



# Reply to Majer et al.: Negotiating policy action for transformation requires both sociopolitical and behavioral perspectives

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We welcome the constructive engagement from Majer et al. (1) with our call to prioritize the challenge of negotiating discord in policy action for sustainability transformations (2). We argued that policy action needs to focus on finding “partial political settlements”: Uncomfortable yet potentially productive compromises in deeply divided sociopolitical settings. Majer et al. enrich this discussion by emphasizing the importance of a behavioral negotiation perspective in identifying barriers, strategies, and opportunities to improve negotiation over difficult policy questions (1). This is a crucial addition not only for understanding negotiation processes but also for bridging sociopolitical and behavioral insights in sustainability transformation debates. The authors usefully argue that, under certain conditions, negotiators can constructively compromise even in the context of discord.

However, we distinguish our argument in three ways. First, our analytical focus is on a sociopolitical level of abstraction rather than on specific interpersonal negotiations. As such, we use the notion of negotiation broadly, referring to a mode of interaction in generating policy action. This draws on previous work highlighting the influence of a multitude of actors on environmental policy and decision-making (3), prospects for concertation among different actors in difficult policy decisions (4), and the inherently conflictual dynamics of policymaking processes more generally (5).

Second, the authors’ recommendations for addressing discord assume that those involved i) can or will hold prosocial concerns, ii) are willing to consider the position of the other side to find acceptable compromises, and iii) are amenable to reflecting on their own “fairness judgments” to overcome “self-serving biases” (1). But our point of departure was that these are precisely the conditions that are rarely observed in heated political debates and struggles. This is especially so for issues infused with not only interest-based but also moral divisions (6) and driven by political narratives, emotions, and differing meanings attached to issues (7),

where actors are often entrenched and unwilling to yield ground.

Third, Majer et al. point to current insights that can be applied to high conflict settings (1). We agree that such insights should be leveraged for sustainability transformations. However, we caution against implicit assumptions of negotiation situations that are amenable to reason and third-party intermediation. Intermediation could come endogenously from “trusted actors who can bridge divided groups” (2, p. 6) but rarely from external authority which is often unavailable (e.g., national governments are rarely subject to supranational authority). Understanding how negotiation can be accomplished when new sources of discord (conflict, pushback, resistance) constantly open up remains challenging.

In summary, while we agree that the insights tabled by Majer et al. are crucial, a behavioral negotiation focus may not directly apply to broader sociopolitical negotiation over policy action in deeply divided societies. Struggles over sustainability transformations are open-ended (8), multilevel (9), and messy (2). Nevertheless, a key takeaway is the imperative to better *jointly* understand the sociopolitical and behavioral dynamics through which societies negotiate large and disruptive processes of transformation. This presents a fascinating and timely research agenda, ripe for exploration through interdisciplinary collaboration.

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