Research Article

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Understanding US government reluctance to accept legally binding emissions reduction targets: the import of elite interest convergence

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Abstract: This essay critically examines why the United States Government (USG) has been reluctant to accept legally binding greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets (LBGERTs). The paper notes that four factors are essential in explaining this, namely the economy, scepticism about climate science, hegemonic drives and a quest for distributive justice. Notwithstanding, USG reluctance to accept LBGERTs is shaped by the convergence of interests of key actors in US political system who conceive government action to combat climate as a threat to their interests, although this can be reinforced or dissuaded by party ideology. While party ideology could strengthen or weaken US actions to fight climate change, the shielding of its sovereignty remains paramount regardless of ideological differences between the Democrats and Republicans. It indicates that while it could be argued that the Kyoto Protocol was a failed regime given the wide acceptance of the Paris Agreement, the planned withdrawal of US from Paris Agreement demonstrates that the Kyoto Protocol was not wholly a failure and buttressed the need to have a legally binding agreement (LBA). Also, it argues that the success of the Paris Agreement is a function of trust, reputation and reciprocity among countries that are parties to it.

Keywords: Climate change; climate regime; legally binding emissions; Paris Agreement; Kyoto Protocol.

1 Introduction

Protecting the environment from harmful practices for the benefit of both the environment and humans has been at the forefront of both domestic, regional (Nwankwo, 2018a) and global politics and policymaking (Nwankwo & Okafor, 2018). Climate change arguably is the world's most controversial environmental issue in the 21st Century (Porinchu, 2017). It is now evident that climate change impacts socio-economic and natural systems, and there are dire consequences that could arise from this (Doyle, McEachern & MacGregor, 2015; Gerrard, 2017). Of the many solutions to climate change, reducing greenhouse gases (GHG) emissions that go into the atmosphere stands atop (Hughes, Chu & Mason, 2018). Gases such as carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide are responsible for the warming of the atmosphere, which causes climate change (Grundmann, 2016). Disagreements have marred negotiations of a global regime to combat climate change over some of the institutions in the regime (Christoff, 2010; Chasek, Downie & Brown, 2013; Nwankwo, 2018b). Chief among these disagreements is the contestation over whether emissions reductions should be legally binding or voluntary (Dimitrov, 2016).

Principal actors differ on this with the developed countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) favouring non-binding actions while the European Union (EU) in conjunction with developing countries advocates a legally binding agreement (LBA) (Babiker, Jacoby, Reilly, 2002; Chasek et al., 2013; Porinchu, 2017). The legality of agreements in the global climate regime has gained the attention of scholars since the establishment of

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the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 1992. As one scholar argues in consonant with (Rajamani, 2009a, 2009b), the legality of the climate regime seems to matter genuinely to the countries that are parties to the UNFCCC (Werksman, 2010). Thus, LBA to tackle climate change has always been a bone of contention in climate regime and the United States (US) has been the main opposition of LBA (Christoff, 2010; Chasek et al., 2013; Porinchu, 2017).

This essay investigates the factors responsible for the United States Government's (USG) reluctance to accept legally binding greenhouse gas GHG emissions reduction targets (LBGERTs). It argues that USG reluctance to accept LBGERTs is a deliberate plot and convergence of interests of principal actors in US political system who envision climate change mitigation as a threat to their interests, though it can be strengthened or dissuaded by party ideology over time. Nevertheless, US sovereignty remains supreme regardless of party ideology. This essay also argues that the Kyoto Protocol did not fail and emphasised the need to have LBA, and it indicates that the success of the Paris Agreement depends on trust, reputation and reciprocity among states that are parties to it.

2 Theoretical Orientations

Various theoretical concepts are used in this paper, but its central argument rests on the idea of policy convergence. The paper uses notions of rationality, trust and reciprocity in social dilemmas (Ostrom 1998) to problematise the climate regime, especially the success or failure of the Paris Agreement. A social dilemma is a situation in which non-cooperation could benefit a member more than others and is a function of trust, reputation and reciprocity among the members. In this regard, members who reciprocate other members' contributions to solve a problem [e.g., emissions reduction] by making their contributions will gain a reputation for being trustworthy which spurs the commitment to solving the problem (Ostrom 1998). The paper also uses the neo-Gramscian notion of hegemony to support the reading that USG reluctance to accede to LBA on emissions cut is because of its hegemony and sovereignty in the international system. Neo-Gramscian perspective to hegemony indicates that competing societal and political actors would present institutions (rules, norms, practices) as if they will benefit all parties (Cox, 1983; Burnham, 2006). However, they persistently serve the interest of the most powerful parties (Mouffe, 1979; Cox & Sinclair, 1996; Bieler & Morton, 2004; Okereke & Matt, 2014).

