

An analysis of the problems with electoral politics in an age of climate change

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Abstract

This essay addresses the extent to which the system of electoral politics acts as a limiting factor to the adoption of effective climate action. The basis of this essay is the argument that the sphere of electoral politics where the majority of climate action is considered, is a contributing factor to the continued failure of our planet to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Term limits cause world leaders to too often adopt a short-term outlook whereby the implementation of mitigation measures against climate change are overlooked and a focus on calls for immediate economic development take precedence over environmental issues. Through analysis of historic and modern case examples, both the complexity that underlies climate policymaking is highlighted, alongside how electoral politics acts as a barrier to effective climate action.

1. Introduction

In this essay, I will be describing countries as ‘developed’ and ‘developing’, following the World Economic Situation and Prospects (WESP) definitions (Country classification, 2020) based on economic development and reflecting the terms used at the 2009 United Nations Climate Conference in Copenhagen (Mohamed Nasheed: Climate Champion for the World’s Most Vulnerable, n.d.).

I will also be defining ‘climate action’ as any increased efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-induced impacts (Goal 13: Climate action, n.d.). Therefore, common forms of climate action include investing in renewable energy technologies, expanding and encouraging the usage public transport links, and committing to international climate agreements (What is climate action about?, n.d.).

World leaders operating in the time-restricted bubble of electoral politics are vying for votes in order to stay in power. Climate change is often perceived to be a distant threat, affecting distant places (Kyselá, Tvinnereim and Ivarsflaten, 2018) and term limits only amplify the concern that necessary mitigation measures against climate change will be delayed (Kyselá, Tvinnereim and Ivarsflaten, 2018). This then raises fears that if leaders fail to be forward-thinking, they will take a traditional focus on economic development (Reeves, 2016) and with fossil fuels remaining such large economic drivers (The Economy and Fossil Fuels | The New Economics Party, n.d.) continued usage will solely act to intensify the climate crisis we face.

The aim of this essay is to explore to the extent which electoral politics on a global scale acts as a limited factor to the adoption of effective climate action. Currently, 57% of countries worldwide are considered to be democracies, meaning they face elections at the end of their terms (Desilver, 2019). And it’s these elections and the desire to be elected & re-elected, that poses the greatest threat to climate action. This will be achieved through the

analysis of historic and modern case examples, with each illustrating the role electoral politics plays in influencing climate policymaking.

2. Case studies

2.1 The global community

The limitations of the United Nations (UN), and at extension the global community, serves as a major barrier to progress in relation to climate change (Clark, 2017). UN climate agreements are unable to forcefully commit countries into climate agreements or to ensure there are legal ramifications for failing to meet targets or backing out altogether. This is a fate UN issued climate agreements are bound to by legislation passed over 25 years ago at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit (Jones, 2016).

The Rio Earth Summit was held in June 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and was the largest environmental conference ever held at the time (Rio Earth Summit | Sustainable Environment Online, 2018). One outcome of the summit was the Rio declaration on Environment and Development. The second principle of the declaration outlined that states have *“the sovereign right to exploit their own resources pursuant to their own environmental and developmental policies”* (Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, 2006). Resultantly, participation surrounding climate agreements remains entirely optional and becomes an issue of political agenda. As global agreements have been drawn up since the Rio Earth Summit, states have opted out of them, failed to implement them or have promised only minimal changes which undermines their purpose altogether (Jones, 2016).

This weakness in international law-making pertaining to climate change is highlighted with the Kyoto protocol of 1997. The Kyoto protocol was signed in 1997 in Kyoto and was the first agreement to mandate individual countries into reductions in greenhouse-gas emissions (What is the Kyoto protocol and has it made any difference?, 2011). The protocol mandated that 37 industrialised nations, alongside the European community, must cut their greenhouse gas emissions (Kyoto Protocol Fast Facts, 2020). Developing nations were exempt, which included India and China at the time, but could comply voluntarily (Kyoto Protocol Fast Facts, 2020). However, then U.S. President George Bush viewed the restrictions to be unfair on America and dropped out of the agreement in 2001 (Reynolds, 2001).

