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Coalitions in the Climate Change Negotiations

RÉSUMÉ

Les coalitions aident les petits pays - qui, autrement, ne seraient pas en mesure d'assister à des réunions telles que la COP26 - à faire entendre leur voix. Bien que les coalitions soient essentielles aux négociations multilatérales et qu'un nombre croissant d'entre elles soient actives dans les négociations sur le climat, elles restent peu étudiées. C'est pourquoi notre récent ouvrage "Coalitions in the Climate Change Negotiations" (Klöck et al. 2020) examine le paysage des coalitions dans les négociations sur le climat, en se penchant sur la formation, le maintien et les effets des coalitions. Les contributions indiquent que les coalitions sont étroitement liées à la dynamique des négociations, qu'elles ont tendance à se maintenir une fois constituées et qu'elles opèrent à différents niveaux - ce qui conduit à un réseau complexe de coalitions qui se chevauchent partiellement.

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ABSTRACT

Coalitions help smaller countries – who may otherwise be unable to attend meetings such as COP26 in person – make their voice heard. Although coalitions are central to multilateral negotiations, and although an increasing number of coalitions are active in climate negotiations, they remain understudied. Our recent edited volume "Coalitions in the Climate Change Negotiations" (Klöck et al. 2020) therefore unpacks the landscape of coalitions in climate negotiations, examining coalition formation, maintenance, and effects. The contributions indicate that coalitions are closely related to negotiation dynamics; tend to remain once formed; and operate at different levels – which leads to a complex web of partially overlapping coalitions.

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1. Coalitions: A key feature of multilateral negotiations

COP26 in Glasgow is the first large in-person negotiation session in a long time. Because of travel restrictions, some countries – notably in Oceania – struggle to attend (e.g. Hook and Klan 2021). But thanks to their partners from the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), Pacific and island interests will still be present in Glasgow.

This example shows just how important cooperation with like-minded countries is, particularly for smaller and poorer countries. Although such cooperation in coalitions is omnipresent in any multilateral negotiation, coalitions remain understudied: We still know surprisingly little about how and when coalitions form, who initiates and joins coalitions, or how the plurality of coalitions affects negotiation dynamics and outcomes. The edited volume "Coalitions in the Climate Change Negotiations" (Klöck et al. 2020) starts to fill this gap. It brings together quantitative and historical institutionalist work, as well as case studies of a range of coalitions. The authors – from political science but also practice – thus explore

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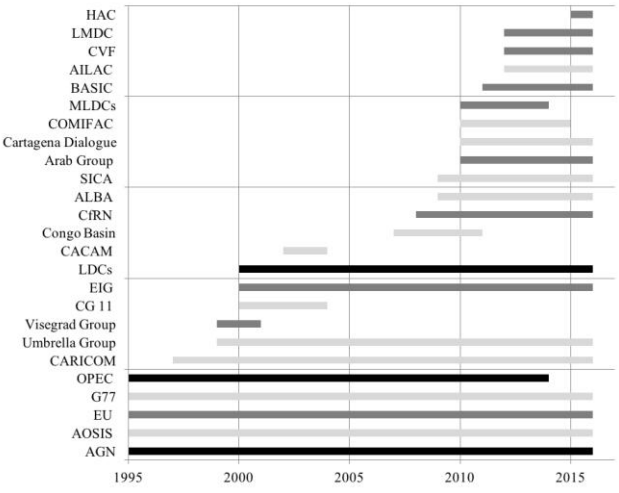
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how and when coalitions emerged, and zoom in on coalitions as diverse as the Pacific Small Island Developing States (P-SIDS), the Bolivarian Alliance of the Peoples of our America (ALBA), the Like-Minded Developing Countries (LMDCs) or the African Group of Negotiators (AGN). By thus going beyond case studies of individual coalitions and bringing together conceptual and empirical work on a plurality of coalitions, the edited volume considerably expands our knowledge of coalitions in (climate) negotiations.

