

**Carlos Hernán GONZÁLEZ-PARIAS, Juan Camilo MESA BEDOYA,
Pedro PIEDRAHITA-BUSTAMANTE, Javier JUÁREZ RODRÍGUEZ**

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Climate Leadership without Hegemony: normative power and Latin American middle powers in global climate governance (2010–2024)

Liderança Climática sem Hegemonia: poder normativo e potências médias latino-americanas na governança climática global (2010–2024)

Carlos Hernán GONZÁLEZ-PARIAS¹
Juan Camilo MESA BEDOYA²
Pedro PIEDRAHITA-BUSTAMANTE³
Javier JUÁREZ RODRÍGUEZ⁴

Abstract

According to conventional research on global governance, hegemonic material capacities are necessary for effective leadership. This study challenges that assumption by analyzing how Colombia, Chile, and Costa Rica—middle powers with limited structural influence over emissions and climate finance—have exerted systemic influence within the UNFCCC climate regime between 2010 and 2024. Using a comparative research design and process tracing, the study identifies three causal mechanisms of "leadership without hegemony": (1) the construction of cognitive architectures through coalitions such as AILAC to overcome North–South dichotomies; (2) engagement in normative entrepreneurship within specific domains, including the Sustainable Development Goals, the Ocean–Climate Nexus, and carbon markets; and (3) the exercise of institutional brokerage during periods of regime crisis. The findings indicate that these states operate according to a logic of "selective credibility," building moral authority internationally while facing implementation gaps and structural contradictions domestically.

The analysis supports a theoretical synthesis of diplomatic constructivism and peripheral realism, concluding that normative power is effective for agenda-setting but encounters a "material glass ceiling" during the distributive phase of climate governance. This argument is empirically examined through two post-Paris cases: the Loss and Damage Fund and the Escazú Agreement on environmental access rights. Although these middle powers successfully advanced normative leadership in both cases, their selective ratification records and limited capacity to capitalize the Fund demonstrate that normative authority is exercised on an issue-specific basis and that the distributive phase remains dominated by material hierarchies beyond their influence.

Keywords: Climate governance; Middle powers; Normative power; Latin America; Niche diplomacy.

Resumo

A literatura tradicional sobre governança global pressupõe que uma liderança eficaz depende de capacidades materiais hegemônicas. Este artigo desafia essa premissa ao analisar como

¹ Tecnológico de Antioquia, Medellín, Colombia. carlos.gonzalez0@tdea.edu.co. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6129-8662>

² Institución Universitaria CEIPA, Sabaneta, Colombia. camilo.mesa@ceipa.edu.co. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8495-9988>

³ Tecnológico de Antioquia, Medellín, Colombia. pedro.piedrahitab@gmail.com. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6408-0431>

⁴ Universidad Complutense de Madrid, España. javijuar@ucm.es. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9441-8229>

a Colômbia, o Chile e a Costa Rica, potências médias sem peso estrutural nas emissões ou nas finanças, exerceram influência sistémica no regime climático da UNFCCC (2010-2024). Empregando um desenho de pesquisa comparativa e rastreamento de processos, o estudo identifica três mecanismos causais de «liderança sem hegemonia»: (1) a construção de arquiteturas cognitivas por meio de coalizões (AILAC) para superar o binarismo Norte-Sul; (2) empreendedorismo normativo em nichos específicos (ODS, Nexo Oceano-Clima e Mercados de Carbono); e (3) mediação institucional durante crises do regime. Os resultados sugerem que estes atores operam sob uma lógica de «credibilidade seletiva», construindo autoridade moral no exterior, apesar de enfrentarem contradições estruturais e lacunas de implementação a nível interno. O artigo conclui que, embora o poder normativo seja eficaz para definir agendas, enfrenta um «teto de vidro material» na fase distributiva, o que valida uma síntese teórica entre o construtivismo diplomático e o realismo periférico. Dois casos pós-Paris, o Acordo de Escazú sobre direitos de acesso ambiental e o Fundo de Perdas e Danos, funcionam como testes empíricos decisivos deste argumento: estas potências médias lideraram com êxito a norma em ambos os casos, mas os seus registos seletivos de ratificação e a incapacidade estrutural de capitalizar o Fundo confirmam que a autoridade normativa opera tema a tema e que a fase distributiva continua a ser governada por hierarquias materiais que escapam ao seu alcance.

Palavras-chave: Governança climática; Potências médias; Poder normativo; América Latina; Diplomacia de nicho.

1. Introduction

The institutional architecture of global climate governance remains fragmented and dependent on state leadership, which rarely possesses the material resources required to drive structural transformation, despite the increasing urgency of climate action⁵.

Much of the literature on leadership in international relations has focused on hegemonic actors, assuming that effective leadership depends on material resources such as climate finance, advanced technology, and leverage in emissions markets⁶. This assumption is challenged by the experiences of Colombia, Chile, and Costa Rica during UNFCCC negotiations between 2010 and 2024. These countries have been identified as co-leaders supporting ambitious climate agreements despite being middle powers with comparatively low emissions⁷. They participate actively in coalitions such as AILAC and promote normative frameworks related to climate justice, just transition, and equity in multilateral forums.

⁵ FALKNER, Robert, 2016. The Paris Agreement and the new logic of international climate politics. *International Affairs*, 92(5), pp. 1107–1125. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12708>.

⁶ ECKERSLEY, Robyn, 2020. Rethinking leadership: understanding the roles of the US and China in the negotiation of the Paris Agreement. *European Journal of International Relations*, 26(4), pp. 1178–1202. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066120927071>.

⁷ EDWARDS, Guy and ROBERTS, J. Timmons, 2015. *A Fragmented Continent: Latin America and the Global Politics of Climate Change*. The MIT Press. ISBN: 978-0-262-33015-2. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9473.001.0001>.

This experience highlights an issue that has received only limited attention in the literature: the gap between international normative ambition and domestic implementation capacity. Although these countries are frequently recognized for building coalitions and advancing innovative normative frameworks, their influence derives primarily from ideational and procedural resources rather than from material power. This distinction becomes particularly significant in the post-Paris era, where the focus of climate governance has shifted from negotiating commitments to assessing implementation, outcomes, and policy credibility⁸. Independent assessments indicate that, despite relatively ambitious NDCs, the policies of these countries remain inconsistent with pathways compatible with the 1.5°C target. This raises important questions regarding the sustainability of normative leadership when material capacities are insufficient to support implementation.

This tension reflects broader structural challenges across Latin America, including dependence on carbon-intensive sectors, fiscal constraints, persistent inequality, and socio-environmental conflicts that complicate energy transitions. Colombia continues to pursue climate leadership while maintaining a significant dependence on hydrocarbons; Chile hosted COP25 amid a period of intense social unrest; and Costa Rica has struggled to extend its influence beyond specific normative niches. Together, these cases illustrate how climate leadership without hegemony operates under conditions of fragility and contingency. This study argues that these countries have developed forms of climate leadership without hegemony through three main mechanisms. First, they build strategic coalitions that amplify shared normative claims in multilateral negotiations, particularly through AILAC⁹. Second, they engage in normative entrepreneurship by advancing frameworks of climate justice, just transition, and shared ambition through their negotiating priorities. Third, they exercise institutional intermediation by leveraging COP presidencies, facilitation roles, and relationships with secretariats to influence procedural rules and agreement texts.

Despite growing scholarly interest in middle powers and climate governance,

⁸ PAUW, W. P. et al., 2020. Conditional nationally determined contributions in the Paris Agreement: foothold for equity or Achilles heel? *Climate Policy*, 20(4), pp. 468–484. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14693062.2019.1635874>.

⁹ WATTS, Joshua and DEPLEDGE, Joanna, 2018. Latin America in the climate change negotiations: Exploring the AILAC and ALBA coalitions. *WIREs Climate Change*, 9(6), p. e533. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.533>.

important gaps remain in the literature. First, normative power theory¹⁰, originally developed by Manners (2002) to analyze the foreign policy of the European Union, has rarely been applied to Global South actors in environmental governance. Existing scholarship on normative power remains heavily focused on Western liberal actors, often overlooking non-Western norm entrepreneurs and their distinctive repertoires of influence. This article extends normative power theory to the Latin American context by examining how middle powers lacking hegemonic capabilities can exert influence through the promotion of norms of appropriate behavior in climate governance.

In addition, the analytical distinction between material, ideational, and normative leadership remains conceptually underdeveloped in the climate diplomacy literature¹¹. While some studies emphasize material resources such as climate finance and technological capabilities, others focus on ideational resources such as expertise and cognitive framing. However, relatively few studies operationalize normative leadership as a distinct analytical category. This article addresses that gap by proposing and applying a tripartite typology that differentiates these forms of leadership according to their resources, mechanisms, and conditions of effectiveness.

