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# Does climate change delegitimize political parties? How movement–party linkages in Germany, Austria, Slovakia, and Poland are reshaped

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## ABSTRACT



Contemporary climate movements such as Fridays for Future have declared to stay away from party politics out of fear of being dragged into a party-political debate. In their perspective, they advocate scientific truths which shall be implemented without political negotiations watering them down. Yet, they direct their demands towards the representative system. In this article, based on a series of qualitative interviews with activists and politicians in Germany, Austria, Poland, and Slovakia, we compare how movements and parties cooperate in the field of climate politics. Using a political opportunity structure perspective, we scrutinize the factors that shape linkages between civil society, movements, and more traditional political forms of political representation in the climate crisis. Results show that different party systems, political cultures, the presence of credible allies as well as the likelihood of influence affect party-movement linkages and activists' satisfaction with representative democracy. Whereas Polish climate movements joined a large coalition that mobilized for the opposition victory in 2023, in Germany we found much lower levels of cooperation. In contrast, in Slovakia and Austria climate movements remain at a distance from political parties and activists show great levels of frustration with representative democracy.

## KEYWORDS

Political parties; social movements; climate movement; representative democracy

## Introduction

How do linkages between representative institutions, social movements, and civil society evolve with the unfolding of the climate crisis? And how do political opportunities influence the transformation of these linkages? As established mechanisms of democratic decision-making and representation are increasingly challenged by the scope and temporality of required decisions, the climate crisis of the contemporary greatly affects the provisioning of democratic transmission belts between institutions and citizens

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(Böhmelt, Böker, and Ward 2016; Krick 2021). For instance, mobilizations such as the new climate movements establish more distant linkages to political parties and the parliamentary system (de Moor et al. 2021). This alters the way representative democracy works and organizes system responsiveness – and it might challenge the established ways a democracy provides legitimation for its policies. However, in different countries, the mobilizations around climate change play out differently – and are very differently incorporated into the parliamentary realm. In this paper, we compare how in four countries climate movements and political parties cooperate and how they understand their roles within representative democracy. These questions are relevant for two reasons: Firstly, especially younger people, whose mobilization has formed the backbone of the contemporary climate movements, increasingly gain the impression that politicians and representative democracy are failing (Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022). They consequently seek other forms of legitimation, engagement, and democracy, outside of established institutions, thereby altering the way representative democracy might function (for instance, Pickard 2019). Secondly, addressing climate change is an inherently and inescapably *political* challenge which depends on the cooperation and interconnection of various political actors (Moore et al. 2024; Schaub, Tosun, and Jordan 2024). Therefore, understanding the different factors shaping stringent climate policies as well as the remoulding of representative democracy in the contemporary is of academically and politically utmost importance.

Our point of departure is the observation that compared to previous (ecological) mobilizations, contemporary climate movements approach the party-parliamentary sphere in a different manner (de Moor et al. 2021; Zamponi et al. 2022). Today's climate movements, such as *Fridays for Future (FFF)*, conceptualize climate change as a universal problem, which might not be solved with the means of traditional parliamentary strategies. In their eyes, it must not be watered down in political negotiation and compromise, but should remain distant to parliamentary or party-political logics (de Moor et al. 2021; Marquardt 2020; Pollex and Soßdorf 2023). These movements take a broad scientific consensus as a point of departure and demand that political institutions '*listen to the science!*'. Some climate movements have sought temporary alliances with especially Green parties which have been beneficial for both sides (Moore et al. 2024; Savolainen and Ylä-Anttila 2021). Others in contrast strictly reject any closer connection to political institutions. However, in their demands they also address these very same institutions they do not want to be part of (Marquardt 2020; Svensson and Wahlström 2023).

In the past, class-based organizations such as the labour movements of the 1920s aimed at a close and stable connection between social movements, parties and parliament (Lösche and Walter 1989). Several decades later, the Western new social and ecological movements of the 1970s and 1980s imagined a relationship, in which social movements steered and controlled the newly formed Green parties, establishing strategic cooperations and partnership (Poguntke 1987). Today, especially in Southern Europe, in the field of austerity politics, movements have formed new linkages with the parliamentary system or even organizationally transformed into hybrid movement parties (della Porta et al. 2017; Varvarousis, Asara, and Akbulut 2020). However, this is not the case in the field of contemporary climate activism. These shifts highlight that on the one hand, the fundamental principles of parliamentary systems might be

understood as increasingly ineffective in addressing climate change and on the other, that the processes of representation and parliamentary negotiations are ever less inducing democratic legitimation. It is the goal of this article to take a closer look at (a) how climate movements and political parties seek cooperation; (b) how they understand their respective roles in a representative democracy; (c) how these perceptions are affected by the perception of their political systems and the political alliances available.

To address these questions, we make use of a qualitative exploration and draw upon a political opportunities approach and conceptualizations of the functional differentiation between movements and parties from party research and social movement studies. Through these perspectives we can compare how different political systems, parties, and available political alliances alter how movements and representative institutions interact (Della Porta 2013) – thus shaping the conditions for addressing climate change. We ask how contemporary climate activists as well as party functionaries (working on climate issues) cooperate and how they perceive their different roles within democracy.

Between 2022 and 2024, we have interviewed 41 climate activists and actors in political parties dealing with climate issues in Germany, Austria, Slovakia, and Poland (see supplementary material to the article) as the four countries show important variation in the dimensions that we have chosen following a political opportunities approach: openness/closure of party systems, the availability of potential political allies, political party culture. In Germany and Austria, Green parties have been part of the national government at the time of the interviews (in a coalition with Social Democrats and Liberals in Germany since 2021 and in a coalition with the conservative Austrian people's party in Austria between 2020 and 2024). In Poland, activists backed the national progressive opposition for the electoral campaign in 2023 that brought a climate-friendly coalition in government after years of a right-wing government in office. In Slovakia, climate change and climate movements have not been in the focus of public discourse – or rather as an enemy image for right-wing populists that won the snap elections of 2023. Thus, whereas climate movements saw climate-friendly parties in government in Germany and Austria, potential allies were in opposition in Poland and Slovakia. Furthermore, whereas German and Austrian party systems have been conceptualized as historically *pillarized*, which suggests a close (and closed!) relationship between the big centre-left and center-right people's parties and sympathetic social movements, as well as with a high degree of corporatism, Polish and Slovak party systems have been conceptualized as comparatively open to new contenders (Casal Bértoa and Enyedi 2016). Against this background, comparing linkages between climate movements and parties in the four countries appears promising as they meet very different political opportunities and incentives for cooperation.

In what follows, we establish an analytical framework for our undertaking, for which we draw upon the concept of political opportunity structures as well as conceptualizations of the functional differentiation between social movements and political parties from party research and social movement studies. Subsequently, in section three we address the methods and the empirical case selection the article is based upon, before in section four we revisit the perceptions of cooperation and democracy, which climate activists and party politicians have voiced in the interviews. We conclude by carving out how in the four countries, activists and party politicians approach potential cooperation very

differently and heed very different ideas of the roles movements and parties assume in a representative democracy.

