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The 2020 US Election and its climate consequences

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ABSTRACT


This 'In Brief' article analyses the 2020 US national election (presidential and congressional) and its implications for environment and climate policy in the US and globally. Drawing on insights from electoral politics, partisanship and executive power, it explores three broad areas: the issues at stake during the campaign and the centrality of climate, explanations for the outcome, and reflections on what lies ahead for the US role under a Biden Presidency.

KEYWORDS 2020 US Election; Biden; climate; Congress; Trump

For observers of environmental and climate politics the 2020 US Election was one of the most consequential in US history. At stake was a choice to re-elect or vote out an Administration noted for its climate denialism, evisceration of environmental protection, and abrogation of global environmental leadership. Also up for grabs was control of the US Congress and key 'down ballot' races within the 50 US states. The outcome would have a tremendous impact on US domestic policy (both environmental protection and climate), but also on the US's global role. This In Brief article examines the issues at stake during the campaign, explanations for the outcome, and reflections on what lies ahead for the US role under a Biden Presidency.

The 2020 US Election campaign

Theories of voting behaviour seldom identify environment or climate as a key issue shaping voter choice. Nor have environmental issues featured prominently in any previous US presidential campaigns. The 2020 election campaign was very different. Climate featured as an election concern as early as the primary season (during which the parties' presidential nominees are chosen). Every candidate for the Democratic nomination offered some sort of climate plan, and a special town forum on the issue was held in summer 2020. Competition amongst Democratic contenders – several of whom placed climate central to their bid – served to ratchet up Biden's own climate

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plans which became increasingly ambitious and encompassing. During the general election campaign climate, environmental protection, energy and fracking all figured prominently in both Presidential and Vice Presidential debates. The voters as a whole rated climate as a key concern with some demographics (especially youth) ranking it within the top three. Of course, like many other issues in contemporary US, views on climate and environment differed sharply between parties; Democrats were nearly four times as likely to rate climate as a key issue, while the most conservative Republicans continued to deny the basic link between climate and human activities (Pew Research 2020).

Candidates from the two competing parties also put out starkly different views. Indeed, protection of the environment and climate was one of the issues on which the contrast between them was most sharply drawn. Donald Trump's views were well known and he stayed true to form during the campaign – denying human responsibility for climate change, dismissing the devastating floods and wildfires, and suggesting in any case the world would 'start getting cooler.' One possible surprise was Trump's announcement of a new moratorium on off-shore drilling in three flood-vulnerable, Republican-held crucial battleground states. The announcement was accompanied by Trump's claim to be 'the Number 1 environmental president' – a curious statement given his Administration had been the one to earlier lift the moratorium. In any case not many agreed with his self-assessment: according to Gallup (2020) Trump's lowest public approval rating was in the area of climate and environment. But the announcement did suggest an awareness of the need to address – however fleetingly or superficially – the issue of environment.

The Democratic ticket of Joseph Biden and Kamala Harris made environment and climate a key issue of the campaign, linking it explicitly to recovery and renewal, and elevating climate to one of four interlinked historic crises they pledged to address (the others were the Covid pandemic, economic recovery and racial justice). During the campaign Biden drew on high-profile environmentalists – including from the activist left – to help shape his climate plan. That plan included tackling climate as a 'top priority', linking it to issues of injustice and promising stronger use of regulatory tools. His pledge of '100% clean energy economy and net-zero emissions no later than 2050' signalled both deeper and faster cuts of carbon emissions than any of his predecessors had achieved. At the centre of his plan was promised investment (of 2 USD trillion) in green technologies. His running mate Kamala Harris had endorsed early on the US Green New Deal (a more ambitious and encompassing initiative including guaranteed jobs and health care for all), and had worked with House Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez on climate justice and equity legislation. Biden stopped short of embracing a Green New Deal, and his policies also included support for

nuclear power, carbon capture, and a refusal to ban fracking. His position was therefore not considered radical (or even sufficient) to many environmentalists. But compared to any previous presidential nominee his ambition was well marked. His proposed policies were – if not radical – still radically different from those of Trump or the governing Republican party.

The issue of climate and environment did not decide the election; traditional factors of economy and party loyalty, as well as new issues such as the pandemic, dominated voter preferences. Party affiliation in particular proved a strong predictor of both voting preferences and views on climate. To illustrate: according to exit polls, the 30% of voters who did not consider climate change a serious problem voted overwhelmingly Republican and overwhelmingly supported Trump. Nor did the polls suggest that the unpopularity of Trump's environment and climate policies was enough to result in a complete renunciation by voters. Millions of voters chose to support Trump despite his views on climate and a record of environmental devastation.