Also, the article uses the concept of policy convergence to do a reading of why the US government have consistently rejected legally binding emissions reduction targets in the global climate regime. The idea of policy convergence entered into the comparative public policy literature because various studies got comparable conclusions signifying that advanced industrial countries are confronted by similar problems and are tending to resolve them in like ways. According to Bennett (1991), policy convergence can have one of five meanings. The first signifies a convergence of policy objectives—when there are unified intentions to solve shared policy problems. The policy content is the second, explained as the more formal materialisation of government policy, e.g., regulations, administrative rules, statutes, court decisions. Thirdly, it can also mean a convergence on policy tools, i.e. the existing institutional instruments to administer policy, be it, judicial, administrative, or regulatory. Fourthly, there can be convergence regarding policy implementation outcomes or consequences or impacts. Fifth, policy style may converge into a more diffuse idea representing the process by which policy responses are framed (corporatist or pluralist, incremental or rational, anticipatory or reactive, consensual or conflictual, etc.).

These five policy convergence contexts highlighted above barely embody precisely distinct analytical categories as they tend to detach policymaking into mechanistic and linear phases and are possibly oblivious to the ever-changing and interactive processes of response that shape policy content. Nonetheless, it is the first meaning of policy convergence that this paper is concerned about—the convergence of policy objectives—when there are unified intentions to shared policy problems. In this respect, convergence should be conceived as a process of approaching instead of a state of 'being' more alike (Bennett 1991). Thus, policy convergence implies moving from different policy positions toward some similar policy ground. Although the concept of policy convergence is most recently used for the comparative analysis of cross-country policy processes and outcomes (Holzinger & Knill 2005; Knill 2005; Holzinger, Knill & Sommerer 2008), this paper focuses on the convergence of interests of key actors in US political system. Thus, in this article, the concept is deployed in a national context, not a cross-country context.

In earlier comparative studies it is argued that there must be a shift over time near some recognised shared point for convergence to occur and as such, the vital theoretical framework is temporal rather than spatial (e.g., Bell 1973; O'Connor 1988; Bennett 1991). There are now studies that focus on the spatial spread of policy convergence (e.g., Busch & Jörgens 2005a, b). The focus here is, however, on the former argument. Thus, to know that the US key political actors' climate change policy positions are similar tells us nothing about convergence but the gravitation of their policy positions towards a common ground. While the conception of policy convergence as a synonym for similarity or uniformity has been critiqued because its usages raise the question of what convergence it is to be compared with (Bennett 1991), this paper does not intend to compare the USG policy position with other actors in the international system but among key political actors within the US. In testing the convergence theory in comparative policy studies, there needs to be a relatively specific and extended timeframe under investigation (Bennett 1991) which allows for identifying path dependence and critical junctures (Nwankwo 2018c). However, this paper does not intend to test the convergence theory. It only draws on the concept of policy convergence to argue that the USG reluctance to accept LBGERTs is shaped by the confluence of policy positions of key actors in the US political system who conceive government action to combat climate as a threat to their interests.

Policy convergence is a process, and as such it is not static but dynamic, and in this sense, four critical policy convergence processes can be identified: emulation, elite networking, harmonisation and penetration. Emulation refers to a method of convergence whereby nations have sought to copy and adapt structures and policies from other societies. Harmonisation involves a broad consonance of motivation and concern and regular opportunities for cooperative policy interaction among policy actors. In contrast to harmonisation, convergence via penetration is one in which states are compelled to take policy positions practised elsewhere by external actors. Although the processes of policy convergence are not limited to these four, they are the most commonly found in the comparative case-study literature. Nonetheless, only the elite networking process is suitable for analysis in this paper because it suggests that policy convergence stems from elite networks and interactions that engender shared policy ideas amongst a relatively coherent and enduring network of elites and is discussed below.