Previous research has emphasized that activists, also with climate movements, often become more optimistic and satisfied *through* their activism (such as Kirsch, Kube, and Zohlnhöfer 2022; Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022). Our results, however, question this. Especially in Slovakia and Austria, climate activists reject any closer cooperation with political parties and show high levels of frustration with institutions of representative democracy and membership organizations, such as political parties. Conversely, activists in Germany but especially in Poland view representative democracy and cooperating with political parties much more friendly. So much that in Poland climate movements widely joined a broad social coalition that mobilized for the opposition victory in 2023. Our findings highlight that the activists' perception of a political system and culture being open to new topics and social demands as well as the existence of promising and credible political allies indicating pathways for change matter most for their strategic choices and attitudes towards representative democracy. However, among climate activists we also find a widespread scepticism towards the inherent logics of membership organizations and institutions. This implies that representative democracy might be remoulded under conditions of the climate crisis.

### **How the political context conditions movement organization and system openness**

In contrast to many previous mobilizations in Europe, most contemporary climate and environmental movements draft alternative futures without the help of close alliances in the parliamentary-political sphere (Butzlaff and Deflorian 2021). It appears that under conditions of an escalating climate crisis and in the eyes of climate activists, the logics of the parliamentary arena and party politics are feared to prioritize processes of political negotiation, compromise, and electoral campaigns. In the perspective of many activists, these priorities rather prevent ecological transformation and social change than enable it (Bosi and Zamponi 2015; Naegler 2018). In contrast, focusing on extra-parliamentary repertoires signals integrity, altruism, and an orientation towards the common good (MacGregor 2021). Consequently, for contemporary climate movements, political parties and parliaments are not considered trustworthy allies (Berker and Pollex 2021; Wahlström et al. 2019). As a result, contemporary climate movements specifically call for science-guided measures and are sceptical of a parliament-focused equalization of social interests through negotiation (de Moor et al. 2021; Svensson and Wahlström 2023). In different European countries, however, activists spell out this scepticism in very different ways. Whereas some movements are open to temporary cooperation with parties and parliaments (Savolainen and Ylä-Anttila 2021), others stay distant and highly sceptical (Berker and Pollex 2021). This suggests, on the one hand, that compared to previous ecological mobilizations, contemporary climate movements might show different expectations regarding representative democracy and their own role in it (Butzlaff and Deflorian 2021; Poguntke 1987). Furthermore, that representative democracy appears to lose trust and legitimacy especially among its most active citizens. On the other hand, this scepticism of representative democracy might make ambitious climate policies all the more complex, as a close involvement of movements as

intermediators has been shown a key ingredient of stringent climate policies (Finnegan 2022; Schaub, Tosun, and Jordan 2024).

To understand relationships between political systems and social movement landscapes, researchers have often turned to the political process model and political opportunity structures (POS) (de Moor and Wahlström 2022; Edwards 2014). The POS approach assumes that the external (political) environment to social movements shapes the conditions for their emergence as well as the strategic choices activists make (Della Porta 2013). Furthermore, it expects that political systems influence the way social movement and protest cultures are embedded in a democracy (Kitschelt 1986). If a political system provides favourable conditions for collective action and the participation in public decision-making and gives activists the impression that the time for collective action has come, it creates opportunities that movements can take advantage of. In contrast, more closed systems that keep movement demands at a distance or even persecute activists might discourage movements from forming or discourage any interaction with the political (Edwards 2014). Consequently, different political systems present different openness and opportunities for citizen participation and movement mobilizations (Della Porta 2013). How state actors meet movement activists and how susceptible and open institutions are to their claims is dependent on how the roles of movements are understood (McAdam and Tarrow 2010). For an operationalization of the model, Tarrow and Tilly (2009, 440) have highlighted six features of political regimes that are considered the most important in shaping movements' collective action and their likelihood of mobilizing successfully: 1. the existence of different independent centers of power within a regime; 2. the openness or relative closure of a system to new actors; 3. the (in)stability of existing political alignments; 4. the availability of influential allies or supporters in the political system; 5. the extent of oppression by the regime; 6. significant changes within the regime. These six features are meant to guide an empirical analysis of the opportunity structure movements face, either focusing on the setup of institutional structures a regime provides, or on changes in these configurations of power (Della Porta 2013). In the development of the theoretical perspective, scholars have often drawn upon environmental movements as case studies (for instance, Kitschelt 1986; Van Der Heijden 1997, 1999). De Moor and Wahlström (2022) have emphasized that to explain the strategic behaviour of environmental movements, differences in output structures or the perception of a government's capacity to ensure changes proved significant.

However, the POS concept has been criticized especially for a. the danger of overstretching, when each and everything might be considered an external influence and b. implying a determinism of external factors on movement behaviour (Della Porta 2013; Edwards 2014; Saunders 2009). Both areas of critique lead to adaptations in our operationalization of the approach. The first criticism underlines that researchers have continuously expanded the list of factors considered an external influence on social movements, until the concept becomes unmanageable, too broad, and therefore almost meaningless. de Moor and Wahlström (2022) have emphasized the importance of distinguishing factors related to governmental institutions and thus the *political* character from others, such as discursive, legal, or corporate opportunity structures. Della Porta (2013) has furthermore suggested to focus on a small number of contextual variables connected to the research interest and to avoid retracing comprehensive systems of external conditions. This procedure should clarify the dependent variable to be

explained as well as the expected independent variables for a comparison. For the research interest pursued here, this means focusing on how parties and party systems influence how movements form alliances and connect to representative democracy (or not) as the connection to friendly parties has often been found a key factor of movement success. Environmental movements, for instance, have often partnered with Green parties in the past (Della Porta 2013; Kitschelt 1988; Poguntke 1987) when these were available, this way creating inroads into participation in political decision-making. The climate movements of the contemporary, too, specifically address state and party actors. Openings or opportunities in these relationships can be expected to affect strategies for collective actions (Edwards 2014). Vice versa, strategic movement choices also matter for concrete policy outcomes. Climate movements as mediating actors have been found to be a key factor for stringent climate policies if they cooperate closely with politicians and representative institutions (Finnegan 2022; Schaub, Tosun, and Jordan 2024). However, it makes a great difference for movements if a potential ally and friendly party is in government or in opposition. Whereas parties in opposition have been found to be more responsive to movement demands as they need mobilization and voters, parties in government are in possession of key resources to make concessions to movement demands in the way of policy changes, or the facilitation of access to government positions (Hutter and Vliegthart 2018). Yet, parties in government respond to a much greater number of stakeholders and are therefore less likely to commit to single issue movements – even more so when they are part of multi-party coalitions. This makes movement–party relations more complicated and tension-ridden, as movement activists criticize the compromise and negotiation-focused policies of an ally in government (McAdam and Tarrow 2010; Savolainen and Ylä-Anttila 2021). In our empirical analysis, we therefore focus on comparing a. the relative openness or closure of the different political systems to new actors as well as b. the availability of influential allies or supporters in the political systems.

