

Domestic Politics, National Interests, and Climate Commitments: A Comparative Study of China and the United States under the Paris Agreement

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Abstract:

This paper conducts a comparative analysis of the climate governance models of China and the United States under the Paris Agreement, investigating how domestic politics and national interests shape their international commitments and compliance behaviors. As the world's two largest emitters, the U.S. and China have embarked on divergent paths. The U.S. demonstrates a model of "contingent participation," characterized by policy instability driven by partisan polarization, presidential transitions, and the influence of interest groups. This volatility reveals the fragility of its international commitments, which are often transactional and subordinate to domestic political struggles. In contrast, China exhibits a model of "coherent implementation," where climate action is a consistent, top-down state strategy integrated into its long-term national development goals, ensuring policy continuity. This study critically examines the explanatory power of liberal institutionalism, arguing that the Sino-U.S. divergence exposes the "illusion of liberalism." It finds that international norms and institutions like the Paris Agreement are insufficient to override the primacy of domestic political structures and interests. The paper concludes that a nation's internal political landscape is the fundamental determinant of its climate policy, and the effectiveness of global governance hinges on aligning international goals with the endogenous motivations and strategic interests of major powers.

Keywords: Climate Commitments; Paris Agreement; Comparative Study.

1. Introduction

The Paris Agreement is a legally binding international treaty on climate change, marking a landmark in the multilateral climate change process. For the first time, it brings all nations together to combat climate change and adapt to its effects [1]. However, the global climate crisis is accelerating at an unprecedented rate. Following the record-breaking global high temperatures in 2024, the goal of the Paris Agreement to limit the global average temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels is becoming increasingly remote [2]. Although the global climate regime lacks any robust follow-up mechanism for these, under the Paris Agreement, ambition is nationally determined [3].

Against this backdrop, China and the United States, as the two largest greenhouse gas emitters in the world, have embarked on divergent governance paths. This divergence became more pronounced after the 2024 U.S. presidential election, casting a shadow over multilateral climate cooperation.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the following core questions: Through what mechanisms do domestic politics and national interests influence the international climate commitments and compliance behaviors of China and the U.S.? Under the framework of the Paris Agreement, what differences emerge in their institutional participation and behavioral patterns? And how is the much-anticipated „illusion of liberalism“ in international cooperation—an optimistic belief that international cooperation, driven by common norms and institutions, can inherently overcome national interests and domestic political obstacles to achieve global solutions—specifically manifested and ultimately shattered in the climate governance practices of the two countries?

Theoretically, this study, through an in-depth analysis of the Chinese and U.S. cases, enriches the understanding of the interactive relationship between domestic politics and international commitments within global climate governance theory and critically examines the liberal explanatory paradigm. In practical terms, this research highlights the inherent complexity and uncertainty of Sino-U.S. climate cooperation and the broader global climate governance process, providing potential insights into understanding its future trajectory.

To achieve these research objectives, this paper will employ several methodologies. First, through literature analysis, it will systematically review domestic and international academic literature, official policy documents, and research reports on Sino-U.S. climate governance. Second, using a comparative analysis approach, our study will systematically contrast the institutional participation models, behavioral logics, and policy paths of China and the U.S. under the Paris Agreement framework. Finally,

taking the signing and implementation of the Paris Agreement as a core case, it will use case study analysis to deeply examine the significant role of domestic political factors in the two countries' interactions with the agreement.

2. Literature Review

As climate change has gained global prominence, numerous scholars have presented diverse perspectives on related issues.

2.1 . Studies on Global Climate Governance and Liberalism

Global climate governance has transitioned from the Kyoto Protocol to the Paris Agreement. It is widely believed in academia that this transition marks a shift from a „top-down“ model of compulsory emission reductions to one centered on „bottom-up“ Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). Eckersley (2020) points out that this shift was largely a transactional design to accommodate the domestic political realities of key nations like the United States [4].

From a theoretical standpoint, neoliberal institutionalism posits that states can foster cooperation by participating in international institutions like the Paris Agreement. However, Unny (2020) notes that in the current world, fraught with suspicion and mistrust, the realist logic of national interest and power competition dominates climate politics, hindering the realization of liberal ideals of cooperation [5].

In recent years, a growing body of critical research has begun to reflect on the inherent limitations of the liberalism-based global governance model. At the political philosophy level, Muraille et al. (2022) argue that the principles of „state neutrality“ and „individualism supremacy“ embedded in liberalism make it structurally ill-equipped to handle global threats that demand scientific authority and collective action [6]. At the political economy level, Kang et al. (2023) point out that liberal democratic states face a „carbon lock-in“ predicament due to their entanglement with market capitalism, and their pluralistic advantages become disadvantages when confronting the singular goal of the climate crisis [7].

