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The science of climate change and human responsibility, the economics of addressing the problem, the justice dimension and, even, implications for North-South relations have all received substantial exposure in public debate and specialized technical, policy, and academic literatures. We also hear about the imperative to “climate-proof” society, the poor, and even the state. Occasionally we are told the “right political framework” is needed, usually meaning an improvement on the **Kyoto Protocol** and national legislation for regulating energy use.

A surprising omission is a balanced inquiry into what climate change and its effects mean for democratization, and what democratization could mean for mitigating greenhouse gas emissions and climate adaptation. Democratization here means movement toward something like actually existing liberal democracy, present in many countries, not theoretical models of deliberative democracy, radical participatory democracy, or “**eco-democracy**”. Just as global warming has become headline news, so another but more celebrated phenomenon of recent times has been a wave of democratization, starting in southern Europe in the 1970s, subsequently embracing Latin America, Central and Eastern Europe, and sizeable parts of Africa and Asia, too. Hardly less eye-catching, however, is the wave’s recent slowing to a halt and, by some accounts, partial retreat.

Climate stabilization and democratization are both important; both are vulnerable; but do they matter for one another? Although the question needs more research, some preliminary observations can be made. One is that political transition from an undemocratic system lacking basic freedoms and the rule of law to consolidated liberal democracy can be an unsteady and protracted process, with uncertain outcomes. The requirements of nation-building and post-conflict reconstruction compound the political challenge. It is made even more difficult by the effects of climate change. Conversely, the traumas of political change can themselves impede a country’s ability to act on climate change and its effects. The established democracies themselves remain on an unfinished journey of democratization. There is always scope for deepening and other improvement; and harm from terrorism and counter-terrorism, political

corruption, popular loss of confidence, and rise of illiberal social sentiments are all salient threats. So, in the interdependencies of climate change and politics, implications follow both for newly emerging and old democracies, with the lines of influence connecting in both directions.

### **Climate change's democratic impact**

The political significance of climate change concerns democratization directly and indirectly. A firm proposition in political science is that economic development with equitable sharing of the benefits supports stable democracy. So where climate change harms development, the democratic prospect suffers, too. By harming the poor and women disproportionately, as the **Global Humanitarian Forum 1**

makes very clear, climate change obstructs the political equality that democracy demands. If climate change's costs overburden weak states, their capability to sustain liberal democratic governance is diminished. Where such consequences as water or food insecurities intensify social conflict and provoke violence, the pressures on democracy increase; grounds for authoritarian rule to maintain public order begin to look stronger. In OECD democracies, climate change may frame public policy increasingly in terms of energy and economic security and preserving territorial integrity against "climate migrants," thereby benefitting the military-industrial complex and at the expense of liberal humanitarian values and commitment to universal human rights.

### **How climate mitigation could affect democratization**

All the above gives cause for thought, but action to reduce greenhousegas emissions adds further problems. For example, some thinkers worry about the threat mitigation measures could pose to free economic markets and individual freedom of choice, which underpin liberal democracy. State intervention can increase public bureaucracy in ways that defy democratic control. Political power will not be redistributed from corporations to the people; on the contrary, industrial interests well-placed to capitalize on climate action strategies, nuclear power for instance, could gain in political clout.

The electoral price of putting mitigation first, especially in developing countries where societies reasonably expect better material conditions, places a high premium on political leadership displaying considerable courage, powers of persuasion, and long-range vision. But these qualities are not over abundant even in rich democracies. To prioritize needful climate action, such leaders might have to go against the wishes of the people. This seems contrary to democracy; poor societies might be forgiven for wondering if a different form of rule would be preferable. Where oil and gas export revenues feature strongly in the public finances, climate

change initiatives that undercut these streams will present costs of national adjustment. Countries like Nigeria and Iraq struggling to build democracies would be affected; if political chaos ensued in exporters like Russia, Saudi Arabia, or Sudan, western-style democracy may not be the obvious outcome. Finally, an international approach to climate mitigation dominated by the big powers and transferring decision-making, monitoring, and enforcement rights to global institutions, has consequences for national democratic selfdetermination.

### **What democratization means for global warming**

Although no necessary connection exists between liberal democracy and environmental responsibility, the customary view is that democracies are more environmentally inclined than non-democracies. However, the record of greenhouse gas emissions, dating from well before Kyoto and now that the climate effects are understood, paints a disappointing picture. Kyoto's weak targets are not being met by many democracies; fortuitous reasons explain exceptions like the UK. In recent years OECD democracies overall have increased total and per-capita CO2 emissions. Adding responsibility for carbon emissions at the point of consumption not production – “carbon leakage” to countries like China and India that rejects mandatory targets – darkens the picture further. Public opinion in the democracies varies, but even where climate awareness is high, the evidence for wide popular support for decisive policies and lifestyle change is weak.

Certainly, differences exist between Sweden, say, and countries like Russia and Saudi Arabia, as the 2009 Climate Change Performance Index 2 shows for levels and trends of energy-related CO2 emissions and climate policies. But the same study left the highest three places empty and awarded low grades to several democracies, like the United States, Australia, and Canada. France performed well by sourcing its electricity from nuclear power – an environmentally sensitive issue. The “democratic deficit” of the European Union makes it doubtful that democracy can claim the credit for EU climate leadership. And just as wealthy, established democracies find it difficult to rise to the challenge of climate mitigation, how much more challenging must it be for newly emergent democracies like Indonesia, South Africa, Mexico, or Brazil, let alone poor countries that are still “lost in political transition”? In contrast President Barack Obama told the US Congress that China has launched “the largest effort in history to make their economy energy efficient”, an accolade that China's allocation of fiscal stimulus spending to investment in renewables enhances. Of course, China has much to gain from scaling back the need for future climate adaptation.

### **Democracy and climate adaption**

The Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen famously argued that democracy is more likely than its alternatives to prevent famine, but can we be sure that democracies everywhere will shelter citizens from all the harm from climate change? The answer is no, for several reasons. Society's ability to afford the financial and economic costs of climate adaptation is important here; and as studies like *Climate Change as a Security Risk 3* show, the state's strength and quality of governance are influential, too. But democracy does not uniquely guarantee development, a strong state, and good governance: on the contrary, democratization may even be dysfunctional. There may be countries where the interests of climate action suggest that investing in state capacity and governance should take precedence over undertaking the hazardous journey toward liberal democracy.

### **Addressing climate change, promoting democracy?**

Ideally, perhaps, progress toward stable democracy and tackling climate change should proceed together. But the chance that in some places political experimentation could retard the bold and urgent action now needed on climate change cannot be ignored. Similarly, in some places the unavoidable effects of a changing climate make democracy's advance more difficult. In order to be persuaded that more democracy is a solution to climate change, then politicians and peoples in established democracies must demonstrate a stronger commitment to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions and help developing countries of all political types address the burdens of climate adaptation. After all, assisting vulnerable communities to minimize the harm done by climate change offers no political certainties but may still be the most effective way to climate-proof everyone's democratic ambitions, in the longer run. The bottom line is that international negotiations in Copenhagen on a climate change deal must show an understanding of the significance for, and relevance of, democratization inside countries, not least in the developing world.

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