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Managing momentum in climate negotiations*

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1. Introduction

The sessions of the conference of the parties (COP) represent the most well-known negotiating venue on climate change. Since COP1 in 1995, the COP has been meeting every year under the auspices of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Every year since 1995, it has attracted thousands of diplomats and observers from academia, industry, and non-governmental organizations. The only exception is 2020, when the session of the COP was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its agenda moved to the 2021 session, an important element to which we return.

For many years, the sessions of the COP received attention mostly from stakeholders directly involved in the negotiating process such as governments and environmental organizations. However, as shown in figure A.1 in the appendix, in recent times media and public attention to the sessions of the COP have increased substantially, in particular since the 2015 session of the COP in Paris. Such evolution provides both upsides and downsides. The most obvious upside is that interest by the media and concerned citizens creates pressure on negotiators and policymakers to increase ambition and show progress on all issues on the agenda. Media attention and pressure from environmental organizations can arguably be very helpful to increase ambition, as long as expectations are set reasonably. Over the last few years, climate change has become in many countries one of the top policy issues (Lloyd's Register Foundation, and Gallup 2019), thanks in part to Greta Thunberg, the climate strikes, and the Friday for the Future and Extinction Rebellion movements.

However, there is also an important downside, to which we would like to draw attention, while at the same time providing suggestions for potential solutions. This important downside is that, in presence of high media coverage and high expectations from the general public, disagreement on technical issues, which may legitimately take years to be addressed, may come across as evidence of failing international cooperation on climate change mitigation. As a result, this focus on technical issues may lead to a lack of momentum in climate negotiations, which can be detrimental to the ultimate goal of increasing ambition.

Indeed, only every few years the sessions of the COP focus directly on the need for countries to set more ambitious goals. While the ultimate objective of climate negotiations is always to work on closing the gap between current emissions goals and the need to prevent dangerous interferences with the climate system, very often delegates meet at the sessions of the COP to discuss mostly technical details. That was the case for both COP24 in Katowice in 2018 and COP25 in Madrid in 2019 (Schneider *et al* 2019).

The UNFCCC bases its decisions on unanimity rules. Requiring all countries to agree on climate policies imposes a very high bar. Climate change mitigation is a global public good, prone to potential free riding, and with important heterogeneity in domestic preferences for climate action, costs of achieving emissions reductions, and expected damages from climate change. Hence, reaching consensus on complex technical issues can take time, without necessarily having substantial implications for the core

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challenge of tackling climate change. For the latter, setting ambitious targets at the country level, and fulfilling them, are the most important elements, for which the bottom-up approach implemented in the COP's session of 2015 gives countries some flexibility, thus relaxing the strict constraint of unanimously agreeing on one-size-fits-all measures (another point to which we return).

Our main argument is that the combination of very high interest by the media and concerned citizens, very high expectations, and a narrow focus on a few selected items on the agenda of climate negotiations, especially technical issues, may lead to a persistent perception of failure beyond what is justified by actual progress by negotiators and policymakers under the rules by which they operate. In turn, such widespread perception can weaken the potential to rally countries towards more ambitious goals and to isolate recalcitrant countries through 'naming and shaming'. It can also create perverse incentives for recalcitrant countries to generate even more disagreement on technical issues, to give the impression that international cooperation on climate change mitigation is generally failing, and to potentially lead climate action to lose momentum. The 2019 session of the COP is a good case in point. In 2019, media attention and expectations were so high that, at its end, COP25 was considered by commentators as a failure (see Streck 2020 for a representative example), despite the technical nature of the negotiations that were not completed during the session, and the very important progress achieved in other areas during the year, including the pledge by an important number of countries to reach net zero by 2050, or the launch of the Coalition of Finance Ministers for Climate Action.

In our opinion, in the current context downsides from high expectations and high media coverage are starting to exceed upsides, absent any adjustment. We suggest the following potential solutions, which in part build on the experimentation with remote interactions that the COVID-19 pandemic has allowed. First, technical issues may be discussed in less public and more regular events, leveraging the ability of negotiators to join remotely. Second, club approaches can be used to bypass the deadlock caused by unanimity rules, in particular concerning technical issues, and potentially also to fast track negotiations. Club approaches can facilitate progress, can provide signals of cooperation when unanimous agreements are hard to reach so to maintain momentum, and can represent credible alternatives to unanimity to reduce the incentives of recalcitrant countries to delay unanimous agreements. Third, United Nations leaders, and influential environmentalists, can try to set expectations consistently with the functioning of the COP and manage them accordingly, paying attention to both areas in which progress is made, including through club approaches, and areas facing gridlocks. The role of ambition is crucial at COP26 and no negotiation on technical issues, no matter how important, should distract negotiators, policymakers, and observers alike from the task at hand, which is building on the current momentum and strengthen and homogenize country pledges.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes in detail the main issue analyzed in this paper. Section 3 provides some suggestions for potential solutions. Section 4 concludes.