2. Integrated theoretical framework: Leadership and power in climate governance.

The conceptualization of leadership in global climate governance has evolved from approaches focused on material capabilities to frameworks that recognize multiple modes of influence. This article proposes a theoretical framework that articulates normative power theory and its contemporary debates, typologies of leadership in climate diplomacy, and approaches to middle powers. This articulation aims to support the conceptual proposal of climate leadership without hegemony as an analytical category for understanding the influence of Colombia, Chile, and Costa Rica on global climate governance.

Before outlining these approaches, it is important to clarify the conception of causality employed in this study. Rather than adopting a Humean and correlational understanding of causation, in which causes are inferred from the regular co-variation

¹⁰ MANNERS, Ian, 2002. Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms? *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40(2), pp. 235–258. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00353>.

¹¹ BÄCKSTRAND, Karin and ELGSTRÖM, Ole, 2013. The EU's role in climate change negotiations: from leader to 'leadiator.' *Journal of European Public Policy*, 20(10), pp. 1369–1386. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2013.781781>.

of independent and dependent variables, this article adopts a mechanism-based and constitutive approach characteristic of constructivist social science. Under this perspective, explanation is not primarily concerned with identifying regular patterns between separate variables but with tracing the causal mechanisms—the sequence of events, processes, and interactions—that connect causes and outcomes within specific contexts. This approach is consistent with the process-tracing methodology employed in the research design¹², and focuses the analysis on how, and under what conditions, ideas shape diplomatic influence.

Within this framework, norms, ideas, and identities perform two analytical functions. On the one hand, they operate as constitutive factors that shape actors' identities, define appropriate behavior, and influence perceptions of interest. Climate norms therefore do not merely constrain pre-existing preferences; they also contribute to the formation of the identities of the states that promote them. On the other hand, once internalized, identities and shared normative commitments generate observable effects on diplomatic behavior, coalition-building strategies, and negotiating positions that cannot be reduced solely to material incentives. Consequently, these factors also function as independent variables with causal significance.

Drawing on the constructivist account of social theory¹³, this study treats the constitutive and causal dimensions as complementary components of a single explanatory framework in which identities both shape interests and causally influence the behaviors that emerge from them.

The primary causal mechanism of the framework can be summarized as follows. Through sustained engagement with the UNFCCC and coalitions such as AILAC, countries like Colombia, Chile, and Costa Rica undergo processes of socialization that contribute to the construction of an identity as ambitious climate actors. As this identity becomes consolidated, their understanding of national interest expands to incorporate shared ambition, just transition, and climate justice as core objectives rather than merely external constraints. Diplomatic action is consequently shaped by these evolving interests, giving rise to a form of climate leadership that operates

¹² GEORGE, Alexander and BENNETT, Andrew, 2005. *Case studies and theory development in the social sciences*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press. ISBN: 978-0-262-57222-4. COLLIER, David, 2011. Understanding Process Tracing. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 44(4), pp. 823–830. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096511001429>.

¹³ WENDT, Alexander, 1999. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN: 978-0-521-46557-1. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511612183>.

independently of hegemonic power.

Within this framework, identity formation, interest construction, and diplomatic action are understood as sequentially related processes rather than loosely connected phenomena. This perspective enables the empirical analysis to identify when and how normative ideas produce observable effects and the conditions under which those effects become constrained. It also clarifies how the constructivist dimension of the argument interacts with the realist limitations discussed later in the article. Material constraints, which become particularly significant during distributive phases of governance, shape the extent to which normative power can be translated into concrete outcomes. However, they do not eliminate the influence of norms on state behavior.

2.1 Theory of normative power: debates and extensions

Manners¹⁴, in his analysis of the European Union as a normative power, argues that normative power constitutes a distinctive form of influence that operates by shaping what is considered appropriate behavior in international politics. It differs from material power, coercion, and ideational power, the latter being associated with the capacity to persuade through ideas and expertise. The author argues that normative power is exercised through mechanisms of normative diffusion and socialization, the unintended transfer of norms, informational persuasion, transactional exchange, conditioning, and the institutionalization of norms through rules and practices.

However, Diez¹⁵ questions whether normative power is truly a distinct analytical category separate from ideational power or soft power, arguing that it may simply represent a form of persuasion grounded in moral appeal. Defenders of normative power theory maintain that it is distinguished by its focus on norms of appropriate behavior rather than on causal or instrumental beliefs. They further argue that it operates through institutionalization and socialization rather than through persuasion alone¹⁶.

A further challenge concerns the measurement and empirical traceability of

¹⁴ MANNERS, Ian, 2002. Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms? *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40(2), pp. 235–258. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00353>.

¹⁵ DIEZ, Thomas, 2005. Constructing the Self and Changing Others: Reconsidering 'Normative Power Europe'. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 33(3), pp. 613–636. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298050330031701>.

¹⁶ MANNERS, Ian, 2008. The Normative Ethics of the European Union. *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*, 84(1), pp. 45–60. Available from: <https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/25144714>.

normative power, particularly in contexts where multiple actors promote norms simultaneously. How can researchers determine whether normative persuasion has occurred rather than a simple convergence of preferences? To address this problem, several studies propose observable indicators, including the adoption of norms by third parties, changes in discourse and institutional practice, and explicit recognition of normative leadership by other actors¹⁷.

Another criticism concerns the theory's Western bias, particularly its tendency to privilege liberal Western actors—most notably the European Union—while underrepresenting norm entrepreneurs from the Global South.¹⁸ This bias is not merely empirical but also theoretical. The conditions commonly associated with effective normative power—liberal credibility, consistency between values and practices, and moral authority—reflect characteristics historically associated with Western actors and may therefore obscure alternative forms of normative influence.

The role of Latin American middle powers in climate governance is illuminated by this critique. Colombia, Chile, and Costa Rica lack consolidated liberal credibility, face persistent tensions between their international commitments and domestic capacities, and pursue normative strategies within contexts characterized by structural inequality and economic dependence. Rather than undermining the validity of normative power theory, these conditions suggest the need to extend its conceptual framework to encompass forms of normative influence that operate under conditions of non-hegemony.

2.2 Typology of leadership in climate governance

The literature on climate leadership has identified multiple forms of influence in multilateral negotiations. However, the analytical distinctions among these forms remain conceptually blurred. The following typology differentiates material, ideational, and normative leadership according to the resources mobilized, the mechanisms of influence employed, and the conditions under which each form of leadership is effective¹⁹.

¹⁷ BJÖRKDAHL, Annika, 2013. Ideas and Norms in Swedish Peace Policy. *Swiss Political Science Review*, 19(3), pp. 322–337. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12046>.

¹⁸ WUNDERLICH, Carmen, 2020. Dedicated to the Good: Norm Entrepreneurs in International Relations. In: *Rogue States as Norm Entrepreneurs*, pp. 15–55, ISBN: 978-3-030-27989-9. Cham: Springer International Publishing. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27990-5_2.

¹⁹ PROVOST, Colin, 2019. Multilevel Environmental Governance in the European Union and United States. In: *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Natural Hazard Science*, ISBN: 978-0-19-938940-7. Oxford University Press. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199389407.013.163>.

Material leadership involves the mobilization of tangible resources capable of influencing the incentives of other actors²⁰. These resources include infrastructure, climate finance, technology transfer, mitigation capacity, and influence within emissions markets. Its mechanisms of influence are primarily transactional and include conditionality, compensation, and the provision of public goods. Effective material leadership depends on fiscal capacity, technological development, and a significant role in global emissions²¹. Representative examples include financial contributions to the Green Climate Fund and leadership in renewable energy deployment.²²

Ideational leadership shapes the beliefs, cognitive frameworks, and policy models through which actors understand climate-related problems and their potential solutions²³. It emphasizes the role of shared values and principles in guiding climate action, in contrast to approaches based solely on interests. The resources associated with ideational leadership include scientific expertise, epistemic credibility, and networks of epistemic communities. Through these resources, ideational leaders influence agenda-setting processes, scientific framing, and the diffusion of public policy models. Effective ideational leadership requires recognized scientific authority, the capacity to generate knowledge, and strong connections with transnational epistemic networks²⁴.

Normative leadership promotes standards of appropriate behavior, principles of justice, and rights within climate governance. It draws upon moral authority, diplomatic capacity, and procedural legitimacy as its principal resources. Its mechanisms of influence include coalition-building, normative framing, institutional intermediation, and the adaptation of universal norms to specific contexts. Effective normative leadership

²⁰ WANG, Di and FANG, Yuzhu, 2024. Global climate governance leadership: Current status, measurement, and improvement paths. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 434, p. 139619. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2023.139619>. KARLSSON, Christer et al., 2011. Looking for Leaders: Perceptions of Climate Change Leadership among Climate Change Negotiation Participants. *Global Environmental Politics*, 11(1), pp. 89–107. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1162/GLEP_a_00044.

