Leadership in Global Environmental Politics
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Summary

There is wide consensus among global environmental politics (GEP) scholars about the urgent need for leadership in international climate negotiations and other environmental issue areas. A large number of GEP studies elaborate rhetoric and actions of aspiring leaders in GEP. In particular, these studies seek to identify which states have sought to provide leadership in international negotiations on the environment, and how they have exercised this role in institutional bargaining processes at the international level. The biggest share of GEP studies generally focus on leadership in environmental governance within the United Nations (UN), and international negotiations on climate under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in general, or the role of the European Union (EU) in those negotiations in particular. Many GEP scholars have also investigated the leadership role of the United States in international environmental regime formation, whereas there are no systematic investigations concerning China’s leadership in GEP. In addition to the states, GEP literature identifies a wide range of other actors as potential leaders (and followers) in environmental issue areas: international organizations, non-governmental organizations, corporations, cities, religious organizations, social movements, politicians, and even individuals.

Since leadership is a social relation, a growing number of scholars have moved to study perceptions of leadership and to conceptualize the relationship between leaders and followers. GEP scholars also identify some qualitative aspects a leader must have in order to attract followers. Many empirical studies show that despite the EU’s aspiration to be a climate leader, it is not unequivocally recognized as such by others. At the same time, it seems that some forms of leadership, especially those based on unilateral action, do not necessarily require followers and recognition by others. In addition to the leader–follower relationship, the motivation of leadership constitutes one of the key controversies among GEP scholars. Some argue that self-interest is a sufficient driver of leadership, while others claim that leaders must act for the common good of a wider constituency (or at least be perceived to do so). To conclude, most scholars studying leadership in GEP regard structural leadership (based on material capabilities and hard power) as an important type of leadership. Much less attention has been paid to the social dimensions of leadership; this is undoubtedly a gap in the literature that prospective studies ought to fill.

Keywords

environmental politics, environmental governance, environmental negotiations, follower, institutional bargaining, leadership, leader, regime formation
Introduction

There is much talk about leadership in the early 21st century, within both academic and political circles. As Nye (2008, p. xii) notes, the concept of leadership is used so often by academic and non-academic literature that it has become analytically diluted and “has come to mean all things to all people.” This article addresses the key debates concerning leadership in global environmental politics (GEP) and seeks to construct a conceptual map specifying how the vast literature on environmental negotiations and regime formation defines leadership. It asks: What counts as leadership in GEP? Who or what can be viewed as a leader? How is this leadership status exercised in GEP? How should this leadership status be exercised? The article also points out the gaps in the contemporary literature and makes a few suggestions for a prospective research agenda developing an understanding of leadership in GEP.

Pioneering Works on Leadership

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the concept of leadership was introduced in the study of international institutions. In particular, three pioneering works on the role of leadership in international negotiations and regime formation were published by Oran Young (1991), Arild Underdal (1994), and Raino Malnes (1995) in the early 1990s. Although they did not limit their focus to environmental issue areas, analyzing the ways in which leaders shape all kinds of processes of institutional bargaining, these three works can be characterized as classics within GEP studies on leadership because most—if not all—later studies have built on their definitions of leadership.

Oran Young

Oran Young (1991, p. 281) notes that leadership “is a critical determinant of success or failure in the processes of institutional bargaining that dominate efforts to form international regimes or, more generally, institutional arrangements in international society.” In particular, leadership increases the “probability of success, often dramatically, in efforts to devise provisions for constitutional contracts that all the participants are willing to accept” (Young, 1991, p. 285). For Young, the agency of individual leaders in institutional bargaining is of interest; he explicitly clarifies that he wanted to bring “the individual back in to the study of an important area of international affairs” (Young, 1991, p. 281), without neglecting the role of collective or corporative entities. In line with this intention, he advises: “we must approach leadership in behavioral terms, focusing on the actions of individuals, differentiating analytically among several forms of leadership, and then analyzing the interactions among them” (Young, 1991, p. 287). While early empirical studies on leadership followed this advice, most later works considered collective entities, such as states and international organizations, the key units of analysis of leadership in international affairs.

Young (1991, p. 285) defines leadership as the “actions of individuals who endeavor to solve or circumvent the collective action problems that plague the efforts of parties seeking to reap joint gains in processes of institutional bargaining.” Thus, for Young, institutional bargaining equals leadership. He identifies three modes of leadership that come into play in international bargaining: structural, entrepreneurial, and intellectual. Structural leadership is based on material
power and the ability to use threats and incentives as bargaining leverage in international negotiations (Young, 1991, pp. 288–293). An entrepreneurial leader, in contrast, has good negotiation skills and is able to facilitate mutually acceptable deals at an international level (Young, 1991, pp. 293–298). Intellectual leadership is based on ideational power, that is, an ability to foster discourses and visions that shape the perspectives of participants in institutional bargaining (Young, 1991, pp. 298–302). In real life, of course, these three forms are often combined in one way or another.

