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The UN climate change negotiations and the role of the United States: assessing American leadership from Copenhagen to Paris

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ABSTRACT

The role of American leadership in the UN climate negotiations that produced the 2015 Paris Agreement is examined. First, United States (US) climate goals are identified. Then, utilizing unique survey data collected at eight UN climate summits between 2008 and 2015, the extent to which the US was recognized as a leader by potential followers is investigated. Finally, the extent to which US goals are reflected in negotiation outcomes is evaluated. Recognition of the US as a leader varied over time, peaking at the UN climate meetings in Copenhagen and Paris, reflecting US leadership in shaping the outcomes of both meetings. Although the results reveal a divided leadership landscape in which the US must compete for leadership with other actors, such as the European Union and China, US leadership was crucial to the successful adoption of the Paris Agreement.

KEYWORDS American leadership; UNFCCC climate change negotiations; COP21 Paris summit; Paris Agreement; COP 15 Copenhagen summit; United States

Introduction

After many years of negotiations, on 12 December 2015, at the COP21 climate summit in Paris, 196 parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) adopted an historic climate accord, the Paris Agreement. The Agreement aims to hold global warming to ‘well below’ 2°C above preindustrial levels and to pursue ‘efforts to limit’ it to 1.5°C (UNFCCC 2016, p. 2). The negotiations succeeded in bringing together long-divided protagonists from the developing and developed world in support of a new climate deal (Bodansky 2016, Dimitrov 2016, Rajamani 2016). Whether the Paris Agreement will actually deliver effective action on climate change, of course, remains to be seen.

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In his official statement welcoming the deal, United States (US) President Barack Obama declared that the Agreement was a ‘turning point for the world’, a ‘tribute to American leadership’, and that over his 7 years in office ‘we’ve transformed the United States into the global leader in fighting climate change’ (White House 2015a). Some days later in his year-end press conference he declared that the US was the ‘key leader in getting [the Paris Agreement] done’ and it ‘would not have happened without American leadership’ (CNN 2015). This view was consistent with Obama’s goal when he took office to position the US as a leader in the fight to combat climate change (Obama 2008). Here, we scrutinize the leadership role the US claimed to play by investigating to what extent the US is actually recognized as a leader by potential followers and to what extent the US has succeeded in achieving its negotiation objectives.

Past research has provided many important insights for understanding global climate change leadership and the individual leadership roles of specific states in shaping negotiation outcomes (Andresen and Agrawala 2002, Christoff 2010, Karlsson *et al.* 2011). However, with some key exceptions (Selin and VanDeveer 2007, Hovi and Skodvin 2008, Kelemen and Vogel 2010, Victor 2011, Hovi *et al.* 2012), the vast majority of the most recent climate leadership scholarship has disproportionately focused on various aspects of European Union (EU) climate leadership (Vogler 2009, Saul and Siedel 2011, Wurzel and Connelly 2011, Bäckstrand and Elgström 2013, Torney 2014, Oberthür and Groen 2015, 2017, Parker *et al.* 2017). US leadership in this area remains a lacuna, in need of further investigation.

In order to address this gap, we first identify the *climate change goals* and the *leadership strategies* pursued by the US within UNFCCC negotiations for the 2009–2015 period. Second, we utilize unique survey data to examine the extent to which the US has been *recognized as a leader* by prospective followers during this period. Finally, we evaluate actual *goal attainment* and examine to what extent the US succeeded in achieving its objectives in the deals reached in Copenhagen and Paris.

In the next two sections, we present a conceptual framework for understanding leadership and our methods. We then empirically examine US climate change goals and the leadership strategies it pursued to fulfill them. The subsequent two sections evaluate the extent to which the US is recognized as leader by potential followers, and the extent to which the US has met its stated climate change goals. The final section discusses how our findings might inform the prospects for US climate leadership going forward under the new Trump administration.

Leadership and its modes

This study utilizes Underdal's widely used definition of leadership as an 'asymmetrical relationship of influence in which one actor guides or directs the behavior of others toward a certain goal' (1994, p. 178). This definition bears close resemblance to other well-known views of leadership like Nye's definition of leadership as 'the power to orient and mobilize others for a purpose' (Nye 2008, p. 19), and there is substantial overlap among many of the definitions of leadership found in previous studies (c.f. Young 1991). However, there are also some differences of opinion regarding the meaning of leadership.