2. The issue: unanimity rules and high expectations and media coverage

Unanimity rules apply to all international agreements, since countries are sovereign, they have the right of political self-determination, are equal on a legal basis, and are free to handle their domestic affairs without external intervention, which are the basis of what is known as the Westphalian system. In the case of global public goods such as climate change mitigation, unanimity rules following from the Westphalian system make progress on international climate negotiations harder to achieve, thus creating the 'Westphalian dilemma' (Nordhaus 2015).

Already when defining countries' ambition levels, climate negotiations had to introduce some flexibility to achieve success, as done with the Paris Agreement. The bottom-up approach implemented in the session of the COP of 2015 introduced flexibility in international climate negotiations, by leaving to countries to determine how ambitious they want to be in their emissions goals or pledges (technically known as Nationally Determined Contributions, NDCs), depending also on internal and external pressure. That is, this solution leaves to countries the decision over individual effort levels, which contributes to relax the constraint of unanimously agreeing on one-size-fits-all measures. This bottom-up approach largely relies on domestic actors pressuring governments to make ambitious pledges. It also relies on citizens and governments feeling that other countries are also doing their part, which is how conditional cooperation works (Carattini *et al* 2019b). So far, this system has been working relatively well. The emissions pledges in the Paris Agreement, when summed up, are expected to lead to emissions reductions able to keep temperature increases within 3 °C above pre-industrial levels, which is supposed to only be a starting point, as through the ratcheting mechanism countries are expected to update their pledges at regular intervals, constantly increasing their ambition and their domestic efforts to decarbonize. Many countries have already done so, a point to which we return.

The approach that led to the Paris Agreement has, however, left some gaps, in the form of technical aspects to be sorted over the first years of the

agreement. Unanimity is, in principle, required to deal with these complex technical aspects.

In this piece, we argue that the combination of very technical issues, high media exposure and expectations from the general public, and unanimity rules is very detrimental to climate cooperation. The main reason is that it is relatively easy for countries opposed to climate change mitigation to delay action and prevent agreement on such technical issues, especially when there are already many legitimate concerns, for instance related to the integrity of carbon trading mechanisms. Several countries took a minority stance and opposed an agreement on the use of Internationally Transferable Mitigation Outcomes (ITMOs) at COP25. A similar process had happened the previous year at COP24.

Many technical issues being negotiated at the sessions of the COP, such as on ITMOs, ultimately do not directly determine levels of ambition, which are what is most important, but rather how such ambition is achieved, in particular in terms of cost-effectiveness. Costs matter, because they affect households and, over the long run, potentially the ability of governments to increase their pledges. However, given that cost-effectiveness can also be influenced through other measures not requiring international consensus (e.g. through a wider adoption of carbon pricing), the overbearing negative light shone on disagreements over technical issues at the sessions of the COP is likely counterproductive.

Despite the technical nature of many sessions of the COP, media attention has steadily increased in recent years. In 2019, very high media attention and expectations led commentators to declare COP25 a failure (see again Streck 2020 for a representative example). Commentators came to such conclusion despite the important number of countries, representing about 10% of global greenhouse gas emissions, which had pledged a few weeks earlier to reach net zero by 2050 and sent a clear signal to the rest of the world, even when ambition was not going to be formally on the agenda until the session of the COP of 2020 (now postponed to 2021).

Hence, given the relative importance, when compared to setting ambition, of the technical issues discussed at COP25, the major success of countries opposing ambitious climate mitigation was not to fail climate action, but to give the world the *perception* that climate action was failing. We argue that such perception may be problematic, in that it may lead to a feeling of powerlessness and despair among the general public, even when climate change has become a top item on the policy agenda, arguably largely thanks to increased pressure from citizens.

