

**NATIONAL DELEGATIONS TO UNFCCC  
CONFERENCES OF THE PARTIES:  
WHO PARTICIPATES?**

Jakob Skovgaard and Jacqueline Gallant



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*Authors' Contact:* Jakob Skovgaard, Lund University ([jakob.skovgaard@svet.lu.se](mailto:jakob.skovgaard@svet.lu.se))

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Ayşem Mert  
Centre for Global Cooperation Research  
University of Duisburg-Essen  
([workingpapers@earthsystemgovernance.org](mailto:workingpapers@earthsystemgovernance.org))

## ABSTRACT

Understanding which ministries represent their countries at the annual United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conferences of the Parties (COPs) helps clarify the dynamics of these important negotiations. Data from COP1, 7, 15, 17 and 19, representing twelve different countries (the US, China, India, Brazil, Indonesia, the UK, Germany, Japan, Denmark, Sweden, Gabon, and Bhutan), was used to analyze which ministries comprised the delegations. Although the delegations have increased in size, the relative shares of different ministries have remained more constant, notwithstanding the larger representation of “peripheral” ministries at decisive COPs like COP15. Environment ministries constitute the largest group followed by foreign ministries. Environment ministries, however, are more predominant in developed countries than their developing counterparts. China and the US are the two outliers, as their delegations have been dominated by the Chinese National Development and Reform Commission and the US State Department respectively.

## SERIES FOREWORD

This working paper was written as part of the Earth System Governance Project, a ten-year research initiative launched in October 2008 by the International Human Dimensions Programme on Global Environmental Change under the overall auspices of the Earth System Science Partnership.

Earth system governance is defined in this Project as the system of formal and informal rules, rule-making mechanisms and actor-networks at all levels of human society (from local to global) that are set up to prevent, mitigate and adapt to environmental change and earth system transformation. The science plan of the Project focusses on five analytical problems: the problems of the overall *architecture* of earth system governance, of *agency* of and beyond the state, of the *adaptiveness* of governance mechanisms and processes, of their *accountability* and legitimacy, and of modes of *allocation and access* in earth system governance. In addition, the Project emphasizes four crosscutting research themes that are crucial for the study of each analytical problem: the role of power, of knowledge, of norms, and of scale. Finally, the Earth System Governance Project advances the integrated analysis of case study domains in which researchers combine analysis of the analytical problems and crosscutting themes. The main case study domains are at present the global water system, global food systems, the global climate system, and the global economic system.

The Earth System Governance Project is designed as the nodal point within the global change research programmes to guide, organize and evaluate research on these questions. The Project is implemented through a Global Alliance of Earth System Governance Research Centres, a network of lead faculty members and research fellows, a global conference series, and various research projects undertaken at multiple levels (see [www.earthsystemgovernance.org](http://www.earthsystemgovernance.org)).

Earth System Governance Working Papers are peer-reviewed online publications that broadly address questions raised by the Project's Science and Implementation Plan. The series is open to all colleagues who seek to contribute to this research agenda, and submissions are welcome at any time at [workingpapers@earthsystemgovernance.org](mailto:workingpapers@earthsystemgovernance.org). While most members of our network publish their research in the English language, we accept also submissions in other major languages. The Earth System Governance Project does not assume the copyright for working papers, and we expect that most working papers will eventually find their way into scientific journals or become chapters in edited volumes compiled by the Project and its members.

Comments on this working paper, as well as on the other activities of the Earth System Governance Project, are highly welcome. We believe that understanding earth system governance is only feasible through joint effort of colleagues from various backgrounds and from all regions of the world. We look forward to your response.

Frank Biermann

Ruben Zondervan

*Chair, Earth System Governance Project*

*Executive Director, Earth System Governance Project*

# 1. INTRODUCTION

The negotiations under the United Nations Convention Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) have come a long way since the first Conference of the Parties (COP1) in 1995. The delegations that governments send to the UNFCCC COPs have multiplied, as have the number of issues and the complexity of the negotiations. It is often claimed that government delegations to the UNFCCC COPs increasingly come from a broader range of ministries or agencies.<sup>1</sup> Yet, it is not clear the extent to which the composition of the national delegations to the UNFCCC COPs has actually changed. Is it a different, perhaps broader, group of ministries and agencies that send representatives to the COPs today? And do different countries send representatives from different ministries and agencies? For instance, do the delegations from developing countries consist of different ministries than those from developed countries?

