The race for climate leadership in the era of Trump and multilevel governance

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Abstract  President Trump’s withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on climate change, albeit predictable, presents both challenges and opportunities for the global system of multilevel governance. Various stakeholders are ready to fill the void, including other world leaders, such as the EU, and in particular Germany; US state actors, such as California; and even cities and businesses. Whatever the outcome, the reaffirmed joint commitment to implementing the climate targets is good news for the planet.

Keywords  Paris Agreement | Trump | Multilevel governance | Climate change | California | Germany

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Introduction

The election of Donald J. Trump as forty-sixth US president left many of the world’s leaders at a crossroads, as they had been on course to tackle global warming together. Trump’s disavowing stance on climate change had long been known, and was further confirmed when he appointed long-time Environmental Protection Agency critic Scott Pruitt to lead the agency (Mooney et al. 2016). This was followed by the undoing of Obama’s environmental and climate legacy by rescinding the limits for power plant emissions and, most significantly, withdrawing from the Paris Agreement (Environmental Protection Agency 2017). In light of these events, this article analyses the international system of multilevel governance and its opportunities for conducting climate policy in the absence of the US leadership.

The winding road to and from the Paris Agreement

On 1 June 2017, a little over four months after his inauguration, President Trump announced that the US would withdraw from the Paris Agreement—the withdrawal was later formally submitted to the UN. It is necessary to review what preceded this announcement. In December 2015 the first-ever legally binding global agreement on climate change was settled, as 195 governments signed up to the goal of limiting global warming to well below the level of a 2°C increase. This agreement was ratified less than a year after its adoption. What made this possible?

To enter into force, the agreement had to be ratified by at least 55 countries representing at least 55% of global emissions. This was expected to be a long process, subject to cumbersome confirmations by national parliaments—yet it was hoped that it would be a smoother process than the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol, which took more than seven years. But, perhaps as the momentum of the euphoria from Paris lingered in the coming months, one by one, the signatories proceeded with their national ratifications.

The real breakthrough came on 3 September 2016 on the sidelines of the G20 Summit, when the US and China, together responsible for 40% of the world’s carbon emissions, sealed their countries’ participation in the Paris Agreement. This was especially important for US President Obama, who wanted to leave behind a legacy before the November presidential elections. With the US and China in, and the other big emitters, including Brazil, Canada and India, on track to ratify during the autumn of 2016, the EU found itself at risk of not being party to the agreement at the moment of its entry into force—rather an embarrassing prospect given the EU’s history of leadership in climate action, as well as the fact that the deal was struck on its soil. An extraordinary Environment Council was called by the Slovak Presidency and, at last, an unprecedented deal was brokered that allowed the EU to ratify the agreement when it had not yet been ratified by all 28 EU member states. The Paris Agreement thus entered into force on 4
November 2016, less than year after its adoption—a record time for any international agreement.

The term ‘agreement’ is important here and, indeed, it is no coincidence that the word ‘treaty’ is nowhere to be found in its text. For the US to ratify any international treaty, it must be approved by two-thirds of the Senate, which at the time was held by a Republican majority. Obama, aware of this constitutional hurdle, asserted that it was merely an executive agreement and ratified it by executive order, thus bypassing the Senate. Some might argue that this was a short-sighted move by the president, as it risked that the executive order would be immediately reversed by his successor. On the other hand, the commitment of the US and China paved the way for the record-speed ratification of the Agreement and sent an important signal to the rest of the world about the seriousness of the issue of climate change and global willingness to tackle it.

Time to shine for the EU’s stars

While there are signs that the US’s withdrawal from the Paris Agreement is not set in stone, and legally it would not be effective before November 2020 anyway, it does leave a vacuum in global climate leadership.

The EU is a natural contender to fill this vacuum, since for almost a decade it has prided itself on being a leader in climate action. It would also not be the first time it has found itself having to drive forward an international climate accord that the US has rejected. In 1998 the Kyoto Protocol was adopted under President Clinton but, with the Senate vehemently rejecting the treaty, he never submitted it for a vote. In March 2001, his successor, George W. Bush, announced that the US would not ratify it, as the accord exempted 80% of the world, including major players such as China and India, from compliance. The EU took the helm in the global fight against climate change, committed itself to the Kyoto targets and successfully brokered an agreement with Japan and Russia to enable ratification of the Protocol (Schreurs and Tiberghien 2007). Domestically, the EU implemented the world’s first and still biggest international carbon emissions trading system as the cornerstone of its policy to combat climate change, and has put in place targets for carbon emissions, share of renewable energy and improving energy efficiency, which are now being revised for the period up to 2030.