2.1 Convergence Through Elite Networking

Convergence through elite networking finds some commanding backing in the comparative policy literature (Bennett 1991; Haas 1992; Holzinger et al. 2008). Transnational and national problem solving often happens within elite networks or epistemic communities sharing common motivation, expertise, beliefs over ends and means, and solutions to common problems (Bennett 1991; Holzinger et al. 2008). The idea of an 'issue network' or 'policy community' is a conversant one within national, and predominantly American, policy studies (Atkinson & Coleman 1992). In this respect, convergence stems from the presence of common ideas among a coherent and stable network of elites engaging in regular interaction. Thus, convergence manifests from a recognisable elite bound by knowledge and know-how of a common policy problem. The elite are like tribal professionals engaging in professional tribalism by sharing the same vision of a policy problem, such as reducing emissions and concern for its resolution via the shared experience of learning about the problem – a process that is as strong as national ethnocentrism (Bennett 1991).

In this sense, political elites who have the same interest in a specific sector such as the oil and gas sector have many concerns in common and can share common policy positions regarding the industry. When such elites come together to articulate their shared policy positions, they develop into a policy community and such a policy community can develop in various areas, although the nature of these elites and the strength of the ties between them can differ in different sectors. For example, a study shows that at the zenith of the air travel community is a small professional elite, with robust global networks, which is in control all over the advanced industrial states for air transportation services (Feldman & Milch 1982).

In the realm of climate change, it is known that there is a network of information exchange among policy elites working on the issue of climate change in the US (Jasny et al. 2018). Carroll et al. (2018) indicate that the boards of Canadian carbon-capital companies have networks that link with significant knowledge-making civil society establishments, plus business advocacy organisations, industry associations, universities, think tanks, and research institutes. The networks reach into these spheres of civil society, creating a single, linked network that is centred in Alberta hitherto connected to the central-Canadian corporate elite via hegemonic capitalist organisations, plus key

financial corporations. Carroll et al. (2018) argue that this structure affords the construction of a “soft” denial regime that recognises climate change but protects the sustained stream of profit to fossil fuel and associated corporations. Policy convergence thus results from interaction and consensus amongst elites that shared common interests and operated within the fray of domestic politics. The policy position they propagate may take the form of a shared pool of scientific knowledge about a climate change propelled by a consensus of motivation.

3 Discussing why USG refuses legally binding emissions reduction targets

This section presents the discourse of why the USG has been reluctant to accept LBGERTs. A review of studies on global climate change regime or US climate change politics indicates that the reason why the USG has been unwilling to accept LBGERTs centres on four broad factors. These factors are the rational economic priority, scepticism about climate science, hegemonic drives and distributive justice (see, e.g., Bodansky, 2010; Chasek et al., 2013; Pflieger, 2014; Bailey, 2015; Chritoff, 2016; Dimitrov, 2016; Afionis, 2017). These factors are considered in the discussion in this section, but other factors are related to these four, which will be referred to during the discussion. It is important to note that these four factors are interwoven. Thus, some level of flexibility will be allowed—touching on one or two other factors when discussing each element. In doing this, the section starts by first presenting the dominant discourses before constructing the pertinence of the convergence of the political elites’ interest.

3.1 The dominant discourse on USG refusal of LBA

The questions of distributive justice in the allocation of emissions reduction has been a significant issue of concern in the global climate regime, but how justice is conceived differs among parties to the UNFCCC. Scholars argue that the EU and developing countries parties prefer a common but differentiated responsibility principle (CDRP) based on respective capabilities to climate change mitigation while the JUSCANNZ (Japan, US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) group led by the US advocated for an equitably distributed responsibilities (Afionis, 2017). The CDRP is based on wealth, the capacity to cope, and importantly, historical emissions trajectories (Chasek et al., 2013). Despite US reservations, UNFCCC allocated significant duty for climate mitigation to industrialised countries and mandated them to help poorer countries in dealing with climate change (Depledge, 2005) but did not make it LBA and sets no timetable for it (Christoff, 2016).