In order to answer these questions, we have mapped the delegations of twelve different countries (the US, China, India, Japan, Germany, the UK, Brazil, Indonesia, Sweden, Denmark, Gabon, and Bhutan) at different COPs spanning most of the UNFCCC negotiations (COP1, 7, 15, 17, & 19)<sup>2</sup>. The countries selected represent both large and small countries as well as developed, emerging, and least developed countries. We argue that it matters which ministries participate, as each ministry has its own distinct perspective and priorities. This, in turn, influences how it addresses climate change (see DOWNIE 2014). To quote Graham Allison, “where you stand depends on where you sit” (ALLISON & ZELLIKOW 1999: 307).

For example, environment ministries emphasize the environmental consequences of climate change whereas development ministries tend to emphasize the consequences for development (PICKERING ET AL 2015). Industry or economic ministries may emphasize consequences for business, while finance ministries often emphasize consequences for the public budget (SKOVGAARD 2012). Furthermore, similar ministries from different countries are more likely to perceive climate change the same way and develop common understandings of climate change issues (such as adaptation or climate finance) and their respective solutions (HAAS 1992; 2000). Hence identifying which ministries participate will help elucidate the dynamics of the negotiations.

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of simplicity, we refer to ministries, agencies, and other national public institutions as ministries.

<sup>2</sup> We would like to thank Heike Schroeder, Maxwell T. Boykoff & Laura Spiers for sharing their data for the US, China, the UK, Gabon & Bhutan for COP1, 7 & 15.

Our research shows that while the national delegations have become slightly more diverse, in most countries they are still dominated by the same key ministries, either the environment ministry or the foreign ministry. With the exception of China, other ministries individually still only make up a few percent of the delegations, although their combined numbers often amount to more than half of their delegation. The more important the COP, the more numerous and the more diverse the national delegation has proven to be. This is most visible in the case of COP15, where all ministries sent more representatives than usual; the more “peripheral” ministries, however, increased their numbers at rates higher than those of the environment and foreign ministries.

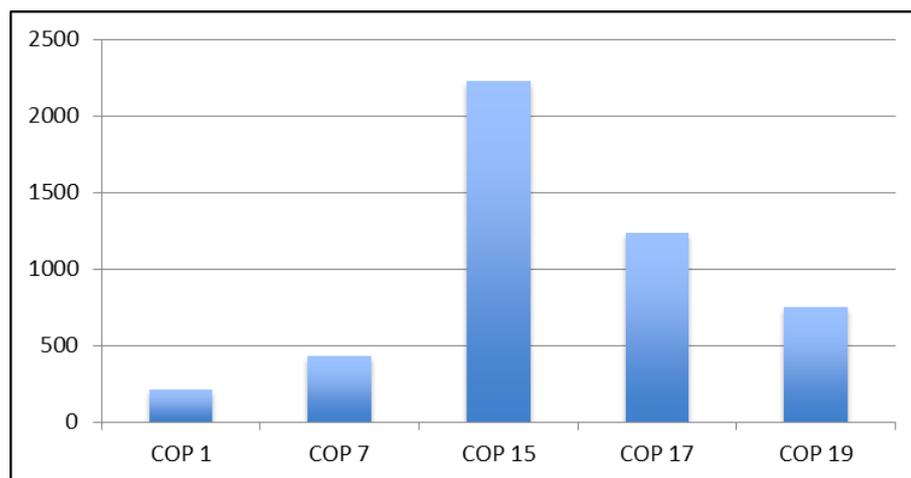


Figure 1: Total participants at COP

## 2. THE ROLE OF COPS AND NATIONAL DELEGATIONS

Countries reach joint decisions at the annual UNFCCC COP. They differ in importance, however; some – such as COP3 in Kyoto and COP15 in Copenhagen – are more important because they were supposed to produce binding agreements that regulate the emissions levels of (some) countries and address other key issues for several years. These key COPs attract significantly more attention and participation than the more low-key COPs in between them, which focus on preparation for and implementation of the key COPs and their agreements.

National governments nominate delegates to serve on the national delegations to the COPs. The delegations also include individuals who are not serving as national representatives, including independent researchers and representatives of sub-state government (cities, states in federal systems, etc.). Nevertheless, since these non- and quasi-state actors do not represent the state in the actual negotiations and are not part of the decision-making process that defines the state position, the ministries and agencies that officially represent the state constitute the focal point. Embassies and other permanent country representations abroad (e.g. consulates) often comprise a

significant share of national delegations, but mainly perform support tasks like logistics, rather than participating in the negotiations and defining the national position. Consequently, participants from embassies are less relevant for this analysis.

