

Political Dynamics of Australian Greens and Labor Party Through Green Political Theory

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the dynamics of environmental politics within Australian domestic party competition through the application of Green political theory (GPT) as a normative analytical framework. It seeks to explain why a persistent divergence exists between principled ecological advocacy and pragmatic environmental policymaking despite the increasing severity of ecological crises. Focusing on the interaction between the Australian Greens and the Australian Labor Party, the study analyses how differing ethical priorities, institutional constraints, and governing responsibilities shape climate and environmental policy positions. The study employs a qualitative deductive design based on document analysis of party platforms, policy statements, parliamentary behaviour, and peer-reviewed secondary literature. Analytical interpretation is guided by core principles of green political theory, including ecological responsibility, critique of growth-oriented governance, and the ethical relationship between political institutions and their policies towards the natural environment. The findings indicate that the Australian Greens consistently articulate eccentrically grounded and normatively coherent ecological positions, while the Australian Labor Party advances environmental reforms that are incremental and strategically calibrated to institutional, economic, and electoral constraints. The interaction between the two parties produces a stable yet normatively constrained policy equilibrium in which ecological concern is acknowledged but structural transformation remains limited. The study's contribution lies in integrating normative political theory directly into the analysis of Australian party competition, moving beyond predominantly institutional and electoral accounts to foreground ethical evaluation crisis.

Keywords: green political theory, Australian Greens, party dynamics, Australian Labor Party, pragmatism, ideological

INTRODUCTION

Australia's political system has developed into a stable multiparty framework in which minor parties exert influence disproportionate to their electoral size, particularly through proportional representation in the Senate. Within this institutional setting, the Australian Greens have consolidated their position as a durable third party, shaping legislative agendas and public debate despite rarely holding executive office. Political scientists, Greg Barber and Andrew Klassen noted in their work to the Australian Journal of Political Science that the Greens' rise reflects the broader ideological shifts in advanced democracies, where climate change, environmental degradation, and post-materialist values have generated political demands insufficiently addressed by traditional major parties (Barber & Klassen, 2021). These developments have unfolded alongside a convergence among major parties, especially the

Australian Labor Party (ALP), around pragmatic policy plannings designed to secure electoral competitiveness and governability as reported by ABC News, 2022. The Greens are on the other hand are widely characterised in the literature as a doctrinal party, defined by relatively non-negotiable commitments to ecological sustainability, social justice, grassroots democracy, and non-violence, rather than by vote-maximisation alone (Turnbull & Vromen, 2006; Jackson, 2016). This orientation has led the Greens to prioritise agenda-setting and norm diffusion, frequently leveraging Senate representation to influence legislation rather than pursuing executive dominance (Bowe, 2009).

This principled orientation has enabled the Greens to function as a consistent advocate for ambitious climate action and environmental reform, while simultaneously exposing the party to strategic dilemmas as ecological issues are partially absorbed into the platforms of larger parties as per The Conversation, 2022. Analyses of party competition show that as environmental concerns enter mainstream politics, the Greens may face the risk of losing their distinctiveness or identity even as their core ideas gain wider rhetorical acceptance (Miragliotta & McCallum, 2023). In contrast, the Australian Labor Party operates within a political logic shaped by electoral competition, institutional constraints, and the practical demands of governance (Fioritti & Thomson, 2024) (Jackson et al., 2022). Empirical studies of Labor's climate positioning indicate that while the party has expanded its environmental commitments over time, these positions are typically calibrated to balance emissions reduction with economic growth, industrial employment, and electoral viability (Nelson, 2015; McMenamin, 2008). Writing from a green political economy perspective, Christoff and Eckersley (2021) demonstrate that this balancing logic produces a pattern of incrementalism, in which environmental objectives are pursued through negotiated compromise rather than structural transformation. The result is a divergence between principled advocacy and pragmatic governance that has become a somewhat defining feature of Australian climate politics (Holloway, Miragliotta, & Manwaring, 2019).

