Democracy Under Heat: Transforming Political Systems in The Face of Environmental Urgency

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Abstract

Philosophically, humans have placed themselves in a hierarchical power relationship with the world, where they have been given the highest rank of the evolutionary ladder, hence granting them the boundless capacity to use the environment as they like. The notion of climate change and the paradox related to human activity has at present led to a broad debate about the interaction between sustainability and democracy. A fast transformation towards sustainability will rapidly change individual lifestyles, thus the modern liberal assumption of Good Life (the Aristotelean 'euzên') that allows maximized individual freedom is incompatible with the need to lower consumption. Once politics takes sustainability seriously, it has to influence the way people live, their mobility, consumption, housing, etc. It is difficult to draw any certain conclusions on the most appropriate model of governance for tackling the wicked problem of climate change. This paper examines the broad issues that both authoritarian and democratic governments face as a result of climate change. By comparing and contrasting the political systems and climate policies of the US and China it provides a broad evaluation of the state of global climate governance. To assess the advantages and disadvantages of democratic and autocratic systems in tackling the climate catastrophe, the study consults secondary sources, policy papers, and current academic literature. The analysis ends with suggestions for how democracies might change to better satisfy the needs of a sustainable future.

Keywords: *democracy, climate change, sustainable, transformation, authoritarianism.*

RETHINKING DEMOCRACY AND THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION

The notion of climate change and the paradox related to human activity has now led to a public debate. Humans have been given the highest evolutionary rank, which gives them unrestricted authority to take advantage of the environment in any way they see fit. This has led them to believe that they live in a hierarchical power relationship with the world. Their new emphasis should be on relationships of understanding, cooperation, and accommodation rather than dominance, exploitation, and power (Oberauer, 2021).

Loreto College Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences
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Loreto College, Kolkata.
Page No: 28-38, Section: Article

Loreto College, Kolkata

Authoritarian governments are currently waging a fierce battle against democratic institutions, and international rivalry appears to be impeding the likelihood of a smooth transition to more sustainable practices. The relationship between sustainability and democracy is currently the subject of heated discussion in the fields of political science and political philosophy, climate-challenged Society (Dryzek et al., 2013).

The potential consequences for the "climate-challenged society" that results from the ecological catastrophe have been examined by authors like Dryzek (Dryzek et al., 2013). The 1980s saw the development of what is commonly referred to as "green political theory" (Goodin, 1999). The climate situation has thus been referred to as a "wicked problem" by several scientists (Head, 2008). The design theorist Horst Rittel first introduced the term "wicked problems" in the 1970s to refer to challenges that are hard or impossible to solve because the knowledge and requirements necessary to do so are insufficient, conflicting, and ever-changing. Since the causes and solutions of these issues are interconnected, attempting to resolve one facet of a wicked problem may uncover or generate others. As a result, wicked problems can only be somewhat effectively alleviated rather than fully treated. Furthermore, wicked challenges frequently cross organizational and disciplinary boundaries, involve a large number of individuals with competing interests, and have significant economic and societal repercussions. The democratic process may encounter challenges as a result of wicked problems.

According to Habermas, democracy has two opposing components. On the one hand, democracy relies on individual liberties that shield people from oppression, fear, and authoritarianism. Human rights are essentially the most basic manifestation of the classical liberal concept of the rule of law, which ensures that citizens feel free and secure. However, democracy involves more than simply "negative freedom"; a second component is citizens' rights, sometimes known as "positive freedom," which includes the ability to express oneself, participate, and voice one's interests and opinions, either individually or in a structured and institutionalized manner. Another name for this second component might be the concept of popular sovereignty. Every political action must somehow take into consideration the wishes of the people; as a result, responsiveness and accountability are essential to a healthy democracy (Habermas, 2001). The way the topic of sustainability is presented is affected by this notion of democracy. What would happen if free persons, either individually or collectively as a political society, decided to live in a way that is not sustainable? It appears that democracy lacks a system to stop irresponsible behaviour or collective suicide. To put it another way, democracy challenges the notion of the Great Transformation, while sustainability challenges the philosophy of democracy. The need to reduce consumption and the modern liberal assumption of a privatized concept of the Good Life or 'euzên' that permits maximum individual freedom are incompatible, as demonstrated by successful examples of a rapid transition to a more sustainable lifestyle. Furthermore, once politics takes sustainability seriously, it must affect how people live, including their housing, consumption, transportation, and other aspects of their lives. Liberals nowadays frequently stress the need to defend individual lives and the private domain against what they perceive to be new kinds of paternalism. Thatcher's assertion that "there is no such thing as society" (Ho, 2010) may appear to be a parody of liberalism, yet it accurately conveys the notion that all important choices should be made at the individual level: In this theory, the res publica does not exist as a collective actor (Heidenreich, 2018).

