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# Intermediating climate change: conclusions and new research directions

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## ABSTRACT

The urgency and threats of climate change have elevated the issue to a prominent – albeit often contested – position within the policy process. Resultantly, climate politics and climate change governance have received enhanced attention in both the academic literature and in real-life discourse. Yet, except regarding certain empirical contexts, there has been a lack of conceptualization or analysis of intermediating actors in climate politics – what we term “climate intermediaries” – that bridge between different types of actors and different levels of governance. This Special Issue sought to reduce this research gap by analyzing the strategies, interactions, and impacts in the policy process of these “go-betweens”, across three continents. In this concluding article, we take stock of the insights provided by the individual contributions and offer answers to the three research questions that guided the Special Issue. In addition, we provide some suggestions for future research avenues and concluding reflections.

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Climate change; governance; intermediaries; policy process; transformation

## 1. Introduction

Climate change refers to long-term shifts in temperatures driven by increased human emissions of greenhouse gases (GHGs). The damaging effects of climate change are already having visible effects on the environment such as droughts, wildfires, extreme rainfall, shrinking glaciers and ice sheets, and shifting plant and animal geographic ranges. To take just one example, the fact that plants and trees are blooming sooner in the year holds implications for agriculture and food production as much as for biodiversity. Moreover, feedback loops, such as those resulting from the thawing of permafrost, can accelerate global heating, worsening the crisis more rapidly over time. In short, the severity of climate change effects we experience will depend on how rapidly GHG emissions can be reduced, which in turn necessitates adaptation and implementation of effective climate policy.

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Climate policy aims to change the ways in which individuals and societies produce and consume products and services that directly or indirectly result in GHG emissions. When the need for climate action first became apparent in the late 1980s, climate policy was understood to comprise mostly how we produce and consume energy. The largest source of GHG emissions from human activities in most countries has been the burning of fossil fuels for producing electricity and heat, hence why the energy sector has been the first target of climate policy. However, over these decades, research on the importance of other sectors has grown, necessitating a more holistic approach that encompasses many sectors and processes, and so focusing on electricity and heating alone is insufficient. Instead, effective climate action requires action in all policy sectors (Adelle and Russel 2013; Tosun and Lang 2017) and even more than that, “deep societal transformations” (Patterson et al. 2018, 1).

“Transformations” research draws from a broad perspective and considers large-scale societal change processes involving social-ecological interactions (Hölscher, Wittmayer, and Loorbach 2018). A closely related perspective refers to “transitions”, which concentrates on social, institutional and technological change in societal sub-systems (Hölscher, Wittmayer, and Loorbach 2018). Both perspectives, transformations and transitions, suggest the need for far-reaching changes to the policy status quo, which policy studies have shown to be difficult to achieve (Caughey, Xu, and Warshaw 2017). The need for greater understanding of the factors that enable far-reaching climate policy change was the rationale behind this Special Issue.

The existing literature on the potential drivers of policy change directed our attention to an actor type that has received limited attention in policy studies: intermediaries. Kivimaa et al. (2019), for example, identify five types of intermediaries that they expect to shape the process and outcomes of sustainability transition. Literature in this area has mostly examined organizations operating in the fields of technological innovations and standardization (Hague and Bomberg 2022). Building on the discussion of intermediaries in the literature on sustainability transition as well as in studies of regulatory governance (Abbott, Levi-Faur, and Snidal 2017), this Special Issue focused on “climate intermediaries”, that is, “go-betweens” that operate between different types of actors and/or between levels of governance, acting directly or indirectly to affect stakeholders’ behaviour and/or policy goals on climate change (Tobin, Farstad, and Tosun 2023a).