We draw on data collected by Schroeder et al (2012), which we have brought up-to-date to include COP17 and 19. We have also expanded the data set by increasing the number of countries included from six to twelve. This expansion makes it easier to distinguish trends among developed, emerging, and least developed countries, and to identify whether the differences between COP15 and earlier COPs was the result of an overarching historical trend or the importance of COP15.

### 3. DEVELOPMENT OF PARTICIPATION OVER TIME

The data demonstrates that the absolute participation of the selected countries has increased over time. The sharpest increase in absolute participation occurred at COP 15 in Copenhagen, after which there was a marked decrease in the absolute number of participants; nonetheless the absolute participation at the 2013 COP 19 in Warsaw was still demonstrably larger than that of COP 1.

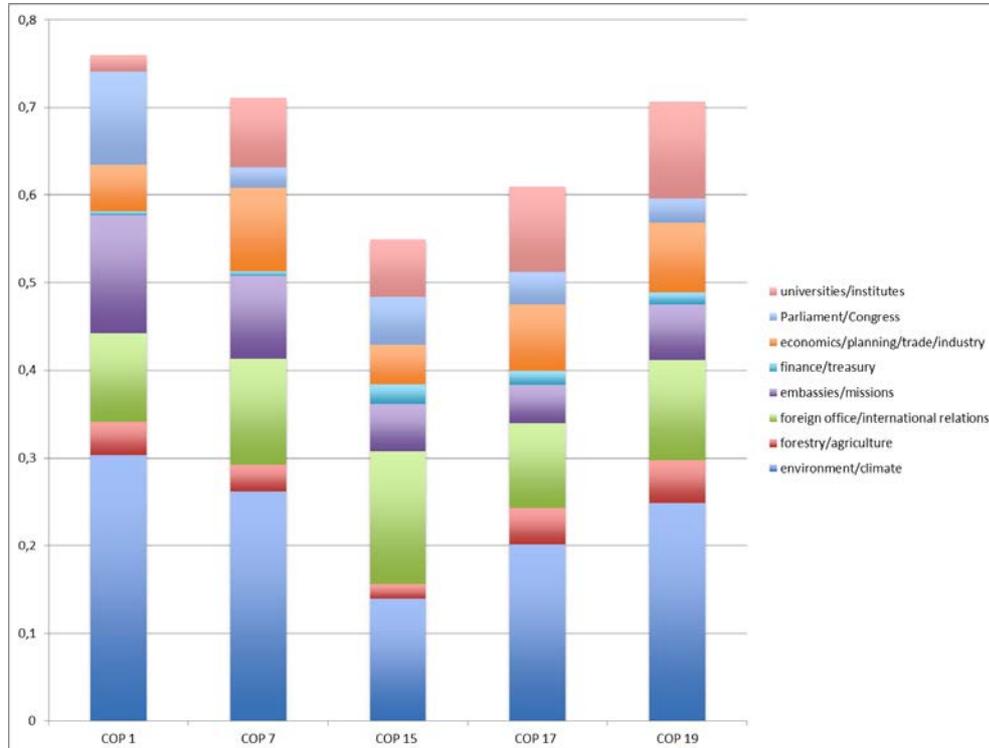


Figure 2: Ministry participation by COP

Relative to other ministries, the environment ministries<sup>3</sup> remain the most represented type of ministry throughout the COPs studied (except COP15), trailed by the foreign affairs ministries and subsequently by embassies. The “other/unknown” category also comprises a significant proportion of the national delegation, in recent years 10-20 per cent. Altogether, the relative proportions of participation from different ministries has remained fairly constant over time with increases in the share of some of the peripheral ministries.

*Table 1: Ministry Participation by COP in Percentages*

	Environment/climate	Forestry & agriculture	Foreign affairs	Embassies	Finance	Economics / planning / trade/ industry	Prime Minister/Executive	Energy / natural resources	Miscellaneous ministries <sup>4</sup>	Development
<b>COP1</b>	30.3%	3.8%	10.1%	13.5%	0.5%	5.3%	1.4%	3.4%	7.2%	1.9%
<b>COP7</b>	26.7%	3.0%	12.1%	9.5%	0.5%	9.5%	1.4%	5.6%	5.1%	2.6%
<b>COP15</b>	14.1%	1.7%	15.2%	5.4%	1.3%	4.5%	4.8%	2.8%	4.3%	1.3%
<b>COP17</b>	21.1%	4.1%	9.7%	4.3%	1.6%	7.6%	1.9%	1.9%	3.1%	1.8%
<b>COP19</b>	24.7%	4.9%	11.4%	6.4%	1.3%	8.0%	1.6%	2.9%	3.6%	1.3%

In terms of different ministries’ share of national delegations, COP 15 constitutes an outlier, as the relative share of the environment and climate ministries dropped noticeably while the foreign affairs ministries increased their share. However, participation at COP 15 was much higher than at previous and subsequent COPs, and the change in relative representation of ministries of COP 15 reflects an overall increase in participation from all ministries, although in different proportions.