When President Trump announced the US’s withdrawal from the climate agreement, arguing that it would weaken the US economy and national sovereignty, it was feared that other big emitters, notably China, would also backtrack on their commitment. Instead it seems that the opposite is happening: the EU and China swiftly announced a joint ambition to implement the agreement (Boffey et al. 2017; Boffey and Neslen 2017). On 15 and 16 September, environment ministers from over 30 countries met in Montreal, Canada, co-hosted by the EU and China, to declare their continued commitment to the pact (European Commission 2017a). And while the ministers emphasised that the accord was irreversible and not open to renegotiation, there were suggestions that the US, witnessing the reaffirmation of the global ambition, was reviewing the terms on
which it could be re-engaged or, as White House Deputy Press Secretary Lindsay Walters put it, could ‘re-enter on terms that are more favourable to our country’ (Al Jazeera 2017).

In his recent speech on the State of the European Union, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker called on Europe to be the leader in the fight against climate change and, borrowing French President Macron’s dig at the Trump campaign, to ‘make our planet great again’ (Juncker 2017). And Europeans support this—according to the latest Eurobarometer survey published in September 2017, an overwhelming majority see climate change as a serious problem (European Commission 2017b). President Juncker has also called for a change in the EU’s decision-making to enable qualified majority voting, thus stripping member states of the right of veto, on issues such as taxation. Granting the EU more authority in this area has previously been frantically opposed by the UK but, consequently, Brexit could pave the way for more ambitious climate policies, perhaps in the form of an EU energy tax.

Germany and California as pioneers of climate policy

Climate leadership can also be exercised from the state level. This is especially true for California in the US, as well as for Germany in the EU if we, for the purpose of comparison, take the EU’s federalist nature and Germany as one of its member states into account. Both Germany and California, the biggest economies on the two continents, have played a pivotal role in shaping, respectively, EU and federal US environmental and climate policies.

On both sides of the Atlantic, the response to the problem of climate change began in the 1970s and 1980s with vehicle emissions standards. California’s pioneering standards granted the state a special waiver from the federal government, allowing it to introduce its own emissions standards as long as they were not lower than the federal regulations (e.g. the Clean Air Act). As a result, other states could choose to either comply with the federal regulations, or uphold the more stringent California standards—a provision which continues to apply to date. In the absence of federal climate policies, California led the way. Early on, it adopted energy efficiency standards for buildings and appliances. When the US failed to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, California pledged to reduce its emissions, established carbon-emission-reduction targets and put in place a cap-and-trade mechanism. After President Trump’s decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement, California voted to extend its emissions trading mechanism up to 2030 (Milman 2017; BBC News 2017). Moreover, California is pushing the climate agenda through a number of regional alliances and has engaged in international agreements with Canada, China, Germany and Mexico to drive forward the implementation of the Paris Agreement (The Guardian 2017; Germany 2016b; Davenport and Nagourney 2017).
While California is conducting its climate efforts in parallel with (or in the absence of) federal policy, Germany has been able to directly shape European climate legislation from within. Germany’s standards on vehicle emissions set the baseline for European harmonisation, mostly to avoid distortions to the common market. With the rising global consciousness about the threat of climate change in the late 1990s, Germany stood at the centre of development of European (and international) climate policy. It offered to host the seat of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) secretariat in Bonn and chaired the first Conference of the Parties meeting in Berlin. It was Angela Merkel, then Helmut Kohl’s environment minister, who helped to negotiate the Kyoto Protocol. Similarly, in 2007, under the German Presidency of the Council, the EU’s first climate and energy targets for up to 2020 were adopted. Through diplomacy or by directly exerting its influence in the Council of Ministers and the European Council, Germany continues to shape European climate policy to this day. Domestically, it has embarked on an energy transformation, or Energiewende,1 by 2050, with an emissions reduction target of 80%, and goals to reduce energy consumption by 50% and to raise the share of renewables in the mix to 80% (Graupner 2013). In 2016 it adopted an action plan to implement the Paris Agreement and become emissions neutral by 2050 (Germany 2016a). Moreover, the reinvigorated Franco-German alliance could pave the way for even more ambitious policy changes. France would be a natural partner for Germany to drive forward the climate agenda. The Paris Agreement was born on France’s soil and, since his election, President Macron has already announced ambitious plans to meet its targets, including an end to the sale of petrol and diesel cars by 2040 (Chrisafis and Vaughan 2017). Shortly after Trump’s announcement of withdrawal from the climate accord, Germany and France announced that they would ‘grasp at new initiatives in order to ensure the climate agreement is a success’ (Watts and Connolly 2017).

