

Red, White, Blue, and Green: High Politics

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The Climate Change Challenge

There are already some signs of positive change around the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. President Bush himself, in the 2007 State of the Union address, recognized for the first time that climate change exists and is a problem. Of course, these are only words, but we must keep in mind that before this public admission, the very existence of climate change was in doubt. Conservative think tanks, such as the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute and the Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI), have spent a large amount of time and resources casting doubts on any scientific reports which supported the existence of climate change. Indeed, groups dominated by the Republicans, such as the CEI, lobbied against the Kyoto Protocol. Though they were not fully successful, Kyoto was never ratified.

Retool and Rethink

The issue of climate change has become an icon of the United States' lackluster global participation, in contrast with the lead role taken on by the European Union in global affairs. This would not be a major problem for the U.S., since it is not the first time that it has refused to cooperate, particularly within the context of the United Nations. But if we add to this the anti-American sentiments found in almost every country in the world, the fiasco in Iraq, the financial world's rejection of the dollar and the looming recession, the United States' global reputation becomes an argument worth worrying about.

Fortunately, through association with a series of related ideas, including energy conservation, energy independence, the rising price of oil and the invasion of Iraq, climate change has now become a security issue for the U.S.

There are already a few tentative steps which reflect a change. In Bali at the end of last year, the U.S. despite initial resistance agreed to a watered-down consensus for a new treaty to reduce carbon emissions. This treaty is intended to replace the Kyoto Protocol as of 2012, and it includes measures to preserve tropical forests and help poor countries adapt to a greener economy. This last-minute agreement - although "light" since it does not include tough limits on emission reduction or the *carbon caps* of climate change jargon, and is based mainly on planting "*sink*", trees which absorb carbon - can at least be seen as a step forward.

Another sign of change is the large number of climate change initiatives presented to the Senate and Congress. Of course, to date few of them have passed in Bush's rarified milieu, but the post-electoral predictions for 2009 are good. Due in part to the impetus of the Democratic leadership in the Senate and Congress following the legislative elections of November 2006, over 54 initiatives have been presented: there is a bit of everything among them, from lukewarm measures such as financing scientific research on alternative energy, through voluntary reduction measures to imposing an obligatory cap, and even more radical measures such as carbon taxes. Furthermore, these initiatives are not only originating from the Democratic party, there are also mixed and Republican ones. For example, even senator McCain has proposed a bill to cut greenhouse gases.

California provides further proof of shifting U.S. attitudes towards climate change. The Assembly bill 32 passed in September 2006 is the first law in the Americas which imposes legal limits on carbon emissions and aims to reduce greenhouse gases by 25% by the year 2020 and 80% by the year 2050.

Inspiration Before Perspiration

Shifting attitudes toward climate change have been an important factor for the introduction of climate change policies in the United States. The Stern Report of 2006, an essentially economic document, played a vital role in this: it demonstrated that without an immediate, minor effort (representing spending of perhaps only 1% of the GNP) future sacrifices would be enormous and could lead to a decline in the world economy of up to 20%.

Prior to this, the perception of climate change was determined by the damages and high costs for industries which had to exchange traditional technologies for others which used less polluting energy sources. But a new vision is beginning to spread, which tends to see climate change as a business opportunity for clean technologies. This view no longer calculates the damages, but rather the benefits which could be gained by the new technologies on the world market. One example is biofuels which, despite how controversial they are environmentally, are already produced and heavily subsidized in the USA. Other technologies being developed in the U.S. today include solar energy, wind energy, fuel-cells powered by hydrogen and new carbon capturing technologies.

However, the new renewable technologies have little value if a price is not put on carbon. This relies on the creation of a carbon market, which itself requires a federal law to impose a cap on industrial CO₂ emissions. Nowadays,

organizations and companies which used to be the main opponents of any regulation of emissions, such as Edison Electric Institute, U.S. Climate Action Partnership, GM, GE, BP, Alcan and Alcoa, are considering accepting federal policies of this kind. This gives rise to optimism regarding the promotion of regulation on climate change, starting in the United States, then extending all around the world.

Nixing the Naysayers

The main argument of Kyoto naysayers is that the United States should not participate in any agreement which is not valid for all countries, including notorious polluters such as China, India, Brazil and Mexico.

This is, at the very least a fallacy, but may also be deceiving. Those opposed to Kyoto, claim that in a few years China will emit more greenhouse gases than the United States. What they do not take into account, is that the main worry of climate change is the amount of emissions created by each person through his or her economic activity. Therefore, emissions must not be measured in total quantities, but rather per capita. If emissions are measured in this way, China is in 122nd place and India is in 164th on the list of the main greenhouse gas emitters in the world, while the United States heads every list of emitters: per capita, total quantity and total throughout history. In addition, it would be illogical to ask India, where a large part of the population still lives without electricity, to make the same energy reduction sacrifices as the United States, the principal consumer in the world.

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The subject of climate change has become an important issue in the current presidential campaign, which is unusual for an environmental issue. All

of the candidates with the greatest chances of becoming president of the United States are in favor of federal action to combat climate change, although with differences in scope. This is in response to a greater concern on the part of most citizens: Democrats, Republicans or Independents, for climate change due to its close relationship to the increasing cost of imported oil from the Middle East and therefore, the war.

Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama support an 80% emission reduction by 2050 while McCain supports a 65% reduction; Obama supports an increase in the car fuel-economy standard to 40 mpg, Clinton sometimes supports this and sometimes not, while McCain only supports an increase to 35 mpg. Obama proposes to channel 50% of the health care savings to research clean technologies for cars. Clinton suggests the creation of a \$US50 billion fund for the research and development of alternative energy. McCain summed up the feelings of all election frontrunners when he stated during his campaign that the issue of climate change and fuel independence is a question of national interest.

There is no doubt that with the end of Bush's presidency, there will be some federal action on climate change. Whether or not the United States will take on the obligations of a future Kyoto 2 will depend in part, on who becomes the next President. Obama is the most likely, followed by Clinton and McCain. Since climate change is linked to international reputation, it is important for the future President of the United States to foster a favorable atmosphere with a focus on environmental action and solidarity with developing countries.