

Arne Ellerbeck* - 26 June 2023

Making the Impossible Possible - Shifting the Overton Window

Effective climate action and policy is currently not politically possible, as politicians face strong resistance from various societal groups and in some cases even have to fear for their re-election when adopting ambitious legislation. In order to achieve the 2030 targets and bring the planet on a trajectory on which we can limit climate change to 1.5°C this problem needs to be addressed. This can be conceptualised as the need to shift the Overton Window, which describes what is politically possible at a given moment in time. For this purpose two options exist, the proposed solutions are more attractive and the sentiment in the general public becomes more favourable. Both levers can be addressed through a diverse coalition consisting of actors ranging from companies to youth activists. Together these groups can reduce the hostility in the discourse around climate action, develop a common understanding and attractive solutions. The unique character of this coalition has the potential to elicit changes in how climate action is thought about in the general public and among political decision-makers. A crucial piece to this coalition is the youth climate movement which possess a unique credibility and legitimacy. However, this movement is highly complex, vast and does not exist as a single actor. In order to overcome these challenges, this policy brief offers a potential definition of what the climate youth movement is, based on a generational aspect and the psychological/sociological concept “opinion/value group”. Furthermore, a coarse categorisation of youth groups is presented based on the size and the level which the group is aiming to exert their impact. The objective is to deliver some initial guidance to support other actors in finding suitable partners among youth groups, with the aim to collaborate in shifting the Overton Window.

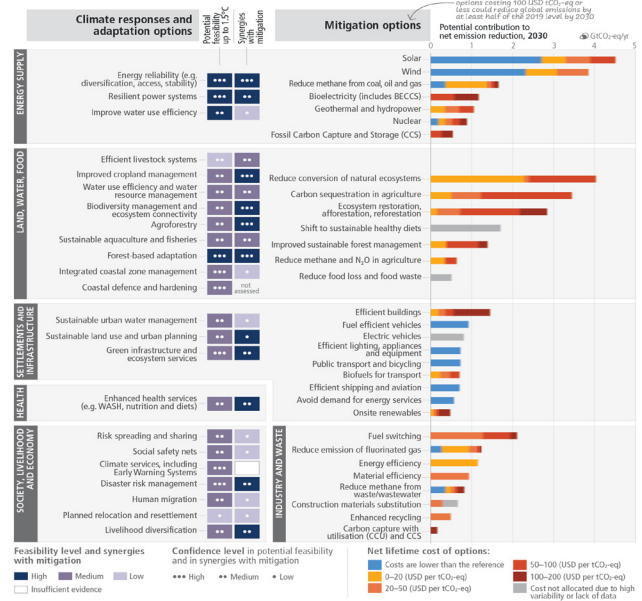
Climate change is a daunting challenge, therefore, we should remind ourselves that it is also a ‘overcomable’ challenge. With respect to the mitigation of climate change, this is highlighted by the recent IPCC AR6 Synthesis Report. The graphic below, taken from the report presents several

mitigation options, their emissions reduction potential and costs:

Figure 1 - AR6 Synthesis Report - Presentation of mitigation and adaptation options¹.

There are multiple opportunities for scaling up climate action

a) Feasibility of climate responses and adaptation, and potential of mitigation options in the near-term



The Problem and the Chance

The target is to cut in half our annual greenhouse gas emissions, from 60Gt to 30Gt, by 2030. Based on the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and economic capacity the EU and the Member States should rapidly scale up and improve existing sustainable solutions to then share them with other countries. After all, this also brings multiple benefits for ourselves, unrelated to climate and environmental protection. The transition brings formidable opportunities regarding, among others, the positioning on the international scene and technological & societal innovation.

