

Voting Systems & Climate Action: The Evidence



Fair Representation
Vote équitable
Canada au Canada

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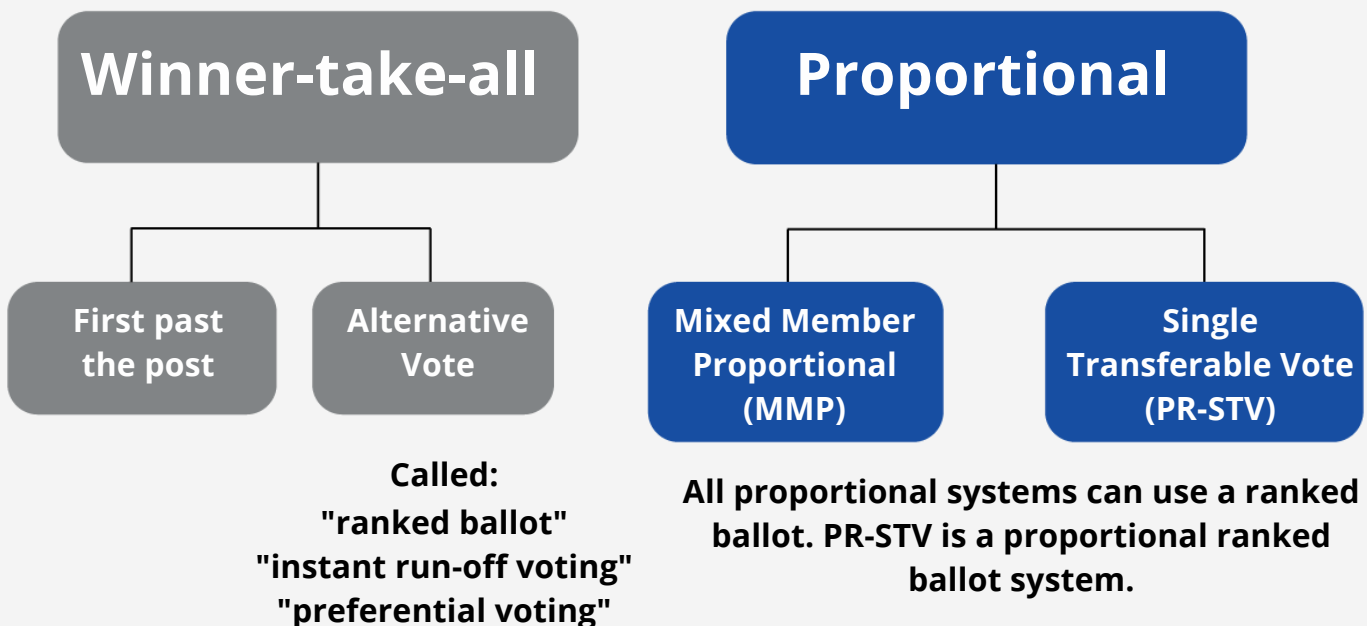
Voting systems 101: System families

There are two main “families” of voting systems in the world: proportional representation and “winner-take-all” (plurality/majoritarian).

These have very different consequences for how people are represented and how politics is done, leading to different policy outcomes.

Proportional representation (PR) is the principle that the seats a party gets should fairly closely match its popular support among voters. About 80% of OECD countries use proportional systems.

System families



Note: The graphic above shows the two proportional systems most often recommended in Canada.

What voting systems protect climate policy from far right populism?



Many commentators have expressed concern about the rise of far right populism around the world and its potential effect on government policy-making, including on climate.

Politicians with a vested interest in maintaining our winner-take-all voting system have even used the prospect of more power for the far right to frighten voters about proportional representation.

Yet the research is clear: countries with winner-take-all systems are at a much higher risk of seeing their climate plans torn up, while countries with PR are more stable.