²¹ TOBIN, Paul, TORNEY, Diarmuid and BIEDENKOPF, Katja, 2023. EU climate leadership: domestic and global dimensions. In: *Handbook on European Union Climate Change Policy and Politics*, pp. 187–200, ISBN: 978-1-78990-698-1. Edward Elgar Publishing. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781789906981.00025>.

²² ECKERSLEY, Robyn, 2020. Rethinking leadership: understanding the roles of the US and China in the negotiation of the Paris Agreement. *European Journal of International Relations*, 26(4), pp. 1178–1202. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066120927071>.

²³ CHEN, Shiyi et al., 2023. International and domestic leadership for fulfilling carbon neutrality in emerging economies: comparative evidence from China and India. *Journal of Chinese Governance*, 8(4), pp. 533–562. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23812346.2023.2213540>.

²⁴ BÄCKSTRAND, Karin and LÖVBRAND, Eva, 2019. The Road to Paris: Contending Climate Governance Discourses in the Post-Copenhagen Era. *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*, 21(5), pp. 519–532. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1523908X.2016.1150777>.

requires domestic credibility, consistency between commitments and actions, coherent rhetorical strategies, strong relationships with civil society and epistemic communities, access to key institutional roles, and mechanisms for monitoring, reporting, and verifying compliance.

These forms of leadership are not mutually exclusive. In practice, states often combine material, ideational, and normative strategies. This perspective helps explain how middle powers, despite their limited material resources, can exercise significant influence through normative and ideational forms of leadership.

2.3 Middle Powers

The concept of middle powers in International Relations oscillates between positional definitions, based on material capabilities, and behavioral definitions, based on diplomatic practices. To analyze the roles of Colombia, Chile, and Costa Rica in climate governance, this study moves beyond material hierarchies and classifications such as “secondary powers,”²⁵ which tend to define these actors primarily as regional counterweights to larger powers such as Brazil. Instead, it adopts the behavioral approach proposed by Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal²⁶.

From this perspective, a middle power is not defined solely by GDP or military capabilities, but by the practice of “middle-power diplomacy.” This form of diplomacy is characterized by a preference for multilateral solutions to international problems, the promotion of compromise, and the construction of coalitions that amplify influence. This approach helps resolve the paradox of grouping countries with markedly different capabilities, such as Chile and Costa Rica, within the same analytical category in the climate regime. Although Costa Rica would generally be classified as a small state under strictly realist criteria, its behavior within the UNFCCC exhibits many of the characteristics typically associated with middle powers, including diplomatic activism, normative entrepreneurship, and leadership within specific policy niches.

A further distinction is commonly drawn between traditional and emerging middle powers, the latter being concentrated primarily in the Global South. Jordaan²⁷ argues

²⁵ FLEMES, Daniel, 2007. Conceptualising Regional Power in International Relations: Lessons from the South African Case. *SSRN Electronic Journal*, (53). Available from: <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1000123>.

²⁶ COOPER, Andrew, HIGGOTT, Richard and NOSSAL, Kim, 1993. *Relocating middle powers: Australia and Canada in a changing world order*. Vancouver: UBC Press. ISBN: 978-0-7748-0450-9.

²⁷ JORDAAN, Eduard, 2003. The concept of a middle power in international relations: distinguishing between emerging and traditional middle powers. *Politikon*, 30(1), pp. 165–181. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0258934032000147282>.

that traditional middle powers tend to support and stabilize the existing international order, whereas emerging middle powers are more likely to pursue reform through forms of moral activism associated with justice and equity. Countries such as Colombia, Chile, and Costa Rica possess limited hard-power capabilities, yet they employ technical expertise and normative resources to influence the global climate agenda. This pattern reinforces the argument that climate leadership can be exercised independently of material dominance.

2.4 Climate leadership without hegemony: a conceptual proposal

By integrating normative power theory, typologies of climate leadership, and approaches to middle powers, this article proposes the concept of *climate leadership without hegemony* to characterize the influence of Colombia, Chile, and Costa Rica in global climate governance.

Climate leadership without hegemony refers to the exercise of influence in multilateral climate negotiations through normative and ideational strategies employed by state actors with limited material capabilities. This form of leadership operates through coalition-building, normative entrepreneurship, and institutional intermediation.

Three dimensions characterize climate leadership without hegemony: the conditions that enable its emergence, the mechanisms through which it is exercised, and its structural limitations. Regarding the conditions of emergence, the first is an inclusive institutional architecture, consisting of climate regimes whose procedures enable the active participation of small and medium-sized states through facilitation roles, presidencies, and working groups²⁸. A second condition is selective domestic credibility, reflected in a degree of coherence between international commitments and domestic policies in specific areas, thereby providing the moral authority necessary to promote norms despite tensions in other dimensions of climate policy. A third condition involves strategic networks, particularly with non-state actors, which amplify normative claims and facilitate their diffusion. A fourth condition concerns opportunities for coalition-building with countries that share similar preferences, allowing influence to be aggregated and voices to be amplified within negotiations. Finally, the availability of resonant normative frameworks—such as climate justice, just transition, and equity—

²⁸ BÄCKSTRAND, Karin and ELGSTRÖM, Ole, 2013. The EU's role in climate change negotiations: from leader to 'lead-actor.' *Journal of European Public Policy*, 20(10), pp. 1369–1386. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2013.781781>.

enhances the capacity of these actors to advance claims that align with both the normative structure of the climate regime and the identities of developing countries. Conceptually, these coalitions should not be understood merely as mechanisms for aggregating votes. As Watts and Depledge argue, climate coalitions such as AILAC function as vehicles for the construction of a shared identity, enabling middle powers to reframe national interests as broader normative claims and thereby transform coordinated diplomacy into a source of normative influence²⁹.

Finally, structural limitations refer to resource constraints that hinder the ability of states to support normative claims through significant financial or technological commitments, thereby affecting their credibility in key areas. Additional limitations arise from internal tensions and the challenges of fulfilling ambitious international commitments in contexts characterized by limited institutional capacity, socio-ecological conflicts, and fiscal constraints. Regional fragmentation, resulting from the absence of cohesive positions, further reduces the capacity of these actors to operate collectively and weakens their overall influence.

3. Methodological design:

The present study employs a qualitative research design based on the Comparative Case Study approach³⁰ complemented with the Process Trace technique³¹. This methodological strategy enables not only the identification of patterns of convergence and divergence across the units of analysis (Colombia, Chile, and Costa Rica), but also the inference of the causal mechanisms through which actors lacking hegemonic material capabilities exert influence within global governance processes.

The comparative approach follows the logic of the most similar systems design³². Three cases were selected that share key independent variables: they are Latin American middle powers (according to the behavioral definition), founding members of the AILAC coalition, and open middle-income economies. This design allows for the

²⁹ WATTS, Joshua and DEPLEDGE, Joanna, 2018. Latin America in the climate change negotiations: Exploring the AILAC and ALBA coalitions. *WIREs Climate Change*, 9(6), p. e533. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.533>.

³⁰ GEORGE, Alexander and BENNETT, Andrew, 2005. *Case studies and theory development in the social sciences*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press. ISBN: 978-0-262-57222-4.

³¹ COLLIER, David, 2011. Understanding Process Tracing. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 44(4), pp. 823–830. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096511001429>.

³² LANDMAN, Todd, 2011. *Política Comparada. Una introducción a su objeto y métodos de investigación*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial.

control of systemic variables while focusing the analysis on how intervening variables—such as internal policy coherence, economic vulnerability, and institutional design—affect the dependent variable: the effectiveness of climate leadership³³.

Case selection follows a purposive sampling strategy. The choice of Colombia, Chile, and Costa Rica is justified by their representativeness within climate activism in the Global South: 1) Costa Rica represents a case of “*moral leadership*,” characterized by strong normative capacities but limited material resources (a small state behaving as a middle power); 2) Chile represents a case of “*technocratic*” or “*institutional leadership*,” capable of assuming COP presidencies while facing significant domestic social tensions; and 3) Colombia represents a case of “*rhetorical leadership*,” characterized by high diplomatic visibility but also by persistent structural contradictions stemming from fossil-fuel dependence.

The longitudinal analysis period (2010–2024) allows for the observation of the evolution of diplomatic behavior across three critical junctures of the climate regime: the post-Copenhagen reconstruction phase (2010–2014), the negotiation and adoption of the Paris Agreement (2015–2016), and the implementation and regulatory phase (2017–2024).