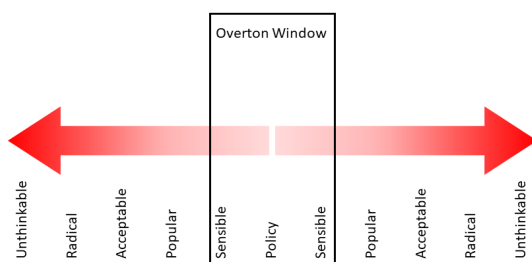
However, the current state of climate policy on the European and national level the actions are insufficient to harness this opportunity. Which is remarkable given that climate protection itself, aside

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from the opportunities it brings, is of high priority. Yet there is a difference between the swift and drastic political responses to the pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine and the frequency with which climate policy remains at the stage of mere lip service.

A useful concept to explain why this is the case is the Overton Window which describes the space of politically possible actions as determined by how politicians understand and interpret public opinion.

Figure 2 - The Overton Window



In the case of COVID-19 and the Russian invasion diverse societal actors started to act themselves and demanded actions from politicians. However, for climate policies of equivalent ambition, politicians have to anticipate strong resistance and possibly even fear for their (re-)election. Potential reasons for this circumstance include: Due to the long time horizon of climate change the urgency is not perceived by some societal and political groups. In conjunction with that, climate action has been framed as a threat to wealth and prosperity and the demands put forward by environmental groups as unrealistic and dangerous. This has resulted in a poisoned debate which hinders the development of implementable solutions and many individuals have developed a negative attitude towards climate protection and those advocating for it. On top of this come, partially very important, actors who lobby against climate protection, as it could bring an end to their business model or at least cause a significant loss of revenue. Therefore, politicians are faced with a large part of their electorate being at least sceptical about climate policy. In a nutshell, in the current situation the establishment a consistent and simple regulatory framework facilitating decisive climate action is not in the centre of the Overton Window.

This directly impacts the policies which are being decided. For example, the easiest regulatory

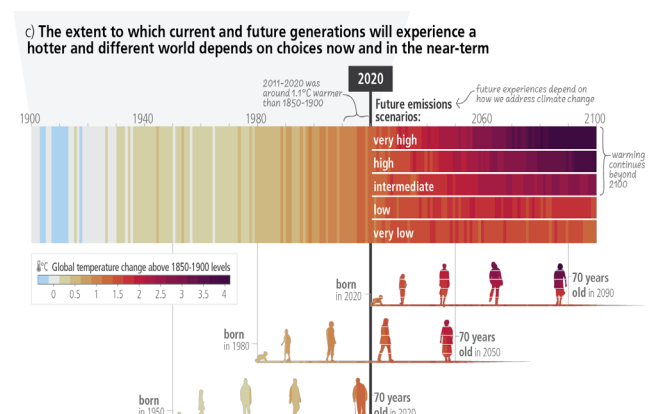
framework achieving effective climate protection is a carbon price or tax of sufficient strength, which has not been implemented in any jurisdiction. Therefore, fine-grained regulation of specific aspects is necessary but is rarely of sufficient strength even when being in the proposal stage. Consequently, as long as the Overton Window remains in its current place, effective climate protection is impossible.

Two options are available to shift the Overton Window. Firstly, solutions which are more attractive and more easily implemented. Secondly, a renewed societal understanding of climate change and protection. Both can be pursued through a diverse coalition of actors ranging from activist groups to industry associations. In a first step this could reduce the hostility in the discourse and enable further steps. If successful, the diversity of this group gives the developed mutual understanding and solutions a unique legitimacy, which enables a smoother legislative process. Particularly through the engagement of market actors these solutions could also convince those still sceptic towards climate policy.

The Youth Climate Movement in a Society-Wide Coalition

A highly relevant part of such a coalition is the youth climate movement. It is established as voice for effective climate protection and thereby lend the coalition credibility. Additionally, it possesses societal relevance and democratic legitimacy, as it represents an important group. This legitimacy is further strengthened through the fact of being exposed to climate change the most:

Figure 3 - AR6 Synthesis Report - Generational distribution of the impact of climate change².