This reflection on the liberal paradigm has prompted scholars to explore more diverse governance actors and dynamics. Understanding a nation's climate policy hinges on analyzing its „bottom-up socialization process of domestic actors“ [8]. Klaus et al. (2023) empirically found that after the Trump administration first announced its withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, U.S. carbon-intensive firms, under public and market pressure, actually strengthened their ESG performance to protect their repu-

tations [9]. Some scholars even suggest that given the extreme instability of U.S. policy, its permanent withdrawal might foster a more stable and diverse leadership for global climate governance [10].

2.2 . The Roles of China and the U.S. in Global Climate Governance

As key major powers in global governance and two of the highest carbon-emitting countries, the roles, strategic motivations, and behavioral patterns of China and the U.S. have attracted significant scholarly attention.

2.2.1 China: A Strategic and Coherent Participant

China's role in climate agreements has evolved. From a "defensive collaborator" in the early stages of the Paris Agreement negotiations [4], China has transformed into an "important participant, contributor, and leader" in global climate governance in the new era [11].

Regarding strategic motivations and internal drivers, scholars generally agree that China's climate action is propelled by strong endogenous momentum; achieving a carbon peak is a "green revolution" that China has proactively chosen to serve the intrinsic requirements of its high-quality national development [12]. Lee (2020) adds from an international relations perspective that one of China's objectives in actively participating in climate governance is to enhance its soft power [8].

China's climate commitments are backed by long-term, systematic scientific research [13]. China had already systematically outlined its strategic blueprint before the official announcement of its "dual carbon" goals [14]. Zhou et al. (2021) demonstrated the necessity of China's deep emission reductions from a global perspective [15], and He et al. (2022) further quantified the immense investment and effort required to achieve carbon neutrality [16].

In terms of strategic resolve against external shocks, China's response to the impact of the first U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Agreement was both prudent and proactive, focusing on achieving its own goals and advocating for a "collective leadership" model in cooperation with the EU, India, and others [17].

2.2.2 The United States: An Unstable and Contingent Participant

In stark contrast to China's coherence, U.S. climate policy is known for its "instability". Pan, X.R. (2024) divides Sino-U.S. climate cooperation between 2008 and 2022 into three phases: "cooperation greater than competition" during the Obama era, "competition greater than cooperation" during the Trump era, and "coexistence of competition and cooperation" during the Biden era, reflecting the cyclical fluctuations of U.S. policy [18].

During the Obama administration, Eckersley (2020) defined its role as a "transactional leader," whose design of

the Paris Agreement was largely a compromise to bypass domestic political resistance [3]. The climate policy of the Biden administration has been described as "Trumpism without Trump"; its measures, such as the Inflation Reduction Act, are essentially an "America First" strategy using climate as a pretext for industrial policy and competition with China [19].

In studies of the Trump era's two "withdrawals," Galbraith, J. (2020) analyzed the first exit, highlighting the institutional weakness of an "executive agreement" [20]. The second U.S. withdrawal was framed as "no environmental problem, only a cost problem," with the Trump administration aiming to lower energy costs to serve the reshoring of manufacturing and the development of the AI industry [21].

2.3 The Impact of Domestic Politics and National Interests on Climate Commitments and Compliance

Synthesizing the above analysis, scholars widely agree that domestic political structures and the perception of national interests are the fundamental reasons for the differing climate governance paths of China and the U.S. It is essential to deeply analyze each country's "domestic contexts" to understand its international behavior [8].

The vacillation of U.S. climate policy is the result of contention among diverse domestic actors. Partisan polarization and electoral punishment hinder climate action (Kang et al., 2023), but at the same time, state governments, corporations, and interest groups act as bottom-up balancing forces, providing resilience to U.S. climate action [9][22]. In China, however, climate action is a centrally planned strategic coordination. Fan, X.R. (2024)'s research explains how the Communist Party of China ensures top-level design and coherent policy execution, with the national interest clearly defined as the synergistic unification of climate goals and long-term national development strategies [11]. Climate action is seen as an intrinsic requirement and strategic opportunity for achieving "ecological civilization" and "high-quality development" [16].

2.4 Gaps in Existing Literature and Contributions of This Paper

In summary, domestic and international academia has amassed a wealth of research on Sino-U.S. climate governance, laying a solid foundation for this paper. However, existing research exhibits certain limitations. First, research perspectives are relatively fragmented, often conducted from a single disciplinary viewpoint or focused on a single period, lacking a comprehensive framework for a systematic and holistic comparison of the two distinct climate governance models of China and the U.S.. Second, critiques of "liberalism" require more systematic and theo-

retical depth, often scattered across different fields and not yet systematically integrated. Finally, there are significant differences between Chinese and Western narrative perspectives, which obstruct a comprehensive understanding of how Domestic Politics, National Interests, and Climate Commitments interact.