The second criticism refers to the fact that political opportunities alone do not automatically shape social movement mobilizations. Many scholars have highlighted that there is nothing deterministic in certain external conditions and openings leading to the emergence of movements (Edwards 2014), and that the same political systems lead to an impressive heterogeneity of movement organizations and strategic choices (Saunders 2009). Instead, ‘opportunities and threats are not objective categories’ (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 45), but need processing and interpretation by social movement actors. This does not mean that objective conditions and opportunities do not matter – but that their effect is mediated through perceptions and processing by activists (de Moor and Wahlström 2022; Saunders 2009). Thus, between external opportunities as independent variables and a movement’s action as explanandum, we rely on the mediation of the movement activists attributing meaning to a situation, the movement’s organizational capacities, and the ‘emergence of an oppositional consciousness’ (McAdam and Tarrow 2019, 21). Political opportunities within a political system can thus be understood as a precondition a movement might take advantage of (or not) or act as stimuli to a movement’s development. It is therefore important to understand how movement activists *perceive* of and make sense of political opportunities; and the *interpretation* and *processing* of seemingly objective structures and contexts can then shape mobilizations and activists’ actions (Kriesi 2004; Kurzman 2004).

The way activists perceive of opportunities a system provides has been conceptualized as a ‘collective narration in which common conceptions of actors, causal connections, and projected developments are constructed’ (de Moor and Wahlström 2022, 265). Activists bring together their own (or others’) experiences of approaching governmental or parliamentary institutions, the strategies they tried out in the past, with their own organization’s collective and strategic identity. Activist perceptions of opportunities are, therefore, shaped by their own or similar organization’s experiences with government institutions and their collective identities – and these are passed on to other activists and agreed upon within organizations through collective narratives (de Moor and Wahlström 2019). By focusing on these narratives, it can be traced why some objective opportunities seem to be acted upon by some actors while similar conditions in another place or time are not. It is this rather subjective element of the political context which we seek to trace. For our research undertaking, this means to closely zoom into how activists *perceive, understand, and talk about* 1. the relative openness or closure of the different political systems to new actors as well as 2. the availability of influential allies in the political systems.

Lastly, not only institutions shape movement opportunities, but the political context of a regime is shaped by its political culture as well as by the interaction with movements itself (Della Porta 2013; Saunders 2009). Collective actions affect institutions, too, through possible effects on the party system, electoral majorities, how the salience of issues and cleavages in publicly perceived, or the political culture (Tilly 2006). This implies that any research comparing the interrelation between different political systems and contemporary climate movements would need not only take into account how activists perceive of opportunities and attribute meaning to them, but also how party functionaries experience the influence of movement actors – as well as how both groups interpret their own political culture and their opportunities to shape it.

In the empirical research on how movement–party interactions play out in political practice, scholars have pointed to differing trends. Whereas some have observed movements growing closer to the parliamentary and party sphere, others have emphasized how far apart the two spheres have grown. In movement research, scholars have emphasized that linkages between movement parties might grow closer (Hutter, Kriesi, and Lorenzini 2019). In their perspective, movement parties bridging electoral and extra-parliamentary politics appear as the most recent and dynamic organizational trend in European party systems (see, for instance, della Porta et al. 2017). Furthermore, that these can be understood as a reaction against the alienation and atomization many experience in post-industrialist societies and austerity politics, promising to shake up the established mechanisms of parliamentary negotiation and political parties (Almeida 2010; Anria 2018; Peña 2021; Prentoulis and Thomassen 2020). Movement parties have been conceptualized as emerging parties that form when established party systems remain unresponsive to new social claims, and when activists of social movements subsequently apply organizational, strategic and mobilization repertoires of movements to the arena of the party system (Kitschelt 2006). These organizational hybrids have been described at different endpoints of the ideological spectrum (see Caiani and Císař 2019 for radical right movement parties; for left wing progressive parties della Porta et al. 2017), as well as established political parties seeking to ‘movementize’ their repertoires (Butzlaff 2024). This development also signals that adding movement characteristics to

the party sphere might help with democratic legitimation – and furthermore that the fields of elections, parties, and protest are moving closer together (Borbáth and Hutter 2024; Hutter, Kriesi, and Lorenzini 2019; Kriesi 2008; Portos 2025; Portos and Carvalho 2022).

In contrast, in the field of party politics, many have observed that parties have professionalized and made stable linkages to civil society and movement–party cooperations more unlikely. For instance, in their influential cartel party hypothesis, Katz and Mair (1995, 2009) have emphasized that parties have withdrawn from civil society and have increasingly turned to resources of the state. As a result, movements and civil society have decoupled from close linkages with the party system. In the research on movements and societal transformation, this emphasis on independence of movements and civil society has been picked up in many ways. For instance, the concept of direct social action (DSA) conceptualizes small, local, independent initiatives to develop experimental and unmediated direct solutions for societal challenges, without watering down through political negotiations and compromise (Bosi and Zamponi 2020; Butzlaff and Deflorian 2021; Forno and Graziano 2014). Especially in the German speaking countries, smaller niche movements have been praised for facilitating socio-ecological transformation (Adloff 2018; Blühdorn and Deflorian 2019; Boddenberg 2018), which was supposedly only made possible by turning away from the parliamentary sphere.

In sum, there are differing observations regarding the overarching trend in how contemporary social movements and political parties interlink. Whereas some explain a growing distance with a professionalization of parties (Katz and Mair 1995) or increasing expectations of directness of activists (Butzlaff and Deflorian 2021), others have observed a hybridization of spheres. However, both diagnoses have highlighted the importance of the political regimes and contexts at play for the way movement–party relations play out. Especially the availability of influential political allies and the openness of the party system, together with the political culture have been identified as key factors for how movements might approach the political system.

Therefore, as it is the goal of this article to take a closer look at how climate movements and political parties seek cooperation and how they understand their respective roles in a representative democracy, we especially explore

- (a) the relative openness or closure of the political systems to new actors as well as the availability of influential allies or supporters in different political systems;
- (b) how climate activists and political party functionaries in different party systems perceive of this openness or closure, and how they view possible opportunities for cooperation;
- (c) how activists and party functionaries perceive of the possibility to co-shape their political systems and culture, as well as how they imagine their roles within representative democracy.

It is important to acknowledge that there might be further influences to the strategic decision-making of climate movements (for instance, see Almeida 2019), and that we cannot claim a comprehensive analysis of all possible factors involved. We chose the POS factors above as a starting point to our qualitative exploration as these had been found significant for our specific questions of shifting strategic relationships between climate movements and representative democratic institutions.

## Methods and cases

To address these questions, we make use of a qualitative approach and semi-structured interviews. Interviews help us to carve out the experiences and expectations of the actors involved as well as their interpretation of the opportunities provided by party systems (della Porta 2014). We have chosen Germany, Austria, Slovakia, and Poland as country cases, as these four countries show a significant variance in the factors that we have developed as the comparative dimensions and independent variables in the preceding section: the openness and closure of party systems, the availability of (potentially) powerful climate-friendly political allies, as well as the political culture with regard to climate politics and social movement engagement more generally. Following our development of the POS approach in the previous section, we would expect the differences between these four countries to affect the activists' perceptions of political opportunities, which then might affect how they approach the political and parliamentary sphere.