The climate youth movement has also emerged as actor on the national and international stages and is increasingly recognised in the societal discourse and in political institutions, exemplified by the strong youth engagement programmes of the UN. Furthermore, the increased political priority given to climate change can be partially understood as the result of the youth in many countries exerting pressure on their governments. On a personal level, many “members” of the youth climate movement have gained valuable experiences through their engagement and their professional careers and are now highly skilled individuals with valuable networks. Therefore, the movement has to be understood as an impactful actor that has built extensive resources over the last years and is a valuable partner.

However, in contrast to other actors the youth climate movement is difficult to understand and consequently difficult to engage with, as it is vast, decentralised and heterogenous. Due to this potential connected with the complexity, it becomes relevant to analyse and describe the youth climate movements, to facilitate the engagement of other actors with this group. The goal of such interaction could be to establish the abovementioned coalition and to shift the Overton Window.

What is the Youth Climate Movement?

The first answer is unsurprising, it does not exist as a clearly defined group. There are climate youth groups in many countries around the planet with different foci, resources and visions. It is often the case that groups do not know about each other, despite working on similar topics. Adding to the complexity of this network is the fact that groups may vanish and new groups emerge. Therefore, the climate youth movement should be understood as a dynamic and constantly changing network. Nevertheless, two general points can be made to define who belongs to the youth climate movement. Firstly, it is all those individuals, who were born into a world acutely aware of the looming threat of climate change and the lack of action. Secondly, it could be referred to as an opinion or value group. This concept stems from Social Psychology and Sociology and describes a group which, instead of group ties based on personal liking or common activities, a shared conviction forms the basis. From these two points, every person that falls into the relevant generations and cares and

acts in some way for the climate is a member. This definition underlines the aforementioned diversity. Manifestations of this definition exist almost everywhere, sometimes blatantly visible, in big demonstration or when a few glue themselves on streets, in other cases hidden, when young people raise awareness among those close to them. Crucially, everywhere it exists in its own context and varies correspondingly.

A third option could be made is based on those methods. For example, distinguishing between groups focusing on protesting, participating in the public debate or contributing hands on solutions. From one perspective, this distinction is not well founded, because all activities of the climate youth movement are directed at a common goal, to limit climate change to 1.5°C. This point is a crucial difference between the youth climate movement and other social movements, such as the ‘68ers, and partially mitigates the risk of internal dispute. This does not mean there are no disputes but it is certainly an advantage over movements that were not equipped with an equivalent. An example for the impact of this shared goal, are the public statements of groups like Fridays for Future about the protest form of gluing oneself to a road. The messaging emphasises the common goal and solidarity between the groups, despite disagreement about the chosen methods. Therefore, the different manifestations should generally be understood as part of the same movement.

Which Kinds of Groups Exist and With Whom to Engage?

	Small groups – small scope	Small groups – medium/large scope
Example	Environmental group at a school/university	Youth-led think tank or lobby group
	Large group – background	Large group – well-known
Example	YOUNGO and Generation Climate Europe	Fridays for Future, Last Generation and Extinction Rebellion

In order to find attractive partners in the youth climate movement one should first look at the respective area of work (e.g., policy or local hands-on engagement). Secondly, size and regularity of output can be used as proxy for consolidation and organisational capacity. Irrespective of the group with which one wants to engage it is crucial to understand that youth groups are serious

undertakings with professional skills and networks that have to be met on an equal footing. Furthermore, to be a credible partner one must pursue genuine aims with regards to climate protection. This does not mean one has to be perfect. It means that, for example, as company it is important to be transparent concerning the constraints one faces when engaging in climate action and be open for possible solutions.