Further, such focus on technical issues may also distract from progress in other areas, such as the launch of the Coalition of Finance Ministers for Climate Action, which may play a very important role in the long run in securing mitigation efforts from all countries in the world, by mobilizing resources and expanding the use of cost-effective solutions such as carbon pricing, possibly in a coordinated fashion. It is noteworthy that this World-Bank-led initiative follows a club approach, with some 50 countries participating, representing about 30% of global gross domestic product.

3. Some suggestions for potential solutions: more frequent and less public interactions on technical issues, club approaches, and expectation management

Some important lessons follow from this experience, which could be addressed in the moment of reflection created by the ongoing pandemic. To be clear, the coronavirus is no good news for climate change mitigation. Even during 'normal' recessions, climate change drops in importance among the general public (Kahn and Kotchen 2011).

At the same time, however, the coronavirus offers a window of opportunity to climate negotiators to figure out the next steps and try new approaches. The absence of a session of the COP in 2020 gives negotiators additional time to address technical issues behind the scenes, including through club approaches. COP26 will focus on ambition, for which high media exposure and attention by the public are important, if combined with plausible expectations. With COP26 postponed by one year, policymakers and negotiators have more time to act and prepare accordingly. Governments should also be given extra time to release their updated pledges or to revise the ones that were released in the midst of the pandemic, as it was the case with Japan (see Moisio *et al* 2020).

In the meantime, climate negotiators have time to expand the use of alternative settings to work out the differences across countries on most technical issues. Using a high-level event that attracts enormous attention and happens only once a year to negotiate over technical details that may require continuous discussions may not be the best way to proceed, and can also send misleading signals about lack of progress on actual climate action. Potential alternative settings include the Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice, where the talks on ITMOs are currently taking place, as well as the global and regional meetings of the World Economic Forum. Most importantly, with these alternative settings, meetings can also occur more frequently, especially given that they all moved online and may (at least partly) remain online, and ministers can be more flexible and participate whenever high-level decisions are needed, with the goal of reaching agreements by the following session of the COP. At the session of the COP announcements could be made, reporting either solutions relying on unanimous consent, if present, or based on a club approach (see

below). In terms of frequency of meetings, it is worthwhile noting that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the large United Nations body tasked to condense in regular reports the scientific evidence on climate change, has already experimented with biweekly virtual, rather than biannual face-to-face meetings, bringing on the same online platform hundreds of researchers from all over the world to write its 6th assessment report. Important lessons may also be drawn, on both content and the way of operating, from the Taskforce on Scaling Voluntary Carbon Markets, launched by the United Kingdom.

Club approaches can also reduce the incentive of recalcitrant countries to try to hinder progress on matters requiring unanimous support. Negotiations on technical issues could drag for years, but incentives to reach a compromise may be stronger if recalcitrant countries knew that most other countries would move on with temporary measures absent a unanimous agreement, unless there is a specific need for a uniform rule. Hence, club approaches could be used to devise such alternative solutions (see Keohane and Victor 2016). Those clubs would have like-minded countries as members, along the lines of the meeting called by French President Emmanuel Macron in December 2017. Clubs should ideally also serve the interests of the least developed countries and small island developing states, as in the case of the Coalition of Finance Ministers for Climate Action, whose goals include a specific focus on developing countries, such as the identification of measures to address the issue of high cost of capital for adaptation and mitigation investments in such countries.

Club approaches can be especially effective at times in which global leadership may be lacking, which was one of President Macron's goals in organizing a meeting of selected countries to signal their continued commitment to climate change mitigation despite the announcement by the United States to withdraw from the Paris Agreement. Club approaches can also provide signals of cooperation in periods in which unanimity-based approaches may not. Additional clubs could emerge around carbon pricing, which, coupled with border tariffs, has the potential to lead to emissions reductions not only among the club members but also among outsiders (Nordhaus 2015, Carattini *et al* 2019a). Club approaches can also be used to fast track negotiations on items requiring uniform rules, although success may only be partial, as with the pre-COP25 meeting organized under the Costa Rican leadership and leading to the San José Principles, a set of rules on ITMOs to which 32 countries agreed. Switzerland and Peru, for instance, recently entered into a bilateral agreement for carbon offsetting in Peru to count as reductions for Switzerland under the Paris Agreement, without double counting. The World Bank-led Climate Market Club has a similar aim. Alternatives to unanimous consensus can help fast tracking negotiations if they can reduce the incentive for recalcitrant countries to intentionally delay action to give the world the impression that no cooperation can be achieved on climate matters. The World Bank and other entities active in realizing such initiatives could play a crucial role in harnessing their potential and ensure that these initiatives are perceived as credible 'threats' to inaction. While an excessive use of club approaches may undermine the functioning of the COP and lead to a fragmentation of climate negotiations, we consider the risk of exceeding in the use of club approaches rather remote at the moment.