To address these gaps, the innovations of this paper are as follows: First, it seeks to construct a relatively integrated analytical framework for comparing governance models, moving beyond simple policy evaluation. Using the specific case of the Paris Agreement, it systematically contrasts the two different climate governance models exhibited by China and the U.S., and deeply analyzes the formation and operation of the former's "volatile model of pluralistic checks and balances" versus the latter's "coherent model of central planning". Second, this paper argues that the inherent flaws of liberalism are a contributing factor to the incoherence and governance failure of U.S. climate policy, offering a more critical theoretical perspective for understanding the differences between the Chinese and U.S. models. Finally, this paper engages in a dialogue between Chinese and Western narratives, systematically comparing the internal perspectives of Chinese scholars with the analyses of Western academia to avoid the biases of a single viewpoint. This fosters a more objective understanding of the different worldviews, interest perceptions, and governance philosophies of China and the U.S. on climate issues, thereby forming a more inclusive and explanatory comparative study.

3. Theory and its Application to the Paris Agreement

3.1 Introduction to the Theory

Liberalism in international relations theory (especially neoliberal institutionalism), while starting from the same premise of anarchy as neorealism, deduces that cooperation in world politics and economics is possible where common interests exist, organized through institutions.

In the face of global challenges like climate change and pandemics, all nations face a common threat and thus share a common interest in cooperation. State behavior is driven not only by power struggles but also by the desire for absolute gains.

Institutions are enduring, interconnected sets of formal and informal rules that specify behavioral roles, constrain action, and shape expectations. Institutional function theory suggests that high levels of institutionalization reduce the destabilizing effects of anarchy by providing relatively symmetrical information, stabilizing expectations, and increasing the costs of defection through economies of scale, thus compensating for the lack of trust between

states. Institutions work by punishing betrayal, raising the cost of deceptive behavior, reducing the costs of cooperation, and leveraging states' concern for their reputations. As a natural product of transactional behavior, Keohane argues that international institutions emerge not as a result of hegemonic supply, but from demand—the need for cooperation creates institutions. They originate from and transcend hegemony; while a hegemon may facilitate their creation, institutions, being products of cooperation, will persist even if the hegemon declines.

The achievement of the Paris Agreement was largely seen as a major victory for liberal international cooperation. However, its subsequent troubles have led more people to question whether this was a victory for liberalism or merely an illusion.

3.2 The Paris Agreement

The global climate governance system has undergone a profound transformation from the Kyoto Protocol to the Paris Agreement. It moved away from the Kyoto Protocol's top-down allocation of emission reduction targets, instead allowing countries to voluntarily submit their own emission reduction commitments based on their national circumstances. This significantly broadened participation in the agreement. Based on the principle of „common but differentiated responsibilities,“ it is centered on „bottom-up“ NDCs, aiming to limit the global temperature rise to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit it to 1.5°C.

However, the birth of the Paris Agreement was still colored by great power politics. It grants countries significant flexibility regarding substantive emission reduction obligations; the specific reduction targets set in each country's NDC are not legally binding themselves. This voluntary and non-binding nature makes it more acceptable to nations than the Kyoto Protocol, but it also creates a disconnect between long-term goals and short-term actions, posing a major implementation challenge in establishing an effective long-term mechanism to ensure national action. From the perspective that global governance cannot escape the objective reality of domestic politics, the Paris Agreement ultimately could not avoid compromising with the domestic politics of major powers. Any grand blueprint for global governance must ultimately be constrained by the domestic political will and capacity of its main participants, which foreshadowed the divergent compliance paths that China and the U.S. would later take.

3.3 The Paris Agreement through a Theoretical Lens

The emergence of the Paris Agreement was a successful outcome of liberalism, establishing an unprecedented global institutional framework in which all countries

participate, and setting a cooperative path for resolving common problems through dialogue, consultation, and regular review. This aligns with the liberal expectation of the function of international institutions.

However, to reconcile the interests of developed major powers (especially the U.S., with its political volatility and checks and balances) and developing countries (like China, insisting on common but differentiated responsibilities and historical accountability for developed nations), the core mechanism of the agreement was designed to be highly flexible. The voluntary nature of NDCs allows countries to prioritize their own national interests and reduce the costs of international commitments, thus retaining a neorealist character, influenced by the domestic politics and practical interests of major powers.

The implementation process following the agreement's entry into force more profoundly exposed the illusion of liberalism. Liberalism believes that international norms can exert a soft constraint on state behavior. However, the Trump administration's two "withdrawals" and its instrumentalization of the climate issue, despite the U.S. being a superpower and a key participant, demonstrate that any international norms and reputational costs can be abandoned when the domestic political tide turns. This behavior followed the logic of realist national interest calculations, not liberal cooperative norms.

