



Battling Climate Change in the Time of Trump

By John D. Podesta

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There is no way to sugarcoat the outcome of the 2016 election for anyone who cares about the health of our planet. President Donald Trump has made clear that he intends to pursue a special interest-driven agenda that would make climate change worse. Since the start of his administration, he has taken steps to increase America's dependence on oil, including foreign oil; eliminate limits on carbon pollution; and weaken vehicle efficiency standards at the expense of American families. His budget decimates scientific research and he selected an administrator for the Environmental Protection Agency, or EPA, who denies that carbon pollution is a main cause of climate change.

The Trump administration's anti-environmental agenda is, without question, a grave danger to the health of our children and grandchildren—and the health of our planet. But this threat alone is no reason to give up hope that we can still avert the most severe impacts of climate change. The energy and effectiveness of citizen activism suggests that the most damaging policies of the Trump administration can be stopped. And, as importantly, a review of the votes cast in the November election and the steps being taken by state and local leaders indicate an alternate path for climate action in the next four years.

The economy is voting for climate action

Winning the popular vote by more than 3 million ballots was not enough for Democrats to win the White House, but those votes nonetheless represent the voices of a majority of Americans. Public opinion research now consistently finds that most Americans believe climate change is a major problem and support steps to cut carbon pollution.¹ What's more, a recent Brookings Institution analysis found that the counties that Hillary Clinton won account for 64 percent of the United States' economic output.²

For those of us counting greenhouse gas emissions, the fact that nearly two-thirds of the U.S. economy voted for progressive leadership in November is more than significant. Governors of states that voted for Clinton, for example, are already stepping up to the challenge of battling climate change. In January of this year, Gov. Andrew Cuomo (D) of New York called on the states that make up the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative,

or RGGI, to lower their collective carbon pollution reduction target an additional 30 percent below 2020 levels by 2030. In California, Gov. Jerry Brown (D) has established the state as a global leader on climate action, adopting a cap and trade program, taking big steps to build a clean energy economy, and setting the aggressive reduction goal of 40 percent below 1990 levels by 2030.³ Gov. Brown also recently denounced the Trump administration's attacks on climate science and research and staked out California's leading role going forward in that aspect of progress.⁴

Even in states that President Trump won, elected officials are continuing to move aggressively to deliver climate change policies. Since the election, 71 mayors from across the country penned an open letter to President Trump, stating that they will continue to take "bold" climate action. Of that collection of mayors, 29 of them come from states that voted for President Trump.⁵ Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed (D), for example, called on fellow U.S. mayors to stand together to deliver on global climate goals and reaffirm commitments to local action.⁶ In addition to taking on a leadership role in the global coalition of more than 7,100 cities committed to the fight against climate change, Mayor Reed is working at the local level in Atlanta, including by launching the city's first solar initiative to reduce municipal energy consumption by up to 40 percent.⁷

Rampage against environmental laws

Make no mistake, though, the Trump administration presents an existential threat to the entire planet. Leadership on the state and local level may be able to bridge the gap at the federal level, but only for a period of time. The administration appears to be on a rampage against environmental laws that protect clean air, water, and our way of life. Since taking office, President Trump has signed more than seven executive orders, presidential memorandums, and bills that roll back environmental protections and prioritize giveaways to the fossil fuel industry. That number is expected to jump even higher in the coming days with an anticipated executive action aimed at undoing the Clean Power Plan, lifting a coal moratorium on public lands, throwing out consideration of climate change in federal decision-making, and making it easier to release the potent global warming pollutant, methane. The list of polluting actions, however, also includes eliminating a prohibition on bribery by oil companies, cutting limits on dumping of toxic mine waste in streams, and trying to make the United States more dependent on Canadian tar sands.

To say that the Trump administration is beholden to the corporate interests that benefit from eliminating environmental protections understates reality. This team stepped out of the boardroom into Washington, D.C. Recently, the White House released a statement⁸ that promoted Exxon and had significant portions that were identical to the statement Exxon itself released.⁹ Administrator Scott Pruitt's own emails show a close relationship with top polluters, such as Devon Energy and Koch Industries,

and illustrate deep coordination as the energy companies pushed through his office the policy outcomes they wanted.¹⁰ Pruitt brings these relationships with him to the EPA, the agency he sued 14 times as attorney general of Oklahoma. Joining him at the agency are staffers who have worked to propagate climate denial under infamous climate denier Sen. James Inhofe (R-OK) and the Koch-backed Freedom Partners.¹¹

The irreversible global shift to clean energy

Although the Trump administration's early actions serve as handouts to the fossil fuel industries, America's clean energy economy is now strong enough to withstand a short-term change in policy. President Barack Obama's dogged focus on emissions reductions will not be easily reversed either. Between 2008 and 2015, the United States' emissions dropped 9 percent even as the economy grew more than 10 percent.¹² Solar, wind, geothermal, and other renewable energy industries have grown substantially in terms of generation and jobs, becoming a fundamental part of the U.S. economy overall. Between 2008 and 2015, U.S. wind generating capacity nearly tripled and solar capacity—both concentrating and photovoltaic systems—grew by 23 times.¹³ For individuals, the cost of residential solar photovoltaic system has fallen to approximately one-third its cost in 1998, or from \$12.34 per watt to \$4.05 per watt.¹⁴ Wind power recently surpassed conventional hydropower as the nation's most significant renewable generation source.¹⁵ According to the U.S. Department of Energy's annual energy jobs report, renewable electricity generation employs nearly 547,000 people, with the solar industry employing nearly 374,000 of that total.¹⁶ The energy efficiency economy, which includes building professionals, efficient appliance manufacturers, energy service providers, and others, has reached more than 2.2 million workers across the country.¹⁷ None of the CEO's or leaders of these growing industries are represented in the fossil fuel-focused White House.