The fact that national delegations at COP19 had a larger share of key ministries (environment and foreign relations) and a lower share of peripheral ministries than at COP17 also indicates a correlation between the importance of a COP and the participation of peripheral ministries.

COP17 in Durban, which outlined the terms of the negotiations towards a global agreement at COP21, was more important than COP19, which was characterized as a “process COP” (CENTRE FOR SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENT 2013). It appears that peripheral ministries increase their participation more than key ministries when the COP is considered important.

<sup>3</sup> In the cases of the UK since 2008 and Denmark since 2007 the climate change ministry.

<sup>4</sup> Miscellaneous ministries includes the science and technology, defense, health, and transportation categories.

Table 2: Environment, Foreign, and Economic Ministries by Country

<b>COP1</b>				
		Environment/climate	Foreign affairs	Economics, planning, etc.
Industrialized	Japan	24.1%	6.9%	10.3%
	Sweden	69.2%	15.4%	0.0%
	Denmark	40.0%	13.3%	0.0%
	United	15.8%	5.3%	0.0%
	United	75.0%	0.0%	5.0%
	Germany	30.2%	5.7%	5.7%
Emerging	India	40.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	Indonesia	9.1%	9.1%	4.5%
	China	0.0%	33.3%	16.7%
	Brazil	11.1%	33.3%	0.0%
Least	Bhutan	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	Gabon	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
<b>COP7</b>				
		Environment/climate	Foreign affairs	Economics, planning, etc.
Industrialized	Japan	17.5%	17.5%	19.6%
	Sweden	51.7%	3.4%	6.9%
	Denmark	12.8%	6.5%	0.0%
	United	9.3%	29.6%	1.9%
	United	51.2%	11.6%	9.3%
	Germany	38.6%	3.5%	7.0%
Emerging	India	35.7%	7.1%	0.0%
	Indonesia	36.4%	0.0%	0.0%
	China	6.7%	16.7%	33.3%
	Brazil	2.8%	5.6%	2.8%
Least	Bhutan	75.0%	25.0%	0.0%
	Gabon	50.0%	0.0%	0.0%
<b>COP15</b>				
		Environment/climate	Foreign affairs	Economics, planning, etc.
Industrialized	Japan	19.5%	15.0%	18.8%
	Sweden	46.8%	7.3%	0.9%
	Denmark	17.1%	33.0%	3.3%
	United	1.7%	24.6%	8.4%
	United	52.9%	11.4%	1.4%
	Germany	38.9%	2.8%	10.2%
Emerging	India	16.4%	12.7%	0.0%
	Indonesia	20.7%	6.0%	1.1%
	China	1.7%	26.8%	10.0%
	Brazil	2.9%	3.5%	0.7%

Least	Bhutan	20.0%	6.7%	20.0%
	Gabon	42.9%	0.0%	0.0%
<b>COP17</b>				
		Environment/climate	Foreign affairs	Economics, planning, etc.
Industrialized	Japan	31.3%	22.4%	22.4%
	Sweden	42.0%	4.0%	2.0%
	Denmark	43.1%	10.8%	0.0%
	United	4.2%	40.0%	1.1%
	United	71.1%	4.4%	0.0%
	Germany	42.7%	2.4%	7.3%
Emerging	India	26.5%	6.1%	2.0%
	Indonesia	21.7%	3.0%	5.7%
	China	1.3%	5.8%	26.0%
	Brazil	4.5%	6.6%	0.0%
Least	Bhutan	25.0%	6.3%	6.3%
	Gabon	57.1%	0.0%	3.6%
<b>COP19</b>				
		Environment/climate	Foreign affairs	Economics, planning, etc.
Industrialized	Japan	22.9%	12.5%	22.9%
	Sweden	66.7%	2.2%	0.0%
	Denmark	48.9%	11.1%	0.0%
	United	4.3%	63.8%	2.1%
	United	69.6%	8.7%	0.0%
	Germany	42.5%	3.4%	6.9%
Emerging	India	21.2%	5.3%	0.0%
	Indonesia	32.3%	22.6%	3.2%
	China	3.6%	7.2%	20.7%
	Brazil	10.6%	8.5%	0.7%
Least	Bhutan	37.5%	12.5%	0.0%
	Gabon	7.1%	7.1%	42.9%

