legitimate and ecologically grounded forms of sustainable consumption governance (Barry 2012; Frémaux 2019; Pettit 1997). Finally, the article elaborates on the normative and institutional implications of green republicanism for the design of sustainable consumption policy and governance by linking the theoretical perspective to the discussion of a systemic and transformative consumption governance approach, namely consumption corridors (Di Giulio and Fuchs 2014; Fuchs, Sahakian, et al. 2021).

By pursuing these lines of inquiry, we seek to advance both diagnostic and constructive perspectives on the sustainable state and on sustainable consumption governance. We bring an explicit state-theoretical lens and green republicanism to bear on demand-side governance, integrating (1) republican freedom as non-domination, (2) deliberative/participatory will-formation, and (3) consumption corridors as a governance model into a justificatory and institutional framework. This moves beyond restating the democratic aspiration underlying consumption corridors by specifying the state-side capacities, legal anchoring, and accountability architecture required for democratizing transformative consumption governance. In doing so, the article contributes to emerging efforts to theorize a potential for the sustainabilization of the state (Bornemann, Christen, and Burger 2025; Bornemann and Christen 2019; Rose 2025), while grounding sustainable consumption governance in a robust understanding of democratic legitimacy and justice.

Diagnosing the democratic deficit in sustainable consumption governance

A growing body of research has underscored the importance of sustainable consumption and lifestyle change in achieving climate-mitigation goals (Creutzig et al. 2018; Roy et al. 2021). Yet, in both academic debates and policy practice, the democratic dimension of such transformations remains significantly underdeveloped. This section argues that democratic considerations are largely treated as contextual or procedural features, rather than as constitutive elements of governance—and that current policy approaches reproduce the liberal sustainable state's emphasis on individual choice and soft steering mechanisms, while bypassing deeper questions of institutional change, collective agency, and political legitimacy that societies would need to answer for an effective sustainability transformation.

Democracy in sustainable consumption and demand-side mitigation research

Within the sustainable consumption (SC) literature, democracy often appears only at the margins. Scholars mostly invoke it in relation to civil society engagement or bottom-up initiatives, such as the simplicity movement (Alexander 2016), environmental alternative action organizations² (Deflorian 2023), or participatory consumer initiatives (Hector 2018). Here, democracy is interpreted as grass-roots empowerment or reskilling—an enabler of localized action rather than a systemic governance principle. A second strand uses democracy as a critical frame to expose power asymmetries or limitations in market-driven approaches. This emphasis includes critiques of corporate influence over consumer autonomy (Doyle, Farrell, and Goodman 2020; Echegaray 2016) and concerns about democratic control in emergent sectors such as the sharing economy or food systems (Frenken 2017; Gumbert 2019). Alternative paradigms relating to consumption, such as degrowth, highlight democratic values but rarely articulate how they would be institutionally embedded in state governance (Berg and Hukkinen 2011). More comprehensive treatments of democracy in this context are rare. An early exception is Cohen's (2006) call to understand sustainable consumption research as a form of "democratic expertise" or counter-expertise, capable of challenging elite economic and political institutions and supporting under-resourced civic actors. More recent exceptions include proposals to democratize food governance (Kanerva 2022) or global value chains (Lamla and Laser 2016), but these remain conceptually fragmented with respect to democratic practices and institutions. Overall, the democratic question is undertheorized even in critical strands of SC literature. This reflects a broader neglect of power that Fuchs et al. (2016) trace from the late 1960s and 1970s roots of sustainable consumption thinking through to the post-Rio sustainable development agenda of the 1990s, where attention often centered on technical choice, individual restraint, efficiency, education, green consumerism, or better science informing better policy rather than on the instrumental, structural, and discursive power relations shaping consumption systems. The limited engagement with democracy and the state can therefore be read as part of this wider depoliticization of sustainable consumption.

The demand-side mitigation literature reflects a similar pattern. Key contributions in this growing field (e.g., Creutzig et al. 2016, 2018; Mundaca, Ürge-Vorsatz, and Wilson 2019; Roy et al. 2021)

typically focus on modeling behavioral change, efficiency gains, and carbon impacts, while offering little reflection on democratic legitimacy, public deliberation and participation, or the political conditions under which such changes are acceptable or feasible. Where democracy is mentioned, it is often as background context (e.g., liberal rights as constraints on stronger regulation, see Jackson and Smith 2018) or as part of general calls for participation (Campos and Marín-González 2020; Stoddard et al. 2021). In short, there is little engagement with democracy as a structuring condition of governance, or as a site of transformation in its own right.

The limits of liberal consumer governance

These scholarly omissions mirror larger mainstream trajectories in sustainable consumption policies, particularly in liberal democracies, which have long relied on a familiar toolkit: information provision, education, incentives, and, more recently, behavioral nudging. These tools have been designed to respect individual autonomy while subtly steering individuals in their role as consumers toward more sustainable choices. Nudging strategies, for instance, restructure decision-making environments—such as default green energy contracts or food placement in stores—without eliminating options (Reisch and Thøgersen 2017). In theory, they preserve consumer freedom while promoting sustainability (Gumbert 2022).