The criticism the Kyoto protocol faced reflects the division present between the desires of the industrialised and industrialising nations of the world. Industrialised nations are dependent on fossil fuels to uphold the economic advantage they currently hold over industrialising nations, with fossil fuels high energy density and lower operating costs meaning they remain economically favourable over renewable energy sources (Richardson, 2019). Poll results of American voters in 2019 showed that while addressing climate change was the main priority for 14%, it was still lower than the 19% that prioritised improving the economy and the 28% that prioritised controlling healthcare costs (Holden, 2019).

The political leverage that economic development holds, means that environmental concerns will remain as a secondary concern for leaders set on being re-elected. While the limitations of the UN means this behaviour is upheld, due to the lack of legally binding commitments or ramifications for inaction.

2.2 The United States of America

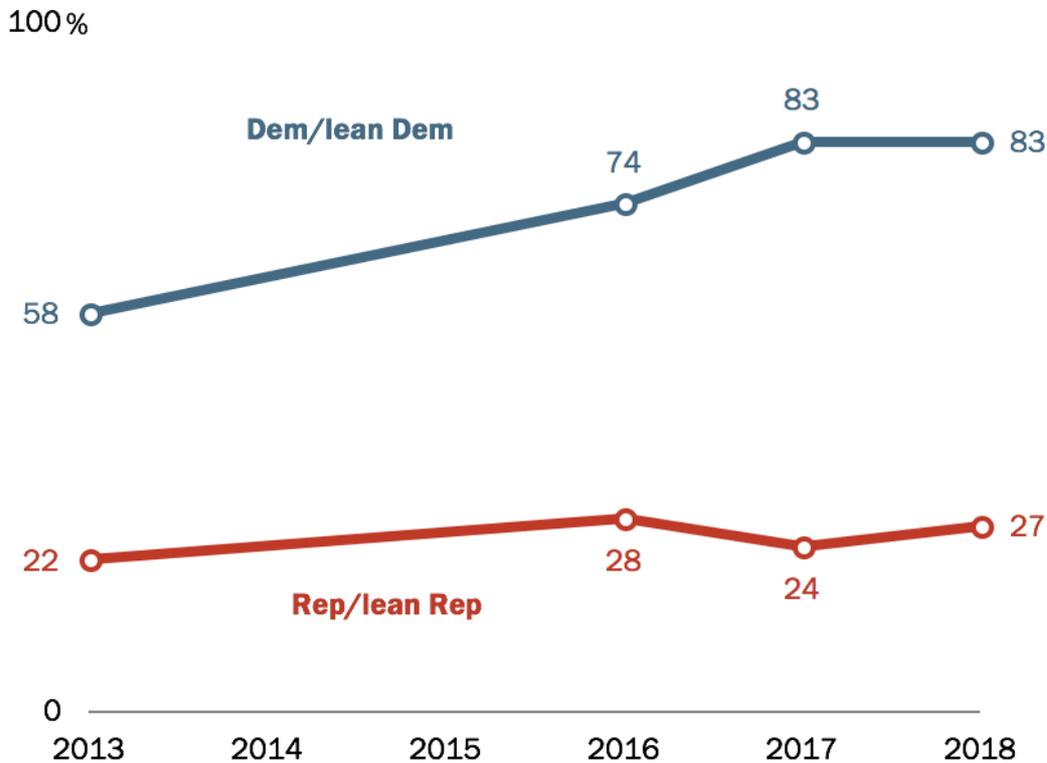
Modern-day disregard of climate action, in the interest of political expediency, is perhaps best illustrated with President Trump's 2015-2016 electoral campaign and his following presidential actions.