The research is based on the triangulation of primary and secondary sources, including official UNFCCC documents, diplomatic statements issued by the AILAC coalition, and specialized academic literature, as well as reports produced by monitoring organizations. Qualitative content analysis was employed to code discourses and official documents according to indicators of normative power and to trace the processes through which norms promoted by these countries were incorporated into, or reflected in, multilateral negotiation texts.

To address the difficulty of measuring direct influence in complex multilateral negotiations, this study operationalizes the concept of “environmental normative power” through five observable indicators that assess both diplomatic effort (*input*) and external recognition (*outcome*). These indicators do not measure causal influence on negotiation outcomes—an inherently difficult task in multilateral contexts—but rather the conditions associated with normative power, as defined by the theoretical framework.

³³ SARTORI, Giovanni, 1991. Comparing and Miscomparing. *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 3(3), pp. 243–257. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0951692891003003001>.

Table 1. Operationalization of environmental normative power

Indicator	Description
1. Participation in climate coalitions	Evaluated through membership in AILAC and other coalitions, the frequency of joint statements, and leadership roles within these coalitions, including presidencies and spokesperson positions.
2. Promotion of normative frameworks	Evaluated through the frequency of references to climate justice, just transition, and equity in official interventions; the inclusion of these approaches in textual proposals; and the consistency of discourse over time.
3. Institutional intermediation	Evaluated through the performance of institutional roles, such as COP presidencies, the facilitation of working groups, participation in negotiation committees, and recognition by the UNFCCC secretariat.
4. Peer Recognition	Evaluated through characterizations in academic literature and by monitoring organizations as “leaders” or “co-leaders”; references by other countries in official interventions; and invitations to participate in climate leadership initiatives.
5. Domestic Credibility	Evaluated through the ambition of NDCs relative to regional peers, national mitigation and adaptation policies, and the coherence between international commitments and domestic actions.

Source: own elaboration³⁴.

4. Results

4.1 Colombia:

Colombia is considered a middle power in Latin America and has frequently exercised leadership on climate issues through coalition-building and the promotion of climate justice frameworks. However, it faces persistent challenges in reconciling its international climate commitments with domestic resource constraints.

4.1.1 Context: material capabilities and structural position

Colombia has made important advances in environmental policy through the establishment of the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development, which holds a broad range of responsibilities. The country has also expanded its system of protected areas, which now covers approximately 15% of its territory, and has adopted legal frameworks that recognize environmental rights. Nevertheless, the implementation of these policies remains challenging due to the legacy of armed conflict, limited institutional capacity in peripheral regions, and persistent economic

³⁴ The five indicators adapt and operationalize criteria developed across the literature on normative power measurement and climate leadership assessment. Indicators 1–3 (coalition participation, framework promotion, institutional intermediation) draw on the typology of leadership mechanisms in Karlsson et al. (2011) and Bäckstrand and Elgström (2013). Indicator 4 (Peer Recognition) follows the external-validation criterion in Björkdahl (2013), who identifies third-party characterization and invitations to leadership initiatives as evidence of normative influence. Indicator 5 (Domestic Credibility) operationalizes the coherence criterion central to Manners (2002) and applies it through independent policy assessments (Climate Action Tracker).

pressures in forested areas.

4.1.2 Participation in AILAC and coalition building

Together with Chile, Costa Rica, Panama, Peru, Guatemala, and the other founding members of AILAC since 2012, Colombia has sought to promote cooperative positions in climate negotiations that bridge the divide between industrialized and developing countries.

Between 2012 and 2024, Colombia participated actively and consistently in AILAC by coordinating positions within negotiation groups, co-authoring joint statements, and contributing to the consolidation of AILAC as a reference point for climate leadership. AILAC delegations received financial and technical support through the International Climate Initiative (IKI) project, “*Ambition Leaders: Support for AILAC Countries in the UNFCCC Negotiations*,” reinforcing their position as ambition-driven leaders in the fight against climate change.³⁵

However, AILAC’s effectiveness as a vehicle for influence has certain limitations. The coalition represents a relatively small group of countries with limited demographic and economic weight compared to blocs such as the G77+China and the European Union. Furthermore, internal tensions persist due to differences in economic capacity, dependence on fossil fuels, and development priorities among its members.

4.1.3 Diplomatic behavior in UNFCCC negotiations

Colombia has been identified as part of a group of Latin American co-leaders that have supported ambitious international agreements in climate negotiations. Edwards and Roberts³⁶, in their analysis of fragmentation in Latin American climate policy, explicitly characterize Colombia as a co-leader due to its support for a range of ambitious international climate agreements.

This characterization reflects Colombia’s approach to international climate negotiations, particularly during the negotiation of the Paris Agreement (2014–2015), when the country adopted ambitious positions on mitigation, transparency, and the review of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). Nevertheless, tensions remain within this approach. Colombia advocates for the principle of “common but

³⁵ INTERNATIONAL CLIMATE INITIATIVE, 2022. *Ambition leaders: Support for AILAC countries in the UNFCCC negotiations – IKI Colombia*. Available from: <https://ikicolombia.com/en/proyectos/ambition-leaders-support-for-ailac-countries-in-the-unfccc-negotiations/>.

³⁶ EDWARDS, Guy and ROBERTS, J. Timmons, 2015. *A Fragmented Continent: Latin America and the Global Politics of Climate Change*. The MIT Press. ISBN: 978-0-262-33015-2. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9473.001.0001>.

differentiated responsibilities” while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of climate finance and technology transfer, positions that may at times sit uneasily alongside narratives of ambitious climate leadership.

4.1.4 Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)

Colombia committed to reducing emissions by 20% below the baseline scenario by 2030 in its first Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), submitted in 2015. A conditional target of 30% was also established, contingent upon international support. The 2020 update to the NDC significantly increased this commitment, raising the target to a 51% reduction below the baseline scenario by 2030.

Independent assessments have questioned the credibility of these commitments. Climate Action Tracker³⁷ classifies Colombia’s climate policies as inadequate and incompatible with limiting global warming to 1.5°C, highlighting significant gaps between NDC commitments and their implementation. Major obstacles include the continued expansion of hydrocarbon production and exploration, ongoing deforestation in the Colombian Amazon, limited institutional capacity to implement sectoral mitigation policies, weaknesses in territorial planning, and persistent tensions between climate objectives and economic development priorities³⁸.

4.1.5 Normative entrepreneurship: climate justice frameworks

Through its participation in UNFCCC negotiations, Colombia has promoted normative frameworks centered on equity and climate justice. These initiatives emphasize the right of developing countries to utilize carbon space for development, the differentiated historical responsibilities of wealthier nations, and the need for climate finance.

However, internal tensions complicate the promotion of these principles with full legitimacy. Colombia has experienced significant socio-ecological conflicts related to resource extraction, infrastructure development, and agricultural expansion, which have disproportionately affected Indigenous peoples and rural communities. Such tensions weaken Colombia’s moral authority to advocate for climate justice frameworks in international forums, particularly when the country faces criticism regarding its domestic environmental justice record.

³⁷ CLIMATE ACTION TRACKER, 2024. *Colombia: Policies & Action*. Available from: <https://climateactiontracker.org/countries/colombia/policies-action/>.

³⁸ CLIMATE ACTION TRACKER, 2024. *Colombia: Policies & Action*. Available from: <https://climateactiontracker.org/countries/colombia/policies-action/>.

4.1.6 Structural limitations of Colombian climate leadership

Structural constraints limit Colombia's capacity to exercise climate leadership. The country's dependence on fossil fuels generates political resistance and economic interests that hinder the energy transition. The effective implementation of climate policies is further constrained by limited state presence in peripheral regions, institutional weaknesses, and challenges in policy coordination. Socio-ecological conflicts related to resource allocation, Indigenous rights, and land tenure disputes exacerbate these challenges and shape environmental policy outcomes.

Colombia's capacity to exercise climate leadership at the regional level is further complicated by divergent national priorities and institutional asymmetries across Latin America, particularly in relation to larger actors such as Brazil and Mexico.

4.1.7 Summary: rhetorical ambition without hegemonic capacity

The Colombian case exemplifies both the potential and the constraints of climate leadership in the absence of hegemonic power. Colombia has projected an identity as an ambitious climate leader through its participation in the Independent Association of Latin America and the Caribbean (AILAC), the adoption of relatively ambitious NDC commitments, and the promotion of climate justice normative frameworks in multilateral negotiations. Nevertheless, this projection of leadership is constrained by limited material resources, tensions between international commitments and domestic realities, and reduced credibility resulting from continued dependence on fossil fuels and persistent socio-ecological conflicts.