Loreto College Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences
Vol-1, Issue-1, **(May, 2025)**
Peer-Reviewed e-Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies
Loreto College, Kolkata.
Page No: 28-38, Section: Article

Loreto College, Kolkata

CHALLENGES FACED BY DEMOCRACIES IN HANDLING CLIMATE CHANGE

i. THE PARADOX OF SCIENTIFIC TRUTH

A democracy is an open society's political system. The natural order of an open society will demolish any attempt to conceal, suppress, or eradicate the truth (Lane, 2020). Plato established the idea of the Noble Lie, which is being used more and more throughout the Republic. This makes it perfectly appropriate to spread misleading information to further the general welfare. Regarding the dangerous climate change caused by humans, many leaders are agnostic. President Donald Trump, who denies climate change, has called the issue a Chinese "hoax" (Altshuler, 2025). Mann claims that human activity is primarily to blame for the changes in the climate over the past few millennia. However, Mann contends that to undermine the corpus of research on climate change, fossil fuel companies have employed scientists, sponsored lobbying in Congress, and spread false information in the media. Mann calls the fossil fuel industry's actions a "war on science." Mann contends that alternative "facts" are offered to further a goal that the fossil fuel business favours (Arboleda, 2018). However, they believe that a broad understanding of climate issues will promote energy conservation, pollution reduction, crop biotechnology, alternative and nuclear energy, global government, social justice, and even personal fitness—all of which they believe are good for society. Therefore, to promote progressive measures, they keep their reservations to themselves and tell lofty tales about the climate (Harris, 2014). It's regarded as a slippery slope. Civil society members grow sceptical of initiatives they would typically support as they learn they have been misinformed about climate change.

It is likewise ineffective in propagating the admirable myth that scientific advancements have prevented climate change and other natural catastrophes. One may wonder why money is needed if people already have the systems and answers in place. In actuality, science is still in its infancy; therefore, if the human race wants to adequately prepare for the future, it must continue researching the climate. Because of the deception that people know how to manage the planet's climate, 94% of the $1 billion that is spent every day on climate finance globally is used to try to manage the situations that future generations may face. Just 6% of people are genuinely reached by climate change adaptation efforts. This strategy has been called immoral.

Politicians who deny the significance of climate change have been steadily changing their stances. There was outright denial five or six years ago, and they were thrilled about the notorious pause that occurred between 1998 and 2011–12 when the global average temperature did not seem to be rising as quickly as it had in the preceding few decades. This gave them a lot of confidence to claim that everything had stopped and that the scientists were mistaken. Since the pause truly ended and they understood their prior idea was no longer viable, their disagreements have now come to an end. Despite their dissatisfaction, the data was too compelling. As a result, they have developed several novel arguments. 1) Although climate change may be true, nothing can be done about it since it is too expensive. 2) It might be occurring, but we can wait because it's not bad enough. 3) The entire concept is uncertain and could either be happening or not (Krebs, 2017).

ii. DIMENSION OF TIME.

One of the primary criticisms has been that policies in democracies are frequently short-sighted, with politicians more concerned with winning elections than with long-term objectives that might be politically unpopular. These obsessions drive politicians to implement short-term, rhetorically appealing populist initiatives when long-term thinking is needed (Banik, 2022). Therefore, sustainability seems to suggest that

Loreto College Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences
Vol-1, *Issue-1*, **(May, 2025)**
Peer-Reviewed e-Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies
Loreto College, Kolkata.
Page No: 28-38, Section: Article

Loreto College, Kolkata

politics must extend the time horizon as far as possible. However, democracy is attacked for its slowness because of the current ecological predicament, which is so serious concerning climate change (Wurster, 2013). A closer discussion between scholars of political theory and sustainability may suggest a re-evaluation of how people allocate, manage, and plan their time. On two levels, the objective of sustainability appears to contradict the traditional liberal representative democracy time regime: it makes them reconsider the notion that governments should make plans for four to five years and then let the people decide how they are doing. On the other hand, it appears that traditional democratic patterns are short-term oriented and concentrated on achieving outcomes that would help them win the upcoming elections. The intricate balance of power, the division of power on several levels, and the ability of various veto players to delay or impede decisions are all features of traditional democratic systems (Heidenreich, 2018).