One key controversy regarding the definition of leadership concerns the motivation behind the goals a leader seeks to accomplish by directing or guiding the behavior of others. Must the goals be directed toward the common good motivated by altruistic concern, or can they be motivated by self-interest? Some scholars argue that a 'leader is supposed to look beyond his or her own interests and concerns, to the interests of a wider group' (Malnes 1995, p. 93). Others, such as Underdal, argue that a would-be leader need not push for collectively beneficial goals for that behavior to count as leadership. The goals may be common overarching ones, or more concrete and limited ones.

Underdal's broad definition captures leadership motivated by either altruism or self-interest. As such, the precise motivation of US leadership is not germane to our analysis. Rather than pursuing a normative evaluation of US as a climate change leader, we focus on empirically examining key aspects of US climate change leadership. Leadership recognition is particularly important, since leadership is a relational concept and any bid for leadership will be seriously undermined if an actor who aspires to be a leader fails to be recognized as such (Parker *et al.* 2015). Furthermore, as attracting followers will require 'the credible inclusion of the interests and/or ideas of potential followers into the leadership project' (Schirm 2010, p. 1), we would expect a prospective leader that ignores the common good to have limited success.

What mode or strategies can an aspiring leader utilize when seeking to guide the behavior of others? Our analytical framework for understanding modes of leadership is adapted from the literature on EU leadership in climate negotiations (e.g. Oberthür and Groen 2017, Parker and Karlsson 2017). This literature has specified four main modes that an aspiring leader can utilize to influence the behavior of others (Young 1991, Underdal 1994, Malnes 1995, Saul and Seidel 2011). Although the terminology varies, these modes of leadership can be distilled to: ideational, structural, directional, and instrumental (Parker and Karlsson 2014).

Ideational leadership (also referred to as intellectual) is about problem naming and framing and the promotion of particular policy solutions (Young 1991, Malnes 1995). This type of leadership is characterized by agenda-setting efforts and includes discovering and proposing joint solutions to collective problems and well as pushing to shape the content of negotiation outcomes. *Structural leadership* is the ability to take actions or deploy power resources that create incentives, costs, and benefits in a particular issue area (Young 1991, pp. 288–289, Underdal 1994, p. 186). *Directional leadership* involves taking unilateral action and leading by example (Malnes 1995, p. 92, Underdal 1994, p. 183). By making the first move, it is possible to demonstrate the feasibility, value, and superiority of particular policy solutions. Finally, *instrumental leadership* refers to an actor's ability to form coalitions, forge leadership alliances, solve negotiation problems, and build bridges necessary to broker deals (Underdal 1994, pp. 187–191).

Methods

As explained above, this study seeks to uncover four key aspects of US climate leadership. This section briefly details how we have gone about examining the US climate change goals, the leadership strategies deployed to meet those objectives, the recognition of US as leader, and its success in meeting its goals.

In order to uncover US climate goals, we examined US submissions to the UNFCCC process and official statements made by key US representatives. In order to observe US leadership strategies, we utilized a conceptual framework adapted from the literature on EU climate leadership and applied it to the negotiations leading up to the outcomes of COP15 in Copenhagen and COP21 in Paris. To assess the extent to which US leadership was recognized by potential followers, we conducted surveys at eight consecutive UN climate summits from 2008 to 2015. Finally, to assess the effectiveness of US leadership we evaluated the extent to which the US succeeded in achieving its objectives in the deals reached in Copenhagen 2009 and Paris 2015.

US goals and leadership strategies

In this section, we identify the goals and analyze the leadership strategies pursued by the US within UNFCCC negotiations concentrating on the objectives the US set prior to Copenhagen in 2009 and Paris in 2015. To put these goals in context, the record shows that the US relationship with multilateral efforts to address climate change has oscillated between engagement and disengagement (Kelemen and Vogel 2010). For example, the US,

during the Clinton administration actively negotiated and then signed the Kyoto Protocol, but after George W. Bush took office in 2001, the US reversed course and pulled out of the Kyoto Protocol (White House 2001, Hovi *et al.* 2012). Under Bush, the US went from a prospective climate leader to a laggard and the US did not take a leading role in the UN climate negotiations while he was in office (Kelemen and Vogel 2010, p. 441).

After the 2008 election of Barack Obama, the US announced its intention to return to a leadership role in the climate negotiations (Obama 2008). Obama pledged that his administration would mark a ‘new chapter in American leadership on climate change’ (Obama 2008). Prior to the 2009 COP15 meeting, in addition to the goal of reestablishing itself as a leader on the climate issue, the US committed itself to ‘reaching a strong international agreement in Copenhagen’ (US 2009, p. 106). The US had a clear leadership vision for the shape of the agreement and its specific negotiation objectives included: an agreement that would require action from all major emitters; a move away from the top-down architecture of Kyoto to a bottom-up approach consisting of national pledges to reduce emissions; and a preference that emission reductions be nonbinding, in conformity with domestic law, and rely on transparency to promote compliance (US 2009, pp. 106–108).

