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Improving trust between climate science and politics

An ongoing attempt to create a scientific advisory body to improve Italian climate policy.

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Tourists walk on raised walkways over floodwater in St. Mark's Square in Venice, Italy, on Saturday, Nov. 26, 2022. The frequency of flooding, known as acqua alta, has been increasing steadily in Venice in recent years and is projected to rise further because of climate change. Credit: Andrea Merola/Bloomberg via Getty Images.

The dialogue between climate science and politics has historically been difficult. Scientists often disseminate their knowledge publicly, but sometimes without enough effort to adapt communication to political decision-makers, or to the general public, underestimating the paramount difficulty of integrating climate change into one's worldview. Politicians are more likely to seek guidance from scientists when faced with an immediate and evident problem, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is a need for stronger links between climate scientists and politicians, and that can be especially challenging in Italy where the awareness of climate change, its risks and opportunities, in politics and in public opinion, is still limited.

A widely used model to improve that dialogue is the appointment of individual advisors to governments and ministries, such as the [Chief Scientific Advisers](#) in the UK. However, using advisors presents some problems. First, they may be biased towards the policymaker's point of view and may not always represent the best climate science. Second, issues such as climate change require policy goals planned for years or decades. This may be not achieved by advisors who are replaced when the government changes.

Another option is to take advice from academies that gather the nation's best scientists and can provide advice upon request, but this is inherently a non-structured model, because politicians can ultimately choose whether to ask for their advice.

The third option is the establishment of a specific body of scientists who dialogue institutionally with politics and can ensure competence, accountability, independence, and effectiveness of scientific contributions, and at the same time can promote the stability of climate-related policy actions.

As well as the European Scientific Advisory Board on Climate Change, advisory boards on climate issues are established in [Germany](#), [France](#) and the [United Kingdom](#). These boards cover many advisory and warning functions, but there is still potential for oversight, for example when the choice of scientific representatives is made only by politicians or, crucially, when politicians are not compelled to seek the boards' advice. For example, the French *Haut Conseil pour le Climat* has no power of consultancy during the preparation of relevant bills, only a power of recommendation ex-ante or evaluation ex-post, while the *Expertenrat fuer Klimafragen* in Germany and the *Climate Change Committee* in the UK must be consulted by their governments during the legislative process. With those examples in mind, and conscious of the limited awareness on climate change, the Italian climate science community sought to have the issue of climate change at the forefront of the 2022 general election

campaign. A [petition](#) (started by the Italian Society for Climate Sciences) to promote the issue was signed by more than 220,000 Italian citizens in August 2022 alone, and a group of climate and environmental scientists, gathered in the scientific committee *La Scienza al Voto* ([Science on the Ballot](#)), launched a project called *Scegliamo Il Futuro* ([Let's Choose Our Future](#)).

The project proposed a new institutional framework for collaboration between science and politics on the climate and environmental crisis during the new legislature, and suggested to citizens, businesses and institutions a range of adaptation, mitigation, research and education measures that can help reaching our common objectives on climate.

The idea was that any vision of the future, of any political orientation, must come to terms with the resolution of the climate crisis, because otherwise there would simply be a lack of resources to implement that vision.

This approach, in which scientific knowledge is presented as a means to enable one's vision of the future to be realized, was met with appreciation and a [cross-party agreement](#) was signed to establish by law a Climate and Environment Science Council (CSCA – Consiglio Scientifico Clima e Ambiente) at the beginning of the new legislature.

As of today, the Science on the Ballot committee is resuming contacts and “building trust” with representatives of all political parties, and has established a legal committee to study how best to incorporate this CSCA into the institutions of the Italian republic. In doing so, efforts will be made to correct some critical issues found in existing models used by governments worldwide to gather scientific advice.

According to the plan currently being discussed with political forces, the members of the CSCA will be chosen based on their scientific track record in the different areas of climate science and on their independence, and the selection will be made collaboratively by politicians and scientists.

Furthermore, we propose a continual dialogue between CSCA and political institutions, as the guiding principle is not to recommend specific solutions but to provide the widest possible range of evidence-based instruments to achieve scientifically sound objectives and to respect international goals.

We are confident that this dialogue between climate science and politicians will prove that scientific advice can have a decisive role in democracy, once a paradigm is chosen that guarantees its independence, transversality, and effectiveness. Hopefully, this will make politicians and citizens of any orientation understand that accepting scientific facts will not disrupt their political views, but rather it will make them feasible in our changing world.