**Arild Underdal**

According to Arild Underdal (1994, p. 178), leadership is the “asymmetrical relationship of influence in which one actor guides or directs the behavior of others toward a certain goal over a certain period of time.” This definition embodies many qualifications that a would-be leader must fulfill. First, leadership is a social relationship between a leader and followers. Thus, without followers there are no leaders. The relationship involves influence and some sort of power—but not necessarily hard power, as leadership is not about coercion. Underdal (1994, p. 178) reminds us that the veto right of permanent members of the UN Security Council does not grant them a leadership position because leadership is about guiding, not vetoing. Second, leaders are expected to have a positive influence “associated with the collective pursuit of some common good or joint purpose” (quoted in Malnes, 1995, p. 94). Thus, Underdal (1994, p. 179) expects states to share some kind of “platform of shared values, interests, and beliefs,” and “successful leadership builds on and cultivates this platform.” Finally, one good idea represented in international negotiations does not make an actor a leader; leadership is “a fairly consistent pattern of interaction extending throughout a certain period of time” (Underdal, 1994, pp. 178–179). Yet how long one must provide leadership in order to be recognized as a leader remains unclear (cf. Liefferink & Wurzel, 2017, pp. 961–962).

Like Young, Underdal (1994) also identifies three modes of leadership: “leadership through unilateral action, leadership by means of coercion, and instrumental leadership (including intellectual as well as political aspects).” Leadership by unilateral action is exercised by seeking to solve a collective problem outside of the negotiation framework via one’s own efforts and thus by setting an example for others (Underdal, 1994, pp. 183–186). Coercive leadership is rather similar to Young’s structural leadership: by communicating promises and threats, a leader can impose on others to accept terms or at least make compromises in negotiations (Underdal, 1994, pp. 186–187). The goal of instrumental leadership is the same, but instead of coercing others, it seeks to convince them of the merits of the leader’s viewpoints and thus facilitate common ends in negotiations (Underdal, 1994, pp. 188–191).

**Raino Malnes**

Raino Malnes (1995, pp. 91–93) identifies three types of leadership. The first, problem-solving leadership, builds on the assumption that leaders are expected to have a superior ability to solve problems by undertaking efforts to reduce constraints and create opportunities in social interaction. This type of leadership comes close to entrepreneurship, the biggest difference being that leaders always act on behalf of a group. The second type is positional leadership, referring to
leaders’ position at the top of a hierarchical organization. Although nominal power does not necessarily bring actual power, it is reasonable to assume that positional leaders have authority that empowers them to lay down rules for others. Finally, the third type of leadership hints that leaders need followers: leaders are agents that make others “do what they would not otherwise have done.” Malnes calls this type of leadership directional leadership. The “crux of leadership,” he writes, is the “ability to exercise influence – to direct other people’s behaviour” (Malnes, 1995, p. 92).

What is more, Malnes raises very interesting and important questions about the goals of leadership, and criticizes Young’s structural leadership and Underdal’s coercive leadership for not making a clear distinction between leadership and ordinary bargaining. “The important thing,” he writes, “is that a leader bases his or her initiatives on some conception of collective goals, although it may be a controversial conception, whose sincerity will sometimes be challenged” (Malnes, 1995, p. 94). Conversely, things that “are done or said for the sole purpose of furthering national goals do not fall within the category of leadership, irrespective of how these things actually affect the process towards agreement” (Malnes, 1995, p. 94).

**Research Agenda on Environmental Leadership**

There is wide consensus among GEP scholars about the “pressing need” for leadership in international climate negotiations and other environmental issue areas (Gupta & Grupp, 2000, p. 4). Although the list of potential leaders has become so long that Liefferink and Wurzel (2017, p. 952) warn about the risk of the “inflationary use of the terms environmental pioneers and leaders (as well as related terms),” it remains unclear what actually counts as leadership in environmental politics. This section addresses the key dimensions of leadership identified by a wide range of GEP literature.

**Leaders and Leadership Strategies**

Because at least a minimum supply of leadership can undoubtedly be regarded as a precondition for leadership roles to emerge in international affairs (Underdal, 1994, p. 181), a large number of GEP studies elaborate rhetoric and actions of aspiring leaders in GEP. In particular, they seek to identify which states have sought to provide leadership in international negotiations on the environment, and how they have exercised this role in institutional bargaining processes at the international level. Most utilize the three classic typologies of leadership developed by Young, Underdal, and Malnes—or their own, modified versions of these—in order to describe what kind of leadership strategies aspiring leaders utilize in GEP. These strategies are introduced in Table 1.