Climate intermediaries are not a specific *type* of actors in the policy process – any individuals, groups or organizations that would qualify as policy actors can function as climate intermediaries. Intermediation is about the *role* actors play in the policy process. For example, there exists a wealth of research on political parties and how they shape public policy, including climate policy (Crowley 2013; Vihma, Reischl, and Andersen 2021; Farstad et al. 2022a). Most of the research on political parties and climate policy concentrate on parties as actors and assess what climate policy preferences they have (Farstad 2018; Carter et al. 2018; Ladrech and Little 2019). This perspective is relevant since political parties select candidates for elections who – when successful – become members of the executive or the legislative. In that capacity, they are responsible for proposing and adopting climate policy. Strictly speaking, such analyses do not focus on the role of political parties, but on the role of members of government or parliament who (mostly) also belong to a certain political party. It is nonetheless correct to conceive of political parties as actors, since members of government or parliament coordinate

their positions with the political parties they belong to. What is more, political parties also participate in political debates in their own right.

However, we can also conceive of political parties as organizations that intermediate between the members and/or supporters of a political party and the members of government or parliament who belong to the same party (Caillaud and Tirole 2002), thereby functioning as a “transmission belt” in the sense of Easton (1971) (see also Bevan, Borghetto, and Seeberg 2023). These roles are not contradictory, because the same actor can perform different roles in different policymaking contexts. Acting as a climate intermediary therefore represents one of several roles that actors can play. In addition to political parties, intermediaries may also include business and professional associations, civil society organizations, experts and even governmental agencies (Abbott, Levi-Faur, and Snidal 2017; Fransen and LeBaron 2019; Maggetti, Ewert, and Trein 2017; Hodson and Marvin 2010; Albareda 2018). Again, it is the relational nature of the role played, not the type of actor, that determines a climate intermediary.

The contributions to this special issue have investigated actors who strive to or perform the role of climate intermediaries. In the remainder of this concluding article, we draw together the insights the individual contributions to the Special Issue have provided with regard to the guiding questions put forth by Tobin, Farstad, and Tosun (2023a) in the introductory article. Furthermore, we highlight unexpected findings and put forth an agenda for future research. The article closes with our concluding reflections and remarks. We propose that future policy studies will benefit from the precise conceptualisation of climate intermediaries, and exploratory empirical insights drawn from Israel, Mexico, New Zealand, Norway, and the United Kingdom, proffered by this special issue.

## 2. Key insights

In the introductory article, Tobin, Farstad, and Tosun (2023a) put forth three research questions, which guided the analyses carried out by the six contributions:

- RQ1: What are the strategies of climate intermediaries for shaping climate action?
- RQ2: How and why do different climate intermediaries, overlap, coordinate, collaborate and compete with one another?
- RQ3: What are the impacts of climate intermediaries?

Eitan and Fischhendler (2022) provided insights into strategies of climate intermediaries (see RQ1) for shaping climate action by concentrating on plans for establishing a large-scale wind farm in Israel. The planned wind farm is a project of eight local communities in the Golan Heights that are organized as cooperative economies. The intermediary in this case study is an individual; more precisely, a veteran resident of the location chosen for the establishment of the wind farm. As a former secretary general of one of the communities, the intermediary has expertise concerning renewable energy projects and relationships with local stakeholders and politicians. Critical for the project’s success was that it succeeded in establishing an inter-community partnership, and for this it was key that the intermediary engaged in negotiations in four arenas: within communities, between communities, vis-à-vis private developers, and vis-à-vis regulators.

While the contribution by Eitan and Fischhendler (2022) is instructive for learning about the strategies of climate intermediaries, it is also insightful for developing a better understanding of what it takes to be able to perform this role. The intermediary in this particular case possessed information and resources he could use in order to facilitate the collaboration between the communities and to synchronize local-level climate action with the national climate policy.

Another important insight garnered from the article by Eitan and Fischhendler (2022) is that in certain situations, intermediaries can share similarities with “policy entrepreneurs”, which feature prominently within certain theories of the policy process, such as the Multiple Streams Framework by Kingdon (2011). This observation suggests that research on intermediaries needs to be attentive of how it conceptualizes and operationalizes intermediaries. It also suggests that research on policy entrepreneurs may benefit from taking the notion of intermediaries into account for an improved understanding of the mechanisms by which entrepreneurship can affect policy design.

