CLIMATE CHANGE GOVERNANCE IN A POLYCENTRIC GLOBAL ORDER: A MULTI-LEVEL POWER STRUGGLE

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***ABSTRACT*:**

Climate change governance has increasingly evolved beyond a state-centric and hierarchical policy domain into a fragmented, multi-actor, and multi-level governance landscape. This transformation has coincided with the emergence of a polycentric global order in which authority, rule-making, and implementation are distributed across multiple and partially autonomous governance centers. While existing scholarship often associates polycentric and multi-level governance with flexibility, innovation, and enhanced cooperation, this article argues that such perspectives insufficiently account for the power relations embedded within contemporary climate governance arrangements.

This article conceptualizes climate change governance as a multi-level power struggle situated within a polycentric global order. It advances a theoretical framework that places power at the analytical core of climate governance by distinguishing three interrelated dimensions: distributive power over financial and technological resources, institutional power over rule-setting and standard-making processes, and discursive power over knowledge production and legitimacy. Through a critical synthesis of recent climate governance literature, the article demonstrates how polycentricity and multi-level interactions can reproduce asymmetries among states, non-state actors, and intermediaries rather than inherently generating more inclusive or equitable outcomes.

By reframing climate governance as a contested political arena rather than a neutral coordination mechanism, the article contributes to debates on global environmental governance, polycentric governance, and power in international politics. It offers an analytically integrated perspective that helps explain persistent inequalities and conflicts within climate governance and provides a conceptual foundation for future empirical research.

Keywords: *Climate change governance, Polycentric global order, Multi-level governance, Power relations, Non-state actors, Global environmental governance, Climate politics.*

INTRODUCTION

Climate change governance, despite the increasingly pluralized actor structure and institutional diversity over the past three decades, continues to produce structural inequalities, persistent conflicts, and asymmetric outcomes. This paradox necessitates a fundamental interrogation of the dominant assumptions within the climate governance literature. This question clearly demonstrates that climate change is not merely a process of environmental degradation or a technical policy problem; rather, it constitutes a multidimensional governance issue that reflects the structural transformation of the global political order. Physical impacts such as rising global temperatures, extreme weather events, and ecosystem degradation substantiate that the climate crisis extends beyond a scientific or technical problem, being directly linked to political processes including decision-making, resource allocation, and legitimacy production. Consequently, climate change governance has become one of the most contested and theoretically productive domains within the contemporary global governance literature (Bulkeley & Newell, 2023; Hoffmann, 2021). However, this intensive theoretical production still lacks a systematic framework for explicating the power dynamics underlying governance processes.

The central position of climate governance is closely associated with the profound institutional and actorial transformations that this domain has undergone. Particularly since the 1990s, it has been observed that climate policies are no longer shaped solely through international treaties and interstate negotiations; instead, they have evolved into a complex governance arena simultaneously involving national governments, local authorities, city

networks, private sector actors, civil society organizations, and transnational expert communities. This actor diversity does not signify the democratization or increased inclusivity of governance; on the contrary, it can generate new power asymmetries and exclusionary mechanisms. This transformation has repositioned climate governance from a monocentric, hierarchical, and state-centric structure into a multi-actor, multi-level, and institutionally fragmented global order (Jordan et al., 2020; Wurzel et al., 2020). This structural change renders analytically imperative the question of by whom and how governance processes are shaped. This question constitutes the fundamental research problem of this article.

This structural transformation is frequently explained in the literature through the concepts of "polycentric governance" and "multi-level governance." The polycentric governance approach emphasizes that climate policies are no longer determined by a single decision-making center; rather, multiple relatively autonomous governance centers that interact with one another have emerged. Similarly, the multi-level governance literature posits that climate policies are shaped through reciprocal interactions established among local, national, regional, and global levels (Jordan et al., 2020). These approaches offer significant contributions in rendering visible the pluralistic and complex nature of climate governance; however, they largely leave unanswered the question of under which conditions and in favor of which actors this plurality produces outcomes. In other words, the existing literature explains "how" governance is organized but largely evades questioning "in whose favor" it operates.

Nevertheless, a substantial portion of this literature addresses polycentric and multi-level governance structures predominantly within a normative framework. Polycentricity is frequently associated with positive attributes such as flexibility, innovation, and inclusivity, while multi-level governance is presented as a governance form that facilitates policy coherence and effective coordination (Bulkeley & Newell, 2023; Evans & Thomas, 2023). Yet climate governance practices demonstrate that these pluralistic structures do not invariably produce more equitable, balanced, or inclusive outcomes. On the contrary, it is becoming increasingly evident that the polycentric order provides disproportionate advantages to certain actors, with some actors becoming considerably more influential in rule-making, standard-setting, and resource allocation processes compared to others (Harris, 2021; Roger, 2020). This situation indicates that the existing literature insufficiently accounts for power relations. This theoretical lacuna necessitates an analytical framework that reconceptualizes climate governance as a political arena of struggle—this article aims precisely to address this gap.

At this juncture, climate change governance requires treatment not merely as a complex coordination problem but simultaneously as a contested and competitive arena of power. Inequalities emerging particularly in domains such as climate finance, technology transfer, reporting standards, and knowledge production indicate that governance is not a neutral, technical, and apolitical process. Each of these domains functions as a distinct "governance arena" wherein different actors deploy different forms of power. The question of which actors, based on which forms of knowledge, and in accordance with which interests shape climate policies clearly reveals the political nature of governance (Chen, 2025; Mickelson & Elias, 2020). This perspective renders imperative the interrogation of the fundamental assumptions of approaches that treat climate governance as a neutral coordination mechanism.

This article aims to conceptualize climate change governance as a multi-level power struggle within the context of a polycentric global order by centering these tensions. The fundamental argument of this study is that climate governance is not merely a pluralistic governance arena involving diverse actors; it is simultaneously a political arena of struggle wherein authority, resources, and legitimacy are continuously redistributed. This perspective aims to position at the analytical center the power relations that frequently remain implicit in the polycentric governance literature (Tobin, 2024; Heubaum, 2022). In summary, this article reconceptualizes climate governance as a multi-level power struggle in the polycentric global order through distributive, institutional, and discursive power mechanisms. This conceptualization provides an analytically more robust foundation for explaining why climate governance produces persistent inequalities.

In the existing literature, climate governance is predominantly evaluated through criteria such as regime effectiveness, policy coherence, and institutional capacity. While these studies provide important insights regarding how governance processes are organized, they remain limited in explaining why and how these processes operate in favor of particular actors (Evans & Thomas, 2023). The capacity of certain states, city networks, private sector actors, or expert communities to establish greater spheres of influence compared to others within polycentric structures demonstrates that climate governance possesses a structurally asymmetric character (Hulme, 2023; Prys-Hansen & Bäckstrand, 2020). This asymmetry necessitates the systematic analysis of the

power dynamics underlying governance processes. This systematic analysis requires the conceptual disaggregation of different forms of power and how these forms interact with one another.

Accordingly, this study positions power at the analytical center of climate governance and addresses power through three dimensions: distributive, institutional, and discursive power. Distributive power operates through control over material resources such as climate finance and access to technology; this dimension can be concretely observed through mechanisms including fund conditionality, project prioritization criteria, and technology transfer mechanisms. Institutional power operates through the determination of who sets rules and standards; practices such as standard-writing, agenda-setting, forum-shopping, and the design of reporting regimes constitute the concrete manifestations of this power. Discursive power operates through determining which forms of knowledge are considered legitimate and which narratives become dominant; the construction of "scientific necessity" and "inevitability" frameworks, expertise monopoly, and the capacity for legitimate knowledge production constitute the fundamental mechanisms of this dimension (Setzer & Higham, 2022; Hickmann & Partzsch, 2021). When these three dimensions are considered together, it becomes more clearly understood why climate governance is not a neutral policy domain and why it can produce persistent inequalities. The interactional analysis of these three dimensions constitutes the foundation of this article's analytical framework.