While this literature provides detailed accounts of party behaviour, electoral strategy, and institutional bargaining, it offers a more limited engagement with the normative dimensions of environmental politics. Much of the scholarship on the Greens-Labor relationship remains anchored in institutional approaches, focusing on organisational developments, parliamentary negotiations, and electoral outcomes, particularly during periods of minority government (Barber & Klassen, 2021). Contributions archived in the Informit and similar databases, including analyses of Labor-Greens conflicts, document these dynamics descriptively but often lack sustained theoretical evaluation of their ethical implications (Burgmann, 2023). As a consequence, there is relatively little explanation for why the Greens persist in a principled, sometimes electorally costly stance, while Labor repeatedly prioritises pragmatic compromises even as ecological crises intensify. Climate policy is frequently treated as a technical or managerial challenge, rather than as a fundamentally normative question concerning humanity's relationship to the natural environment that sustains life. This analytical emphasis leaves unexamined the ethical assumptions that underpin judgments about responsibility, compromise, and political realism in the ever-evolving issue of environmental governance – especially in advanced democracies.

The limitations of this approach become increasingly evident in the context of the accelerating ecological crises currently confronting Australia. These include climate-induced disasters such as the Black Summer bushfires from 2019 to 2020 that burnt over 18 million hectares of land, biodiversity loss such as last year's 2025 Christmas Island shrew extinction declaration by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and the long-term consequences of resource-intensive developments like land clearing for ongoing iron ore mining and gold exploration that reached decade-high expenditures last year and continues

to drive habitat fragmentation particularly in Western Australia and Queensland. Australian policy scholarship consistently demonstrates that environmental degradation is no longer a marginal policy issue but a systemic challenge that exposes tensions between the country's economic growth, democratic governance and the limits and impact of policies related to ecological sustainability. (Christoff & Eckersley, 2021).

McDonald, Park, Anantharajah and Vogler's 2024 work published in the *Australian Journal of Politics and History* emphasize that incremental reforms, while politically defensible, may be normatively insufficient when evaluated against the scale and urgency of ecological breakdown. As climate impacts intensify, the central political question shifts from how policies can be made electorally palatable, to whether existing party strategies and institutions are capable of addressing ecological collapse at all? The absence of a robust normative framework limits the ability of scholars and policymakers to assess whether incremental progress constitutes meaningful ecological responsibility or merely postpones more fundamental transformations. This gap indeed underscores the need for a theoretical approach that explicitly engages with ethics, intergenerational justice, and of course the moral standing of non-human nature.

As a result, green political theory (GPT) provides a coherent analytical lens through which these party dynamics can be reassessed. First developed and used by the prominent political theorist Robert Goodin in his 1992 work titled *Green Political Theory*, which provided the first full-length philosophical discussion surrounding green political movements. Goodin argued that the natural world possesses an intrinsic value independent of human interests, requiring a political framework that prioritizes the preservation of ecological processes over short-term social or economic desires. In line with Goodin, 1992 and Eckersley, 2004, GPT challenges anthropocentric and growth-oriented assumptions embedded in mainstream political thought and advances an ecocentric ethic that foregrounds ecological limits, responsibility and justice (Eckersley, 2004). This approach is complimented by recent contributions to the Australian ecopolitical scholarship, including journal-based assessments of ecological crises in Anthropocene, who've argued that contemporary environmental challenges require an expansion of political ethics beyond exclusively human-centred needs and wants (*Ecological Crises and Ecopolitics Research in Australia*, 2024).

From this perspective, the Australian Greens can be somewhat understood as norm entrepreneurs seeking to reorient political priorities, while the ALP represents a form of adaptive governing practices that incorporates ecological concerns without fundamentally challenging existing political-economic structures. This normative tension also extends beyond domestic policy, shaping Australia's international environmental posture, where the country is being generally described as an ecocidal middle power caught between climate commitments and continued fossil fuel dependence (*Guardian Australia*, 2023) (*Australia as an Ecocidal Middle Power*, 2024). Accordingly, this study applies green political theory to examine how the interaction between principled green advocacy and pragmatic governance produces constrained ecological outcomes within Australia's party system, clarifying the ethical and institutional dynamics that continue to shape climate policy and political responsibility.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative deductive approach grounded explicitly in green political theory (GPT) as a normative analytical framework. Party behaviour and policy positioning are therefore examined in light of core ecological principles central to GPT, including ecological

sustainability, intergenerational justice, and responsibility toward non-human nature, as articulated in foundational theoretical work by Goodin (1992) and Eckersley (2004) as per their subsequent contributions and developments in the understanding and appreciation of environmental political theory. The analytical process involves systematic examination of policy texts and political discourse to identify recurring themes in how environmental issues are framed, justified, and operationalised by each party. This approach allows the study to trace patterns in policy positioning, governance strategies, and the relationship between normative commitments and institutional practice.