In the negotiations leading up to COP21 in Paris, the US once again explicitly committed itself ‘to playing a leadership role on climate change’ in achieving an agreement that would both attract countries to join and promote real-world ambition to limit global temperature below a two-degree increase (US 2013a, 2013b). Specific goals included: an agreement containing a mix of legally binding and nonlegally binding provisions; mitigation contributions required from all countries; a bottom-up design in which pledges would be nationally determined through a consultative process; the inclusion of a process to incentivize a ‘race to the top’ in which countries would put their best commitments forward; and the use of transparency as a mechanism to enhance ambition and promote compliance (US 2013a, 2013b).

Having established the overarching and specific goals of US climate leadership, we now investigate which modes of leadership the US utilized to achieve them. We focus on the COP15 outcome in Copenhagen and the negotiations that led to the breakthrough in Paris at COP21. An examination of US actions during this period reveals that it has deployed all four modes of leadership – ideational, structural, directional, and instrumental – in important ways. Although it has traditionally relied on ideational and structural leadership in pursuit of its goals, a more sustained commitment to instrumental leadership in the negotiations leading to Paris was essential for overcoming stumbling blocks that long stymied past negotiations for a new climate deal.

Ideational leadership

Prior to Copenhagen the US concluded that it would not be possible to conclude a legally binding treaty and instead pushed for a political agreement that would include the key aspects of a new architecture to address the problem of climate change (Parker *et al.* 2012). The US leadership vision was for a deal that encompassed all countries with significant emissions profiles, especially the emerging economies of China, India, and Brazil. US ideational leadership was expressed in pushing for the goal of 'legally symmetrical' agreements, meaning that, with the exception of the least developed countries, all major emitters must have an obligation to act (Stern 2010).

The US also arrived in Copenhagen with ideas on what the content of a deal should contain, including specific GHG reduction targets, as well as a vision for what the institutional design principles should look like (White House 2009). Once it became apparent that China and India would block any binding agreement containing specific targets and timetables, the US elected to join forces with the BASIC countries (Brazil, South Africa, India, and China) and cut a deal on what became the Copenhagen Accord (Christoff 2010, Parker *et al.* 2012). This outcome reflected many elements of the US leadership vision and negotiation goals. The Accord stated that all major emitters were expected to act, it was based on the pledge-and-review architecture the US sought, and the emission pledges were nonbinding (UNFCCC 2010).

Post-Copenhagen the US backed a new negotiating mandate, the 'Durban Platform for Enhanced Action'. In this process, the US pushed its leadership vision for what the institutional design and content of the post-2020 climate change agreement should look like. According to the US, the new agreement needed to be 'applicable to all Parties' and should have a 'supple architecture that integrates flexibility with strength' (Stern 2013a). In other words, the US vision for the agreement was one with a pledge-and-review structure that allowed for bottom-up, or 'nationally determined mitigation commitments', rather than top-down, binding targets and timetables, such as the EU had pushed for in the past and at COP15 in Copenhagen.

Structural leadership

The US has attempted to back its ideational leadership with structural leadership by offering inducements to developing countries in the form of funding for actions to mitigate and adapt to climate change. The US, for example, made recommendations for financing adaptation, energy investment, and support for developing countries by calling for \$100 billion a year to be collectively mobilized by 2020. However, as Obama noted at the Copenhagen heads-of-state meeting, to 'channel some of the resources from

our countries into developing countries' would be 'a very heavy lift' without a 'sense of mutuality' (Rapp *et al.* 2010).

At a subsequent COP in Warsaw in 2013, the US highlighted its role in climate finance, noting in 2013 it had provided \$2.7 billion in assistance and was playing a leading role in convening donors to develop strategies to meet the \$100 billion a year 2020 finance goal (Stern 2013b). The US was also instrumental in helping reach the goal to raise at least \$10 billion for the Green Climate Fund (GCF) prior to Paris. The 2014 US pledge of \$3 billion, combined with \$1.5 billion from Japan and some \$5 billion from EU member states (Oberthür and Groen 2017, p. 14), ensured the initial GCF resource mobilization goal was met on time and demonstrated resolve by the US to deliver on its finance commitments and build momentum for reaching an agreement in Paris (White House 2014a).

