

Nationally Determined, Publicly Aligned?

Citizen climate policy priorities and G20 Nationally Determined Contributions

By Paula Rosa Haerle, 19 June 2026

Summary

Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) are the main public documents through which governments communicate national climate priorities under the Paris Agreement. Their nationally determined character establishes which governments author them, leaving open whose priorities are visible in their content. This brief summarizes a study that compared citizen climate policy priorities from the People's Climate Vote 2021 to the NDCs of 13 G20 countries submitted between 2020 and 2023. The findings show that correspondence was strongest in established areas of national climate planning, meaning policy areas that governments routinely address in NDCs through dedicated sectoral targets and measures, such as conservation, renewable energy and climate-friendly farming. By contrast, clean transport, resilient infrastructure and green jobs receive less attention in NDCs than their level of public support suggests. Cross-country differences in democratic governance, civil-society consultation and other political and institutional conditions did not consistently explain variation in alignment. By contrast, NDCs that covered more policy areas and provided greater sectoral detail tended to reflect a wider range of citizen priorities.

The motivation

The Paris and UNFCCC framework increasingly situates NDCs within participatory climate governance. Parties are encouraged to promote public participation and report on planning processes, and UNFCCC also affirms the importance of meaningful and effective social dialogue and the participation of affected stakeholders. Yet these expectations emphasize process - whether governments report consultation - rather than whether citizen-supported priorities shape NDC content. This is socially consequential as NDCs communicate sectoral priorities that affect households, workers, communities, and economic actors, across energy, land use, transport, infrastructure, employment, public investment, and community protection. Existing NDC research has examined ambition, emissions pathways, implementation capacity, and consultation procedures more extensively than the substantive correspondence between citizen priorities and NDC content. This study thus examined whether citizens' expressed priorities were visible in the thematic and sectoral priorities communicated in NDCs.

Approach and methods

The study used a descriptive comparative approach to assess sectoral priority congruence between citizen priorities and NDC content. Citizen priorities came from the People's Climate Vote 2021, which reports country-level support for concrete climate policy options. These options defined the comparison domains. NDC sentences from documents submitted between 2020 and 2023 were classified into the same domains using ClimateBERT-assisted content analysis and manual validation. For each country, public support for each policy option and the share of NDC sentences devoted to the corresponding policy area were expressed as relative shares. Comparing these shares identified where NDC emphasis was proportionate to, lower than or greater than citizen support.

Key findings

- 1. Congruence was strongest in established areas of national climate planning:** Conservation, renewable energy and climate-friendly farming received both substantial citizen support and strong emphasis in NDCs.
- 2. Citizen-facing delivery priorities were less visible in NDC content:** Clean transport, resilient infrastructure and green jobs received substantial citizen support but comparatively less emphasis in NDCs. Clean transport showed the largest gap between citizen support and NDC attention.
- 3. Accountability and community participation received greater relative emphasis in some NDCs:** In some countries, NDCs placed more emphasis on making polluters bear the costs of pollution and involving communities in protecting natural resources than would be expected from their relative levels of citizen support.
- 4. NDC specificity shaped observable congruence:** NDCs covering more policy areas and describing sector-specific actions in greater detail captured a wider range of citizen priorities. NDCs covering only a few areas, or concentrating heavily on particular sectors, reflected a narrower range of priorities.

Insights and Interpretation

Taken together, the findings suggest that correspondence is strongest where citizen priorities align with established areas of national climate planning. These areas are already routinely addressed through the sectoral targets and measures contained in NDCs. Priorities related to the delivery and social benefits of climate action, particularly clean transport, resilient infrastructure and green jobs, received less consistent attention. An NDC may consequently be ambitious or informed by public consultation without reflecting all citizen priorities equally in its final content.

What this means for research and practice

Future research would benefit from citizen-priority data that are policy-specific, repeated and disaggregated. Such data would make it possible to trace sectoral priority congruence across more countries, social groups and NDC cycles, moving beyond a diagnostic comparison of NDC content towards a fuller account of representation and responsiveness in climate governance.

For practice, the findings highlight the importance of clear sectoral detail in NDCs. UNFCCC guidance could encourage governments to connect headline targets to sector-specific pathways, indicators and responsibilities. Governments could also explain how priorities raised through public participation were incorporated into, modified or excluded from final NDC commitments. Civil society could then use successive NDC cycles to assess whether publicly expressed priorities remain visible, particularly in areas such as transport, infrastructure and green jobs. The objective is not for NDCs to reproduce citizen preferences, but for the relationship between public priorities, governmental choices and implementation pathways to become easier to identify, justify and contest.

National determination identifies who submits an NDC, not whose priorities it represents.

Concluding Remark

Attribution: This Research Brief is based on the Master's thesis “*Nationally Determined, Publicly Aligned? Citizen Climate Policy Priorities and Sectoral Priority Congruence in G20 NDCs*” as part of the ClimateFiGS Speaker Series. ClimateFiGS did not fund, commission, or edit the underlying paper.