Hague and Bomberg (2022) concentrated on Christian faith-based actors in Scotland and examined the strategies adopted by them to perform the role of climate intermediaries, which also responds to the first research question. The authors explored intermediaries’ capabilities to represent, mobilize, and aggregate interests, and how these have affected both domestic and global climate policy. As the study revealed, Christian faith-based actors have mediated “downwards” to mobilize action on global climate concerns within their own congregations. They have also mediated “upwards” by aggregating specific theological knowledge and translating it into a moral imperative for climate action. In terms of representation capabilities, faith-based actors participated in policy consultation and introduced the views of their members to the policy process. In terms of mobilization, and providing an answer to the second research question, the authors showed that faith-based actors connected with civil society actors in order to intensify the call for climate action. In terms of aggregation capabilities, the faith-based actors translated the church doctrine to a general moral imperative. Conversely, these faith-based actors managed to explain to their congregations the local-level implications of the global challenges of climate change.

The importance of the political and societal context for the emergence and functioning of climate intermediaries is addressed by Solorio and Tosun (2022) and Tobin et al. (2023b). Concentrating on Mexico, Solorio and Tosun (2022) contended that the opportunity structure for climate intermediaries changed with different presidents entering office. This study also aligns with research on how populism affects climate politics and policy by showing that populist leaders such as the incumbent Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador tend to limit the opportunities for climate intermediaries. As a result, for example, numerous science organizations have withdrawn from the policy process and do not offer information on climate change or the means to reduce GHG emissions anymore, which would have shaped policy design. The authors also showed that the different presidents trusted different types of climate intermediaries, which resulted in those lacking their trust to be excluded from the policy process. This finding is important in responding to the second research question because it suggests that competition or cooperation among different types of climate intermediaries also depends on the design of the political opportunity structures in which they operate.

Turning to Muslim faith-based actors in the United Kingdom, Tobin et al. (2023b) provided a complementary perspective to Hague and Bomberg (2022). The authors found that the impacts of Muslim faith-based actors as climate intermediaries within “mainstream” fora have been limited, especially regarding the opportunity to provide strategic insights. When engaging with state actors and mainstream civil society organizations, Muslim faith-based actors tend to be invisibilized or instrumentalized. This reality results in the fatigue of Muslim climate intermediaries when seeking to participate in the climate policy process, which in turn diminishes the representativeness and effectiveness of the resultant policies. However, when Muslim climate intermediaries engage with organizations from the shared faith or acting in interfaith contexts, they are not impeded in acting as climate intermediaries to the same extent, thus answering the second research question. What is particularly noteworthy about this case is that the marginalization of Muslim faith-based actors is not only the outcome of decisions taken by political actors and therefore the politically defined opportunity structures, but also of societal actors and other climate intermediaries. This insight points to the importance of exploring the strategic interests of climate intermediaries, which not only determine the strategies they use to “go between” between policymakers and their constituencies, but also how they strategically position themselves vis-à-vis other (potential) climate intermediaries, which provides further answers to the second research question.

The mobilization and allocation of finance are critical factors for enabling the transformation towards low-carbon economies (Köhler et al. 2019). As such, funding bodies can be regarded as key climate intermediaries, as the articles by Farstad et al. (2022b) and Hall and Meng (2023) showed. At the same time, these two articles offer valuable insights into the impacts of climate intermediaries, thereby providing answer to the third research question.

In their article, Farstad et al. (2022b) concentrated on the Norwegian “Klimasats” Fund which plays an important role as an intermediary in the meta-governance of climate action in the country. Funding bodies align very well with the notion of intermediaries since they provide funding which enables climate action but without being the ones who have defined the criteria for being eligible for funding, which is determined by policymakers (Obydenkova, Rodrigues Vieira, and Tosun 2022). Funding bodies have a bi-directional functionality, as they provide financial incentives to local-level actors while ensuring the experience in implementing the local-level projects is fed back to higher-level government. However, the impact of funding bodies as intermediaries is that they can only have a direct influence on those local authorities that actually receive financial means for local-level climate action. To achieve further impacts, they must act indirectly, by empowering other actors to perform the role of climate intermediaries as well as, by influencing climate policy discourses.