iii. MAXIMISING POLITICAL INCLUSION AND EFFICIENCY

Climate change sceptics include both the general public and the right-wing journalists who prefer fossil fuels. It turns out that despite being a deliberate movement started by fossil fuel companies, climate denial gained traction because it resonates deeply with a particular demography. These people who deny climate change believe that it is a fabricated justification for a massive top-down intervention scheme. They believe that climate activists are trying to restrict their liberties. They seek to impose dietary restrictions, eradicate rural communities, and open the door for widespread international migration. These sceptics may be mistaken about the fabricated nature of climate change, but they are unambiguously right about the effects. Things will indeed change, with a lot of people moving both inside and across nations (Finnigan, 2024).

According to climate and economics researchers, 13 degrees Celsius is the ideal temperature for economic production. The majority of today's economically dominant nations are already warmer than that. According to these analysts, the annual cost of climate change is already equal to half of the global GDP. Heat is one of the climate conditions that has a significant impact on agricultural yields. By the end of the century, when global warming is expected to reach roughly 4 degrees, as is the case if people don't alter their course, their grain yields may be just half as abundant as they are now. There are attempts to feed almost 50% more people worldwide today, but the yields are half as abundant. However, there will be much stronger intuitions about resource scarcity if the human race ends up in a world that is 3–4 degrees warmer. If there is an attempt to project what a politics based on that would entail, it can be anticipated that more zero-sum calculations of political advantage, more nationalistic self-operations or nationalistic self-interest and nativism, and more turning away from those who are suffering elsewhere in the world and concentrating on the immediate needs of one's own country. These factors are already influencing the politics in which people live (Wells, 2019).

Most economists would argue that there are genuine humanitarian costs and that people have a moral duty to take action to prevent climate change because of the suffering of people, especially those who are most in need. However, when weighed in monetary terms, climate action did not make much sense. In addition to some of the previously mentioned economic activities, it necessitated a significant upfront expenditure. These explain why there was such a glacial political movement on this issue: our policy officials around the world were worried about economic development and believed we had enough time to come up with innovative solutions. However, the conventional opinion of economists studying this subject has changed dramatically in the last few years, and in part, this is because they have begun to estimate the costs of climate change, which are significantly higher now than they were a few years ago. If the trajectory is not

Loreto College Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences
Vol-1, Issue-1, **(May, 2025)**
Peer-Reviewed e-Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies
Loreto College, Kolkata.
Page No: 28-38, Section: Article

Loreto College, Kolkata

altered, it is now anticipated that by the end of the century, climate damage might amount to six hundred trillion dollars, which is double the current global wealth. Additionally, GDP might be 20–30% lower than it would be in the absence of climate change. 30% would have an impact that is twice as severe as the Great Depression and would last forever, but they also see potential short-term economic prospects if moved swiftly to address climate change. Rapid decarbonization could boost the global economy by $26 trillion by 2030, according to a significant 2018 analysis (Wells, 2019).

Over the past twenty years, Indonesia has doubled its per capita income, cut the poverty rate in half, and doubled its emissions. It is a reflection of the majority of developing nations, where increased industrialization, which is more reliant on fossil fuels, is necessary to lift people out of poverty. However, Indonesia believes that it can cut its emissions in half by 2030, surpassing its Paris Accords goals, and continue to expand at a rate of 6% annually, which is faster than its previous 5% growth rate. This exemplifies the new economic theory that says preventing a global catastrophe does not require embracing a new world with significantly slower economic growth. However, it also emphasizes that becoming significantly affluent in a short period is possible if one moves swiftly (Lindvall, 2021)

IS AUTOCRACY A BETTER REGIME TO TACKLE THE WICKED PROBLEM?

