

Sacrificing the climate for reelections

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In business as well as international politics, the best and ideal agreement is one that is credible and expected to be complied with. Compliance often necessitates trade sanctions or other sufficiently severe consequences for those parties that do not comply as promised.

So what explains the logic behind why most existing international environmental agreements are weak and without sufficiently strong sanctions? As an example, countries that emitted excessively under the 1997 Kyoto Protocol were asked to compensate by cutting emissions more in the future but faced no additional sanctions if they didn't. And in late December 2018, negotiators met in Katowice, Poland, to discuss the implementation of the Paris Agreement on [climate change](#) but failed to take advantage of the possibility to introduce sanctions on noncompliers.

Why does this continue to happen? A new political economy analysis forthcoming in the [Journal of Political Economy](#) shows that domestic policymakers may not have sufficient incentives to negotiate efficient treaties. In "The Political Economy of Weak Treaties," authors Marco Battaglini and Bard Harstad explain that: "When a treaty is weak and not fully enforced, voters are uncertain whether the obligations will be met and they forecast that compliance hinges on whether they elect the incumbent or a political challenger." The political incumbent can always turn this contingency to their advantage, they show.

When the treaty is weak, a relatively "green" party with more environmentally friendly preferences than the median voter may prefer

to comply, while a relatively "brown" party will not. Thus, a green incumbent prefers to negotiate a weak treaty that is attractive to the median voter, but not to the brown challenger, so that the voters must reelect the incumbent to see the treaty being implemented. Likewise, a brown incumbent prefers a treaty so weak and so costly that the median [voter](#) prefers to elect the brown party, which will not comply, rather than the more environmentally friendly green [party](#), who would comply regardless. In either case, the incumbent improves the reelection chances by negotiating some kind of weak treaty, because only weak treaties differentiate the competing candidates.

This reasoning implies that state leaders who face elections (in contrast to dictators) prefer to sign many treaties as long as the treaties are likely to be weak and essentially ineffective. The study finds that [democratic countries](#) do sign more treaties but the effect of a treaty on [emission cuts](#) is smaller than for other countries.

When American Vice President Al Gore negotiated ambitious emission cuts on behalf of the US in the late 1990s, the commitments were not strongly enforced and the next president could easily walk away from the treaty, which he did. The authors explore similar stories from Canada, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. "In many of these cases, sacrificing the climate can have been motivated by reelection concerns," the authors note.

Provided by University of Chicago

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