However, such strategies face serious limitations. The “attitude-behavior gap” (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002) and the “behavior-impact gap” (Csutora 2012) highlight that more information or motivation does not reliably lead to meaningful behavioral or ecological outcomes. Moreover, these strategies often fail to address the structural and institutional constraints that lock individuals into unsustainable practices. As critics have argued, they reproduce a model of consumer democracy, in which individuals express their political will through market choices—an approach that marginalizes those lacking material resources, neglects relevant power asymmetries, and fails to enable meaningful political participation (Isenhour 2019; Lamla 2013; Princen 1997). At a broader level, this scholarship frames more ambitious state-led interventions as threats to freedom or as steps toward a so-called “eco-dictatorship.” The dominant liberal conception of freedom as maximized individual options makes any limitation of choice appear inherently suspect (Pettit 2003). This rhetorical framing not only undermines support for stronger sustainability measures but also narrows the political imagination, reducing complex debates about justice, sufficiency, and intergenerational equity to questions of prohibition and personal sacrifice (Gumbert and Bohn 2021; Lepenies 2022).

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that in many contemporary contexts, citizens may experience eco-political interventions themselves as forms of domination—especially when policies are perceived as elitist, distributively unfair, or imposed without meaningful voice and credible alternatives.³ Recent debates on climate-policy backlash (from fuel-tax protests to broader contestation of “green transition” packages) highlight that demand-side measures can trigger resistance and can be mobilized politically, particularly where they intersect with cost-of-living pressures and distrust in institutions (Ewald, Sterner, and Sterner 2022; Patterson et al. 2025). This situation reinforces our core argument: the challenge is not only to design effective instruments, but to build democratically grounded, transparent, and justice-sensitive governance architectures that can legitimate contested limitations while reducing perceptions of arbitrary interference.

Complementing these critiques, heterodox political economy highlights how private ownership structures, financialized investment regimes, and growth-oriented industrial strategies systematically reproduce high-carbon provisioning systems and narrow the feasible space for demand-side transformation. From this perspective, democratizing sustainable consumption governance also implies confronting macro-level constraints—such as mission-oriented industrial policy and debates on democratic economic planning within ecological limits—because they shape what consumption options are socially produced in the first place (Durand, Hofferberth, and Schmelzer 2024, Mazzucato 2021).

The systematic neglect of democracy as a constitutive and transformative dimension is symptomatic of a particular understanding of the liberal sustainable state that has become dominant. In this iteration, it privileges individual behavior and market-based instruments and seeks incremental

improvement through voluntary action and stakeholder consensus, without confronting the deeper normative and institutional changes that a sustainability transformation would require. Others have argued that the liberal state is not only capable of furthering such democratic procedures and orientations but should actively encourage them, grounded in its own normative foundations (Gumbert and Bohn 2021). However, there is little reflection on how state institutions might democratize their own consumption-governance structures. Addressing this deficit requires more than adding participatory instruments to existing strategies. It entails a normative and institutional reorientation: from a liberal logic of choice and efficiency to, as we suggest in the following section, a republican logic of collective self-rule, civic freedom, and institutional legitimacy.

Green republicanism and the sustainable state

This section offers critical insights into how the state can be reimagined as an agent of democratic, just, and ecologically grounded transformation in the governance of sustainable consumption and lifestyles. It thereby not only enhances our understanding of how states can become sustainable but also points to new normative and institutional horizons for governance in the Anthropocene.

However, before turning to green republicanism, we clarify the baseline distinction between republicanism and liberalism. In the republican tradition, freedom is typically understood as non-domination (protection from arbitrary power), not merely as noninterference, and legitimate state interference is acceptable when it is publicly controlled and contestable rather than discretionary (Pettit 1997, 2003). Republican freedom as non-domination does not imply a society without constraints, coercion, or binding rules; rather, it distinguishes between arbitrary interference and interference that is publicly justified, contestable, and institutionally controlled. Liberalism, by contrast, more often foregrounds individual rights, state neutrality, and the presumption against interference. In pluralist societies, this distinction matters because many collectively binding rules will be experienced as restrictive by some actors, without thereby constituting domination in the republican sense. If we further distinguish green liberalism from green republicanism, both endorse environmental protection and democratic commitments, but green republicanism more explicitly treats sustainability as a matter of the ecological common good and emphasizes civic self-rule and contestatory control over the institutions (including market arrangements) that structure unsustainable lifestyles. These are some important distinctions that explain that, while structurally similar, the contrarian views on safeguarding individual vs. collective/common goods, the role and responsibility of citizens vis-à-vis the state, and finally the relation to the economy, lead to two very different versions of the sustainable state.