Second, institutionalized cooperation cannot transcend domestic politics. The reality is that domestic politics is the fundamental variable determining a country's climate policy. In the United States, deep-seated partisan divisions, lobbying by interest groups such as the fossil fuel industry, and a prevalent individualism cause federal climate policy to be erratic. The U.S. often joins climate agreements under presidents who favor environmental policies (e.g., Clinton supporting the Kyoto Protocol, Obama joining the Paris Agreement), but Congress and more conservative succeeding presidents often hold negative views (e.g., Congress passing the Byrd-Hagel Resolution to block the Kyoto Protocol, which George W. Bush subsequently exited; a Republican-majority Congress questioning the climate crisis, leading Obama to join the Paris Agreement via executive action, which Trump then brazenly exited). Even during the Biden administration, which pledged "active participation," its policies were filled with protectionism serving domestic industry and realist considerations of competition with China, rather than pure global cooperation.

In contrast, China's compliance behavior is not primarily driven by the external incentives or constraints of the Paris Agreement. Its strong execution stems from internalizing climate goals into its long-term national development strategy (such as Ecological Civilization) and promoting them top-down through a powerful central planning system. Compared to the inaction on climate resulting from

political opposition in the U.S., effective climate governance may depend more on a country's internal strategic determination and institutional capacity.

In conclusion, the Paris Agreement, as a product of liberal institutions, successfully created a platform for global dialogue and cooperation, but it cannot overcome the structural flaws inherent in its member states, particularly the Western liberal powers. When these countries are unable to take effective, coherent action due to their internal political, economic, and social contradictions, the cooperative ideal embodied in the agreement becomes a beautiful "illusion." This is the core issue this study seeks to deeply analyze.

4 The U.S. Model: Contingent Participation amid Pluralistic Contention

The institutional participation and behavioral patterns of the United States under the Paris Agreement framework exhibit cyclical reversals, driven by presidential transitions, partisan conflicts, and deep-seated domestic political divisions. This inherent instability makes U.S. participation in global climate governance contingent, transactional, and ephemeral. Therefore, U.S. climate policy represents not a coherent national will, but rather the outcome of contention among diverse domestic actors.

4.1 Policy Shifts Dominated by Presidential Transitions

U.S. federal climate policy is largely shaped by the executive power of the president, characterized by sharp partisan divisions and demonstrating the fragility of U.S. international commitments.

The engagement of the Obama and Biden administrations illustrates this. The former actively promoted a „green new deal,“ placed climate change on the national agenda, and pushed for the Paris Agreement, where the NDC model was designed to bypass domestic political resistance, particularly from a Republican-controlled Congress. However, this also paved the way for his successor's easy withdrawal. The latter rejoined the Paris Agreement and introduced the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), yet some scholars note this is a form of „Trumpism without Trump,“ where the climate issue serves an „America First“ industrial policy and geoeconomic competition with China. Overall, domestic politics and economic competition have created significant obstacles to positive climate action [23].

Conversely, the Trump administration's two withdrawals and „de-climatization“ policies show a different approach. Trump moved from publicly questioning the science of climate change to drastically cutting support for renewable energy, prioritizing the fossil fuel industry, and halting

nearly all international climate cooperation. Some scholars have also noted that it is not just that the Republican Party, represented by Trump, opposes the climate progress supported by Democrats; there are also divisions within the Republican Party itself on whether to repeal the IRA. The climate issue has become a partisan one, and „the U.S. has never been as divided as it is today“ [24].

4.2 The Domestic Crucible: Partisanship, Interest Groups, and the Market

The volatility of U.S. climate policy is rooted in the complexity of its domestic political economy.

First, partisan division in the U.S. is not just about policy preferences but about fundamental differences in the perception of the climate change issue itself. Climate change is one of the top issues for Democratic voters but

ranks last among 20 priorities for Republican voters [25]. Polling data shows a vast cognitive gap between voters of the two parties. For example, in 2023, as high as 82% of Democrats viewed climate change as a „serious threat,“ while only 16% of Republicans shared this view. On the question of whether climate change is happening and the impact of human action, the partisan gap reached an all-time high of 35% by 2024. Although some scholars note that one cannot say the views of Democrats, Republicans, and independents are entirely opposite, the conclusion is that between 2020 and 2024, their opinions on climate policy diverged significantly [26]. This makes any long-term, bipartisan consensus on climate policy challenging. Figure 1 shows that republicans rank climate change at the bottom of their priorities for the president and Congress in 2024.

