

CLIMATE CHANGE AT A CROSSROADS: WILL THE US ELECTION TRUMP THE PARIS AGREEMENT?



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Never has climate change been so present in the US elections as this time. During the 2012 electoral campaign, shale oil and gas attracted far more attention than the issue of climate change. During the 2008 electoral campaign, the Democratic and Republican positions on climate change were almost identical – with Barack Obama and his Republican opponent, John McCain, proposing a cap-and-trade plan to cut carbon emissions.

Things have changed much since then. The Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton is a strong proponent of climate change action. The Republican candidate Donald J. Trump, meanwhile, is not a big advocate of man-made climate change. What is more striking, however, is that the US electorate has varying perceptions of climate change. A survey conducted by Yale and George Mason universities reveals that 92% of Clinton supporters think that global warming is happening, whereas 44% of Trump supporters believe the contrary. What about the rest of Trump supporters? Interestingly, 55% of Trump supporters think that climate change is mostly caused by natural changes in the environment. Only 1% of Trump supporters believe in man-made climate change.

In the first electoral debate on September 26th 2016, Clinton accused Trump of believing climate change is a hoax created by the Chinese. The Republican candidate was caught by surprise and asserted that he had never said that. In a 2012 tweet, however, Trump claimed that “the concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive”. The issue of climate change, among others, was considered a crucial reason why Trump lost this first round of the electoral debates.

Beyond political talks, there is much more on climate change than meets the eye. Never have the stakes been so high. The future of an entire planet will be affected by this US race for president.

The global average temperature has already increased by almost 1.1°C. China and the US are the world's first and second largest emitters of carbon dioxide, accounting for 42% of global carbon emissions. In 2014,

China poured 9.68 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, with the US following with 5.56 billion.

Against the backdrop of the 2009 Copenhagen failure, the Obama administration put in place a diplomatic offensive in order to convince Beijing that the two largest economies and emitters in the world have a special responsibility to lead the fight against climate change. By means of climate diplomacy, China and the US came to a solid understanding. On November 12th 2014, President Barack Obama and President Xi Jinping announced an historic climate agreement in Beijing – with the US pledging to reduce carbon emissions by 26% to 28% below 2005 levels by 2025 and China committing to achieving peak carbon emissions around 2030 and to make its best efforts to peak early.

The US-China deal paved the way for the adoption of the Paris climate agreement on December 12th 2015 when 195 governments unanimously made a landmark agreement to limit global warming to well below 2°C and pursue efforts to stay within 1.5°C of pre-industrial levels. These targets will have to be accomplished through national plans (Nationally Determined Contributions, NDCs) and increased climate finance flows. The agreement also includes a mechanism for ratcheting up action every five years starting in 2018 and does not allow backsliding.

The US submitted its INDC to the United Nations on March 31st 2015. Its backbone is formed of Obama's Clean Power Plan, which aims to cut carbon emissions from power plants by one-third of 2005 levels by 2030. Power generation is the largest source of CO₂ in the US; hence, such a policy is crucial for US emission reductions. However, on February 9th 2016, the US Supreme Court put a temporary hold on Obama's Clean Power Plan: while four Democratic judges voted in favour, five Republican judges voted against it. If the Clean Power Plan is finally rejected, it might also undermine the landmark Paris Agreement. Without the Clean Power Plan, the US would not be able to meet its INDC pledges, which were prepared on the assumption that the Clean Power Plan would be implemented.

In an attempt to "lock in" its domestic and international climate strategy, the Obama administration made another early move along with its Chinese counterpart. On September 3rd 2016, the US and China deposited their respective instruments to join the Paris Agreement. For the Paris Agreement to enter into force, at least 55 countries accounting for no less than 55% of global emissions have to ratify, accept, approve or accede to it. This makes a significant contribution towards the early entry into force of the Paris Agreement before the end of this year.

The US election will have a huge impact on the future of Paris climate governance. There are three possible scenarios.

- **First scenario:** Clinton wins the race for president and takes Obama's legacy forward – domestically, bilaterally with China, and internationally. Low-carbon private investments, job creation, and technology development are scaled up. The US races against China and India to become a clean superpower.

- **Second scenario:** Trump wins the election but dismisses his political positions on climate change. At the international level, the Trump administration does not oppose the Paris Agreement, which is based on non-binding voluntary action at domestic level, after all. At domestic level, however, his administration is unlikely to implement Obama's policies. This leaves a question mark over whether the Trump administration would establish an alternative, credible and sound climate policy plan or simply continue with business as usual at the domestic level. This also poses questions about low-carbon private investments, job creation and technology development.
- **Third (worst-case) scenario:** Trump becomes president of the US but sticks to his beliefs against climate change. His administration makes a U-turn on domestic climate policy and dismisses the Paris Agreement. As a result of this, the entire global climate governance structure finds itself in peril.

To conclude, these three scenarios prompt questions about China as well as other emerging economies. What would China do on climate change if Trump was elected president?