Trump's electoral campaign publicly denounced the Obama administration's climate policies and championed the United States' fossil fuel industry (Greshko et al., 2019). His election highlights the success he has experienced through hosting a political strategy that both plays into the population's fears and concerns of climate change, and actively polarizes the electorate, by focusing on climate scepticism (Viala-Gaudefroy, 2020).

Historically climate change has proven to be an issue that has polarized the two main political parties, with the Democrats being associated with climate action – since Al Gore was a leading voice on the issue (Viala-Gaudefroy, 2020) – while the Republicans support the fossil fuel industry (Viala-Gaudefroy, 2020). Research carried out by the Pew Research Centre found that while concerns regarding climate change have grown among Democrats, they haven't with Republicans (Fagan and Huang, 2019) – Figure 1 below.

Concerns about climate change have grown among Democrats, but not among Republicans

Global climate change is a major threat to our country



Source: Spring 2018 Global Attitudes Survey. Q22d.

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Figure 1. A graph showing the percentage of Democrats and Republicans that believe ‘Global climate change is a major threat to our country’ between 2013 and 2018. Democrats are illustrated by the blue line, while Republicans are illustrated by the red line. From the Spring 2018 Global Attitudes Survey by the Pew Research Center (Fagan and Huang, 2019).

A clear example of this contention in practice is with ‘The Green New Deal’. The Green New Deal is a climate proposal, introduced by the Democrats Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Edward J. Markey, which aims for the American federal government to move away from fossil fuels (Friedman, 2019). It was introduced in Congress in February 2019 as a non-legally binding resolution (Dsouza, 2019) that calls for both net-zero greenhouse gas emissions to be achieved, while the American people are protected from the challenges this poses (Ocasio-Cortez, 2019).

While being heavily praised by Democrats, even being seen as a central belief of the party (Lavelle, 2020), Republicans have been quick to criticise the proposal (Friedman, 2019).

Trump has claimed the proposal would cost \$100 trillion, while supporters have argued climate change holds the potential to cause even greater economic losses. Yet so far it has proved difficult to calculate exact figures regarding the plan's cost (Friedman, 2019).

The Green New Deal was voted upon in Senate on March 25th, 2019 and failed to advance by way of a 0-57 vote (Shabad and Clark, 2019). The vote, however, has been criticised as being nothing more than a 'sham' (Green New Deal: Senate defeats proposal as Democrats unite in protest, 2019), organised by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (Lavelle, 2019). The vote came before U.S. lawmakers had even finalised the details of the proposal and saw the Senate vote on a version McConnell himself had introduced (Lavelle, 2019). Forty-three democrats voted "present" in protest against the vote, not wishing to divide themselves into 'yes' and 'no' camps (Lavelle, 2019).

America is stuck in a cycle whereby any progress the Democrats make regarding climate action will always be countered by the Republicans who can easily reverse any commitments if they are elected (Popovich, Albeck-Ripka and Pierre-Louis, 2020). As a result, there can be no expectation of truly effective and long-lasting climate action to come out of America while this polarization continues.

2.3 The Maldives

Mohamed 'Anni' Nasheed is the current speaker of the People's Majlis, the legislative body of the Maldives, and was the 4th President of the Maldives from 11th November 2008 – 7th February 2012 (Mohamed Nasheed, 2020). The Maldives has no ground surface higher than three metres, making it one of the most vulnerable countries in the world to rising sea levels (Sea-Level Rise in the Republic of Maldives | Global Warming Effects, n.d.). Recent predictions have suggested once the local sea level rises one metre higher than present, at least half the island will flood each year (Gabbatiss, 2018) – which is expected to occur no later than by the middle of the 21st Century (Gabbatiss, 2018).