Republicans rank climate change at the bottom of their priorities for the president and Congress in 2024

% of U.S. adults who describe each of the 20 issues asked about as a *top priority* for the president and Congress

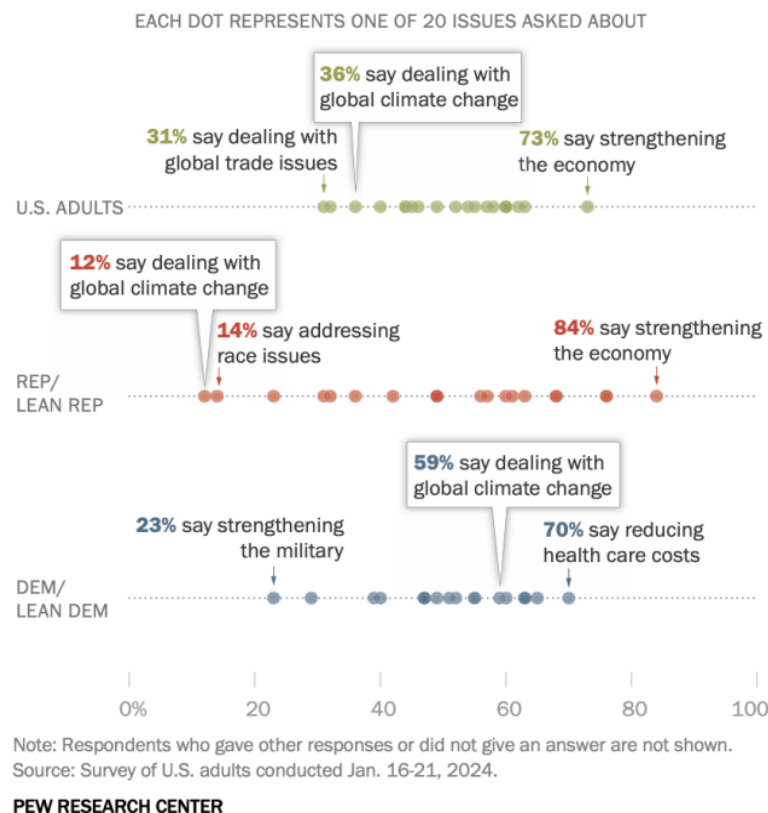


Figure 1. Republican Climate Issue Ranking, 2024

Source: Pew Research Center (<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/03/01/how-republicans-view-climate-change-and-energy-issues/>)

Meanwhile, in the context of U.S. „money politics,“ the lobbying activities of interest groups have a huge impact on policymaking. From 1998 to 2023, the oil and gas in-

dustry spent \$2.8 billion on federal lobbying, far exceeding the roughly \$429.3 million spent by environmental organizations over the same period. When it comes to federal lobbying spending, the oil and gas industry routinely dwarfs environmental interests. The \$2.8 billion in federal lobbying spending by the oil and gas industry from 1998 to 2023 dwarfs the roughly \$429.3 million spent by environmental interest groups over the same period. This

has therefore directly obstructed climate legislation and influenced public opinion and political discourse, steering them toward more conservative actions focused on economic benefits, employment impacts, and policy costs. Figure 2 shows a comparison of federal lobbying expenditures between environmental organizations and the oil and gas industry.