The analytical focus is only confined to domestic party politics in Australia, with particular attention to the Australian Greens and the Australian Labor Party as contrasting political actors operating within the same institutional context. These parties are selected because they represent distinct and well-documented orientations toward environmental governance. Data collection is based on publicly available documentary sources to ensure transparency and replicability. These include official party platforms and policy statements, parliamentary debates and legislative records published in Hansard, electoral data released by the Australian Electoral Commission, and peer-reviewed academic literature on Australian party politics, climate policy, and environmental political theory. This methodological design enhances analytical consistency by linking empirical observations to a clearly defined theoretical framework. At the same time, several limitations should be acknowledged. Document-based analysis may not fully capture internal party deliberations, informal negotiations, or intra-party variation. To address this limitation, the study draws on multiple types of documentary sources to enable triangulation and strengthen the robustness of the analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Australian Greens: Doctrinal Commitment and Normative Consistency

The Australian Greens' political behaviour is characterised by a sustained emphasis on normative consistency in environmentally friendly practices. Empirical studies of party competition often show that the Greens maintain stable ecological positions across electoral cycles, even when these positions generate strategic disadvantages for the party or constrain coalition opportunities with other parties (Barber & Klassen, 2021; Altman & Scalmer, 2020). This consistency is reflected in the party's continued advocacy for prohibiting new coal, oil and gas developments and advancing comprehensive decarbonisation pathways – positions that again have remained central across successive election platforms. The party's parliamentary actions further reinforce this orientation, particularly in the Greens' consistent opposition to new fossil fuel approvals and their support for stronger environmental regulatory frameworks. Such patterns indicate that policy positioning is not routinely reactive in response to short-term electoral incentives, but instead reflects a relatively stable normative foundation within the party's approach to environmental governance and Australia's climate goals.

Their approach is also evident in the party's framing of environmental issues. Climate change and ecological degradation are consistently articulated as matters of "moral" and "systemic urgency", grounded in ecological limits, impacts and intergenerational responsibility. Party policies and public statements frequently emphasise the need for structural transformation rather than incremental adjustment, positioning environmental protection as a primary objective rather than just a policy domain to be balanced against the state's economic considerations. Comparative analyses of climate discourse show that major parties, including Labor, tend to frame environmental policy in terms of the country's

economic transition, employment stability, and competitiveness (Christoff & Eckersley, 2021; Li et al., 2025; de Groot, 2022). As a result, the persistence of this alternative framing within the Greens' discourse seem to highlight a divergence in how environmental responsibility is conceptualised, reinforcing the continued presence of ecocentric perspectives within a predominantly anthropocentric policy environment (Pickering et al., 2020).

From an institutional level, the party's approach or actions seem to be heavily oriented toward agenda-setting and legislative influence rather than outright executive control. Again the Greens' parliamentary actions strongly corroborate with this approach as they tend to utilize Senate representation to shape policy outcomes through negotiation and amendment. (Miragliotta & McCallum, 2022; Barber & Klassen, 2021; Altman & Scalmer, 2020). This was evident during the passage of the 2022–2023 climate legislation, where the Greens successfully negotiated modifications to the Safeguard Mechanism (Crediting) Amendment Bill, including provisions that introduced a "pollution cap" that strengthened emissions constraints on major industrial facilities. In addition, the party has also advanced legislative proposals such as the consistent push for a "climate trigger" in the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act of 1999 that came in effect on July 16, 2000, aimed at ensuring that climate impacts are formally considered in development decisions. The Greens' sustained focus on redefining what constitutes as responsible and environmentally sustainable climate governance therefore reflects a theoretical synthesis between ethical commitment and institutional realism, rather than a rejection of political efficacy altogether.