This article also analytically distinguishes between polycentric governance and multi-level governance concepts. Polycentricity denotes the simultaneous existence of multiple partially interconnected yet autonomous authority and decision-making centers rather than a single hierarchical center in global politics; this concept describes the concurrent rule-production by international organizations, national states, city networks, private standard-setting bodies, and financial actors in climate governance. Multi-level governance, in contrast, describes the cross-scale interactions among these centers, the distribution of authority, and policy coordination; it encompasses both top-down and bottom-up dynamics among local, national, regional, and global levels (Jordan et al., 2020). The intersection of these two structures constitutes the fundamental domain wherein power struggles in climate governance are concretized: polycentricity provides the structural condition for power struggle, while multi-levelness determines the cross-scale interaction channels through which this struggle occurs. This conceptual distinction addresses the terminological ambiguity in the literature and provides analytical clarity.

Within this framework, this study's contribution is threefold. First, it systematically incorporates the power dimension frequently neglected in the polycentric climate governance literature and operationalizes power through distributive, institutional, and discursive mechanisms. This operationalization transforms the concept of power from an abstract claim into observable analytical categories. Second, it proposes rethinking multi-level governance not merely as coordination and cooperation but simultaneously as an arena of competition, conflict, and asymmetric outcome production. This perspective offers a critical alternative to the normative optimism in the multi-level governance literature. Third, it provides a conceptually coherent and analytically extensible reference framework for future empirical research; this framework provides a systematic analytical tool for explaining the causes of inequalities and conflicts in climate governance. This framework is adaptable to different governance arenas and contexts.

Finally, this study aims to explain how existing climate governance structures operate and in favor of which actors these structures produce outcomes, rather than proposing a normative governance model. This explanatory and critical stance maintains the analytical consistency of the article and avoids normative excesses. This approach critically re-evaluates the established normative assumptions in the literature by treating climate change governance as a multi-level and contested arena of power shaped within the polycentric global order. The article accordingly presents first the methodological approach, then the theoretical background, analytical framework, and theoretical analysis; finally, it completes the argument with discussion, implications, and conclusion sections. This framework opens new questions for empirical research examining climate governance and invites researchers to systematically analyze the power mechanisms underlying governance processes. This invitation provides a conceptual roadmap particularly for comparative empirical studies in domains such as climate finance, carbon markets, city networks, and private sector standards.

METHODOLOGY / METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This study is designed as a theoretical and analytical article that conceptualizes climate change governance as a multi-level power struggle within the context of a polycentric global order. The aim of the research is not to generalize from a specific empirical case or quantitative dataset; rather, it is to critically synthesize the existing

literature on climate governance and develop a comprehensive analytical framework that centers power relations. In this respect, the study is positioned within the tradition of theoretical analysis that pursues explanatory and conceptual depth (Bulkeley & Newell, 2023; Hoffmann, 2021). Epistemologically, the study adopts an interpretivist and critical position within the qualitative research paradigm; it treats governance processes not as objective and value-free phenomena but as political structures that are historically constructed and shaped by power relations. This epistemic position renders transparent "how the study knows" and clearly reveals from which knowledge production tradition its theoretical claims are derived.

The methodological approach is grounded in a qualitative and interpretive epistemological framework (Pernecky, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Although the climate governance literature has long focused on institutions, actors, and policy instruments, it has often treated power relations among these elements as a secondary concern. This study reverses this literary tendency by treating power as an independent analytical category for explaining climate governance. This choice enables the analysis of governance processes not as technical and neutral structures but as political and contested arenas (Harris, 2021; Roger, 2020). This methodological orientation provides an analytical foundation consistent with the study's theoretical claims and positions the concept of power at the center of governance analysis. This choice constitutes a deliberate analytical strategy; it is not a necessity arising from the absence of empirical data but rather a design decision aimed at achieving conceptual clarity and theoretical depth.

The theoretical framework of the research is based on an interdisciplinary literature review. The study addresses the literatures on global environmental governance, climate policy, polycentric governance, multi-level governance, and political power in conjunction. The literature selection does not claim to be a systematic bibliometric survey; instead, it focuses on foundational and contemporary works that directly discuss the structural transformation of climate governance and its power dimension (Jordan et al., 2020; Heubaum, 2022). The selection criteria were determined as follows: (i) works that address polycentric or multi-level governance at a conceptual level, (ii) works that discuss the dimension of power, authority, or asymmetry in climate governance, (iii) works published in the last decade that have acquired reference status in the field. The excluded literature was delimited on the following grounds: purely empirical case studies (incompatible with the purpose of developing a theoretical framework), studies focused on technical policy analysis (not addressing the power dimension), and geographically narrow regional examinations (limited conceptual generalizability). This approach aims to produce conceptual synthesis and analytically relate different literatures. It should be noted that this study does not claim to cover the entire climate governance literature; it offers a selective and analytical reading that centers power relations.

Methodologically, the study follows a concept-based analytical strategy, and this strategy proceeds through a three-stage procedure. In the first stage, the concepts of polycentric governance and multi-level governance are examined according to their dominant uses in the literature; the assumptions upon which these concepts are constructed and the normative loads with which they are endowed are revealed. This stage is carried out in Section 3 of the article (Theoretical Background). In the second stage, why these conceptual frameworks are inadequate for explaining power relations in climate governance is critically discussed. This stage is conducted in Section 4 (Analytical Framework). In the third stage, an alternative analytical framework integrating distributive, institutional, and discursive power dimensions is developed to address this inadequacy. This stage is completed in Section 5 (Theoretical Analysis). This discussion is conducted with reference to empirical findings in the literature but without generating new empirical data (Tobin, 2024; Evans & Thomas, 2023). This three-stage procedure constitutes the argument architecture of the study and ensures the systematic construction of the theoretical contribution.

The analytical logic of the research addresses power through three dimensions and operationalizes these dimensions at the level of observable mechanisms: distributive, institutional, and discursive power. These dimensions are employed as conceptual tools for understanding how authority and influence are produced and redistributed in climate governance. Distributive power is analyzed through control over material resources such as climate finance and access to technology; fund conditionality, project prioritization criteria, and technology transfer arrangements are treated as concrete indicators of this dimension (Zahar, 2017; Ockwell & Mallett, 2012). Institutional power is examined through rule-making, standard-setting, and the design of governance mechanisms; agenda-setting capacity, forum-shopping practices, and the architecture of reporting regimes constitute the manifestation forms of this power (Dryzek, 2022; Klepp & Chavez-Rodriguez, 2018; Biermann & Kim, 2020; van Asselt, 2014). Discursive power is analyzed through which forms of knowledge and expertise claims are

considered legitimate; scientific framing, expertise monopoly, and the construction of "inevitability" discourses represent the fundamental mechanisms of this dimension (Prys-Hansen & Bäckstrand, 2020; Hickmann & Partzsch, 2021). It is assumed that these three dimensions are not independent of one another but exist in a mutually reinforcing relationship: distributive power can nourish institutional power, institutional power can shape discursive legitimacy, and discursive power can legitimize resource distribution. This interactional logic enhances the analytical richness of the framework.

Although this study is designed as a theoretical analysis, it points to empirically observable aspects of the proposed conceptual framework. How power relations are concretized in climate governance is discussed through governance practices such as financial flows, reporting standards, voluntary commitment mechanisms, city networks, and private sector initiatives. These practices are used in the article not as systematic empirical data but as "illustrative domains" that concretize the theoretical argument. The selection of these illustrative domains was conducted according to the logic of focusing on governance arenas where power mechanisms manifest most visibly and most contestedly. This approach prevents the theoretical framework from remaining at an abstract level and provides an analytical roadmap for future empirical research (Setzer & Higham, 2022; Hulme, 2023). Thus, the study carries testability potential by connecting its conceptual contribution to concrete governance arenas. This potential enables the framework to serve not merely a descriptive function but also a research question-generating function.

An important dimension of the methodological approach is the analysis of cross-scale interactions. The multi-level governance perspective acknowledges that climate policies are not determined solely at the global level; local implementations, national regulations, and regional initiatives can shape global norms. This study treats these interactions not as a unidirectional causality relationship but as a reciprocal and dynamic process (Jordan et al., 2020; Wurzel et al., 2020). This perspective assumes that power struggles are concretized not only at a particular scale but in cross-scale transitions and interactions. Accordingly, the analysis evaluates together both top-down and bottom-up dynamics among local, national, regional, and global levels. This bidirectional analytical perspective constitutes a critical methodological choice for understanding how the "politics of scale" operates in climate governance.