The effectiveness of Colombia's normative leadership ultimately depends on its ability to address these tensions, strengthen domestic credibility through the implementation of policies consistent with its international commitments, and leverage strategic coalitions such as AILAC to amplify its influence despite the absence of hegemonic capabilities.

Table 2. Summary of results: Colombia.

Indicator	Empirical evidence and causal mechanism
Context	Profile: Emerging middle power, low emissions (0.4%), high vulnerability, and an extractive economic structure.
1. Participation in climate coalitions	Mechanism: <i>strategic cohesion</i> . • Founding member of AILAC. • Exercised intellectual leadership in overcoming the Annex I (industrialized countries with mandatory emissions-reduction commitments) / Non-Annex I (developing countries with "voluntary" commitments) divide, facilitating the universality of the Paris Agreement.

2. Promotion of regulatory frameworks	Mechanism: Normative <i>Entrepreneurship</i> . • SDGs: Original author of the 2011 proposal linking development and climate action. • Human Rights: Contributed to the inclusion of human rights in the Preamble of the Paris Agreement. • Biodiversity: Promoted the “Peace with Nature” framework (COP16).
3. Institutional intermediation	Mechanism: <i>Bridge Diplomacy</i> . • Active role of female negotiators (e.g., A. Guerrero, I. Cavelier) as formal and informal facilitators between the G77 and the EU, helping to unblock negotiation texts.
4. Peer Recognition	Mechanism: External recognition. • Repeatedly characterized as a regional co-leader supporting ambitious agreements (Edwards and Roberts); recognized and supported as an ‘ambition leader’ within the UNFCCC process (IKI/AILAC).
5. Domestic Credibility	Gap Identified: <i>Structural Inconsistency</i> . • High diplomatic ambition contrasted with fiscal dependence on coal and oil. • Persistent socio-ecological conflicts weaken the projected moral authority of the state.

Source: own elaboration.

4.2 Chile:

Chile represents a paradigmatic case of the tensions inherent in climate leadership without hegemony. As the designated host of COP25 in 2019—which was subsequently relocated to Madrid following the social unrest of 2019—Chile became emblematic of the tensions between international climate ambition and domestic demands for distributive justice.

4.2.1 Context: economic development and climate vulnerability

Chile is considered one of the most developed economies in Latin America, with a GDP per capita of approximately US\$16,000 (2023) and one of the highest levels of human development in the region³⁹. However, the country faces significant climate vulnerabilities, including severe water stress⁴⁰, glacial retreat, exposure of coastal infrastructure to sea-level rise, and increasing risks associated with heat waves and flooding resulting from urban expansion and changes in land-use patterns⁴¹, among other challenges.

³⁹ PROGRAMA DE LAS NACIONES UNIDAS PARA EL DESARROLLO – PNUD CHILE, 2024. *Informe sobre Desarrollo Humano en Chile 2024*. Santiago de Chile: PNUD. Available from: <https://doi.org/https://www.undp.org/es/chile/publicaciones/informe-sobre-desarrollo-humano-en-chile-2024>.

⁴⁰ BOBADILLA, Andrea, STEHR, Alejandra and TORO, Nicolás, 2024. Evaluation of climate-change impacts on the temporal and spatial behaviour of drought in South-Central Chile. *Hydrological Sciences Journal*, 69(2), pp. 165–184. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02626667.2023.2288217>.

⁴¹ INOSTROZA, Luis, PALME, Massimo and DE LA BARRERA, Francisco, 2016. A Heat Vulnerability Index: Spatial Patterns of Exposure, Sensitivity and Adaptive Capacity for Santiago de Chile. *PLOS ONE*, 11(9), p. e0162464. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0162464>.

In terms of emissions, Chile contributes approximately 0.25% of global GHG emissions. Historically, however, its economy has been carbon-intensive due to its reliance on coal-fired power generation. Since the 2010s, Chile has undergone an accelerated energy transition, marked by the rapid expansion of solar and wind energy, which has significantly transformed its electricity mix. This transformation has been driven largely by energy policies designed to attract investment in renewable energy⁴².

Chile has also developed significant capacities in climate governance, including the establishment of the Ministry of the Environment in 2010, as well as the adoption of legal frameworks, monitoring systems, and fiscal mechanisms designed to discourage carbon-intensive activities⁴³. The country has further promoted industrial policies in emerging sectors such as green hydrogen⁴⁴. Nevertheless, implementation has encountered resistance stemming from the persistence of the neoliberal development model, the concentration of economic power in extractive sectors, social inequalities, and the influence of elites who prioritize investment and capital accumulation over environmental concerns⁴⁵.

4.2.2 Participation in AILAC and climate diplomacy

Chile is a founding member of AILAC and has played a leading role within the coalition. Edwards and Roberts⁴⁶ explicitly identify Chile as one of the Latin American co-leaders that supported an ambitious international climate agreement, reflecting the country's position during the negotiation and adoption of the Paris Agreement.

Chilean climate diplomacy between 2010 and 2018 was characterized by a consistent alignment with progressive positions within AILAC, the promotion of greater ambition in mitigation commitments, and the defense of transparency mechanisms and

⁴² OSORIO ARAVENA, Juan Carlos et al., 2020. The role of solar PV, wind energy, and storage technologies in the transition toward a fully sustainable energy system in Chile by 2050 across power, heat, transport and desalination sectors. *International Journal of Sustainable Energy Planning and Management*, pp. 77-94 Sider. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.5278/IJSEPM.3385>.

⁴³ MARDONES, Cristian, 2024. Contribution of the carbon tax, phase-out of thermoelectric power plants, and renewable energy subsidies for the decarbonization of Chile – A CGE model and microsimulations approach. *Journal of Environmental Management*, 352, p. 120017. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvman.2024.120017>.

⁴⁴ ORIHUELA, José Carlos, IRARRÁZAVAL, Felipe and FLORES, Cristián, 2026. Chile at the Green Window of Opportunity: The Troubled Road to New Productive Capabilities. *Journal of Globalization and Development*, 16(2), pp. 277–304. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1515/jgd-2024-0090>.

⁴⁵ LATTI, Alex and AGUAYO, Beatriz, 2012. Testing the Limits: Neoliberal Ecologies from Pinochet to Bachelet. *Latin American Perspectives*, 39(4), pp. 163–180. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582X12439050>.

⁴⁶ EDWARDS, Guy and ROBERTS, J. Timmons, 2015. *A Fragmented Continent: Latin America and the Global Politics of Climate Change*. The MIT Press. ISBN: 978-0-262-33015-2. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9473.001.0001>.

the periodic review of NDCs. Chile actively participated in negotiations concerning the implementation rules of the Paris Agreement and advocated for positions that favored robust and comparable reporting systems.

4.2.3 COP25: Leadership opportunity and credibility crisis

Chile was selected to host COP25 in 2019, providing a unique opportunity to demonstrate climate leadership through the presidency of the conference. This role is particularly important because it allows the host country to influence negotiating agendas, facilitate agreements among negotiating blocs, and project normative leadership. However, in October 2019, Chile experienced a major wave of social unrest, initially triggered by an increase in public transportation fares but rooted in broader demands related to economic inequality, access to public services, and distributive justice. As a result, the Chilean government decided to cancel the conference in Santiago and relocate it to Madrid, while retaining the formal presidency of COP25.

The relocation of COP25 generated important debates regarding the relationship between climate action and social justice. The crisis highlighted tensions between neoliberal economic structures, persistent inequalities, and demands for justice, all of which are central to the pursuit of a just transition. Although Chile retained the COP25 presidency while the conference was held in Madrid, negotiations remained focused on carbon markets, loss and damage mechanisms, and the revision of climate targets. Nevertheless, the conference was widely perceived as having delivered limited progress due to persistent disagreements over carbon market rules and climate finance⁴⁷.

4.2.4 NDCs and domestic policies

In its first NDC (2015), Chile committed to reducing emissions intensity (emissions per unit of GDP) by 30% by 2030 relative to 2007 levels. The 2020 NDC update significantly increased this ambition by committing to carbon neutrality by 2050 and establishing a maximum carbon budget of 1.1 billion tons of CO₂eq accumulated between 2020 and 2030.

Despite this progress, challenges related to implementation and policy coherence remain. Climate Action Tracker classifies Chile's climate policies as almost sufficient, recognizing important advances while identifying remaining gaps. Key challenges

⁴⁷ EARTH NEGOTIATIONS BULLETIN (ENB), 2019. *Chile/Madrid Climate Change Conference - December 2019*. Available from: <https://enb.iisd.org/chile-madrid-climate-change-conference-cop25>.

include continued subsidies for fossil fuels, the expansion of water-intensive mining activities in the context of increasing water scarcity, conflicts between renewable energy projects and Indigenous territorial rights, and limitations in land-use and transportation policies.