Firstly, the four countries vary in the openness of their party systems. Both in Austria and Germany, the party systems have been described as historically *pillarized*, which suggests a close relationship between each of the big center-left and center-right people's parties, such as the SPD/SPÖ or the CDU/CSU/ÖVP, and respective sympathetic social movements (Detterbeck 2008). In contrast, the post-socialist party systems in Poland and Slovakia had developed differently after 1990. Consequently, the German and Austrian party systems have been conceptualized as comparatively closed to new social claims and new movements challenging the established parties (although Austria much more closed than Germany, see Casal Bértoa and Enyedi 2016), which would suggest hurdles and challenges for (new) climate movements seeking contact and cooperation with established parties. In comparison, Polish and Slovak party systems show a much higher openness to new contenders and the integration of emerging topics (Casal Bértoa and Enyedi 2016). Císař and Vráblíková (2019) have found that in several Central and Eastern European countries movement and party relations work differently than in the West – that, on the one hand, 'the substitutive dynamics between party and protest politics is weaker' and, on the other, 'the issue agendas in party and protest arenas are here more alike' (Císař and Vráblíková 2019, 1152).

Secondly, when it comes to climate politics specifically, and the availability of potential political allies, parties and party systems across countries vary considerably in their understanding of environmental problems such as the climate crisis (Pollex and Berker 2022). In this dimension, the four countries differ in how prominently the topic of climate change figured in the public political discourse: In Germany and Austria, the topic assumed a very prominent position in public discourse and political debates from 2019 onwards. The Green parties have benefitted from this discourse, have grown electorally, and have been part of the national government at the time of the interviews (in a coalition with Social Democrats and Liberals in Germany between 2021 and 2025, and in a coalition with the conservative Austrian people's party in Austria 2020–2025; see Haunss and Sommer 2020; Sommer et al. 2019). This was much less the case in Slovakia and Poland (Borbáth and Hutter 2024). In Poland, climate activists backed the national left-liberal opposition for the successful electoral campaign in 2023 that ended years of a right-wing government in office. In Slovakia, climate change and climate movements have not been in the focus of public discourse (Wertlen 2023) – or rather as an enemy

image for right-wing populists that won the snap elections of 2023. Thus, at the time of most interviews, climate-friendly parties as potential allies were governing in Germany and Austria, but potential movement allies were in opposition in Poland and Slovakia.

Thirdly, the four countries show differing levels and trends of trust in national democratic institutions, which might also enable or restrict movements' strategic choices towards cooperation with political parties. Whereas trust in national representative institutions is comparatively highest in Germany and Austria, trust levels are lower in Poland and (especially) Slovakia (Boda et al. 2018). Whereas Western European Societies, such as Germany and Austria, have been conceptualized as 'social movement societies' (Quaranta 2016) due to the strong influence of movements and their close interrelation with the political system, this is not the case for CEE political systems. However, research on environmentalism has often used a Western blueprint and has therefore discarded Central and Eastern European (CEE) societies as little interested and engaged, whereas environmentalism had taken different forms and perspectives in CEE (Jehlička and Jacobsson 2021). Activism and especially environmentalism has assumed different roles, collective memories, and pathways in Central and Eastern Europe (Meyer et al. 2020; Torsello 2012).

The interviewees have in common that at the time of the interviews they were or had been active with a climate movement or a political party, NGO, or were an expert journalist/civil servant of the administration in the field of climate politics. In the four countries, we have focused on various local (and national) movement groups, such as *Fridays for Future* and groups that developed out of the first FfF mobilizations, such as *Klíma ťa potrebuje* (The climate needs you). We sought interviews with activists from groups that were not entirely anti-system or against any cooperation with politics from the start. We sought movements with a higher degree of strategic orientation and claims-making towards parliamentary politics – so that the *potential* for cooperation is higher. Likewise, we have interviewed functionaries from parties that, from the activists, were perceived as at least potentially open for a constructive policy development and not as completely negligent to the topic.

In the four countries, we approached various local (and national) Fridays for Future groups as well as political parties with a climate policy agenda. After the first interviews, we continued with a snowball sampling by asking people for recommendations for further interviewees. It was the goal to cover a wide range of age groups, social background, rural/urban areas, local/regional/national levels, as well as different roles and functions in movements and parties – so that we did not focus on a small segment of functionaries within the organizations, which might lead to over-interpretation and over-generalization. Still, given the qualitative nature of our undertaking and the limited number of interviewees per movement/party/country, we need to be aware of the limitations of making generalizing comparisons and focus on qualitative exploration. Furthermore, recruiting proved more difficult in some countries than in others – for instance among party politicians in Slovakia, where we did not manage to conduct the same number of interviews as in the other countries. We have interviewed people at all political levels and in various regions, from former ministers and Fridays for Future activists active at an international level to people active (only) in their local town or village. In total, the interview sample contains 41 interviewees (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Overview of interviewees.

|          | Climate activists | Party functionaries | Experts (journalists/civil servants) | Total |
|----------|-------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------------|-------|
| Austria  | 4                 | 6                   | 2                                    | 12    |
| Germany  | 6                 | 6                   | 1                                    | 13    |
| Poland   | 5                 | 2                   | 1                                    | 8     |
| Slovakia | 5                 | 3                   |                                      | 8     |
| total    | 20                | 17                  | 4                                    | 41    |

Interviews were between 30 and 100 min each. The research followed our universities' ethical research guidelines and data protection policy. It included prior informed consent by the participants, as well as carefully ensured confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy of the interviewees, to prevent any identification of individuals. A more detailed overview of the distribution of interviewees across categories, a brief description of their positions, as well as the interview questionnaire can be found in the supplementary online material to the article.

Interviews in Germany and Austria were conducted in German and the coded sections later translated into English. Polish interviews were conducted in English, and in Slovakia, in Slovak. The interview material was coded with the help of NVIVO. The coding of the material followed a directed qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005) using a deductive category application and coding scheme which were informed by the framework developed in section two and which were adapted during the interpretation process. Furthermore, the interpretation followed an interpretative approach (Wagenaar 2011) in that we were specifically interested in how party and movement activists *perceived* the political context and opportunities for cooperations, representation, and democratic legitimation differently.

### **New linkages in the climate crisis? (Non-)cooperation between movements and parties**

When we look at how interviewees interpret the potential for cooperation between social movements and political parties in the field of climate politics, big differences between the four countries arise. In Austria and Slovakia, activists are highly critical towards political parties and the political system, rejecting most forms of direct cooperation. In Germany, activists are critical towards political parties yet show a higher degree of pragmatism and lower levels of frustration with representative democracy. In contrast, Polish activists are much more pragmatic and open to strategic cooperation with the progressive side of the Polish party system.