“Governments need to understand what are the right policies to stimulate the private sector to change. The private sector doesn’t care what the policies are as long as they are consistent and they offer a level playing field. Policies keep changing, in countries like the US, Canada and Australia, they go up and down like a yoyo.”

Bob Watson, previous chairman of the IPCC. In Nuttall, Philippa. “Dangerous climate change has arrived”: IPCC report is a warning to the world ahead of Cop26. New Statesman, August 2021.

What voting systems protect climate policy from far right populism?

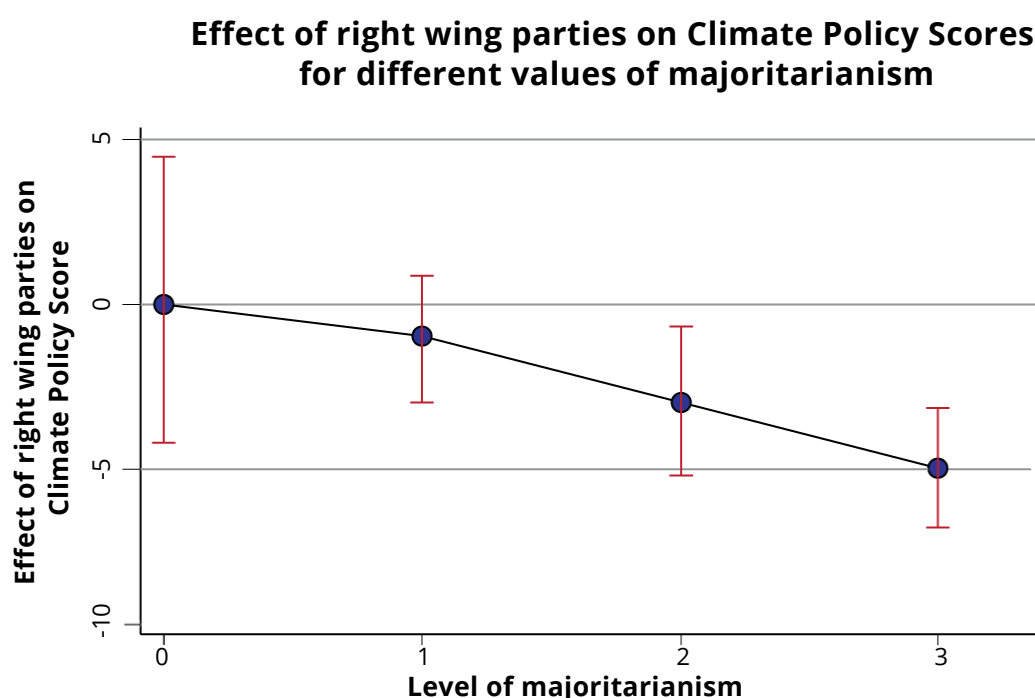
A [2022 study](#) by Ben Lockwood, Professor of Economics at the University of Warwick, and Matt Lockwood, Senior Lecturer in Energy Policy in the Science Policy Research Unit (SPRU) at the University of Sussex Business School, **looked at the impact of the far right on climate policy in 31 OECD countries from 2007 to 2018.**

Their research found that countries with proportional representation (PR) voting systems are better protected against the threat of having climate policy reversed by right wing populists than countries outside the EU with winner-take-all systems such as Canada, the USA and Australia.

Lockwood & Lockwood found that proportional representation seems to act as a bulwark against climate policy lurch: **in countries with PR, far-right parties had no significant effect on climate policy.**

This stands in contrast with research findings in winner-take-all systems, where the far right was much more successful in blocking or reversing climate action.

As Lockwood noted, **in countries with winner-take-all systems the far right can “capture an existing centre-right party”**, forming a mainstream populist government with a profoundly negative effect on climate policy. It's worth recalling that in Canada, a single-party “majority government” can be formed with about one third of the popular vote.



