Backlash to Sustainability Transformations: Implications, Strategies and the Role of Research

Insights from the RIFS Conference "Tough Conversations in Tough Times"

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RIFS Discussion Paper
Potsdam
October 2026

Zusammenfassung

Geopolitische Instabilität, wirtschaftlicher Druck und der Aufstieg der extremen Rechten gefährden Nachhaltigkeitstransformationen zunehmend. Das Diskussionspapier, zeigt, dass der Backlash gegen Nachhaltigkeitstransformationen eng mit Fragen von Gerechtigkeit, gesellschaftlicher Polarisierung und rechtsextremer Mobilisierung verwoben ist und im Kontext einer Erosion demokratischer Werte und Institutionen verstanden werden muss. Gleichzeitig gefährdet der Backlash durch schwindende Wissenschaftsfreiheit, Mittelkürzungen und Forderungen nach einer vermeintlichen Neutralität auch die Bedingungen der transformativen Nachhaltigkeitsforschung. Die Autor:innen plädieren für eine Forschungsagenda, die sich kritisch mit den sehr dynamischen Herausforderungen des Backlashs auseinandersetzt. Ebenso sollten Forschende und transformative Forschungseinrichtungen ihre Rolle kritisch reflektieren, Allianzen über unterschiedliche Sektoren hinweg bilden und ihr Engagement für sozial-ökologische Nachhaltigkeit und Wissenschaftsfreiheit verteidigen.

Summary

This discussion paper examines the growing backlash against sustainability transformations amid geopolitical instability, economic pressures, and the rise of the far right. It argues that this backlash is closely intertwined with questions of (in)justice, societal polarization, and far-right mobilization, and must be understood in the context of a broader erosion of democratic values and institutions. At the same time, sustainability-oriented and transformative research is itself coming under increasing pressure from funding cuts, shifting research agendas, and calls for greater ‘neutrality’. Backlash is therefore not only a subject of research but also an increasingly challenging condition in which such research is conducted. The authors call for a research agenda that critically engages with the rapidly evolving challenges posed by the backlash. In addition, they urge researchers and research institutions to critically reflect on their roles, defend academic freedom, build strong cross-sectoral alliances and maintain their commitment to sustainability transformations.

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1 Introduction

Over the past years, the global context for sustainability transitions has shifted profoundly. Geopolitical instability, economic pressures, and the rise of the far right in many parts of the world are destabilizing the political conditions under which sustainability transitions are pursued. This backlash challenges the adoption and implementation of sustainability policies, their public legitimacy, and, increasingly, the conditions under which climate and sustainability research is conducted.

This discussion paper results from the RIFS Conference “Tough Conversations in Tough Times,” held in Berlin in December 2025. The conference provided a space for critical reflection and open dialogue among more than 350 representatives of the social sciences and transdisciplinary research, civil society, and the policy field. Participants examined the backlash against sustainability policies, discussed possible responses, and explored the role of research in advancing sustainability-oriented transformations under increasingly difficult political conditions. Building on these discussions and taking account of subsequent political developments, this paper contributes to the ongoing debate on backlash against sustainability policies and its implications for the role and practice of sustainability research.

The growing backlash against sustainability transitions – manifested not only in the contestation of climate and sustainability policies but also in mounting efforts to delay, weaken, or reverse them – must be understood in the context of broader global shifts. Cracks are appearing in the liberal world order, understood here as the system of multilateral cooperation, international rules, and democratic institutions that has shaped global governance in recent decades. This is exemplified by the United States’ renewed withdrawal from the Paris Agreement under the Trump administration and the weakening of elements of the European Green Deal. At the same time, authoritarianism is on the rise across the globe, including within liberal democracies in Europe and the Americas. Viewing sustainability transformation merely as a strategic concept to solve the climate crisis risks ignoring the role of global power relations and the current crisis of the liberal world order. We can only better understand the obstacles to policy change if we analyse the broader context in which transformation is embedded (Brand, 2016). Therefore, the fundamental question is no longer just "how" or "at what pace" sustainability transitions can be achieved, but how they are contingent upon global power relations and the crisis of the liberal world order.

At the same time, the rise of the far right is directly affecting sustainability research. In the United States, for example, the Trump administration has made massive cuts to science funding, in particular for climate and sustainability research. The implications of this are profound and raise a vital question: how can we sustain research and respond to backlash within an increasingly hostile political climate?

