

The Problem with Consensus in the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change

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When Russia, along with Ukraine and Belarus, shut down one track of negotiations at the intercessional conference of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) last June, no one was pleased. “We need to act now, and we need to act together,” the negotiator for the Least Developed Country block said, expressing the frustration of the world’s most climate-vulnerable countries (Mathema 2013). The conference in Bonn, Germany was never to be a monumental one – it was not a full conference of the parties, rather, a smaller meeting of subsidiary bodies – but with the deadline for a new international climate agreement rapidly approaching, the Bonn conference was a potentially important step. Yet, by proposing an amendment to the provisional agenda aiming to hold “a formal discussion of meeting procedures,” the trio of Eastern European powers blocked all progress on matters most important to vulnerable nations relating to climate adaptation, forest protection, and the framework for a legal instrument to deal with climate-related catastrophic loss and damage (UNFCCC 2013b). The problem of procedure in the UNFCCC struck again.

A background document submitted to the UNFCCC Secretariat in the lead-up to the November 2013 Conference of the Parties (COP19) clarifies Russia’s concerns. In that document, the Russian Federation described an eroding UNFCCC process that limits the authority and usefulness of the institution. Legal entanglements are increasing and transparency is fading, Russia claimed. Additionally, the country wrote that, having never adopted the Draft Rules of Procedure, UNFCCC presiding

officers have relied on their long-standing fallback procedure – “ad hoc consensus” – in partial and dubious ways. Russia called for discussion of five specific issues at COP19, but the messy nature of consensus was at the root of each (UNFCCC 2013a).

The de facto and ad hoc decision-making procedure employed by the UNFCCC is the way the body got around its first roadblock – a refusal by Saudi Arabia and other oil-producing states to sign on to group voting rules – and conference presidents continue to abide by it, as the body has never since formalized decision-making rules (International Institute for Sustainable Development 1995). Yet, despite clear problems, 850 environmental NGOs most dedicated to climate action responded to Russia’s concerns by slamming the country for stalling progress (Brockley 2013). The major problem within the UNFCCC is a problem of international ambition, they indicated in a press statement, and the procedural claim was nothing more than a last-ditch effort by a low-commitment loser dragging its heels.

In this article, I will argue that international climate action advocates can’t dismiss procedural problems in the UNFCCC. Though the history of procedural questions in the UNFCCC has been one of blockage, these questions must be addressed for the sake of efficacy and justice. The existing UNFCCC decision-making process is both ineffective and unjust. It is ineffective because it hinders the exchange of information necessary to spur international climate cooperation, and it is unjust because it fails to adequately differentiate between countries based on their domestic capabilities (it assumes collective rather than shared responsibility). I

will develop these claims through an examination of the limits of consensus decision-making, through an analysis of the UNFCCC within an international climate regime complex, and through a discussion of shared responsibility as a response to the structural injustice of climate change. Finally, I will posit that by instituting some form of majority voting the Framework Convention could increase its fairness and effectiveness.

The Futility of Ad Hoc Consensus

Though the concept of consensus is connected to the private law principle of “consensus ad idem” – total agreement about the meaning of a contract that gives it its legal force – the principle of consensus as used in the UNFCCC lacks clear definition (Cambridge Business English Dictionary, 1st ed.). It does not mean complete unanimity. Often it is defined in the negative – the absence of “stated objection,” or of “express opposition,” leaving wiggle room when it comes to defining just what explicit objection looks like (Legal Response Initiative 2011). And sometimes, “consensus” can be declared despite the express objection of some. That’s what happened at the Cancun conference of the parties when the conference President Mexican Foreign Minister Patricia Espinosa gaveled through the conference a decision in the face of explicit objection from Bolivia. She argued that to hold everything up for one party would be to ignore the will of the other 193 states present, turning to a seemingly new understanding of consensus that one observer called “consensus minus one” (Rajamani 2011). The move appealed to those who point out that consensus decision-making is not meant to award all parties veto power. They say it ought to build the space for more comprehensive conversations, to elevate diplomacy, to form a broader base of buy-in among parties (Brunnée 2002).

Yet despite Espinosa’s success as a conference President – she achieved substantive progress where some thought it couldn’t be made – it’s hard to argue that the Cancun meetings were a *procedural* success. Decision-making procedures that accept objections by one party sometimes and not other times – procedures that leave that question up to the whim of the presiding officer – rest on fragile ground. One negotiator called it “terror by applause” (ibid.), perhaps a hyperbolic term, but one that raises the

question: how loud must the applause be to drown out the voices of a few?