[ADD TABLE 1 here]

In its early stages, leadership studies focused largely on the behavior and actions of individual leaders. Young (1991) offers a long list of individual politicians and officials who can be viewed as having played structural, entrepreneurial, or intellectual leadership roles in various international environmental negotiation processes, such as the international law of the sea,
stratospheric ozone depletion, global climate change, and long-range transboundary air pollution. While the conduct of individual political leaders undoubtedly directly and indirectly influences the developments in GEP, most of the scholarly work on leadership focuses on the leadership roles of collective entities such as states, international organizations, and corporate actors (cf. Andresen & Agrawala, 2002; Bailey, 2019; Skodvin & Andresen, 2006; Urpelainen, 2011). As Underdal (1994, pp. 180–181) notes, this may be a reasonable choice because even the most skilled individual diplomats fail to provide leadership in international negotiations if they happen to represent a state that does not share this ambition.

Arguably, the largest share of GEP studies generally focus on leadership in environmental governance within the United Nations (UN), and international negotiations on climate under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (Andresen, 2007; Andresen & Agrawala, 2002; Karlsson, Parker, Hjerpe, & Linnér, 2011; Parker, Karlsson, & Hjerpe, 2015; Parker, Karlsson, Hjerpe, & Linnér, 2012; Saul & Seidel, 2011), or the leadership role of the European Union (EU) in those negotiations in particular (Bäckstrand & Elgström, 2013; Groen, Niemann, & Oberthür, 2012; Gupta & Grupp, 2000; Gupta & Ringius, 2001; Oberthür & Groen, 2018; Oberthür & Roche Kelly, 2008; Parker & Karlsson, 2010, 2017; Rayner & Jordan, 2013; Saul & Seidel, 2011; Skodvin & Andresen, 2006; Torney, 2015, 2019; Wurzel & Connelly, 2011). Many scholars also study climate leadership offered by various EU institutions (Barnes, 2011; Burns, 2016; Burns & Carter, 2011; Dupont & Oberthür, 2016; Oberthür & Dupont, 2011; Schreurs & Tiberghien, 2007; Skjærseth, 2016; Wurzel, Liefferink, & Di Lullo, 2019). Others elaborate the (lack of) leadership role of individual EU member states (Andersen & Nielsen, 2016; Andersson & Mol, 2002; Boasson & Lahn, 2016; Bocquillon & Evrard, 2016; Costa, 2011; Jänicke, 2011, 2016; Jänicke & Wurzel, 2019; Jankowska, 2011, 2016; Kanie, 2003; Liefferink & Birkel, 2011; Liefferink, Boezeman, & de Coninck, 2016; Rayner & Jordan, 2011, 2016; Schreurs & Tiberghien, 2007; Solorio, 2016; Szarka, 2011; Wurzel et al., 2019). Thus, in the context of leadership literature the actorness of the EU is not questioned (Vogler, 2005, 2011, 2016), but the EU is largely viewed as a normative power (Manners, 2002). Vast literature elaborates on whether or not and how the EU plays out its “green normative power” (Falkner, 2006) by providing leadership in GEP in general (Sbragia & Damro, 1999; Vogler & Stephan, 2007; Zito, 2005), or in some other specific environmental issue areas in particular. In addition to the studies of EU climate leadership, examples include negotiations on sustainable development (Lightfoot & Burchell, 2005), biofuels policy (Afionis & Stringer, 2012), biosafety regulation (Falkner, 2007), industrial environmental regulation (Gouldson, Carpenter, & Afionis, 2015), international energy governance (Goldthau & Sitter, 2019), the protection of the ozone layer (Oberthür, 1999), and the marine environment (Carpenter, 2012), for instance.