Green republicanism: a normative framework for the sustainable state

Green republicanism offers a compelling and increasingly relevant normative framework for reimagining the sustainable state. Building on the classical republican tradition, which defines freedom not as noninterference but as non-domination (Pettit 1997, 2003), green republicanism extends this understanding to encompass ecological and intergenerational dimensions. It insists that political liberty must include protection from environmental degradation and structural inequalities that undermine individuals' capabilities, autonomy, and well-being (Barry 1999; Cannavò 2016). Domination, in this view, can take ecological forms—when polluted environments, unstable climates, or exploitative provisioning systems restrict people's life prospects and violate the basic conditions for flourishing. At the same time, republicanism does not assume that all politically experienced constraints amount to domination. In contexts of deep pluralism and anti-democratic contestation, limits on socially harmful practices or on the obstruction of democratic procedures may be necessary to secure a non-dominating order for all. What distinguishes green republicanism from liberal theories is its philosophical starting point. While liberalism centers on the free and autonomous individual and the primacy of state neutrality, green republicanism begins with the vulnerability and ecological embeddedness of human beings. It recognizes that human life is fundamentally dependent on both natural systems and social cooperation—and that this existential interdependence creates obligations to protect the conditions for a just and livable future (Barry and Smith 2008; Curry 2000). The function of political

institutions, then, is not to safeguard abstract individual preferences, but to enable the greatest possible degree of freedom and equality under conditions of planetary constraint (Cannavò 2016).

At the heart of green republicanism lies a vision of active and civic-minded citizenship. Civic actors are not imagined as passive consumers navigating markets, but as coauthors of the norms and institutions that structure collective life. This entails a politics oriented toward the common good—not only in its immediate social form, but in its spatially and temporally extended sense: what Barry (1999) calls the *ecological common good*. Rather than assuming that individual preferences are sacrosanct, green republicanism holds that preferences must be open to critical reflection, especially when their expression—through carbon-intensive lifestyles or unsustainable practices—has far-reaching impacts on others and future generations (Barry 1996). Consequently, sustainability is not about incentivizing preexisting desires, but about enabling the transformation of preferences through deliberation, education, and public reasoning (Bohn 2025). This should not be read as a claim that deliberation neutralizes conflict or guarantees convergence on sustainability-oriented outcomes. Rather, republican deliberation is valuable because it subjects collectively binding rules to public justification and contestation, even where disagreement persists. In a similar way, green republicanism also advances a critical redefinition of prosperity and the good life. It challenges dominant economic paradigms rooted in growth and consumption, and instead promotes a politics of sufficiency, care, and well-being (Frémaux 2019; Heidenreich 2018). The goal is not to restrict life options per se, but to create the social and material conditions under which all people can lead dignified, meaningful lives—now and in the future. This requires a fundamental shift in how we organize provisioning systems. Rather than relying on consumer choice and market competition, green republicanism emphasizes collective deliberation over what people need, what counts as “enough,” and how to fairly distribute resources within ecological boundaries. Democratic deliberation thus plays a central role in this framework, but not as a mere procedural formality. It is valued and indeed necessary because it enables citizens to interrogate their own assumptions, confront social and ecological interdependencies, and codetermine just outcomes under conditions of contestation. Where ecological limits and non-domination are taken seriously, redistribution, decommodification, and institutional redesign, as key elements of a just transition, are more likely to emerge as recurrent points of contestation and justification.

A republican account of non-domination must also confront the political economy of domination: how private ownership structures and market governance shape the range of socially available “needs satisfiers,” (Max-Neef 1991) lock societies into carbon-intensive provisioning, and constrain democratic choice. Green republicanism is therefore not only a moral theory of ecological citizenship but also a critique of growth- and capital-dependent statecraft, where public authorities become structurally reliant on private investment, tax revenues tied to growth, and the political leverage of incumbent industries and asset holders (Barry 2012, 2021). In this sense, domination operates not only through direct coercion but also through structural dependence—when the state’s capacity to secure the ecological common good is subordinated to market imperatives and the preferences of large capital. This political-economic dimension is explicitly foregrounded in green republican interventions that link ecological freedom and the common good to the need to contest the institutional drivers of unsustainability, including the growth imperative and the political power it entrenches (Durand, Hofferberth, and Schmelzer 2024). These constraints have become particularly visible in contemporary debates about the “Big Green State” and green industrial policy (Gabor and Braun 2025). Critical macro-finance accounts show how strategies that hinge on “mobilizing” global finance through de-risking and asset-based approaches can narrow the space for democratically steered transitions and reproduce private forms of domination—precisely the kind of dependence that republicanism sees as undermining freedom (Gabor 2021). Conversely, recent work on post-growth industrial policy in Europe highlights emerging tensions between strategic autonomy, decarbonization, and sufficiency goals, and argues that industrial policy must be aligned with planetary boundaries and social objectives rather than competitiveness and growth alone (Bärnthaler, Mang, and Hickel 2025). This objective resonates with green republicanism’s insistence that the ecological common good must have priority over private accumulation logics and that the state requires the capacity to shape markets rather than merely correct them at the margins.

