One phrase we often hear is “Don’t kill the messenger.” It is meant as a reminder that informer and information are not necessarily intimately related. In addition to asking you to keep this in mind, I also want to emphasize that the following consideration constitutes a crude oversimplification. Listing gives the impression of completeness. However, lists are more often than not only a rhetoric tool. Clearly a blog post cannot possibly explain democracies’ failure to cope with changing climates (neither political ones nor the Climate). This is an attempt to shed some light on a taboo topic nonetheless. While these ten reasons cannot do justice to the issues, the implications need to be taken seriously. They might be upsetting and seem to go against our core values. But honestly, much of the contemporary liberal belief system is not only negatively affecting the whole world and above all the future, but even more, much of this liberal belief system is inherently inconsistent.

1. **For starters, in a limited world tradeoffs are real.**

   We cannot fly, eat or live how we want and still have sufficient food and shelter for everyone. It is simple. In a limited world one person’s freedom easily means another
person’s suffering. Philosophically many might agree on the equation: “Everybody to count for one, nobody for more than one” (see Mill 1879). It may be used to justify democracy, even. Unfortunately, democracy is not a system that ensures such equation in most areas of life. For instance, a possible tradeoff for political freedom is economic equality. Whether a system that cannot produce economic equality, and often produces inequality, can be justified would be a different question. Yet, economic inequality typically is connected to unsustainable living.\(^1\) In a world of scarcity upper limits need to be set, minimums need to be secured.

2. **Procedure and substance should not be confused.**

Democracy enthusiasts easily confuse procedure and substance in the hope that what they think is a good procedure also produces the best outcome. A fair procedure does not always produce a good outcome. “One person, one vote” is understood to mean political equality, but does the pilot really produce as good of a political decision as the political science professor? Flipping a coin can be a fair procedure, but that does not mean that the outcome is good.

3. **Democracy is legitimate, since it is ‘self-determination’.**

When it comes to the politics of nature, democracy has a legitimation problem. Democracy is defined and legitimized as self-government, yet human animals born at a particular place at a particular time decide about others who are separated by time, space and species. Decisions about how we use (and abuse) nature do not stay within the borders of countries. They can be irreversible. They concern people outside the borders of any state, future people and other species. The vast majority of the affected is excluded from decision making over their own lives. Or in other words, the majority has no chance to determine if they have or will have breathable air, food and a viable climate. So democracy is actually a minority government by chance. By the chance of being born into a powerful democracy, you get to rule over others. We decide if our children, grandchildren, animals and humans in other regions have a chance or not.

4. **People know best.**

Climate change is a complicated issue. Some politicians do not understand science at all. I have no clue how to calculate different emissions in the atmosphere. Here, we should not judge. It is unsurprising that there is a huge gap between layman and expert and that the gap is growing exponentially. We differentiate between popular science – the fun stuff – and science. Someone who worries about putting food on the table might not have the time or energy to get informed about politics. Some people find politics and science boring. It appears easy to be ill-informed on issues that have direct personal effects such as vaccinations. How can people be expected to know best about the necessary steps towards

\(^1\) See worldbank.org
the ‘maintenance’ of nature’s life support systems? One cannot and why should one be expected to know best?

5. Long-term vs. short-term interest.
Ever tried a diet? Is the donut at work or cake at the café way more attractive than your health or fitting into that little black one? Not really, yet it is ridiculously difficult to withstand today’s indulgences for a reward in the future. Two weeks can appear too long. The diet is delayed to tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. Sometimes eating unhealthy becomes a problem only after decades. Climate change is subject to time lags and good environmental politics mean giving up something concrete today for something abstract in the future. Climate change is much less tangible than the diet. Who gives up driving cars now so the climate will not change by more than 2 degrees on average? With environmental stuff, we definitely do not listen to the doctor’s prescription.

6. Other issues are sexier and higher on the agenda.
According to rational choice theory, the best policies to implement in a democracy are simple and immediate. Election cycles and people’s perception favor policies that benefit short-term. “Cake now!” Normally, environmental destruction is hard to understand anyway. Complex issues are beyond most people’s grasp. Human brains are not made to see small changes. Above all, other issues appear much more relevant. The Economy, employment rates etc. grab the spotlight. Economic growth is presented in numbers. Numbers seem easy. As long as people do not see a healthy environment as a precondition for everything, nature will lose against ‘sexier’ topics.

7. More democracy will solve the problem.
So far democratic mechanisms have not been shown to promote greener policies. In many democracies green has been on offer for a long time. The electorate does not give green parties sufficient support. The majority is unlikely to vote green and the outcomes of direct votes are not substantially better. Plebiscites are not proven instruments to a greener world. Even deliberations regularly fail to advance the most environmentally-friendly option.

8. Self-interest is often fostered.
The voter legitimately cares about food on his table, about a job etc. Campaign slogans make many promises. The logic of “one person, one vote” can lead you to think of politics as having to not just respond to your needs, but to your wants. People practically justify their choice of party with their position in life and only sometimes with a personal stance toward a common good. Ever heard of the abbreviation NIMBY? It stands for “NOT IN MY BACKYARD” as often represents how people vote and make decisions.

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2 While you are reading this post another species probably went extinct.
9. People do not usually restrict themselves.
Again the diet is much easier if the doctor says that you have to. Of course it is not the same for everything. Even people who believe in climate change buy cars with big engines (let us not talk about the insane concept of consumer democracy here). Look at the extreme example of Leonardo DiCaprio and his personal consumption. Despite much of the production of electronics occurring under bad labor conditions and producing high levels of pollution, we still feel a ‘need’ the next iPhone.

10. Democracy makes sense.
In every area of life we meet people who are trained to do their jobs. We generally trust the surgeon to know his job. We trust the pilot to fly an airplane. Why in politics at once, we are all equal? When the rule lies in everyone’s hand, we fail to distinguish between layman and expert. Although elected politicians (hence we) make decisions that can mean life or death, there are no licenses necessary. Looking around the world, do people seem to recognize competence? Does that make sense to you? Hoping means gambling and the price is high.

Democracy does not follow a logic of necessity (or protecting the global common good). Survival is not its primary concern. Keep in mind that ‘the state of the art system’ is often presented as a ‘one size fits it all solution’ while never actually existing in all its glory in the real world. I question its performance in a scarce world and its potential to be ‘truly green’. Nature does not care how a decision is made though. Earth is facing catastrophe.


Didem Aydurmus earned a PhD in Political Science from the Graduate School of Social Sciences of Istanbul Bilgi University. If you are interested in learning more about this topic and perspective, Aydurmus’s recently published dissertation *Survival despite the People: Democratic Destruction or Sustainable Meritocracy*, is available through the MAHB Library.

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