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US Environmental Politics under Trump: Domestic and Global Implications

US environmental politics has long been defined by competing visions, interests and imperatives. Under President Trump we've seen a sharp escalation of debates and concern as his Administration has sought to dismantle climate policies and environmental protection built up over previous decades. Trump's record number of regulatory roll backs has rescinded or weakened rules designed to protect wildlife, reduce carbon emissions, ban dangerous pesticides, and limit pollution of waters, land and air (Harvard University Kennedy School 2019). The Administration's executive action also includes stripping budgets and resources to fund science, experts and research. No US president has been so enthusiastic in his efforts to limit 'government overreach' in this area while 'freeing up' businesses, including the most polluting ones. These moves have had an undeniable impact on policies that directly affect the fate of Americans' health and future. The list of Trump's environmental rollbacks, combined with the efforts of the Administration officials leading them - an overwhelming percent of whom come directly from fossil fuel and chemical industries - suggests this environmental dismantling will continue.

On the global level US environmental leadership has also suffered. Trump has formally announced the US withdrawal from Paris climate agreement, skipped discussions of biodiversity, marine conservation held at G7 summits, and cast doubt on UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate change reports. Nor have executive actions been meaningfully curbed by the US legislative branch characterised by sharp partisanship and a Republican party unwilling or unable to curb Executive action and possible transgressions. In short, the 'state of the environment' under Trump Administration appears grim. Below I consider the domestic and global implications of these developments, but suggest that environmental politics in the age of Trump is not all gloom and doom. Trump's government has undoubtedly done much to undermine environment and climate policy, yet it has been unable to undermine environmental **action and concern** from other quarters; indeed such action and engagement is increasing across several dimensions and at several levels of governance.

Counter-Mobilisations

The actions of the Trump Administration have mobilised counter-action across a range of actors, several of which are newly energised in the areas of climate and environmental protection. In particular, significant resistance has come from states, cities, and citizens movements.

Despite Trump's efforts, a majority of **US states** have accelerated efforts to limit carbon and strengthen environmental protection. To illustrate, the US Climate Alliance is a bipartisan group of state governors from 25 states, representing 55 percent of the U.S. population and 60 percent of U.S. GDP. They have pledged – and are on track – to meet US reduction targets agreed at the UN Paris climate summit in 2015 even though the US seeks to formally withdraw. Meanwhile, the coal industry – a main cause of CO₂ emissions - is dying. The last few years witnessed a huge drop in the number of coal power plants in America, with a concurrent drop in US greenhouse emissions. One reason is the supply of gas through fracking which carries its own environmental risks. But the decline in coal is also due to a sharp increase in investment and use of renewables – in many states renewables are cheaper than gas. Over half of US states have targets for clean energy, and many offer tax credits for renewables. Several of these are Republican-controlled states.

Motivation for action by sub-federal politicians is clear: cities and states bear much of the brunt for the health costs of pollution. They experience first hand the impact and cost of extreme weather events exacerbated by climate change, such as hurricanes, wildfires and sea level rise. In Florida and other states with coastal military installations climate change has real security implications. Indeed in early 2019 the Pentagon and Trump's Director of National Intelligence warned of the security threat caused by ecological degradation and climate change. The warning was ignored by Trump, but it features in state legislatures plans, especially states housing military installations and infrastructure.

Equally as significant has been the increase in concern and action by **citizens**. Awareness of climate change has increased considerably. According to recent Pew opinion polls, a strong majority of Americans now believe climate change poses a major threat and want government action. There is similarly high support for other environmental measures – even when costs are mentioned. That overall measure hides sharp partisan differences (the more conservative the respondent the less likely s/he is to be concerned). But the overall upward trend is clear and rising.

The public mood has translated into individual action. Since Trump's inauguration in 2017 we've seen a spike in membership of traditional environmental organisations such as the Sierra Club. Newer movements have also sprung up, most notably those linking environment and health, climate and security, or climate care and religion. The dramatic mobilization of youth seen world wide (see Pickard 2019) is occurring in the US as well. In September 2019 a school strike march led by youth activist Greta Thunberg attracted hundreds of thousands of participants in New York city alone.

Globally, counter action is equally noteworthy. When Trump announced his intention to withdraw the US from the UN Paris climate agreement the fate of that agreement (which includes pledges from nearly 200 states to take national action designed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from rising to dangerous levels) could have been in real danger. The actual withdrawal will not take formal effect until November 2020, after the next presidential election. But symbolically, the US intention to withdrawal is disappointing. As the world's second largest greenhouse gas emitter (and largest cumulative emitter) the US decision to formally abdicate responsibility means other countries will need to do more -- certainly more than agreed at recent UN climate summits. But the US withdrawal did not lead to any cascade of defections, and others – the European Union and to a certain extent China - have stepped in to take a leadership role. Similarly, when Trump attacked advocates of climate activists as 'radical socialists' and 'prophets of doom' at the World Economic Forum in January 2020, his words were met with a frosty reception from other economic leaders, especially compared to Trump's rival at the podium, Greta Thunberg. In short, there has been counter action from both above and below. It can not undo the Administration's moves but it can mitigate them and suggests longer term counter trends are likely.