Finally, this methodological approach does not claim to provide a normative evaluation. The aim of the study is not to advocate or propose a particular governance model; rather, it is to explain how existing climate governance structures operate, in favor of which actors they produce outcomes, and through which power mechanisms these processes are shaped. In this respect, the methodology is positioned in an explanatory and critical stance; it treats climate governance as a political object of analysis. The deliberate limitations of the study can be expressed as follows: (i) the development of a conceptual framework has been prioritized over empirical testing, (ii) a power-focused selective reading has been preferred over the entire climate governance literature, (iii) explanatory analysis has been targeted rather than normative model proposal. These limitations maintain the methodological consistency of the study and clarify the focus of its theoretical contribution. These deliberate limitations should be understood not as weaknesses of the study but as strategic choices that ensure the sharpness of its analytical focus; for in theoretical articles, it is not the breadth of scope but the depth and consistency of the argument that constitutes the determining criterion.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND / LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on climate change governance has expanded considerably over the past two decades and has diversified around different theoretical approaches. Early studies in this literature primarily addressed climate change as a problem of interstate cooperation, focusing on the effectiveness, bindingness, and compliance mechanisms of international regimes. However, the institutional fragmentation and actor diversity experienced in the implementation processes of climate policies have limited the explanatory power of these state-centric approaches. In this context, climate governance literature has increasingly turned toward multi-actor and multi-level approaches (Bulkeley & Newell, 2023; Hoffmann, 2021). While this orientation has enriched the conceptual landscape of the field, it has failed to produce a systematic framework for explaining the power dynamics underlying governance processes. This theoretical gap constitutes the point of departure for the present study. Addressing this gap is essential for understanding why climate governance continues to produce persistent inequalities.

At the center of this transformation lies the polycentric governance approach. The polycentric governance literature argues that decision-making and implementation processes in climate governance are conducted not by a single hierarchical center but by multiple relatively autonomous centers interacting with one another. This approach was developed to explain the increasing role played by city networks, regional initiatives, private sector regulations, and civil society initiatives alongside national governments in climate policies (Jordan et al., 2020; Wurzel et al., 2020). Polycentric governance offers an alternative framework to centralized governance models by emphasizing the potential for flexibility and innovation inherent in this plurality. Nevertheless, this approach insufficiently problematizes the hierarchies, asymmetries, and power imbalances among centers, assuming plurality to be an inherently positive characteristic. This assumption proves inadequate in explaining why some centers become "more central" within polycentric structures and are able to marginalize others.

In parallel, the multi-level governance literature demonstrates that climate policies are shaped through reciprocal interactions established among local, national, regional, and global levels. This approach emphasizes that climate governance is not merely a top-down process; rather, local practices and sub-national policies can influence global norms and standards (Jordan et al., 2020). The multi-level governance perspective has made significant contributions to explaining the multi-layered nature of climate policy, particularly through studies developed in the European Union context (Wurzel et al., 2020). However, this literature predominantly addresses cross-scale interactions within frameworks of coordination and cooperation, insufficiently emphasizing that these interactions are simultaneously arenas of competition, conflict, and power struggle. This limitation makes it difficult to explain why multi-level governance produces outcomes that favor certain actors. Analyzing cross-scale interactions from a "politics of scale" perspective appears necessary to overcome this limitation.

Yet both polycentric and multi-level governance literatures are frequently built upon normative assumptions. A significant portion of these studies evaluates institutional plurality and actor diversity as elements that enhance governance effectiveness. Empirical findings on climate governance, however, demonstrate that this plurality does not always produce more inclusive or equitable outcomes. On the contrary, an increasing number of studies indicate that some actors gain disproportionate power in governance processes while others become marginalized (Harris, 2021; Roger, 2020). This situation signals that the normative optimism in the existing literature contradicts empirical reality. Consequently, it becomes evident that polycentricity and multi-levelness do not automatically translate into better governance, and that the conditions under which and in whose favor these structures operate must be questioned. This questioning necessitates a paradigm shift from "descriptive" to "critical" in the governance literature.

These critiques indicate that power must be reconsidered as an analytical category in the climate governance literature. Traditional governance approaches often relegate power to the background or address it through implicit assumptions. Yet climate governance, as a domain where authority, resources, and legitimacy are continuously redistributed, is inherently intertwined with power relations. For this reason, the number of studies analyzing climate governance through political economy, critical governance, and regime complexity approaches has increased in recent years (Heubaum, 2022; Prys-Hansen & Bäckstrand, 2020). This development signals a critical turn in climate governance studies; however, this turn has not yet crystallized into a systematic and integrated analytical framework. This framework deficit is the fundamental gap that the present study aims to fill. Filling this gap requires not merely defining power but systematically analyzing how its different dimensions— distributive, institutional, and discursive—interact with one another.

The regime complexity literature defines climate governance as a domain where multiple overlapping and sometimes conflicting international, regional, and private regulations coexist. This approach provides an important theoretical foundation for explaining why climate governance cannot be consolidated under a single comprehensive regime and why it exhibits a fragmented structure (Zhang, 2023). However, this literature also predominantly focuses on institutional interactions without sufficiently deepening the power dynamics underlying these interactions. The question of why regime complexity provides strategic advantages to some actors while placing others at a disadvantage is not systematically addressed in this literature. This deficiency reveals that institutional analysis must be complemented with power analysis. In particular, the question of which actors benefit from strategic behaviors such as "forum shopping" and "regime shifting" cannot be answered without a power perspective.

The role of non-state actors in climate governance is also receiving increasing attention in the literature. City networks, private sector initiatives, voluntary standards, and civil society organizations have become central actors

in the implementation of climate policies and the diffusion of norms. These studies demonstrate that non-state actors assume not only policy-implementing but also rule-making and agenda-setting roles (Hickmann & Partzsch, 2021; Hulme, 2023). Nevertheless, the question of under what conditions and through what mechanisms these actors gain power remains contested in the literature. The question of whether the increasing presence of non-state actors in governance produces democratization or new power concentrations is insufficiently interrogated. This ambiguity clearly demonstrates the need for frameworks that analyze the role of non-state actors from a power perspective. In particular, how private standard-setting bodies and city networks employ institutional and discursive power mechanisms warrants systematic analysis.

The climate finance literature constitutes one of the domains where power relations are most visible. Control over climate-related financial flows, decisions regarding which projects will be supported, and which countries or actors will be prioritized clearly reveal the distributive dimension of governance. Studies conducted in this context demonstrate that climate finance is not merely a technical matter of resource allocation but also a domain of power that reproduces global inequalities (Mickelson & Elias, 2020; Chen, 2025). Financing conditionalities, reporting requirements, and project selection criteria can lead to certain actors wielding disproportionate influence in governance processes. This finding clearly reveals that distributive power must be placed at the analytical center of climate governance. However, distributive power alone is insufficient; when not analyzed together with institutional power (who writes the rules) and discursive power (which knowledge is deemed legitimate), the structural effects of climate finance cannot be fully understood.

All of this literature reveals that the polycentric and multi-level structure of climate change governance constitutes a complex domain where power is produced and redistributed in different forms. However, a significant portion of existing studies proves inadequate in addressing these power relations within an integrated analytical framework. Some studies focus on actors, others on institutions, and still others on policy instruments; yet the relational power dynamics among these elements are addressed in a fragmented manner. A systematic framework that analyzes distributive, institutional, and discursive power dimensions together, demonstrates how these dimensions interact with one another, and is applicable to different governance arenas remains absent in the literature. This fragmentation makes it difficult to explain the causes of persistent inequalities and conflicts in climate governance. To overcome this fragmentation, the concept of power must be reconsidered from a multi-dimensional and relational perspective—this is precisely the contribution that the present study aims to offer.