However, the threat facing the Maldives hasn't stopped Anni's push for climate action, both on a local and global levels. Nasheed rose to worldwide fame following the 2009 UN Climate Conference in Copenhagen (Mohamed Nasheed: Climate Champion for the World's Most Vulnerable, n.d.), where he pushed for a legally binding agreement that would limit temperature rise to 1.5°C (Mohamed Nasheed: Climate Champion for the World's Most Vulnerable, n.d.). His actions in Copenhagen have been hailed as helping form the foundation of the Paris agreement in 2015, which remains the most significant piece of legislation regarding climate change to date (Mohamed Nasheed: Climate Champion for the World's Most Vulnerable, n.d.).

Beyond this, in 2009 Anni made a promise to make the Maldives the first carbon-neutral country, all while continuing to develop his country's economy and infrastructure (Vince, 2014, p. 154). The plan he announced was radical and aimed to eliminate fossil fuel usage by 2020 (Clark, 2009). It included creating renewable energy and transmission infrastructure (Clark, 2009), phasing out the use of diesel and petrol engines (Clark, 2009) and outlined plans to create a biomass plant that would burn coconut husks (Clark, 2009). Under the targets to be carbon neutral, any greenhouse gas emissions would be offset by

measures such as purchasing carbon credits or by planting of mangroves which act as a carbon sink.

Despite Anni's global recognition and praise surrounding his work on climate change (World must rise to climate change challenge, President Nasheed tells British media, 2009), he was ousted from office in 2012 (Mohamed Nasheed: Climate Champion for the World's Most Vulnerable, n.d.) and in February 2015 was (Long sentence for ex-Maldives leader, 2015) arrested and sentenced to 13 years in prison for ordering the arrest of a judge while in office. In November of 2018, Anni was released from prison after his sentence was cancelled (Maldives court clears jail sentence of Mohamed Nasheed, 2018). This followed a review by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention which concluded that he'd been targeted solely for political reasons (Mohamed Nasheed: Climate Champion for the World's Most Vulnerable, n.d.).

Even with the challenges that have faced Anni over the years, it is his unwavering dedication to climate solutions that separated him from other heads of state during his presidential term (Vince, 2014, p. 155). He traded desires for economic development for a respect of the environmental crisis we are facing and it is ultimately these characteristics of selflessness that led to the Maldives' progressive stance on climate change. These are traits that should be further adopted by the rest of the global community, as President Nasheed serves as a reminder of the positive change that political leaders can cause when they actively push for climate action.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the feature of term limits associated with electoral politics acts a limiting factor regarding climate action, both in the amount of climate action that can be undertaken by any given leader and through its encouragement to adopt a more selfish approach to policymaking. Acting in their country's best interests, in an attempt to secure re-election, rather than acting in the interests of the whole global community regarding the climate crisis.

With this said, we can see through the comparisons made between President Trump's actions in office and President Nasheed's, that ultimately the attitudes of a country's leader and the electorate are the key determining factors in relation to the pursuit of effective climate policymaking. The differing values the two leaders hold can be linked to the direct threat from climate change that the Maldives faces. President Nasheed recognised the necessity of climate action for both his country's and the planet's survival and sacrificed a path of traditional economic development to implement it.

Following this essay, it could be argued that I'm encouraging a less democratic approach to be taken towards climate action – focusing on reducing the formal processes required for such action to be passed. We are in a position whereby if we want to limit global warming to below 2°C above pre-industrial levels we need to take immediate action. That being said, I do not view dictatorial positions towards climate action as being beneficial, as all policies ought to be challenged and revised respectively to ensure that they are both appropriate

and progressive. Therefore, I would rather urge the global community to actively prioritise climate action above desires for economic development, as ultimately it is only through this that effective co-operation and action towards the climate crisis can be achieved.

While this essay acts to explore just a single factor pertaining to climate policymaking, the complexity of the climate crisis should be stressed. However, this complexity should not detract from the pressing need for more climate action to be undertaken. A selfish desire for re-election is not a satisfactory excuse for inaction surrounding the climate crisis. The science and understanding is widespread, it is blatant ignorance to be jeopardising the lives of billions for solely selfish gain.

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