But of those 80 million who voted for Biden – he not only won the Electoral College but amassed a lead of over 7 million votes – Biden's support for climate action was central and tied directly to issues of equity and pandemic relief. The climate issue affected outcome and turnout in several ways. The issue was a key mobilizer for the youth vote. According to a Harvard study (2019) young voters are far more likely to rate climate as one of top three issues, linked closely to the issues of racial justice and equity. In this election the youth demographic increased dramatically: 53% of eligible youth voters cast votes in this election versus 45% in 2016 (Circle 2020). According to exit polls (New York Times 2020), of those young voters, 65% backed Biden – up from the 55% who voted for Clinton in 2016. In short, a record number of youth voters – motivated heavily by concerns of justice and climate – were instrumental in ensuring Biden's victory.

Voters in the 2020 election did not just choose a President. Crucial to any President's agenda success is the support his party holds in Congress. The Biden Administration needed Democrat congressional victories to keep control of the lower House, but also a net gain of seats to secure control of the Senate from the Republicans. Democrats did not fare as well as expected in House elections but did manage to hang on to a slim majority. More nail-biting was the outcome in the Senate. The final balance was not determined until January following two run-off Senate elections in Georgia. The outcome (announced 6 January) was overshadowed by news of the attack on the Capitol by a Trump-supporting mob seeking to halt certification of Biden's victory. But the insurrection did not stop Biden's victory or the victory of Democrats in both Georgia races. Those gains now give Democrats the majority control of both Houses. A simple majority won't ensure smooth passage of bills (given the role of the filibuster and other blocking measures

in the Senate), but it did bring changes in committee priorities and leadership which will make a Biden agenda more likely to be heard – if not moved forward.

In short, the issue of climate and environment featured in this federal election as never before. The Biden ticket's emphasis on climate – including its link to recovery and equity – served as a core mobilization device, especially amongst core constituencies of youth and voters of colour. For environmentalists the climate issue did not feature as heavily as it should have done; nor was it decisive to the electoral outcome. But the inverse is certainly true: the electoral outcome has decisively affected the future of environment and climate policies both in the US and beyond.

The transition

The promised change of a new Biden Presidency was evident during the transition as Biden named his Cabinet posts and team. These appointments underlined a clear commitment to addressing climate, and a shift in environmental priorities (Bomberg 2021). A central office in this endeavour is the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) which is tasked with, *inter alia*, regulating power plant emissions, cleaning up toxic dumps, and enforcing core laws. Trump's appointments to lead this core agency were a series of former oil men with a zeal for deregulation, culminating in a stunning rollback of core environmental regulations and oversight. (According to Justice Department data, the number of pollution cases referred for criminal prosecution under Trump's EPA was the lowest in over 30 years.) Biden's choice marked a reversal: Michael S. Regan, a former state environmental official and the first Black man to be appointed to the role, was chosen because of his strong record of enforcement and focus on environmental justice.

Other cabinet nominations underlined the theme of reversal. To head the Interior Department Biden appointed Representative Deb Haaland, the first Native American cabinet secretary, champion of Green New Deal, and a staunch opponent of Trump's handling of land use. The Department of Interior manages the listing of endangered species and huge swathes of federal lands, including wildlife refuges and national parks. Heading the Department of Energy is an outspoken clean energy advocate Jennifer Granholm who, like Biden, sees clean energy as a huge economic opportunity – including for blue collar workers. Tasked with slashing emissions from the transport sector in particular, Granholm has promised to work closely with auto and labour unions (with which she has already close links). The Granholm appointment represents a shift in environmental and energy priorities, but also represents Biden's emphasis on reaching out to traditional

Democratic voters, and his view that climate protection and economic recovery are inextricably, and positively, linked.

Even more striking is Biden's creation of new posts explicitly charged with incorporating and championing issues of climate change across the entire policy agenda. Gina McCarthy (who served under President Obama as head of the EPA) leads the new White House Office of Domestic Climate Policy. Her remit is clear: ensuring climate is not treated as a discrete area of policy but is integrated into all other areas of policy. The other new post is the appointment of former Secretary of State John Kerry as special Climate envoy at the National Security Council. Kerry, who signed the Paris climate Agreement on behalf of the US in 2015, underlines the Administration's global engagement but also the link between climate and security (a link severed by Trump who removed climate change from a list of national security threats in 2019). The signal these appointments send is unequivocal – a clear pivot away from the previous Administration's priorities, and towards a far more ambitious, progressive embrace of climate and environmental protection at home and abroad.