Unlike UNFCCC, the Kyoto Protocol (KP) seeks to reduce GHG emissions by 5.2% below 1990 levels by committing developed countries listed in Annex B of the Protocol to LBGERTs and sets a timetable for it (Bailey, 2015). Negotiations began in 1995 at the first UNFCCC conference of parties (COP). The US proposed stabilisation of six GHGs instead of emissions reduction, but the EU refuted it suggesting LBGERTs of at least 7.5% in 2005 and 15% by 2010 before the end of 1997 beyond 2000 from 1990 levels (Chasek et al., 2013). The US opposed the EU proposal arguing that the Kyoto Protocol is economically ineffective and unjust in the distribution of emissions reduction targets. The issue of distributive justice will be discussed here while the economic implications will be considered next. The debate on distributive justice results from the Kyoto Protocol’s exemption of developing countries from reducing emissions. This scenario is termed the PPP (*polluter pay principle*). The PPP is the idea that developed countries should do more for climate change mitigation because they are responsible for the bulk of the global emissions due to their historical development trajectories (Caney, 2010) while poor counties suffer most of the brunt (Okereke, 2010). However, the US considered it unfair to other parties (Chasek et al. 2013). This disagreement dominated the negotiations of the climate regime from the UNFCCC to the various COPs culminating in the Paris Agreement.

The President Bill Clinton administration played an intricate part in the negotiation of the Kyoto Protocol after being elected in 1993 with his Vice-President Al Gore making an unusual appearance at the tail end of the Kyoto COP to add finishing touches to the draft Protocol (Sullivan & Warrick, 1997; Bailey, 2015). Unlike his predecessor, George H.W. Bush Clinton agreed to freeze emissions at 1990 levels by proposing an ostensibly ambitious Climate Action Plan (Anderson, 1997; Depledge, 2005). However, President Clinton did not submit the Kyoto Protocol to the Senate

Figure 1: Trends in China and US CO₂ emissions, 1990-2015 (unit: billion tonnes of CO₂). Source: Adapted from the European Commission Joint Research Centre, 2016. Trends in Global CO₂ emissions: 2016 report (pp. 42-43)

for ratification due to the Senate's adoption of the Byrd-Hagel Resolution (BHR). The BHR proscribed the USG from ratifying any climate change treaty that is injurious to the US economy and does not commit developing country parties especially the BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India and China) group to emissions reduction (Chasek et al. 2013). The George W. Bush administration held on to these premises, arguing that the BASIC group constituted 80% of the world population and contributes substantially to global emissions consequently disapproving the Kyoto Protocol in 2001 as an inequitable and ineffective treaty (Peters & Woolley, 2001).

For example, China emerged as the world's most prominent emitter in 2004 one year before the Kyoto Protocol entered into force (Christoff, 2010). Before 2004, China was the world's second-biggest emitter after the US, but its emissions have snowballed while US emissions have almost stabilised (see Fig. 1). Also, China's economy has multiplied, coming very close to the US as the world's second-largest economy (see Fig. 2). So, the US argued that it is an injustice if the BASIC countries' emissions and economy continue to grow without committing them to reduce emissions (Chasek et al. 2013). On the other hand, the BASIC group insisted on the PPP (Chasek et al. 2013). Many scholars have justified and supported the CDRP and PPP characteristic of the Kyoto Protocol (e.g., Caney, 2010; Meyer & Roser, 2010; Schlosberg, 2012; Schlosberg & Collins, 2014). Some scholars (e.g. Page, 2007; Schüssler, 2011) have argued that the CDRP and PPP should not hold because developed countries were unaware of the effect of their past emissions. Schüssler (2011) contends that comparing emissions with some previous heinous actions that were done with complete knowledge of their impacts, e.g., the Apartheid regime in South Africa or the Nazi genocide is unreasonable. Page (2007) argued that developing countries should commit to emissions reduction because they have full awareness of its impacts. However, climate change can be more horrendous than apartheid or genocide if actors carry on with blame games without co-operating.

