



Why Local Adaptation Policies Can Facilitate Sustainable Progress to Mitigate Climate Change

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President Barack Obama clearly wants to tackle climate change – and he has shown real leadership by promulgating new Environmental Protection Agency rules to curb carbon dioxide emissions from power plants, by negotiating a climate pact with China, and by pushing big investments in clean energy. Nevertheless, the United States remains far from attaining the turning point envisaged by candidate Obama in 2008, when he promised to reach the point where “the rise of the oceans [begins] to slow and our planet [begins] to heal.” Given limits to what any president can achieve through executive action, Congress and the states must act as well. Yet even when new laws are in place, the sustainability of efforts to limit damage from climate change cannot be taken for granted. In this brief, I explain why sustaining climate mitigation policies is so difficult – and outline ways in which steps to address the climate adaptation needs of local communities can help to build supportive coalitions and prevent backsliding.

The Challenge of Sustaining Climate Mitigation Policies

Enacting far-reaching climate change solutions is a tough task. Politicians like to deliver measurable benefits to constituents, but climate change is an intergenerational and global problem. As the legal theorist Cass Sunstein observes, the main beneficiaries of greenhouse gas emission reductions either are not born yet or live elsewhere, but current lawmakers are reluctant to impose short-term pain for long-term gain. To be sure, the U.S. Congress mobilized revenue to defeat fascism during World War II. But in that instance, voters could readily grasp why they were being asked to make sacrifices. Today, the situation with climate change is entirely different – the risks are more diffuse, individual citizens and businesses can always choose to let others bear the burden of necessary sacrifices, and the payoffs to Americans are far from certain.

Difficult as it is, passing bold measures is just half the battle; victories must be sustained. All public policies, whether regulatory or market-based, require government rules to support them. And new rules for implementation carry inevitable political risks and uncertainties. The politicians who passed the original law – such as an emissions cap or a carbon tax – will not stay in office forever, and their successors may have different agendas. Moreover, the interest groups that lost at the moment of enactment may return to fight another day. Rather than a one-shot affair, climate policymaking should be seen as a *dynamic* process in which the consolidation of reform may be more challenging than the adoption of a statute or regulation in the first place.

Policy sustainability refers to the capacity of a reform to maintain its integrity and deploy core principles to guide implementation and stave off pressures for debilitating changes. Research suggests that the most durable reforms stick not because they are “frozen in place,” but because they *reconfigure* politics in ways that preserve core principles and spur continuing momentum. According to previous research, here are some important ways this can happen:

- ***Sustainable policies undercut support for opponents of reform*** – for example, by weakening industries or interest groups that do not want the new policy direction.
- ***Sustainable policies reconfigure institutional authority and change the venues in which further decisions are made*** – for example, by stipulating that an independent agency, not Congress, will be in charge of future policy modifications.
- Most importantly, ***sustainable policies create “positive feedback” by encouraging citizens, businesses, and interest groups to adjust to new ways of doing things***. Once that happens, such actors become reluctant to have reform repealed or fundamentally changed, because they want to protect their investments in new profits and ways of doing things.

We can draw implications for successful climate policies, where the basic challenge is not simply to reduce dangerous greenhouse gas emissions in any one year but to lock in practices that, over time, steadily reduce emissions levels. To meet that challenge, a new law or regulation needs not just support from environmentalists but also from market interests and localities that develop vested interests. What is more, although large-scale change is certainly needed, small immediate victories can alter the policy landscape in ways that increase the feasibility of future reforms – for example, by creating new interests, strengthening allies of reform, or dividing opponents.

Considerations about political sustainability should be front and center from the start, worked into the initial design of a law or regulation. One good tactic is to ensure that immediate benefits are delivered in salient ways. And local assistance can help to do that.

Using Local Adaptation Projects to Sustain Climate Mitigation Progress

As the planet warms, localities face frequent episodes of extreme weather or shifts in sea levels. Environmental advocates know about such threats, but have sometimes assumed that helping local communities cope – for example, by funding infrastructure projects to protect coastal cities against floods – will undermine public support for broader reforms. But as Harvard climate expert Robert Stavins points out, even if a national U.S. carbon tax or cap-and-trade system were passed tomorrow, programs to cope with climate shifts already under way would still be needed. Moreover, adaptation policies carry important political advantages. By delivering *local* benefits, they give officeholders welcome opportunities to claim credit for job-creating projects; and they reinforce the message that climate change is a present danger, putting deniers on the defensive.

The key maneuver is to propose mitigation and adaptation policies as *complements* rather than substitutes. For example, a Virginia Beach Republican legislator introduced the Virginia Coastal Protection Act, calling for his state to join a nine-state cap-and-trade program, the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative. In his proposal, half of the revenues generated from the sale of carbon allowances would help Tidewater communities pay for immediately needed climate resilience projects, such as building floodwalls and elevating roads. The other half would support renewable energy, efficiency improvements, and economic development in southwest Virginia, where fossil fuel production has previously been a source of good jobs. This cleverly designed bill has gained key support from many mayors, elected officials, and citizens. It may show the way to bipartisan, sustainable legislation in the future.