Early action

Biden wasted no time in implementing environmental promises made during the campaign. On his first afternoon in office, immediately following his Inauguration ceremony, Biden signed several executive orders reversing Trump's legacy. One of the first and most notable actions was re-joining the UN Paris Climate Agreement. Biden and his international climate envoy John Kerry immediately began to reassert US global leadership on this issue. In addition to re-joining the Agreement the US announced its intention to host and lead a global climate summit on Earth Day in April 2021. Biden has also indicated he will personally attend the next UN's Conference of the Parties in Glasgow (COP26) in November 2021 where national emission reductions commitments are to be 'ratcheted up' and the tricky issue of international finance resolved (the Trump Administration had revoked the US commitment of international climate finance.) A key factor in global climate negotiations will be the ability of the US to develop (and indeed reset) relations with China. Kerry worked closely with Chinese leadership in talks surrounding Paris agreement, but relations since 2015 have soured, and it remains uncertain how or if these two giant emitters will cooperate or compete to make CoP26 a success. Of course the main 'Paris challenge' needs to be delivered at home. Under the Paris Agreement the US Nationally Determined Contribution pledge was to reduce US emissions by at least 26% by 2025: for the international community the real test is not just pledges made but whether the US can deliver the domestic action needed to meet its promised target.

An encouraging sign was that Biden's early days which were chock full of domestic climate and environmental declarations and actions. Within a week of his Inauguration President Biden had repeated his warning that climate posed an existential threat. He reasserted his campaign promise of immediate action and pledge to achieve net-zero emissions on the power grid by 2035 and economy-wide by 2050. Specifically, he announced a halt on all new oil leases on federal land, ambitious water and land conservation policies, job measures linked to renewable energy, and plans to electrify the government's vast fleet of vehicles.

Crucially, Biden very much pitched these policies as part of US economic recovery, declaring 'Today is climate day in the White House which means today is jobs day at the White House.' Central to his plans was investment linked to growing demands for renewable energy – especially wind and solar – which, according to Biden would not just replace but surpass the number of jobs lost due to the decline of jobs in the coal and fracking industries. His team took care to underline the feasibility of transition, noting how well the skills required to install and manufacture solar panels and wind turbines matched those of workers employed in sectors like mining and offshore drilling. Moreover, his orders created a task force specifically focussed on reviving communities dependent on the fossil fuel industry. He promised jobs linked to construction work building new energy-efficient homes, or engineering work sealing off leaking oil and gas wells. Similarly, he stressed that speeding up the transition away from gasoline-powered cars to an all electric fleet would ultimately lead to 'one million new jobs in the American automobile industry.' He addressed youth employment specifically, announcing the creation of Civilian Climate Corps which would provide young people with 'good jobs' as well as training them for environmentally friendly careers. In short, these announcements were indeed about addressing climate change, but they were couched unmistakably in the language of domestic job creation and equitable economic renewal.

Many of these initiatives landed on fertile soil and supported existing trends. Oil and gas producers were already struggling under weak prices, while wind and solar technologies industries (and stocks) have been robust and growing dramatically for years. Even under the Trump Administration shifts within the markets, finance sector, as well as on-going climate initiatives by US cities and states were moving ahead to transition to a clean energy (Bomberg 2017). But a clear message from the top is crucial for encouraging (and reassuring) actors already keen to push further towards carbon transition. As noted by one observer, proponents no longer need to fear an anti-wind energy tweet tirade from a president who once claimed the sound of wind turbines caused cancer (Burke 2019).

None of this means Biden's moves will go unopposed. Those on the left of his party – including a strong contingent of youth and environmental justice

advocates – have already protested his announcements do not go far enough (for instance he has halted but not completely banned oil leasing on federal lands). These activists demand more and reminded the Biden team that their mobilization was crucial to his election. Opposition from the right has been sharper. Indeed within minutes of Biden signing his order to halt drilling on federal land an alliance representing oil and gas producers filed a lawsuit, arguing he had exceeded his authority. The large number of Court appointments – another key presidential power – made by the Trump Administration has resulted in far more jurists arguably less amenable to Biden's proposed executive rules. Moreover, several congressional republicans were quick to claim moves as 'job destroying,' a claim repeated on Fox News. While that opposition is not surprising, it highlights a real weakness in Biden's moves so far. His action has been overwhelmingly focused on unilateral executive orders.