Local push for a global fight

On the day of the announcement of the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, 377 US mayors, representing 67.7 million Americans, pledged to implement the Agreement’s climate goals (Climate Mayors 2017; Parker and Welch 2017). The New York Times reported that a group of mayors, governors, university presidents and businesses was negotiating with the UNFCCC to have its climate pledges submitted to the Paris Agreement (Tabuchi and Fountain 2017). UN Special Envoy for Cities and Climate Change and former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg said that by redoubling their climate efforts, the cities, states and corporations could achieve, or even surpass, the US pledge to reduce its carbon emissions by 26% by 2025. The Mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, who chairs a group of representatives of 40 major cities, said: ‘No matter what decision is made by the White House, cities are honouring their responsibilities

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1 Energiewende refers to the transition in Germany to an environmentally sound, reliable and affordable energy supply, especially by phasing out fossil fuels and nuclear power, and by promoting energy efficiency and renewable energy sources.
to implement the Paris agreement. There is no alternative for the future of our planet’ (Watts and Connolly 2017). Later, in June, 7,400 city leaders met at the global covenant of mayors and pledged to work together to meet the climate targets.

These local pledges are not to be taken lightly, especially in the US, where urban areas account for 75% of the population and GDP production, and where leaders have committed to fight climate change. As Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed pointed out, cities have the ability to achieve 35%–45% carbon emissions reductions without the involvement of the national government (Boffey 2017). The global role of cities and other non-governmental stakeholders in fighting climate change was formally acknowledged within the UNFCCC when the Global Climate Action Agenda was set up and tasked to coordinate the local initiatives.

While local authorities face inherent challenges when influencing global issues such as climate change, their initiatives are crucial for building up domestic support for future policies from within and for empowering and motivating citizens to act via a sense of individual responsibility (Dirix et al. 2013). As Lutsey and Sperling (2008) argue, local commitment at the individual level is the key to real, long-term progress and economic and social transformations. Their comparative study found that, even 10 years ago, more than 50% of US emissions were covered by state-level mitigation plans and if only half of the US states achieved their climate reduction targets, US national carbon emissions would stabilise by 2020. Bloomberg (2017) alluded to a similar phenomenon in his recent address to the European Parliament, when he explained that the US is already halfway towards its Paris commitment of a 26% emissions reduction by 2025—despite the federal government having had almost nothing to do with that progress. Rather, it is the achievements of the cities, states, businesses and citizens, together with the market, that have helped to mitigate and have adapted to the effects of global warming. Finally, as Shepura (2017) points out, local and personal stories of citizens directly affected by climate change or of the innovators combating it might strike the right chord with President Trump.

Conclusion

Based on these developments, one can envisage what the future might hold for the Paris Agreement. International alliances and joint commitments from world powers should be able to drive its implementation, despite the absence of the US. In the EU, the reinvigorated sense of optimism and the forward-looking Franco-German leadership is likely to help this process further. There is a series of milestones ahead: the composition of the new German government following the 2017 federal elections, the outcome of the Brexit negotiations, President Juncker’s legacy for the EU and the 2019 EU elections, culminating in the 2020 German Presidency of the Council of the EU. Well-aligned results might have a long-lasting impact on the future of the EU, as well as on the global fight against climate change.
Across the Atlantic, those leading the local and state initiatives are adamant about mitigating climate change. Under the US federal model, this bottom-up surge of progress has proven efficient and is perhaps the only way to enable change. As was the case in the past with the fight for civil liberties, or more recently same-sex marriage, the federal government will only dare to address the subject once there is acceptance (or indifference) within the majority of the population and it stops being a polarising issue for society. With climate change, the more states that follow California’s lead in green policies, the sooner the federal leadership will find the courage or political backing to re-engage on the international level. Cities will have an important role to play in enabling the changes locally, with the help of the private sector and its commitment to green innovation. Additionally, the process might be accelerated by the effects of climate change itself as the US recovers from the recent record-strong hurricanes Harvey and Irma, which devastated parts of its territory, bringing enormous economic costs. But regardless of whether the climate initiative comes from the top–down or the bottom–up, timely action will be to the benefit of everyone.

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