In contrast to the direct impacts of funding bodies, the indirect impact is not limited to local authorities who receive funding but can, in principle, also affect local authorities that do not receive funds. In this regard, the impact on climate policy discourses can be seen to transcend beyond the members of the governance networks. Local authorities that do not implement projects for reducing GHG emissions can be induced to change their approach in order to become considered legitimate. Nevertheless, the authors stressed that the impact of funding bodies as intermediaries is prone to being skewed towards climate leader municipalities, which is an aspect worth to be explored in

more detail by future research. Overall, Farstad et al. (2022b) have provided a comprehensive and yet nuanced assessment of the impact of climate intermediaries at the level of an entire network of local actors.

Hall and Meng (2023) looked into a sustainability finance roadmap and how it was developed in Aotearoa New Zealand, which was led by a climate intermediary: the Sustainable Finance Forum. Intermediation was important for the development of the sustainability finance roadmap, since the institutional structures were fragmented and needed coordination in order to re-orient the financial system towards sustainability objectives. Drawing on 14 semi-structured interviews, the authors showed that the intermediation functions of the Sustainable Finance Forum resulted from a lack of coordination and directionality in the financial system and therefore were a strategic response. The insights provided by this study suggest that intermediaries can be critical actors for achieving cross-sectoral policy integration, including climate policy integration. To the best of our knowledge, the role of intermediaries for cross-sectoral policy integration has not been discussed explicitly (Tosun and Lang 2017; for more on climate policy integration, see, e.g. Dupont 2015). However, implicitly, such reflections may be considered as falling within the analysis of intermediaries in sustainability transformations research, since such processes require changes in multiple policy sectors.

Taken together, the six contributing empirical articles have shown that by focusing analytical attention onto climate intermediaries, we can obtain a more refined understanding of the forms and outcomes of climate politics and the climate policy process.

### 3. New research directions

The overarching finding of this Special Issue is that when employing the full portfolio of policy studies concepts and theories to explain the climate policy process, we need to include the easily-neglected bridging roles of climate intermediaries. Pertinent research tends to conceive of individuals and organizations almost as monolithic types of actors, even though they can play many different roles in the policy process. Elaborating on the different roles available, and when actors elect to play which roles, proffer rewarding opportunities for future research. Building on the insights offered by the contributions to this Special Issue, we can identify several new research directions that future work could embrace in order to advance our understanding of the nature of climate intermediaries and the impact they can have on climate politics and climate policy. Specifically, our proposed future research agenda comprises conceptual, theoretical, and empirical directions.

#### **Conceptual directions for future research**

Conceptually, the study of climate intermediaries can be sharpened by mapping systematically when individuals or organizations decide to embrace this role. As Hague and Bomberg (2022) and Tobin et al. (2023b) have demonstrated through their analyses, climate intermediaries are not necessarily rooted in the climate policy subfield. Some climate intermediaries do not exist *because* of their commitment to climate action, but may seek to engage with climate change for other reasons. On the other hand, some climate intermediaries, such as dedicated funding bodies,

have been purposefully established to deal with climate change, as highlighted by Farstad et al. (2022b) and Hall and Meng (2023). The universe of possible climate intermediaries represents a heterogeneous group. Thus, we see merit in paying further conceptual attention to climate intermediaries' characteristics, as well as determining what are the implications of these varied characteristics for climate politics and climate governance.

The complementary perspective refers to the conditions under which policymakers and the target populations of public policies accept an organization to act as an intermediary. For intermediaries to act in this capacity they need to be trusted by the actors between which they intermediate (Maman, Feldman, and Levi-Faur 2022). Tobin et al. (2023b) and Solorio and Tosun (2022) showed that the willingness to act as a climate intermediary does not mean that an actor actually gets to perform this role. The importance of trust in climate policy systems has received elevated attention since the late 2010s, not least because of the identification of trust as being one of the five core propositions of polycentric climate governance proposed by Jordan et al. (2015, 2018).