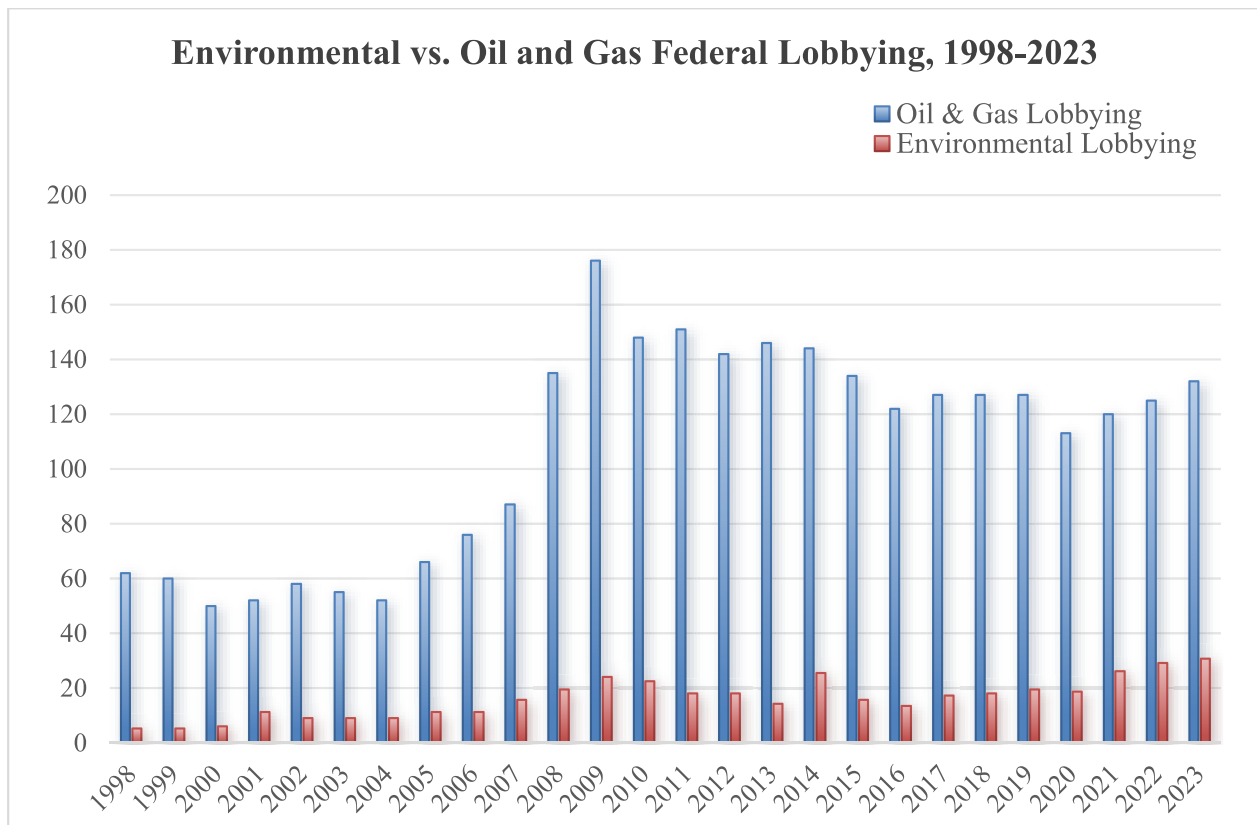


Figure 2. Environmental vs. Oil and Gas Federal Lobbying, 1998-2023

Source: Open Secrets (<https://www.opensecrets.org/news/issues/climate-change>)

Finally, regarding market and local resilience, despite federal-level uncertainty, market forces represented by Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) investing are driving bottom-up corporate climate action. Global asset management firm BlackRock has placed sustainability at the core of its investment strategy, fueling the rise of ESG investing and providing some resilience to U.S. climate action [27]. However, this also faces considerable political controversy, as Republican lawmakers in 12 states successfully pushed anti-environmental, social and governance legislation through for the first time in 2023. Therefore, even these spontaneous market forces are susceptible to fierce domestic partisan conflict and are fraught with uncertainty.

5 The China Model: Coherent Implementation under State Leadership

In stark contrast to the United States, China's participation within the framework of the Paris Agreement demonstrates a high degree of strategic coherence, long-term planning, and strong state leadership. China's climate action serves its core national development strategy, thereby promoting a comprehensive green transformation of its economy and society.

5.1 Policy Context

Since the 18th National Congress of the CPC, under the guidance of President Xi's thought on ecological civilization, China has implemented the new development philosophy, placing climate change in a more prominent position in national governance. It has continuously in-

creased its carbon intensity reduction targets, strengthened its self-determined contribution goals, made its utmost efforts to enhance its climate change response, promoted a comprehensive green transformation of its economic and social development, and worked to build a modernization where humans and nature coexist in harmony. In 2020, President Xi announced at the 75th UN General Assembly that China would strive to peak carbon emissions before 2030 and work to achieve carbon neutrality before 2060 [28].

5.2 Compliance Path: Adherence to Principles, Domestic Action, and International Cooperation

China implements the goals of the Paris Agreement through the concrete practices of adhering to principles, taking active domestic action, and engaging in international cooperation.

As the largest developing country, China firmly supports the Convention and its Paris Agreement and upholds the principle of „common but differentiated responsibilities.“ This is the cornerstone of global climate governance. Developed and developing countries have different historical responsibilities for causing climate change, as well as different development needs and capacities. Therefore, it is necessary to fully consider each country’s national conditions and capabilities and adhere to the institutional arrangement of nationally determined contributions based on their respective abilities [28]. In its basic position on COP29, China stated that the international community should focus on removing the factors that currently „disable“ climate action and respond to the long-neglected demands of developing countries on which their climate ambitions depend, all while adhering to a pragmatic approach. Among these, finance is the core concern for developing countries and the basis for maintaining multilateral trust. „Talking only about ambitious goals without mentioning the conditions for achieving them is unfair to developing countries.“ China advocates for reaching the New Collective Quantified Goal on Climate Finance and ensuring developed countries fulfill their obligations to provide and mobilize funds for developing countries and ensure transparency in their contributions [29].