In terms of structural leadership the US – with the size of its market and its role as an aid donor – is well endowed to offer economic, technological, and diplomatic incentives, but has demonstrated only limited structural leadership. For example, the US would not commit to mandatory finance commitments in Paris and developing countries have criticized the actual amount of support mobilized by the US and the other developed countries (Cléménçon 2016, pp. 10–11).

Directional leadership

The US is aware that directional leadership is important. As Todd Stern (2010) observed: 'If the United States means to assert leadership, it needs to act like a leader'. For this reason, prior to the Copenhagen meeting, the US tried to buttress its credentials as a climate actor by highlighting its break with the inaction of the Bush years and trumpeting its domestic and international leadership accomplishments (White House 2009).

The US came to COP15 in Copenhagen ready to commit to specific GHG reduction targets. In Copenhagen, the US offered reductions in the range of 17% below 2005 levels by 2020, with the ultimate goal of reducing emissions 83% by 2050. The problem for the US was whether potential followers saw this as a credible directional leadership. First, the selection of 2005 as a base year, rather than the Kyoto Protocol's base year of 1990, means the US pledge is less ambitious than what the EU has promised. Second, US GHGs reduction goals, which the US made as part of its Copenhagen Accord commitments and in its INDC prior to Paris, may be hard to achieve without tailor-made legislation or strong regulations, which, due congressional politics, would be extremely difficult to enact.

However, upon being reelected for a second term in 2012, after 2 years of virtual silence, Obama, with his Climate Action Plan, relaunched an aggressive policy program, relying primarily on executive action and the EPA's regulatory

power. In Warsaw and Lima, the US touted its domestic actions and directional leadership credentials by reporting on its new regulations in the power and transportation sectors, its investment in clean energy and energy efficiency, its measures to reduce methane and HFC emissions, and its progress in reducing GHG emissions (Stern 2013b, 2014). The US also doubled renewable energy production in Obama's first term and announced plans to double it again by 2020 (Stern 2013b). In Warsaw, the US further announced that it was making good progress toward meeting its GHG reduction commitment under the Copenhagen Accord (Stern 2013b). To further bolster US credibility on domestic climate action, in August 2015, Obama announced his 'Clean Power Plan', which was designed to reduce emissions from the power industries by 32% from 2005 levels by 2030 (EPA 2015).

Instrumental leadership

Instrumental leadership has become a more prominent part of the US strategy for pursuing its goals post-Copenhagen. The US worked hard to form bilateral leadership alliances or coalitions with China and the EU. Obama engaged in personal diplomacy to privately lobby the leaders of China and India to support a deal at COP21 in Paris (Cléménçon 2016, p. 6), and, in the run-up to Paris, the US invested heavily in improving cooperation with China. In successive years prior to COP21 in Paris, the US and China made high profile bilateral climate cooperation announcements. In November 2014, the US and China announced their respective post-2020 intended national contributions in which the US pledged to reduce its emissions by 26–28% below its 2005 level in 2025 and China pledged to peak its CO₂ emissions around 2030, while both sides pledged to increase ambition over time. The purpose of the announcement was to 'inject momentum into the global climate negotiations and inspire other countries to join in coming forward with ambitious actions' (White House 2014b).

The 2014 announcement was followed up in September 2015 by a joint presidential statement. Both Obama and Xi Jinping stressed the need to coordinate action to combat climate change by emphasizing their personal commitment to a successful agreement in Paris, laying out their joint vision for the outcome of the negotiations, stating their goals for enhancing bilateral and multilateral cooperation, and reaffirming their commitment to take aggressive domestic climate actions (White House 2015b). Their attempt to provide coordinated and joint leadership prior to Paris stands in stark contrast to the lack of cooperation and frosty relations in Copenhagen (Parker *et al.* 2012). The bilateral partnership between the US and China has been highlighted as a key factor in explaining the positive outcome in Paris (Dimitrov 2016, p. 9).

Once it became clear that the GHG emissions goals of a new agreement would be nationally determined, the US partnered with the EU to work toward a hybrid system that would balance the flexibility of bottom-up pledges with top-down accountability in a meaningful way. The US and EU goals were to ensure that the nationally generated commitments would be subject to rigorous reporting, monitoring, and review to confirm countries were actually following through on their obligations (Parker *et al.* 2017). The robust provisions for transparency, accounting, and ratcheting can be credited to the overlapping preferences of a coalition of developing and developed countries. This informal ‘friends of the rules’ group pushed to ensure these elements were included in the final agreement (Rajamani 2016, p. 500).