Against this background, the paper pursues two main objectives. First, we discuss the rising backlash against sustainability transformation as a socio-political phenomenon that is intrinsically linked to questions of justice and injustice in sustainability transitions, societal polarization, and the growing influence of far-right movements. This requires distinguishing among public, political, and institutional forms of backlash and examining how material grievances, perceptions of unfairness, cultural conflicts, and strategic political mobilization interact. Second, we address the implications of this backlash for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary sustainability research, both in terms of research content – the questions, concepts, and agendas that require greater attention – and the increasing risks for research practice. Finally, we conclude by identifying priorities for continued debate.

2 How backlash, justice and societal polarization interlink

2.1 Multiple forms and drivers of backlash

Backlash against climate and sustainability policies has become increasingly visible across political systems and policy domains, raising important questions about its drivers and about how policymakers, practitioners, and researchers might respond.

Backlash can be understood as a strong reaction against ongoing or proposed political and societal changes. In the context of sustainability transitions, it refers to efforts by a significant number of actors (or a few but powerful ones) to resist, weaken, delay, or reverse climate and sustainability policies. While contestation and disagreement are normal features of democratic politics, backlash is characterized by its intensity, scale, and its explicit opposition to the direction of change (Bosetti et al., 2025; Patterson, 2023). Backlash can manifest in multiple ways: *Public backlash* appears as strong societal opposition to sustainability policies or broader transformation processes. Such reactions are often triggered when policies are perceived as unfair, costly, or disconnected from citizens' everyday realities. The Yellow Vest movement in France (Douenne & Fabre, 2022) and the "farmers' revolt" in the Netherlands (Siegmann, 2024) remain some of the most prominent examples, where increases in fuel taxes and changes in nitrogen regulations became symbols of broader social disputes.

Political backlash originates from political parties or influential public actors that actively challenge sustainability policies and narratives. Examples include the political controversy surrounding Germany's heating reform in 2023 (Bosetti et al., 2025) and the growing role of right-wing populist actors in opposing climate policies across Europe (Lockwood & Lockwood, 2022). Within the European Union, such actors have frequently opposed environmental legislation while simultaneously framing climate policies as threats to economic prosperity, personal freedoms, or national sovereignty.

Institutional backlash occurs when governments themselves seek to dismantle, weaken or undermine sustainability policies and institutions. Examples include the climate and environmental rollbacks pursued under the Trump administrations in the United States (Ettinger & Collins, 2025), the Bolsonaro government in Brazil (Milani et al., 2026) and, more recently, the libertarian administration of Javier Milei in Argentina. In all three cases, backlash extends beyond opposition to specific policies and involves efforts to reshape the institutional foundations of sustainability governance.

These forms of backlash are closely interconnected. Public dissatisfaction can create political opportunities for actors opposing climate policies, while political mobilization can further amplify public grievances. The electoral success of anti-climate or anti-environmental parties can then translate into institutional changes that weaken existing policy frameworks. Backlash should therefore be understood not as a single event, but as a dynamic process operating across society, politics, and state institutions.

It is important to distinguish backlash from related phenomena such as contestation and obstructionism, while recognizing that the boundaries between these concepts are often blurred. In academic analysis – and even more so in political and public debate – the terms resistance, opposition, backlash and obstruction are frequently used interchangeably. Moreover, the same conflict may combine different dynamics: legitimate disagreement over policy design may develop into broader public backlash, while organized actors may strategically amplify these grievances to delay or weaken policy change. Contestation refers to democratic disagreement over policy goals, priorities, instruments and implementation pathways. Obstructionism, by contrast, involves deliberate and often coordinated efforts by organized actors to delay, weaken or prevent policy change (Brulle et al., 2024). Backlash may overlap with both, but is not reducible to either. Assessing the interests, behaviour, track records and intentions of the actors involved – and the political context in which opposition emerges – is therefore important for distinguishing legitimate contestation from strategic obstruction (Lamb & Mattila, 2025).

Backlash also forms part of a wider spectrum of opposition to climate and sustainability action. This spectrum ranges from outright climate denialism to more subtle discourses of delay that accept the existence of climate change while questioning the urgency, feasibility or fairness of particular responses (Lamb et al., 2020). It also includes forms of "conditional environmentalism," particularly among right-wing populist actors that endorse environmental protection only insofar as it does not conflict with economic growth, national sovereignty, established lifestyles or other political priorities (Caiani & Lubarda, 2024). These positions do not necessarily constitute backlash in themselves. They can, however, provide narratives and political resources through which dissatisfaction with particular policies is connected to opposition to the broader direction of sustainability transformation. Backlash can therefore be understood as a dynamic process through which existing grievances, conditional support and sceptical or obstructionist narratives are activated, connected and translated into organized resistance or policy reversal.

