

The green revolution will not be led by international treaties, but by persistent voters

*The limited progress of climate diplomacy is often imputed to the shortcomings of national leaders who fail to see humanity as one, or their inability to simply follow the science. **Alessio Terzi** writes that the green revolution will not be made top down by binding international treaties, but bottom up, by the determination and persistence of climate-conscious citizens.*

The 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) had been [dubbed](#) “the last chance saloon” to save Earth. It is then no surprise that as soon as it came to an end, commentators rushed to give an assessment of the final agreement. Given such high expectations, [many](#), if not most, were left with a bitter taste.

The *j'accuse* generally works along two lines of argument. First, national leaders are failing to listen to climate scientists, as evidenced by the fact that the pledges made in Glasgow would still amount to warming in excess of 1.5 degrees Celsius by 2100, leading to an uncomfortably high probability of crossing key tipping points. Second, world leaders are still [wrangling in negotiations](#), typically juxtaposing rich and poor countries, therefore failing to see humanity as one, trapped in the [vestiges of nation states](#), ignoring the example given by younger generations through global mobilisation movements such as Fridays For Future. Making matters worse, currently insufficient decarbonisation pledges are at high risk of not even being met, given they are not binding, leading [some](#) to dub these multilateral gatherings as just a lot of “blah, blah, blah”.

Expectations for multilateral climate summits, and the implied internationalist [cahier de doléances](#), carry conspicuous parallels with long-standing issues of globalisation, and are therefore likely to run into the same type of roadblocks. In the [early 2000s](#), some early warnings were voiced that a highly-integrated world economy (hyper-globalisation) would require common international rules that would significantly curtail the policymaking space for national democratically-elected leaders. In other words, extensive multilateral rules would either require bringing democracy to the global level, creating a world government and ditching nation states, or giving up democratic politics. Retaining the two would lead to only a loose set of global coordinating principles. With the appropriate caveats, global efforts to mitigate climate change face a similar predicament.

Making the economy carbon-neutral between now and 2050 will require an unprecedented fast-tracking of economic transformation. [Doing so](#) is going to hinge on a vast array of regulations and (tax) policies that touch all aspects of citizens' life, including production, consumption, dietary habits, transport, housing, just to mention a few. In other words, large parts of a country's yearly budget, and government policy action more broadly, will be determined extensively by decarbonisation targets. This incidentally casts climate change apart from past successful international environmental agreements with binding clauses, such as the Montreal Protocol to protect the ozone layer, which entailed a seamless phase-out of CFCs.

Can decarbonisation targets be made binding, perhaps dictated by climate science alone? What if a country realises it is off-track? In a dynamic reminiscent of the Gold Standard, should this prompt contractionary economic policies or even temporary lockdowns, similar to the ones observed during the Covid-19 pandemic, in an effort to force down CO₂ emissions and meet year-end obligations? Likewise, what if a national leader is elected on a political platform entailing a slower decarbonisation path, in the middle of a recession that calls for other (social) investment priorities, or during a shortage of green minerals? What if the sudden national security priority requires a sudden shift away from gas, even if this means re-opening more polluting coal-fuelled power plants, as is the case in many European countries in light of Ukraine's invasion? We can hardly expect that in any of these situations global climate binding targets will prevail. When push comes to shove, democracy would shrug off the multilateral 'green straitjacket'.

How about solving the dilemma by bringing democracy to the global level? Just as in the case of globalisation, this is highly unlikely to happen. While it is true that on the surface of it a common challenge like climate change could unite humanity, reality will remain variegated. Entrenched differences between countries in terms of level of affluence, culture, values, demographics, or access to technology will imply that each nation will have its own views on what the optimal decarbonisation strategy should be.

All this should not imply forms of climate fatalism. Rather, it should lead us to appreciate that climate science is only one side of the equation, albeit an important one. The other side irremediably being politics, meaning the art of finding a compromise in the face of heterogeneous preferences, both within and between countries. Wishing it away will only edge us closer to [eco-authoritarianism](#) and, eventually, political upheaval.

The best hope for sustained climate action is indeed the [growing priority](#) national electorates are according to preserving nature, across geographies and levels of development. The key parameter to gauge when forming expectations on the speed of decarbonisation will be the pressure put by a broadening constituency of citizens on their elected officials, re-shaping priorities and established world views. This in turn will determine the policy feasibility set.

Decarbonisation plans can only be (sub-)nationally determined and non-binding, and this is not because of a failure of our current leaders. Multilateral climate agreements will best serve their function by setting broad principles, and providing a framework for loose cooperation, exchange of best practices, and some useful peer pressure. The green revolution will not be made top down by binding international treaties, according to scientifically set parameters, but rather bottom up, by the determination and persistence of climate-conscious citizens.



Notes:

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