In *Austria*, interviewees emphasize a strong separation of spheres between parties and climate movements and highlight that there is hardly a personal overlap between the two.<sup>1</sup> A4 Benjamin, a Viennese functionary of the Green party, points out: 'We have tried it several times and have given up eventually. [...] also, we hardly know the Fridays for Future activists in and around Vienna.' Austrian climate activists strongly prioritize their movements' independence and autonomy. They clearly reject the idea of partnering with a political party and perceive the Austrian party system as closed, dysfunctional, and as ideologically entrenched. Any topic related to one political party would immediately be rejected by the other parties and not up for public debate anymore:

We cannot be associated with them officially (referring to the Green party's youth organization, the author), because the other parties are only waiting to dismiss us as part of the

Green party organization [...] Actually, there is nobody with us who is active in a political party. (A3 Hanna)

Many emphasize they hardly know each other, even at the local level or with parties' youth organizations that are typically interested in climate politics, such as the Greens. The spheres of parties and climate movements, it seems, stay strictly separated. 'Simply, because we want to be completely independent from political parties. [...] We just want that every party takes Paris-compatible measures. We don't care so much how exactly they do that. That is their job' (A9 Peter).

Austrian climate activists shy away from any closer cooperation or stable connection to a political party. 'Internally, there was and there is a clear politics – we don't want a close relationship and we don't want to be captured' (A6 Martin). Although they report a lot of contact in the beginning of the big climate demonstrations in 2019, and some more one-sided cooperation from sympathetic members of parliament or Green/Social Democratic bureaucrats in ministries that passed on information. In the beginning of climate mobilizations in 2019, they recall, they would have sought more deliberations and talks with parties and politicians. But they have been more and more distant because they felt it didn't lead anywhere. As a result, activists imagine themselves rather as outsider agenda-setters to the parliamentary system: 'Now we are doing this five times less, as media work brings much more reward with limited resources' (A9 Peter).

This separation is fuelled by a mutual frustration. Many Austrian party functionaries report that climate activists are frustrated by how little democratic institutions act upon climate issues and how sceptical to cooperate or to join those very same institutions they are: 'There is an almost obsessive impulse not to be pocketed and coopted by political parties' (A12 Paula). In turn, party functionaries feel rejected by climate activists because notwithstanding their own climate political motivations, they feel anything they do is criticized as insufficient: 'You always do too little!' (A1 Nadia) Also, they emphasize having to play down their party role when contacting movements: 'that we always have to accept that we might be welcome, but only if we stay invisible (as Green youth organization, the authors)' (A12 Paula). Especially the fact that activists criticize core principles of party organization, such as the idea of compromise and consensus, as co-responsible for the climate crisis is a big hurdle for a better understanding between movements and parties: 'Dear SPÖ, this is about the climate crisis, this is nonnegotiable! [...] there is no either – or. 'Or' doesn't exist!' A5 Sandra, an SPÖ-functionary, underlines that she perceives this approach 'indeed as problematic, as there are still other problems around.' But as A8 Constanze, another SPÖ-functionary, adds, 'I am annoyed that so many stay away from political parties, because with them we would much earlier gather a critical mass to achieve change within the party, too.'

In Austria, activists understand the national political parties, and the corporatist character of Austrian politics, as the main problem. 'It is dangerous for us if we are viewed as party political actors. It is about pressuring all political parties to draft an adequate climate political program' (A7 Julia). 'Especially in Austria, politics is so ideological, subjective, and historically entrenched' (A9 Peter).

They perceive the organizational structures and internal logics of political parties per se as counterproductive. Party politicians would often focus on public marketing and seek compromise with the many internal interests. 'The eco-system political party

limits you in your perceptions to find solutions' (A6 Martin). They feel 'abandoned by all political parties' (A6 Martin). The fact that the Austrian Greens were the junior partner of a coalition with the business-friendly Austrian People's Party ÖVP makes this even more problematic and elevates the potential for frustration. An influential ally in a position of power seems to be available, yet the perceived character of the party system as well as coalition dynamics let frustration even grow stronger. The coalition struggled with implementing more ambitious climate politics and fell short of what the movements expect from a Green party in government. In the interviews, Green party functionaries are then portrayed as hardly differing from other politicians: There would be those

that stand completely behind our values, but do not have any political power, and there are those that have power, that try to make us believe that they are willing to act, but that delay and make us wait – and that in fact, don't want to act. (A3 Hanna)

Beyond climate politics, for some this transfers to a general frustration with the character of the Austrian party system inhibiting a cooperation between social movements and political parties: 'As soon as you are associated with a political party, it becomes really difficult to address a wider group of people (beyond the party, FB).' (A12 Paula) A8 Constanze, a Social Democratic functionary, underlines that already now 'the climate movement is denied any legitimation and is being lashed at as a Green party's sub-organization.'

In comparison, *German* climate activists are more open to contact and cooperation with sympathetic political parties. Like Austrian activists, they are frustrated by the parties' focus on political communication, campaigning, and marketing – and they are also frustrated about politicians not delivering on their promises. Yet, they do not perceive the whole party system as closed, dysfunctional or destructive and they report more and closer contact with politicians right from the beginning of climate demonstrations in 2019 (see also Mucha et al. 2023). In their strategies, they try to focus on pragmatic contacts that might lead to concrete results. 'Talks with politicians have to score a goal. [...] we have to pose a threat and to challenge their power, in order for them to listen to us' (D6 Janosch). 'This crisis is too big to leave it to civil society. Therefore, we turn to the institutions' (D8b Charlotte).

Activists are still highly sceptical of and firmly criticize the organizational culture of parties.

Parties are often shaped by people who love to participate in processes, internal regulations, and who are not necessarily burning for a topic, but often only for their own careers, to hold power in their hands. [...] I don't dislike power, if you want to change something for the better, but the dynamics of a party disgusts me a bit. (D6 Janosch)

Yet, many highlight the necessity to establish contact and cooperation with sympathetic politicians: 'We strive to speak more with politicians in order to get to know them better' (D7b Ernst). It is a very matter-of-fact and levelheaded cooperation that shows in the interviews. The party system and German parliamentarism are viewed very pragmatically and parties a comparative evil they must make use of. The interviews lack the destructive and deeply frustrated tone of the Austrian interviews.

In the interviews, German party politicians agree with these findings. Many report that party functionaries and members of parliament of progressive parties<sup>2</sup> are in contact with local climate activists 'because you know each other from the local leftist environments'

(D1 Justus). Compared to Austria, there are much more reports about the parties' youth and university organizations facilitating organizational support for the climate movements: We have 'shown that we want to help and that we do not overtake them, that we do not heed evil plans' (D11 Axel). Also, that 'many members of the Fridays actually are members of the Greens' (D4 Daniela). Furthermore, there are cases of climate activists running as party candidates at local, regional, or national levels – a phenomenon which could hardly be observed in Austria. They even have an expression for these activists that join a party, says D8b Charlotte: 'Her or she has institutionalized him/herself.' Party politicians welcome this closer connection as it has an impact on their organizations: 'We Greens need this pressure and this push from civil society, to pursue these goals' (D4 Daniela). German party politicians perceive the activists to have accepted at least parts of the parliamentary logics: 'They have indeed understood that they can implement some of those things only inside the parliamentary system.' And it is through their contacts, that the movements change, too: 'This way, they also learn the needed ability to compromise' (D4 Daniela).