[Lockwood, B and Lockwood, M. \(2022\)](#) compared the average marginal effects of right wing political parties (rwp) on Climate Policy Scores (CPS). The results shown in Figure 4(a) suggest that right wing political parties have more impact on climate change policy in majoritarian electoral systems. *Note: red bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.*

Winner-take-all voting systems cause policy lurch

Tackling the climate crisis requires serious and sustained effort. Ongoing cooperation between political parties and the ability to plan and deliver long-term solutions across multiple political terms are key to success.

Researchers have long identified “policy lurch” as a side effect of winner-take-all voting systems. This refers to a pattern of drastic shifts in policy, usually where a new government reverses the policies of the previous government.

For example, in 2019 Jason Kenney vowed to spend his first 100 days in government undoing many of the policies brought in by Rachel Notley. Rachel Notley is currently promising to spend her first 100 days undoing the policies of Jason Kenney.

Policy lurch is also on full display in Ontario. It is felt most acutely on the issue of climate policy, with the abrupt cancellation of the cap and trade system and 758 renewable energy projects in 2018.

Cyclic reversals of legislation, dismantling regulations and canceling programs related to any policy area is always economically wasteful.

But on climate policy, they are especially harmful. Scientists have told us we have only a few years to significantly reduce emissions. We simply don't have time for the policy lurches of winner-take-all systems.



Proportional voting systems: stability and continuity

Most countries with proportional representation are governed by majority coalitions, or similar arrangements where multiple parties work together to create and execute plans to tackle climate change.

Since parties cooperate to create policy, legislation generally has the support of a real majority of voters.

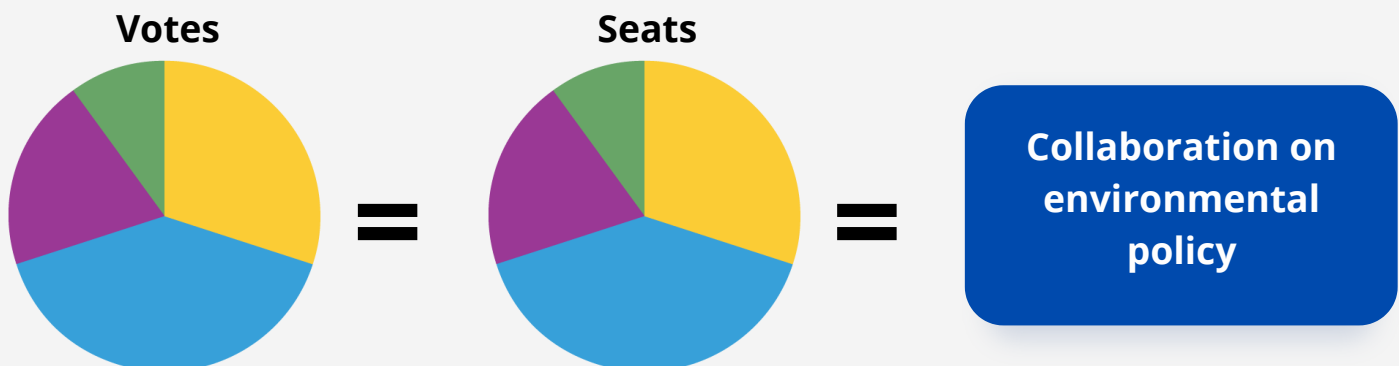
Policies built through meaningful collaboration are much more likely to last through changes of government.

Denmark is a good example of the kind of political culture that is possible with proportional representation. In 2020, almost every party, including conservative parties, worked together to pass one of the strongest climate laws in the world.

Ongoing, multi-party collaboration helps to ensure stability and continued progress.

“ Even if we run into a financial crisis again, even if political parties change and climate won't be as high on the agenda as it is right now, the law we've made now makes sure that the progress on fighting climate change will not stop... If the markets are to react they need to be sure it's not just a good idea that's in fashion right now. They need to be sure it will last. ”

Dan Jørgensen, Denmark's climate and energy minister, on the strong climate law passed by eight out of ten parties in 2020. BBC, Timperley, Joceylyn. The law that could make climate change illegal. BBC, July 7 2020.