At the same time, it is also fair to acknowledge that the translation of these positions into broader policy outcomes are often shaped by structural constraints within Australia's political economy. Analyses of climate governance highlight the continued influence of fossil fuel industries, resource-sector interests and growth-oriented policy coalitions, which tend to limit the scope of transformative environmental reform (Goods, 2021; Lucas, 2020; Rimini et al., 2022). The Greens' successful and often limited success in securing transformative climate outcomes is thus consistent with GPT's structural diagnosis that ecological crises cannot be resolved within existing institutional paradigms alone as it explicitly anticipates that liberal-democratic institutions such as that of Australia's will absorb ecological critiques without fundamentally altering their underlying growth imperatives. Taken together, these dynamics indicate that the Australian Greens operate within a political space defined by both normative consistency and institutional constraint. While the party demonstrates a relatively stable commitment to ecocentric principles, its engagement with parliamentary processes also reflects elements of strategic adaptation, particularly in the use of negotiations and amendments to influence policy outcomes (Eckersley, 2004; Baer, 2021). This synthesis is better understood as a differentiated form of political engagement rather than a fixed ideal type, shaped by the interaction between normative commitments and the structural conditions of contemporary governance (Burgmann, 2023).

Australian Labor Party: Pragmatism, Governance, and Ecological Compromise

The environmental and climate politics of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) tend to be shaped by a governing logic that situates ecological objectives within broader economic and institutional priorities rather than a direct standalone approach. Content-based and longitudinal analyses show that Labor consistently frames climate commitments through economic transition, employment security, and industrial competitiveness, with environmental protection treated as a domain to be balanced rather than a foundational constraint (de Groot, 2022; Nelson, 2015). Evidently, this orientation is reflected in policy stances such as the introduction of the Safeguard Mechanism (Crediting) Amendment Bill 2023 (which was amended by the Green's as mentioned earlier), which seek to reduce industrial

emissions while maintaining production continuity and investment stability. Such approaches illustrate how environmental commitments are calibrated alongside economic considerations, aligning with broader patterns in governing parties operating within growth-dependent political or capital-intensive economies (Eckersley, 2004; Paterson, 2010; Baer, 2021). At the same time, Labor's expanding engagement with climate policy across electoral cycles indicates a degree of adaptation, suggesting that environmental concerns are increasingly incorporated into its policies.

This pragmatic orientation is further evident in the incremental and negotiated character of Labor's climate policy approach. Analyses of climate related planning by the national government demonstrate that Labor administrations rely on market-based mechanisms such as the Australian Carbon Credit Units (ACCUs) or new Safeguard Mechanism Credits (SMCs), allowing the market to find the lowest-cost abatement path, stakeholder consultation such as the mandated climate-related financial disclosures for large companies and gradual regulatory reform such as the Climate Change Act of 2022 aimed at reducing emissions by 43% in 2030 and net-zero by 2050. However, in November 2025, the ALP set a new 2035 target of 62–70%. This was criticized by the Greens as an "under-ambitious" concession to the fossil fuel industry (Goods, 2021; Rimini et al., 2022; Christoff & Eckersley, 2021). Policies built around emissions baselines, carbon market mechanisms and industry transition frameworks reflect an emphasis on managing ecological risk while preserving economic stability. This incrementalism is closely tied to the structural constraints of governing within a fossil-fuel-dependent economy, where rapid transformation carries significant political and economic costs (Lucas, 2020). As a result, Labor's approach occupies an intermediate position in which environmental responsiveness is evident but consistently mediated by institutional feasibility, complicating interpretations that equate gradualism with normative indifference.

Complimentary to Labor's discourse and positioning on ecocentric policy adaptation, their parliamentary debates and policy documents consistently justify climate action as acknowledged earlier in terms of employment outcomes, energy affordability and national economic resilience – a fairly pragmatic approach (Pickering, Bäckstrand, & Schlosberg, 2020; Li et al., 2025; McMenamin, 2008). This emphasis reflects the continued dominance of anthropocentric reasoning within mainstream party politics. However, the ALP's increasing incorporation of concepts such as "just transition" established under the Net Zero Economy Authority Act of 2024 tasked specifically with supporting workers and regional communities during the closure of coal and gas-fired power stations introduces a layer of normative complexity, particularly in its recognition of distributive justice and the uneven social impacts of decarbonisation (Goods, 2021). While this does not displace the underlying economic framing, it indicates that Labor's environmental discourse is not static, but evolving in response to both political pressure and shifting societal expectations. This evolution suggests that governing parties can partially internalise ecological concerns without fundamentally restructuring their policy logic.