In seeking to explain the emergence of backlash, we can distinguish three broad categories of drivers. First, *socio-economic drivers* stem from how the costs, benefits and risks associated with sustainability transitions are distributed across social groups and territories. Recent research suggests that both actual and perceived economic impacts can generate opposition to climate policies, particularly when citizens fear declining living standards, increased costs, or unequal burden-sharing (Bosetti et al., 2025). Who bears the costs of transformation and who receives the benefits – and are outcomes (perceived as) fair? These questions – and the ways in which sustainability transitions have developed alongside, rather than challenged, persistent patterns of inequality – are discussed in the next section.

Second, *cultural drivers* relate to perceptions of identity, belonging, and trust. Climate and sustainability policies increasingly intersect with broader societal debates about values, lifestyles, and cultural change (Patterson, 2023). In some contexts, climate policy has become associated with broader grievances related to anti-elitism, distrust of institutions, or perceptions that political decision-making is disconnected from everyday concerns. Sustainability transitions have increasingly become the target of polarizing far-right narratives and risk crystallizing into a central axis of societal polarization. This question is taken up in greater detail in subsequent sections.

Third, *political drivers* shape how socio-economic and cultural grievances are interpreted and mobilized. Political actors may strategically frame climate policies as symbols of government overreach, elite control, or external interference. In recent years, right-wing populist movements have played an important role in politicizing climate policy in this way (Haas et al., 2025). This connection underscores the need to examine the political backlash against sustainability transitions in relation to the erosion of democracy that such polarizing strategies can facilitate.

Importantly, these drivers rarely operate in isolation. Rather, backlash emerges through their interaction. Economic concerns and unjust transitions can reinforce cultural anxieties, while political actors may amplify both through strategic framing and mobilization. As a result, conflicts increasingly extend beyond specific policy instruments and concern the broader legitimacy and direction of sustainability transitions themselves.

2.2 Unjust transitions: justice as a source and terrain of backlash

Whose perspectives are recognized? Who has the opportunity to influence decision-making? And who benefits ultimately from climate and sustainability policies? Justice considerations have become an important lens through which conflicts and resistance against sustainability transitions are interpreted, understood and ultimately addressed. They echo the necessity to alleviate poverty and inequality as well as the need to promote inclusion and participation in transition processes. More specifically, they capture questions of how the costs, benefits and risks of transformation are distributed (Jenkins et al., 2017; Schlosberg, 2012).

Justice was a central theme throughout the 2025 RIFS Conference, which explored different dimensions of justice in sustainability transitions and the challenges of addressing them across diverse socio-demographic, geographical and political contexts. Questions of socio-economic justice cut across multiple scales and phases of sustainability transitions, for instance from phasing out existing fossil-fuel-based systems to phasing in new technologies and infrastructures. The normative imperative of "saving the planet" does not diminish the social consequences of the transition. On the one hand, coal-mine workers and

the communities and regions reliant on fossil-fuel industries must confront the end of an economic pillar that has sustained livelihoods for decades. On the other hand, the territories that supply the raw materials, minerals and metals for new infrastructures and technologies must contend with the impacts of extractivism and newly emerging distributional conflicts.

Questions of ownership and control are also at the heart of the justice debate: who owns the assets of the emerging energy system? Who benefits from new value chains? And who decides in the planning, development and implementation process? This matters because when infrastructure is developed and owned by "external" actors, rather than by the local community, profits may largely accrue outside the region, while local communities bear many of the associated impacts. Where residents see little tangible economic benefit, as has been the case in communities across the state of Brandenburg, perceptions of injustice are reinforced. Justice therefore extends from the local distribution of costs and benefits to questions of global resource use and North–South relations.

The Paris Agreement explicitly recognises the imperative of a just transition for workforces, whereas the Sustainable Development Goals situate climate action within a broader commitment to eradicate poverty, provide decent employment, reduce inequalities, and ensure inclusive development. Together, these frameworks underscore that climate action must account for social and developmental concerns. Nevertheless, a deeper tension runs through contemporary sustainability transitions. As seasoned climate lawyer and activist Farhana Yamin reflected on the main conference panel, the current backlash against sustainability may in part be understood as a reaction to the significant progress achieved in sustainability transitions and human rights over recent decades. However, this progress has not removed underlying inequalities or power asymmetries. Rather, new transformation processes interact with existing inequalities and, in some circumstances reproduce or create new forms of disadvantage.

