**Optimizing** **Climate Cooperation: A Comparative Study of Mega-Environmental Agreements and Mini-Clubs**

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International cooperation is essential for addressing climate change. The Parties to the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC) have negotiated multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) to allocate responsibilities, provide support, and increase climate ambition. The latest achievement—the Paris Agreement (PA)—has nevertheless been disturbed by the U.S. controversial retreat since 2017. The resulting frustration triggered a wide range of responses, among which forming climate clubs has attracted significant attention. The logic for these clubs is to unify like-minded partners in smaller groups that could improve bargaining efficiency and provide exclusive benefits such as access to climate finance and green technology. The Western Climate Initiative (WCI) is one such club through which California, Québec, and Ontario integrated their cap-and-trade programs for reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Ontario’s recent decision to leave the WCI is a reminder of how vulnerable climate clubs are when political support is faltering. Accordingly, questions arise: How and to what extent can cooperation, be it multilateral or club-like, survive an unfavorable political environment? When neither an MEA nor a club can sustain its participants’ enthusiasm for cooperation, is it politically and legally desirable to study how the two institutions relate to each other?

Inspired by the scholarship that tackles the proliferation of international institutions and the relational theory, I will focus on the relational and functional dimensions of an MEA-club interaction. I will examine how club-based norms and practices can innovate those in multilateral forums, and *vice versa*. My analysis roadmap is: (1) examining the design, maintenance, and dysfunction of MEAs and clubs in the context of political changes; (2) identifying the legal and normative developments that have the greatest potential to be resilient to those changes; and (3) exploring the theoretical assumptions behind them and developing an analytical framework to sustain their strengths and feasibility.

The relational approach will be illustrated by select cases. As the centerpiece of international climate law, the FCCC, the Kyoto Protocol and the PA will be the ideal MEAs for case studies. For clubs, I will compare the WCI, the EU emissions trading scheme (ETS), and a Northeast Asian carbon market. First, the WCI involves subnational administrations in the U.S. and Canada, where climate change remains more a politically divisive issue. Second, the EU follows a more diligent path when it comes to taking the leadership role during the downturns of multilateral negotiations. Third, NGOs and corporations are enthusiastic about building a carbon market that will link China’s policy instruments to its neighboring jurisdictions like Japan and Korea. This market could be significant because China’s ETS, if functioning, will be the world’s largest system. But it is unclear whether China’s climate policies are serious or symbolic.

Hopefully, this research can advance the ongoing debates on how to integrate and optimize different forms of climate cooperation. It may also equip legal scholars and practitioners with analytical and methodological tools to understand how MEAs and clubs rise and fall.