2. Coalitions bring both benefits and costs to its members

Global climate negotiations are extremely complex. Taking place annually since 1995[1], these summits bring together almost 200 parties with vastly different interests and preferences, and cover a wide range of highly technical and partly overlapping items, such as deforestation or carbon markets. The annual climate summits now routinely attract thousands of government and non-state delegates. Coalitions are a key mechanism to facilitate and structure negotiations. They reduce the number of actors from 196 parties to around 20 groups (see figure 1) – although countries do still intervene as individual parties alongside the groups, and although not all groups intervene on all agenda items, or at every meeting.

Figure 1 : Climate coalitions over time



Colours indicate coalition cluster: black = global generic coalitions; dark grey = global climate-specific coalitions; light grey = regional coalitions.

Coalitions such as AOSIS further help smaller and poorer countries to more fully engage in the negotiation process. Some countries are only represented by a handful of diplomats at the climate meetings – or may even be completely absent[2]. Small delegations are hard pressed to cover the many different agenda items and attend the multiple and often simultaneous meetings. By pooling resources, information and expertise, and by coordinating with others, smaller countries can engage in a broader set of issues than what their individual delegations could cover. Similarly, the position of a group of countries automatically carries more weight than that of an individual country (particularly if that country is small). By improving their negotiation capacity and bargaining power, coalitions are thus of particular importance to smaller countries such as small island states.

At the same time, coalitions do not come without costs. Coalitions add another meso-layer to the negotiations; they represent "negotiation within negotiation" (Starkey et al. 2005, p. 40). It takes significant efforts and resources to bring together like-minded countries, negotiate a common position within the coalition, and constantly coordinate actions. During climate summits, many coalitions meet once, if not twice, daily. Coalition positions are also necessarily compromise positions, and these joint positions may be relatively far away from the positions of individual countries. This is particularly the case for larger and more heterogeneous coalitions, such as the G77 and China. Uniting over 130 developing countries, the G77 and China has struggled with internal fragmentation for some time, and often only manages to agree on some broad points, such as the need for technical and financial assistance from developed countries (e.g. Ciplet and Robert 2019).

Overall, however, the benefits seem to outweigh the costs, or so the growing number of coalitions in the climate negotiations seems to suggest. While some coalitions have been active since the very first climate summit in 1995, others emerged much later. Overall, we notice a proliferation of groups, in particular around the contested 2009 Copenhagen Summit and the acclaimed 2015 Paris Summit (Castro and Klöck 2020; see also figure 1). These coalitions – old and new – come in many forms and shapes, from loosely organised informal networks to very tightly coordinated and cohesive organisations. Indeed, a key purpose of the edited volume is to describe coalitions more systematically and to identify differences and commonalities across them, so we can better understand how coalitions affect negotiation dynamics and outcomes (and vice-versa). In the following, we briefly summarise four key results.

3. Coalitions in Climate Change Negotiations: Four Key Findings

The contributions to the edited volume emphasise the role of context and temporal dynamics: The emergence and evolution of coalitions closely reflect overall negotiation dynamics. The fact that many coalitions first started to coordinate around the Copenhagen and Paris Summits reflects the importance of those two meetings for the overall

[1] 2020 was the first year in which no COP could take place because of the global pandemic.