This point was emphasized in the conference's keynote contribution by Manisha Anantharaman, who argued that sustainability transitions are not inherently just. Rather, they are shaped by existing unequal power relations that influence how environmental problems are defined, whose interests are prioritized and whose capacities to shape change are recognized. A just transition therefore requires more than ensuring that the outcomes of transformation are fairly distributed. It also requires attention to unequal capacities to influence change, recognition of different experiences and interests, and the political coalitions through which transitions are negotiated. This is particularly pertinent in the Global South.

The reproduction of colonial patterns under the banner of the green transition highlights how decarbonization can perpetuate unequal patterns of resource extraction and create new forms of dependency. The development of a hydrogen economy in the Global North, for example, raises questions about access to land, water and energy – and about who ultimately benefits from the emerging green value chains. Where can and should large-scale renewable energy infrastructures and water-intensive electrolysis plants be located, when the hydrogen they produce is destined for export? More fundamentally, critiques of the green growth paradigm question whether technological substitution and economic growth alone sufficiently challenge the underlying structures and patterns of production and consumption that contribute to the environmental crisis. From this perspective, justice is not an additional consideration to be addressed alongside environmental objectives, but becomes central to questions of how transformation itself is conceived and governed.

Among scholars, policymakers and civil society organizations the debate on justice is also evolving in response to the growing pressure to accelerate sustainability transformations. While distributive, procedural and recognitional justice have become established dimensions of just transition research, recent work has begun to examine how these dimensions interact with the temporal pressures of rapid decarbonization (Markard et al., 2020; Mey et al., 2025; Newell et al., 2022). Sovacool et al. (2025), for example, extend conventional approaches to energy justice by considering how justice needs to be understood under conditions of acceleration. This raises two important questions that are increasingly relevant in both research and policy: Can transitions be both fast and fair? And if they can, under what conditions? Similar tensions are reflected in debates around public responses to energy technologies, where the political imperative to accelerate deployment may come into tension with expectations vis-à-vis participation, fairness and local control (Hielscher et al., 2025; Skjølsvold & Coenen, 2021).

At the same time, the justice dimension is particularly vulnerable to far-right populist instrumentalization in public and political communication. Claims about fairness are open to competing interpretations of who is disadvantaged by climate policies (Reusswig et al., 2025). Far-right actors increasingly position themselves as representatives of citizens who

perceive themselves as negatively affected or left behind by decarbonization. By framing climate policies as imposed by distant elites, as threats to livelihoods, or as unfair redistributions of resources, they can mobilize existing grievances and connect them to opposition to the broader sustainability transition – often under the language of justice itself. In this context, far-right actors can appropriate and reframe justice claims in climate and energy debates, portraying the transition as a form of state paternalism that unfairly redistributes costs and burdens across social groups and territories.

Such narratives can reinforce an urban–rural divide, contrasting urban climate ambitions with the perceived economic, spatial and environmental burdens imposed on rural communities. This can produce a counter-narrative of regional injustice, in which rural populations are portrayed as bearing the costs of a transition designed elsewhere while urban areas are perceived as capturing its benefits. Justice thus becomes not only a substantive dimension of transition policy but also a contested political resource through which different actors define problems, allocate responsibility and construct political identities (Knauf, 2022; Lindvall, 2023; Reusswig et al., 2025).

The backlash against sustainability transitions cannot be understood apart from the profound inequality of the global economic system. Transitions are embedded in this system and, unless these inequalities are actively addressed, may reproduce or intensify them – as illustrated by emerging forms of green extractivism. At the same time, justice concerns can be instrumentalized by far-right movements to mobilize opposition to sustainability transitions and deepen societal divisions.

2.3 Polarization or a shift to the right?

Our societies appear to be increasingly polarized over issues such as climate policy, migration and gender identities. A recent study found that 81% of people in Germany believe that society is currently divided (Vorländer et al., 2025, S. 8). This perceived polarization is widely seen, both within and beyond academia, as a growing threat to social cohesion, democratic stability and sustainability transitions. Accordingly, a growing body of literature has begun to engage with this issue (Eversberg et al., 2024; Kohler et al., 2025; Kumkar, 2024; Mau et al., 2023; Vorländer et al., 2025) and research is under way on successful strategies against polarization (Angeli, 2026). Discussions at the RIFS Conference, which centred around the German context, highlighted that the concept of polarization can be misleading and deflect from a broader shift of our societies to the right. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the research community to sharpen our understanding of the concept and its connection with backlash against democratic sustainability transitions.