Yet, German party politicians strongly emphasize that they feel responsible for the whole society, in contrast to movements focusing on single issues:

Fridays for Future are rather annoyed from getting bogged down in the details of everyday politics and the long-term uphill battle [...] we understand that but you have to pursue both. [...] it is a different reality in which parties act. It is a luxury of movements, not to have to care too much about the detailed solutions and not about too many problems at the same time ... (D1 Justus)

At the time of the interviews, as in Austria, in Germany at least two parties open to more ambitious climate politics have been in government between 2021 and 2025: the usual suspect of the Green party and to a lesser degree the Social Democrats. Therefore, most activists concentrate lobbying efforts towards politicians on these two parties as potential allies. In contrast, the Left party is open to the climate activists' demands but does not offer any realistic perspective of coming into office in the near future. However, as in Austria, having the Greens in government also creates constant frustration among activists because of a higher gap between expectations and concrete outcomes. Furthermore, the fear of being coopted and instrumentalized by government institutions is clearly visible in the interviews. Activists show to be constantly torn between the role of pressuring and checking on politicians and government officials, on the one hand, and supporting those progressive politicians they believe to be motivated by a similar goal of more ambitious climate politics, on the other. The compromises especially the Green politicians have to make in their government roles hinder activists to perceive parties and movements as being part of one broader movement, but to imagine the two as widely separated spheres. In contrast, especially Green politicians assume to be partners of climate movements, an expectation that in the interviews is backed with their own party history as spokesperson of the environmental movements of the 1980s (Butzlaff and Deflorian 2021). Activists emphasize different conclusions from having a potential ally in government and chose to remain distant and sceptical. Yet, in comparison, German activists show imaginations of movement roles that do not restrict themselves to merely outsiders but engage with parties pragmatically from a distance.

Looking at the *Polish* interviews, the picture is different. Here, the interviews took place before and after the 2023 election, in which a progressive opposition alliance took victory and ended eight years of right-wing populist government of the Law and Justice party that had been fiercely rejecting any more ambitious climate policy goals. Consequently, and in contrast to the German and Austrian cases, activists were almost uniquely targeting opposition parties, as these presented a potential alliance to win the national government and alter Polish climate politics drastically: ‘The past right-wing government was not interested in NGO and expert knowledge at all and with the forming opposition coalition, they (the activists, FB) had an opportunity to be heard’ (CM P8 Agnieszka) ‘The ruling party (PiS, FB) does not want to speak with us and is not interested in what we say.’ (CM P2 Michał) Although some activists emphasize that there was an unofficial side to the right-wing government, any form of cooperation was almost impossible. ‘There are some PiS MPs that are interested in climate measures. But we have to contact them indirectly via more conservative movements or local politicians that we know.’ (CM P2 Michał) ‘They have two ways at the same time [...] for the media and the people, they try to hide it.’ (CM P3 Mateusz).

Furthermore, prior to the elections, contact with the progressive parties in opposition clearly had the goal of forming a societal and political coalition to win the elections as for the activists this was the only way to ensure more attention to climate topics and the possibility for more ambitious regulation. ‘There is no cooperation between the climate movements and the governing party, but there is much more cooperation with the parties in opposition. They are much closer (to the climate movements, FB).’ (CM P3 Mateusz).

Before 2023 (and the elections and campaigns), it was much harder to push for progressive climate politics, so our struggle was more about mobilizing people. We have more room now. [...] Now meeting them (government politicians and ministers) is much easier and we are being invited. (CM P6 Magda)

The priority were policy programmes, but above all mobilizing a successful voter coalition – and the activists understood that for any more ambitious climate policies in Poland, an electoral change had to come first. Hence, in comparison with Austria and Germany, the distance between movement activists and political parties (of the pre-2023 opposition) was much smaller.

This showed in how the interviewees talked about spaces where they met and the social backgrounds of activists and (youth) politicians. For instance, CM P4 Maria describes that climate movements were regularly cooperating with the Lewica youth organization – and that people often were active on both sides:

These were similar social spaces and the presence of these groups at marches etc. supported us. [...] These communities were blending and intersecting, many people doing both at once. It was a problem only when somebody’s bias was all too visible. But usually it wasn’t a problem.

This doesn’t mean that activists were not critical of political parties or sceptical towards a cooperation. But it was clear from the interviews that there was a higher political goal that forced them into more contact, cooperation, and pragmatism. As CM P7 Kacper puts it, there is a lot of cooperation, because activists and (some) politicians feel they are

'jointly defending the climate. [...] The spheres (parties and movements) are not hostile towards each other, there are similar patterns and behaviors.'

Activists were still critical of parties and political institutions.

There were a lot of politicians that were praising young people and how active they were. It always felt like it was just a high five gesture, but never in the form of a partnership.' (CM P4 Maria) She calls it a 'performative alliance' – but unproductive and not serious. By the government and institutions, 'we were treated like silly young people brainwashed by Germans.' But in contrast to Austrian (and to a lesser degree to German) activists, Polish activists hardly transfer their frustrations with politicians to a rejection of the political system or political parties per se. Instead, they imagine assuming part of the responsibility themselves and form more and better alliances: After CM P5 Julia, it is about 'finding true and better representatives that really understand what we demand and why and making them partners. [...] We need to establish this connection, also locally.' And she adds, 'It may start to appear, as we grow older, that people from the movements will be candidates for local lists, parties, etc. We might have left the movements, but we still pursue these goals and have the same ideas. [...] It starts to become a priority (in Poland), that younger people become involved and active.' And CM P6 Magda assists: 'A lot of people from the movements run as candidates in local or regional elections. So many more people under 30 are engaging with politics.'

There was a much higher degree of political pragmatism showing from the interviews that enabled cooperation between activists and (some) political parties, which might indicate that the higher openness of the Polish party system translates to movement activists perceiving more opportunities for cooperation and partnership. As for instance CM P7 Kacper explains,

In my daily life as a politician, I always try to have direct information and impressions from climate activists. To use their arguments, their language in the political debate. (...) I tried to acquire information directly from NGOs which was very important.

