ANALYSIS

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When Climate Activism and Nationalism Collide

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Given the importance of the fight against global warming, the conflict between nationalist narratives and green internationalism could become the dominant political divide of the 2020s. If so, then the climate debate may import global issues into national politics like never before.

There is an overwhelming consensus among scientists that this decade will be the last window for humanity to change the current global trajectory of carbon dioxide emissions so that the world can get close to zero net emissions by around 2050, and thus avoid potentially catastrophic climate risks. But although the massive technological and economic changes required to achieve this goal are well understood, their political implications are rarely discussed.

While climate activists have built an impressive international movement, broadening their political support and crossing borders, the nationalist narrative has been gaining ground in domestic politics around the world. Its central message – that the world consists of nation-states in relentless competition with one another – stands in sharp contrast to the climate movement's "one planet" emphasis on human solidarity. And these two trends are on a collision course.

Although greenhouse-gas (GHG) emissions do not respect political borders, and climate change affects all parts of the planet, the impact of global warming is decidedly not uniform. An *average* global temperature increase of 2°C will create extreme heat stress in India and Africa. Similarly, although rising sea levels will threaten lower-lying areas around the world, and more extreme weather events will affect almost everyone, already poor and vulnerable populations are especially at risk. Another inherently international aspect of the problem is carbon leakage as a result of trade. While GHGs are emitted in one country by the production of, say, steel, it is the use of that steel in importing countries that "causes" the emissions in the exporting country.

The net benefits for all countries of controlling global warming are clear, because the various tipping points (and the possibility of cascading effects) present huge global risks, and not just for future generations. Moreover, the green economy

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offers big medium-term opportunities. But, because climate mitigation is a global public good, and given the geographically varied impact of global warming and the transmission of emissions through trade, it is extremely difficult to make progress through multilateral negotiations. Every government tries to maximize its gains and minimize its losses according to a narrowly nationalist perspective – and often within very short-term political timeframes. The failure of the recent COP25 climate negotiations in Madrid reflects these difficulties only too well.

The climate movement has thus correctly perceived that success will require a *planetary ethics* based on global solidarity and responsibility, with any credible solution necessarily including compensation for the temporary losers from green policies. Solidarity may take the form of direct financial transfers or a global agreement to vary national emissions targets or carbon taxes according to countries' income levels.

For that reason, climate change poses a clear dilemma for the political right. On one hand, an increasing number of voters – including many conservatives – are becoming more sensitive to the climate challenge, as extreme weather events and air pollution resulting from GHG emissions directly affect them. Some strongly religious voters have also become sympathetic to conservationist pleas, and Pope Francis has weighed in with an encyclical on ecology, *Laudato Si'*.

On the other hand, the need to overcome short-term national interests in tackling global warming runs counter to the resurgent nationalist narrative. This is especially so in rich countries, which will have to compensate less developed economies either directly or by agreeing to differentiated rights and responsibilities. Raghuram G. Rajan, for example, recently proposed a formula whereby rich countries with *per capita* CO_2 emissions above the world average would pay into a global fund that rewards low *per capita* emitters. However, under Rajan's proposal, the United States would pay about $36 billion per year into the fund. Would nationalist politicians in advanced economies ever agree to such a formula, or even to much less ambitious variants?

Moreover, even governments that claim to be committed to the overall (and insufficiently ambitious) mitigation targets in the 2015 Paris climate agreement are dragging their feet when action requires substantial short-term sacrifice. Without robust solidarity, it seems, the tough measures and difficult compromises needed to protect the world from potentially devastating climate change are unlikely to come soon enough – if at all.

Some climate advocates minimize the distributional issue, because they want to build as wide a political tent as possible and emphasize the long-term gains for all from tackling global warming. And as some center-right political parties, notably in Europe, make climate protection part of their programs, government coalitions comprising them and green parties appear increasingly possible. Globally, however, the inherent contradiction between the conservative nationalist and green internationalist narratives will remain.

What China and India do is crucial, because they already account for about one-third of total global CO_2 emissions. Further rapid increases in their share would fuel the nationalist reflex elsewhere, making any global climate agreement even harder to achieve. The European Union's plans for a carbon border tax will be hotly contested, not least on equity grounds, unless developing countries are exempted. The EU's proposed tax also could trigger a negative reaction from the US, depending on the results of November's presidential election.

The Nobel laureate economist Robert J Shiller has argued that economies are driven more by popular "narratives" than by technical policies. The same is true of politics, and, given the centrality of the climate issue this decade, the conflict between climate activism and nationalism is likely to become more pronounced.

In fact, this clash may become a defining feature of politics, with the nationalist right facing a coalition of climate-oriented voters comprising not only today's Greens, but also those from the social-democratic center-left and the traditional center-right.

Moreover, other issues will be connected to this fault line, not least the need for *domestic compensation* of those groups that temporarily lose out as a result of ambitious climate mitigation efforts.

If the dominant divide of the 2020s is between the nationalist narrative and green internationalism, then the climate debate may import global issues into national politics like never before. The outcome, of course, remains to be seen.

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