Prior to Paris, the EU formed an alliance, the High-Ambition Coalition, with a number of small island states, developing countries, and like-minded states that were pushing for an ambitious agreement. As negotiations wound down in Paris, some members of the G77, including China and India, were threatening to litigate old divisive claims on burden sharing in conjunction with the review process and climate finance commitments. To help prevent this, the US announced it was joining the EU and the other 79 members of the High-Ambition Coalition (McGrath 2015). This coalition played a pivotal role in US and EU efforts to prevent China and India from diluting the transparency and reporting elements of the deal and ensuring that the stock-taking and ratcheting requirements would take place on 5-year cycles and not every 10 years as countries such as India preferred.

Having examined some of the headline climate goals that the US has pursued and the strategies that the US has deployed for achieving them, we turn our attention to the question of whether or not the US has been recognized as a leader in the climate change negotiations and how it compares to other leadership contenders.

Is the US recognized as a climate leader?

In order to understand if the US is recognized as a climate leader by potential followers, we conducted surveys at eight consecutive UNFCCC COP meetings, 2008–2015. The dataset consists of a total of 3661 completed questionnaires, which we distributed in person at each COP. Given the operating environment, random sampling was not an option and we chose instead to use quota sampling to select respondents. The survey collected a strategic sample of the two largest and most important categories of COP participants: members of party delegations, such as negotiators and government representatives, and NGO representatives and researchers. Roughly, 42% of the respondents in the final sample were delegates (negotiators and government representatives) and 58% were

observers (NGO representatives, UN/IGO representatives, researchers, or media), which corresponds with the composition of the frame population where the percentage of delegates in the eight COPs surveyed has varied between 43 and 45. The overall response rate was approximately 65%.

The survey directly asked respondents which actors they saw as leaders in the field of climate change. Rather than providing respondents with a fixed number of response alternatives, we used an open-ended question to tap into their views on climate leadership: 'Which countries, party groupings and/or organizations have, in your view, a leading role in climate negotiations?' Respondents could thus answer by putting down none, one, two, or as many leaders as they found to be present in the negotiations.¹

There are, of course, methodological concerns that may be raised in connection to a survey such as this. For example, how can we be sure the respondents understand the question the way it was intended, i.e. as a way of accessing their views on which actors are actually exercising leadership, as opposed to which actors are simply seen as the most powerful?

We cannot be absolutely certain of how respondents understood the question. However, our time-series data suggest that the respondents take into account an actor's commitment to addressing the climate change issue, rather than simply basing their answers on the aggregate power held by prospective leaders. If the latter were the basis for the respondents' answers, then, because an actor's aggregate power changes slowly, we would expect only minor shifts over time. But this is not what we find. To the contrary, our data report fairly dramatic changes from one year to the next, which is more consistent with respondents taking into account the varying degree of engagement, resolve, and influence actors show inside the UNFCCC negotiations.

Our results demonstrate that the US, the EU, and China were the actors most frequently mentioned as playing a leading role in the climate negotiations. In a clear but distant fourth place we find the G77, which was recognized as leader by between 20% and 30% of respondents. Other party groupings (e.g. the BASIC and the BRIC countries and the Alliance of Small Island States) as well as individual countries like India and Brazil were also recognized as leaders by some 10% of the respondents. However, no other actor approached the recognition levels recorded for the three actors that appear in [Table 1](#).

In order to exercise effective leadership, an actor needs to be recognized as a leader first and foremost by those key participants, namely the party delegates, who will determine the outcome of the negotiating efforts at the COP meetings. How different leadership contenders are perceived by the official delegates is therefore crucial. However, it may also be important to be recognized as a leader by other types of important actors, e.g. interest organizations, researchers, and media representatives, as these may have the power to

Table 1. Leadership recognition 2008–2015, by delegates and nondelegates (percentages).

	EU as leader			US as leader			China as leader																	
	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15								
Delegates	58	42	50	51	54	49	51	36	19	47	48	37	31	38	46	48	50	50	51	46	49	46	44	46
Nondelegates	66	48	41	49	49	47	45	44	32	58	51	46	45	46	57	67	44	45	52	55	47	42	51	59
All respondents	62	46	45	50	51	48	48	41	27	53	50	42	39	42	52	59	47	48	52	50	48	44	48	54

Total number of respondents = 3661.

influence the general picture of an actor's importance and standing in terms of leadership. Still, the delegates are the key actors and as 'insiders' they are also in a position to make well-grounded assessments regarding which actors play a leading role in the climate change negotiations. Table 1 reports the survey results for delegates as well as nondelegates. However, for the reasons noted above, unless otherwise indicated, the ensuing analysis draws on the perceptions of delegates only.