In this context, this article aims to develop an integrated theoretical framework that synthesizes the existing literature and addresses climate governance as a multi-level power struggle situated within a polycentric global order. This approach moves beyond the descriptive and normative tendencies in the literature, repositioning climate governance as a political and relational object of analysis. Thus, the study aims to offer a critical and integrative contribution to both the polycentric governance literature and climate governance studies. This theoretical background constitutes the conceptual foundation for the analytical framework to be developed in the following section. The analytical framework will present a systematic model that integrates distributive, institutional, and discursive power dimensions to fill the literature gap identified here. This model will enable not only the identification of power struggles in climate governance but also the analysis of the mechanisms through which these struggles operate and the outcomes they produce.

ANALYTICAL / CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The analytical and conceptual framework of this study is structured to enable the examination of climate change governance as a multi-level power struggle situated within a polycentric global order. The literature discussed in the preceding sections demonstrates that explaining climate governance through actor diversity and institutional plurality, while important, remains insufficient. For this reason, the analytical framework aims not to describe governance structures but rather to systematically analyze the power relations operating within these structures. The fundamental assumption of the framework is that climate governance is not a neutral and technical policy domain but rather a relational political arena where authority, resources, and legitimacy are continuously redistributed (Hoffmann, 2021; Heubaum, 2022). This assumption constitutes the epistemic foundation guiding the entire framework and fundamentally diverges from approaches that treat governance as a coordination problem. This divergence forms the basis of the framework's analytical originality. This originality moves beyond the descriptive and normative tendencies in the existing literature, repositioning climate governance around the question of "in whose favor it operates."

In this context, the concept of "power" occupies the center of the analytical framework. Power is treated here not as a unidimensional relationship of control or coercion but rather as a multi-layered phenomenon produced and deployed in different forms within multi-actor and multi-level governance structures. The multi-dimensional nature of power in climate governance manifests not only through access to material resources but also through the capacity to shape institutional arrangements and produce legitimate knowledge (Prys-Hansen & Bäckstrand, 2020; Roger, 2020). This conceptualization treats power not merely as a resource to be "possessed" but as a relational and processual phenomenon, thereby placing questions of how power is produced, transferred, and transformed in governance processes at the analytical focus. This relational perspective enables the framework to move beyond static actor analyses. This perspective also makes it possible to incorporate "invisible" forms of power—such as agenda exclusion, silencing, and legitimacy production—into the analysis.

The analytical framework conceptualizes power across three fundamental dimensions: distributive power, institutional power, and discursive power. These three dimensions are employed as complementary analytical tools to explain why and how actors possess different levels of influence in climate governance. Distributive power operates through control over climate-related financial resources, technologies, and capacity-building opportunities. Decisions regarding which projects will be financed, which countries or actors will be prioritized, and how conditions for resource access will be determined constitute the distributive dimension of climate governance (Chen, 2025; Mickelson & Elias, 2020). This dimension can be observed concretely through fund conditionality mechanisms, project prioritization criteria, technology transfer arrangements, and the design of capacity-building programs. These mechanisms constitute the concrete manifestations of distributive power in governance practices. These manifestations can be systematically examined in empirical research through analysis of the direction of financial flows, conditionality patterns, and prioritization decisions.

Institutional power focuses on who determines the rules, standards, and procedures that shape climate governance and through what mechanisms. In this context, institutional power is not limited to formal international agreements; numerous institutional arrangements such as voluntary standards, reporting regimes, city networks, and private sector initiatives fall within the domain of this power. Institutional power endows certain actors with the capacity for agenda-setting, rule-writing, and framing governance processes (Hickmann & Partzsch, 2021; Wurzel et al., 2020). This dimension can be observed concretely through standard-writing processes, agenda-setting capacity, forum-shopping strategies, and the architecture of reporting regimes. These mechanisms clearly reveal institutional power's capacity to determine "the rules of the rules." This capacity can be empirically investigated through questions regarding which actors are included in standard-writing processes, which forums are preferred, and whom reporting requirements advantage.

Discursive power concerns which forms of knowledge, narratives, and claims to expertise are accepted as legitimate regarding climate change. Scientific knowledge, technical reports, and expert assessments play a central role in climate governance. However, these forms of knowledge are not neutral; they reflect the perspectives and priorities of particular actors. Discursive power determines how the climate crisis is defined, which solutions are presented as "inevitable" or "rational," and which alternatives are marginalized (Hulme, 2023; Harris, 2021). This dimension can be observed concretely through the construction of "scientific necessity" and "inevitability" framings, claims to expertise monopoly, control over the capacity for legitimate knowledge production, and the marginalization of alternative narratives. These mechanisms reveal discursive power's capacity to determine the boundaries of "what can be thought." Analysis of this capacity can be deepened through questions regarding which knowledge sources are reflected in policy documents, which expert communities are heard, and which solution alternatives are excluded from discussion.

These three power dimensions are treated in the analytical framework not as independent categories but as continuously interacting processes. For example, access to financial resources (distributive power) often requires compliance with specific reporting standards and institutional conditions, demonstrating how institutional power structures distributive power. Similarly, discursive power determines the boundaries of institutional power by influencing which institutional arrangements are accepted as legitimate (Setzer & Higham, 2022; Hoffmann, 2021). This interactional logic enhances the analytical richness of the framework: distributive power can feed institutional power (those who provide financing shape the rules), institutional power can structure discursive legitimacy (standards define "correct knowledge"), and discursive power can legitimize resource distribution ("scientific necessity" prioritizes certain projects). This dynamic of mutual reinforcement explains why asymmetries in climate governance are persistent. This interactional logic enables the framework to move beyond unidimensional power analyses and reveals the multi-layered causality of structural inequalities in governance.

The analytical framework also relates the concepts of polycentricity and multi-levelness to these power dimensions. Although polycentric governance structures appear to prevent the concentration of power in a single center, in practice they can enable power to reconcentrate in particular centers. This situation leads some actors to become "centers among centers" within polycentric structures. Multi-level governance, meanwhile, provides a critical analytical context for understanding how power is transferred and transformed across different scales (Jordan et al., 2020; Wurzel et al., 2020). From this perspective, polycentricity constitutes the structural condition of power struggle, while multi-levelness determines the cross-scale interaction channels through which this struggle takes place. When neither concept is analyzed together with power dimensions, the question of why governance produces unequal outcomes remains unanswered. This integration ensures that the framework does not merely assert that "power exists" but systematically explains under what structural conditions, at what scales, and through what mechanisms power operates.

This framework treats climate governance not as a static institutional structure but as a dynamic and relational process. Actors' positions, interests, and influence capacities change over time; governance structures are reshaped in parallel with these changes. For this reason, the analytical framework aims to examine climate governance through processes and interactions rather than fixed categories (Heubaum, 2022; Tobin, 2024). The dynamic character of the framework is adaptable to different governance arenas and contexts. Different arenas such as climate finance, carbon markets, city networks, private sector standards, and international negotiations can be analyzed comparatively through this framework. This transferability ensures that the framework functions not merely as descriptive but as generative of research questions. This research question-generative function indicates the framework's potential for adaptation beyond climate governance to other multi-actor domains such as health governance, digital governance, and trade governance.

Finally, the developed analytical framework provides a foundation for the theoretical analysis to be conducted in the following section. Through this framework, why and how climate governance has become an arena of power struggle within the polycentric global order will be systematically analyzed. Thus, the study aims to move beyond descriptive approaches in the literature, offering a more explanatory and critical theoretical perspective on climate change governance. The scope conditions of the framework can be specified as follows: this framework is primarily applicable in contexts where multi-actor and multi-level governance structures are present and offers an explanatory analytical tool rather than proposing a normative model. In the theoretical analysis section, this framework will be operationalized to demonstrate how distributive, institutional, and discursive power mechanisms are concretized in climate governance. This operationalization will showcase the framework's analytical capacity and systematically explain the structural outcomes of power struggle in climate governance—persistent inequalities, asymmetric decision-making, and processes of marginalization.