All interviewees emphasized that the desired climate politics were only possible if climate-friendly parties would assume government, whereas Austria and Germany already had climate-friendly parties in government. This seems to have greatly influenced the way activists feel about strategic choices and representative institutions. 'It is important that this change is pushed for not only in the streets but in parliament, too. Many, but not all NGOs and activists understand this.' (CM P8 Agnieszka) Many interviewees described a perception that civil society and activists feel the need to actively support and help politicians to achieve social change:

There is a visible pragmatic approach that we (from the civil society and activists) need to meet with politicians. We need to help them with drafts, arguments, formulations, and with orientation that they can then bring into the parliament. Provide them with concrete ideas and drafts to help them. This is quite particular for Poland, also beyond the topic of climate politics. (CM P7 Kacper)

Research has shown that in some countries environmental movements and parties that address environmental topics tend to form closer cooperation prior to elections, and seek greater distance once a new government is formed (Savolainen and Ylä-Anttila 2021). In contrast, the Polish interviews show a rather pragmatic and continuous cooperation. This degree of pragmatism had not (yet) decreased in those interviews

that took place in early summer of 2024, more than half a year after the elections – now with a progressive coalition of (at least partly) climate-friendly political parties in office. Yet, with time, this also might change:

Within the last six months (after the elections won in 2023) this did not change dramatically, there is still a lot of cooperation. But I see a slowly growing atmosphere of dissatisfaction with the decisions of the new government. This is somewhat normal. They (the activists) have their own expectations and we politicians often fail to meet them. (CM P7 Kacper)

CM P8 Agnieszka assists: ‘Many activists believe that this government and themselves have the same goals. They know that they need us in the government, even if we deliver only 60-70% of our promises. And that we need this change.’

In contrast to the Polish case, in *Slovakia* we found a rather limited cooperation and contact between climate movement activists and political parties. Although Slovakia had also seen a (snap) election during the year of the interviews in 2023, and activists did run smaller projects such as checking electoral manifestos of parties and identifying potential partners, most of the interviewees emphasized that potential cooperation partners in the parliamentary realm were few and far between. In comparison to Poland, activists did not perceive there were potential party allies available, and that Slovak parties were neither interested in climate politics nor presented a credible pathway to power.

Still, also in Slovakia climate activists have made and continue to make demands towards political parties and the parliament. However, in contrast to the other three country cases they perceive that currently only opposition parties with no realistic outlook to assume governmental powers are sympathetic to their undertaking. The parties between the center-right and the far right in Slovakia, which have been dominating the public political discourse and which have assumed government in 2023 did not show any interest in discussing more ambitious climate politics with the movements, let alone strategic cooperation. Still, activists experience that also those parties that are programmatically open to more ambitious climate regulation are not interested in potential cooperations or not listening to movement actors. For the interviewed activists, one of the most influential experiences was when in 2020 a movement and CSO initiated national referendum, *Climate needs you*, gained around 130.000 signatures but was completely ignored at the parliamentary level, which should have picked up the topic.

In contrast to Polish activists, Slovak opposition parties did not seem to show great interest in cooperating, coordinating, or joining forces with movements or civil society organizations. Activists report having a hard time convincing politicians to meet or ponder coalitions and joint campaigns. They also emphasize that most Slovak parties, especially on the progressive and more climate-friendly side of the political spectrum have developed only weak social networks and on-the-ground personnel, which might make local cooperation more complex and complicated, and movement-party-contact harder to establish. These parties appear to operate mainly from their national headquarters in Bratislava.

Consequently, cooperations are sought rather at the municipal level than with national parties. Interviewees report that although still hard to persuade, local municipal authorities are more approachable than Slovak party actors – and can make concrete changes happen. In contrast to national Slovak parties that are open to the climate topic but remain in opposition and have developed little regional or local networks

beyond the capital, local municipalities offer tangible changes at the local level. Furthermore, many of the movement activists portray movement strategies and repertoires that focus more on the daily life and the education of citizens, on an everyday materialism (Schlosberg 2019) that zooms in on local, practical, and tangible solutions and motivations rather than on national or international contexts and actors.

In our hub, we have very friendly, free, safe and trustful relations, rather different from relations at school, and I can see that if our members can convince at least one of their relatives about some steps towards green ways, it is a big motivation for them. (S11 Vanesa)

This is in line with diagnoses of the different character of CEE and specifically Slovak environmentalism (Jehlička and Jacobsson 2021).

Different to the Polish and German cases, Slovak parties are not perceived as convincing contenders for change in the field of climate politics. Considering limited resources, seeking partnership or cooperation with political parties might just be a waste of time. Still then, activists report that local political actors and municipalities often do not take participation and activists seriously: 'It is not enough to prepare nice documents and plans. If they are not accepted by the citizens and do not involve them, they will not work.' (S11 Vanesa)

However, the participatory discussion process [...] is not transparent, and numerous comments from the expert community and citizens are overlooked or ignored. This means that the strategy has still not been approved and cannot be implemented. We are at least ten years behind other European countries in this area. (S14 Lubos)

Slovak activists show understandings of movement roles which focus on outsider agenda-setting, and seek to establish the topic in the arena of extra-institutional and daily routines of citizens. Interviewees emphasize their role as translators of social and environmental demands into the political system and as pressuring the system to become active (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Movement-party cooperation, political systems, and democratic frustration.

|  | Austria                                    | Germany  | Poland   | Slovakia                                     |
|--|--|--|--|--|
| Party system openness<br>(taken from the index of Casal Bértoa and Enyedi 2016)              | Very low                                   | Low  | High   | High   |
| Climate-friendly parties in government   | Greens part of coalition                   | Greens part of coalition                                       | Progressive electoral victory after joint campaign             | No parties with climate agenda in government |
| Movement-party personal overlap (perception of activists and party functionaries)            | Low  | Medium   | Medium/high  | Low  |
| Movement-party cooperation (perception of activists and party functionaries)                 | Low  | Medium   | Medium/high  | Very low                                     |
| Frustration with democracy among activists (perception of activists and party functionaries) | High                                       | Medium   | Low  | Medium                                       |
| Roles climate movements imagine (perception of activists and party functionaries)            | External agenda-setter to the party system | External agenda-setter, but also bridging arenas & cooperation | External agenda-setter, but also bridging arenas & cooperation | External agenda-setter to the party system   |

However, in contrast to activists in Austria, and to a lesser extent in Germany, this does not lead to a general frustration with the system of representative democracy. Activists in the interviews do not dismiss the political system or the democratic party system per se as flawed, corrupted, or inefficient for addressing climate change. They voice little universal frustration with democracy, but much more with individual politicians or political parties. It is an outside role not because of a rejection of representative democracy but because of their perception of the party system not being responsive towards, or receptive of social movements, but also because of the lack of a credible ally for making climate topics a priority for a future government. In contrast, the interviewed activists advocate for a change in the citizenship and their demands: 'I am glad that the awareness about climate change among young people is increasing – even those who are not very active, when you talk to them, they are quite well informed and aware ...' (S13 Maria)

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have set out to shed light on how climate movements and political parties seek cooperation in different European countries, how they interpret their different roles within representative democracy – and how their strategic choices are mediated by perceptions of the political opportunities they encounter. Our findings show that the perceptions of political context and opportunities matter greatly for how climate movements and parties cooperate.

The interviewed climate activists are highly sceptical of political parties. Here, they diverge from many accounts of movement strategies of previous ecological (or other) mobilizations, which inter alia led to the founding of the Western Green parties (for instance, see Butzlaff and Deflorian 2021). However, we found very different patterns of cooperation between movements and parties between our four country cases. We also found that the perception of the political opportunities a system provides greatly influences how activists approach parties and the parliamentary realm. Here, several factors stood out.