Many GEP scholars have also investigated the leadership role of the United States in international environmental regime formation (Bang & Schreurs, 2011, 2016; Falkner, 2005; Gouldson et al., 2015; Ivanova & Esty, 2008; Paarlberg, 1997, 1999; Parker & Karlsson, 2018; Paterson, 2008; Skodvin & Andresen, 2006; Sussman, 2004; Urpelainen & Van de Graaf, 2018). As the global status of the United States is generally declining and China’s keeps rising, a wide range of International Relations studies elaborate international leadership in the post-American international order in general, and the role of China in that order in particular. Recent examples
include special issues on international leadership and global governance (see Wæver & Chen, 2017) and leadership with Chinese characteristics (Kristensen & Morgan, 2018), which touch upon climate leadership but do not exclusively focus on leadership in GEP. Although there is also a substantive number of studies elaborating China’s role in international climate negotiations (e.g., Gao, 2016; Harris, 2011; Kopra, 2019a), systematic investigations concerning China’s leadership in GEP remain close to zero, probably because it has not yet been viewed as a true leader in international environmental negotiations (cf. Dai & Diao, 2011; Dong, 2017; Li, 2017). Some studies have investigated whether other major emerging powers (i.e., Brazil, Russia, India, and South Africa) have the potential to provide environmental leadership individually (Afionis, Stringer, Favretto, Tomei, & Buckeridge, 2016; Jørgensen, 2016) or collectively (Papa & Gleason, 2012). A few scholars have also elaborated on the leadership role of Japan (Dauvergne, 1998; Graham, 2004; Maddock, 1994; Schreurs, 2004) and small states in GEP (Águeda Cornelo & Mol, 2014; Benwell, 2011; Ourbak & Magnan, 2018). In addition to the states, GEP literature identifies a wide range of other actors as potential leaders (and followers) in environmental issue areas: international organizations, non-governmental organizations, corporations, cities, religious organizations, social movements, politicians, and even individuals (see, e.g., Wurzel, Liefferink, & Torney, 2019, for a special issue on “Pioneers, Leaders and Followers in Multilevel and Polycentric Climate Governance”; and Gallagher, 2012, for a massive collection of cases). Despite wide agreement among GEP scholars that non-state actors play a crucial role in international environmental politics (e.g., Bäckstrand, Kuyper, Linnér, & Lövbrand, 2017), it remains unclear whether such actors can offer leadership as defined by classic leadership typologies. And, if we agree that non-state actors can be leaders, future studies have to contemplate what forms of leadership aspiring non-state actors utilize in GEP, including whether, and how, their leadership strategies differ from the strategies of aspiring state actors introduced in the Table 1. Despite offering fine-grained analyses of leadership mechanisms, scholarly work focusing on the classic leadership typologies seem to fail to represent a holistic picture of the role of leadership in GEP. Clearly, the leadership typologies focus on explicit declarations and/or intentional actions of aspiring leaders in international negotiations. In other words, they focus on the behavior of would-be leaders and do not touch upon the demand side of leadership; that is, the followers of a leader. Therefore, some find it necessary to distinguish “between the desire to take leadership and the ability to take actual leadership” (Gupta & van der Grijp, 2000, p. 70). This raises the question: Does the ability to take leadership refer to the recognition of one’s leadership role by others and/or one’s ability to attract followers, or can one take actual leadership without the recognition? Reasonably, the leader–follower relationship has begun to attract scholarly interest among GEP researchers.

Leaders and Followers

Notably, both Young’s and Underdal’s classic definitions underline that leadership is a social relation: without followers, there is no leadership. The ability to attract followers differentiates leaders from pioneers (and related terms, such as pushers or first-movers) (see Jänicke, 2005; Liefferink & Wurzel, 2017, 2018), who, in parenthesis, are antipodes to laggards (Andresen & Agrawala, 2002; Liefferink, Arts, Kamstra, & Ooijevaar, 2009) or bystanders (Oberthür & Groen, 2017). Therefore, leadership “must be seen first and foremost as a relationship between a
leader and those who follow the leader” (Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1991, p. 396). This relationship is “shaped by the responsiveness and by the demand of the followers as well as by the supply of leadership services provided by the leader(s)” (Kilian & Elgström, 2010, p. 259).

A growing number of scholars have moved to study perceptions of leadership and to theorize which factors motivate actors to follow a leader. Among the first such scholars were Gupta and van der Grijp (2000), who investigated leadership perceptions within international climate negotiations. Other examples include Burzo and Li (2017), Elgström (2007), Kilian and Elgström (2010), Parker and Karlsson (2017, 2018), as well as Karlsson and colleagues (2011), who have analyzed the extent to which the EU, the United States, and China are perceived as climate leaders by potential followers and other participants in international climate negotiations. Interestingly, many empirical studies show that despite the EU’s aspiration to be a climate leader, it is not unequivocally recognized as such by others (Gupta & van der Grijp, 2000). Likewise, despite having overarching climate change goals and leadership strategies in the 2009–2015 period, the recognition of the leadership status of the United States has varied over time (Parker & Karlsson, 2018). Moreover, almost half of respondents of Karlsson and colleagues’ (2011, p. 96; see also Parker et al., 2015) survey conducted at the UN climate summit in 2008 perceived China as one of the leaders (others being the EU, the Group of 77, and the United States) in international climate politics even though the Chinese government had not committed to any emissions reduction targets, but at the time stressed the historic responsibility of industrialized countries. Does this mean that studies of leadership perceptions do not necessarily manage to study those who are perceived as leaders, but actually indicate who is expected or hoped to take a lead? In any event, Parker and colleagues (2015, p. 435) justifiably make a case for the demand for a “systematic understanding of the role and importance of followership” in leadership literature, given the incompatibility between the supply and demand for leadership.