Executive orders are not legislation, they are executive action which can be signed – and later revoked- by presidential action alone. They cannot replace legislation but rather allow the President to give guidance to federal agencies as part of his constitutional duty to 'take care that the laws be faithfully executed'. These orders have become absolutely central to climate and environmental politics in the US, especially in periods of divided power (one party holding power in Congress, the other the White House). Obama used them for his Clean Power Plan; Trump was far more zealous, signing dozens as part of his attempt to overturn or chip away swathes of measures designed to protect the environment and combat climate change.

But executive orders have neither the stability nor the durability of actual legislation. National legislation must be introduced and approved by Congress – it is far more difficult to overturn or reverse, and tends to endure even when opposition emerges and electoral fortunes change. Prospects for legislative change remain highly uncertain. Bills need the support of both Houses, and Democrat control of the Senate is razor thin (50–50 tie with Vice President Kamala Harris able to cast a tie-breaking vote). Nor are all of Biden's planned legislative proposals certain to receive all 50 Democratic votes. Senators from West Virginia and Arizona have already voiced concern about the reach of Biden's more ambitious climate proposals. Moreover, under current rules Senate legislation on most matters requires not a simple majority but a 'filibuster-busting' 60 votes. Filibusters allow the minority to stall or block legislative proposals. They are intended to underline the Senate's role as a more deliberative, consensus seeking chamber though they have not had that effect under recent administrations.

An important if temporary means around this institutional barrier is through the use of budget reconciliation measures which require only a simple majority in the Senate rather than the 60 votes needed to overcome the threat of filibuster. Such measures must be specific to budgets – they instruct congressional

committees to change spending, revenues or deficits by a specified amount. Biden and Congressional Democrats used this technique to pass the American Recovery Plan (APA) in March 2021 – a massive 1.9 USD trillion measure which included significant climate-related provisions such as funding for federal energy agencies, city and state environmental projects, and energy assistance for low-income households. Even bolder is Biden’s mammoth 2 USD trillion ‘American Jobs Plan’ which may also be passed under budget reconciliation rules. Nominally an infrastructure bill, it is infused with climate measures, including funding for research and development on ‘cutting-edge clean technology’, billions for public transport, re-training workers, retrofitting and weatherising buildings, electrifying vehicles, replacing lead pipes, and climate adaptation measures designed to make infrastructure more resilient to extreme weather events (White House 2021).

These recovery bills are not the same as the overarching climate bill desired by Biden, and there are limits. They need to be reviewed annually, and voting on them looks likely to be entirely along partisan lines – not a single Republican supported the APA. These do not, in other words, signal a move to a more bipartisan approach to climate policy. Republicans continue to bristle at what they say are Biden’s ‘radical’ rules undermining his promise of unity. Even so, if these recovery budget bills are deemed a success (they already are hugely popular with the public) and their climate-linked provisions take hold, it could well serve as the start of a larger transformation sought by Biden and his supporters. What will matter mightily is the success of Biden’s early policies and how they are supported by the public and voters. That timing matters because his party’s control of Congress might only last until the next midterm congressional election in November 2022.

Conclusion

This In Brief analysis has suggested that a change in US climate and environmental *legislation* might not be as radical as some environmental advocates would like. That legislative outcome is not due to a lack of presidential concern, but because of continued institutional barriers and partisan intransigence. We should expect Biden’s policy changes to focus more on budgetary, infrastructure or sector-specific regulatory measures and investment. We can also expect legal challenges and fierce partisan opposition. However, by linking climate to recovery and using the latter to introduce an ambitious swathe of climate-linked policy measures, the Biden Administration is attempting an important climate policy feat: embedding climate into legislation without passing climate legislation itself.

The election of the Biden presidency is also not just about legislative change. A new Administration can signal and set a new tone, one that can motivate actors already engaged with changing mindsets and markets. In these ways the US 2020

election did herald a radical departure in priorities and ambition. The signals sent by this Administration are unmistakable – climate matters and the US is engaged. It is now for other actors – movements, cities, states, markets, lawmakers and global partners – to seize on that opportunity and bring about the more fundamental, long-lasting shift required.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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