The first conclusion to be drawn from Table 1 is that there is no single, undisputed leader on climate change. Putting the focus on the seven climate summits of the Obama years, what we see is best described as a 'fragmented leadership landscape' (Parker *et al.* 2012) with three leadership candidates – the EU, the US, and China – being recognized as leaders by roughly 40–50% of the respondents at one or more of these COP meetings. If we look back at how the situation has changed since COP14 in Poznań 2008, we can register some fairly dramatic shifts in leadership recognition.

In Poznań 2008, only 19% of delegates viewed the US as a leader, the majority of delegates instead recognizing the EU (58%) and China (50%) as leaders. This result is noteworthy because it suggests that the aggregate power held by different actors does not seem to be a particularly important explanatory factor with regard to the leadership perceptions of prospective followers. Despite having the greatest combined power resources and being one of the two largest GHG emitters, the US was recognized as a leader by less than a fifth of all respondents. This indicates that diplomatic engagement and perceptions concerning an actor's commitment to addressing the climate issue matters. An actor's aggregate power and its potential for exercising resource-based leadership are simply not sufficient for it to be widely recognized as a leader.

The lack of active participation by the Bush administration in the UN climate change process appears to have profoundly impacted the extent to which the US was regarded as a leader on climate change by COP14 participants in Poznań. The reversal of US policy after Obama's election and the active US presence in Copenhagen dramatically altered the leadership perceptions of the Copenhagen participants. Between Poznań and Copenhagen, we measured a dramatic change in leadership recognition: the percentage of delegates recognizing US leadership more than doubled, whereas recognition of EU leadership dropped significantly. This suggests that the degree of diplomatic engagement significantly influences perceptions of leadership.

Importantly, the negotiation outcome from Copenhagen mirrored these perceived levels of leadership influence, with the Copenhagen Accord reflecting the negotiating preferences of the US and China – bottom-up, voluntary, and with a pledge-and-review design – rather than those of the EU (Parker *et al.* 2012).

Subsequently, at COP16 in Cancún (2010), levels of US leadership recognition remained high, with 48% of delegates recognizing the US as a leader. However, with the Obama administration's failure to persuade Congress to pass domestic climate legislation and movement on the regulatory front stalled, leadership recognition for the US eroded. The numbers dipped to 37% in Durban (2011) and 31% in Doha (2012), before climbing again to 38% in Warsaw (2013) and 46% in Lima (2014). The rise in recognition followed Obama's reelection, his aggressive executive action on climate change, such as his 'Clean Power Plan', and the influential role played by the US in shaping the negotiations leading to the deal in Paris. In the aggregate, recognition of US leadership from 2008 to 2015 increased by 29 percentage points. However, the previous US high of 48% in Cancún 2010 dropped in 2011 and 2012, by 11 and 17 percentage points, respectively, prior to climbing again in 2013 and culminating with leadership recognition levels in 2015 that made the US the most recognized leader in Paris.

In comparison, EU recognition declined from a high of 58% in Poznań 2008 to 42% in Copenhagen 2009. However, at subsequent summits EU recognition increased again to 50% in Cancún 2010 and 51% in Durban 2011. At the latter, the EU was instrumental in setting the agenda for the Durban Platform (Bäckstrand and Elgström 2013), wherein the EU agreed to adopt a second commitment period for the Kyoto Protocol in exchange for negotiations toward a new deal by 2015. These negotiating successes are reflected in the survey data, but EU leadership recognition dropped significantly in Paris 2015 (Parker *et al.* 2017). These results suggest that the EU had difficulties translating its agenda-setting successes into outcomes that closely reflect its institutional design preferences.

In contrast, the recognition of China as a leading actor has been relatively stable. China's leadership recognition peaked in Cancún 2010 at 51%, and was second only to the US in Paris where 46% of the delegates viewed China as playing a leading role in the negotiations. These results reflect China's leadership role among developing countries and major emerging economies in the UNFCCC and its ideational leadership is particularly prominent on issues of development, financing, equity, and common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR) (Parker *et al.* 2012, Jinnah 2017). China's leadership was, for example, crucial in shaping how CBDR is treated in the Paris Agreement (Jinnah 2017).