Thinking of investing? Check the voting system

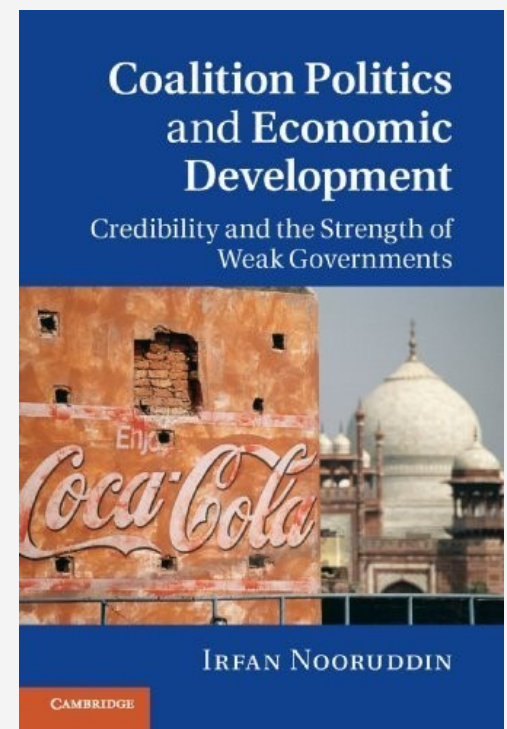
CANCELLED IN ONTARIO:

Cap and trade,
758 clean energy
projects, costing
hundreds of millions
in cancellation fees
and legal costs.



When it comes to building the green economy of the future, stability is exactly what businesses and investors need. Irfan Nooruddin's 2011 study of economic volatility and electoral systems found that coalition governments produced less economic volatility due to more stable economic policy. He notes:

"When a single party controls all the levers of the legislative process, it is better able to enact policies closer to its ideal point. The resulting policy might in fact be the preferred outcome for economic agents too... **but the government can not guarantee that future governments will not reverse course should the opposition win. In this case, even if economic agents respond by investing in the country, they will remain wary of future policy change, and forgo more irreversible investments.**"



Thinking of investing? Check the voting system

CANCELLED IN ONTARIO:

Rebates for electric vehicles and electric vehicle charging station requirements in Ontario's building code.



Nooruddin also found that **businesses** judged countries run by coalition governments to be more stable:

"In a World Bank survey of firms across the world, I find that firms located in countries governed by parliamentary coalitions are less likely to perceive policy uncertainty to be a major obstacle to their businesses, and more likely to consider opening a new establishment in the near future."

The evidence is clear: **the policy lurch typical of winner-take-all voting systems creates instability.** Companies hoping to invest in a clean energy future in a country with a winner-take-all voting system are left wishing they had a crystal ball.

“ Economic policy only works when it reflects economic and social reality. In a democracy that reality is made real by parliaments that are representative of how people actually voted. First past the post alters, dilutes, frustrates and often negates how people actually voted. Economic policy based even in part on this distortion cannot but be distorted itself. ”

Former Conservative Senator Hugh Segal, author of "Bootstraps Need Boots: One Tory's Lonely Fight to End Poverty in Canada".

Research on voting systems & environmental outcomes



Peer-reviewed research over decades shows that countries with proportional systems act sooner, do more and deliver better outcomes on the environment.

Frederiksson (2004) found that countries with proportional systems set stricter environmental policies.

Cohen (2010) found that countries with proportional systems were faster to ratify the Kyoto protocol, and that their share of world total carbon emissions had declined.

“

By changing electoral systems, countries may be moving a step closer to realizing environmental improvement. However, a commitment to effective environmental policies must be widely shared.

”

Cohen, Darcie (2010). Do Political Preconditions Affect Environmental Outcomes? Exploring the Linkages Between Proportional Representation, Green parties and the Kyoto Protocol. Simon Fraser University.

