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Unsustainability in Climate Policy: Climate Change policies in an era of rising
nationalism/populism

The current climate change situation has caused optimism to wane, to say the least. Temperatures keep rising and the dreaded 1.5C mark seems all the closer as the days, weeks, months, and years pass by. As the severity of the situation continues to become clearer and denial gets more difficult, the response from the public has tilted in favor of strong and decisive action to turn our fate around and avoid the effects that have yet to come. However, the response from politicians around the world has not yet risen to match those of the common people. As is frequent in many areas, the political decision-making progress has resulted in several dead attempts and half-hearted moves to deal with the problems stemming from anthropogenic climate change, countering the growing amount of awareness and support for action on the issue.

To make matters worse, the past few years have been full of political turbulence around the world, with the rise of governments rejecting the global status quo and favoring a retreat from international engagement. The unpredictable rise of these governments, often called “populist” and/or “nationalist”, has made its impact on the climate change decision-making debate as well, with several of them resisting the call for action and even perpetrating the movement to deny that humankind has had a hand in causing the matter. This trend comes at a critical time for global policymaking, as the influence of these governments is cutting into the momentum of the Paris Agreement and slowing down a process that was not exactly quick to begin with.

With this unfortunate setback in mind, it is important to examine these governments in order to conclude exactly what drives them away from more decisive action to combat climate change and what factors are not as important. By doing so, we gain a greater understanding of the roadblocks to a solution and how to better frame the debate in order to maximize engagement around the world. In order to do so, we will look at various of these governments around the world and try to examine the characteristics that unite them and the different angles through which they examine environmentalist policy.

To start off, the most notable example of a government with the aforementioned characteristics is far and away the Trump administration of the United States of America. Trump's surprising 2016 victory has sowed political discord all over the world, and it has been felt acutely in climate change discussions. Trump has continuously made comments that ignore scientific reasoning and deny the global consensus on climate change, both before and after becoming President of the US (@realDonaldTrump). These comments highlight Trump's lack of understanding on basic scientific principles and an unprecedented aggression towards global efforts to combat the issue. These stances have trickled down into the rest of the government through key Trump appointments. Notable examples of climate change deniers that Trump has appointed include Rick Perry, the Secretary of Energy (Mufson, Steven), and more importantly Scott Pruitt, Trump's first EPA chief and former Oklahoma attorney general famous for using the latter role to litigate against environmentalist policies formed by the department he later came to lead (Davenport and Lipton). With Trump's blessing, the people he has appointed have led efforts to implement heavy-handed and possibly disastrous deregulation (Monsell, Kristen) that could have negative effects for years to come.

The Trump administration's anti-science climate stances and policies, combined with the influence that the US as a whole enjoys, have slowed climate policies and threatened to undo previous progress (Curtin, Joseph). The factor of US influence on the world is increasingly problematic following Trump's abrupt withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, which not only saw the retreat of a former key negotiator but also has decreased the incentive to transition away from fossil fuels.

Besides denial of the most basic of scientific principles, the motivation for Trump's decisions on climate change appear to be primarily economic, based on his repeated denouncement of the effects of regulations on the economy (@realDonaldTrump). He has notably campaigned as being protective of jobs in fossil fuel industries, particularly coal mining, and has almost exclusively blamed regulation for a loss of jobs in the sector.

Transitioning to the south, another notable offender in the field of progress-reversing environmental policies is Jair Bolsonaro, the newly elected President of Brazil. Bolsonaro's climate policies are particularly dangerous because Brazil houses the Amazon rainforest, which is the largest of its kind and has, for centuries, helped regulate global temperatures through its plant life (Nobre, Antonio Donato). Unfortunately for the world, the Amazon was already at risk even before Bolsonaro's election. Between the 1970s and 2000s, heavy deforestation due to industries like cattle ranching has heavily plagued the vulnerable marvel and caused it to lose vast amounts of land (Margulis, Sergio). The impact from the loss of this area alone is already significant enough on its own. Unfortunately, Bolsonaro's policies threaten to make the problem significantly worse.

Ever since the election, Bolsonaro made it clear that his approach to climate change would be markedly different from his predecessors', which had previously made Brazil a world leader in environmental policymaking (Horton, Escobar). Since taking office, Bolsonaro has made rigorous

efforts to effectively neutralize his country's climate change efforts by restructuring the Brazilian bureaucracy, by eliminating and moving several departments and sub-departments dedicated to climate change. Notably, he has also renamed the Secretariat of Climate Change and Forests, formerly in charge of three of the eliminated departments, to the Secretariat of Forest and Sustainable Management, and removed climate change from its mission statement. (Horton, Escobar). These notable shifts in structure indicate that deforestation stands to get worse under Bolsonaro's administration.