4.2.5 Normative entrepreneurship and justice frameworks

Despite the challenges associated with COP25, Chile has continued to promote ambitious normative frameworks related to climate governance and justice. The academic literature documents efforts to incorporate considerations of justice and Indigenous participation into climate governance debates. At the same time, Chile has faced criticism for constitutional and legal barriers that limit the protection of human rights in the context of climate change.

4.2.6 Structural limits: the tension between international ambition and domestic viability

The Chilean case illustrates particularly clearly the central tension of climate leadership without hegemony: the gap between international ambition and domestic political viability. The cancellation of COP25 in response to the social crisis revealed that ambitious climate policies are unlikely to be sustainable unless they simultaneously address demands for distributive justice, access to public services, and democratic participation.

This tension manifests itself through three principal mechanisms. First, the distribution of transition costs. Climate policies such as the removal of fossil-fuel subsidies, the implementation of carbon taxes, and the promotion of energy transition measures may impose disproportionate costs on lower-income sectors. In the absence of effective compensation mechanisms and social safeguards, such policies can generate resistance and undermine political stability.

Second, conflicts over natural resource use. Renewable energy projects and the extraction of critical minerals required for the energy transition often generate disputes concerning territorial rights, access to water, and the distribution of benefits among local communities. If these conflicts are not addressed through inclusive and participatory processes, they may undermine the credibility of climate policies.

Third, challenges related to democratic legitimacy. In contexts characterized by inequality and low levels of institutional trust, climate policies may be perceived as technocratic impositions that fail to reflect the immediate concerns and priorities of the broader population.

4.2.7 Summary: Climate leadership under structural strain

The Chilean case demonstrates how tensions between international ambition and domestic viability constrain climate leadership in the absence of hegemonic power. Through its participation in AILAC, its presidency of COP25, and the adoption of ambitious Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), Chile established itself as a climate leader. However, the social crisis of 2019 revealed the fragility of this leadership when ambitious climate policies are not accompanied by measures that address both social justice and climate objectives.

Chile’s experience illustrates that effective climate leadership requires not only strong international commitments but also credible domestic policies that align ecological transformation with distributive justice, democratic participation, and respect for territorial rights. Without this alignment, climate leadership remains vulnerable to internal social conflicts that can undermine its legitimacy and long-term effectiveness.

Table 3. Summary of results, Chile.

Indicator	Empirical Evidence and Causal Mechanism
Context	Profile: OECD member country (high income), high climate vulnerability (cryosphere and ocean systems), and an accelerated energy transition. Mechanism: <i>Mobilizing Ambition.</i>
Indicator 1: Participation in coalitions	• Key member of AILAC. • Promoter of the Climate Ambition Alliance (2019), supporting the goal of carbon neutrality by 2050.
Indicator 2: Promotion of normative frameworks	Mechanism: <i>Agenda Expansion.</i> • Ocean-Climate Nexus: Successful promotion of the “Blue COP” concept and the institutionalization of ocean-related dialogues. • Science: Systematic integration of scientific expertise into public policymaking through the Scientific Committee.
Indicator 3: Institutional intermediation	Mechanism: <i>Crisis Management and Multi-stakeholder Engagement.</i> • COP25 Presidency: Preservation of multilateral negotiations during a period of domestic social crisis. • High-Level Champion: Innovation in the role through the large-scale integration of private-sector actors (Race to Zero).
Indicator 4: Peer Recognition	Mechanism: <i>External recognition.</i> • Characterized in the specialized literature as a co-leader of ambitious climate agreements (Edwards and Roberts). • Recognized as an architect and convener of the Climate Ambition Alliance (2019). • The COP25 presidency was internationally acknowledged as a reference point for advancing the carbon-neutrality agenda.
Indicator 5: Domestic Credibility	Gap Identified: <i>Distributive Justice.</i> • Critical lesson from the 2019 social uprising: technocratic climate ambition lacks long-term viability in the absence of social justice and economic equity.

Source: own elaboration.

4.3 Costa Rica: a normative pioneer with limited material capabilities

Costa Rica represents a paradigmatic case of climate leadership rooted primarily in normative authority rather than material capabilities. With a population of approximately 5 million and global greenhouse gas emissions accounting for only about 0.05% of the world total, the country has nevertheless established an international reputation as a climate leader. This reputation is grounded in ambitious decarbonization commitments, strong domestic policies on conservation and renewable energy, and the active promotion of ambitious climate frameworks in multilateral negotiations. This section examines the foundations of Costa Rica's normative leadership, the mechanisms through which it is exercised, and the structural limitations that constrain its influence.

4.3.1 Context: small economy, big regulatory ambition

In 2023, Costa Rica's GDP was estimated at approximately US\$68 billion, with a GDP per capita of nearly US\$13,000.

Costa Rica has been a pioneer in several areas of climate policy, including electricity generation based almost entirely on renewable energy sources, extensive payment-for-environmental-services programs that have supported reforestation, the phase-out of fossil fuel subsidies, and the adoption of ambitious decarbonization targets.

4.3.2 Commitment to carbon neutrality: building a normative identity

In 2007, Costa Rica announced its intention to become carbon neutral by 2021, becoming one of the first countries to adopt such an ambitious objective. This commitment was reaffirmed by President Luis Guillermo Solís during Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week in 2017⁴⁸.

The carbon-neutrality pledge has generated debate regarding both its feasibility and its credibility. As noted above, Costa Rica did not achieve carbon neutrality by 2021 and continues to face significant challenges in the transportation and agricultural sectors, which account for a substantial share of the country's emissions. Nevertheless, this commitment has successfully reinforced Costa Rica's international reputation as a leader in climate policy innovation and environmental governance.

Costa Rica has incorporated this commitment into a broader national identity

⁴⁸ CLIMATE ACTION, 2017. *Costa Rica pledges carbon neutrality by 2021 - Climate Action*. Costa Rica. Available from: https://www.climateaction.org/news/costa_rica_pledges_carbon_neutrality_by_2021.

centered on environmental stewardship and ambitious climate action. Although implementation remains challenging, these commitments function not only as policy objectives but also as symbols of national identity, strengthening the country's international standing and normative influence⁴⁹.

4.3.3 Participation in AILAC and climate diplomacy

Costa Rica is a founding member of AILAC and has played a leading role within the coalition. Edwards and Roberts⁵⁰ explicitly identify Costa Rica as one of the countries that can be considered a co-leader due to its consistent support for ambitious international climate agreements.

Costa Rican climate diplomacy has been characterized by the consistent promotion of greater ambition in mitigation commitments, the defense of transparency and accountability frameworks, support for the periodic review of NDCs, and the promotion of normative frameworks centered on equity and climate justice⁵¹.

Costa Rica has leveraged its reputation as an environmental leader to exercise influence disproportionate to its material capabilities. Participation in AILAC has enabled the country to amplify its voice through collaboration with larger states while maintaining its distinctive identity as a normative pioneer.

4.3.4 NDCs and domestic policies

In its first NDC, submitted in 2015, Costa Rica committed to limiting net emissions to 9.37 million tons of CO₂eq by 2030, representing a 25% reduction relative to the baseline scenario. The updated NDC, submitted in 2020, increased this ambition by establishing a net-zero emissions target for 2050 and a maximum emissions budget of 106.5 million tons between 2018 and 2030. Supported by the 2019 National Decarbonization Plan, the updated NDC also emphasized the bioeconomy, green growth, and social inclusion⁵².

Costa Rica has implemented a range of policies that reinforce its leadership in

⁴⁹ FLAGG, Julia, 2018. Carbon Neutral by 2021: The Past and Present of Costa Rica's Unusual Political Tradition. *Sustainability*, 10(2), p. 296. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.3390/su10020296>.

⁵⁰ EDWARDS, Guy and ROBERTS, J. Timmons, 2015. *A Fragmented Continent: Latin America and the Global Politics of Climate Change*. The MIT Press. ISBN: 978-0-262-33015-2. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9473.001.0001>.

⁵¹ FLAGG, Julia, 2018. Carbon Neutral by 2021: The Past and Present of Costa Rica's Unusual Political Tradition. *Sustainability*, 10(2), p. 296. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.3390/su10020296>.

⁵² GRANADA, Isabel and ORTIZ, Paola, 2022. *Descarbonizando el transporte en Costa Rica*. Inter-American Development Bank. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.18235/0004553>. CASTRO SALAZAR, René, CASTRO CORDERO, Rene and CORDERO, Sarah, 2021. Increasing Forest Cover for a CO₂ Neutral Future: Costa Rica Case Study. *Studies of Applied Economics*, 39(3). Available from: <https://doi.org/10.25115/eea.v39i3.5080>.

climate action. Between 98% and 99% of the country's electricity is generated from renewable energy sources—including hydroelectric, geothermal, wind, and solar power—with some periods reaching 100% renewable generation. The country has also successfully reversed deforestation, increasing forest cover from approximately 20% in the 1980s to more than 50% through its Payment for Environmental Services program⁵³. Furthermore, Costa Rica has developed sectoral strategies aimed at achieving net-zero emissions, including the electrification of transportation, industrial decarbonization, and the promotion of sustainable agriculture.