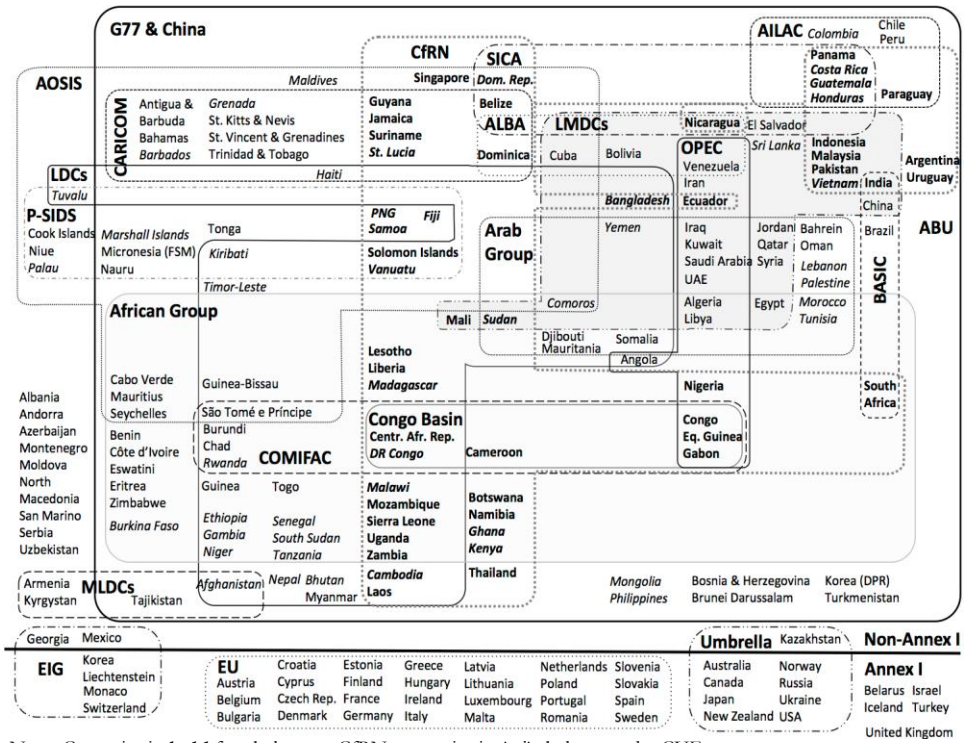
[2] Even without travel restrictions, countries have not always been able to attend meetings. Trinidad and Tobago for example had no delegation in 2017, San Marino was absent in 2016, 2017 and 2019.

climate regime, and key discussions in the run-up to the 2009 Copenhagen Accord and 2015 Paris Agreement, respectively. Groups like BASIC (Brazil – South Africa – India – China) or the Like-Minded Developing Countries (LMDCs) appeared when overall negotiations focused on the differential treatment of developing ("Non-Annex I") and developed ("Annex I") countries, and the question of whether the latter should also have legal obligations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions – which these groups opposed[3]. Similarly, the Cartagena Dialogue was formed by progressive countries from across to globe to salvage the negotiations after the failed Copenhagen Summit. As an informal network cutting across the developing-developed countries divide, the Cartagena Dialogue helped to create trust and momentum among countries from all major coalitions to put the overall negotiations 'back on track' (see Blaxekjær 2020). Just as coalitions shape negotiations, so do the negotiations shape coalitions.

Even if coalitions emerge at a specific time in the negotiations, once formed, they tend to be "sticky" and persist. While other research sees coalition formation as a short-term strategy to achieve specific common objectives (e.g. Drahos 2003), we find that climate coalitions typically go beyond such short-term cooperation. For example, BASIC and the LMDCs were eventually unsuccessful in their defence of a strict division of developed vs. developing countries: under the Paris Agreement, all countries have the same obligation to regularly communicate nationally determined contributions (NDCs). Yet even if the discussions have moved on, BASIC and the LMDCs continue to coordinate and issue joint positions in the negotiations. Coalition formation seems to be relatively resource-intensive, making countries reluctant to abandon such platforms once created. Nevertheless, coalition activity waxes and wanes: coalitions may be very active and vocal at some meetings and on some agenda items, but relatively inactive and silent at other points in time, or on other issues.

Not all coalitions operate at the same level: some coalitions are sub-groups, nested within larger coalitions such as the G77 and China. These sub-coalitions want to influence the position of that larger coalition; for example, the Pacific small island states started to meet separately to represent their Pacific voice within the larger Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) (see Carter 2015, 2020). In the main negotiations, these sub-groups typically explicitly align with and support the positions of the larger group, notably the G77 and China. Other coalitions are better described as "meta-coalitions", coalitions of coalitions. The Cartagena Dialogue specifically wanted to bring together representatives from different coalitions from the Global North and the Global South, to act as a bridge and identify common positions across the various groups to allow the negotiations to move forward (see Blaxekjær 2020). To some extent, there is thus a hierarchy of coalitions. Rather than adding just one meso-layer to multilateral negotiations, coalitions represent several nested layers of "negotiation within negotiation".