That said, some forms of leadership, especially those based on unilateral action, do not seem to require others to recognize the leadership position of an actor. Thus, the self-declaration of a leadership role seems to be adequate and no followers are needed. For example, Saul and Seidel (2011) assume that a leader must have “the intention to get others on board, that is, that he tries to generate followers” and whether “he is successful (and thereby solves the problem) is a separate question.” Similarly, Bäckstrand and Elgström (2013) differentiate between a leader and “a ‘leadiator’ (leader-cum-protector)” (see also Oberthür & Groen, 2017). While the former exclusively builds on unilateral and directional leadership strategies, the latter combines leadership strategies with mediation activities, such as coalition-building and bridge-building (Bäckstrand & Elgström, 2013, p. 1370). This implies their definition of leadership does not necessarily require followers and that one-sided aspirations suffice. Yet the conceptualization of “leadiator” seems rather short, and it remains unclear how a “leadiator’s” mediation activities differ from the influence mechanisms utilized by, for instance, problem-solving and entrepreneurial leadership.

Based on surveys conducted in various UN climate conferences, Parker and colleagues (2015) seek to identify what factors motivate followers to support would-be leaders. Interestingly, structural leadership, which many works on the supply of leadership identify as one of the most
important leadership types, was viewed as a less important factor for attracting followers than other leadership types—namely, directional, ideational, and instrumental modes, which were all given roughly equal weight in respondents’ judgments (Parker et al., 2015, pp. 444–445). Likewise, Parker and Karlsson (2018, p. 528) conclude that an actor cannot exercise effective leadership if other states do not recognize it as a leader. In addition, recognition by other actors, such as non-governmental organizations and media representatives, may prove to be important given their role in putting forward public discourses and images. Yet one can ask whether “leader–follower” is a hierarchical dichotomy. For a “true leader,” Chen, Zhou, and Wang (2018, p. 17) argue, “other countries should be equal partners to achieve a common goal.”

Torney (2015) develops an analytic framework to study the ways in which the EU’s internal drivers (i.e., normative commitment, material interest, and polity building) affect the form of its external engagement with China and India on climate change. The form of engagement, he explains, “affects the response to prospective followers’ engagement, which is conditioned by the domestic political structure of third countries along with their perceptions of material interest and preexisting normative frames” (Torney, 2015, p. 19). Furthermore, Torney (2019) makes an important move towards conceptualizing the leader–follower relationship. He defines followership as “the adoption of a policy, idea, institution, approach, or technique for responding to climate change by one actor by subsequent reference to its previous adoption by another actor” (Torney, 2019, p. 169). Given the fragmented nature of international climate governance, he points out that various types of actors can be leaders or followers in GEP: not only states, but also cities, municipalities, and private actors, for example (Torney, 2019, pp. 170–171). Torney (2019, pp. 174–176) also elaborates on the factors that enable followership: characteristics of a would-be leader and a would-be follower, as well as characteristics of the relationship between these two actors.

Motivation and Credibility of Leadership

Within leadership studies, a key controversy concerns the motivation of leadership. What motivates an actor to take a leadership role? Can a leader be driven by self-interest, or must leadership be based on altruistic motives to promote the common good of a large group? If so, who defines what counts as the common good, and how? Young’s structural and entrepreneurial forms of leadership focus on the bargaining power of individuals; many later GEP studies on leadership also paid a lot of attention to power-based leadership and interests of would-be leaders. For example, Skodvin and Andresen (2006, p. 15) assume that rational actors always promote their interests in international negotiations, and taking a leadership role in negotiations may sometimes serve these goals. Self-interest is a sufficient driver of leadership from this vantage point: leaders are “motivated or driven to exercise leadership to further their own values or goals rather than to fulfill some sense of ethical responsibility to the community” (Young, 1991, p. 296; see also Saul & Seiden, 2011, p. 904). In addition to material interests, there are also other rational drivers that motivate actors to take a leadership role in GEP (Torney, 2015).

Yet one can argue that self-interest bargaining or coercion is not about leadership but instead about domination. According to Malnes (1995, p. 94), leaders are expected to promote their interests prudently, “bound up with a sense of responsibility for wider constituencies.” Although
leadership does not presume sacrifices and self-abnegation, leaders’ activities qualify “as leadership only if self-interest takes second place to collective goals” (Malnes, 1995, p. 94). This view is supported empirically by Karlsson, Hjerpe, Parker, and Linnér (2012), as well as Parker and colleagues (2015), whose survey identified self-interest motivation as the most unimportant factor motivating followers to support would-be leaders in international climate negotiations. In contrast, the surveys demonstrated that to gather widespread support for leadership aspirations, one must act for the common good (or at least be perceived to do so) (Karlsson et al., 2012, pp. 50–51; Parker et al., 2015, pp. 444–445).