The frustrations of ad hoc consensus decision-making do not vex the political processes of the world’s most effective international environmental bodies. None, besides the UNFCCC, relies simply on consensus formation without any kind of majority voting:

- The *Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species* requires a simple majority to approve procedural decisions, and a two-thirds majority to approve all other decisions (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora 2013).
- Parties to the *International Whaling Convention* aim to make decisions by consensus, but the rules of procedure allow majority voting if they cannot reach consensus. When voting, a two-thirds majority is required to approve changes to significant regulations on the status of water space, protection of specific species and whaling methods; in all other decisions, simple-majority rules (International Whaling Convention 2012).
- The *Montreal Protocol* requires a simple majority of the parties to approve procedural decisions, and a two-thirds majority to approve substantive decisions. The President determines which questions are matters of substance, and which are matters of procedure, though her discretionary power can be overruled by an appeal of one party and a ruling from a majority of the parties (United Nations Environment Programme Ozone Secretariat 2011).
- Like the IWC, the *Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity* requires parties to work towards decision-by-consensus, but provides a majority-vote-based alternative. If parties cannot reach consensus, a two-thirds majority is required to approve all decisions, except for those relating to the financial mechanism (which must be reached by consensus), or those relating to procedure (which require a less-

stringent simple majority) (Convention on Biological Diversity 1992).

- The *International Civil Aviation Organization* requires a simple majority to approve most decisions. Parties require a four-fifths majority to admit additional states into the convention, and a two-thirds majority to amend it (International Civil Aviation Organization 2008).

The goals of these multilateral agreements are more specialized and limited in scope than those of the Framework Convention, so they cannot be taken as precise analogues. Still, within these varying procedures, there are some clues that we ought not ignore regarding what works in international bodies. Though all of the bodies listed above have established and explicit voting rules, two – the International Whaling Convention and the Convention on Biological Diversity – aim for consensus, and use voting as a last-resort when consensus on an issue cannot be achieved. Though there are limits to majority rule from the perspective of justice, the voting rules in these organizations demonstrate a useful compromise; they require parties to attempt to forge agreements based on mutual compromise that all can agree to, but refuse to sacrifice efficacy and forward momentum for the sake of the procedure.¹

The ineffectiveness of consensus is also easy to explain if one looks at the UNFCCC through the lens of international regime complex theory. The UNFCCC is just one piece of a large and adaptable arrangement of international institutions – a “regime complex,” as termed by Robert Keohane and David Victor – that together work to combat international climate change in “sometimes conflicting, sometimes mutually reinforcing” ways (Keohane and Victor 2011). It’s a flexible free-for-all made up of many forms of organizations and agreements: U.N. legal regimes like the UNFCCC and its subsidiary bodies, expert scientific assessment groups like the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, specialized U.N. agencies that work on issues implicated by climate change like the U.N. Environmental Programme, “clubs” like the Group of 20, multilateral development banks, bilateral initiatives, and even unilateral programs like the California carbon trading system (ibid.). It’s an arrangement uniquely suited to tackle the issue of

climate change, an issue that’s defined by both “problem diversity” (its effects are cross-cutting), and “interest diversity” (solving the problem will require action by many) (ibid.).

Information Flow and Exchange

At first, the flexibility of this arrangement seems to support the “ad hoc” nature of consensus as employed by the UNFCCC. Yet the flexibility that Keohane and Victor write about is only important insofar as it helps develop the diverse and sophisticated information necessary for international cooperation on climate change (Keohane 1984). International regimes serve to help countries overcome “political market failures” – institutional barriers to mutually beneficial cooperation – by lowering “transaction costs” associated with international action, and by developing “bits and pieces” of law that establish norms of legal liability (ibid.). But ultimately, their biggest job is to help countries share information. Countries need a lot of it if they are to make action on public goods problems worth the investment. And they need high quality, trustworthy information, which comes only from high quality, trustworthy communication. Talking doesn’t equal trusting, Keohane writes:

Not all communication reduces uncertainty, since communication may lead to asymmetrical or unfair bargaining outcomes as a result of deception. Effective communication is not measured well by the amount of talking that used car salespersons do to customers or that governmental officials do to one another in negotiating international regimes! The information that is required in entering into an international regime is not merely information about other governments’ resources and formal negotiating positions, but also accurate knowledge of their future positions. In part, this is a matter of estimating whether they will keep their commitments (ibid.).

