This Substack post from Matthew Yglesias on climate policy gets, I think two things right and one thing wrong. And getting those three components of climate policy correct is, I believe, important to long term, politically sustainable success in addressing climate change.

First, as Yglesias correctly notes, climate change is not a priority for most voters. The polling data on this has been consistent over time. While a majority of Americans want to do something about climate change, it never ranks particularly high on the list of priorities for voters. That in turn means that policy tools such as carbon taxes are very difficult to enact and sustain over time. It means that efforts to use large-scale political mobilization to push elected officials to take action face major hurdles, and will be difficult to sustain over time. And it means (and this is not unique to the US at all), that policy efforts to reduce fossil fuel combustion (as opposed to accelerating clean energy innovation and deployment) will also be generally politically unpopular and hard to sustain.

Second, Yglesias is also correct that much of the progress we have made in terms of decarbonization has resulted from dramatic drops in the cost, and improvements in the quality, of clean energy technologies, allowing them to be deployed at scale, and allowing for them to displace fossil fuel combustion without affirmative policy efforts to shrink fossil fuel usage.

But the third point is one that I think Yglesias is wrong about. He makes a claim that climate policy would be improved with "much less emphasis on marginally speeding up the adoption of good climate solutions, and much more emphasis on trying to solve the remaining hard problems of climate change on a technical level." But that ignores two key points. First, much of the progress in innovation in clean energy resulted from policy choices, such as research and development support, tax credits, regulatory programs such as renewable portfolio standards, and feed in tariffs. And in fact much of the improvement for these technologies came from not just the innovation, but also supporting the expanding deployment of these technologies. Increased deployment produces "learning by doing" that has been a major driver of many of the cost reductions for these technologies. "Marginally speeding up the adoption of good climate solutions" may well have the impact of making those good solutions even better.

Second is Yglesias's focus on broader public opinion. He is absolutely correct that public opinion is a key constraint on climate policy. But there are many other actors and sources of influence in policymaking besides just basic public opinion. Interest

groups can be very important, particularly on issues that are not high salience for voters. And climate policy can have the effect of building up interest group power. Renewable energy companies were big losers in IRA repeal, but the counterfactual where there is not a relatively powerful renewable energy industry to lobby against repeal is likely a repeal that is much harsher to clean energy. And interest group pressure is a key reason why very conservative states like Texas have not (yet) mimicked the Trump Administration to impose punitive regulations or taxes on renewable energy. So again, "marginally speeding up the adoption of good climate solutions" maybe important for climate policy because of its impacts on the political landscape.

In the end, the lessons I take from these three points is that successful climate policy will often be quiet climate policy. It will not principally be driven by broad public mobilization, and it will be cognizant of political constraints in terms of its structure and direction. But it very different from a retreat from policy to entirely focusing on bleeding-edge technological innovation – something that is a necessary, but not sufficient, component of decarbonization.