Useful categories to think in are the following:

Firstly, smaller groups can be distinguished into groups which are active on a small or local scale and those aiming at large-scale impact. Regarding the former, there is a multiplicity of groups frequently with a hands on approach. An example could be a working group of pupils trying to improve the environmental footprint of their school. On the one hand this is the least attractive category of youth organisation to engage with, due to their highly dynamic nature and often limited capacity for consolidated processes. On the other hand, these groups could be valuable partners for local action. Furthermore, in cooperation with a partner that is well-equipped with resources, such groups might be able to achieve impressive results by scaling up their activities. The second type of small group focuses on overarching levers like policy, for example, a youth-led think tank or lobby group. These groups are generally more promising partners for cooperation, as in many cases they possess professional skills, an ambitious target and a (somewhat) consolidated structure. Importantly, these are only two manifestations of small youth groups, however, an entire universe exists. Therefore, it is not desirable to present concrete organisations in this text, doing so would necessarily distort the picture of these organisations. A further consequence of this vastness, together with the high dynamism, is that it becomes a challenge to find the right partner. A promising approach to overcome this problem is to organise an event of some shape or form, in which one calls for the participation of those groups. For example, hosting a competition asking for proposals from youth groups how to approach a specific problem regarding climate change. This presents the opportunity to assess which groups are able to produce high quality output and are therefore potentially valuable partners.

Secondly there are larger groups, split into those which are well-known to the public and those operating more in the background. Examples of the former category are groups such as Fridays for Future, Last Generation and Extinction Rebellion, which have developed a strong profile through public action. Furthermore, youth groups are active in various established organisations, such as Greenpeace. These groups are likely to be valuable partners in the described coalition due to their societal relevance, resources and expertise. Most importantly, they have shown the capacity to influence public opinion and possess strong credibility. Therefore, their involvement in the coalition could convince other stakeholders that the coalition is genuinely pursuing environmental protection. When this is combined with other members of the coalition which are not traditionally associated with such goals this could achieve an unprecedented shift in how the public in general and politicians in particular perceive climate protection.

The second type of larger group is often known in the 'climate bubble' but not as much to the general public. Often these are associations of organisations bringing together several smaller groups in order to pool their resources or to connect groups usually working on topics different to climate protection. A highly prominent example on the international stage is YOUNGO which is integrated into UNFCCC. On a European level, there is youth engagement through the European Union. Furthermore, Generation Climate Europe is a network organisation of various European youth organisations.

These larger groups are an important part of the envisioned 'whole-of-society' coalition. Due to their nature, these groups have vast networks and are highly able to facilitate interactions with smaller youth groups. Furthermore, engagement with them is easier, as they have more consolidated and professional structures, including defined processes for cooperation with other entities. Lastly, through their online presence their contact details can easily be found. An important trend for engagement with the youth climate movement, which was indicated above, is the emergence of a new branch, bringing professionalisation. These individuals will be found with some likelihood in these larger and more consolidated organisations making them good first

points of contact for any organisation that wishes to engage with youth groups. Furthermore, the skills and knowledge possessed by these individuals facilitates the process of developing a common position and of attractive solutions.

Conclusion

At the current moment in time effective policy measures to address climate change are politically difficult due to the public opinion that politicians face. A promising way to confront this situation is to build a society-coalition of actors which embark to find a common understanding to improve the discourse around climate protection. Furthermore, this coalition could develop attractive solutions carried by a wide array of societal stakeholders in order to shift public opinion and to supply

politicians with implementable yet effective policies. An important part of such a coalition is the youth climate movement, due to its unique credibility and legitimacy. In order for companies and other organisations to engage with these groups it is attractive to begin this process by focussing first on larger youth groups, due to their consolidation and professionalisation. Following this a wider range of youth groups could be integrated through the networks of larger organisations or by organising events inviting the participation of small and decentralised youth groups. The combination of youth activism with, among others, private market actors, NGOs and academia could become a uniquely powerful societal force enabling the best use of the time that remains.

References

- ¹ IPCC, 2023: *Synthesis Report of the IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (AR6). Longer Report. Contribution of the Core Writing Team. Figure 4.4.* Figures: <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/figures>
- ² IPCC, 2023: *Synthesis Report of the IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (AR6). Longer Report. Contribution of the Core Writing Team. Figure SPM.1.* Figures: <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/figures>