Therefore, it could be argued that President Barack Obama administration's effort at bringing all antagonists of the global climate change regime to table to develop the Paris Agreement lends support to international regime theorists' argument that behavioural standards in global regimes are better framed within the perspective of the rule of 'reciprocity'—mutual responsibility (Krasner, 1983; Okereke, 2010). The Paris Agreement's most vital institution—the Intended Nationally-Determined Contributions (INDCs) is forged through the principle of reciprocity. In international law, reciprocity is an apt behavioural standard that stimulates cooperation among states (Keohane, 1986; Falk & Fischbacher, 2006). Besides, rational choice theorists argue that reciprocity is an essential factor that drives collective action among rational actors (Ostrom, 1998; Fehr & Gächter, 2000; Feiock, 2007; Guzman, 2008; Evans & Krueger, 2016). Nevertheless, the theory of reciprocity falls short of the explanation of reasons why the US wants to withdraw from the Paris Agreement despite the commitment of almost all countries of the world. Therefore, the argument that US reluctance to accept any LBGERTs is a function of the inequality of the global climate regime can no longer hold. An

Figure 2: GDP of of top ten world economies (Million USD) (2016). Source: World Bank 2016

Figure 3: Relationship between trust, reputation and reciprocity in the Paris Agreement Regime. Source: Adapted and modified from Ostrom (1998, p. 13).

alternative explanation will be attempted based on the implications of trust and reputation on reciprocity in a social dilemma situation.

Ostrom (1998) argued that the possibility that a member of a group will cooperate in a social dilemma situation in which non-cooperation could benefit a member more than others is a function of trust, reputation and reciprocity among the members. In this regard, members who reciprocate other members' contributions to solve a problem [e.g., emissions reduction] by making their contributions will gain a reputation for being trustworthy which spurs the commitment to solving the problem (Ostrom, 1998). The Paris Agreement regime is like a social dilemma situation because the possibility that a country will cut its emissions could depend on its trust that others will do the same. If parties to the Paris Agreement remain committed and continue to meet their targets, reputation is built, and it will reinforce trust and spur reciprocity among countries, enhancing the level of cooperation (see Fig. 3).

However, there is no assurance that some countries will not cheat on others and when this becomes rampant, trust is broken, reputation is lost, and the level of cooperation reduces, and the regime may collapse. It could be argued that the USG under Donald Trump being a climate change sceptic and rational actor was quick to exit the deal believing that other countries will not reduce their emissions. Thus, the success of the Paris Agreement may depend on the level of trust all the parties have among themselves to reciprocate meeting their INDC. Furthermore, Senate ratification is not needed for the Paris Agreement, which eliminates the conflict between the head of governments and legislature that snagged the Kyoto Protocol (Sussman, 2015). However, its failure to achieve LBA could be an argument that Kyoto Protocol was a failed regime (Helm, 2012; Kutney, 2014; Pflieger, 2014; Gross, 2015; Rosen, 2015) could be an argument that Kyoto Protocol was a failed regime that delayed climate solution by two decades (Rosen, 2015). Nevertheless, the intended withdrawal of the US from the Paris Agreement challenges this position because had the Paris Agreement been LBA, the US would not have the liberty to withdraw without punishment. Besides, it contradicts (Roberts, 2011) argument that US hegemony on global climate politics is decreasing.

Economic consideration is by far the most crucial factor that spurred USG refusal to accept LBGERTs. Scholars indicate that the USG reasoned that reducing GHG emissions would destabilise the US economy (Babiker et al., 2002;

Buchner, Carraro & Cersosimo, 2002; Depledge, 2005; Christoff, 2010; Chasek et al., 2013; Bailey, 2015; Afionis, 2017). This stance was spurred by an inevitable increase of emissions as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) rose in the 1990s (Depledge, 2005). In 1999, US GHG emissions were estimated to be about 13% above 1990 levels with a possible rise to 25% during the Kyoto Protocol commitment period (Vrolijk, 2001). Thus, the USG reasoned that cutting emissions would lead to reducing economic output (Bergesen & Sydnes, 1992; Depledge, 2005). Available models at that time show that Kyoto Protocol commitments would cause estimated GDP losses ranging from 0.2 to 2% or 0.3 to 1.4% (Grubb, Vrolijk & Brack, 1999). However, the models were found to have overestimated the costs because nearly all did not include non-CO₂ gases, sinks or the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) but this did not deter US opposition of the Kyoto Protocol (Grubb et al., 1999; Depledge, 2005). Therefore, the US would require a huge emissions reduction to meet its Kyoto Protocol targets.