Institutionally, the overall vision calls for embedding environmental rights and duties in constitutional and legal frameworks (Barry 2008; Ekeli 2007). These include the right to a healthy environment, the legal standing of future generations, and the institutionalization of long-term democratic accountability for ecological outcomes (Bovenkerk 2015; Gonzalez-Ricoy and Gosseries 2016). Such measures are not only about safeguarding rights but about securing the procedural and normative stability needed to sustain difficult transitions over time. In orchestrating institutional reform and societal transformation, the state has a central responsibility. Its obligation is to organize, protect, and facilitate deliberative spaces that allow for the development of civic virtue and collective judgment (Barry 1999). This responsibility includes support for citizens' assemblies, participatory planning forums, and institutional mechanisms that foreground the voices of marginalized groups and future generations (Bohn 2025; Boswell, Dean, and Smith 2023). While deliberative mechanisms are also found in green liberalism, their function diverges significantly. Green liberalism treats individual preferences—sustainable or not—as politically inviolable. In contrast, green republicanism views the transformation of preferences as a democratic necessity, given the interdependent nature of ecological and social life.

Toward the republican sustainable state

Building on these insights from green republicanism allows us to envision a new version of the sustainable state.⁴ It is well documented that the liberal sustainable state tends to reproduce consumer democracy while failing to deliver on effective transformation. This model obscures deep inequalities in access and agency, marginalizes collective deliberation and agency, and reinforces forms of domination and exploitation—both social and ecological. In contrast, the Republican Sustainable State would be defined not merely by its climate targets or green technologies but by its normative orientation toward non-domination, democratic participation, and ecological justice. A republican orientation also implies that the macro-economic steering required for sustainability cannot be treated as a purely technocratic matter. Rather, it points toward democratic economic planning—not as centralized command, but as institutionalized collective self-rule over provisioning priorities and limits under ecological constraints (Durand, Hofferberth, and Schmelzer 2024). By anchoring sustainability in civic responsibility, democratic self-rule, and the ecological common good, the green republican lens supplies the normative scaffolding for a republican sustainable state (RSS)—an institutional form capable of facing the twin crises of climate breakdown and democratic erosion.

And yet, despite their differences, it is important to acknowledge that liberal and republican perspectives share important common ground (Bohn and Gumbert 2021; Frémaux 2019). Both traditions converge in recognizing the importance of public participation, though liberals tend to emphasize rights-based engagement while republicans stress civic responsibility and active self-governance (Cannavò 2016). Moreover, both approaches reject authoritarianism and support pluralism, even if they diverge in how to conceptualize the role of the state in shaping preferences or promoting the common good. In republican terms, pluralism does not eliminate the need for collectively binding judgments about the common good; it means that such judgments must remain publicly contestable, revisable, and constrained against arbitrariness. These shared foundations provide potential avenues for dialogue and integration in democratic sustainability governance.

In practical terms, the state would institutionalize processes of collective will-formation around the definition of sustainable needs and limits and, with respect to consumption, acknowledge the social embeddedness of consumption practices, seeking to transform provisioning systems to reduce dependency on high-carbon lifestyles (Barry 2021; Cannavò 2016; Frémaux 2019). This vision is not utopian but grounded in real institutional possibilities. The tools for such a transformation already exist in deliberative democratic innovations, environmental rights frameworks, and emerging post-growth policy models (Bohn 2021; Bohnenberger 2020; Campos et al. 2024; Dodsworth 2021), all of which ponder how to overcome powerful barriers in the form of status quo interests and a (capitalist) political culture prioritizing (in large parts) cheap commodities, consumer culture, and private self-interest. Against this backdrop, the RSS offers both a normative ideal and a practical horizon: a state identity that would align democratic legitimacy, social justice, and ecological responsibility, thereby enabling effective sustainable consumption governance.

Rethinking sustainable consumption through the democratic lens: consumption corridors and green republicanism

This section explores an innovative framework for governing sustainable consumption and lifestyles: the consumption corridors (CC) approach (Di Giulo and Fuchs 2014; Fuchs, Sahakian, et al. 2021, Sahakian et al. 2021). This concept differs significantly from mainstream consumption governance, not only in how it conceptualizes sustainable consumption but also in how it relates consumption governance to democratic principles and practices. Specifically, the CC approach proposes institutional mechanisms for organizing consumption (and thereby provisioning) that would reorient societies toward sustainability and justice based on democratic engagement. In the following, we discuss its normative and procedural underpinnings, describe their alignment with green republican ideals, and delineate how a green republican framework can inform its implementation.