Research on voting systems & environmental outcomes



In Lijphart's second edition (2012) of his groundbreaking work on electoral systems and democracy in 36 countries over 55 years, he found that **countries with proportional systems scored six points higher on the Yale Environmental Performance Index**, which measures ten policy areas, including environmental health, air quality, resource management, biodiversity and habitat, forestry, fisheries, agriculture and climate change. Baird, Bodily and Meriam (2007) found that the scores on the Environmental Performance Index increased as the degree of proportionality in the voting system increased.



Using data from the International Energy Agency, Orellana (2014), in his book "Electoral Systems and Governance: How Diversity Can Improve Policy Making", found that between 1990 and 2007, when carbon emissions were rising everywhere, the statistically-predicted increase in emissions was significantly lower in countries with fully proportional systems: only 9.5%, compared to 45.5% for countries using winner-take-all systems. He found the use of renewable energy to be approximately 117 percent higher in countries with fully proportional electoral systems.

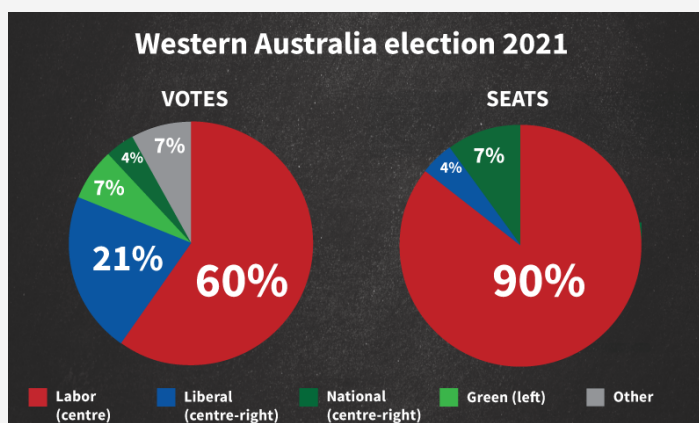
Orellana (2014) found that citizens in countries with PR were more supportive of environmental action, and more willing to pay the costs associated with environmental protection.

What about a winner-take-all ranked ballot?



Recently, some politicians have been promoting a winner-take-all ranked ballot system as a way to produce more “cooperative” politics.

Although proportional systems can use ranked ballots, when the politicians or media refer to a “ranked ballot” system, they always mean the winner-take-all system properly called Alternative Vote (AV). **This system can be even less proportional than first-past-the-post.**



Only two countries use Alternative Vote at the national level: Australia and Papua New Guinea.

Australia, with a similar history to Canada, provides a good illustration of the kind of politics that develop under AV, and the consequences for climate policy.

Politics with winner-take-all ranked ballot: anything but cooperative

The Guardian

In the fight club of Australian politics, the public suffer the knockout blow



Australia's brutal politics claims yet another leader as ruling party drifts right

Scott Morrison was sworn in as the country's sixth prime minister in a decade on Friday.

Australia adopted Alternative Vote 100 years ago—a self-interested political maneuver by the conservative parties to stop “vote splitting” that was allowing Labor candidates to win.

The use of winner-take-all ranked ballots has **not** produced a more cooperative system. Instead, it has entrenched a hostile and divisive two-party system.

[Click here and scroll down the page to see some real political ads from Australia, like the ones below.](#)



Politics with winner-take-all ranked ballot: anything but cooperative

Research by John and Hargreaves (2011) concluded: “Alternative Vote is unique amongst ordinal voting systems in that it supports and perhaps encourages hostility between the largest parties thus contributing to Australia’s harsh political culture.”

“Blood sports” is how Professor Mark Evans of the University of Canberra Institute for Governance and Public Analysis describes Australia’s politics, where the public’s trust in political institutions hit an all-time low in 2019.