In regards to ALP's institutional dynamics, they further illustrate how Labor's environmental positioning is shaped by the sustained influence of resource-sector interests as evident in Labor's Future Gas Strategy released in May 2024, which explicitly approved major extensions for projects like the North West Shelf till 2050. This reflects the "accommodation" of export-oriented industries to ensure economic and investment stability despite ALP's net zero goals. Trade unions also play a crucial role in influencing ALP's policies as the Net Zero Economy Authority (NZEa) was heavily shaped by the by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). Which mandated employers of energy related jobs to support workers during plant closures. This ensures climate policy is politically feasible by tethering environmental targets to union-backed employment guarantees. Additionally, export-oriented sectors like the

Ore and Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) indeed play a significant role in shaping ALP's range of politically feasible climate actions (Lucas, 2020; Baer, 2022; Humphrys, 2018). At this point, Labor's continued accommodation of these actors reflects the practical demands of governance within a growth-oriented system, where policy decisions must reconcile environmental objectives with employment, investment, and electoral considerations, but is not uniformed (Barber & Klassen, 2021).

Synthesising these findings, the Australian Labor Party emerges as a boundary case given that their pragmatic behaviour correlates strongly with GPT's position regarding anthropocentrism, incrementalism, and growth-oriented governance, thereby reinforcing the theory's structural critique (Eckersley, 2004; Baer, 2021). Despite this, Labor's adaptive engagement with climate discourse normative movement that GPT tends to under-theorise (Pickering et al., 2020). This study therefore demonstrates that GPT is most analytically robust when applied as a critical framework for diagnosing structural limits, but less precise in accounting for gradual normative shifts within governing parties like the ALP in this case in Australia (Burgmann, 2023).

Normative Tension and Party Competition in an Age of Ecological Crisis

When both parties are examined, their interaction reveals a persistent normative tension embedded within Australia's domestic party competition (Figure 1).