## 4. COMPARISON BETWEEN COUNTRIES

In addition to the differences in participant composition between various COPs, countries also differ in the types of delegations they send. Firstly, the environment ministry has been the most represented ministry in most country delegations at all COPs except COP15. This is particularly the case with developed countries: at all the COPs, environment ministries have prevailed in the German, Swedish, and British delegations; this was also the case for the Danish and Japanese delegations except for COP15. Moreover, environment ministries prevail in the delegations of the Least Developed countries Bhutan and Gabon, as it is the case (although to a lesser degree) with the delegations of the emerging economies India and Indonesia.

Secondly, in most delegations the foreign ministry constitutes either the largest or second-largest ministerial delegation. In the case of the US and (until COP19) the Brazilian delegations, the foreign ministry has sent the most representatives. This sets the US delegation (which is led by the State Department) apart from the delegations of the other developed countries. The Brazilian delegations have been characterized by a gradual increase in the environment ministry's share of the delegation until it became the largest ministry at COP19, which reflects the Brazilian environment ministry's increasing involvement in the UNFCCC negotiations (HOCHSTETLER & VIOLA 2012).

Thirdly, China stands out because a planning ministry, viz. the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), has prevailed in its delegation (except for COP1). The NDRC is arguably the most powerful non-security ministry in China, and plays a pivotal role in defining Chinese economic development. Thus, China and the US – the two most powerful actors within the UNFCCC – stand out in terms of which ministry is the largest within their delegations.