This shift toward clean energy is a global one. Countries around the world—including both developed and emerging economies—see that their future prosperity hinges on non-polluting energy. Thanks to the leadership of President Obama, more than 130 countries have now officially joined the Paris Agreement—a historic pact to reduce greenhouse gas pollution and build resilience to the destructive effects of climate change.¹⁸ These countries are not liable to reverse course in the wake of the U.S. election. In fact, all countries have reaffirmed their dedication to implement the Paris Agreement and more than 30 countries have officially joined the pact after the election of President Trump.¹⁹

It would be economic folly for the United States to turn its back on this global shift toward nonpolluting energy. Recognizing this, approximately 900 U.S. businesses and investors have now encouraged U.S. and global leaders to support the Paris Agreement and climate action.²⁰ If the United States cedes its leadership in the global movement to curb greenhouse gas pollution, other major powers, most notably China, are primed to dominate the coming clean energy economy.

In the meantime, global leaders who are serious about stopping climate change are more likely to visit governors' mansions in Sacramento, CA, or Albany, NY, than the White House. Elected officials there and in other states and localities understand that American leadership on clean energy means that U.S. workers will be creating, making, and selling technologies and products in developing and emerging markets.²¹ These sub-national level elected officials can themselves become leaders and have political clout in the international movement to combat climate change. Governors, mayors, and other elected officials can pick up the climate change mantle abandoned by the Trump administration and help the United States lead by example around the world. The challenge will be to organize the leadership that represents those jurisdictions that voted for strong action on climate change into a force that can counterbalance the lack of ambition from the United States at the federal level.

The growing resistance

As governors, mayors, clean energy leaders, and citizens continue to advance climate action domestically and internationally, it is equally important that, as Americans, we do all we can to stop the Trump administration and Republican leaders in Congress from implementing the most anti-environmental agenda in decades. The engagement and direct action being taken by individuals in every community in every state is nothing short of inspiring. Resistance works. From the Women's March in January to February's Day Without Immigrants, millions of Americans—especially young Americans—are making their voices heard.

Notably, a significant percentage of the Millennial generation failed to show up to vote last November, yet their understanding of the dangers of climate change presents some cause for hope: They believe that the climate is changing. An October, 2016 poll from the University of Texas at Austin found that “[m]ore than 9 out of 10 survey respondents (91 percent) under age 35 say climate change is occurring compared to 74 percent of those age 65 older.”²² The Harvard Institute of Politics released a poll in April of 2015 that had similar results, showing that, “3 in 4 millennials believe global warming is a fact.”²³ If this generation now understands that their votes or their decisions not to vote have consequences and turns out in the coming years to express their determination to combat climate change, the Trump administration and its climate denying allies will soon be a brief chapter in the history books.

Two upcoming governor's races will provide a glimpse into how the resistance we are witnessing translates to results at the ballot box. Both New Jersey and Virginia have off-year gubernatorial elections in 2017. Virginia can be a bellwether for greater sentiment across the country. The year after President Obama's historic election when Democrats swept into power across all chambers of government, Virginians elected Republican Bob McDonnell to be governor by a 17-point margin.²⁴ Hillary Clinton won the state 49.8 percent to Trump's 44.4 percent, showing there is a strong Democratic base. However,

the state retains deep ties to fossil fuels, with coal mines making up close to 2 percent of U.S. production, its ports shipping over one-third of all U.S. coal exports, and some oil and gas production in its southwestern counties.²⁵

Hillary Clinton also won New Jersey but by a greater margin, 55 percent to 41 percent. New Jersey's economy is not strongly tied to fossil fuels, but it has suffered the slowest economic growth in the nation for the past few years.²⁶ Although the races for these governors' mansions are still taking shape, they will likely become referenda on what is happening in Washington, D.C., and in some measure, the anti-environmental policies being pursued by the Trump administration. The results of these races could be a preview for the congressional midterms in 2018 and send a powerful signal to climate deniers, at all levels of government, that they will be held accountable for their out-of-the-mainstream views.

What's on the line

One cannot overstate the stakes in this fight to defend climate policies and to continue progress at the city, state, and international level. President Trump's own Secretary of Defense James Mattis has acknowledged climate change as a "threat multiplier," and has called on the military to "unleash us from the tether of fuel," according to past reports.²⁷ Other national intelligence experts are also concerned that conflict regions around the world increasingly share similar problems because of political, economic, and social instability exacerbated by climate change.²⁸ The most recent and high-profile example of climate's destabilizing force on the world is the Syrian refugee crisis. The historic drought affecting Syria between 2006 and 2009 left entire regions without food and water, making worse the perilous circumstances there and contributing to violence that forced people from their homes.²⁹

Here at home, the Office of Management and Budget, or OMB, released a report last November that identified climate change as a serious fiscal risk to the federal government. The report calculated that sea-level rise and extreme weather will drive up annual federal disaster recovery costs in coastal areas by \$19 billion by 2050 and by \$50 billion by 2075.³⁰

The truth is that President Trump has taken climate change into account for his own properties. Trump's Ireland golf resort filed a permit application to build a sea wall, citing "global warming and its effects."³¹ In Palm Beach, where Trump's home Mar-a-Lago sits on the water's edge, elected officials expect that sea levels in the region may increase by seven inches by 2030 and two feet by 2060.³²

Conclusion

Though President Trump can choose to ignore climate change and line the pockets of oil, gas, and coal executives, most Americans know that, as a nation, we do not have the luxury of arguing the politics or putting our heads in the sand. It is therefore on all of us—local leaders, state leaders, campus leaders, and citizens—to find optimism in the reality that we can find paths to progress, even as we fight, every day, to stop the Trump administration from selling out our planet and our future.

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