President George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush echoed these apprehensions by dramatically declining to accede to the UNFCCC and Kyoto Protocol respectively if they set targets and timetable for reducing emissions (Chasek et al., 2013). Given the fact that fossil fuel drives all aspects of US society, Kyoto Protocol targets were considered to be almost unfeasible to accomplish without substantial changes to US lifestyles (Babiker et al., 2002; Depledge, 2005). For example, the culture of individual consumerism and high mobility in the US accentuates the excessive use of fossil energy (Buchner et al., 2002; Harrison & Sundstrom, 2010). The spatial extent of the country means that long distances will have to be covered by its highly mobile population compared to other countries (Mendelsohn, 2005; Bulkeley & Newell, 2015). Thus, emissions reduction will mean less mobility (Lewis, 2008). The Chief of Staff to President G.H.W. Bush, John Sununu buttresses this point by arguing that Americans prefer to use the automobile than pursuing environmental protection goals (Giddens, 2009).

Besides, prominent US economists argued, it would require immediate costly capital-intensive investments to change buildings, power plants and factories to achieve Kyoto Protocol targets which are not feasible (Mendelsohn, 2005). They argued that the Kyoto Protocol would raise the price of energy significantly because acceding to LBGRTs would mean that US fossil fuels would be useless. Thus, this will reverberate into a tremendous negative impact on the US economy resulting in economic hardship and competitive disadvantage (Coon, 2001; Grubb, 2004; Chasek et al., 2013). Coal, in particular, is the US' largest energy reserve (one-fourth of the world's coal reserves) and as such, it was considered as a safe long-term energy supply (Lewis, 2008). Consequently, the USG thought it would be irrational to embark on such investment before lasting international agreements that engage all countries of the world are made (Mendelsohn, 2005; Giddens, 2009).

For these reasons, as noted earlier, the US Congress adopted the BHR in 1997 before the Kyoto Protocol. However, as we have seen previously, the question of involvement of all countries does not seem to explain why the US has planned to withdraw from the Paris Agreement. Based on these backdrops, US global climate actions buttresses the argument of rational choice international regime theorists that states are 'utility maximising' actors on the world stage who seek self-serving solutions to collective action problems (Franceschet, 2002; Okereke, 2010). In the realm of international political economy, structuralists would argue that 'economic structure determines politics [that is] the way the world is organised economically determines how world politics is conducted' (Rourke, 2009, p. 378). So it is easy to translate economic power into political power (Keohane, 2005; Ravenhill, 2017). Consequently, the developed countries of the global north would always strive to keep the states of the south under-developed to maintain the structure of the world system (Rodney, 1972; Wallerstein, 2004; Gilpin, 2011).

Many scholars have drawn upon these structuralists assumptions to forge their analysis. They argue that US fears emissions reduction will put the developing countries particularly the BASIC group's economic power above its own thereby restructuring the world political order (Bergesen & Sydnes, 1992; Grubb et al., 1999; Vrolijk 2001; Babiker et al., 2002; Giddens, 2009). US fear grew following the rise of Japan in the 1980s and the emergence of China and Korea in the 1990s (Depledge, 2005). Thus, the USG policy on climate change was clothed in a hegemonic toga in a quest to retain its position on the international stage— a 'superpower' and 'world power' status it has enjoyed since the last century. These positions underscore realists and neoliberal functionalists' argument that rational states would always seek a Pareto-optimal solution to collective action problems (Okereke, 2010) but justify *rational egoists'* tradition—self-interest is paramount (Mueller, 1986; Donnelly, 2000). While rational egoism could explain US hegemonic drives in the global climate regime, it negates the tenets of a liberal democracy that the US promotes. President Woodrow Wilson argued that liberal democracy makes states seek cooperation with other countries to engender a peaceful world (Rourke, 2009).

From a neo-Gramscian theoretical perspective on hegemony, the US has successfully framed its interests in the global climate regime as a universal general interest. For example, the carbon market (Okereke & Matt, 2014), and INDC are now considered universal prevailing norms by most countries in the EU and world respectively, whereas the US proposed them because it thought they would serve its economic and political interests. As neo-Gramscian theorists would argue, competing societal and political actors would present institutions (rules, norms, practices) as if they will benefit all parties (Cox, 1983; Burnham, 2006). However, they persistently serve the interest of the most potent parties (Mouffe, 1979; Cox & Sinclair, 1996; Bieler & Morton, 2004; Okereke & Matt, 2014). Another factor that is related to the hegemonic drive is the primacy of sovereignty. Revkin and Broder (2009) argue that the US as much as China, does not want to sacrifice its independence to any global institution. This notion is because the USG conceives that it would limit US economic, political and military supremacy (Scott, 2004; Sharp, 2004), which spurred the alignment between US and China to develop the framework upon which the INDC is based before the Paris Agreement COP. Thus, their alliance re-emphasises the neo-Gramscian argument made above.