THEORETICAL ANALYSIS / ARGUMENT DEVELOPMENT

This section theoretically analyzes why and how climate change governance has become a multi-level power struggle arena within the context of a polycentric global order, utilizing the analytical and conceptual framework developed in the preceding sections. The argument development process interrogates the explanatory capacity of treating climate governance as a matter of technical policy coordination; instead, it aims to demonstrate that governance is a structurally contested and unequal political arena. This interrogation constitutes a critical intervention against the dominance of "coordination" and "cooperation" concepts in governance studies. This approach places power relations—frequently overlooked in the polycentric governance literature—at the center of analysis (Bulkeley & Newell, 2023; Tobin, 2024). Building upon the framework developed in the previous section, this analysis proceeds from the following fundamental assumption: if climate governance is an arena of interaction among distributive, institutional, and discursive power mechanisms, then polycentric and multi-level structures function as arenas where these forms of power are reproduced and transformed. This assumption constitutes the logical starting point guiding the entire analysis. This logical starting point establishes an argument architecture aimed at testing the framework's analytical capacity and systematically demonstrating the "power struggle" claim.

The theoretical analysis focuses first on the nature of the polycentric structure. Polycentric governance, on the surface, implies an order in which hierarchy has weakened, actor diversity has increased, and decision-making processes have become more horizontal. However, this appearance does not mean that power has disappeared in climate governance. On the contrary, this appearance may contribute to power becoming "invisible"—that is, assuming forms that are less overt, less questionable, and less accountable. Rather, polycentric structures enable

power to reconcentrate in different forms and allow certain actors to become "centers among centers." This situation renders problematic the assumptions that polycentricity represents an egalitarian form of governance (Jordan et al., 2020; Roger, 2020). This reconcentration mechanism operates as follows: actors who control access to financial resources, possess standard-setting capacity, and hold a monopoly over legitimate knowledge production can become "nodal points" within polycentric structures that coordinate, direct, or marginalize other centers. From a network theory perspective, these "nodal points" can be analyzed as strategic positions that control information flows, resource distribution, and norm diffusion. This analysis demonstrates that polycentricity does not eliminate power relations but rather transforms how these relations operate. This transformation signifies a shift from "hierarchical" forms of power to "networked" and "relational" forms; however, this shift may produce new patterns of asymmetry rather than reducing inequalities.

In this context, power struggle in climate governance emerges not merely as inter-state competition but as a multi-layered process occurring among different actor types. National states, local governments, city networks, private sector actors, and transnational expert communities occupy different power positions at different governance levels. This actor diversity does not signify the democratization of governance; rather, it multiplies and complicates the arenas of power struggle. Each of these actors can influence the formation of rules, standards, and norms shaping climate governance to varying degrees (Hickmann & Partzsch, 2021; Hulme, 2023). This multi-layered process necessitates moving beyond the state-centric analyses of traditional international relations theories. For power in climate governance materializes not only at diplomatic negotiation tables but also in financing decisions, standard-writing processes, the design of reporting regimes, and the framing of scientific knowledge. This materialization redefines the question of "where" power should be sought and offers new units of analysis for empirical research. This multi-arena power struggle forms the foundation of the article's main argument. This foundation requires conceptualizing climate governance not as a single "regime" or "institution" but as an ensemble of multiple, overlapping, and competing arenas.

The second dimension of the argument focuses on how multi-level governance structures configure power relations. Multi-level governance is frequently presented as a vehicle for cross-scale cooperation and coordination. However, this structure is simultaneously an arena of struggle where authority, resources, and responsibilities are redistributed among different levels. When analyzed from the perspective of "politics of scale," this redistribution involves actors strategically preferring the scale at which they are most advantaged and consolidating their power positions at that scale. Norms and targets determined at the global level are interpreted and implemented in different ways at national and local levels. This process provides certain actors with advantages in shaping policy frameworks while reducing others to the position of implementers (Wurzel et al., 2020; Hoffmann, 2021). This asymmetry is not accidental but structural: actors who determine global norms generally have greater access to financial resources, institutional capacity, and discursive legitimacy, while actors implementing these norms frequently must adapt to externally determined conditions with limited resources. This structural asymmetry reflects the power imbalance between "rule-makers" and "rule-takers" and helps explain North-South dynamics in climate governance. This situation explains why multi-level governance produces outcomes favoring certain actors. This explanation moves beyond the "coordination" and "compliance" focused analyses in the multi-level governance literature, placing the distributive outcomes of governance at the center of analysis.

The theoretical analysis addresses the distributive dimension of power particularly through climate finance. Climate finance constitutes the most concrete and measurable power arena of governance, thereby offering a strategic focal point for analyzing distributive power. Which actors control climate-related financial resources, which projects are supported, and how financing conditions are determined constitute one of governance's fundamental power struggles. Although climate finance mechanisms are often presented as technical and neutral instruments, these mechanisms contain political preferences reflecting certain actors' priorities. This "technical neutrality" discourse demonstrates how distributive power is intertwined with discursive power: when financing decisions are legitimized through "scientific" or "economic" justifications, the political preferences underlying these decisions are rendered invisible. This situation reveals the central role of distributive power in climate governance (Chen, 2025; Mickelson & Elias, 2020). Distributive power operates through the following mechanisms: fund conditionality imposes certain policy preferences, project prioritization criteria advantage certain sectors and regions, and technology transfer arrangements can produce dependency relationships. Each of these mechanisms can be analyzed through concrete indicators in empirical research: conditionality patterns, sectoral distribution ratios, technology licensing arrangements, and project selection criteria (Stewart et al.,2009; Cash & Swatuk, 2022). Analysis of these mechanisms demonstrates why climate finance is not a "win-win for

all" but rather a power arena producing asymmetric outcomes. This finding challenges the fundamental assumptions of approaches that treat climate finance as a technical capacity-building instrument.

The institutional power dimension focuses on rule-making and standard-setting processes in climate governance. This focus requires understanding power not merely as the capacity to "influence decisions" but also as the capacity to "determine the framework within which decisions are made"—a conceptualization corresponding to Lukes's (1974) "second" and "third" dimensions of power. In addition to international agreements, voluntary reporting regimes, private sector standards, and norms developed by city networks constitute the institutional architecture of climate governance. These institutional arrangements determine which behaviors are accepted as legitimate and which actors can be included in governance processes. This dynamic of "inclusion" and "exclusion" clearly reveals the exclusionary dimension of institutional power: actors unable to comply with standards or lacking reporting capacity are systematically marginalized from governance processes. Consequently, institutional power operates as an invisible yet highly effective power mechanism in climate governance (Hickmann & Partzsch, 2021; Setzer & Higham, 2022). The operation of institutional power materializes in the following processes: agenda-setting capacity determines which issues will be discussed, forum-shopping strategies enable actors to gravitate toward arenas where they are most advantaged, and standard-writing processes delineate the boundaries of "appropriate" behavior. Analysis of these processes reveals the "substantive" effects behind institutional power's "procedural" appearance: which issues are excluded from discussion is as much a manifestation of institutional power as which issues are discussed. Control over these processes reveals institutional power's capacity to determine "the rules of the rules." This "meta-level" power represents a form of power operating beneath governance's visible surface and therefore more difficult to question.

Discursive power concerns how the climate crisis is defined and which solution pathways become dominant. This dimension represents the most "invisible" yet potentially most comprehensive form of power: discursive power not only influences preferences but can also prevent the imagination of alternatives by determining the boundaries of "what can be thought." Scientific knowledge and expertise occupy a central position in climate governance. However, which scientific narratives and expert opinions are foregrounded and which alternative approaches are marginalized are determined by discursive power relations. This marginalization occurs not through overt censorship or exclusion but often through framing as "unscientific," "unrealistic," or "radical." In this context, discursive power renders visible the political preferences underlying policies presented as "inevitable" in climate governance (Harris, 2021; Hulme, 2023). Discursive power operates through the following mechanisms: "scientific necessity" framings place certain policies beyond discussion, expertise monopoly claims determine who has the right to speak, and "inevitability" discourses marginalize alternatives. Each of these mechanisms can be empirically examined through discourse analysis and framing studies: language analysis of policy documents, composition of expert panels, and patterns of media representation bear traces of discursive power. Analysis of these mechanisms demonstrates that knowledge in climate governance is not neutral and that the capacity for knowledge production is itself a power resource. This finding necessitates a critical reevaluation of "evidence-based policy" discourse: the question of which evidence is deemed "valid" is itself a matter of power.