However, even when accepting that trust is a critical condition for being able to act as a climate intermediary, additional questions arise. For example, the social movement *Fridays for Future* has made a strong case in favour of listening to science and taking action (Svensson and Wahlström 2023). Yet, there exist many scientists and experts to whom policymakers could listen, and depending on their respective discipline and background, the climate action they propose may vary strongly. It is plausible that in an attempt to follow the calls by *Fridays for Future*, politicians may find those scientists who are closer to them in terms of their political ideology to be more trustworthy. In such a constellation, it is not entirely clear whether scientists become intermediaries in their capacity as scientists, or as individuals with an ideological proximity to policymakers.

In other words, it is not only the capability and willingness of the potential intermediaries that determine whether they can indeed function as climate intermediaries but also how they are perceived and how much they are trusted by both the policymakers and policy-takers. This aspect certainly deserves more attention in future research on climate intermediaries. We suggest that this line of inquiry may be usefully guided by the existing literature on the politics of evidence-based policymaking (see, e.g. Cairney 2016, 2022).

Another key conceptual ambiguity that has plagued the literature on intermediaries is what distinguishes intermediation from advocacy, and the pursuit of one's own interests in the policy process. This ambiguity applies to climate intermediaries as much as to any other intermediary. The contribution by Solorio and Tosun (2022), for example, suggested that some of the actors investigated could possibly also be regarded as interest groups, which takes us back to the point that climate intermediaries are only those actors who perform this particular role. It is important to clarify this aspect not least because theories of the policy process build on the notion of policy subsystems, which effectively comprise networks of subsystem actors. What role do intermediaries play in such networks vis-à-vis advocacy groups? This question requires careful reflection for advancing our understanding of policy processes and improving theories of the policy process.



### ***Theoretical directions for future research***

There also exist several avenues for advancing the state of research on climate intermediaries in theoretical terms. An important aspect stressed by scholars of regulatory intermediaries is that intermediation can only function if the intermediaries are trusted (Maman, Feldman, and Levi-Faur 2022) – a point we already made above. But what are the factors that determine whether an intermediary is considered trustworthy? There exist numerous determinants of trust as identified by the literature on political sociology, which research on climate intermediaries is advised to take into consideration (for an overview, see Zmerli and Van der Meer 2017).

Likewise, intermediaries could lose the trust of policymakers if they modify their positions on issues in response to the (changing) interests of their constituencies. Given that the technologies available for mitigating climate change are constantly progressing, the information supplied by intermediaries on them is subject to change over time, which may have implications for the effectiveness of intermediation. For example, renewable energy technologies have been more expensive previously than they are today. The affordability of renewable energy technologies may result in more renewable energy projects being constructed, which may reduce the public's support for them. In turn, intermediaries would need to communicate this shift in opinion to policymakers, which could make the intermediaries appear less reliable as partners. At the same time, intermediaries are unlikely to make an effective contribution to policy processes if they are not aware of changes in the policy positions among the groups they represent. For example, cheaper renewable energy technologies may result in industry become more accepting of them, which a responsive intermediary representing the industry would communicate to policymakers. This discussion, which merits further elaboration, points to one fundamental theoretical need: to better understand the dynamic relationship between intermediaries and the actors between which they intermediate.

In addition to trust, the institutional opportunity structures for intermediation appear relevant for understanding the policy influence of intermediaries, and therefore their potential impact. Solorio and Tosun (2022) made this point in their contribution to this Special Issue, but it aligns more generally with research on interest intermediation systems, which gravitate towards corporatist or pluralist ideal types (Siaroff 1999). In corporatist systems, policymakers engage with a few intermediaries of an encompassing character, often resulting in representation monopolies. In pluralist systems, a large group of intermediaries competes with one another for access to policymakers and with one another. In addition to these classic forms, research has also identified hybrid and alternative types of interest intermediation systems in which, for example, technocratic governments largely exclude intermediaries (see, e.g. Dobbins, Horváthová, and Labanino 2021). These systems, which Solorio and Tosun (2022) have shown to be subject to changes over time, require enhanced attention in order to understand which climate intermediaries exist and which strategies they apply to have an impact on climate policy.