Given all of this – given that increased exchange of reliable information is the fundamental benefit of the international regime – the flexibility of consensus decision-making must be carefully analyzed. It is only useful so long as it doesn’t get in the way of information flows and the development of international trust.

The fact is that consensus obscures more than it reveals. It makes a fundamental and prior assumption that all parties have similar goals and expectations, and that they trust one another enough to work through disagreements publicly – and it removes potentially fundamental disagreements from the public debate. In so doing, it requires that discussions take place in a kind of political vacuum where parties are just responsible to one another, not the diverse group of stakeholders they actually represent. It ignores the push and pull of political dialogue within a country, and it ignores the fact that negotiators are sent as delegates of an entire state made of heterogeneous actors with diverse short-term interests that are often at odds with prospects of long-term cooperation.

And yet despite its need to adjust its goals and expectations, the UNFCCC continues to flatten widely varying national understandings by attempting to achieve consensus, a process that cannot possibly contain the multitude of national needs. This leads to a disconnect between stated procedure and actual procedure, perverting proceedings (Elias and Lim 1998). Despite an outward dedication to consensus building, despite UNFCCC Secretariat efforts to highlight commonalities among countries (see the Secretariat's November 2013 event about gender equity that ended in a group sing-along), deep divisions remain and the process breaks down.

We saw this happen at the November 2013 talks, when parties tasked with outlining features of a 2015 international agreement scattered into small group “huddles” after thirteen hours of group negotiation on the second-to-the-last day. Negotiators from Brazil, Venezuela, India, Bolivia, the U.S. and others “got hot and close to each other” in order to do the work that hadn't effectively been done, drafting aloud two contentious paragraphs of negotiating text, surrounded by a large scrum of observers, desperate to hear clues to their progress.² Fundamental disagreements, bottled up throughout two weeks of “consensus-building,” had impeded the way to substantive progress, and the only path forward was outside of accountable proceedings. The huddle pushed along negotiations, but it did so at the expense of transparency.

“We did not have the privilege of being in the huddle,” the negotiator from Colombia said once the group reconvened around 12:30AM, “in part because I am of small stature, and a small party” (personal

observation, November 23, 2013). Furthermore, the dubious transparency of the huddle-talks took up more time as the group reconvened, leading parties to “support the nature of the huddling,” or to criticize it (ibid.). This was an example of the two-faced nature of consensus negotiations: when parties outwardly dedicate themselves to building international consensus, late-night, side-corridor huddle-negotiations become necessary in order to deal with real disagreement. This ultimate breakdown of process is obfuscatory – it damages prospects for transparency.

Consensus obscures more than it reveals.

Instead, the UNFCCC procedure ought outwardly to embrace discord in order to align expectations and stated assumptions with reality. That's because, in a world where international cooperation is difficult – where it's easiest in the short-run for countries to go it alone, to pursue immediate self-interest – cooperation only happens when the world is threatened by the potentially disastrous effects of a go-it-alone strategy. Cooperation “reflects partially successful efforts to overcome conflict, real or potential,” Keohane writes, and it “takes place only in situations in which actors perceive that their policies are actually or potentially in conflict, not where there is harmony” (Keohane 1984). Cooperation is a “reaction to conflict or potential conflict,” he says, since “without the specter of conflict, there is no need to cooperate” (ibid.).

Though the “specter of conflict” comes with vastly different stakes depending on the issue at hand – economic cooperation is often easier to manage than military cooperation, for example – Keohane's argument resonates with what we've seen in the experiences of other international environmental bodies.³ Most use majority voting rules, but the two that seek to build consensus – the International Whaling Commission and the Convention on Biological Diversity – include a mechanism for voting as a last resort. In those two cases, voting *is* a variant of Keohane's “specter of conflict,” albeit one scaled down, that spurs along the formation of consensus first. The same arrangement (a dedication to consensus, with explicit voting rules for decisions on

which parties cannot reach consensus) is written out in the Mexico-Papua New Guinea proposed joint amendment to the Framework Convention. That 2011 document calls on parties to “make every effort to reach agreement on all matters by consensus,” but “if such efforts to reach consensus have been exhausted and no agreement has been reached, a decision shall, as a last resort, be adopted by a three-fourths majority vote” (UNFCCC 2011). Little progress on this amendment has been made.⁴ Still, because a clean vote makes visible the conflict that is obscured by the attempted consensus-formation, it’s likely that by instituting some sort of majority voting system within the UNFCCC, parties would increase the efficacy of international cooperative efforts.