Despite these notable achievements, significant challenges remain. Climate Action Tracker classifies Costa Rica's climate policies as almost sufficient, recognizing its leadership while identifying persistent weaknesses⁵⁴. The transportation sector remains the principal obstacle, accounting for approximately 40% of national emissions. Progress has been constrained by continued dependence on internal combustion vehicles and longstanding deficiencies in public transportation infrastructure.

4.3.5 Mechanisms of normative power: moral authority and niche diplomacy

Costa Rica's influence in climate governance is rooted in the moral authority derived from the consistency between its domestic policies and its international commitments. This alignment strengthens the country's legitimacy and enhances the credibility of its climate diplomacy. Initiatives demonstrating a sustained commitment to climate action—such as the expansion of renewable energy, forest conservation, and the phase-out of fossil fuel subsidies—have reinforced Costa Rica's standing in international negotiations. Costa Rica has cultivated a reputation as a leader in conservation, sustainable energy, and environmental governance. Through its participation in AILAC, it has been able to amplify its influence by working alongside larger countries while maintaining its distinctive identity as a normative pioneer. This reputation has enabled the country to promote ambitious climate action, facilitate negotiations, and attract international support for sustainable development initiatives.

⁵³ Costa Rica's Forest Conservation Pays Off, 2022. World Bank. Available from: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2022/11/16/costa-rica-s-forest-conservation-pays-off>.

⁵⁴ CLIMATE ACTION, 2017. *Costa Rica pledges carbon neutrality by 2021 - Climate Action*. Costa Rica. Available from: https://www.climateaction.org/news/costa_rica_pledges_carbon_neutrality_by_2021.

4.3.6 Structural limits of Costa Rican normative leadership

Despite its success in promoting normative leadership, Costa Rica faces significant structural constraints. Its small size and limited material resources restrict its influence in negotiations where financial and technological capabilities play a decisive role. As a result, its ability to support normative claims through climate finance, technology transfer, or market influence remains limited. Costa Rica’s economy is also highly dependent on tourism, making it particularly vulnerable to external shocks and climate-related disruptions. The economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted these vulnerabilities by reducing the country’s fiscal capacity. Furthermore, despite substantial progress in renewable energy generation and forest conservation, the decarbonization of the transportation sector remains a major challenge.

An additional tension arises from the relationship between tourism and conservation. Although ecotourism constitutes a central pillar of Costa Rica’s development model, it can also place increasing pressure on infrastructure, waste-management systems, and protected areas, creating potential conflicts between environmental conservation and economic activity.

4.3.7 Summary: normative power without hegemonic capacity

The Costa Rican case illustrates how climate leadership can emerge from moral authority and domestic policy coherence rather than from material capabilities alone. Through ambitious climate commitments, the implementation of consistent domestic policies, and active participation in strategic coalitions such as AILAC, Costa Rica has established itself as a recognized leader in global climate governance.

Nevertheless, this form of normative leadership remains constrained by the country’s limited economic size, structural vulnerabilities, and persistent challenges in decarbonizing key sectors of the economy. The effectiveness of Costa Rica’s normative power ultimately depends on its ability to maintain domestic credibility through the alignment of national policies with international commitments and to leverage strategic partnerships that amplify its influence despite the absence of hegemonic capabilities.

Table 4. Summary of results, Costa Rica

Indicator	Empirical Evidence and Causal Mechanism
Context	Profile: <i>Small state exhibiting middle-power behavior. Electricity matrix more than 99% renewable.</i>
1. Participation in coalitions	Mechanism: <i>Asymmetric Alliances.</i> • Co-leadership of the High Ambition Coalition (HAC) during the Paris negotiations (together with the Marshall Islands) in support of the 1.5°C target.

	• Leadership within the HAC for Nature and People initiative (30x30 target).
2. Promotion of normative frameworks	Mechanism: <i>Environmental Integrity</i>. • San Jose Principles: Promotion of strict standards for carbon markets, including the avoidance of double counting. • Pioneer in initiatives advocating the phase-out of fossil-fuel exploration (BOGA).
3. Institutional intermediation	Mechanism: <i>Honest Broker</i>. • Leveraging its reputation as a peaceful nation to facilitate difficult negotiations in areas where major powers often generate distrust. Host of pre-COP25 meetings.
4. Peer Recognition	Mechanism: External recognition. • Characterized in the specialized literature as a co-leader (Edwards and Roberts). • Long-standing reputation as a moral and environmental leader, enabling influence disproportionate to its material capabilities.
5. Domestic Credibility	Gap Identified: <i>Sectoral limitations (transportation)</i>. • Strong credibility in forest conservation and renewable electricity generation, but weaker performance in the transportation sector (approximately 40% of national emissions), limiting its overall credibility as a model for comprehensive decarbonization.

Source: own elaboration.

5. Discussion:

The comparative study of Colombia, Chile, and Costa Rica offers empirical evidence that challenges the traditional assumptions of hegemonic stability theory, which link leadership effectiveness to the possession of “hard” material capabilities⁵⁵. By contrasting the findings with the existing literature, this discussion argues that Latin American middle powers have developed a variant of “subaltern normative leadership”: a form of agency that operates through diplomatic skill and selective moral authority rather than economic coercion.

5.1 Validation of the behavioral approach

The results support the relevance of the behavioral approach⁵⁶ in comparison with strictly positional definitions of power. If classic realist metrics were applied, Costa Rica would be categorized as a “small state” lacking systemic relevance. However, its capacity to co-lead the High Ambition Coalition demonstrates that diplomatic influence is not necessarily correlated with territorial size.

More specifically, the role of AILAC corroborates the argument advanced by

⁵⁵ ECKERSLEY, Robyn, 2020. Rethinking leadership: understanding the roles of the US and China in the negotiation of the Paris Agreement. *European Journal of International Relations*, 26(4), pp. 1178–1202. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066120927071>. FALKNER, Robert, 2016. The Paris Agreement and the new logic of international climate politics. *International Affairs*, 92(5), pp. 1107–1125. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12708>.

⁵⁶ COOPER, Andrew, HIGGOTT, Richard and NOSSAL, Kim, 1993. *Relocating middle powers: Australia and Canada in a changing world order*. Vancouver: UBC Press. ISBN: 978-0-7748-0450-9.

Watts and Depledge⁵⁷, who contend that climate coalitions are not merely instruments for aggregating votes but also vehicles for identity construction. Unlike the G77, which operates within a North–South confrontational framework⁵⁸, AILAC has enabled its members to project a “bridging” identity, thereby supporting the constructivist proposition that norms and identities are constitutive dimensions of power capable of redefining national interests beyond immediate material gains⁵⁹.

5.2 Revisiting Manners:

This study offers a constructive critique of Ian Manners’s⁶⁰ theory of Normative Power. The original model, derived from the experience of the European Union, assumes that normative influence stems from internal coherence and a virtuous normative identity. However, the cases of Colombia and Chile present a theoretical anomaly: both countries are able to exert international influence despite significant domestic contradictions, including dependence on fossil fuels and persistent social inequalities.

As a theoretical contribution from the Global South, this article proposes the concept of “Selective Credibility.” Unlike established powers, developing countries construct moral authority in specific policy domains rather than across all dimensions of governance. Costa Rica, for example, demonstrates leadership through its renewable energy matrix despite persistent weaknesses in the transportation sector. Similarly, Chile has exercised leadership in ocean governance despite ongoing domestic social tensions. These cases suggest that normative authority in the Global South is performative and modular. It depends less on an unattainable standard of structural coherence and more on the capacity to define agendas and exercise influence within specific policy niches.

The Escazú Agreement⁶¹ provides an illuminating test of this selective and

⁵⁷ WATTS, Joshua and DEPLEDGE, Joanna, 2018. Latin America in the climate change negotiations: Exploring the AILAC and ALBA coalitions. *WIREs Climate Change*, 9(6), p. e533. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.533>.

⁵⁸ VIHMA, Antto, MULUGETTA, Yacob and KARLSSON-VINKHUYZEN, Sylvia, 2011. Negotiating solidarity? The G77 through the prism of climate change negotiations. *Global Change, Peace & Security*, 23(3), pp. 315–334. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14781158.2011.601853>.