Consumption corridors: integrating consumption, justice, and sustainability

The CC concept offers a consumption-centered governance model that is normatively anchored in the principles of social and ecological justice. At its core, this approach aims to delineate a range of acceptable consumption—defined by minimum thresholds that guarantee all individuals the resources necessary to live a dignified life, and maximum ceilings that prevent the overuse of shared ecological resources and protect the rights of others, including future generations. This dual structure directly reflects a justice-based approach to sustainability: minimum standards address basic needs and capabilities (Max-Neef 1991), while maximum limits respond to ecological and societal limits and the imperative of equitable burden-sharing (Fuchs, Sahakian, et al. 2021). What distinguishes the CC model from other frameworks, such as Doughnut Economics, is its insistence that neither minimum nor maximum limits can be predefined globally or technocratically. Instead, what constitutes a “good life” and what counts as “excessive” consumption must be negotiated and interpreted democratically, contextually, and reflexively by members of the community. This is crucial because the notion of the good life is inherently pluralistic and contested and is embedded in local cultures, social imaginaries, and historical experiences (Di Giulio and Fuchs 2014). Imposing a one-size-fits-all conception of either sufficiency or prosperity would risk epistemic injustice and political exclusion. In this way, the CC model places democratic deliberation at its conceptual and procedural core. Defining both lower and upper limits involves negotiating complex normative questions: What needs are non-negotiable? What forms of consumption are socially acceptable or harmful? Who decides, and through what processes? These are not merely technical decisions but value-laden judgments that require inclusive, transparent, and participatory mechanisms to attain legitimacy. Democracy is not treated as a procedural add-on or external constraint, but as a constitutive condition for governing contested limits in pluralist societies—precisely because minima/maxima and “needs satisfiers” are normatively disputed and must be authorizable, contestable, and revisable over time.

The model envisions three iterative and dialogical phases: (1) collective reflection on visions of the good life and sustainability; (2) empirical linkage of these visions to available resources and institutional arrangements; and (3) the design, implementation, and adaptive revision of policy instruments (Defila and Di Giulio 2020; Fuchs, Sahakian, et al. 2021). This procedural openness acknowledges the fluidity of needs, the changing nature of ecological and technological conditions, and the reality of moral disagreement in pluralist societies.

From a green republican perspective, this open-endedness is not a design flaw but a normative strength. Republicanism emphasizes freedom as non-domination, which implies that sustainability cannot be imposed by governments and policy elites through paternalistic or technocratic fiat, even for well-intentioned ends. Rather, citizens (in our broader understanding) must be coauthors of the limits that bind them, exercising civic agency to define shared responsibilities and sustainable futures. The risk of conflict and disagreement, far from being a drawback, is an expected and desirable feature of democratic life—one that should be structured, institutionalized, and mediated through public reasoning rather than bypassed (Pettit 1997). Moreover, CCs offer a way to reconcile ecological sustainability with intersubjective ideas of the good life, avoiding the false dichotomy between freedom

and limitation (Gumbert and Bohn 2021; Lambacher 2016). The space between the minimum and maximum boundaries does not prescribe a singular lifestyle but offers a protected sphere of autonomy within justifiable limits—where individuals can pursue their own conceptions of well-being without infringing upon the capabilities or rights of others. This mirrors the republican vision of civic freedom: one in which limits are not constraints on liberty but conditions for its realization, negotiated through collective self-rule. Crucially, just as the CC approach, the RSS is not merely procedural. Because it has a normative duty to safeguard the ecological common good and planetary boundaries, it must be able to set binding parameters—legal/constitutional commitments, enforceable standards, and provisioning reforms—within which deliberation takes place and policy is implemented. Stronger steering and enforcement are therefore permissible, and at times required, when they are non-arbitrary: publicly justified, institutionally controlled, legally bounded, and embedded in democratic contestation and accountability.

Green republicanism, as developed earlier in this article, offers a coherent framework for critically supporting and extending the democratic ambitions of the CC approach. Its core commitments—to freedom as non-domination, civic virtue, and the common good—align well with the logic of both models. They shift the policy focus from maximizing individual choice to structuring fair opportunities and obligations through democratic negotiation, effectively treating sustainability as a question of political judgment and public reasoning. In both cases, green republicanism offers not only normative endorsement but also institutional guidance.

Green republicanism as a guide: implementing democratic consumption governance

The above discussion highlighted that implementing CCs would be highly demanding, both in terms of the obligations placed on citizens and the extended responsibility of the state. Operationalizing CCs, or any comprehensive and effective consumption governance approach for that matter, is an ambitious process of democratic statecraft, not simple policy engineering. Below, we outline a sequenced approach of how green republicanism could guide this political transformation, emphasizing institutional, legal, and participatory reforms needed to sustain the democratization of consumption governance.