Climate Change as Structural Injustice

But even if the move away from the current “ad hoc consensus” decision-making method doesn’t immediately increase the efficacy of the UNFCCC, it would make the body a stronger tool in the fight against the structural injustice of climate change. Climate change is a structural problem because of its multitudinous and interconnected challenges – the crosscutting effects that disproportionately affect the poor and marginalized, the multilayered web of stakeholders it implicates, the complexity of assigning blame. And it’s an injustice because of the asymmetry of its effects, damaging the livelihoods of the most vulnerable.

Though her writing has focused on the worldwide system of sweatshop labor, philosopher Iris Marion Young provides an account of structural injustice which is easily mapped on to the climate change issue. Climate change is not the result of intentional oppression or deprivation, but rather it is the “consequence of many individuals and institutions acting in pursuit of their particular goals and interests, within given institutional rules and accepted norms,” ultimately putting “large categories of persons under a systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities” while enabling “others to dominate or have a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercising their capacities” (Young 2006; Schiff 2014).

And just as this mess of problems is poorly untangled by rigid, comprehensive regimes, the structural injustice of climate change is hard to right through a “liability model” of responsibility that seeks

to assign blame, punish wrongdoers, and absolve everyone else (Young 2006). When dealing with a diffuse structural injustice, where massive inequality is not the result of intentions, or even of specific actors – where everyone in some sense is implicated – the traditional conception of responsibility breaks down. That’s why Young’s “social connection model” of responsibility is so useful in the climate change conversation (ibid.). The social connection model draws from a different conception of responsibility, the sense that “people have certain responsibilities by virtue of their social roles or positions” (ibid.). In determining who has what responsibility, the model is forward looking, pushing actors to carry “out activities in a morally appropriate way and aiming for certain outcomes” (ibid.).

Young lists five main aspects of her model, but one is particularly appropriate to the procedural question. She writes that the social connection model emphasizes “shared responsibility” that distributes discrete responsibility to individual parties, over “collective responsibility” that fails to hold individual states accountable (ibid.). Collective responsibility means that a group – a corporation, an organization, or, in this case, the parties to the UNFCCC – publically takes responsibility for an injustice. Though potentially useful, in the complexity of assigning responsibility for something like climate change, that’s often a way to shift blame, as Young suggests.

Drawing on the work of philosopher Larry May, Young writes that by claiming collective responsibility, a group can gain the moral high ground “without any of its individual members being determinately responsible for it” (ibid.). Collective responsibility is *deceptive* – it creates an aura of action without individual accountability necessary to spur action; it is *inequitable*, because it’s a responsibility that glosses over the variety of skills and capabilities among a group of actors; and ultimately, in the UNFCCC setting, it is *ineffective*, because it doesn’t allow for an ongoing conversation about how responsibility ought to be differentiated, a major sticking point in negotiations.⁵

There’s an interesting parallel here. The failures of collective responsibility – *deception*, *inequity*, and *ineffectiveness* – are the same as the failures of consensus. In fact, it seems that consensus decision-making itself is a model of collective, rather than shared, responsibility. Consensus is certainly deceptive, enforcing an ideal of collectively shared

assumptions and goals when they don't always exist, and the hold-ups in negotiation caused by its nebulous definition, as well as the ways in which it limits legitimate information flow between parties, demonstrate its ineffectiveness.

But comparing consensus to the concept of collective responsibility does further work for us – it demonstrates the ways in which consensus decision-making limits the justness of the UNFCCC. If a just conception of responsibility is a responsibility based on *politics*, however, or as Young calls it, “public communicative engagement with others for the sake of organizing our relationships and coordinating our actions most justly,” then attention to the quality of that engagement, to the quality of that communication, is crucial in any analysis concerned with global justice (Young 2006). Just process yields just outcomes.