When we break down the recognition data by respondents' geographical base, we find some interesting differences (see Table 2).

As Table 2 shows, geographical belonging matters for which actors are recognized as leaders. The evidence suggests that actors typically find it much easier to become recognized as a leader by followers from their 'home constituency'. Thus the US tends to be recognized as a climate leader by a

large proportion of respondents from North America. US leadership recognition has also been strong in Europe, but the US has found it more challenging to gain support from African and Asian respondents where we find substantial variation over time. Among Asians, its leadership recognition has increased 29 percentage points and in Paris at COP21 almost half of Asian respondents recognized the US as a leading actor. Although the US has strengthened its position across the board we still find significant differences among respondents from different regions. US leadership recognition between 2008 and 2015 has, for example, increased 49 percentage points among respondents from Latin America, but only 11 percentage points among African respondents. In Paris 2015, African respondents stood out as the only ones where a clear majority did not recognize the US as a leading climate change actor. Even so, in Paris, among Africans, China was the only country more recognized than the US.

The overall trend shows that the US has strengthened its position as climate change leader and that by 2015 it enjoyed fairly widespread recognition as a leading actor. However, it is clear that the US conception of itself as a climate leader is not matched to the same degree by potential followers outside of the Western world.

US goal attainment: an assessment

With respect to the UNFCCC negotiation outcomes, particularly in Copenhagen 2009 and Paris 2015, and in light of the survey results considered above, how should we evaluate the effectiveness of US climate leadership? A balance sheet assessing the success of the various modes of leadership the US deployed from 2008 to 2015 shows a mixed record of results, but once the US returned to a role of active diplomacy under the Obama administration we see negotiation outcomes in Copenhagen and Paris that match US preferences to a large extent.

Despite the acrimonious process at COP15 that produced the Copenhagen Accord, the outcome accomplished many of the objectives expressed in the US leadership vision for the agreement (US 2009). The Accord moved away from Kyoto's top-down institutional design and was based on the pledge-and-review architecture that the US wanted; the pledges were not legally binding, and it established the precedent that all major emitters were expected to act. Although the Accord was the most substantial climate commitment the US had made in a multilateral context in many years, it only committed the US to goals the Obama administration felt it could, if necessary, achieve through executive action alone.

The Paris Agreement was also very much in line with the Obama administration's goals and in fact met 'all key demands of the US' (Dimitrov 2016, p. 8). Unlike Copenhagen, which was largely seen as a

failure around the world, Paris was treated as an historic success by much of the press and other world leaders (Christoff 2016, Dimitrov 2016, Rajamani 2016). The agreement establishes a long-term, ambitious mitigation goal, it has: an architecture of nationally determined pledges to start reducing GHG emissions; a robust transparency system to track progress toward the long-term goal; a cycle of stocktaking that will take place every 5 years; and a novel system to ratchet up ambition over time by requiring countries to update their national plans to reduce emissions 2 years after the performance review and then to do so again every 5 years (UNFCCC 2016). All of these provisions reflect US preferences or used formulations acceptable to the US (Bodansky 2016, Rajamani 2016).

The legal character of the agreement, the architecture, transparency, review, and ratcheting provisions, as well as the deal's long-term goal were all very much in line with US goals (White House 2015a). For example, the provision that mitigation commitments would be 'nationally determined' and not binding, as some parties wanted, can be connected directly to US submissions (US 2013a, 2013b) and won widespread support. The inclusion of rigorous transparency requirements was crucially important for the US which felt this would serve as a viable alternative to having the agreement include binding mitigation measures (Bodansky 2016, p. 297). The US benefited from overlapping preferences of other key states, such as their allies from the Umbrella Group, and especially Japan, in winning support for an agreement with obligations for all major emitters, and from the EU on issues of transparency.

Although many observers were disappointed that much of the Agreement is not legally binding, this too reflected US preferences. The nonbinding character of the INDCs was essential to the Obama administration's ability to sign and then formally enter into the Paris Agreement (Bodansky 2016, p. 294, Dimitrov 2016, p. 3). US negotiators worked hard to form the content and structure of the Paris Agreement so it would not require approval or ratification by the Senate (Rajamani 2016, p. 511), the Obama administration arguing that the legally binding parts of the deal are consistent with US obligations under the UNFCCC, which had already been approved by the Senate and ratified.