Furthermore, leadership literature identifies some qualitative aspects a leader must have in order to attract followers. In particular, it asserts that credibility is an important requirement for leadership (Elgström, 2007; Grupp & Gupta, 2000; Kilian & Elgström, 2010; Underdal, 1994; Young, 1991). Based on their study of the performance of the EU’s climate leadership, Parker and Karlsson (2010) conclude that idea-based leadership can hardly be efficient without performance credibility. The fact that the EU has not managed to implement its climate change mitigation targets decreases the credibility of its directional leadership (Gupta & van der Grijp, 2000). With a reference to their conception of environmental leadership, Andersson and Mol (2002) also note that the Netherlands’ failure to reduce carbon emissions has caused a credibility gap and hence jeopardized its leadership aspirations in international climate politics. When it comes to power-based structural leadership, however, the credibility of the leader seems not to necessarily be a very important factor. In contrast, structural leadership utilizes unilaterally imposed (material) incentives to influence others, but does not seek to attract them (Parker and Karlsson, 2010, p. 937). Yet the implementation of structural leadership requires material resources, otherwise a leader’s inducements and threats do not have real weight in international negotiations (Grupp & Gupta, 2000, p. 302).

Another important qualitative aspect of leadership is coherence, or consistency (Groen et al., 2012, p. 176; Kilian & Elgström, 2010, p. 259). Building on Mark Nuttal’s conceptualization, Kilian and Elgström (2010, p. 259) distinguish between four types of coherence: horizontal, institutional, vertical, and chronological. They explain:

Horizontal coherence means that policies with external implications in different issue-areas should be consistent with each other. Institutional coherence refers to consistency of external policies emanating from the various EU institutions (Commission, Council, Parliament). Vertical coherence addresses consistency among member states and between member state and EU policies. Chronological coherence, finally, refers to consistency over time. (Kilian & Elgström, 2010, p. 259)

Building on James MacGregor Burns’s work on transactional and transformational leadership, as well as Jack Hayward’s work on humdrum and heroic leadership, Wurzel and Connelly (2011), Wurzel, Liefferink, and Connelly (2016), and Liefferink and Wurzel (2017, 2018) analyze styles of leadership. This choice enables them to assess the manner in which leaders pursue their ambitions and the actual impact of those efforts. According to their categorization, transactional leadership is “reactive and aims at short-term expedient goals without the provision of long-term strategies,” whereas transformational leadership “aims to bring about radical or ‘revolutionary’
change” (Wurzel et al., 2016, p. 12). As Liefferink and Wurzel (2017, pp. 961–962) note, this categorization also adds a time dimension to the leadership analyses. In short, humdrum leadership refers to “short-term and incremental [leadership], leading to marginal adjustments of existing policies,” whereas heroic leadership “relies on long-term objectives, strong policy coordination and the assertion of political will” (Wurzel et al., 2016, p. 12).

Methods to Study Leadership in GEP

Most empirical studies have sought to identify aspiring leaders in international environmental regime formation. For these purposes, most scholars have applied qualitative research methods and utilized official statements and strategies, media materials, interviews with key stakeholders, questionnaires, secondary literature, and observation of negotiation processes as sources of key data. Yet some have also applied quantitative methods as well. For example, Saul and Seidel (2011) created a new leadership index in order to measure the extent to which the EU provided leadership in international climate negotiations. Urpelainen (2011) developed a model to analyze the strategic logic of unilateral leadership, and Liefferink and colleagues (2009) conducted a bi- and multivariate analysis explaining differences in states’ domestic environmental policy output. Furthermore, Parker and Karlsson (2017, 2018), Karlsson and colleagues (2011), and Parker and colleagues (2015) collected survey data at UN climate summits in order to analyze participants’ (including members of party delegations, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and scholars) perceptions of leadership (see also Burzo & Li, 2017). As Parker and Karlsson (2018) point out, however, there are methodological concerns regarding the use of surveys. They ask: “How can we be sure the respondents understand the question the way it was intended, i.e. as a way of accessing their views on which actors are actually exercising leadership, as opposed to which actors are simply seen as the most powerful?” This is an important question that can arguably be directed to the entire scholarship of leadership in GEP. In particular, when analyzing power-based structural forms of leadership, how can we ensure that we are truly studying leadership, not just the bargaining power of the most powerful participants in the negotiations?

Avenues for Future Research on Environmental Leadership

Despite the vast social science literature on leadership in GEP, Young’s (1991, p. 281) statement about leadership being a “complex phenomenon, ill-defined, poorly understood, and subject to recurrent controversy among students of international affairs” continues to be largely valid. The last section of this article attempts to reveal some gaps in the contemporary literature and proposes themes for prospective research on leadership in GEP and other international issue areas (see also Hart & Rhodes, 2014).

How Are Power and Leadership Interlinked?

There is wide agreement among leadership studies that leaders must have some sort of power, otherwise they do not have leverage to influence others’ behavior. As Table 1 demonstrates, most scholars studying leadership in GEP regard structural leadership (based on material capabilities and hard power) as an important type of leadership. Much less attention has been paid to the social dimensions of leadership—this is undoubtedly a gap in the literature that
prospective studies ought to fill. In this respect, social theories of International Relations, such as constructivism and the English School theory, have great potential not only to theorize aspects and functions of leadership in international society, but also to deal with questions related to the legitimacy of leadership (e.g., Bukovansky et al., 2012; Clark, 2005).