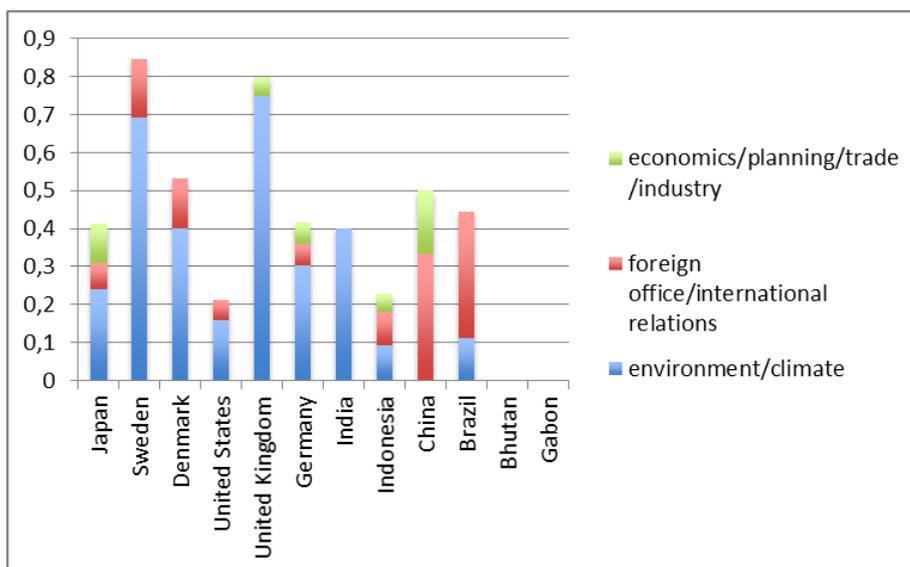


Figure 3: Ministry Participation at COP 1

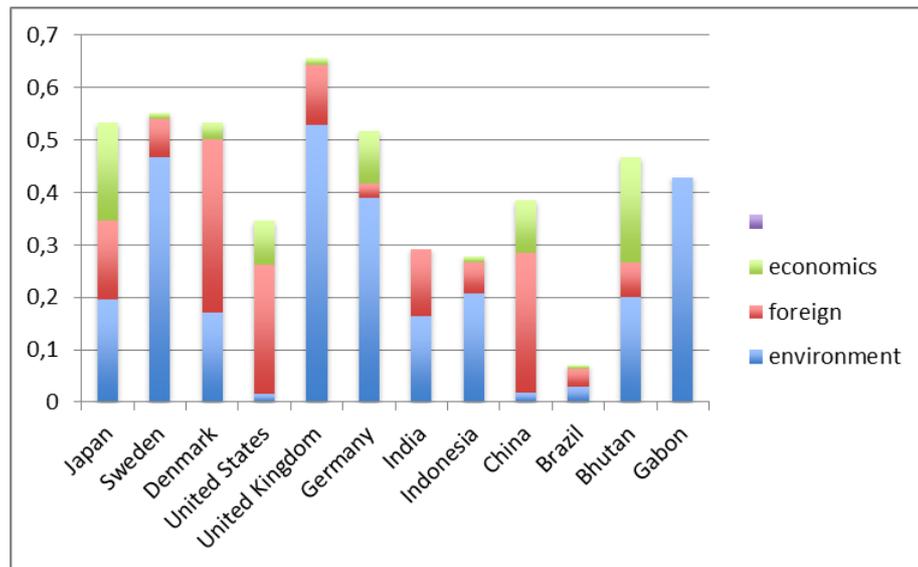


Figure 4: Ministry Participation at COP 15

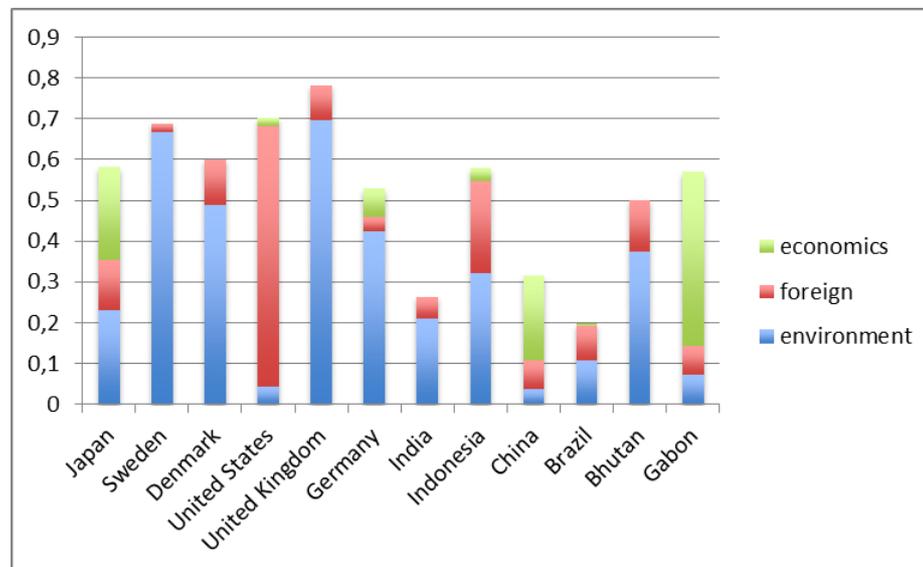


Figure 5: Ministry Participation at COP 19

## 4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS/ PERSPECTIVES

Environment ministries, followed by foreign affairs ministries, have prevailed in the cases of most countries and at most COPs. While there is an increase in the absolute numbers of all ministries, their respective shares of national delegations have changed little, despite a slight increase in the percentage of representatives that come from peripheral ministries. The relationship between the participation of peripheral ministries and the importance of the COP is more evident: the more important the COP (e.g. COP15), the more participants from ministries of finance, economics, transportation etc. It is, however, possible that the delegates who only show up at the important COPs are less active in the negotiations than the COP regulars. In terms of differences between countries, environment ministries largely dominated developed countries' delegations except that of the US, whereas developing countries' delegations were somewhat split between environment and foreign affairs ministries. Interestingly, the two outliers are China and the US, whose delegations generally speaking have been dominated by the National Development and Reform Commission and the State Department respectively.

These findings have different implications for policymakers. As the important COPs attract more peripheral ministries, it may be worth exploring new ways of engaging the officials from these ministries through particular forums, events, etc. Additionally, since different ministries are tasked with different missions, their objectives for the COP conferences are different. This, in turn, has a bearing on the manner in which representatives from different ministries interact and may ultimately shape the outcome of the negotiations. It is thus critical to remain aware of the different goals and expectations that the ministries will have and ensure that these differences become an asset for rather than an obstacle to the negotiations. Preparing for these differences and possible tensions may not only improve the output of the negotiations, but also the chance that this output will lead to changes within different countries, which requires the cooperation of several ministries.

Regarding future research, more analysis exploring the influences of different ministries at the COPs is needed. Such research could inter alia include studying the influence of the predominant ministry on negotiation positions, inter alia through process-tracing, comparative case studies or large-N studies. It is also worth exploring whether it is easier for similar ministries from different countries to reach an agreement compared to when different ministries negotiate.

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