At its most basic, polarization refers to a process in which attitudes diverge significantly between relatively stable social groups (Mau et al., 2023). Ideological polarization describes the increasing “distance between opposing political opinions, attitudes, and orientations” (Vorländer et al., 2025, S. 12). A certain degree of ideological polarization is generally considered a normal and even necessary feature of democratic systems and party competition (Zick et al., 2025). Affective polarization, by contrast, refers to the growing emotional distance and hostility between groups. Originally coined in the United States in the context of partisan divides between Democrats and Republicans (Mason, 2016), the concept captures how political identities become central social identities, structuring not only political preferences but also social relationships (Torcal & Harteveld, 2024; Vorländer et al., 2025). Affective, rather than ideological polarization is seen as a threat to democracy, as democratic processes depend on negotiation and compromise. When political opponents are not merely seen as holding different views but as fundamentally illegitimate or inferior, the possibility of constructive dialogue diminishes.

Empirical evidence on political polarization in Germany remains mixed. In their widely discussed book Triggerpunkte, Mau et al. (2023) argue that German society is less polarized than commonly assumed. They identify broad consensus on issues such as the recognition of climate change, the liberalization of rights for sexual minorities, and generally positive attitudes toward migration. Rather than deep polarization, they point to a more differentiated picture in which specific “trigger points” (such as heat pump policies) can quickly lead to an emotional escalation (ibid.). In contrast, other studies find society increasingly polarized, for instance around climate policy measures (Vorländer et al., 2025).

While there is broad agreement on the importance of studying polarization, the concept itself remains contested in several respects: (1) the extent to which it actually characterizes our current democratic societies; (2) the methods used to measure it; (3) the potential challenges of understanding our societies through a polarization lens; and (4) the ways in which polarization is communicated in public debate. Moreover, polarization as both a

concept and an analytical framework deserves critical scrutiny, because the way in which polarization is framed shapes which strategies are considered viable for addressing it.

One main critique of the concept of polarization is that it tends to adopt a horizontal view of society, focusing on opposing groups while neglecting the underlying social and material conditions that shape attitudes and identities. A more "vertical" perspective would allow for a deeper understanding of how structural inequalities and material interests influence political orientations. In this regard material inequalities, deteriorating living conditions and a decaying social infrastructure can lead to social polarization and resentment against a political and economic elite unresponsive to the needs of the public. Therefore, rather than focusing on polarization per se, Eversberg et al. identify distinct social "mentalities" based on survey data. These can be grouped into three broad categories: a social-ecological spectrum (about a quarter of society) that actively supports transformation; a conservative, growth-oriented spectrum (just under half) that seeks to maintain current standards of living; and a defensive-reactive spectrum (about a quarter) that feels left behind. The socio-ecological and the reactive-defensive spectrums could be regarded as opposites on a polarization axis, whereas the conservative growth-oriented spectrum would have been traditionally regarded as the centre (Eversberg et al., 2024). Follow-up data from 2023 indicate an overall shift away from sustainability-oriented positions. While eco-social mentalities have declined, the conservative middle has moved closer to defensive-reactive positions, increasingly opposing transformation. As growth-orientation and ecological transformation are increasingly regarded as incompatible, a growth-oriented defensive spectrum is on the rise. This suggests not so much polarization, but rather the emergence of a broader "defensive consensus" aimed at preserving social and material privileges.

Similar findings emerge from the Mitte Study (Zick et al., 2025), which measures progressive and regressive attitudes towards climate policies. Data gathered between 2022/2023 and 2024/2025 identifies a shift in public discourse: away from climate change itself and toward resistance against climate policies. This shift reflects a growing defensiveness rather than a widening ideological divide.

These findings point to a development that is difficult to capture with the concept of polarization alone. We may be witnessing a gravitational shift in the polarization axis towards the right of the political centre. For instance, in 2020 the recognition of climate change and the institutionalization of climate policy such as the Green Deal in Europe or the exit from nuclear energy in Germany were positions promoted by centre parties, underscored by scientific evidence. By 2026 support for such policies is ascribed to the social-ecological spectrum, regarded as being on the left of the polarization axis. The polarization framework, which assumes stable extremes moving further apart from a fixed centre, struggles to account for such a shift.