The first step would be to establish a robust constitutional and legal foundation that anchors sustainability and non-domination as core principles of governance (Barry 2008). The lead would have to be taken by constitutionally authorized public institutions, but such processes should be prepared and legitimated through broad consultation with scientific bodies, civil society, affected groups, and deliberative citizen forums. This undertaking would require moving beyond policy voluntarism toward a binding legal framework—ideally through a constitutional amendment or a comprehensive national sustainability law. Such a framework would formally recognize ecological limits, basic social needs, and intergenerational justice as normative obligations of the state, rather than optional goals subject to political discretion. The RSS, in this context, would assume explicit normative responsibility by setting both procedural and substantive parameters for governing consumption within just boundaries. Key reforms would include enshrining the right to a sustainable livelihood and the corresponding duty of the state to safeguard planetary boundaries. Within green republicanism, a “sustainable livelihood” should not mean an unconditional right to maintain whatever livelihood people currently have, nor a vague promise of “green jobs,” nor a maximal right to continue one’s private lifestyle. A sustainable livelihood is a socially secured capacity to meet objective and democratically specified needs in ways that do not depend on dominating others, future generations, or the ecological conditions of freedom. Such a right, understood as a constitutional or statutory framework right, would place growth-dependent and ecologically destructive policy pathways under normative pressure and require the state to justify macroeconomic strategies in light of need satisfaction, fair distribution, and ecological ceilings. Moreover, mechanisms such as legal standing for future generations or the natural environment—potentially through the creation of independent ombudspersons or guardian institutions—would institutionalize these commitments (Gonzalez-Ricoy and Gosseries 2016).

Second, the process would require the institutionalization of inclusive, transparent, and impactful participatory institutions (e.g., citizen assemblies) that would allow civic actors to collectively

deliberate and co-create relevant outputs, which, in turn, would be integrated with the institutions of representative democracy in a meaningful way.⁵ In the case of CCs, these mechanisms and institutions would be needed for citizens to define what constitutes “enough”—both the minimum standards required for a dignified life and maximum limits necessary to preserve shared ecological resources. Rather than relying on technocratic expertise or market preferences, an RSS would actively facilitate and safeguard public reasoning processes in which diverse voices—especially those historically marginalized—can engage in substantive debate, while also allowing for disagreement and conflict (Bohn 2025). Safeguarding such processes also requires institutional protections against systematic intimidation, disinformation, and obstruction by actors seeking to undermine the democratic conditions for deliberation. From a republican perspective, placing limits on anti-democratic obstruction does not negate freedom as non-domination; it protects the public conditions under which equal civic freedom can be exercised at all. This additionally requires the creation or adaptation of democratic institutions capable of sustaining iterative and reflective engagement (Dryzek and Pickering 2019). For instance, permanent or recurring citizens’ assemblies on sustainable lifestyles could be established to deliberate sector-specific corridors in domains such as food, housing, and mobility (e.g., Sandover et al 2021). Regional sustainability councils, comprising civil society actors, workers’ representatives, environmental experts, and community organizations, could institutionalize pluralistic oversight. Additionally, legally mandated multi-level stakeholder consultations would ensure that deliberations are embedded within the real complexities of policymaking.

Third, these deliberative and participatory mechanisms would help define sector-specific corridors that translate the abstract principles of social justice and ecological sustainability into actionable norms. This step moves from deliberative visioning to concrete standard-setting by delineating acceptable ranges of consumption for different domains—again, for example, housing, mobility, nutrition, and energy use. To do so, the process would need to integrate scientific analysis, citizen deliberation (including residents and affected persons), and sectoral expertise. Environmental agencies, research institutions, and statistical bodies would contribute the necessary data and scenario modeling; deliberative citizen forums and civil society organizations would contribute to democratic legitimacy by enabling inclusive participation; and sectoral stakeholders—such as farmers, urban planners, or housing associations—would bring practical insight into feasibility and equity. The result of this multi-actor process would be the articulation of provisional corridor guidelines, such as the square meters of housing, annual emissions limits for mobility, or thresholds for caloric intake balanced against ecological impact. The RSS would play a crucial role in this phase: it ensures open access to relevant evidence, mediates conflicts among stakeholders, and facilitates fair and transparent negotiation processes.

The fourth step involves aligning societal provisioning systems with democratically defined limits (Steinberger et al. 2024). This marks a decisive shift from a consumption-oriented form of governance that limits its focus to individual choices within market logics to a provisioning-oriented governance approach that focuses on what and how essential goods and services are needed, collectively produced, distributed, and accessed (Brand-Correa and Steinberger 2017; Fuchs, Sahakian, et al. 2021). Ensuring fair and sustainable access to needs-based consumption requires the restructuring of key systems such as energy, housing, mobility, and food. This process includes expanding public and cooperative ownership in strategic sectors to increase democratic control and reduce profit-driven inefficiencies, as well as implementing universal basic services to guarantee access to a baseline of sufficiency for all citizens (Coote and Percy 2020). Infrastructural reforms—such as recalibrating urban planning, transportation networks, and public procurement—must also be guided by corridor limits to ensure alignment with ecological and social goals. The RSS would assume a central role in coordinating these transformations: it mobilizes long-term investment, establishes equitable regulatory frameworks, and guarantees just distributional outcomes across social groups and regions.

