Climate change is a difficult problem to solve, politically. The costs of addressing climate change are born by current generations, but the benefits accrue to many generations to come. Addressing climate change might require people today to make significant sacrifices to benefit people around the world, as well as future generations. There are significant, powerful interest groups – such as the oil and gas industry – that benefit significantly from the status quo. Changing policy to address climate change requires overcoming barriers to legislation and regulation – what political scientists call status quo bias – that can be very significant, especially in democratic political systems. While climate change is one of the most important challenges facing us this century, it tends to be relatively low on the list of policy priorities for most of the public (in the US and elsewhere). And the impacts of climate change will generally speaking fall hardest on communities and people who are poor and generally politically disempowered.

How can we address these political challenges to effective implementation of climate policy? One common suggestion is that we just need more "political will" by policymakers to make climate action happen despite all the obstacles. But political leadership appears to make little difference in enacting or sustaining climate policy – and in any case, a one-time victory in the face of deep public opposition is unlikely to produce climate policy that sustains itself over time. And one key requirement for climate policy is that it has to have staying power – climate policy has to ensure a long-term transition to a non-fossil-fueled economy, and the long residence time of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere means that we cannot afford to backslide in terms of emissions reductions in the future.

Thus, addressing climate change requires policies that are feasible to enact now (because hypothetical policies do not reduce emissions) and that will be politically sustainable over time. What kinds of approaches can succeed?

We can develop the answer to that question by looking at past and current examples of climate policies that have been enacted, and that have been politically sustainable over time. Drawing on that history of climate policy, and the now significant political science and public policy literature on climate policy, we can distill some key principles. In this series of blog posts, I'll articulate those principles. These posts draw on a paper of mine (available here on SSRN, for readers who would like to dive into the details). Those key principles are:

Climate policy necessarily has to balance between a range of different goals, including keeping costs down (economic efficiency), building political support for

sustaining and expanding policies in the future (political economy), supporting the development of new technology, addressing distributional or equity issues, and of course, reducing emissions.

Those different policy goals will necessarily come into tension, at least to some extent. So policymakers will need to choose which goals they are prioritizing at particular times.

Climate policy therefore necessarily involves sequencing – sequencing between different policies at different times in order to address the policy goals that are most pricing at any given stage in policy development. In general, climate policy will need to start by building political support through the creation of sympathetic interest groups (or conversion of existing interest groups to support climate policy). That in turn will be driven mostly by subsidies (or to a lesser extent, regulations) targeted at particular sectors to encourage investments in new carbon-free technologies, both building political support and advancing technological innovation. Over time, policymakers will need to sequence away from subsidies because of increasing costs or equity impacts.

Carbon pricing is not a politically feasible approach to initiate carbon pricing with in most cases, and in general will be a policy tool that follows the political and technological changes produced by subsidies or regulations.

Mass mobilization of the public to address climate change – often by connecting the issue to a range of other policy areas – may only have limited potential to succeed, particularly in highly polarized political environments (as in the United States).

Climate policy that relies on subsidies to drive change will result in feedback effects, and in many ways will have to in order to overcome the power of incumbent fossil fuel industries. But this means striking a delicate balance between using feedback effects to lock in decarbonization over time, and the risk that feedback effects could lock us into a suboptimal outcome.

And climate policy will need to expand across sectors, across jurisdictions, and over time. The approach developed above will necessarily vary depending on the economic sector and political and economic context. Feedback effects may allow for leveraging climate policy from one jurisdiction or economic sector to another, but other times a different, new sequence of policy will have to be initiated.

I’ll build on all of these principles in the following posts.