Moreover, framing political conflict in terms of opposing extremes risks creating false equivalences. The MIDEM study on polarization, for instance, finds that the most polarized groups in society are supporters of far-right parties and supporters of the Greens and the Left (Vorländer et al., 2025). Such a finding risks equating far-right actors – some of whom have been classified by German domestic intelligence services as threats to the democratic order – with actors promoting ecological transitions that operate within constitutional frameworks. It also obscures the extent to which anti-democratic ideas may be gaining acceptance within the political mainstream. The Mitte Study highlights this process as one of "shameless normalization," in which previously taboo positions and forms of expression become increasingly acceptable. This includes not only the spread of misinformation but also repeated challenges to democratic institutions. The process is distinguished by a certain 'shamelessness' (Zick, 2025, p. 30), whereby public outrage flares up in response to such challenges, yet fades as boundaries that were once taboo are repeatedly crossed. Such developments suggest that the primary concern may not be polarization as such, but rather the shifting boundaries of acceptable discourse.

The perception of a polarized society is reinforced by media dynamics that amplify conflict and by political strategies that rely on clear oppositions to mobilize support. Polarization, in this sense, is not only a social reality but also a communicative tool. That is why Kumkar (2024) argues for the need to approach polarization primarily as a communicative phenomenon. Media and political actors benefit from framing issues as conflicts between opposing camps, often simplifying complex realities into binary narratives. For instance, framing debates as a clash between "urban elites" and "rural populations" can obscure the diversity of positions within these groups. Importantly, recent years have seen the increasing influence of actors who actively promote such polarizing narratives. Far-right "culture wars" – focused on anti-gender, anti-migration, and anti-"woke" discourses – have proven particularly effective in shaping public debate and influencing mainstream political agendas.

It is therefore the responsibility of the (sustainability) research community to keep questioning and critically analysing the assumption that our societies are polarized along a left–right spectrum, and to interrogate what actually constitutes the presumed centre. The centre itself may, directly or indirectly, be contributing to the backlash against sustainability transitions. The sustainability research community must also uphold sustainability as a concern that belongs to neither side of the polarization spectrum, but that warrants – indeed demands – a central place in current research agendas.

3 Implications for sustainability research

3.1 Towards a new research agenda

One key insight from the conference was that backlash should not be understood merely as an external obstacle to sustainability transitions, but as an inherent feature of transformative processes that must be anticipated and addressed throughout the course of transformation. At the same time, further research is needed to better understand the different forms and dynamics of backlash, the conditions under which it emerges, and how different responses may shape its trajectories and consequences.

While socio-economic, cultural, and political drivers are often examined separately, their interaction across governance levels – from global developments and national politics to local experiences of transition – remains insufficiently understood. Important gaps also remain with respect to the consequences of backlash. While its immediate effects on policy adoption and implementation have been documented, much less is known about mid- and longer-term environmental, social, economic, and political impacts. Likewise, emerging forms of institutional backlash, such as those associated with libertarian governments in Argentina, remain underexplored despite their potential implications for sustainability governance. This points to several research questions that deserve closer attention:

- How do governments, civil society organizations, businesses, and researchers contribute to mitigating or amplifying backlash?
- How do local contexts mediate broader political and economic dynamics?
- Which strategies against backlash work under different political, social, and cultural conditions?
- More broadly, what role should sustainability researchers play in increasingly contentious public debates?
- How can questions of sufficiency and degrowth be addressed in an increasingly authoritarian and neoliberal environment?
- How does backlash against sustainability align with backlash against democracy?

The discussions around just and unjust transitions demonstrate that understanding the backlash against sustainability transitions requires more than assessing whether transition policies produce fair outcomes. It also entails examining how sustainability transitions are embedded in global and local inequality; how, and by whom fairness is defined; and how competing claims about costs, benefits, rights and responsibilities are articulated and politically mobilized. Understanding how these competing interpretations of justice emerge, circulate and gain political traction is an important avenue for future research.

There was general agreement at the conference that sustainability transitions are more likely to gain public support when social concerns are addressed from the outset. Resistance is often driven not only by objective costs but also by perceptions of affordability, fairness, and unequal burden-sharing. Yet, more evidence is needed on which policies have worked in different contexts, in particular with respect to their environmental effectiveness and their socio-economic impacts across populations. In particular, we need to ask:

- Under what conditions can attention to justice strengthen the legitimacy and acceleration of sustainability transformations?
- When do unresolved or newly created inequalities become resources for contestation and political mobilization?
- How do political and economic contexts shape the design, implementation, and distributional effects of climate policies – and why do similar policies generate support in some contexts but resistance in others?
- How do far-right actors appropriate and reframe claims about justice and fairness to delegitimize climate action?