Finally, the institutionalization of mechanisms for ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and adaptive revision would be central to this planning process. To maintain the legitimacy and effectiveness of corridors over time, governance would need to be reflexive and responsive to evolving ecological realities, shifting social needs, and new scientific insights. This would require establishing independent

monitoring bodies directly linked to deliberative assemblies and citizen forums, ensuring that oversight is both technically competent and democratically accountable. Corridor standards, then, should be subject to periodic public review and formal reauthorization, thereby embedding a culture of temporal openness and iterative legitimacy. Public authorities would need to place particular emphasis on integrating feedback from affected communities, especially marginalized or underrepresented groups, whose lived experiences and vulnerabilities may challenge abstract metrics or generalist assumptions. The RSS would need to facilitate a dynamic and inclusive process of norm evolution. Thereby, consumption norms would remain politically contestable and publicly negotiable, reinforcing democratic agency and ecological justice as co-constitutive dimensions of sustainability governance.

Conclusion: toward a democratic reorientation of sustainable consumption governance

This article has argued that the governance of sustainable consumption and lifestyle change remains limited in both theory and practice by a pervasive democratic deficit. While climate-governance frameworks recognize the urgency of demand-side reductions, the way these agreements conceptualize and operationalize them often bypass meaningful democratic engagement and thereby lack authorizable, contestable foundations for legitimate limitation, while simultaneously remaining ineffective in the pursuit of transformative change. Using green republicanism as a theoretical lens, we have then opened a space for imagining an alternative form of (sustainable) state. Specifically, we delineated how effective consumption governance could be achieved in an RSS. Using the CC approach with its systemic and transformative ambitions as an illustration, finally, we identified five steps that would be necessary for the implementation of such an approach: (1) establishing a robust constitutional and legal foundation that anchors sustainability and non-domination as core principles of governance, (2) institutionalizing inclusive, transparent, and impactful participatory institutions, (3) preparing the definition of sector-specific corridors that translate the abstract principles of social justice and ecological sustainability into actionable rules and processes for sustainable consumption, 4) aligning societal provisioning systems with these democratically defined limits, and 5) institutionalizing mechanisms for ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and adaptive revision. These arguably very high demands must be the result of collective political mobilization that is subsequently institutionalized by the democratic state. As the consumption corridors approach emphasizes, the social forces that drive unsustainable consumption are collective and structural, and therefore must be addressed through structural change, collective conversation, and democratic debate rather than appeals to individual restraint alone (Fuchs, Sahakian, et al. 2021). Responsibility, therefore, lies with civic actors, social movements, communities, and deliberative publics to generate and articulate demands for change, and with the state to translate these demands into durable legal, institutional, and provisioning reforms.

By outlining these steps, we do not assume a linear pathway from “more democracy” to “more sustainability.” Nor do we assume that legitimate sustainability governance can dispense with coercion altogether: in pluralist societies, some actors will often experience binding ecological and social limits as restrictive. The relevant republican criterion is therefore whether such constraints are non-arbitrary, publicly justified, and open to contestation and revision. Deliberation and participation are highly conditional—shaped by institutional design, power asymmetries, media environments, and distributive conflict—and we cannot assume that they will dissolve antagonisms or guarantee sufficiency-oriented outcomes by becoming more “ecologically rational” (Machin 2022). For that reason, republican demand-side governance must combine participatory will-formation with binding boundary commitments and robust institutions of accountability, contestability, and implementation capacity.

Envisioning how an RSS may enable effective sustainable consumption governance can invite criticism from diverse sources, and it is important to acknowledge these perspectives to get a clearer picture of the limitations, potential dangers, and omissions of our argument. First, the willingness and capacity of citizens to engage in time-consuming participatory processes and the likelihood that these processes will yield sustainable and impactful outcomes may be limited (Blühdorn 2020). Democratic fatigue, scarce resources, and a lack of reliable integration into institutions and processes of representative democracy are only some factors that can undermine participatory mechanisms

(Pickering, Bäckstrand, and Schlosberg 2020). Even when engagement occurs, there is a risk that only certain demographics—typically more educated, resource-rich, and already politically better represented citizens—will dominate the process, or that engagement will be used to legitimize predetermined outcomes (Arnstein 1969). Clearly, inclusive and impactful deliberation and participation are extremely demanding in terms of process design, institutional integration, and knowledge creation and management (Bohn et al. 2023). Yet, progress in these aspects of research and practice over the past years is increasingly creating the potential for meaningful improvements in the inclusivity and impact of political participation and state responsiveness to citizen voices (Renn, Webler, and Schweizer 2026), while representation remains crucial for perceptions of democratic legitimacy (Germann 2025). At the same time, citizen assemblies have shown that citizens tend to orient toward more sustainable outcomes than traditional governmental politics, while surveys document that general support for climate governance is much higher in many countries than dominant political discourses claim (Lage et al. 2023).