Many scholars maintain that leaders do not need followers and that unilateral action qualifies as leadership. Underdal (1994, p. 186) even identifies coercive leadership as one type of leadership—a choice that clearly contradicts his own definition of leadership as a social relationship. Others underline the importance of the leader–follower relationship and argue that leadership differs from power and hegemony. According to Young (1989, p. 88), for example, “leadership differs from overt hegemony in that it involves a distinct element of negotiation or give-and-take in contrast to processes in which an obviously dominant actor simply dictates terms to others who have no choice but to acquiesce [sic].” At the same time, Falkner (2005, p. 589) notes that although “hegemony is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for the existence of environmental leadership, it is usually only powerful states that have a lasting effect on international negotiations and norm creation.” Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that most empirical studies on environmental leadership analyze the extent to which conventional great powers—the United States, the EU, and China—have provided leadership in international negotiations (cf. Águeda Corneloup & Mol, 2014). Yet the existing literature on leadership in GEP does not address whether and how great power status and leadership are interlinked in social and normative terms.

Some scholars have theorized special responsibilities of great powers in GEP (Bukovansky et al., 2012; Clark, 2011; Kopra, 2019a, 2019b), but they do not systematically conceptualize the relationship between special responsibility and leadership. This raises a question that is not addressed by the existing GEP literature: What is the linkage between great power status and leadership? Since most leadership typologies emphasize the (material) power of a leader, this implicitly hints that great power status may bring a leadership position in international negotiations (cf. Bukovansky et al., 2012). Yet it remains unclear whether and how mechanisms of great power leadership differ from “ordinary” leadership provided by lesser states or non-state actors. Broadly speaking, it is also unclear how leadership differs from other types of influencing and bargaining in international regime formation. What constitutes “ordinary” conduct and bargaining in international negotiations, and how does the conduct of a leader make a difference? As Nye (2008, p. x) reminds us, “leadership involves power, but not all power relationships are instances of leadership.” From this vantage point, leadership should not be reduced to successful bargaining and usage of material power.

Is There a Universal Understanding of Leadership and How to Assess Leadership Normatively?

Karlsson et al. (2011) demonstrated that geography matters in leadership perceptions, noting that “the various leadership contenders were more widely recognized as leaders in their ‘home constituencies’ than among respondents in general.” Yet one can ask whether geographic components really matter, or whether Karlsson and colleagues’ findings refer instead to cultural-historic norms and values that these “home constituencies” tend to support. Given that China, for example, is an authoritarian state not committed to liberal norms, can it ever be fully recognized
as a leader in contemporary international society? Arguably, most leadership literature in GEP and beyond is written by Western (white male) scholars, and empirical cases largely focus on the role of the EU in environmental regime formation. Does this imply that the contemporary understanding of leadership is somehow Eurocentric in nature? If so, what would, for example, Asian, African, or Latin American leadership in GEP look like? GEP scholars can be recommended to take a global approach to leadership in order to ensure that the leadership typologies and mechanisms of influence identified in Table 1 really cover the entire range of leadership strategies in GEP (and not just those applied by the EU and the United States). In this regard, Chen and colleagues (2018), who develop the concept of facilitative leadership based on Chinese leadership practices, seem to open up an intriguing research agenda on non-Western leadership (see also Kristensen & Morgan, 2018; Schirm, 2010; Yan, 2011).

In a similar vein, a critical analysis of the demand of leadership could provide a fruitful avenue for future research. In addition to perceptions of leadership, intellectual focus could be directed towards expectations of leadership, because the existing GEP literature fails to conceptualize linkages between perceptions and expectations of leadership. Surveys and interviews of party delegates and other key actors in environmental negotiations could provide valuable information on expectations of leadership in GEP. Future studies could ask, for example: Who is expected to take the lead, and what factors motivate and/or justify those expectations? Does geography matter in leadership expectations? Are states or other actors belonging to certain geographic areas more widely expected to take the lead in GEP? Arguably, such a discussion cannot avoid ethical ponderings about the fairness of expectations and the linkages between leadership and (international) justice, for example.