The controversy surrounding Germany's heating reform – derided in tabloids as the "heating hammer" — underscored the critical importance of communication to sustainability transformations. Backlash unfolds within a rapidly evolving communication environment. It is increasingly shaped by social media platforms, digital information ecosystems and frequently strategically influenced by polarizing narratives (Kumkar, 2024; Zick et al., 2025). Climate debates are influenced not only by scientific evidence but also by values, identities, emotions, and competing political narratives (Corner et al., 2014; Moser, 2016). In such contexts, fact-based communication alone often struggles to engage audiences who interpret climate information through the filter of deeply held worldviews and motivated reasoning (Druckman & McGrath, 2019; Kahan, 2015). Future research should therefore consider:

- What role do “polarization entrepreneurs” play in creating an environment hostile to thinking about climate change?
- To what extent is polarization around sustainability transitions promoted from positions that are assumed to be at the political centre?

Relatedly, there is a need for compelling and inclusive narratives about sustainability transitions. Recent communication strategies have increasingly highlighted the co-benefits of climate action, including energy security, improved public health, economic opportunities, and quality of life. While such approaches may broaden support, participants also noted the risks of downplaying climate risks and urgency. Participatory and dialogue-based approaches may also contribute to reducing the conditions under which sustainability-policy backlash emerges and can strengthen the legitimacy of policy decisions, foster trust between stakeholders, and help address local concerns before they escalate into broader political conflict (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Newig et al., 2019). And while participation is frequently viewed as inherently beneficial and an uncontroversial silver bullet, it is in need of a more critical assessment: existing approaches and practices need to be evaluated and revisited to better understand what works, under which conditions, and with what effects. This also raises the question of whether some forms of participation have fallen short of their potential in recent years – because they were not sufficiently meaningful, offered limited opportunities for influence, or failed to match the expectations and concerns of those involved. Therefore, we should ask:

- To what extent can established approaches, such as stakeholder participation and dialogue, remain effective under conditions of increasing polarization?
- Do we need new political strategies such as coalition-building, distributive compensation, or narrative-based approaches to sustain public support for sustainability transformations?
- Under what conditions do participatory approaches meaningfully influence climate and energy policy and contribute to legitimacy and trust, and where have existing approaches fallen short?

3.2 Increasing risks for sustainability research

Although not the key focus of the conference, the repercussions of backlash for research in general and sustainability research in particular were a constant underlying concern and part of many conversations. As far-right parties continue to gain ground, these concerns have only grown, including questions on how backlash shapes research agendas, constrains academic debates, affects researchers’ relationships with societal and political actors and influences our working conditions. We see three overarching threats emerging.

Firstly, attacks on the freedom of science have increased significantly worldwide. The Academic Freedom Index Update for 2026 indicates that 50 out of 179 countries and territories around the world “have experienced a statistically and substantially significant decline in academic freedom compared to ten years ago, while only nine countries saw an increase in academic freedom”(Academic Freedom Index, 2026). Even though Germany has experienced only a slight decline in overall academic freedom, some potential threats to science

generally and to transformative science in particular can be observed (Möllers, 2026). Moreover, if the AfD takes power in the federal state of Saxony-Anhalt in late 2026, these risks could soon become reality. According to its platform, the party intends to strike gender and postcolonial studies from university programmes and create an 'Institute for the Consequences of Climate Policy' to scrutinize "climate rescue" policies pursued by recent federal and state governments, which the AfD characterizes as being based on "dubious climate studies".[1]

Secondly, cuts to science funding in countries like the USA and Argentina have significantly affected sustainability research and community involvement in climate and infrastructure planning (Contreras et al., 2026). A more subtle shift in research funding can also be observed in Europe, where governments increasingly prioritize research on competitiveness, technology innovation, and defence rather than open science in the field of sustainability.[2]