In addressing the issue of climate change, autocratic governments may have significant benefits over their democratic equivalents. According to prominent scientist James Lovelock, concerning climate change, "It may be necessary to put democracy on hold for a while" to allow a small number of honest officials to make judgments based on evidence that restricts individual freedom (Lovelock, 2010). When citizens' basic requirements for protection are met, such an authoritarian power exercise is accepted as acceptable in democracies during times of crisis. Two principal factors bolster this viewpoint. First, centralized policymaking restricts the power of potentially hostile actors (such as corporations), which is advantageous to authoritarian regimes. Furthermore, authoritarian leaders are not under the same pressure as democratic leaders to put the needs of the populace first, prioritizing immediate personal gain over long-term climate goals. Climate mitigation may encounter resistance from industries and communities who are unwilling to bear unequal burdens because it usually offers global advantages at the price of localized costs.

Second, authoritarian governments can quickly mobilize people and resources, using their coercive powers to limit personal liberties and unhinderedly concentrate attention, resources, and energies on their top priorities. Therefore, climate-conscious autocracies have the potential to effectively reduce carbon emissions from individuals, groups, and organizations. Known as "authoritarian environmentalism," this style of government is typified by a concentration of power in a small number of executive agencies, little public involvement in policymaking or execution outside of state-led mobilization, quick policy outputs, and restrictions on personal freedom. According to some academics, authoritarian approaches to climate governance may become increasingly prevalent and essential as modern democracies struggle to respond to climate change in a timely and efficient manner (Gilley, 2012).

Natural disasters have caused social unrest and disturbances, including violence and looting, in nations with weak state institutions and unstable political environments. Some research indicates that these events might also contribute to a growing mistrust of democracy. These circumstances can be used by an authoritarian government to increase its social legitimacy. Natural catastrophes can also reduce the likelihood of protests, which gives authoritarian governments the chance to impose more dictatorial control and restrict people's freedoms. This is particularly true in nations that already have political instability and

Loreto College Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences
Vol-1, Issue-1, **(May, 2025)**
Peer-Reviewed e-Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies
Loreto College, Kolkata.
Page No: 28-38, Section: Article

Loreto College, Kolkata

have an intermediate regime type. Natural catastrophes may also result in a scenario where parties with opposing interests are brought together, reinforcing national unity and enabling social and political change. Natural disasters often do not threaten the political system in industrialized democracies. In democracies, if people are unhappy with how the government is responding. In autocratic nations, such circumstances could result in regime transition, while in other countries, leadership could be punished in future elections. As an illustration, consider the April 2015 earthquake that rocked Nepal, killing 9,000 people and seriously damaging infrastructure and homes. The catastrophe drew political parties together at a time when the nation was discussing a new constitution. According to some analysts, the catastrophe aided in the progress of democratization, and two years later, Nepal had its first municipal elections in almost two decades.

Feeding the world's expanding population will become extremely challenging due to global warming. Food insecurity is therefore quite likely to rise in the future, and as a result, food costs will increase. Rising food costs put democratic institutions under strain by raising the possibility of economic and social unrest, urban riots, protests, and political instability. Such occurrences are likely to be detrimental to the advancement of global freedom and could result in a collapse of governing structures. However, these occasions could also present opportunities for the transition of autocratic governments to democracy. Non-democratic regimes are better able to silence a hungry populace, while elected leaders typically find it more difficult to maintain their hold on power if the people are unable to eat.

A move away from fossil fuels, however, may also lead to beneficial economic growth, advancing the green economy and generating employment in sectors that create the technological solutions required for a zero-carbon economy. According to an Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) assessment, the G20 nations could expand by 2.8 percent annually, if the right policies are put in place to encourage eco-friendly companies and change the economic landscape (OECD 2017). The economy may become more stable and less susceptible to changes in the price of oil if fossil fuels are eliminated. New economic models that emphasize sustainability and more local production could also have a good democratic impact by reducing economic inequality and fostering more stable economic growth. A UN-sponsored study on the post-pandemic recovery strategies of the 50 biggest nations states that only approximately 20% of total recovery expenditures were green (UNEP 2021). In 2021, while the EU is implementing its Green Deal and the USA is implementing a stimulus package under President Joe Biden, a larger portion of recovery funds may be allocated to the green sector.

