Democracy is Good for Climate Ambitions

Robust empirical evidence shows that democracy is critical to combating climate change. Democracies consistently perform better than autocracies when it comes to committing to policy on climate change mitigation. *Moving from the lowest levels of democracy (e.g., China) to the highest (e.g., Canada) equals an increase in policy commitments to climate change mitigation by 19%* (Bättig & Bernauer 2009). The effect is similar regarding signing of multilateral climate agreements (Neumayer 2002).

**FIG 1. EMISSIONS DEMOCRACIES AND AUTOCRACIES (V-DEM DATA AND OUR WORLD IN DATA)**

A 10% increase on the V-Dem democracy index equals a 3% increase in the level of ambition of the degree target under the Paris Agreement. *Moving from a fully authoritarian regime to a full democracy therefore generates a large increase in ambition, equal to almost -1.6°C* (Tørstad et al. 2020). This has major consequences for global climate change (see Fig 1.). Annual risk of civil conflict reduces substantially as female political empowerment increases.

In addition, evidence demonstrates that more egalitarian democracies have higher commitments toward combatting climate change than other democratic types (Povitkina & Jagers 2021).

Democracies Are Better at Taking Action

Ambitions produce outcomes. Ample evidence shows that each new climate policy enacted by governments on average reduces CO2 emissions by 0.79% over the first three years and 1.79% after that. In 2016, the reduction in global CO2 emissions due to additional climate policies was larger than the total US yearly emissions. The cumulative CO2 emission reductions related to climate policies between 1999 and 2016 amount to one year's worth of global CO2 emissions (Eskander & Fankhauser 2020).

Evidence also demonstrates that democracies clearly perform better than autocracies in terms of domestic environment. *Air quality in cities is found to improve by 0.14% with each 1% increase on a democracy index* (Bernauer & Koubi 2009). Data shows that democracy also led to the improvement of the marine environment in coastal countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (Sjöstedt & Jagers 2014).

Civil Society Freedom Is Key

Democracies provide more freedom for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that can educate citizens about climate problems, and exert pressure on governments to take action.

**FIG 2. CO2 EMISSIONS/C, COUNTRIES ON THE LOWER AND UPPER HALF OF THREE INDICES ENABLING NGOS (V-DEM, OUR WORLD IN DATA).**
Extensive empirical evidence shows that greater civil liberties and freedom of expression are critical for environmental NGOs to bring governments to reduce states’ environmental and climate impact.

A 10% increase on V-Dem’s civil liberties index produces a substantial 0.5% decrease in country CO2 emissions through environmental NGOs’ greater actions (Pacheco-Vega & Murdie 2020).

Off-Shoring Pollution and Corruption

Democracies offshore pollution by increasing the ecological footprint of their imports (Kolcava et al. 2019). Yet, evidence from 18 high-income democracies in 2005-2015 found that the emission reductions over this period—which were substantial—were only to a small part owed to the off-shoring of emissions (Le Quéré et al. 2019). Rather, the largest contributions came from decreases in fossil share of final energy and decreases in energy use, which accounted for a median of 47% and 36% of reductions in CO2 emissions respectively.

Research also shows that democracy’s positive effect on climate change outcomes is reduced if levels of corruption are high. Only democracies with low levels of corruption effectively implement policies that reduce climate impact (Povitkina 2018). For instance, new climate policies produce 2.43% reduction in national CO2 emissions within three years when rule of law is strong, compared to 0.27% when rule of law is weak (Eskander and Fankhauser 2020). Effective implementation of policies is essential for making the most of democracy’s dividends.

REFERENCES

- Ritchie Hannah, & Max Roser (2020) - “CO₂ and Greenhouse Gas Emissions”. Published online at OurWorldInData.org, emissions.

About V-Dem Institute

V-Dem is a unique approach to conceptualization and measurement of democracy. The headquarters – the V-Dem Institute – is based at the University of Gothenburg with 23 staff, and a project team across the world with 5 Principal Investigators, 19 Project Managers, 33 Regional Managers, 134 Country Coordinators, Research Assistants, and 3,500+ Country Experts. V-Dem is one of the world’s largest data collection projects on democracy.