Despite the similarities in action, Bolsonaro's administration differs from several other notable world governments because it has not resorted to outright denial of the science behind climate change. This curious stance has not been confined to speeches alone and can be seen in the relatively untouched state of the government office in charge of observing climate change and measuring carbon emissions. Rather than outright denialist, the Bolsonaro administration has instead chosen to be more dismissive of the issue and deprioritize it. In order to do so, it has tied the issue to political ideologies they oppose, such as left-wing parties and organizations and, more importantly, globalists. (Horton, Escobar) This association of climate change to the opposition has been key to waving away the negative effects of the administration's actions and justifying the deprioritizing of environmental concerns. However, it is unclear to what extent this actually forms part of the administration's motivation; what is known is that, similar to the Trump administration, the Bolsonaro administration perceives sound environmentalist policy as detrimental to the economy, as Bolsonaro's Minister of Foreign Affairs once explained when claimed that the idea of climate change is a way to "suffocate the economic growth of capitalist, democratic countries".

Over in the east, the Russian administration of Vladimir Putin is another key example of a nationalist government that has not engaged positively in international climate change

policymaking. Unlike many other nationalist governments', the rise to power of the Putin administration is relatively dated, with Putin first becoming president in 1999 and maintaining the final say in policymaking, officially or unofficially, since then. The case of environmental policy in Russia is an interesting case because of the staggering grip on power that Putin holds over the country and his acute interest in maintaining it. In order to maintain his hold, Putin has often looked to boost the economy in tandem with the fossil fuel industry. In order to prevent questioning, this has led to a large-scale effort by the state-controlled media to engage in climate change denial by painting the idea of anthropogenic climate change as undecided, participation in climate change as illogical, and the impacts of climate change on Russia as low risk (Tynkkynen and Tynkkynen). This is similar in style to many of the governments that have subsequently come into power, but notably much more extreme in implementation. Although not having been previously unheard of in the country and mostly just increasing in scope under Putin, Russia's state-sponsored skepticism is an example of near-sighted policy gone too far; overdependence on the fossil fuel industry to boost the economy and therefore maintain a dangerous status quo has become so engrained into Russian politics that, even if one was wanted, it is difficult to image how to implement a reversal of it. For the purposes of this overview, it serves as a stark reminder of what may happen if climate change is deprioritized for too long. The warning that Russia emits to the world serves as a startling reminder of why progress needs to advance as quickly as possible in the direction of a solution to climate change.

To contrast with the decades old Putin administration and Russian precedent, it is also important to note the stance of the more recently-formed Five Star Movement in Italy, another anti-establishment electoral power that has recently come into power through a coalition with the far-right, nationalistic League party. Among the groups mentioned so far, Five Star stands out for,

at least in theory, being quite in favor in of environmental causes, with these being one of the namesake five issues at the core of its foundation (Natale and Ballatore). This makes Five Star evidence that political populism and nationalism and anti-environmental stances do not necessarily go hand-in-hand. Unfortunately for advocates of decisive action, Five Star's environmental stance has fallen victim to one of its trademark flaws, a lack of comprehensive policy preferences prior to taking part in its coalition. Because of the lack of a detailed policy layout, Five Star's environmental goals have, as well, fallen victim to economic pressures and been phased to the background (The Local). As such, Five Star's view on environmental policy offers both a promising possibility of separation between climate change stances and political inclination, along with a grim reminder of the all-too-common lack of priority of this stance present in many administrations, although to what extent this is due to the League's role remains unknown in the current infancy stages of the young coalition.

In the rest of Latin America, several other countries form an interesting picture in regards to their approach to climate change. Following the rise of several governments that have been described as populist in a regional movement commonly called the "Pink Tide", and the subsequent turn away from this style of government, several administrations with different ideals and styles have come to coexist in the region. Although there is broad support for action to curb the effects of climate change among most countries, the differences in style between populist and non-populist governments have made themselves known in international climate change negotiations as well (Torres, Jorge Foa). In line with other actions these countries have taken in international diplomacy, populist administrations such as those of Ecuador's Rafael Correa and Argentina's Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner have tried to leverage the question of responding to climate change in order to serve their own foreign policy agenda and push back against the

