



Global democracy and earth system governance

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ABSTRACT

The issue of climate change confirms the global reach of earth system governance, whose legitimacy and effectiveness could gain from democratisation. While electoral democracy as practised in states provides no model for global democracy, lessons drawn from the performance and history of states prove helpful in identifying the elements that a well functioning ecological democracy ought to strive for. We capture these elements through reference to the idea of a deliberative system, and show how the idea of such a system can be used to analyse, evaluate, and provide prescriptions for the global governance of climate change.

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1. Introduction

The relationship between democracy and environmental affairs now has a long history of study. In both normative and empirical literatures, the balance of opinion has over the years come down on the side of the efficacy of democracy. However, in normative thinking, much turns on what kind of democracy is at issue. In empirical study, a lot depends too on what indicators of environmental performance are used, and whether there is much of an effect independent of the level of economic development (if the environmental Kuznets curve that links eventually positive performance with the level of economic development holds).

The rise to political pre-eminence of the climate change issue creates new challenges because the issue is so clearly global, and so clearly one that has eluded existing governments of all sorts, as well as existing transnational and global political processes. The public opinion that drives democracy may only move decisively in the direction of action when its effects are large, visible, and immediate; but by then it may be too late. This is what Giddens (2009) calls “Giddens’s paradox”, though it had of course been common wisdom in environmental studies for several decades before Lord Giddens so thoughtfully bestowed its new name.

Losing patience with the seemingly interminable machinations of polycentric politics, some observers of climate change politics have called for more authoritarian approaches (for example, Shearman and Smith, 2007). James Lovelock in a 2010 interview asserted that “Even the best democracies agree that when a major war approaches,

democracy must be put on hold for the time being. I have a feeling that climate change may be an issue as severe as a war. It may be necessary to put democracy on hold for a while” (Guardian, 2010). Some point to the likelihood that the East Asian approach to environmental governance is likely to be as authoritarian as the East Asian approach to economic development (Beeson, 2010). These treatments echo works from the 1970s, when a discourse of limits and survival was accompanied by calls for authoritarian government by Garrett Hardin (1977), Robert Heilbroner (1974), William Ophuls (1977), and others.

Even if global authoritarianism were possible (which it is not), it would still be desirable to think about global democracy first – for the sake of legitimacy, even before we get to the question of environmental performance. Conventional liberal democracy, stressing competitive elections and individual rights under a constitution, is a non-starter at the global level for many reasons, including its close ties as a model to developed Western states (on this point, see also Spagnuolo, 2011). It is much more fruitful to think in terms of deliberative democracy. As Sen (2003) points out, democracy as voting is a Western construct, democracy as public reason and discussion is more universal. There is a substantial literature that points to the ecological efficacy of deliberative democracy (Smith, 2003; Baber and Bartlett, 2005), which can be joined to an emerging literature on global deliberative politics (for example, Bohman, 2007).

Many international relations scholars would at this point object that we have jumped the gun: that international politics lies in a realm beyond authoritarianism and democracy, where international regimes are created by negotiations between states (or through imposition by hegemonic states), but otherwise anarchy reigns. We assume that in light of contemporary global demands for legitimacy and accountability in global governance for climate change in particular (Biermann and Gupta, 2011), such a response will not do. And it is not as though negotiations between states have been a resounding success in

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producing an international climate regime that is either effective or legitimate.

In this article we show that recent work on the idea of a deliberative system enables fruitful contemplation of the elements of global democracy for earth system governance (see [Biermann et al., 2010](#), for an overview of earth system governance challenges). The task of identifying the key elements and characteristics of a deliberative system is aided by a brief review of the comparative environmental performance of states. Who performs best, and why? What shortcomings remain? We show in the next section that the environmental performance of consensual democracies is generally superior to that of adversarial democracies. However, the close proximity between the state and civil society in consensual democracies tends to thwart radical critique, which is necessary insofar as their environmental performance remains inadequate. In a global deliberative system, then, we should be looking for critical distance between empowered and public space. The value in thinking about global democracy in deliberative terms is then illustrated by the global governance of climate change. A rudimentary deliberative system already exists in this arena but its shortcomings are significant. The challenge for democracy and ecologically effective climate governance is to find ways to overcome these shortcomings.