Congress and New Green Deal

It is difficult to find much source for environmental optimism at the US federal level. Congressional action on climate and environment has been stymied by growing partisanship and a recalcitrant Republican-controlled Senate. That polarization has severely limited bipartisan endeavours and has led Republicans to support Trump's measures with remarkably few exceptions. But certain initiatives – including discussions around a Green New Deal (GND) - hold promise for future developments. The GND is a resolution (a vision statement rather than legislative proposal) introduced in both houses of

Congress in early 2019. It was sponsored by progressive House representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Ed Markey (himself a sponsor of unsuccessful cap and trade deal during the Obama administration). The resolution proposed fundamental changes to the US economy and society, including rapid decarbonisation but also plans to mitigate the social effects of decarbonisation through ambitious job guarantees and universal health care.

No Republicans supported the resolution and it did not pass. But that was not entirely the point of its proposers. The GND signalled and sparked new discussion and debate on climate change, decarbonisation and links to social justice. The attention it received in Congress and the media was significant, including from major networks and press. Media scholars have demonstrated how news outlets can shape the way the public views environmental issues. Yet despite repeated attacks on the GND by conservative media outlets such as Fox News, support for the basic idea of rapid decarbonisation remains robustly supported. Republicans felt compelled to counter with their own less radical alternatives (such as the 'Real Green Deal'). Discussions of climate transformation is now far more central than previously. That is unlikely to alter the current government's record but it has combined with action at other levels to suggest alternative ways forward.

Looking forward: 2020 Elections

A related question is whether these issues will feature in the next US general election on 3 November 2020. Trump's position in the presidential race is likely to feature further plans to bring back coal, dismantle and relax environmental protection, and disengage with international efforts. Less certain is how much the Democratic candidate will embrace climate and environmental action and how prominent these issues will be during the presidential election campaign.

Those hoping for engagement can point to promising signs. The embrace of environmental and climate issues by the Democratic party has been striking. In the 2016 general election these issues received scant attention from either party or candidate. This election is different. All Democratic candidates for the presidential nomination (there were a record number this year - several dozen to start) embraced environmental and climate issues to some extent. A few, such as Jay Inslee or Tom Steyer, made it a central plank of their campaign. In September 2019 news channel CNN aired several hours of Democratic candidates answering questions on what they would do about climate change.

Although the Democratic race remains extremely fluid, as of February 2020 the pool of viable Democratic candidates had reduced to a handful. The top ranking candidates all feature environmental issues in their campaigns, albeit to varying degrees. In particular, all have offered comprehensive plans designed to limit climate change, deal with its consequences (especially sea level rise), and facilitate a just transition to low carbon economy. The plans of the current front runners differ both on means (in particular the role of nuclear power and market tools) and the extent of state intervention. Bernie Sanders' plan is the most radical (redolent of the Green New Deal) but also the most punitive, stressing fines and prosecution of fossil fuel companies. He has been formally endorsed by Ocasio-Cortez, one of sponsors of the GND. Elizabeth Warren does not have one climate change plan but several, integrated into other policy areas. Her platform heavily features the promise of green jobs, especially in the renewable sector. Her foreign policy 'Green Marshall Plan' would provide billions of federal funds to encourage countries to buy American green technology. Frontrunner Joe

Biden has used the issue of climate to highlight his service and experience (he introduced one of the first climate bills to Congress in the 1980s). Like several other candidates, including a late entry to the race, Michael Bloomberg, and tech entrepreneur Andrew Yang, Biden's plan stressed necessary changes to the US tax code and incentives, technological innovation, and the importance of job re-training. He also, as did others, pledged to work with (not against) other countries. On the other end of the age spectrum the youngest candidate in the race, Pete Buttigieg stressed the intergenerational justice implications of climate change but his main policy focus was on disaster relief, climate adaptation and resilience through technological advancement.

The first event in the race to choose the Democratic nominee is the Iowa caucus on 3 February, followed the next week by the New Hampshire primary. Even more consequential will be 'super Tuesday' on March 3 which will include 14 states. Amongst them will be environmental leader and delegate-rich California. These primary results will give us an early idea of who the Democratic nominee might be and what s/he may pledge. Whichever Democrat wins the nomination, we can expect him or her to embrace environmental and climate far more than in any other presidential race. First, it is a clear way to distance themselves from Trump. Trump's lowest public approval is in the area of climate and environment -- he received a record low (under 30%) approval rating according to *Washington Post* polls. Moreover, an emphasis on environment is a core way to reach the elusive youth vote. According to a recent Harvard study, millennials are far more likely to support ambitious climate and environmental policies; they are most likely to oppose Trump's position, and they overwhelmingly lean Democrat (though note even Republican millennials embrace action on climate change). But millennials traditionally have been the age demographic least likely to turn out to vote. A huge priority of Democratic contenders is to entice them to do so. Unfortunately for the Democrats they cannot depend on the thousands of 'school strikers' who will be too young to vote this time around. But there's always 2024.

A lot of uncertainty lies ahead, not least the outcome of the November 2020 election and its impact on environmental and climate policy. The media tend to focus overwhelmingly on the presidential race and its outcome. For good reason: the next President of the US will have the opportunity to direct (or misdirect) the environmental and climate policy of the country at a crucial time. But equally important will be the election of Congress and 'down ballot' races which determine the leadership of states and cities. This is where much of the meaningful action takes place. By examining action across different levels we've seen how the impetus and support for action is now embedded in US politics. Its source may not be found in places receiving the most attention (it is certainly lacking in current presidential or congressional leadership). Instead this action is found above and below – especially at the level of states, cities and citizens concerned with the security and sustainability of the US, if not the planet.

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