Besides, it shows that while party ideology could reinforce or weaken US actions to combat climate change, the shielding of its sovereignty remains paramount regardless of party ideological differences between the Democrats and Republican governments. It was argued that the US-China alignment undercut the traditional narrative that if the US cuts its emission without BASIC countries doing the same, the US would be disadvantaged (Haïtes, Yamin & Höhne, 2014; Carafa, 2015; Sussman, 2015). However, the withdrawal of the US from the Paris Agreement faults this argument and re-emphasises US hegemonic drives. Thus, rational egoism on sovereignty could perhaps explain why the US has committed to domestic climate policies instead of multilateral LBA even though it is often portrayed as if the US has not done much on climate change mitigation. Some of US internal climate actions include the funding of scientific research on climate change, energy conservation, the cap and trade scheme, the Clean Air Act, among others (Bailey, 2015).

3.2 The convergence of elites' interests

A significant factor that made USG reluctant to accept LBGERTs is the scepticism about climate science and the climatic data generated by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). However, the level of uncertainty differs among USGs and population over time vis-à-vis the Democrats (less-sceptics) and Republican (sceptics). It is argued that the Republican Party's ideology more than Democrat reinforce USG scepticism about climate change and in turn, catalyses the unwillingness to accede to LBGERTs (Bergesen & Sydnese, 1992; Giddens, 2009). An anti-environmental American conservative movement mobilised in the 1990s to construct climate change as a 'no-problem' issue (McCright & Dunlap, 2003; Dunlap, 2013). The movement challenged climate science and aligned themselves with major American climate change sceptics in affiliations with the fossil fuels and allied industries, propagating their agenda through the media and blogs (Antilla, 2005; Boykoff & Boykoff, 2007; Urry, 2015). The movement was reinforced by the 1994 Republican takeover of Congress, which helped concretise their agenda through the BHR (Chasek et al., 2013; Bailey, 2015; Afionis, 2017). The ascendancy of George W. Bush into the US presidency in 2000 further gave a boost to the antagonists of government action to mitigate climate change (Bailey, 2015).

Proponents of intense action to combat climate change got elected into Congress in the 2006 midterm elections and used their power to probe G.W. Bush administration's climate policies and subsequently established their influences (Bailey, 2015). Their forces coupled with substantial scientific evidence swayed the G.W. Bush administration to reframe the issue of climate change from narratives of scientific uncertainty, economic costs, and global competitiveness to long-term nature of the problem (Bailey, 2015). Conversely, the vigorous action proponents framed it as an urgent problem that portended grave dangers to the US (Bailey, 2015). Consequently, the G.W. Bush administration responded through many initiatives but preferred voluntary actions instead of LBGERTs although many actors within his government saw the need to cut down GHG emissions (Chasek et al., 2013; Bailey, 2015).

The election of Democratic President Obama was thought that it would change the status quo (Gerson, 2012; Gillis & Kaufman, 2012; Dunlap, 2013). The Obama administration made various efforts including his use of executive power to ask the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to interpret and implement the US environmental law in a way that fits into his climate change agenda (Bailey, 2015). Despite his many national efforts, his global climate change legacies culminated in the Paris Agreement, which is not far from what his Republican predecessors proposed—voluntary actions that involve all nations (Dimitrov, 2016). However, many scholars and commentators have applauded the Paris

Agreement as a considerable success (Dimitrov, 2016; Christoff, 2016; Kinley, 2017) that heralds hope for a just response to the global climate crisis (Buxon, 2016). Therefore, the decision of President Donald Trump to exit the Paris Agreement reinforces the argument that the Republican Party is often against actions to combat climate change due to their ties with US big businesses, especially the oil and automobile industries.