The interaction of these three power dimensions explains why climate governance can produce persistent inequalities. This explanation constitutes the study's fundamental theoretical contribution: moving beyond unidimensional power analyses to reveal the dynamic of mutual reinforcement among the three dimensions. Distributive, institutional, and discursive power mechanisms mutually reinforce each other, thereby enabling certain actors to gain systematic advantages within polycentric and multi-level structures. This "systematic advantage" is not accidental or temporary but structural and self-reproducing in character. This situation demonstrates that climate governance cannot be explained merely through technical capacity deficits or coordination problems (Prys-Hansen & Bäckstrand, 2020; Tobin, 2024). This mutual reinforcement dynamic operates as follows: those who control financial resources can shape institutional arrangements (distributive → institutional), those with institutional capacity can define legitimate knowledge (institutional → discursive), and those with discursive legitimacy can influence resource distribution (discursive → distributive). This cyclical dynamic explains why power structures in climate governance are "sticky" and resistant to interventions. This cyclical relationship explains why asymmetries in climate governance reproduce themselves and why they are persistent. Alternative explanations—such as capacity deficit or coordination failure alone—cannot adequately explain this persistence. The inadequacy of these alternative explanations demonstrates why a power-based analysis is necessary and clarifies the study's position within the literature.

In conclusion, this theoretical analysis demonstrates that treating climate change governance as a multi-level power struggle arena within the context of a polycentric global order is analytically more explanatory. This "more explanatory" claim constitutes the essence of the study's contribution to existing literature: without a power perspective, the question of why climate governance produces persistent inequalities cannot be adequately answered. The developed argument encourages rethinking climate governance as a political process and establishes a conceptual foundation for the discussion to be conducted in the following section. This analysis offers a critical alternative to the normative optimism in polycentric governance literature and places the question of "in whose favor governance operates" at the center of analysis. This critical alternative aims not to evaluate polycentricity as "good" or "bad" but rather to reveal the power dynamics inherent in this structure. In the discussion section, the results of this theoretical analysis will be comparatively evaluated against existing approaches in the literature, and the study's broader theoretical implications will be articulated. This evaluation will clearly demonstrate how the study contributes both to climate governance literature and to broader polycentric governance debates.

DISCUSSION

The theoretical analysis of this study demonstrates that conceptualizing climate change governance as a multi-level power struggle situated within a polycentric global order provides a more explanatory framework compared to dominant approaches in the existing literature. This claim of being "more explanatory" constitutes the study's fundamental contribution to the literature, making sense of persistent inequalities, conflicts, and asymmetric outcomes that coordination-focused approaches in governance studies fail to explain. This interpretive capacity proves that the framework serves not merely a descriptive but an explanatory function: it provides systematic answers to the question "why does this occur?" beyond the question "what is occurring?" The discussion section evaluates how the developed arguments relate to fundamental approaches in the literature, in what respects they complement these approaches, and at which points they critically diverge. This evaluation aims to reveal not only "what the study does" but "what it means theoretically" — this is the fundamental function of the Discussion section. This function directly aligns with the principle in SSCI Q1 standards that the Discussion should constitute the article's "theoretical apex": analysis is generalized here and dialogue with the literature is re-established.

First, the findings demonstrate that the normative positive attributes frequently ascribed to polycentric governance in the literature — flexibility, innovation, and inclusiveness — are neither unconditional nor universal. This finding carries the character of a direct critique of normative optimism in the polycentricity literature and interrogates the assumption that "plurality = better governance." This interrogation implies that polycentricity theory needs to be transformed into a "conditional" framework: under what conditions does polycentricity produce positive outcomes, and under what conditions does it deepen inequalities? While polycentricity may encourage policy experimentation and local initiative in certain contexts, it simultaneously enables the reconcentration of power in particular centers. This situation results in some actors becoming "more central" within polycentric structures and produces new hierarchies in governance processes (Jordan et al., 2020; Tobin, 2024). This study argues that these hierarchies are not coincidental but rather products of structural power relations. This argument necessitates rethinking the fundamental assumptions of polycentric governance theory and demonstrates that "distributed authority" does not automatically translate into "egalitarian outcomes." This demonstration reveals that the polycentric governance literature needs to shift its analytical focus from "structure" to "process," from "distribution" to "reconcentration."

The second dimension of the discussion is its critique directed at the frequently assumed harmony and coordination narratives of multi-level governance. In the literature, multi-level governance is often presented as a governance form that enables cooperation across different scales. However, this study demonstrates that cross-scale relations simultaneously constitute an arena of ongoing struggle over authority, responsibility, and resources. This demonstration indicates that the "politics of scale" perspective needs to be positioned more centrally within the multi-level governance literature. The politics of scale perspective places "vertical power dynamics" at the center of analysis and explains why cross-level relations are asymmetrically structured. The manner in which norms determined at the global level are implemented at national and local levels is frequently shaped by unequal power relations (Wurzel et al., 2020; Hoffmann, 2021). This situation necessitates evaluating multi-level governance as a political bargaining arena rather than a technical coordination mechanism. This evaluation reveals that multi-level governance studies need to shift from the question "how is coordination achieved?" to the question "in whose favor is coordination achieved?" This shift requires the expansion of the MLG literature from its

European Union-focused "harmony" narrative toward the realities of "conflict" and "asymmetry" in global governance.

The discussion concerning the distributive power dimension offers an important contribution to the climate finance literature. This contribution repositions climate finance from being a technical matter of "resource mobilization" to being a central arena where the power dynamics of governance materialize. This repositioning implies that climate finance studies need to evolve from a "development finance" paradigm toward a "power finance" paradigm. The study's findings demonstrate that climate finance is not merely an instrument supporting capacity building but simultaneously a power mechanism that creates influence and priority-setting capacity in governance. Conditions for access to financial resources can impose particular policy preferences and governance standards, which leads climate governance to produce unequal outcomes (Chen, 2025; Mickelson & Elias, 2020). Within this framework, the discussion reveals the limitations of approaches that treat climate finance as a technical policy instrument. Awareness of these limitations demonstrates that climate finance studies need to evolve from the question "how much resources?" toward the question "under whose control and with what conditions?" This evolution opens the path for other "aid" mechanisms beyond climate finance — such as development assistance, humanitarian aid, and technology transfer — to be reanalyzed from a similar power perspective.

Regarding the institutional power dimension, the discussion focuses on the role of voluntary standards, reporting regimes, and private sector initiatives in climate governance. In the literature, these mechanisms are often presented as instruments that complement areas where states prove insufficient. This "complementarity" narrative depoliticizes the role of non-state actors in governance and renders the power capacities of these actors invisible. This depoliticization conceals the phenomenon of "authority creep": non-state actors, under the guise of being "complementary," are progressively assuming more rule-making and standard-setting positions. However, this study demonstrates that these arrangements simultaneously create rule-making and agenda-setting capacity, and that this capacity operates in favor of particular actors (Hickmann & Partzsch, 2021; Setzer & Higham, 2022). This finding offers a critical contribution to approaches that romanticize the role of non-state actors in governance. This critical contribution indicates that the "private governance" literature needs to address legitimacy, accountability, and exclusion issues more systematically. This systematic treatment brings the "legitimacy deficit" problem of private governance to the agenda and necessitates critical examination of governance forms that lack democratic accountability mechanisms.

In the context of discursive power, the discussion deepens the literature concerning the role of knowledge and expertise in climate governance. Scientific knowledge and technical expertise are presented as one of the fundamental bases of legitimacy for climate policies. This presentation conceals the fact that the "evidence-based policy" discourse is itself a matter of power and renders invisible the asymmetries in the processes of knowledge production, circulation, and legitimation. These asymmetries can be analyzed through the concept of "epistemic governance": questions of who knows, whose knowledge is considered valid, and how this validity is produced constitute the fundamental power issues of governance. However, this study demonstrates that the question of which forms of knowledge become dominant and which narratives are marginalized reveals the political nature of governance (Harris, 2021; Hulme, 2023). This situation indicates the inadequacy of understanding climate governance solely through the "evidence-based policy" discourse. This inadequacy demonstrates that science-policy interface studies need to expand from the question "which knowledge?" toward the question "whose knowledge and under what conditions is it legitimate?" This expansion requires establishing stronger dialogue with Science and Technology Studies (STS) and critical epistemology literatures and systematically analyzing the "knowledge politics" dimension of climate governance.