With the two suggestions for potential solutions that we just outlined, more frequent and less public meetings and the intensification of club approaches, many of the interrelated issues that influence ambition may be addressed in large part before COP26, which could thus focus on increasing, and homogenizing, pledges. Given the current pandemic, policymakers around the world need to respond to the urgent demands of their citizens. Resources and high-level governmental attention are limited. Increasing ambition is compatible with recovery programs and so is carbon pricing, especially if it provides dividends to citizens (see Carattini *et al* 2019a).

The third suggestion focuses on expectation management. United Nations leaders have now time to work on their ability to manage expectations, which may also include downplaying the importance of some rounds of negotiations, when these focus mostly on issues of technical nature. Countries whose interest is in delaying climate action have all the incentives to make sure that global citizens' perception is that of faltering cooperation and United Nations leaders have the responsibility to manage expectations and align perceptions with actual progress. While sessions of the COP also serve as venues for exchanging ideas and for networking, a more austere and insulated setting may be more conducive to actual progress when the focus of the negotiations is represented by tedious and technical aspects of climate change mitigation. Currently the sessions of the COP aim at achieving many goals, but there may be a trade-off between breadth and the ability of reaching such goals, including the core objective of advancing climate negotiations. Moreover, when setting expectations, it would also be useful for United Nations leaders to expand efforts to communicate how much has already been achieved with respect to business as usual, and not only how much remains to be done. The IPCC can offer again an example, with its outreach activities. Virtual forums allow the UNFCCC to engage more with stakeholders, to educate them on the functioning of negotiations, to report on progress, as well as to receive feedback.

Efforts by United Nations leaders to manage expectations may not necessarily convince environmentalists or the general public. Hence, influential

environmentalists also have a role to play, and so do seasoned commentators and academics, in particular in helping addressing information asymmetries. For instance, influential environmentalists could get more accustomed with the functioning of the sessions of the COP, so to inform the general public when stakes are high and when they are not. Influential environmentalists could also become more experienced at walking that thin line between putting pressure on negotiators and policymakers to increase ambition and making sure that immediate expectations are not unattainable, not to inadvertently play in the hands of countries opposed to climate action. Praising achievements by negotiators, and by governments on domestic action, can be as important as reminding them that more needs to be done. Policymakers may not have strong incentives to act if they feel that environmentalists are never happy and that they would not be politically rewarded for their actions. Further, environmentalists could try to channel their forces in strategic ways to further mobilize voters in recalcitrant countries, including countries with formal democratic institutions such as Australia and Brazil.

At COP26, stakes will be very high, with the expectation that most countries will have by then communicated updated, more ambitious nationally determined contributions (NDCs), providing the first opportunity to gage global progress on near-mid-term climate actions through the NDCs and long-term targets through net-zero announcements and other mitigation strategies. Influential environmentalists can play a crucial role in shifting attention to the most relevant aspect of the international negotiations, which is short-run and long-term ambition, rather than technical issues, and contribute to the effectiveness of the 'naming and shaming' process implicitly included in the bottom-up approach introduced at the session of the COP of 2015.

4. Conclusions

In 2015, the world witnessed the introduction of a landmark climate agreement, the Paris Agreement. With it, countries pledged to provide emissions reductions that, taken together, would be able to keep temperature increases within 3 °C above pre-industrial levels. While environmentalists keep reminding the public that 3 °C is way above the window provided by climate scientists to avoid severe climate damages, which is set between 1.5 °C and 2 °C, we would consider 3 °C a rather important starting point on which to build to narrow this gap, compared with the alternative scenarios that were on the table until a few years ago. Indeed, over the last few years, the most pessimistic climate change scenarios (such as SSP5-8.5 and SSP3-7.0) have become increasingly less likely, while scenarios implying less interference with the climate system (such as SSP4-6.0 or SSP2-4.5) have become increasingly likely, an important progress that we should not dismiss (Hausfather and Peters 2020).