A nation that receives a large influx of migrants may experience pressure, and its institutions may find it difficult to integrate newcomers and provide for their welfare. This might hinder the growth of democracy, particularly in weaker states. Through remittances, immigrants might aid in the democracy of their home nation. It is unclear how migration and democracy are related, although some evidence indicates that migration may hurt democracy in both the receiving and leaving countries. For example, migrant communities may support political and civil rights movements, although this is not always the case. It can also lead to a "brain drain," which could jeopardize democratization. However, there have generally been detrimental effects on democratic norms and standards from the massive migratory flows to the USA and the EU in recent years. 1.8 million migrants entered the EU in 2015, which fuelled right-wing authoritarian populist parties, fuelled a political debate about identity, religion, and values, and added to political polarization. According to some analysts, this resulted in a decline in EU cooperation and European democracy. Proposals to strengthen border controls have been on the political agenda in the USA, India, and the EU. The burden on undoubtedly, the impact of migration on democracy primarily depends on how policies are implemented, how well immigrants integrate, and other factors that affect the receiving

Loreto College Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences
Vol-1, Issue-1, **(May, 2025)**
Peer-Reviewed e-Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies
Loreto College, Kolkata.
Page No: 28-38, Section: Article

Loreto College, Kolkata

community's tolerance and xenophobic sentiments. Given the anticipated rise in migration brought on by climate change, this topic is likely to continue to dominate political discourse for some time to come.

IS DEMOCRACY LEADING TO LOWER EMISSIONS?

Some experts believe that while economic growth initially causes environmental degradation, public perceptions of ecological protection shift as economic growth increases, thereby reducing environmental damage. The validity of such a relation to greenhouse gas emissions is increasingly questionable (Amate et al., 2024). First of all, growing living standards and economic expansion cause consumption to rise, which raises emissions. Moreover, with economic development, emissions tend to spill over between nations, as low-income nations receive a transfer of production. Although income level may increase knowledge of environmental issues like global warming, it is unclear if this has a meaningful impact on emissions. People in certain nations with high per capita carbon emissions are less worried about the climate crisis than people in low-income nations. This could mean that people who have grown accustomed to a lifestyle that relies heavily on fossil fuels are unwilling to acknowledge the effects this has on the environment (Maler, 2001). Climate attitudes are influenced by several other factors outside wealth level, including the educational system, public institution trust, news media's scientific objectivity, the fossil fuel industry's influence, and firsthand knowledge of climate-related occurrences. Politicians find it challenging to advance a progressive political agenda on a problem for which there are no ideal solutions. The agenda-setting process may be hampered by the lack of clarity and frequently conflicting information regarding the nature of the issue and its remedies. Given that every political solution to handle a wicked problem might be condemned for not addressing the problem fully or for creating new problems and igniting numerous social and economic debates, politicians may find it challenging to provide a tangible and effective climate policy. Furthermore, because the results of different policies are frequently unclear, it can be challenging for people to assess the effectiveness of a policy being pursued and to hold politicians responsible.

The fact that the same people who need to offer solutions are also responsible for the crisis is another barrier to widespread climate mobilization, which is connected to the severity of the issue. Since there are no obvious victims or offenders, it has been challenging for the effort to create a shared political identity. The climate issue lacks the dynamic of a perceived "us and them" confrontation, which has been an essential element of past social movements, including the labour movement and the women's rights movement. In recent years, however, the climate movement has gained strength, partly by leveraging the competing features of intergenerational challenges. Additionally, the idea that human acts, like consumer decisions, may address global warming has come under increased scrutiny, while corporate responsibility has been emphasized (Lindvall, 2021).

COMPARISON BETWEEN REGIMES USING CASE STUDIES

Case Study 1: Policy Volatility in the United States and the Challenges of Long-Term Climate Commitments.

One of the biggest producers of greenhouse gases in the world, the United States, is a prime example of how party polarization and election cycles may make it difficult for democratic governments to implement consistent and successful climate policies. The nation's participation in the Paris Agreement serves as a particularly instructive example.

Loreto College Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences
Vol-1, *Issue-1*, (May, 2025)
Peer-Reviewed e-Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies
Loreto College, Kolkata.
Page No: 28-38, Section: Article

Loreto College, Kolkata

Under President Barack Obama, the United States committed to aggressive emissions reduction goals and played a significant role in the negotiations of the Paris Agreement in 2015. However, President Donald Trump announced the United States' withdrawal from the deal in 2017, claiming national sovereignty and economic concerns, as part of a campaign pledge (Bang et al., 2016). Rather than long-term environmental planning or scientific consensus, this decision was influenced by short-term political objectives and lobbying pressure from the fossil fuel corporations. To regain its position as a worldwide leader in climate governance, the United States re-joined the Paris Agreement when President Joe Biden took office in 2021. The back-and-forth approach taken by different administrations, however, emphasizes how brittle climate policy is in democracies, where election changes have the power to quickly revoke previous pledges (Rabe, 2007). The situation in the United States highlights a larger trend: democracies encourage openness and public involvement, but they frequently find it difficult to implement and maintain the long-term, occasionally controversial measures required to properly address climate change.