Second, the argument that the RSS would be better positioned to pursue normative societal ambitions, such as those delineated by the CC approach in terms of consumption limits, may give rise to concerns over creeping paternalism: the fear that particular eco-lifestyles will become hegemonic, crowding out value pluralism, diversity in life choices, or individual expressions of autonomy. This could feed into suspicions that the RSS might enforce communitarian norms at the expense of liberal freedoms, blurring the line between democratic deliberation and coercive conformity. Such concerns ultimately reinforce rather than weaken our argument. In the neo-republican tradition, the common good is not a comprehensive doctrine of the good life, but the set of shared interests required to secure freedom as non-domination under conditions of disagreement; it is therefore compatible with value pluralism as long as constraints are publicly contestable and non-arbitrary. Within a CC logic, this means: democratically agreed minimum and maximum boundaries protect others from domination and ecological harm, while leaving a wide space for diverse conceptions of the good life within the corridor. If anything, an RSS may, therefore, be more closely aligned with the democratically articulated will of citizens than the current liberal state in the consumption domain. By contrast, the liberal state's prevailing political-economic power dynamics can enable less visible but highly consequential forms of coercive conformity—for instance, through market dependence, corporate agenda-setting, and unequal influence over what counts as “normal” and “feasible” ways of living. And yet, as this article operates at the intersection of republicanism as a normative theory and as a potential form of state, the question of how such a model can achieve long-term political stability without reproducing new forms of exclusion, externalization, or coercive overreach remains an open and important area for further research.

Finally, some may be inclined, given entrenched political and economic interests, to question the feasibility of transforming to an RSS with strong participatory processes and institutions (Kreinin et al. 2024). Powerful industry actors and status-quo-oriented elites tend to resist shifts that challenge profit models dependent on high consumption or carbon-intensive lifestyles, while institutional inertia, bureaucratic fragmentation, and resource dependence further impede reform on the political side. Indeed, how this transformation may come about is a challenging question, one that only becomes larger in the light of current (geo)political developments. However, we firmly believe that even or especially in such times, it is important to ask what other worlds are possible, and what would be needed to get there. While we are not arguing that our societies are currently moving in this direction or that such a move will be easy, we believe it is important to outline normative and structural requirements for the state as well as participatory processes that can enable an effective, democratically legitimate, and socially just sustainability transformation. Clearly, such a political and societal transformation is incredibly demanding. But this demand reflects the political and moral complexity of governing in an age of ecological crisis.

Notes

1. By “liberal sustainable state,” we refer to a sustainability-oriented variant of the contemporary liberal-democratic

state whose default governing logic remains centered on market allocation, individual autonomy/choice, and non-coercive policy styles, while sustainability is largely pursued through incremental, technocratic, and incentive-based steering (rather than through binding collective limit-setting, deep provisioning reforms, or re-politicization of socio-economic structures). In this sense, our use of the term is continuous with debates on the environmental state and its structural “glass ceiling” of transformation, i.e., the idea that environmental integration can proceed only up to the point where it does not fundamentally challenge growth- and capital-dependent governance arrangements and dominant political-economic imperatives (Hausknost 2020).

2. Environmental alternative action organizations (EAAOs) are self-organized environmental initiatives that seek to transform society by building practical, everyday alternatives to unsustainable systems of consumption and provision. They do this through activities such as sharing, swapping, repairing, gardening, food cooperation, upcycling, or co-housing, thereby enabling people to participate directly in more sustainable routines (Deflorian 2023).
3. Throughout the article, we use the term “citizen” in a broad, civic rather than narrowly legal sense. This clarification is particularly relevant in the United States context, where “citizenship” is often framed in relation to formal nationality, voting rights, and immigration status, thereby invoking wider debates about political membership, exclusion, and representation. Our usage does not presume that only formal state citizens should be considered legitimate participants in democratic life. Rather, we use the term to describe individuals in their role as politically significant stakeholders, including residents and affected persons, and in their capacity to deliberate about and contribute to the common good. In this sense, “citizenship” refers to civic virtue: the ability and responsibility to consider shared concerns, recognize the claims of others, and participate in collective efforts to shape common futures.
4. At this point, it is important to note a broader tension that underlies this contribution. Green republicanism is mobilized here both as a normative theory—articulating a critique of domination, ecological unsustainability, and growth-dependent statecraft—and as a basis for thinking about institutional transformation. However, the relationship between republicanism as a moral-critical framework and republicanism as a historically realized form of state is not straightforward. Historical republican orders have often been socially exclusive and materially dependent on the appropriation of external resources. Translating republican ideals of non-domination and the common good into a stable and inclusive institutional order under contemporary ecological constraints, therefore, remains a non-trivial and partly (if not largely) unresolved challenge.
5. What such a meaningful integration could look like is currently an important topic in the literature on democratic innovations and participatory governance (Boswell, Dean, and Smith 2023; Elstub and Escobar 2019; Smith 2009).

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