If the trend continues, Democracy 2025 researchers concluded that **by 2025, fewer than 10% of Australians will trust their politicians and political institutions.**

Hyper-partisan, adversarial, disruptive behaviour in the legislature is a longstanding embarrassment to citizens:

From 2013 to 2015 alone, the Speaker ejected 400 MPs from the chamber—about three per day.

From 1994 to 2016, 1508 disciplinary actions were levelled against MPs, including 1423 instances where MPs were ejected from the chamber for a period of one hour.



Unfortunately, despite public disgust, bad conduct has been increasingly frequent in recent years.

“The antagonistic relations between the major parties, at least in public, in which often complex issues and ideas are bifurcated into two simple and diametrically opposed positions, is an observable Australian phenomenon. Efforts at approaching problems in an evolutionary, cross-partisan fashion are extremely rare.”

John and Hargreaves (2011) The Alternative Vote in Australia: Exacerbating a Culture of Adversarialism?, Paper Presented at the Australian Political Studies Association Conference, 27 September 2011.

Policy lurch has had a devastating effect on climate policy in Australia

NEWS

One year since Australia's devastating wildfires, anger grows at climate change 'inaction'

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CLIMATE IN CRISIS

One year since Australia's devastating wildfires, anger grows at climate change 'inaction'

"I feel ashamed of our country as it's allowed some sort of short-term cynical politics to prevent proper climate action," one survivor said.



The hostile, winner-take-all political system has had an ongoing and profoundly negative impact on climate action in Australia.

“

The main thing holding back Australia's climate ambition is **politics**: a toxic coalition of the Murdoch press, the right wing of the Liberal and National parties, and vested interests in the fossil fuel sector.

”

Rudd, Kevin. and Turnbull, Malcolm. Australia's ambition on climate change is held back by a toxic mix of rightwing politics, media and vested interests. The Guardian. April 20, 2021.

Policy lurch in Australia

A classic case of the devastation of policy lurch happened in Australia over the issue of a carbon tax.

The chance for a bi-partisan deal on a carbon tax was scuttled for reasons directly tied to Australia's winner-take-all voting system:

a) Alternative Vote has forced politicians into a couple of big tent parties.



The right-wing party therefore has a significant number of MPs who deny climate change or oppose climate action—and they can have a big influence on policy.

b) Winner-take-all voting systems encourage parties to find wedge issues with which to attack their opponent in order to win votes in the handful of swing ridings that matter.

In Australia, a majority of MPs in the right wing bloc, rather than working with Labor on a carbon tax, *simply wanted to use the issue to wage a winner-take-all election battle against the Labor Party.*

When a carbon tax was brought in by the Labor government (alone) in 2012—which resulted in the biggest annual reduction in greenhouse gas emissions in 24 years—it was soon reversed by the Liberal-National (conservative) government in 2014.

Carbon pricing has never been reintroduced in Australia.

“ It came down to a judgment about the political fortunes of the Liberal party. A minority believed that humanity hasn't had the claimed effect on the climate. There were divided views. But the majority simply wanted to draw a line in the sand on the issue and they wanted to fight Rudd (the Labor Prime Minister). ”

Julie Bishop, former Deputy Leader of the right-wing Liberal Party, on why a bi-partisan deal for a carbon tax fell apart.
Source: Crabb, Annabel. The day that plunged Australia's climate policy into 10 years of inertia. ABC, Nov 23, 2019.

Policy lurch in Australia

GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSIONS (excl LULUCF)

