

REPLY

The Paris Agreement has the potential to facilitate ambitious climate action: a reply to ‘Why do climate change negotiations stall? Scientific evidence and solutions for some structural problems’ by Ulrich J. Frey and Jazmin Burgess

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Introduction

Frey and Burgess (2022) argue that climate change negotiations have stalled because of the global public goods nature of the problem, the consensus decision-making process and the lack of institutions to enforce sanctions. I will argue that this is not the most precise, nor the most fruitful, way to frame the political challenge of limiting climate change, for two reasons. First, the authors of the Paris Agreement were mindful of the limitations of a global accord negotiated under a consensus rule. They created a flexible umbrella for national – and non-governmental – action that can allow climate ambitions to ramp up over time. Second, whereas climate change is a global problem, important elements of it can potentially be solved through climate clubs, where many of the issues that plague global negotiations do not apply.

Ramping up national climate action

The Paris Agreement establishes aspirational global goals, in particular, the goal to limit warming to well below 2 °C and to pursue efforts to limit it to 1.5 °C, and the core of the agreement are the non-binding nationally determined contributions

(NDCs). By this description, it may appear to be a weak treaty, but it is more useful to describe it as self-aware: international conference diplomacy cannot solve the climate challenge by itself, in part, because it cannot force any sovereign nation to undertake any actions it is unwilling to undertake. What matters is whether the Paris Agreement is effective at enabling action on the ground. It is obviously far too early to provide a conclusive answer, but there are some positive early indications that should not be overlooked amid negative media headlines on rising global emissions and the emerging consequences of climate change.

The Paris Agreement, combined with the special report on global warming of 1.5 °C it invited the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to write, established *net-zero emissions* as an almost obligatory target for all actors who want to be taken seriously. The importance of this paradigm shift in how climate mitigation is viewed should not be underestimated. Prior to the Paris Agreement, the debate was about marginal emission reductions: how to cut emissions by a few more percentage points; how to implement efficiency improvements; and, for example, whether to start with reducing CO₂ emissions or with the emissions of short-lived climate pollutants. The net-zero concept changed this into a debate about how and when to eliminate all emissions. Marginal cuts and emission reductions are no longer seen as sufficient, as the goal is zero (net) emissions, with all the implications that carries for policymaking, technological innovation and long-term investments by governments, businesses and other actors. By now, more than 70 countries that are responsible for over three quarters of global emissions, over 1,200 companies, over 1,000 cities and a large number of other actors have set a net-zero target ([United Nations, 2022](#)).

The European Green Deal is a core example of how the Paris Agreement is used to shape and motivate climate action. The European Union (EU) might well have also proceeded with ambitious climate plans in the absence of the Paris Agreement, but the way it is framed around net zero and how it is justified (with ample references to the Paris Agreement) seems unthinkable without the agreement we do have.

The Paris Agreement is intended to facilitate climate action in various forms. The 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) in Glasgow in 2021 showcased a plethora of other such actions: the Glasgow Leaders' Declaration on Forests and Land Use was signed by more than 130 countries; the Global Methane Pledge was signed by more than 100 countries; and the Agriculture Innovation Mission for Climate was signed by more than 30 countries.

Whereas the Paris Agreement has unquestionably led to a proliferation of net-zero commitments, setting a target does not ensure that it will be met, and it is politically far easier to pledge to an ambitious long-term target than to immediate action. [Depledge \(2022\)](#) sees 'inadequate implementation at the national level' (p.3) as the core issue, and this risk is highlighted by how 2030 commitments do not align with the longer-term pledges (typically net-zero pledges for around 2050). [Meinshausen et al \(2022\)](#) show that if all Paris Agreement pledges were implemented, peak warming could be limited to 1.9–2.0 °C (5–95 per cent range of temperature outcomes 1.4 to 2.8 °C). However, when including only the more detailed and more credible pledges for 2030, they find that the pledges are in line with warming of 2.6 °C (5–95 per cent range of temperature outcomes 1.9 to 3.7 °C). This gap between projections based on longer-term targets and on shorter-term targets represents a serious credibility gap. Researchers have long claimed that there is a trade-off between ambition and credibility: the most ambitious pledges are the least credible. New research, however,

should lead us to at least nuance this view: [Victor et al \(2022\)](#) surveyed climate policy experts (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change [UNFCCC] attendees) on the credibility of national commitments. They find that the policy experts, unlike the researchers, believe ‘the countries making the boldest pledges are also making the most credible pledge’ ([Victor et al, 2022: 793](#)). This is the logic of the Paris Agreement, they argue: because the commitments are non-binding, governments have greater flexibility to reveal what they are able and willing to do.

Climate clubs

Frey and Burgess ([2022: 9](#)) write:

as a large group finds it difficult to agree on a single goal, the group tends to split into smaller groups, with the members of each smaller group sharing the same goal.... Given the results from the laboratory, one way to improve negotiations might be to separate free riders ... from conditional cooperators and high cooperators.

They also highlight that studies on endogenous group formation ‘consistently find that high cooperators find each other and are able to maintain a high level of cooperation’ ([Frey and Burgess, 2022: 9](#)).

These are essential insights and point to the potential for establishing climate clubs. This approach to cooperation should be seen not only as an alternative to the UNFCCC process, but also as a potential complement, and one that is fully compatible with the design of the Paris Agreement (see [Falkner et al, 2022](#)). Facilitating club formation, whether between groups of countries on overall climate policy, as a result of sectoral cooperation (for example, within aviation or shipping) or based on specific technologies (such as hydrogen or carbon capture and storage), can help overcome or circumvent the problems of ‘opposing interests and political stances’ that Frey and Burgess ([2022: 2](#)) identify (and offer a more realistic path forward than overturning the consensus decision-making rule). At the global level, these problems can indeed become insurmountable obstacles, but that is why it may be useful to complement what can be achieved at the global level with institutions that have configurations of countries whose interests align better. Climate change may be a global public good problem, but it can be broken down into smaller component parts that can be effectively solved by smaller groups: as the EU moves ahead with its ambitious policies (and it can be seen as a climate club), this will help bring down the cost of climate-friendly technologies, making it easier for other actors to adopt more ambitious policies.

The early findings on climate pledges, credibility and the potential for climate clubs still leave us several steps away from being able to conclude on whether the ideas underpinning the Paris Agreement will work, but they should inspire some confidence in the process and serve as a reminder that we should judge the effectiveness of the Paris Agreement on what it actually delivers, not what we (upfront) perceive the weaknesses to be.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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