China is also an active practitioner of nationally determined contributions, demonstrating a powerful, state-led, top-down implementation model in its domestic actions. It is guided by the „1+N“ policy framework for peaking carbon and achieving carbon neutrality. The „1“ consists of two documents: the „Opinions of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on Completely, Accurately and Comprehensively Implementing the New Development Concept and Doing a Good Job in Carbon Peaking and Carbon Neutrality“ and the „Action Plan for Carbon

Peaking Before 2030.“ The „N“ refers to implementation plans and supporting measures for key areas and industries. All provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities have formulated their own carbon peak implementation plans. Various regions, departments, industries, and enterprises are implementing these policies and measures, intensifying practical efforts, and promoting key tasks in a forceful, orderly, and effective manner [28].

Finally, in international cooperation, China actively participates in and leads global governance on climate change, promoting the construction of a fair, reasonable, and cooperative global climate governance system. In terms of leadership climate diplomacy, President Xi has repeatedly articulated China’s proposals on global climate governance at important meetings and events, driving significant progress. China has been a constructive participant in international climate change negotiations, helping to establish multilateral consultation mechanisms such as the „BASIC Four“ ministerial meetings and the Ministerial on Climate Action. It has actively coordinated the negotiating positions of the „BASIC Four,“ the „Like-Minded Developing Countries,“ and the „Group of 77 and China,“ playing an important role in maintaining the unity of developing countries and defending their common interests. In South-South cooperation, China continues to provide support to other developing countries, especially small island states, least developed countries, and African nations, in tackling climate change. It has signed 53 memorandums of understanding on South-South cooperation for climate change with 42 developing countries, helping to enhance their capacity to respond to climate change. Lastly, China strives to build a green Silk Road, contributing Chinese solutions to global climate governance [29].

5.3 Existing Challenges

Under strong policy momentum, China’s climate action has achieved remarkable success, but it also faces significant challenges.

On one hand, China’s climate action has made considerable achievements in energy, industry, and market mechanisms. In the energy sector, the share of non-fossil energy consumption reached 17.9% in 2023, and the total installed capacity of renewable energy historically accounted for 51.9% of the national total. Through technological innovation and large-scale production, China has substantially reduced the global costs of wind and solar power by over 60% and 80%, respectively, in the past decade. In green industry, the export value of electric vehicles, lithium batteries, and photovoltaic products surpassed one trillion yuan for the first time in 2023, becoming a new engine for economic growth, while traditional industries are also accelerating their green transformation. In market mechanisms, the „Interim Regulations on the Management of Carbon Emissions Trading“ officially came into

effect on May 1, 2024, providing a solid legal foundation for the world's largest national carbon market [29].

On the other hand, China's dependence on coal remains deeply entrenched. Due to considerations of energy security and economic stability, China is still approving and constructing new coal-fired power projects even as it accelerates the development of renewable energy. At the 2025 „Two Sessions“ (the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference), China announced it would launch a „low-carbon upgrading pilot“ for coal-fired power plants, and a separate NDRC report also reinforced coal as having a „basic supporting role,“ announcing that China will „continue to increase coal production.“ Some scholars believe that influenced by the post-pandemic economic recovery and rapid energy consumption growth due to extreme weather events, the primary task remains economic development. China faces challenges in meeting the energy intensity and carbon intensity reduction targets set in its „14th Five-Year Plan“ (2021-2025), and thus there is a risk these targets may not be met [30].

This paradox also reflects the problems in China's climate governance model. This is not a political polarization like in the U.S., but rather a conflict between different policy goals within the state-led system—a structural contradiction between the green transition goals and the objectives of energy security and economic growth. The success or failure of China's climate transition will ultimately depend on its ability to successfully manage this internal contradiction and gradually and orderly wean itself off its dependence on fossil fuels while ensuring energy security and stable economic operation.

6 Comparative Analysis: Divergent Paths under a Common Framework

Under the common institutional framework of the Paris Agreement, China and the United States have forged two starkly different paths in climate governance. This divergence is not only reflected in policy appearances but is also deeply rooted in the fundamental differences in their political systems, perceptions of national interest, and international roles, as well as the fragility of the liberal ideal of international cooperation in the face of political reality.

6.1 Institutional Contrast

The U.S. model of participation is contingent and discontinuous. Its policy direction is highly dependent on presidential election outcomes, exhibiting sharp cyclical fluctuations. Meanwhile, due to a lack of broad domestic consensus and the influence of interest group lobbying, U.S. international commitments are fraught with uncertainty. Its participation in international climate regimes

is often a „transactional“ act by the executive branch to bypass the legislative branch, rather than a strategic decision based on national consensus. This instability not only undermines the effectiveness of America's own climate actions but also brings great uncertainty to global climate governance, leading to widespread questioning of its leadership.