LULUCF = Land Use, Land Use Change, and Forestry

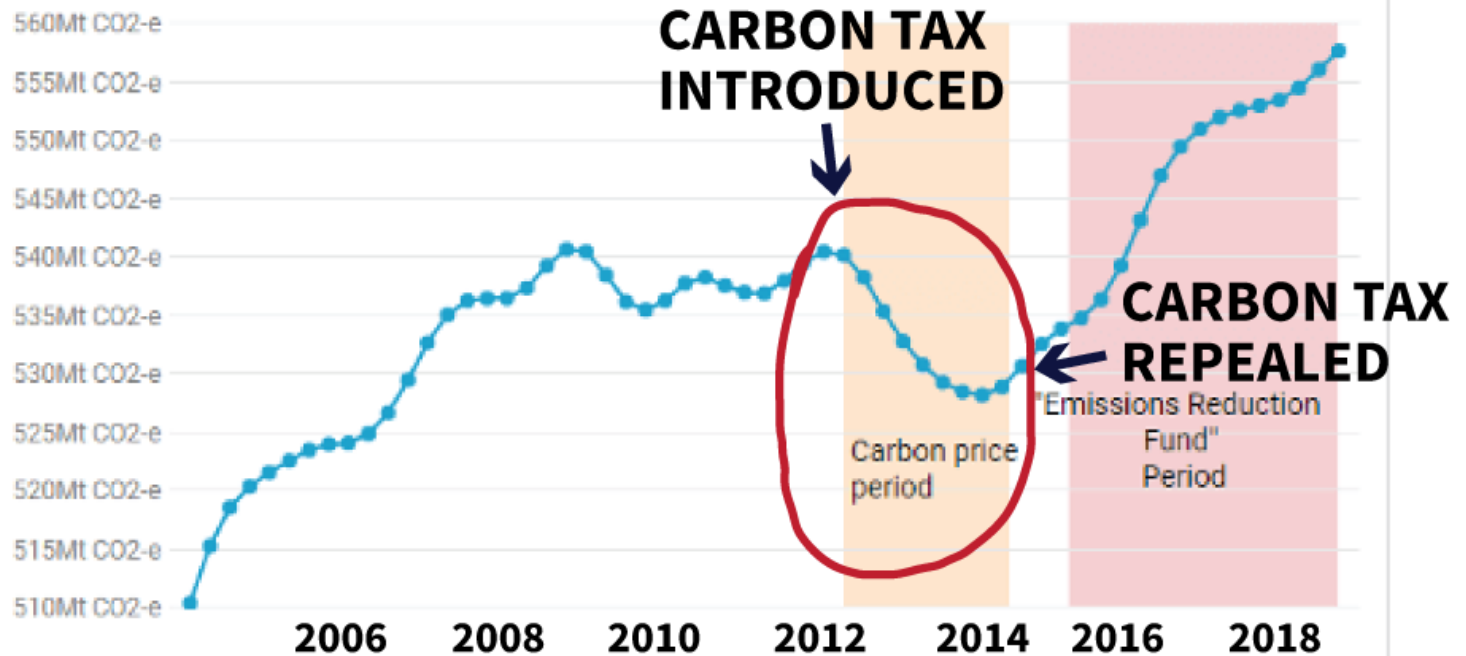


Chart: Greg Jericho • Source: Dept of Environment, Table 1C, derived • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

<https://www.climatecorecard.org/2020/03/australias-ill-fated-emissions-trading-system/>

On the 2022 Climate Performance Index, Australia ranked sixth-worst among 61 countries plus the EU.

Despite suffering catastrophic wildfires in recent years and a strong majority of citizens supporting climate action, **Australia scored zero—dead last—on the Climate Policy Scale.**

It's no coincidence that in 2019, the top three emitters of CO₂ per person in the OECD were Australia, the United States and Canada—all of which use winner-take-all electoral systems.



CCPI 2022
Climate Change
Performance Index

64.	Australia	0.00
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*Climate Policy ranking - bottom in the world

The climate crisis needs a democratic system up for the challenge



Scientists are telling us that climate action in the next decade will decide our fate. New evidence strengthens the link between proportional representation and better environmental performance (especially in the presence of right wing populists). We need our elected leaders to abandon their self-interested refusal to consider electoral reform.

Canadians, and indeed citizens around the globe, are counting on our government to do the right thing.

There's no time to waste.



Fair Vote Canada

www.fairvote.ca

www.nationalcitizensassembly.ca



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Représentation
Vote équitable
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