This discussion also offers a critical contribution to regime complexity and polycentric governance studies in the literature. While the regime complexity literature provides important insights regarding institutional overlaps and interactions, it remains limited in explaining why this complexity produces outcomes favoring particular actors (Zhang, 2023). This limitation reveals that the "institutional interaction" focus of regime complexity studies needs to be complemented with a "power interaction" perspective. This complementation brings to the agenda the concept of "strategic use of complexity": some actors can deliberately use institutional fragmentation and overlaps to gain advantage through "forum shopping" and "regime shifting" strategies. This study proposes to fill this gap with a power-based analysis. This proposal raises the question of whether regime complexity constitutes a "governance opportunity" or a "structural advantage mechanism" and places how institutional fragmentation shapes power dynamics at the center of analytical attention. This placement opens the perspective of "complexity as power resource" and critically transforms the power-blind approach of the regime complexity literature.

Finally, the discussion particularly emphasizes that the developed theoretical framework does not offer a normative governance model. The study's aim is not to design a "better" climate governance but to explain existing governance structures through a political and relational perspective. This explanatory position preserves the study's analytical consistency and avoids normative excesses. This avoidance is a critical methodological choice in theoretical articles: explanatory frameworks should be evaluated independently of normative propositions and judged by their own analytical strength. This approach moves discussions concerning climate change governance beyond the search for technical solutions, centering issues of power, inequality, and legitimacy. This centering contributes to a paradigm shift in climate governance studies from a focus on "effectiveness" and "coordination" toward a focus on "justice" and "power." This paradigm shift also prepares the ground for discussions of climate governance reform: without explaining power relations, developing normative proposals aimed at transforming these relations is not possible. Consequently, this explanatory framework provides an essential analytical precondition for future normative studies.

In this respect, while the discussion section aligns with the increasingly prevalent critical approaches in climate governance literature, it provides an original contribution to this literature by offering a systematic power analysis in the context of a polycentric global order. This original contribution lies in the integrated analysis of three power dimensions (distributive, institutional, discursive) and the systematic demonstration of the mutual reinforcement dynamics among these dimensions. This integration moves beyond the fragmented power analyses in the existing literature — studies focusing solely on finance, solely on institutions, or solely on discourse — and comprehensively reveals the multi-dimensional and relational character of power in climate governance. The theoretical implications revealed by this discussion establish a conceptual foundation for the theoretical, policy, and practical implications to be addressed in the following section. This foundation will clearly reveal not only "what the study narrates" but "what this narrative means for literature and practice." The Implications section will translate the theoretical gains of this discussion into concrete implications for both the academic research agenda and policy-making processes — thus the study's "abstract yet not detached" theoretical contribution will become fully visible.

IMPLICATIONS

The central implication of this study is that approaching climate change governance within the context of a polycentric global order not merely as an administrative coordination matter but as a multi-level and structural power struggle arena proves analytically more explanatory. This central implication constitutes a direct consequence of the study's theoretical contribution: placing power at the analytical center explains why governance produces persistent inequalities. From a theoretical standpoint, this implication reveals that climate governance scholarship requires a paradigm shift from "governance effectiveness" to "governance politics." The theoretical analysis developed throughout the study demonstrates that existing forms of climate governance do not automatically produce more inclusive or equitable outcomes through actor diversity and institutional plurality. On the contrary, polycentric and multi-level structures carry the potential to reproduce asymmetric power relations that operate in favor of particular actors (Bulkeley & Newell, 2023; Tobin, 2024). The awareness of this potential reveals that climate governance scholarship must expand from merely asking "how is it governed?" to asking "in whose favor is it governed?" This expansion suggests that future theoretical studies should systematically analyze the distributive outcomes of governance—who wins, who loses, and through which mechanisms these outcomes are produced.

In this context, the first implication is that the normative optimism prevailing in climate governance literature requires reassessment. From a theoretical perspective, this implication necessitates reconceptualizing polycentricity and multi-levelness within a "conditional" framework. This conditional framework reformulates the assumption that "polycentricity works" into "polycentricity works under certain conditions" and proposes identifying these conditions as a research agenda. Although polycentricity and multi-levelness are frequently associated with flexibility and innovation, this study demonstrates that these structures can simultaneously generate new hierarchies and exclusionary mechanisms. This situation necessitates that the success of climate governance be evaluated not solely through the number of actors or institutional diversity, but through the power relations among these actors (Jordan et al., 2020; Wurzel et al., 2020). This evaluation suggests that future theoretical studies should systematically investigate the question of "under what conditions does plurality produce positive outcomes?" This question offers a critical starting point for translating polycentric governance theory into empirically testable hypotheses: under which actor configurations, which institutional designs, and which power distributions does polycentricity produce positive outcomes?

The second significant implication concerns the central role of climate finance in governance. From a policy perspective, this implication suggests that power dynamics must be considered in the design of climate finance mechanisms. This suggestion implies that not only "how much" but also "how" and "under whose conditions" questions regarding climate finance must be centered in policy design. The study demonstrates that the distribution of financial resources and the conditions of access to these resources create capacity for influence and priority-setting in climate governance. This finding indicates that approaches treating climate finance as a technical capacity-building instrument must be transcended. Finance mechanisms, by facilitating the global diffusion of particular policy preferences and governance standards, consolidate structural power relations in governance (Chen, 2025; Mickelson & Elias, 2020). The awareness of this consolidation implies that conditionality of financing and prioritization criteria should be designed transparently and accountably—however, this study prioritizes explaining these dynamics rather than proposing a normative model. This explanatory priority ensures that policymakers are aware of power dynamics when designing climate finance mechanisms; yet it leaves specific design recommendations to empirical research and contextual assessments.

The third implication is directed toward the reconceptualization of the role of non-state actors in climate governance. For practitioners, this implication reveals that the role of non-state actors in governance should neither be entirely affirmed nor wholly rejected; rather, the positions of these actors within power relations should be analytically examined. This analytical examination transforms the question "do non-state actors improve governance?" into "which non-state actors, under what conditions, shape governance in whose favor?" City networks, private sector initiatives, and voluntary standards are often presented as structures that complement areas where states fall short. However, this study demonstrates that these actors simultaneously possess rule-making, agenda-setting, and legitimacy-producing capacities (Hickmann & Partzsch, 2021; Hulme, 2023). The recognition of this capacity necessitates evaluating private governance mechanisms in terms of legitimacy and accountability—the present framework provides an analytical foundation for this evaluation. This analytical foundation offers practitioners systematic questions they can employ when assessing the role of non-state actors: which power mechanisms do these actors deploy, in whose favor do they produce outcomes, and to which accountability mechanisms are they subject?

Finally, the study emphasizes the necessity of a power-based, relational, and multi-level analytical perspective for understanding climate governance. This perspective serves a dual function for both academic research and policy-making processes: from an academic standpoint, it generates new research questions, while from a policy standpoint, it provides analytical tools for critical evaluation of existing arrangements. This dual function concretizes the study's approach of "theory for explanation" rather than "theory for theory's sake" and reveals the practical value of the theoretical framework. This perspective provides a stronger theoretical foundation for explaining why climate policies fail in certain contexts or why they produce unequal outcomes. In this regard, the implications point to the importance of approaching climate governance through political and structural dynamics rather than technical solutions, for both academic literature and policy-making processes. This importance concretizes the study's "abstract but not detached" theoretical contribution and reveals the framework's function of both explaining and generating research questions. This function can also extend beyond the climate governance field: the power-based, relational, and multi-level analytical perspective is applicable to other multi-actor global policy domains such as health governance, digital governance, and trade governance.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study presents a theoretical analysis that conceptualizes climate change governance as a multi-level power struggle within the context of a polycentric global order, and this approach carries certain inherent limitations. These limitations should be understood not as weaknesses of the study but as deliberate methodological choices that sharpen its analytical focus. For in theoretical articles, the depth and conceptual consistency of the argument, rather than the breadth of scope, constitutes the determining criterion. First and foremost, the study is designed as a theoretical analysis that does not aim to generate empirical data. This choice enables a holistic treatment of the structural and relational dimensions of climate governance, while at this stage limiting the direct testing of developed arguments through specific case studies. This situation does not weaken the study's explanatory power; however, it results in empirical details regarding how findings manifest across contextual diversity remaining outside the scope (Jordan et al., 2020; Tobin, 2024). This choice prioritizing conceptual framework development aligns with the principle that in theoretical articles, the depth and consistency of argument rather than breadth of scope is determinative. This alignment maintains the study's methodological consistency and reveals that the absence of empirical data is not an apology but a deliberate design decision.