While this is not disputed, it is imperative to clarify that not all Republicans are sceptics neither all Democrats are pro-climate action. In 1994, the Democrats held 46.90% and 48% of the seats in the House of Representatives and Senate, respectively (Bailey, 2015) so they still had some influence. Besides, Democrat members of Congress did not vote against the BHR, which is the cornerstone of US withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol and restricted subsequent USGs from accepting any LBGERTs. As Bailey (2015) argues, many principal actors within the Bush, G.W. administration supported government action to combat climate change, which is contrary to his position. Therefore, the USG reluctance to accept LBGERTs is not just a function of deliberate Republican construction of climate change as a phenomenon that is evidenced by falsified science. It is more of a convergence of interests of principal actors and political elites in the US political system who conceive that their interest would be jeopardised if the USG takes drastic actions to cut emissions. Nonetheless, this is reinforced when Republicans are in power.

On the Contrary, public opinion polls show that those who identify themselves as Democrats are less sceptical about climate change and support government action more than Republicans and the gap has been growing in recent times (Dunlap & McCright, 2008; Bailey, 2015). For example, in 2014, 73% of Democrats believed that global warming was already occurring while 36% of Republicans believe so. Similarly, 79% of Democrats identified anthropogenic factors as the primary cause of climate change compared to 41% of Republicans (Jones, 2014; Saad, 2014; Newport, 2014). However, as Bailey (2015, p. 36) argues, *'public opinion on climate change has provided few incentives for policymakers to engage in a major effort to address the problem over the last 25 years'*.

Similarly, Nisbet (2011) argues that public opinion on climate change lacked the force that could spur a significant shift in policy. However, what makes the strength insignificant? The answer I would suggest is that there is no robust mobilisation for it; instead, the reverse is the case because it is not in the interest of most of the political elites. Hence, we can see that the convergence of interests of those who are against combating climate change is stronger than those who favour government action. The result is a growing neoliberal sentiment and scepticism about climate change. In this respect, Bailey (2015) explained that even though most Americans believe that human activity causes climate change; opinion polls indicate that they are unconvinced of the gravity of the condition which has spurred the general hostility against government action to combat climate change.

The central argument being made in this paper is that among the factors that influenced USG not to accept a legally binding emission reduction treaty, the convergence of political elites' interest is pertinent. The political elites have ties with oil and gas corporations and have common interests regardless of the party lines, and through elite interaction and networking, they find some commanding backing in the US climate change policy. It has been argued that transnational and national problem solving happens within elite networks or epistemic communities sharing common motivation, expertise, beliefs over ends and means, and solutions to common problems (Bennett 1991; Atkinson & Coleman 1992; Holzinger et al. 2008). In this context, this paper conceives the US climate change policymaking to have been shaped by elite political and business network interests more than public demands. The political elites' policy positions on climate change tend towards convergence, and it stems from the presence of common ideas among a coherent and stable network of elites (the political elites and the oil corporation elites) engaging in regular interaction.

4 Conclusion

This essay has investigated why the USG has been reluctant to accept LBGERTs. The paper notes that four factors are essential in explaining this, namely the economy, scepticism about climate science, hegemonic drives and distributive justice. Notwithstanding, USG unwillingness to accept LBGERTs is a calculated plot and convergence of interests of key actors in US political system who envisage government action to combat climate change as a threat to their interest, although this is reinforced or dissuaded by party ideology over time. However, while party ideology could strengthen or weaken US actions to combat climate change, the shielding of its sovereignty remains paramount regardless of party ideological differences between the Democrats and Republican governments. Furthermore, while it could be argued

that the Kyoto Protocol was a failed regime given the wide acceptance of the Paris Agreement, the planned departure of the US from Paris Agreement demonstrates that Kyoto Protocol was not wholly a failure and re-emphasise the need to have LBA.

The essay argues that the Paris Agreement is a social dilemma regime; consequently, its success will depend on trust, reputation and reciprocity among states that other parties will remain determined to meet their pledged emissions reduction targets. It argues that among the factors that influenced UGS not to accept legally binding emission reduction treaty, the convergence of political elites' interest is pertinent. The political elites have ties with oil and gas corporations and have common interests regardless of the party lines, and through elite interaction and networking, they find some commanding backing in the US climate change policy. The paper agrees with the finding of recent work that there is a network of information exchange among policy elites working on the issue of climate change in the US (Jasny et al. 2018). Also, it supports Carroll et al. (2018) indication that the boards of carbon-capital companies have networks that link with significant knowledge-making establishments such as civil society, universities and political elites which help construct a specific notion on climate change.

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