One of the strategies employed by climate intermediaries could be to form alliances with other intermediaries. From this perspective, it appears promising to apply network theories (and network analysis) to formulate empirically testable hypotheses on the organization of climate intermediaries among themselves, as well as for testing their impact on climate policy (Galaz 2019; Kim 2019). The adoption of a network

perspective would especially aid clarity around the extent to which intermediaries not only interact with policymakers or policy target populations, but also with other intermediaries, which has received limited attention in this Special Issue. Indeed, the interaction between intermediaries could boost the joint impact of the intermediating organizations, but it could also result in a reduced impact, as research on interest groups in pluralist systems has shown (see, e.g. Gilens and Page 2014). The application of network theories could also help scholars to understand whether sector-specific intermediation or cross-sectoral intermediation is more effective.

Indeed, this Special Issue has not looked into the question of how climate intermediaries attempt to achieve climate policy integration (Adelle and Russel 2013; Dupont 2015). Addressing this aspect promises to advance our understandings of intermediation for climate action, and even more so for achieving comprehensive socio-economic transformation (Kivimaa et al. 2019). In sum, network theories appear to provide a theoretical lens that could seize the potential of research on climate intermediaries. From here, the rich literature on interest groups could offer several theoretical arguments on which research on climate intermediaries can draw.

### ***Empirical directions for future research***

Empirically, all contributions to this Special Issue looked at individual case studies and drew rich insights through interview methods. The interviews were essential for being able to answer the guiding research questions of the Special Issue. It would be conducive to our understanding of climate intermediaries to carry out further comparative work. Comparative case studies would be a good start, and in the longer run, large-n studies will help to reduce existing knowledge gaps. For example, one could administer a survey that asks policymakers which organizations they consider to be climate intermediaries and why. Such an elite survey would also provide answers to our above question regarding the importance of trust for effective intermediation. Likewise, intermediaries could be surveyed to learn about their strategies and interactions. As the wide geographical coverage of this Special Issue has shown, there is a lot to be gained by studying climate intermediaries in different countries since their room to manoeuvre could be shaped by the characteristics of political systems.

Likewise, the study of climate intermediaries can provide an opportunity for policy scholars to engage with the literature on the varieties of capitalism and the structure of political economies, which differentiates between liberal and coordinated market economies (Hall and Soskice 2013). Similar to the political system, the organization of a political economy should determine who can act as climate intermediaries and what their impacts can potentially be, especially on aspects related to technological innovations for reducing GHG emissions (Ćetković and Buzogány 2016). We could hypothesize that the political economy of a country will affect which organizations function as climate intermediaries. In coordinated market economies, trade and business associations as well as labour unions can be expected to play an important role in intermediating climate change. In liberal market economies, (scientific) experts could potentially act as influential climate intermediaries. However, these expectations need a more rigorous theoretical justification and an adequate research design in order to be tested – both elements would go well beyond this conclusion but they represent promising themes for future research.

## 4. Conclusion

The study of climate intermediaries expands the scope of analysis beyond existing perspectives on climate politics, which tend to concentrate either on the supply side, that is, politicians' positions on climate action (Farstad 2018; Farstad et al. 2022a; Jordan et al. 2022; Debus and Himmelrath 2022), or the demand side, that is, public opinion or the position of civil society organizations on climate action (Buzogány and Scherhauer 2022; Marlon et al. 2022; Mildemberger and Leiserowitz 2017). Evidently, the notion of climate intermediaries aligns more with studies that focus on the concept of climate change governance (Jordan et al. 2015), but nevertheless, in that otherwise rich literature they have also received scant attention.

Analysis of intermediation brings additional actors into the picture that provide information and resources to policymakers, as well as to the target populations of public policies, thereby offering a framework that works equally well for explaining policy design and policy implementation. Another advantage of this perspective is that it broadens the empirical purview of climate politics beyond public actors (Abbott, Levi-Faur, and Snidal 2017). The articles by Hague and Bomberg (2022) and Tobin et al. (2023b) have demonstrated the roles that faith-based actors can play for climate governance, which represents one of several promising avenues for future research. More broadly, there is benefit to understanding how actors that do not exist because of climate change still end up becoming climate policy actors. This field is important because of the reality that most actors are not established for climate change purposes, but will nevertheless need to reduce their GHG emissions and play at least some role in the transformation of our global energy system.

