

The Taken-For-Granted Transition: How Talk of Decarbonization Shifts Attention Away From It

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Abstract

States are declaring targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, indicating growing support for decarbonization. In a novel ethnography of the deliberations to achieve New York's climate target, one of the world's most ambitious, I find that climate politics is not just characterized by disagreements over whether or not to decarbonize, but how to sequence actions to reduce emissions. Expanding beyond accounts of climate obstruction, delay, and "fantasy" technologies that justify the combustion of fossil fuels, I show how norms of deliberative talk shape how people temporally coordinate action to reduce emissions. In a micro-interactional analysis of more than 300 hours of deliberation from 2020 to 2024, I point to a yet-considered challenge of decarbonization: agreement on near-term action such as the urgent buildout of renewables can be taken-for-granted, shifting attention to disagreements over later steps of action. For example, energy firms pointed to the lack of reliability of a renewable-heavy grid with less dispatchable energy. State officials shifted attention to the later target, expressing confidence in the achievement of the 2030 goal, but also to prudently plan. Climate advocates were split in their focus but were drawn to disagree over the "false solutions" for zero-emissions proposed by energy firms. Even when groups agreed to build renewable energy, they focused over disagreements of the challenges once they were built, with no focus on the headwinds that wind and solar projects soon faced. Less attention on the short-term targets meant planners could not guarantee their achievement, while focus on long-term concerns persisted due to irresolvable uncertainty. State officials eventually concluded that achieving the short-term target was in jeopardy. By understanding decarbonization as a challenge of temporal coordination, I offer the insight that our cultural norms of talk to drift to long term disagreements can be bound by focusing on short-term targets.

Extended Abstract

On the 20th of July 2019, in Albany, New York, state legislators made a proclamation of exciting conviction, but unclear consequences. They signed the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act into law. The act set out an intention to rapidly reduce emissions in the state, committing New York to generate 70 percent of the state's electricity by renewable energy by 2030, achieve 100 percent "zero-emissions" electricity by 2040, and no less than 85 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 from 1990 levels. New York State touts it as "among the most ambitious climate laws in the nation." It is, and more. New York's Climate Act is one of the most ambitious greenhouse gas reduction targets for any polity in the world: city, state, or country (Hans et al. 2022).

New York is on the sharp edge of states around the world proposing targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. While the widespread declarations suggest a regulatory compact to reduce emissions, we have little insight into the implications of declaring targets on climate politics (Fankhauser et al. 2022). Climate targets are policy instrument to temporally coordinate action to reduce emissions (Lascoumes and Le Gales 2007; Tavory and Eliasoph 2013), revealing a peculiar feature of decarbonization that sets the cultural grounds of its politics: it is not one problem, but a sequence of many.

In New York, many came to agree that the state needed to rapidly deploy renewable energy and electrify buildings and transport and then address concerns of how to decarbonize "hard-to-abate" sectors such as aviation and industry. The shift to a renewable-heavy grid by the 2030s also meant that power would no longer be "dispatchable" on-demand, a feature of a fossil fueled grid, indicating the need for

“dispatchable emission free resources.” Decarbonization involves an intricate temporal coordination of these various steps.

In a micro-interactional analysis of more than 300 hours of deliberation on New York’s climate targets, I show how a cultural norm of talk shapes how people make sense of and act on climate change. Agreement on shorter-term actions, such as the deployment of renewable energy by 2030, can shift attention to disagreements over technologies necessary for the longer-term target. An implication is that agreement on climate action can foster inattention to it, as it is taken-for-granted. Such an explanation departs from the dominant explanations of climate politics focused on denial, delay, and obstruction (Lamb et al. 2020; Oreskes and Conway 2011). Scholars have argued that fossil fuel firms often fund the obstruction of climate action, and instead propose alternative “fantasy” technologies such as direct air capture, and carbon capture and storage to justify the continued use of fossil fuels (Lund et al. 2023).

Yet in my case, I find that representatives of fossil fuels firms come to agree on the necessity of renewables but raise concerns about what happens *once* renewables are deployed. They do not deny climate change, or overtly obstruct the deployment of low-emission technologies, but through norms of talk in negotiations to resolve open disagreements, shift attention away from a focus on renewables. Environmentalists focus their attention on opposing the proposals of energy firms, labelling them as “false solutions,” but as a result reinforcing the footing of considering the longer-term targets. State officials also shift their attention to the longer-term target, expressing confidence in

achieving the short-term goal, and preparedness for the longer-term one. As a result, shorter-term targets fall aside in deliberations, and concerns are not fully deliberated.

The case of New York is an extreme but revealing one. It is unique in its deliberative implementation of an ambitious climate target. And with a highly mobilized climate movement, liberal polity, and an economy not solely dependent on fossil fuels, it suggests ideal conditions to decarbonize. Yet it also provides grounds to understand yet-considered challenges of decarbonizing, a thorny problem with no policy or problem-solving precedence. Complementing explanations solely rooted in political economy, the symbolic dominance of experts, or climate misinformation, New York's case reveals the salience of cultural of talk, and social construction of problems, to rapidly reducing emissions.

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