Firstly, the activists' perception of the openness or closure of the party systems or party culture alone does not appear to explain strategic choices of movements for (non)cooperation with political parties. Also, the perception of activists in this regard did not necessarily match the measurements political scientists had attributed to objective opportunity structures (Casal Bértoa and Enyedi 2016). In rather closed party systems like Austria and Germany, as well as in rather open ones such as Poland and Slovakia, we found considerable variation in how activists approach cooperation and alliances with parties.

This picture changes if we take into consideration two additional factors: (a) if activists perceive political allies to be available that show a credible pathway to influence; (b) if activists and party politicians perceive their political culture attributing a positive democratic role to movements. If these factors align, for instance in Poland or comparatively less so in Germany, they appear to provide a more plausible explanation of when and why movements choose to cooperate with political parties or form more stable alliances. Movements that have a politically powerful ally available and meet a political culture favourable to movements appear to seek cooperation even if the party system shows certain degrees of closure and therefore does not provide many openings for movement

influence. Whereas in Poland and Germany climate movements show self-understandings as outside agenda-setters to the political system in combination with cooperating with sympathetic political parties and forming alliances between arenas, in Austria and Slovakia activists restrict their role to an outsider agenda-setter to representative institutions without approaching them for closer cooperation. Here, the activist perception that the political system was not open to civil society demands and/or friendly political parties lack a credible pathway to influence appears to shape this strategic choice. Whereas Slovak activists did not perceive the party system as open due to a lack of potential allies, German activists perceived the comparatively closed party system as relatively open because they experienced potential allies open to conversation. In their work on contemporary environmental and climate movements, de Moor and Wahlström (2022) have concluded a re-responsibilization of the state but have questioned whether POS remain relevant to movements at all. Our findings indicate that the perception of opportunity structures matter for activists and how they approach political institutions.

Secondly, the perceptions of opportunities appear to shape the more general satisfaction with representative democracy. Polish activists were comparatively satisfied with representative democracy, as at the time of the interviews they were in the process (or later had achieved) of forming a successful opposition coalition to oust the climate sceptical right-wing populist government. They also had incorporated collective memories of the constructive role the *Solidarność* movement had played in the transformation to democracy in the 1980s. In contrast, German and Slovak activists show higher levels of criticism with representation but remain more content with the abstract idea of representative democracy. In turn, Austrian activists are very critical and frustrated as they perceive the whole political culture as ideologically entrenched and dysfunctional. More specifically, the perception of a comparatively closed party system plus a political culture not very open to newly arising movements seems to generate more general frustration among activists. In this view, parties are seen as limiting the channels through which citizens and newly emerging demands can make themselves heard. This is the case even if political allies are available (as for instance in Austria with the Green party in government by the time of the interviews). Furthermore, the closure of the party system affects the political system and how parties generally approach movement actors and civil society. The example of Austria implies that movements may stay distant from political parties when they perceive them as closed and patronizing, and the system of parties in parliament shows high levels of corporatist arrangements. The fact that a party sympathetic to more ambitious climate politics, the Green party, was part of the national government, even exacerbated this perception, and made the climate movements choose to stay clearly distant. Here, activists did not feel accepted in their democratic role and had the impression that their demands were not listened to. Therefore, they voiced demands towards political parties but otherwise remained distant. The opposite illustration was Slovakia, where activists perceived of the party system as rather open, but did not see a credible political ally that would draft a plausible pathway to power. However, this did not lead to a more general rejection of representative democracy among Slovak interviewees.

These results carry several implications for future climate policies and for the research on contemporary climate movements. Firstly, it appears that climate movements show patterns of strategic choices towards representative democracy that diverge from

previous research on how ecological movements, party politics, and representative democracy interlink (Butzlaff and Deflorian 2021; Poguntke 1987). Activists appear to be more sceptical compared to previous generations. Younger generations had been described as feeling that politicians are failing (Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022), and that this was one of the mobilizing topics of the recent wave of climate mobilizations (Zamponi et al. 2022). Institutions of representative democracy are targeted but not believed to be able to provide effective tools and solutions compared to previous ecological mobilizations (de Moor and Wahlström 2022; Saunders, Doherty, and Hayes 2020). This is indeed a perception that we found in many interviews. However, political allies that provide a promising pathway to influence as well as a political culture emphasizing the positive democratic contribution of movement actors may lead activists to act upon perceived political opportunities, even if the objective opportunity structure shows comparatively few openings. As the Polish interviews underlined, when young activists perceived the political system provides opportunities and possible pathways to changing government and the ruling on climate, it drew them towards institutions and appears to make them much more satisfied with representative democracy.

Secondly, young people were found to become more optimistic through engagement and mobilization and activists more satisfied with democracy (Kirsch, Kube, and Zohlhöfer 2022; Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022). For the case of climate movements, this appears to depend very much on their perceptions of the opportunities a political system provides for the co-participation in decision-making by civil society and movement actors. Especially in the Austrian interviews it was *through* their experiences with engagement and mobilization that activists became more frustrated with representative democratic institutions and political parties. Activism, as it seems, can also carry the kernel to even higher scepticism of representation, if the political system forecloses opportunities and remains unresponsive.

Thirdly, in our interviews we could confirm the literature on participation stating that younger generations divert from traditional structures of engagement and criticize the long-established logics of democratic representation (Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022; Pickard 2019). In light of our results, this might make future stringent climate policies all the more complex and challenging, as these have been shown to rely on close linkages between politicians, administration, and movement actors as mediators (Finnegan 2022; Moore et al. 2024; Schaub, Tosun, and Jordan 2024).

These results, however, have limitations. Our study is a qualitative undertaking, and 41 interviews cannot claim representativeness for the four cases studies, given the heterogeneity of both the movements involved as well as the party systems. Also, there are more movements than Fridays for Future (such as with the Slovak activists interviewed), so other climate movements might show different patterns, and we miss longitudinal insights. Instead, we provide a qualitative exploration of how the interviewed activists and politicians interact. In this light, comparative claims must be made carefully. Qualitative research runs the risk of overgeneralizing and reading too much into a selected number of cases. We tried to balance this by seeking knowledge saturation and asking for how interviewees perceived of a certain topic as being discussed in the wider movement. Further research should address these limitations by including more countries and a wider horizon of movements. However, some of the findings travel between the cases and underline that in light of the future need for ambitious climate policies interactions

between political parties, parliaments, and social movements might become more and more complicated and unstable.

## Notes

1. As a prominent counter example figures the candidacy of one of the Austrian Fridays for Future leaders, Lena Schilling, for the Greens in the European Parliamentary elections 2024, two years after the interviews have taken place. This is one of the very few examples of a FfF member running as a party-political candidate in Austria and the exceptional character it has been ascribed in the Austrian public discourse only emphasizes the findings above.
2. For the purpose of this paper, this includes the Green Party, the Social Democrats, and the Left.

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