Case Study 2: China's Authoritarian Efficiency and Its Limits in Climate Governance

China's massive investments in electric vehicles, renewable energy, and extensive infrastructure have made it a popular example of state-driven climate policy. Because of its authoritarian political system, decisions can be made quickly and long-term plans may be carried out without the delays that come with democratic negotiation (Li & Wang, 2012). However, its climate governance also suffers from significant inefficiencies and paradoxes brought about by this centralized control. Despite this initiative, China's ongoing reliance on coal is the main reason it continues to be the world's greatest emitter of carbon dioxide. In sharp contrast to its climate goals, China authorized the construction of more than 100 new coal-fired power facilities in 2023 alone (Global Energy Monitor, 2023). Local politicians frequently undermine the national government's climate ambitions by putting short-term economic growth and employment ahead of environmental responsibilities. To seem in line with national objectives, local administrations may also underreport pollution levels or fabricate emissions data in an authoritarian regime. Furthermore, the political climate in China suppresses press freedom, independent research, and civil society involvement—all essential components of environmental accountability. When environmental activists speak out against pollution or contradict government narratives, they may be subject to surveillance, censorship, or even arrest. Although China's centralized government permits swift action, the efficacy and sustainability of its climate policies are eventually hampered by its lack of accountability, transparency, and grassroots involvement (Steinhardt & Wu, 2016).

Implications

People who live in democracies are the highest emitters. Only slightly more than 4% of people on Earth reside in nations that are deemed completely democratic by the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, but they bear greater responsibility for eight percent or so of global emissions. On the other hand, despite making up 40% of emissions, authoritarian nations are home to one-third of the world's population. About 45% of people reside under democracies with flaws, and 18% do so under hybrid regimes; they are responsible for 43% and 10%, respectively. Many of the worst polluters per capita are located in non-oil-producing democracies, including the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kazakhstan. However, several well-known democracies, including the USA, Canada, Mongolia, Australia, and the Republic of Korea, are also among the top 20 nations in terms of emissions per person because of their economies that rely heavily on fossil fuels. According to this assessment, structural inefficiencies limit both regime types (Lindvall, 2021).

Loreto College Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences
Vol-1, Issue-1, **(May, 2025)**
Peer-Reviewed e-Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies
Loreto College, Kolkata.
Page No: 28-38, Section: Article

Loreto College, Kolkata

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The paper highlights that structural inefficiencies limit both democratic and authoritarian regimes. Democratic governments frequently lack the political unity required for long-term climate action, despite their greater transparency and participation. Although authoritarian governments can be quickly put into place, they usually lack transparency, accountability, and meaningful public participation. Therefore, regime type by itself does not determine the success of climate policy; rather, it influences results through interactions with governance practices, institutional design, and civil society engagement. Thus, democracy needs to be transformed to implement a sustainable lifestyle. Green republicanism is one potential approach to rethinking democracy as it is evolving to meet democratic norms. Authors like Barry, Cannavò, and Honohan are credited with coining the term (Barry, 2012). According to this school of thinking, there are at least two ways to put democratic ideas into practice, and liberal democracy is just one of them. Unlike the liberal tradition, which prioritizes individual liberty, republicanism is a second school that promotes the essential function of the res publica, or common welfare. The notion that sustainability can be compared to the paradigm of citizens being dedicated to the common good in traditional republican regimes in Athens, the Florentine Republic, or Switzerland unites the various Green republican approaches (Heidenreich, 2018). If the goal of politics is to implement collective freedom through shared decisions rather than to maximize individual freedom, then these decisions may restrict individual freedom. Though hotly contested in many nations, requiring citizens to provide sustainability services could be a significant means of advancing this republican concept. The current capitalistic system needs to be redesigned to address the threat posed by climate change. It could be remodelled in a way that makes humans more resilient.

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Loreto College Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences
Vol-1, *Issue-1*, **(May, 2025)**
Peer-Reviewed e-Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies
Loreto College, Kolkata.
Page No: 28-38, Section: Article

Loreto College, Kolkata

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Page No: 28-38, Section: Article

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