A second limitation relates to the nature of the literature review. This limitation has been deliberately accepted to maintain the study's methodological consistency. The rationale for preferring selective and analytical reading over systematic scanning is that the conceptual synthesis centering power relations takes priority over the aim of covering all literature. The study does not claim to offer a systematic meta-analysis or bibliometric survey; instead, it focuses on foundational and current studies in the field that directly discuss the polycentric and multi-level structure of climate governance. While this approach provides advantages for producing conceptual synthesis, it may result in unequal representation of all empirical findings in the literature. Consequently, the study does not claim to cover the entirety of the literature; it offers a selective and analytical reading (Bulkeley & Newell, 2023; Hoffmann, 2021). This selective reading constitutes a strategic choice for constructing the framework centering power relations and rests on the assumption that the aim of covering all literature would be realized at the expense of theoretical depth. This assumption implies that future systematic surveys and meta-analysis studies could serve a complementary function to this framework.

Third, the developed analytical framework addresses power through distributive, institutional, and discursive dimensions, discussing the interaction among these dimensions at the conceptual level. The scope conditions of this framework can be specified as follows: the framework is primarily valid in contexts where multi-actor and multi-level governance structures are present, and it offers an explanatory analytical tool rather than proposing a normative model. These scope conditions demonstrate that the framework does not claim to "explain everything" and consciously delineates the boundaries of the contexts in which it can be applied. However, questions such as how these interactions operate in concrete policy processes and under which contextual conditions which forms of power become dominant should be examined in greater detail through empirical research. This situation constitutes an important research agenda for future studies (Heubaum, 2022; Prys-Hansen & Bäckstrand, 2020). This research agenda concretizes the framework's testability potential and demonstrates that it serves a function of generating research questions, not merely describing. This function reveals that the theoretical framework is designed as an "open" rather than "closed" system and can be revised in light of empirical findings.

In light of these limitations, several directions can be suggested for future research. These directions aim to expand the framework's analytical capacity and test its adaptability to different contexts. Each direction offers concrete research questions aimed at empirically deepening a specific dimension of the framework. First, testing the developed theoretical framework through empirical case studies in different geographic and institutional contexts will strengthen the framework's explanatory power. Particularly, comparative studies conducted in areas such as city networks, climate finance mechanisms, and private sector initiatives can reveal the concrete forms of polycentric and multi-level power relations. Second, qualitative studies that deeply examine the role of discursive power in climate governance can provide more detailed insights regarding knowledge production and legitimacy processes. Finally, examination of how power relations in climate governance have evolved over time through longitudinal analyses will provide important contributions for understanding the dynamic nature of governance. These directions open the potential for the framework to be adapted not only to climate governance but also to other multi-actor domains such as health governance, digital governance, and trade governance. This generalization potential demonstrates that the framework is designed as a "governance-general" rather than "climate-specific" analytical tool and can offer a conceptual reference point for comparative governance studies.

CONCLUSION

This study has aimed to present a holistic theoretical framework that goes beyond the descriptive and normative approaches dominant in existing literature by addressing climate change governance as a multi-level power struggle within the context of a polycentric global order. This aim stems from a fundamental gap in the climate governance literature: existing approaches explain "how" governance is organized but refrain from sufficiently questioning "in whose favor" it operates. Filling this gap is essential for understanding why climate governance produces persistent inequalities. The argument developed throughout the article reveals that climate governance must be conceptualized not merely as a multi-actor and multi-level coordination arena, but simultaneously as a political struggle arena where authority, resources, and legitimacy are continuously reproduced. This approach renders visible the explanatory limits of approaches that attempt to explain climate governance through technical policy instruments and administrative arrangements (Bulkeley & Newell, 2023; Hoffmann, 2021). This rendering visible reveals the necessity of a shift from a coordination-centered paradigm to a power-centered paradigm in climate governance scholarship.

One of the study's fundamental findings is that polycentric governance structures do not automatically produce more just, more inclusive, or more balanced outcomes. This finding constitutes the study's main theoretical contribution: without a power perspective, the question of why climate governance produces persistent inequalities cannot be adequately answered. This inability to answer reveals the fundamental limitation of the "coordination optimism" assumption in existing literature. On the contrary, polycentricity and multi-levelness can allow particular actors to gain disproportionate power in governance processes and can prepare the ground for the emergence of new hierarchies. This situation demonstrates that evaluating the success of climate governance solely through institutional diversity or number of actors is insufficient (Jordan et al., 2020; Tobin, 2024). This insufficiency reveals that "distributed authority" does not automatically mean "egalitarian outcomes" and that polycentricity does not eliminate power dynamics but rather transforms them. This transformation signifies the transition from "hierarchical" forms of power to "networked" and "relational" forms; however, this transition can produce new patterns of asymmetry rather than reducing inequalities.

The article also reveals how the distributive, institutional, and discursive dimensions of power are intertwined in climate governance. The integrated analysis of these three dimensions enables the study to transcend the fragmented power analyses in existing literature—studies focusing only on finance, only on institutions, or only on discourse. This transcendence comprehensively reveals the multi-dimensional and relational character of power and renders visible the interaction dynamics that one-dimensional analyses miss. Climate finance mechanisms, reporting and standard-setting processes, and knowledge and expertise production emerge as the fundamental power channels creating capacity for influence and priority-setting in governance. The interaction of these three dimensions explains why climate governance can produce persistent inequalities and why certain actors systematically obtain advantaged positions (Chen, 2025; Prys-Hansen & Bäckstrand, 2020). This explanation makes sense of the "sticky" character of power and why asymmetries in governance are resistant to interventions. This sense-making also contributes to climate governance reform debates: without explaining power relations, developing effective strategies for transforming these relations is not possible.

In this context, the study offers three fundamental contributions to climate governance literature. First, by rethinking polycentric and multi-level governance approaches through the perspective of power relations, it brings the political dimension that often remains implicit in this literature to the center of analysis. This bringing constitutes a critical alternative to the normative optimism in polycentric governance literature. This alternative aims to reveal the power dynamics contained within this structure rather than evaluating polycentricity as "good" or "bad." Second, by treating climate governance as a dynamic and relational process rather than a static institutional structure, it provides an analytical foundation for explaining how interactions among actors transform over time. This foundation requires that governance be analyzed through "processes" rather than "snapshots." This requirement emphasizes the importance of longitudinal and comparative research designs. Third, it proposes a conceptually consistent and extendable framework for future empirical studies. This framework is adaptable to different governance arenas and contexts. This adaptability demonstrates that the framework can offer a broader contribution to global governance studies beyond climate governance.

In conclusion, this article argues that climate change governance constitutes a multi-level and structural power struggle arena shaped within a polycentric global order. This argument theoretically justifies the expression "power struggle" in the article's title and systematically reveals how the polycentric order structures power dynamics in climate governance. This systematic revelation demonstrates that the title is not merely a rhetorical emphasis but an analytically proven claim. This perspective moves policy debates concerning the climate crisis beyond the search for technical solutions by centering questions of power, inequality, and legitimacy. Thus, the study aims to more clearly reveal the limits and transformation possibilities of existing governance arrangements for both academic literature and climate governance practices. This aim contributes to the expansion of climate governance scholarship from a focus on "effectiveness" and "coordination" toward a focus on "justice" and "power," and reveals that this expansion is not merely an academic matter but simultaneously constitutes an essential analytical precondition for the construction of more just and inclusive governance arrangements. Meeting this precondition requires that the climate crisis be addressed not only as a technical but also as a political and structural matter, and suggests that this approach should strengthen the bridges between academic research, policy design, and civil society action.

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