Finally, even established media outlets are calling for greater neutrality in academia. For example, the FAZ newspaper argues that "normative reshaping of the academic system (…) promotes social polarization"[3], while weekly newspaper Die Zeit notes that higher education used to be primarily about excellence. "Today, social policy is also on the agenda – a disastrous development."[4] What is referred to here as 'social policy' is universities' efforts to address diversity deficits and discrimination. Yet, as critics have pointed out, there is no indication that Germany's universities have fallen behind in international rankings over the last decade. Equally, public trust in science is still high.[5] Nevertheless, these delegitimating discourses by certain political parties and the media may have repercussions for scientific freedom in the medium term. A glance at the USA suggests how such statements can become harbingers of increasingly restrictive funding policies. Even during the Biden administration, prior to Trump's second term, terms such as "diversity, equity, inclusion" (DEI) were frequently omitted in research applications to improve the likelihood of securing funding. We are now seeing in the USA both a coerced and a voluntary rollback of DEI programmes in research institutions and the private sector.[6] Is the ban on gender-neutral language in the Ministry of Culture[7] here in Germany a harbinger of a similar trend? And do claims of a lack of neutrality extend to sustainability research and, in particular, transdisciplinary research?

Rather than succumbing to anticipatory obedience, transdisciplinary sustainability researchers need to ask uncomfortable questions:

- Does backlash lead to changes in how researchers communicate, frame or justify sustainability research, and with what consequences?
- How does increasing polarization affect opportunities for dialogue and knowledge exchange between researchers and societal and political actors?
- How can sustainability research anticipate and respond to shifts in political priorities and potential declines in funding?
- To what extent should we rethink the communication of research results and the language used to become more accessible?

[1] https://www.forschung-und-lehre.de/politik/afd-will-niedergang-der-deutschen-wissenschaft-beenden-7639
[2] https://www.forschung-und-lehre.de/politik/2026-sogar-fast-235-milliarden-fuer-das-bmftr-7418
[3] https://www.faz.net/aktuell/karriere-hochschule/hoersaal/es-gibt-zu-viel-wertsetzung-in-hochschulgesetzen-accg-110851520.html
[4] https://www.zeit.de/wissen/2026-03/deutsche-universitaeten-zustand-exzellenz-wettbewerb-gemeinwohl
[5] https://www.soziales-nachhaltigkeitsbarometer.de/daten
[6] https://www.forbes.com/sites/conormurray/2025/04/11/ibm-reportedly-walks-back-diversity-policies-citing-inherent-tensions-here-are-all-the-companies-rolling-back-dei-programs/
[7] https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/kulturstaatsminister-untersagt-gendersprache-in-dienstschreiben-110.html

4 Moving forward

Backlash against sustainability transformations cannot be understood in isolation from the broader backlash against democratic values and practices. Opposition to climate and sustainability policies increasingly intersects with the weakening of democratic institutions, the normalization of exclusionary and authoritarian narratives, declining trust in public institutions, and attacks on pluralism and evidence-based policymaking. Although disagreement and contestation are inherent, and indeed necessary, elements of democratic transformation, the forms of backlash examined in this paper frequently extend beyond disputes over particular policies. They challenge the legitimacy of sustainability transformation itself, the democratic processes through which it is negotiated and, increasingly, the knowledge and institutions that support it.

This shifting context creates new challenges for sustainability research and calls into question fundamental epistemological and ontological assumptions that underpin the field. It calls into question not only what we know and how we come to know it, but also our understanding of the reality being studied. These challenges extend beyond formulating research questions regarding the origins, forms, and consequences of the backlash; they also concern the conditions under which research is funded, conducted, communicated, and translated into societal action. Interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary researchers must navigate increasingly polarized public debates, shifting political priorities, and mounting pressure on academic freedom. They must also contend with growing hostility towards research perceived as normative or transformative. At the same time, collaboration with societal actors becomes both more important and more difficult as trust declines and participatory processes themselves become politically contested.

Researchers must, therefore, address backlash both as a subject of research and as a condition reshaping research practice. This requires sustainability researchers to reflect critically on their roles, methods and forms of engagement without retreating from the normative commitments to justice, democracy and ecological sustainability that underpin much of the field. Responses to backlash also have a very human dimension: we as researchers need to find ways of supporting each other within the academic community – particularly by caring for those who, due to their backgrounds or stances, may become more vulnerable in an increasingly hostile environment. At the same time, we need allies, networks and ways of communicating that help us stay connected to the broader public, listen to perspectives beyond academia, and ensure that our thinking remains grounded in wider societal realities. The challenge is twofold: to make sustainability research more resilient to political pressure, and to ensure that it remains scientifically rigorous, socially relevant and capable of supporting democratic transformation under increasingly adverse conditions.

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RIFS Discussion Paper

October 2026

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ViSdP:
Prof. Dr. Doris Fuchs,
Scientific Director, Speaker

Editor:
Damian Harrison

DOI: 10.48481/rifs.2026.029

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