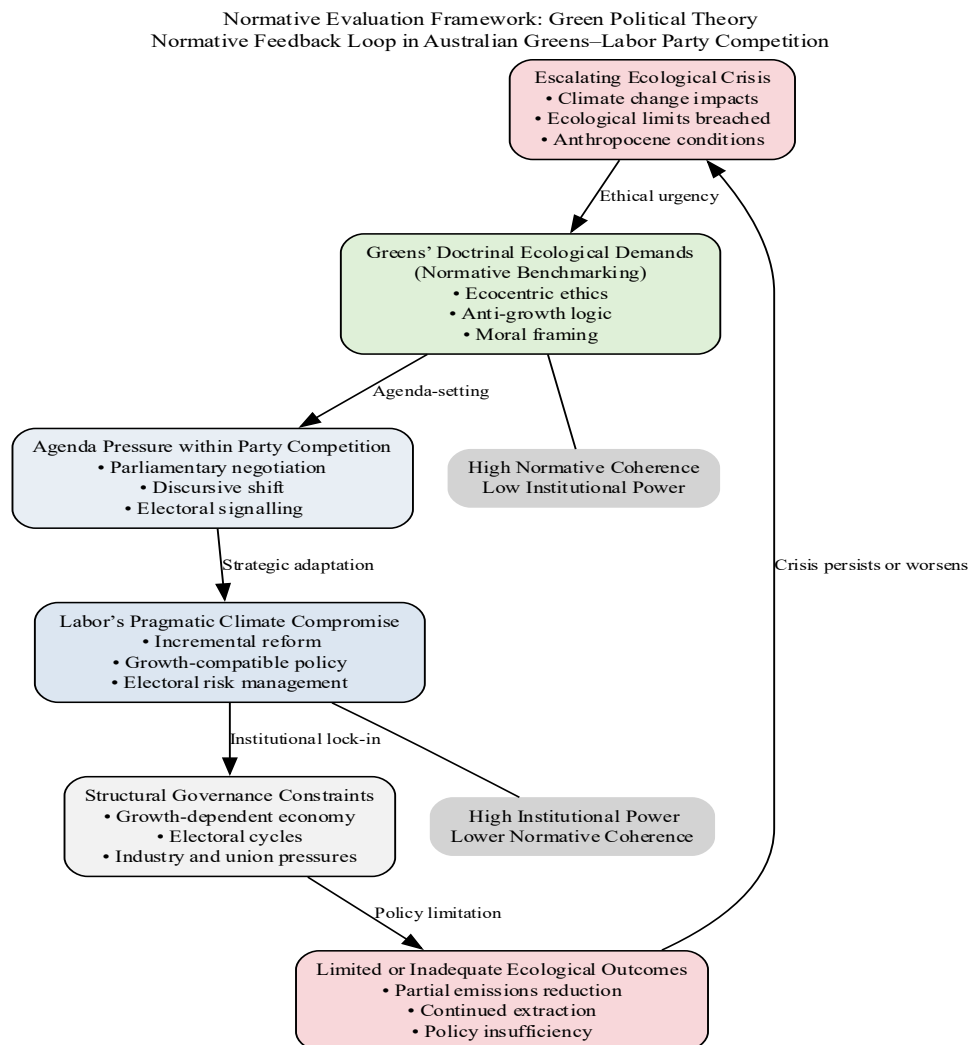


Figure 1: Normative feedback loop illustrating the dynamics. Source: Authors

The Greens' sustained agenda-setting pressure, which articulates climate change as an ethical and systemic challenge—has been successful under favourable conditions in contributing to the shifts in Labor's rhetoric and selective policy positioning (Barber & Klassen, 2021; Miragliotta & McCallum, 2022; Burgmann, 2023). However, these shifts remain bounded by the structural constraints discussed earlier, including industry influence, fossil fuel dependence, and the imperatives of governance resulting in an adaptation that is primarily discursive rather than transformative (Goods, 2021; Rimini et al., 2022; Lucas, 2020). This interaction highlights a differentiated but interdependent relationship: the Greens function as a normatively consistent actor that is guided by its ecocentric doctrines or values that fail to compromise even at the cost of electoral concessions owing to its long ecologically friendly stances within political discourse, while Labor party on the other hand tends to reflect the limits of policy realisation as to how far, practical and above all, pragmatic a policy can and may be implemented even or despite being under conditions of institutional constraint. For this reason, GPT does not predict immediate resolution of this tension; rather, it identifies such divisions as characteristic of ecological, environmentally related politics in capitalist liberal democracies.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Australia's party system is capable of managing ecological concern but is structurally ill-equipped to resolve ecological crisis. Incremental reforms and policy adjustments may mitigate specific harms, yet they remain insufficient to address the underlying drivers of environmental degradation. Green political theory may help us understand why this outcome persists without attributing it to ignorance, incompetence, or partisan bad faith. Rather, it demonstrates that the limitations of Australian climate politics reflect a deeper tension between ecological ethics and democratic governance as currently constituted. Recognising this tension does not resolve it, but it provides a necessary analytical foundation for reassessing how party competition, political responsibility, and ecological sustainability are understood in contemporary public policy while acknowledging that full implementations may face constraints beyond papers (Nelson, 2015; Pickering, Bäckstrand, & Schlosberg, 2020; de Groot, 2022; Eckersley, 2004; Baer, 2021; Gatta, 2023; Australia as an Ecocidal Middle Power, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study finds that the divergent approaches of the Australian Greens and the Australian Labor Party (ALP) to climate and environmental politics are most coherently explained through the use of Green political theory as a normative analytical framework. The Australian Greens consistently prioritize ecocentric ethics and normative coherence, sustaining principled environmental positions even when these positions limit institutional influence or governing capacity. By contrast, the Australian Labor Party advances environmental policy through a pragmatic logic shaped by governing responsibilities, electoral incentives, and growth-oriented institutional constraints. The analysis demonstrates that party competition between the Greens and Labor produces a stable yet normatively constrained policy dynamic in Australian climate politics. Normative pressure exerted by the Greens contributes to discursive shifts and incremental policy movement by Labor, but structural and institutional limitations restrict the translation of ecological urgency into systemic transformation. These findings address the study's objective by showing that the persistence of limited climate action in Australia

reflects an enduring structural tension between ecological ethics and pragmatic democratic governance, rather than deficiencies in political awareness, information, or formal commitment.

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