2. Lessons from the Environmental Performance of States

To begin with the question of who does best: consensual democracies consistently out-perform other kinds of states. An inspection of the environmental performance league tables sponsored by the World Economic Forum shows many of the top positions occupied by European consensual democracies. (The rankings are online at <http://epi.yale.edu/Countries>). [Scruggs \(2003\)](#) finds that there is a strong positive association between degree of corporatism and environmental policy performance. Corporatism, a sub-category of consensual democracy that involves joint policy making by representatives of peak business and labour organisations and government executives, blurs the divide between government and opposition, and often coalition governments incorporate parties representing a broad range of social interests. While there is little agreement on the components of environmental performance indicators, there is a convergent validity across the findings of studies using different sorts of indicators (for further comparative studies, see [Jänicke, 1992](#); [Jahn, 1998](#)). [Poloni-Staudinger \(2008\)](#) finds that consensual democracies do better on many pollution control measures. Of course there are other factors that enter into explanation of cross-national variation in the environmental performance of states. Our claim is not that consensual democracy is the only explanatory variable that matters, merely that it is a particularly robust predictor. When it comes to climate policy in particular, the adversarial democracy of the UK has recently shown signs of breaking the mould by taking a leadership position; but we note that whatever policy commitments the labour government (defeated in 2010) adopted, UK leadership has yet to be reflected in outstanding performance.

What is responsible for the relatively good performance of consensual democracies? It could be the efforts they make to integrate seemingly conflicting values, which is why the discourse of ecological modernisation, putting environmental and economic values in a positive-sum relationship, flourishes in these states ([Mol et al., 2009](#)). It could be their economic systems: consensual democracies tend to have what [Hall and Soskice \(2001\)](#) call cooperative market economies, while adversarial democracies tend to have competitive market economies (and so embrace neo-liberal economics).

Another possibility is that consensual systems are more deliberative: that is, politics involves a greater ratio of communicative action to strategic action than in adversarial democracies. [Steiner et al. \(2004\)](#) find in their comparative study of parliamentary debates that consensual democracies such as Switzerland and Germany feature

substantially higher quality deliberation than adversarial democracies such as the United States and United Kingdom. Their finding is based on the careful application of a 'discourse quality index' that codes all interventions in debates on a number of criteria derived from Habermas' account of communicative action, and then sums the scores and divides by the number of interventions to get an average for the debate as a whole.

Deliberative, communicative action ought in theory to promote environmental values because in such action, argument is effective to the degree it proceeds in terms generalisable to all parties concerned ([Dryzek, 1987](#): 204–5). Ecological values are examples (of course not the only examples) of such values, so there is every reason to expect such values to come to the fore to the degree interchange is deliberative. Evidence from designed deliberative 'mini-publics' composed of ordinary citizens on environmental issues frequently shows that deliberation among participants induces such a green shift ([Niemeyer, 2004](#)). So for example [Fishkin \(2009](#): 124) trumpets the deliberative polls held on energy issues in Texas and Louisiana. After deliberating on the energy supply issue, the citizen participants came down decisively on the side of greater investment in renewable energy and conservation – and the Texas state government adopted some of the recommendations. [Dryzek et al. \(2009\)](#) show that mini-publics organised on the issue of genetically modified foods in many countries almost always come to conclusions that are more precautionary than the Promethean commitments of political elites, who are much more inclined to favour GM agriculture as an ingredient of conventional economic growth.

A more subtle analysis of both the ecological effectiveness of consensual states and its limits is made possible by taking a look at historical dynamics. Consider the environmental histories of Norway and (West) Germany, as analysed in [Dryzek et al. \(2003\)](#). Norway exemplifies the actively inclusive consensual state. Formations that in other countries inspire and constitute social movements are in Norway integrated into the state from the very beginning. So from the early 1970s, environmentalists participated in key policy making committees, and were funded by government. The membership of these organisations has always been tiny, as they do not need members. While all this may look exemplary, what it means is that Norway can institutionalise only moderate forms of environmentalism and ecological modernisation. In contrast, Germany for a long time featured a lively green public sphere mobilising large numbers of activists, organisations, and ecological research institutes at a distance from the state. Until the mid 1980s, Germany's corporatist system of government was closed to environmentalists (and other social movements outside the traditional corporatist triumvirate of government executives, business, and labour). It was in Germany's oppositional green public sphere that some of the most profound and thoroughgoing green critiques of the political economy were generated. Since the mid-1980s many activists made the long March from oppositional public sphere to state institutions, as Germany's corporatist system opened up. But many of these activists carried at least a memory of radical critique.

If the performance of even the best consensual states is ecologically inadequate, then such radical critique is a necessity. And if consensual states cannot generate this kind of critique themselves, they must import it from elsewhere. Or to put it slightly differently, in a way that will support some generalisations we will make in a moment, effective environmental governance benefits from both deliberative empowered space and deliberative public space at a critical distance. Any consensual government in empowered space should be linked to contestation in public space. This insight can be applied to governance of any kind and level: from the local to the global, from sovereign government to informal networks.

These generalisations drawn from comparative studies of states will not automatically apply to the structurally different international global polity (for which we can have no direct cross-sectional

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