Figure 2 : The Landscape of climate coalition membership



Note: Countries in **bold** face belong to CfRN; countries in *italics* belong to the CVF.

These different layers of coalitions, but also their stickiness, result in a complex web of partially overlapping groups, as seen in figure 2. As a result, many countries are members of not one but multiple coalitions at the same time. Particularly countries from the Global South routinely belong to three or more coalitions. This multiple coalition membership seems to have both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, groups can mutually support each other and reinforce their respective positions. This is the case for example for sub-groups within the G77 and China that emphasise their alignment with the G77 position in plenary negotiations. Pacific SIDS also seem to have benefitted from being present in multiple groups (Carter 2020). In other cases, such as the African Group of Negotiators, multiple coalition memberships seem to have stretched limited resources too thinly, and brought tensions across and within groups to the fore.

[3] Under the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, only developed countries – mostly listed in Annex B to the Protocol had legally binding emissions reduction targets.

4. Coalitions in (Climate) Negotiations: Many Questions Remain

Coalitions are a fundamental feature of any multilateral negotiation (Dupont 1996), and the climate negotiations are no exception. Despite their importance, coalitions remain understudied. While our edited volume has expanded the field of coalition research, through both, more theoretical contributions of a plurality of coalitions, and case studies of individual coalitions, there remain many open questions. We here highlight three issues in particular, which are not only of academic interest but should also lead countries to reflect on and maybe reconsider their coalition memberships and participation.

First, the effects of coalition proliferation remain unclear, and this applies to effects on the behaviour of individual countries as much as on the overall negotiations: how do countries navigate multiple coalition memberships, especially smaller countries with few delegates? When do they engage in which coalition, and how? How does the co-existence of multiple coalitions affect the cohesion and influence of individual coalitions? Do (sub-)coalitions with overlapping memberships create bridges, facilitate deal-making and strengthen each other, or do they instead reinforce differences, "complexify" negotiations and make compromises harder?

Second, some coalitions are more than simple negotiation groups within the climate talks. Some emerge out of existing regional organizations, such as the Central American Integration System (SICA), or the Arab Group. Therefore, they engage with their member states beyond the climate negotiations, and in some cases contribute to capacity building efforts and to domestic policy development (see Chin-Yee et al. 2020 for some evidence from the African Group of Negotiators). The importance of coalitions for climate policy making beyond the climate talks is critically understudied.

Third, the pandemic has severely disrupted the climate negotiations (as other multilateral processes). 2020 was the first year without a climate summit in over 20 years of continuous negotiations. At least some of the more technical discussions were continued in virtual "consultations" (without decision-making power). How has this change in format affected coalitions? Does the use of virtual formats facilitate meetings and coordination of sometimes far-flung countries that would otherwise only come together in the annual climate summit (and interim meetings in Bonn)? Or does the absence of face-to-face meetings, informal networking and chatting in the corridors instead hinder coordination and cooperation, both within and across coalitions? Particularly countries from the Global South – for whom coalitions are of particular importance – tend to have low connectivity, and have resisted virtual negotiations that would go beyond non-binding 'consultations'.

As the urgency around finding effective solutions to the climate change challenge grows, so does the need to improve the voice and participation of those most vulnerable to climate change, as well as to enhance informal communication and exchange channels across parties in order to increase trust. Coalitions – particularly those crossing the traditional North-South or vulnerable-emitter divides – can be pivotal in achieving these aims. A closer look at how they can help rather than hinder negotiations, and also contribute to improving domestic capacities among the poorer countries, is needed both academically and among practitioners.

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