Apart from a few exceptions (e.g., Andersson & Mol, 2002; Liefferink & Wurzel, 2017), leadership studies tend to ignore the ambition level of leadership in GEP. Given that environmental leadership can be expected to be intentional in nature—that is, it seeks to improve the environment, or at least to reduce environmental harm—it is indeed surprising that the GEP literature on leadership pays little attention to the actual environmental impact of leadership. Most studies elaborating leadership strategies investigate aspirations of would-be leaders—not their performance. In addition to environmental impacts, the level of ambition and implementation of a state’s domestic environmental policy also plays an important role in “legitimation of that particular country to take the lead in regime formation progress” (Andersson & Mol, 2002, p. 51). What is more, how a leader seeks to lead matters: if a climate leader implements its emissions reductions only through carbon offsetting methods, its credibility is likely to be compromised. In general, however, there is no consensus on “responsible” or legitimate ways to reduce carbon emissions. For example, some environmentalists are in favor of nuclear power or geoengineering, while others oppose the use of these kinds of technological measures. These kinds of opposing views of acceptable means to implement environmental policies inevitably impact what is considered a legitimate way of performing leadership in GEP. However, the existing literature lacks normative ponderations of the legitimacy of leadership.
Concluding Remarks

Global environmental problems, such as climate change and the loss of biodiversity, are truly global in nature: many countries contribute to them, their impacts are not equally distributed, and they cannot be solved by individual countries on their own; —collective actions are necessary. As the literature reviewed in this article makes clear, leadership is a crucial ingredient of successful collective action: leadership is necessary to initiate agendas, coordinate efforts, and spur ambition for collective actions, among other things. Thus, leadership is always goal-oriented: it is exercised in order to reach a specific common goal. Although the existing GEP literature does not describe particular characteristics of environmental leadership or explicitly specify what its goals are, it is probably fair to define the improvement of the quality of the environment as the ultimate objective of environmental leadership—a goal that can be characterized as a public good that no country can be prevented from enjoying (nor can any country avoid the negative effects in case of its absence). Thus, the supply of leadership does not benefit the leader itself at the expense of others, but payback of leadership, that is, the better quality of the environment, profits all countries alike. Yet it would be misleading to conclude that leadership in GEP is motivated by altruism; there is no doubt the supply of environmental leadership brings various advantages and benefits, such as good international image and soft power, which serve the leader’s broader interests in international affairs. What remains unclear, however, is what exactly motivates some states to offer leadership in GEP, and how those motives differ from motives to exercise leadership in other issue areas in international politics, if at all.

Although it may be argued that all efforts to provide international leadership are linked to the provision of public goods, such as security and global public health, there seems to be at least one special characteristic that distinguishes environmental leadership from other forms of international leadership: environmental leadership is not necessarily anthropocentrically driven but may involve non-anthropocentric underpinnings. While the existing GEP literature on environmental leadership is more or less based on rationalist assumptions of the self-interested nature of human decision-making, the emerging debate on planet politics (e.g., Burke, Fishel, Mitchell, Dalby, & Levine, 2016), which challenges the discipline of International Relations to rethink and reorganize its very foundations and accept the peremptory nature of planetary boundaries, has great potential to shake ontological and epistemological assumptions revolving around leadership in GEP. Such fresh developments could open up intriguing questions about leaders’ and/or followers’ ideas of nature, the relationship between leaders and nature, and the planetary impact of leadership, for instance. In addition to political philosophy questions, putting the well-being of the environment at the heart of GEP study on leadership could also have substantial potential to educate more eco-centric leaders for the future.

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References


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(Eds.), Governing climate change: Polycentricity in action (pp. 135–151). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.


Sanna Kopra

**Table 1. Leadership Strategies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form of leadership</th>
<th>Basis</th>
<th>Mechanisms of influence</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Structural/power-based/coercive</td>
<td>Economic, military, and political power</td>
<td>Incentives, sanctions, threats</td>
<td>Young, 1991; Underdal, 1994; Águeda Corneloup and Mol, 2014; Andresson and Mol, 2002; Grupp and Gupta, 2000; Gupta and Ringius, 2001; Elgström and Kilian, 2010; Liefferink and Wurzel, 2017, 2018; Papa and Gleason, 2012; Parker and Karlsson, 2010, 2017, 2018; Parker, Karlsson, and Hjerpe,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Leadership</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>References</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Instrumental/entrepreneurial/ problem-solving leadership</td>
<td>Negotiation skills</td>
<td>Creating structures and coalitions, applying diplomatic skills, resolving deadlocks, mediation</td>
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<td>------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Symbolic leadership</td>
<td>Play-acting</td>
<td>Posturing, promoting certain policy measures without implementing them</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Institutional leadership</td>
<td>Institutions</td>
<td>Supply and support of institutions, financing</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership Type</th>
<th>Vision and reality</th>
<th>Setting and implementing ambitious domestic policies, influencing perceptions of what is desirable and possible</th>
<th>Source(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environmental leadership</td>
<td>Ambition and reality</td>
<td>Andersson and Mol, 2002; Águeda Corneloup and Mol, 2014</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy-based leadership</td>
<td>Vision and reality</td>
<td>Papa and Gleason, 2012</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Framing problems, promoting and implementing particular policy solutions</td>
<td></td>
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