Further, during 2019 alone, 60 countries, as well as the states of California and New York, pledged to become carbon neutral by 2050. In 2020, China pledged to become carbon neutral by 2060. These pledges further contribute to reduce the gap with the 1.5 °C–2 °C goal. According to the Emissions Gap Report 2020 by the United Nations Environment Programme, 'the growing number of countries that are committing to net-zero emissions goals by around mid-century is the most significant and encouraging climate policy development' (UNEP 2020, p 17). The current pledges are only a starting point: countries are expected to continue to regularly increase their ambition. While some scholars are quick to stress that pledges are not policies and that there is no enforcement mechanism in the Paris Agreement (see Harstad 2018 for a discussion), others, such as Carattini *et al* (2019b), Sakamoto and Karp (2019), and Figueres (2020), stress the importance of maintaining some degree of optimism, as it is a crucial ingredient for success in international climate negotiations. As aptly described by Figueres (2020, p 471), 'when the Paris agreement was achieved, the optimism that people felt about the future was palpable—but, in fact, optimism had been the primary input.'

Hence, important progress on climate change mitigation is currently being made. In this piece, we argue that the combination of very high interest by the media and concerned citizens, very high expectations, and a narrow focus on technical issues for which unanimous consensus is required may lead to a persistent perception of failure beyond what is justified by actual progress by negotiators and policymakers.

As a result, we suggest three types of potential solutions. First, more frequent and less public meetings on technical issues. Second, an intensification of the use of club approaches, not only to circumvent gridlock but also to reduce the incentive for recalcitrant countries to slow down negotiations on technical issues simply to provide the world with the perception of faltering cooperation on climate change mitigation. Third, better expectation management, to ensure that delays on technical issues are not communicated or perceived as general failures of international cooperation.

Data availability statement

All data that support the findings of this study are included within the article (and any supplementary files).

Appendix

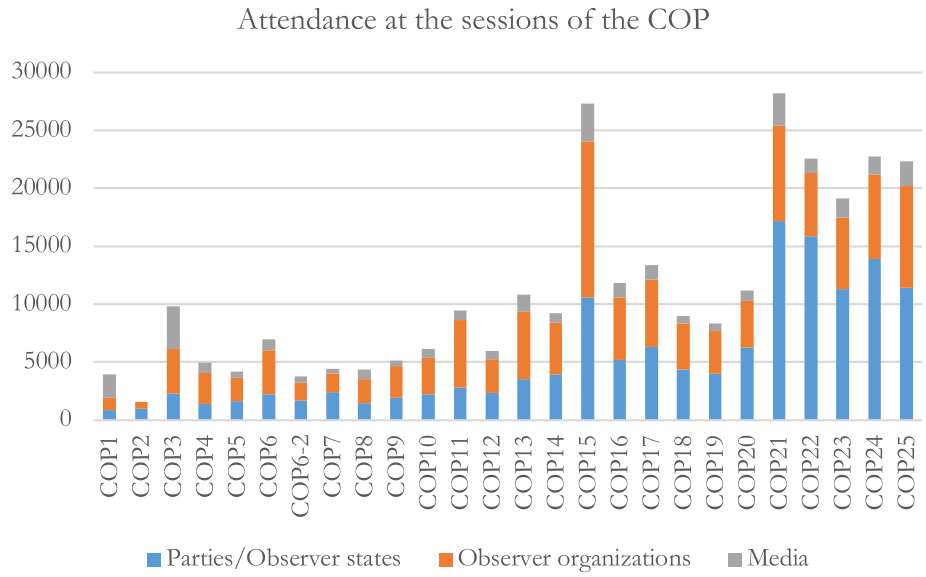

Figure A.1. Attention to the sessions of the COP has kept increasing in recent years.
Note: number of attendees at the sessions of the COP by status: parties and observer states; observer organizations; media. The number of attendees at the COP has massively increased over time, from a few thousands in the 1990s, when many stakeholders would know each other personally, to around 10 000 in the following decade (with the exception of COP15 in 2009), and more than 20 000 in most recent years. The figure also shows that not all sessions of the COP are the same. COP15 in Copenhagen, with 27 294 attendees, was expected to lead to a landmark agreement. COP21 in Paris too, and it did. Such peaks in importance may, however, not be that well reflected in people's attention or expectations, which may reflect the divergence between the 'climate emergency' rhetoric and the need for climate negotiations to work in cycles. Source: UNFCCC statistics and yearly lists of participants.

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