

All Politics Is Local, Including Climate Politics

The idea that climate change is a “collective action problem” has held back international negotiations for years, researchers say.

By [Eric Roston](#)

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Nobody likes cheaters. Is it possible to hate them too much?

The 30-year record of climate diplomacy suggests the answer is absolutely yes, according political scientists Michaël Aklin of University of Pittsburgh and Matto Mildemberger of University of California, Santa Barbara.

To understand how that could be, consider for a minute how we’ve been encouraged to think about international climate talks since 1992, when leaders agreed in Rio de Janeiro to the framework that still governs climate talks to this day.

Climate change is frequently called a “collective action problem,” meaning that victory requires participation from everyone and that any diplomatic agreement must prevent and punish “free riders,” or countries that benefit from global progress without cutting their own emissions.

Yale economist and 2018 Nobel laureate William Nordhaus wrote in 2015 that treaties have largely failed because of “the strong incentives for free-riding in current international climate agreements.” The late Harvard economist Martin Weitzman wrote two years later that “the core problem” in global climate politics is “to overcome the obstacles associated with free-riding.”

The U.S. isn't a member of the Paris Agreement anymore (a condition President-elect Joe Biden has pledged to reverse once he's inaugurated in January). Leaders from Australia, Brazil, Mexico, Poland, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey—all still parties to the 2015 pact—have been criticized for setting climate goals too lax to be taken seriously. By the logic of the free-rider doctrine, all these nations are cheaters. Fearing they'll be taken advantage of, climate champions should also drop out of the Paris Agreement and unwind their climate policies.

So why did 75 countries announce stronger climate commitments this past Saturday at a virtual conference to mark the fifth anniversary of the Paris climate agreement and preview next year's round of climate talks in Glasgow? The U.K. just tightened its 2030 emissions goal to 68% below 1990 levels. European Union leaders agreed to change their target to a 55% emissions drop by 2030. Denmark, the EU's biggest oil producer, will phase out oil production by 2050. China shocked the world in September by vowing to zero out its emissions by 2060, a move heralded potentially as “the single biggest piece of climate news in the last decade.” While still woefully insufficient, climate efforts are growing stronger, not weaker, the U.S. and other cheaters notwithstanding.

There's a better explanation than free-riding to explain how countries negotiate, Aklin and Mildenberger say: domestic political factions and special interests. The core problem negotiators face isn't fear that other nations will betray them, it's getting domestic support for their positions. "Climate policies create new economic winners and losers," the two academics write. These potential winners and losers vie to control national discussions, and that's primarily what guides the big talks.

Aklin and Mildenberger run through the history of climate diplomacy to show that the classic examples of the free-rider hypothesis in action don't really hold up. Before world leaders—including U.S. Vice President Al Gore—signed the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, the Senate overwhelmingly voted against the idea over concerns that it wouldn't bind developing nations as it would rich ones. The George W. Bush White House formally ended U.S. support for Kyoto in 2001 after relentless lobbying from the oil industry, and the treaty has entered collective memory as a missed opportunity.

Despite not solving climate change, however, the Kyoto Protocol raised awareness around the world, with national commitments increasing despite the U.S. absence, Aklin and Mildenberger write. The agreement prompted the EU to start its Emissions Trading System, and created a "clean development mechanism" that let rich nations buy carbon credits from emissions-avoiding projects in developing countries.

Opposition to free-riding "is an idea that's very intuitive," Mildenberger said in an interview. But what's "created the most friction has been economic conflicts between winners and losers at the national level."

But aren't politicians such as the U.S. officials who point fingers at China for standing to benefit from U.S. emissions curbs clearly responding to the free-rider threat? No, the authors write. It's a "rhetorical flourish to disguise just outright opposition," Mildemberger said. By casting themselves as willing to cooperate under the right conditions, these officials are hiding the likelier fact that they are unwilling to cooperate under any conditions.

The Paris Agreement already represents a monumental shift in diplomatic approach. The pact is an aggregation of domestic pledges, not a centralized litany of instructions. It's not "the kind of straight jacket that was imposed in the past," Aklin said. "It also allowed each country to focus on what they were good at."

The three most important stories to watch in the coming year aren't related to Paris agreement sticking points at all, Aklin said, further underscoring the flexibility of this diplomatic agreement. How will Biden implement his climate strategy? What details can China add to its dramatic September announcement? And how will India phase out its coal?

In the next phase of climate diplomacy, cheaters are only cheating themselves.