And it's clear, in a process analysis, that consensus does not do the job. As negotiators entered hour thirty of the final day of the Warsaw talks, the negotiator from Venezuela took the floor to remind conference organizers of the human rights of the negotiators themselves. “Small countries with small delegations are being put in a very impossible physical situation to follow this conference,” she said, contrasting her delegation with those of large countries that have more negotiators who can share the burden of grueling talks. “We are human beings. We are not machines to deliver decisions,” she said (personal observation, November 23, 2013). The long hours of the process, as well as the breakdown of large group talks into small group huddles, draw negotiations out further and further every year – observers often say they expect negotiations to last longer than the allocated two weeks. And this exacerbates existing inequity, weighing heavier on poorer countries with smaller delegations.

Just process yields just outcomes.

The problem of collective responsibility as embedded in consensus decision-making, too, illustrates the ongoing problem of differentiated responsibility within the UNFCCC. Further analysis is necessary in order to adequately treat the justness or injustice of commonly touted principles like

“common but differentiated responsibility,” and the more contentious “historical responsibility,” within Young's model. Still, it's worth noting that while collective responsibility, according to Young, shuts down ongoing and iterative discussions of differentiation – just as the difficulty of consensus has shut down honest conversation about the role of “developing country” major emitters like China – shared responsibility may allow for ongoing productive dialogue. A conception of responsibility as held in common, but individually accountable, may allow for a rethinking of the two sharply defined legal groupings – Annex I (so-called developed countries) and Non Annex I (so-called developing countries) – that have made true cooperation and trusting international relationships very challenging. It's likely that the rigidity of consensus decision-making and the rigidity of collective responsibility require rigid differentiation. Yet what's needed in a multilayered, deeply complicated regime is differentiation that accounts for the constantly changing state of the global political economy. What's needed is ongoing honest conversation about the terms of debate in discussions of responsibility.

A system of majority voting, as proposed by Mexico and Papua New Guinea, won't solve all of these problems. To say that majority-rule voting within the U.N.'s Framework Convention on Climate Change would lead to a new conception of global responsibility based on connection rather than liability would be outlandish. But in view of a close look at how consensus works in practice at UNFCCC conferences, as well as how it is used in other international fora, and in view of an analysis of the UNFCCC through the regime complex framework, it seems clear that the “ad hoc consensus” model is ineffective, and that a system that allows for majority voting may be more effective. “The procedure that we're following has in fact come into conflict with the complexity of the issues we discuss,” the negotiator from the Russian Federation said on the last day of the conference in Warsaw, as fellow diplomats sat bleary-eyed after days without sleep. He's right there, and his country's team was right when they called for further discussion of procedure within the convention. Procedure matters, and those dedicated to the idea of international cooperation on climate change ought to pay attention.

Conclusion

In this paper, I've argued that the claims of Russia in November, and Ukraine and Belarus over the summer – claims that consensus as practiced does not work, and that current procedure doesn't fit UNFCCC needs – ought to be taken seriously by the world community. Despite the claims of some that consensus, though difficult to obtain, is necessary for just decision-making and UNFCCC legitimacy, I believe that on the international scale, consensus is both ineffective and unjust. It obscures in a forum that's meant to clarify. It glosses over the differentiated capabilities of the world's countries in a forum that needs to grapple with those differences. And the result is procedure that suffocates ambition and frustrates diplomats to the point of exhaustion. Mexico and Papua New Guinea have proposed an alternative to the morass of consensus – voting rules – one that won't automatically spur enhanced international action or a more just conception of international responsibility. Still, it may facilitate both. And with time running out, every procedural roadblock is a potential death knell to the world's most vulnerable. Increased international ambition is crucial if we are to mitigate and adapt to the effects of global climate change, but a just and effective procedure must grease the wheels as the world ramps up.

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Acknowledgments:

Thanks to Jade Larissa Schiff for her support and suggestions throughout the writing of this article. Thanks also to the Oberlin College Environmental Studies Department and the Oberlin Initiative in Electoral Politics for their financial support.

Notes:

¹ For a justice-based criticism of plebiscite-style voting (albeit in an American political context), see Young 2000.

² “We got hot and close to each other” in the huddle, the EU negotiator said after parties had returned to the negotiating table around 12:30 AM on Friday, and we

“came out with something that might fly.” Personal observation, Warsaw Climate Change Conference, November 23, 2013.

³ For more on the difference between economic and military cooperation, see Lipson 1993.

⁴ For a concise discussion of the political challenges to instituting majority voting, see Kemp 2012.

⁵ For a review of the various meanings and uses of the common but differentiated responsibility principle in the UNFCCC and other international fora, see Bauer et. al. 2014.

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