countries, notably the US, that they have postured against in their political campaigns. These administrations have done so by pushing for agreements that assign responsibility for action based on historical levels of blame for the effects that have manifested themselves, rather than based on maximization of positive progress. This negotiation style is best illustrated by a quote from former Argentinian Vice President Amado Boudou, in which he says “El abordaje del cambio climático no puede desvincularse de la agenda del desarrollo, la erradicación de la pobreza y mejora de la distribución del ingreso entre países” (translation: “We cannot separate the question of climate change from the agenda of development, eradication of poverty, and better distribution of income among countries”). What this would mean, in theory, is that climate change diplomacy would go hand-in-hand with efforts to integrate historically disadvantaged peoples; however, in practice, it has instead meant that the floor for debate on how to make progress and push back the clock has become yet another opportunity to gain an advantage over political rivals in the ever-lasting quest for foreign influence. Despite the fact that the region is still answering serious questions on the integrity of government officials supposedly efforts to advance integration, like, for example, Boudou’s following his conviction on numerous corruption cases (Argentina, Tribunal oral en lo Criminal Federal 4) (a phenomenon that has sadly become common among ex-officials of Latin American populist governments), the effects of these policies transcend the integrity of the efforts; rather than accomplish the stated goal, they have simply led to power struggles that have undermined the goal of multilateral action.

Meanwhile, the efforts of Latin American non-populist governments in Latin America have, for the most part, served as a foil to those of their neighbors; Torres notes that, instead of infusing climate change negotiations with an agenda contradictory to progress in this field, these countries have strived to make agreements that reach across the political aisle. This contrast can

be observed in the overnight change in Argentina's style during the 2015 Paris negotiations, during which former President Kirchner completed her last term and transferred power to the non-populist administration of the current President, Mauricio Macri. When he took office, Macri sent a new envoy to the negotiations with instructions to negotiate with a wider range of countries and make an attempt to "lower the decibels" (an Argentinian expression indicating a transition towards a more soft-spoken position). This overnight shift in stance resulted in an attempt to make negotiations more pragmatic and made for a smoother negotiation progress. Another clear example of this difference in negotiation style can be seen in the approach of the current Chilean administration, whose Minister of the Environment, Maria Ignacia Benitez, has described her Ministry's goals in negotiating climate agreements as "un relato constructivo que ponga de relieve la cooperación, desafiando las lógicas imperantes de Norte contra Sur, o de grande contra pequeño, las que solo antagonizan e impiden la generación de consensos" (translation: "a constructive discourse that focuses on cooperation and defies the prevailing ideas of North vs South, big vs small, that only serve to antagonize and prevent the forming of a consensus"). The result of this difference in posture produces noticeable effects: Chile has signed on to more agreements than both Ecuador and Argentina and has come to prominence as a mediator in the world stage of climate change agreements through its long-term pragmatic approach. As these contrasting approaches show, the political tendency to be combative in climate change policymaking has a marked effect and provides a strong incentive to ensure that this process is as depoliticized as possible.

As may be evident by now, all of the aforementioned groups have, in some way, acted in ways that delayed the path to a solution. Despite this, there are marked difference in approach and public stance, ranging from outright denial, to a lack of priority on the issue or combative

negotiation that in practice disincentivizes multilateral action. These difference in approach underscore the fact that, despite an overarching nationalist and populist record, these labels do not negate the differences between them and show that it is unlikely that their vaguely common characteristics are the cause of weak environmental records. Instead, there are two particular trends stand out much more significantly and that must be countered comprehensively in order to make an effective attempt at reaching solutions. The first trend is a conflict between short-sighted economic policy and long-term environmental goals. Simply put, short-term economic gains by promoting declining fossil fuel industries have caused numerous setbacks to long-term negotiations and will continue to do so as long as these gains are promoted in elections. The second trend is a worrying use of climate change as a proxy in efforts to jockey for international influence. This trend contradicts efforts to advance towards a solution in two ways: it either serves as a virtual Trojan Horse, by masquerading as a legitimate effort but in fact putting our ability to compromise at risk, or by creating a contradicting effect even in domestic policies by establishing an apparent association between economic policies and the political opposition.

Unfortunately, these trends are not simple and require a thoroughly developed approach, contradictory to the urgent nature of climate change as a whole. However, there are a few possible solutions that could prove effective. First, there is a need for key negotiators to set a precedent by inviting opposition parties from each country to multilateral climate change discussions. This practice has the potential to depoliticize climate discussions by not just limiting engagements to the current election winners, who will more likely than not have to transfer power at some point. It is quite ironic that discussions pertaining to an issue that will affect us for millennia to come do not, in any official way whatsoever, involve potential future administrations, even though this should be a logical step in ensuring continuity. Interparty involvement in climate change

discussions has the potential to decrease political incentive to undo previous actions, and will make it harder to identify environmentalist policies with any particular groups. Another possible tactic is to make strong environmental policy a requirement to maintain membership in international economic forums, such as the World Trade Organization and G20. This requirement would serve to make it contradictory to economic gains, short- or long-term, to deprioritize environmental policy in favor of economic policy. Despite the possibilities these fixes offer, implementing them remains easier said than done, as almost any country in the world is likely to take their political and economic risks more seriously than their environmental potential.

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