China's model of participation, however, is stable and long-term, stemming from a „top-level design“ that incorporates climate goals into its long-term national development strategy. Through the „1+N“ dual carbon policy system, climate action is integrated into various sectors such as the economy, energy, and industry, and is promoted top-down through a strong central planning system. This model ensures the long-term consistency of policy direction, unaffected by short-term political fluctuations, thus providing a guarantee for effective and stable climate action.

6.2 The Evolution of Competition and Cooperation

The interaction between China and the U.S. in the climate field is a microcosm of the evolution of global climate politics. The period from 2014 to 2016 was a honeymoon for Sino-U.S. cooperation, with the 2014 joint statement by Obama and Xi widely regarded as a milestone. During this time, the two countries treated climate change as an area of common interest where they could transcend differences and demonstrate cooperation. This cooperative logic aligns with the expectations of liberal institutionalism, where great powers can address global challenges through cooperation, thereby building mutual trust and achieving win-win outcomes.

However, from 2017 to the present, the Trump administration's withdrawal interrupted the cooperative process, and the Biden administration's return did not restore it to its former state. Instead, the climate issue has been thoroughly „geopoliticized.“ Today, the main theme of Sino-U.S. relations is „coopetition.“ The U.S. is reshaping supply chains in its favor through industrial policies like the Inflation Reduction Act. China, in turn, is building its own network of green development partners through the „Green Silk Road“ and South-South cooperation. Cooperation between the two has diminished, while competition for leadership and rule-making in the future green economy has intensified, reflecting a renewed embrace of realism.

6.3 The Illusion of Liberalism and the Way Forward

The birth of the Paris Agreement was once hailed as a major victory for liberal international cooperation. However, the subsequent divergent paths of China and the

U.S., along with the long-delayed funding from developed countries, have cast a shadow of illusion over climate action.

Liberal institutionalism believes that international institutions and norms can constrain state behavior and promote cooperation by providing information, reducing transaction costs, and applying reputational pressure. However, the contrast between the policy reversals in the U.S. caused by complex domestic politics and the climate governance achievements in China obtained through stable, unified state power shows that domestic political contention can greatly influence, and even dominate, a nation's consideration of international norms and reputational costs at the international level. Therefore, the fundamental variables shaping a country's climate commitments and compliance choices are its domestic political structure and interest landscape, not the external constraints of international institutions. U.S. policy vacillation is a direct product of its domestic partisan divisions, interest group contention, and electoral politics. China's policy coherence is the result of its unique, centralized political system and its internalization of climate goals as a national strategy. Ultimately, global climate governance is subordinate to domestic politics; this is perhaps an objective reality of international politics.

Finally, the „bottom-up“ model of the Paris Agreement successfully created a global platform for dialogue but has struggled to overcome the structural flaws within its key members, particularly the liberal Western powers. When these countries are unable to take effective, coherent action due to their internal political, economic, and social contradictions, the cooperative ideal embodied in the agreement becomes an „illusion.“ It has created a framework that allows for the coexistence of multiple governance models but lacks the power to push them toward convergence and cooperation. This is the fundamental reason why China and the U.S. have followed divergent paths under the same agreement.

7 Conclusion

The vast difference between the U.S. and China in climate governance does not stem from a differing level of concern for environmental issues, but is a direct manifestation of the fundamental differences in their domestic political systems, power structures, and state-society relationship models. The contest in Sino-U.S. climate governance is, in essence, a reflection of two different political models performing on the stage of a global issue. Therefore, the design of international institutions seeking multilateral cooperation must take into account the stances and behaviors shaped by the domestic political differences among nations.

Under the “iron law” of “domestic politics first,” are inter-

national institutions destined to be powerless? This author argues the key lies in whether they can be successfully transformed into a nation's endogenous motivation. This relates to the “mechanisms” through which domestic politics and national interests influence international climate commitments and compliance, and the “differences” in the institutional participation and behavioral models of the two countries under the Paris Agreement framework, as explored in this study. Specifically, when a global agenda can align with a nation's core strategy (like economic transformation), empower domestic drivers of change (like local governments and emerging industries), and be converted into reputational capital in the competitive and cooperative dynamics of great power politics, only then can external pressure be truly transformed into a powerful driver for internal change. Looking ahead, from the climate domain to broader global governance solutions, an institutional framework must be designed that can both effectively address transnational challenges and be compatible with major powers while promoting pragmatic action, thereby truly unlocking the power of international institutions. This power lies not in coercion that overrides national sovereignty, but in fostering a resilient normative ecosystem that respects national conditions and domestic politics—one that can integrate with, mobilize, and ultimately reshape the domestic political agendas of various countries. This, perhaps, is the path to moving beyond the “illusion of liberalism” and allowing global cooperation to blossom in the soil of realism.

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