The focus on climate intermediaries holds the potential of advancing the literature on climate policy in at least three ways. First, as we showed, the intermediaries perspective encourages researchers to think more about the roles of actors in given policymaking situations, which is often only implicitly considered, if at all. Differentiating more systematically between actors and their varied roles in policy processes can enrich future policy studies that focus on climate change, as indeed it can for any other substantive area, by introducing concepts and theories from psychology and sociology (see, e.g. Hornung 2022; Hornung, Bandelow, and Vogeler 2019).

Second, the defining feature of climate intermediaries is that they link up different actors, which stresses the relational characteristics of the policy process. Research drawing from the Advocacy Coalition Framework has stressed relational aspects (Gabehart, Nam, and Weible 2022), but by focusing on policy networks at a more aggregated level. The intermediation perspective provides a complementary perspective to the extent that it enables concentration on the relationships between actors, without the need to expand the analysis to the entire policy network.

Third, focusing on climate intermediaries can provide an alternative perspective to whether and how climate policy changes. Currently, the predominant empirical focus in much existing research is on the adoption of climate policies (Schaub et al. 2022; Schmidt and Fleig 2018; Tobin et al. 2018; Schmidt, Tobin, and Moore 2022), but, as the transition process continues, it is likely to shift to the question of how exactly climate policies have developed and matured over time. It is in this niche, then, that the role of intermediaries could become instructive.

While we see great potential in expanding the study of climate politics to include climate intermediaries, and we have provided an explicit definition of climate intermediaries, we also stress that both the practice and conceptualization of intermediation are contested (Abbott, Levi-Faur, and Snidal 2017). In this Special Issue, the contributions have shown that it is not always straightforward to empirically delineate intermediaries from interest groups. Distinguishing between intermediaries and interest groups further becomes complicated by the fact that the literature states that intermediaries provide a variety of services, ranging from advice and consultancy activities, to lobbying, coordination and management (Fransen and LeBaron 2019; Hodson and Marvin 2010). This delineation is one of several challenges that require careful conceptual reflection, in order to develop the study of climate intermediaries further.

Another facet of intermediation that merits reflection is the reality that it comes in many different shapes, which has implications for the mechanisms underlying the intermediation process. The contributions by Farstad et al. (2022b) and Hall and Meng (2023) have shown that financial intermediation works differently from the other types of intermediation investigated by the contributions. This observation raises the question of whether a subsequent classification of climate intermediaries can be made to improve our understanding of the mechanisms underlying intermediation, perhaps resulting in a typology of climate intermediary according to the implementation mechanisms that climate intermediaries employ to achieve their goals.

In a way – and indeed, we hope that – this Special Issue may have prompted more questions than answers it gave. If this is the case, we consider it a success, and a confirmation for the perceived need for research and reflection on climate intermediaries. To make a meaningful contribution, the literature on climate intermediaries, which we hope this Special Issue has established, will need to take into consideration further concepts and theories from policy studies and comparative politics. Policy Studies are insightful due to research on policy process theories such as the Advocacy Coalition Framework (Gabehart, Nam, and Weible 2022) as well as other research perspectives such as that of national policy styles (Richardson 1982). The literature on comparative politics is particularly relevant because of the existing research on interest groups and policy advocacy (Hojnacki et al. 2012). Furthermore, research on climate intermediaries can build on the literature on sustainability transition and transformation, which provides both conceptual and theoretical guidance on the empirical realities of intermediation (Kivimaa et al. 2019).

This Special Issue made several suggestions for advancing research on climate intermediaries, which we hope students and scholars will regard as an invitation to partake in future research efforts. The study of climate intermediaries can extend our understanding of climate politics. However, as Hague and Bomberg (2022) have stressed in their contribution, it is important to study climate intermediaries rigorously and to avoid stretching this concept to far. Here, we have offered a precise and original conceptualization of intermediaries within the climate policy process. By developing and applying systematically our conceptualization, we hope that the study of climate intermediaries can enrich our understandings of the policy process, for the benefit of students, scholars and practitioners alike.

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