On 6 September 2016, the US, together with China, deposited instruments with the UN to formally join the Paris Agreement. This paved the way for it to enter into force early on 4 November 2016, one month after 55 countries representing at least 55% of global emissions formally joined the agreement. Seeing the agreement enter into force prior to leaving office was an important goal for the Obama administration for a number of reasons, one of which is that it would make it more difficult, although not impossible, for a Republican president to withdraw from the agreement.

Conclusions

Here, we have shed light on the extent to which the US is recognized as a leader, especially in comparison to other leadership candidates such as China and the EU, analyzed US goals and leadership strategies, and explored the role that US leadership played in the Copenhagen and Paris negotiation outcomes with respect to goal attainment.

Critics may object to an overly positive portrayal of US leadership, noting that it should have been more altruistic, ambitious, and done more to promote the interests of the most vulnerable countries (Hurrell and Sengupta 2012, Rajamani 2012, Cipler 2015, Cléménçon 2016). As our survey data show, many are indeed skeptical of US leadership. The record also shows that the US was not the sole leader in Paris and many of its goals matched the preferences of other states on key issues such as universal obligations and differentiation. The EU was the strongest leader on ambition and the US shared leadership with the EU on the transparency, reporting, and stocktaking elements of the Paris deal (Dimitrov 2016, Oberthür and Groen 2017, Parker *et al.* 2017). The joint leadership ‘vision’ expressed by the ‘G2’ of the US and China prior to the conference and their ability to work pragmatically together was a crucial element in COP21’s successful outcome. Nonetheless, in Copenhagen and in Paris, the US was the most recognized leadership candidate and, as our examination of the role the US played in the negotiations showed, the US clearly exercised its asymmetric influence in shaping the institutional design of both the Copenhagen Accord and the Paris Agreement. The proposed hybrid architecture that the US pushed for in Paris was a crucial factor in leading to a substantive global climate agreement that was able to secure the support of all the countries involved in the UNFCCC negotiating process.

The results from our survey, which found that no leader was consistently able to register over 50% support from potential followers, demonstrate that the world has lacked a single undisputed leader in the field of climate change. The spikes in recognition of US leadership among COP participants – from 27% to 53% between Poznań and Copenhagen and from 39% to 59% between Doha and Paris – can be linked to the time periods in which active US climate diplomacy was more closely aligned with US domestic action.

The years in which the US was seen as the most recognized leader – 2009 and 2015 – also reflect the fact that both the Copenhagen Accord and the Paris Agreement were heavily shaped by US preferences and influence. The Copenhagen Accord clearly reflected the negotiating preferences of the US – bottom-up, voluntary, and with a pledge-and-review design – rather than those of the EU (Parker *et al.* 2012). As happened in Copenhagen, the US was once again the most recognized leader in Paris. The US learned important lessons from the outcome in Copenhagen and shifted its leadership strategies in ways that allowed it to form leadership coalitions with China and the EU, which

contributed to a Paris Agreement that reflected the most important US preferences but garnered widespread support and broad-based buy-in from other countries.

The results from the years when the US did not score high in leadership recognition – for example, in 2008 during the final year of the Bush administration, and in 2011 and 2012, in which leadership support for the US eroded for two consecutive years – also suggest some important lessons. Leadership is not simply a function of structural power, and US leadership recognition is closely tied to active US climate diplomacy and meaningful domestic action. The fact that the US is often seen as a leader by fewer than 50% of respondents, and that leadership recognition varies dramatically by region, is evidence that many participants in the climate negotiations question the legitimacy and credibility of US climate leadership.

Historically, there is good reason for this type of skepticism of US climate leadership. Because the US often encounters domestic political difficulties in honoring its international commitments, many parties question whether or not the US can deliver on its promises. The 2016 election of Donald Trump put the continued participation of the US in the Paris Agreement and the UNFCCC in jeopardy. As a candidate, Trump was critical of the deal and on 1 June 2017, Trump announced his plan to withdraw the US from the Paris Agreement, once again abdicating the US' role as a leader in international climate cooperation.

The way Trump has decided to leave Paris has a silver lining. He did not withdraw the US from the UNFCCC, which would be faster and more permanent, taking only one year, instead of four, to exit both the UNFCCC and Paris Agreement. If Trump follows through, it is possible, if a new administration wins the White House in 2020, for the US to return to the Paris Agreement. Whether that will happen, or whether the US will ever return to a leadership role, is an open question. Achieving a climate deal in Paris was a major milestone, but the hard work to fully implement it is just beginning. It will not be easy for the Paris Agreement to truly help the world avert dangerous climate change and this task will be made more difficult without US participation or leadership.

Note

1. The response rate to this question was 80%.

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