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Reflecting on Democracy, Corruption and Climate Change in the COVID-19 Era

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When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Europe, most governments responded with a quick and efficient shutdown, closing economies and forcing their citizens to take on new modest lifestyles with no international travelling, eating out, or shopping. These are actions that climate activists have been advocating for years and yet no democratic government dared to constrain the liberties of their citizens to such an extent before, at least not for the sake of the climate. Why have countries been able to mobilize so quickly in a fight against the spread of COVID-19, but are lacking such a response to tackle climate issues?

There are several important characteristics that distinguish climate change from the current pandemic. First, the problem of climate change is “invisible” – the majority of the population has not yet experienced severe consequences from climate change first hand and those who have might not be able to attribute their hardships to the elusive problem of the changing climate. Although in the long term the problem is acute and severe, it does not affect human survival in the short term and remains easy to de-prioritize in favor of more urgent needs. Second, there is a significant time lag between our actions and climate response: it takes a long time before the results from climate change interventions (policies) become visible in the environment to the public. Third, the sources of climate change are diffuse and it is difficult to assign responsibility or hold particular actors accountable, unless they are obviously large CO₂-emitters.

These characteristics make climate change a particularly challenging issue for democratic governments. The slow-moving nature of climate change, its diffuse sources, and low ranking in people's preferences is incompatible with short electoral cycles. Political survival of democratic leaders relies on public approval and if the electorates do not support spending on climate change mitigation, then there is little motivation for political leaders to pursue climate goals. This is especially true if climate action comes at the expense of short-term policy programs, such as building schools and hospitals, that deliver quick visible results and may boost legitimacy. Moreover, if citizens are concerned, it is easy for governments to create an image of climate action by addressing the climate change problem in public policies but avoid responsibility by evading implementation. As citizens are aware of the slow-moving response of the climate to policy change, they might not be able to trace the lack of results to a particular policy or a leader.

Authoritarian regimes, however, are not doing better. In theory, a more coercive alternative than a liberal democracy for climate change action is appealing; however, pro-climate authoritarian leaders are scant and there has been little evidence of authoritarian regimes credibly pursuing and delivering on climate goals. The commonly brought up exception is perhaps that of China. However, despite China's ambitious climate pledges, we are yet to see if the country delivers on its promises. Moreover, calls for authoritarian transition for the sake of the climate are dangerous. The widely reported democratic backsliding in the world today is often due to populist politicians who appeal to electorates with promises for short-term visible results, far from beneficial for the climate.

What makes it even harder for both democratic and authoritarian regimes to achieve climate goals is corruption. Corruption exacerbates the challenges that climate change poses to governments by stimulating the short time horizons of all actors, from citizens to business actors to political leaders. For example, when corruption is a “rule of

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the game,” there are often severe income inequalities and a lack of universal, reliable healthcare and education systems. Improving these policy areas most often ranks higher among citizens’ policy preferences than climate change mitigation. Due to the instability and uncertainty in contexts with systemic corruption, polluting industries, aiming to maximize their profit, will have a channel to avoid regulations by paying their way out of the prescribed rules instead of complying. Political leaders in turn are more likely to engage in rent-seeking behavior, given the opportunities, rather than fixing long-term problems.

Corrupt practices, such as bribery and favoritism, impede the successful enforcement of climate laws. They hamper compliance with climate regulations by creating more channels to avoid fines for unlawful behavior. Widespread embezzlement, or stealing of public funds, may divert collected tax revenue or climate aid away from climate goals and at the same time may decrease trust among the taxpayers, thereby lowering their compliance and increasing the motivation for tax evasion. With a lower level of trust in government, support for climate policy instruments, such as carbon taxes, is also likely to fall as citizens develop a belief that the policy instrument will not achieve its purpose; for example, that money from tax-collection will be “lost” or implementation will be inefficient.

In addition, corruption creates opportunities for businesses to strengthen their influence over politics. Even in settings with relatively low levels of corruption, the voices of polluting enterprises are rather strong in political decision-making due to lobbying and business financing of political campaigns. Corruption opens up a new channel for powerful business actors whose interests clash with climate change mitigation to influence political decision-making and the implementation of climate policies.

Empirical examples of the detrimental effect of corruption on climate change action are plenty. Comparing countries around the globe, economists Heinz Welsh and Matthew Cole independently show that countries where corruption is widespread emit more CO₂, holding other relevant drivers of emissions constant. Political scientist Aksel Sundström provides a comprehensive overview of numerous case studies demonstrating how corruption exacerbates the problem of deforestation – one of the major sources of CO₂ emissions in countries with tropical forests. Recent studies by Marina Povitkina and co-authors show that corruption hampers the achievement of climate goals in democracies, providing evidence that democracies with relatively less widespread corruption are doing substantially better than democracies with pervasive corruption.

In sum, the problem with climate change commitments is that there are few incentives for rational leaders, be they democratic or authoritarian, to launch and maintain their long-term implementation. Therefore, international cooperation and pressure is key. Participation in international climate agreements and ratification of international decisions in domestic legislation may give national climate commitments a necessary boost. As the record of international cooperation on climate goals shows a lack of accountability and climate action in authoritarian regimes, the hope for credible commitments to climate change mitigation rests on democracies of the world. However, corruption remains a lingering issue that may hamper efforts to enact effective climate policies in democracies. Tackling corruption in the public administrations that implement climate policies, the judicial systems that enforce climate laws and the legislative branches that adopt climate policies should thus be a key component to any climate action.

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