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THE SECOND DOLOMITE CONFERENCE ON THE GLOBAL GOVERNANCE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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PSG 2.
**THE IDEA OF A GLOBAL
ACCOUNTABILITY: IS
THERE A WAY TO
CONSTRUCT
MECHANISMS OF
GLOBAL
REPRESENTATION?
SHOULD THEY
PROVIDE FOR A
REPRESENTATION
SKEWED TOWARDS
YOUNG GENERATIONS?**



Actions Beyond Words

PSG 2

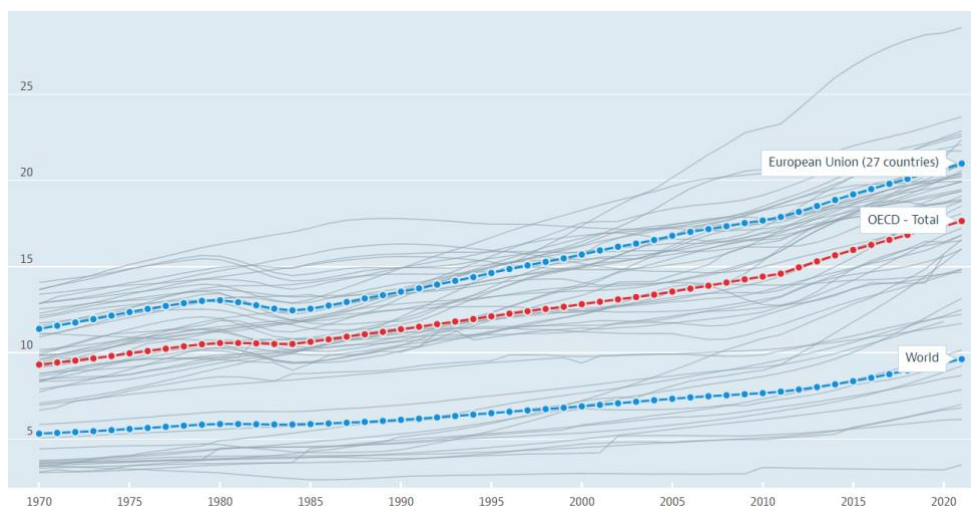
THE IDEA OF A GLOBAL ACCOUNTABILITY: IS THERE A WAY TO CONSTRUCT MECHANISMS OF GLOBAL REPRESENTATION? SHOULD THEY PROVIDE FOR A REPRESENTATION SKEWED TOWARDS YOUNG GENERATIONS?

The seriousness and the urgency of climate change should never represent an excuse for disregarding the principles of democratic systems. Nonetheless, the inalienability of democracy does not imply its lack of deficiencies, in particular in presence of complex and long-term challenges as the climate one. The present concept note provides insights on two inter-linked issues that potentially undermine the implementation of effective climate policies: the ageing population and the global scalability of democracy.

IS DEMOCRACY TOO OLD FOR FACING CLIMATE CHANGE?

Democracy should be blind to demographic characteristics such as age: its very foundation is based on the 'one person, one vote' principle. However, this principle does not imply that democratic systems should ignore the implications of majority rule for minorities. Importantly, the process of ageing, spurred on by increasing life expectancy and sustained low fertility, and is being felt across the developed World, and more recently also in developing nation, (OECD Data, Elderly Population, 2023), is generating a new political minority: young people.

FIGURE 1: ELDERLY AS % OF THE POPULATION FROM 1970 TO 2021



SOURCE: OECD DATA

The political marginalization of young people, indeed, may undermine the 'unwritten rule' of democracy: due to the pyramid-shaped age distribution, the majority of voters has ever constituted by the ones most likely to be impacted by the outcomes of the democratic

process in the long-term (Berry, 2014). Always until the demographic pyramid has gradually started to be tipped over.

It is important to point out that in so far political preferences are the same among the young and the old, the process of ageing, would not entail any democratic distortion. Even if there is not an academic consensus on this point, many studies confirmed that the generational gap has made the difference in several cases (Ahlfeldt G. M., Maennig W. and Mueller S. Q., 2022; Duffy B., 2021).

Due to the long-term implications of climate change, a possible democratic distortion due to an ageing population may assume high relevance. If a majority of older voters care less about climate change compared to the young, then the process of ageing will potentially impede action against climate change. Yet is rushed to argue that older people are less concerned with the challenges invoked by climate change. In fact, studies provide contradictory results on this point (Duffy B., 2021; UNDP and University of Oxford, 2021): there might not be a simple linear relationship between age and climate concerns. Still, in face of radical climate policies, the principle of voters' utility maximization (Messner and Polborn, 2004) will prevail, suggesting that in presence of trade-offs between short- and long-term oriented policies, elderly and young voters will vote differently, not least because they differ in terms of their remaining lifetime.

IS DEMOCRACY SCALABLE AT GLOBAL LEVEL?

The principle of international law grants each sovereign state political autonomy and supreme authority within its borders (Oxford Public International Law), resulting in global policies relying on mutual consensus rather than command-and-control enforcement (Field B. & M., 2021). Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) are the legally binding instruments that are normally employed in climate diplomacy. Among the others, the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) is the most impactful forum on the topic. The states involved in the convention meet annually in the Conference of Parties (COP), where decisions on climate commitment are taken after days of negotiations. Normally, formal vote is avoided and final decisions are taken through consensus.

MEAs are often unsatisfactory in achieving results. There are many barriers that countries face in climate negotiations: firsts are legal, since effective enforcement mechanisms are hard to gain when decisions are reached through consensus. Additionally, many political barriers applies countries might face internal political frictions in perusing climate actions if national interests diverge. Historically, there has been divergence on responsibilities between negotiation blocks, with developing countries claiming for historical responsibilities of western countries in climate change while becoming the top emitters amidst their industrialization processes. Dealing with climate change also implies financial and technological burden, which developing countries often are not able or willing to sustain. For this reason, UNFCCC has adopted the "common but differentiated responsibilities" principle, to state the role of developed countries in driving the ecological transition.

Given the often-unsatisfactory outcomes of MEAs, its principles and voting mechanisms have been doubted. During formal votes the "one country, one vote" principle applies, to ensure that even the smallest country has a say in the decisions. However, population density factors are not taken into consideration, and this can create a distortion in the voting

processes. Most advanced economies, such as US and China, often have the economic and soft power to drive their preferred outcomes in the decision making. Alternative voting mechanisms based on population factors could make the international agreements more democratic. In such scenario, developing countries - that are often characterized by younger population - could count more on decisions and MEAs would potentially be more adherent to new generation's needs. However, this system wouldn't come without controversial aspects: many emerging economies and highly populated countries' governments are not democratically elected, and giving higher voting power to autocracies can exasperate the divergence between population interests and MEAs outcomes.

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