⁵⁹ FINNEMORE, Martha and SIKKINK, Kathryn, 1998. International Norm Dynamics and Political Change. *International Organization*. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081898550789>.

⁶⁰ MANNERS, Ian, 2002. Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms? *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40(2), pp. 235–258. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00353>.

⁶¹ ONU, 2018. *Acuerdo Regional sobre el Acceso a la Información, la Participación Pública y el Acceso a la Justicia en Asuntos Ambientales en América Latina y el Caribe* | Observatorio del Principio 10. Available from: <https://observatoriop10.cepal.org/es/tratado/acuerdo-regional-acceso-la-informacion-la-participacion-publica-acceso-la-justicia-asuntos>.

modular credibility. By transforming the procedural principles of climate justice—participation, transparency, and accountability—into a legally binding instrument, Escazú became the first regional treaty to link environmental protection with access rights and the protection of environmental defenders. During the negotiation process, all three countries acted as norm entrepreneurs. However, as the theory would predict, their subsequent trajectories diverged. Chile, which co-led the negotiations but declined to sign the agreement in 2019, ratified it in 2022 under a new government. Colombia ratified the agreement in 2024, transforming previous rhetorical leadership into a legally binding commitment. Costa Rica, by contrast, despite being a co-author of the agreement and a symbol of environmental diplomacy, has yet to ratify it, revealing the fragmented character of its normative power⁶².

This divergence demonstrates that normative entrepreneurship at the international level is not always accompanied by domestic legal internalization. For these middle powers, credibility is constructed, negotiated, and contested on an issue-by-issue basis rather than existing as an indivisible whole.

5.3 The return of Realism:

Although constructivist approaches have been effective in promoting and institutionalizing norms—such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement—the analysis confirms the continued relevance of the material constraints identified by scholars such as Eckersley. There remains a “material glass ceiling” that limits the transition from normative influence to hegemonic leadership.

The “consistency gap” observed across the three cases—where diplomatic rhetoric outpaces domestic implementation—should be understood not merely as political inconsistency but as a manifestation of structural dependence within the global system. These countries lack the financial and technological resources necessary to translate their normative commitments into material outcomes at the pace demanded by their own discourse. As Falkner cautions,⁶³ while soft power may shape the rules of climate governance, hard power continues to determine its distributive outcomes. Consequently, the leadership exercised by Costa Rica, Chile, and Colombia has been

⁶² ONU, 2018. *Acuerdo Regional sobre el Acceso a la Información, la Participación Pública y el Acceso a la Justicia en Asuntos Ambientales en América Latina y el Caribe* | Observatorio del Principio 10. Available from: <https://observatoriop10.cepal.org/es/tratado/acuerdo-regional-acceso-la-informacion-la-participacion-publica-acceso-la-justicia-asuntos>.

⁶³ FALKNER, Robert, 2016. The Paris Agreement and the new logic of international climate politics. *International Affairs*, 92(5), pp. 1107–1125. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12708>.

highly effective in the procedural dimension of climate governance but considerably weaker in the substantive dimension of emissions reduction.

Loss and damage provides a particularly clear illustration of this procedural–distributive divide. During the post-Paris period, advocacy by vulnerable states and middle powers helped transform loss and damage from a contested normative claim into an institutional reality through the establishment of dedicated funding arrangements at COP27⁶⁴ and the operationalization of the Fund at COP28⁶⁵.

For Colombia, Chile, and Costa Rica, the issue is especially revealing. As norm entrepreneurs, these countries were able to credibly support the principle of loss and damage—an agenda-setting achievement consistent with the niche-based and identity-driven forms of leadership described in this article—because endorsement required moral authority rather than substantial material contributions. Yet these same actors remain structurally unable to capitalize the Fund, while their own climate vulnerabilities position them as potential recipients rather than donors. Loss and damage therefore serves as a litmus test both for the credibility of the climate regime and for the limits of leadership without hegemony. Normative power can place distributive justice on the international agenda, but the transformation of that norm into funded outcomes remains governed by the material hierarchies that constructivist explanations alone cannot overcome.

5.4 Structural conditions and margins of maneuver:

First, this form of leadership depends on institutional permissiveness, understood as the existence of decision-making regimes based on consensus rather than veto power. Such institutional arrangements create margins of maneuver that allow norm entrepreneurs to operate within structural constraints while exploiting opportunities embedded in the architecture of global governance⁶⁶.

Second, climate leadership without material dominance depends on the availability of niche symbolic capital. This refers to the capacity to mobilize intangible assets—such as biodiversity in the case of Colombia or peace credentials in the case

⁶⁴ UN, 2022. *UNFCCC Decision 2/CP.27*, 2022. UN. Available from: https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/2_CP.27.pdf.

⁶⁵ UN CLIMATE CHANGE, 2023. *Operationalization of the new funding arrangements for responding to loss and damage and the fund established in paragraph 3 of decisions 2/CP.27 and 2/CMA.4. Report by the Transitional Committee* | UNFCCC. Dabai. Available from: <https://unfccc.int/documents/632319>.

⁶⁶ BETZOLD, Carola, 2010. 'Borrowing' Power to Influence International Negotiations: AOSIS in the Climate Change Regime, 1990–1997. *Politics*, 30(3), pp. 131–148. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9256.2010.01377.x>.

of Costa Rica—as functional substitutes for economic or coercive resources. These symbolic assets enable states to compensate for material limitations while maintaining credibility, legitimacy, and visibility in climate negotiations.

Third, this form of leadership requires collective normative entrepreneurship. Rather than relying on the actions of individual states, it emerges through disciplined coalitions capable of framing particular interests as universal norms. Platforms such as AILAC demonstrate how coordinated action can reduce the marginality of individual actors and sustain influence within multilateral climate governance, even in the absence of hegemonic power⁶⁷. Taken together, these findings suggest that power in contemporary international politics is more relational and diffuse than neorealism acknowledges, yet more structurally constrained than liberal idealism often assumes.

6. Conclusions

The comparison of Colombia, Chile, and Costa Rica demonstrates that each country has developed distinct strategies for exercising influence in international climate governance, including coalition-building, norm promotion, and institutional intermediation. Through these mechanisms, they compensate for limitations in material capabilities by fostering legitimacy, credibility, and cooperation around shared principles.

The findings suggest that Manners's theory of normative power remains applicable to countries of the Global South, although it requires adaptation to account for their specific structural conditions. Latin American middle powers engage in coalition-building, norm entrepreneurship, and institutional mediation, but they do so while facing greater resource constraints and persistent tensions between domestic realities and international commitments.

The evidence further demonstrates that ideas, norms, and values can exert significant influence over climate negotiations even in the absence of substantial material capabilities. This challenges the long-standing assumption that effective leadership necessarily depends on economic or coercive resources. Such influence, however, is contingent upon institutional arrangements that provide opportunities for participation and agenda-setting. In this respect, the UNFCCC regime offers

⁶⁷ JORDAAN, Eduard, 2003. The concept of a middle power in international relations: distinguishing between emerging and traditional middle powers. *Politikon*, 30(1), pp. 165–181. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0258934032000147282>.

particularly favorable conditions because of its relatively inclusive decision-making procedures.

Strategic alliances play a crucial role in overcoming resource limitations. Coalitions such as AILAC amplify the voice of middle powers and provide a platform for coordinated action. Their effectiveness, however, depends on internal cohesion and the maintenance of shared positions among members.

At the same time, the study demonstrates that climate leadership without hegemony remains constrained by material resources and technological capabilities, limiting its influence in key distributive domains. Regional fragmentation within Latin America, together with tensions between global ambitions and domestic constraints, further limits the effectiveness of such leadership. These constraints do not diminish its importance; rather, they shape both its scope and its outcomes.

The central argument of this article is that sustained engagement within the UNFCCC and AILAC encourages states to redefine their interests and develop new forms of non-hegemonic leadership. Although this pattern is evident across all three cases, its effectiveness varies across different stages of the policy process. Shared norms and identities can generate concrete diplomatic outcomes during agenda-setting, including coalition formation and the promotion of negotiating texts. However, their influence becomes more limited in distributive arenas involving resource allocation, climate finance, and implementation. The experience of the Escazú Agreement illustrates these limitations, revealing persistent gaps between normative commitments, legal internalization, and practical implementation. Thus, while norms can reshape the rules of international politics, they do not eliminate the material hierarchies that continue to structure global governance.

Future research could build on these findings by examining more directly the influence of Latin American middle powers on specific UNFCCC negotiation texts. Comparative studies involving middle powers from other regions of the Global South, particularly Asia and Africa, would also contribute to a broader understanding of non-hegemonic climate leadership in contemporary international politics.

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Rua Dr. António Bernardino de Almeida, 541 - 4200-072 Porto

Email: upt@upt.pt