Strategies to Influence Outcomes in Long Environmental Negotiations

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In December 2015 in Paris, the nations of the world will come together for their latest attempt to agree to a legally binding agreement to address soaring greenhouse gas emissions: the cause of dangerous climate change. Like in Copenhagen in 2009, when the last significant attempt to reach a legally binding climate agreement was made, there will be plenty of actors trying to influence the outcome, from environmental groups, like WWF and Greenpeace, to business groups, like the International Chamber of Commerce and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development.

For scholars of global environmental politics, the international climate change negotiations have long been recognised as an arena in which non-state actors – namely environmental NGOs and business groups – are especially conspicuous (Betsill and Corell 2008). Many studies have mapped the proliferation of these actors, and the influence on the international climate change negotiations (Newell 2000). In doing so, most studies ascribe these actors with significant influence on international outcomes. However, it is not always clear what are the most effective strategies to influence key countries, especially in prolonged international negotiations that stretch for years and sometimes decades, like the climate change negotiations.

In what follows, I will suggest three strategies that could be employed by highly networked non-state actors in long negotiations. These suggestions are drawn from a rich empirical data set based on approximately 100 elite interviews undertaken between 2008 and 2010 with state and non-state representatives who were intimately involved in the climate negotiations in the United States and the European Union throughout the 1990s and early 2000s (Downie 2014).

Before I do, a few words about prolonged international negotiations. By this I am referring to substantive international negotiations over a legally binding instrument that continue for five or more years (for more detail, see Downie 2014). For instance, the Kyoto Protocol negotiations that commenced in 1995 when nations began negotiating a tentative international treaty, which was signed at Kyoto in 1997, and continued until 2005, after Russia ratified the Protocol and it entered into force, could be considered a round of prolonged international negotiations.

The point is that in long negotiations of this nature, things change. As a result, strategic opportunities will arise for actors to influence state behaviour, and in turn negotiation outcomes, by making strategic choices at the domestic, international, and transnational level. As I will discuss, for example, this can include the level of engagement of different actors, or the nature of their relationships with other actors.

While the following strategies are by no means the only ones, these strategies could be particularly well-suited to exploiting opportunities that arise in long negotiations.

First, in the initial stages of international negotiations, weak actors, such as environmental NGOs, may have a unique strategic opportunity to dominate discussions because more powerful actors are not mobilised. As Schattschneider (1960) first pointed out, it matters which actors are mobilised and which are not because it affects the balance of forces between actors. In addition, actors who exploit these circumstances will have the opportunity to frame

discussions. One of the most effective ways that actors can affect state behaviour is by strategically framing debates to draw attention to their concerns. As others have shown, the actor or coalition of actors that succeeds in establishing a frame that is consistent with its goals is likely to reap the greatest gains from negotiations (Braithwaite and Drahos 2000, Odell and Sell 2006).

Second, in a networked world where the state acts as an agent for the interests of non-state actors, and other actors act as agents for states, highly networked actors have the capacity to shape state behaviour (Rhodes 2007). For environmental NGOs, this is often difficult, given that policy networks are often inaccessible. However, there are occasions, such as at the beginning of a new term of government, when such networks are more fluid; it could be easier for weaker actors to move in and out of this space with greater ease. The evidence from environmental NGOs and business groups in the US and the EU during the climate change negotiations is that non-state actors should build relationships with state actors, as environmental NGOs did with the Clinton administration. They should infiltrate orthodox policy networks, as organisations such as Environmental Defense Fund did in the policy debates on emissions trading, and they should engage in domestic lobbying, as fossil fuel groups have proved so effectively in places like the US and EU, among others. However, infiltrating and manipulating networks and coalitions is not only a strategy that non-state actors can employ against state actors. It can also be used effectively against opposing non-state actors, as the Pew Center on Climate Change demonstrated so effectively in the late 1990s, when it forced some of the world's most powerful corporations in the US to step back from their fierce opposition to climate change action (Downie 2014).

Third, while these first two strategies suggest that non-state actors will have more influence domestically, clearly, as much of the international relations literature would attest, non-state actors should not abandon their international and transnational networks. Indeed, transnational networks, which refer to the regular interactions across borders that state and non-state actors have (Risse-Kappen 1995), can be particularly effective in long negotiations. This is especially so when such networks facilitate the flow of expert knowledge to policy elites to inform their beliefs and, in turn, their preferences and negotiating positions (Haas 1992). As the case of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) shows, transnational epistemic communities can help to frame a problem by creating a shared understanding based on their specialised knowledge. This would seem to be most effective during the agenda-setting phase of the policy cycle when policymakers are more uncertain about the issue at hand.

As the critical climate change negotiations to be held in Paris draw near, non-state actors who wish to influence state behaviour and negotiation outcomes could be well served by each of these strategies, especially if they are employed at the right time to exploit the strategic opportunities that arise in long negotiations.

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