An analysis of the United States' approach to international climate policy

POL23300 Climate Politics: International, National and Local Dimensions

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1 Introduction

This paper will look at the United States as global actor regarding international climate policy, examining the positions it has taken in international conferences and the internal political circumstances under which they came about. As such, this paper is split into two sections; an account of the US's stance in previous COPs (Kyoto, Copenhagen and Paris), and an analysis of likely negotiating positions of US delegations in the upcoming COP25 in Madrid.

2 International engagement

The US is a central player in international climate negotiations due to it having the largest GDP (14.2% of the global GDP Fund [2019]) and the second largest share of GHG emissions (14% in 2017 Muntean *et al.* [2018]) among attending parties, as well as having considerable soft power with which it can influence other countries' stances.

Though the US is a hugely important actor in climate negotiations, it is also an incredibly fickle one owing to the structure of its democracy, which following the separation of powers principle, operates government through three branches; the legislative branch, the executive branch and the judicial branch. The former and the latter are consensus based and change relatively slowly, but the views of the executive branch are greatly influenced by the president, who can be replaced from one day to the next after an election. This means that the US' approach to international climate policy can change dramatically between presidencies.

2.1 Kyoto

The Kyoto Protocol was negotiated at COP3 in Kyoto, with Vice President Al Gore playing a crucial role in striking a last-minute deal Harrison [2010]. The US wanted flexibility mechanisms in the deal to make it easier for domestic business to comply, but to get them, it had to find a compromise with the EU. This, along with a negotiation strategy focused on reductions relative to 1990 rather than ones relative to projected emissions in 2010, meant that the US ended up taking deep cuts compared to the 'business as usual' case. On the other hand, the EU got less ambitious targets in return, since its targets dropped to be more in line with the US ones. This benefitted the EU twice over since the measurements were now more flexible, and their cuts were lighter too.

Despite the deal being negotiated by Vice President Gore, the COP3 conference was held towards the end of the Clinton presidency, and Bush moved into office quickly after. The political environment in the US was very hostile to the Kyoto protocol by this point, with an administration that heavily deprioritized climate issues, and with the Byrd-Hagel resolution, which ruled out ratifying any treaty that didn't require the same GHG cuts from developing countries as it did of developed countries Harrison [2010].

This law is indicative of an interesting dynamic of US national politics, in that unlike other democracies such as in the UK, the main parties do not hold great sway on the voting behaviour of individual politicians, who are often highly invested in local interests such as supporting the local economy and local businesses. The fact that the law passed through the house is indicative of the fact that many democrats from states with a heavy fossil fuel or car industry presence, were against climate legislation on the grounds that it would harm their local economies, despite their party's official stance being pro-regulation.

2.2 Copenhagen

The Copenhagen conference took place in 2009, and was attended by hundreds of heads of state, including the newly elected President Obama, keen to present the US as a leader on climate change after the Bush era Parker and Karlsson [2018]. Unfortunately, the Copenhagen conference was a divided affair, with BASIC countries (Brasil, South Africa, India and China) meeting together and deciding to veto any binding agreement with specific targets.

The US decided to support the BASIC group's stance in the hope of getting at a deal with reduced scope, as opposed to no deal at all. Unfortunately, the deal was so weak, that it was rejected by many states, and no deal was signed.

2.3 Paris

In the years since the Copenhagen accord, the US had continued to deepen its partnership with China on climate issues, culminating in climate cooperation announcements that were intended to set the scene for global action in the COP21 in Paris. The thinking by the Obama administration, was that if the world's two biggest emitters were shown to be prepared to take action well in advance of the conference, then other delegations would be inspired to do similar House [2014].

The US then went on to play a crucial role in facilitating a strong agreement in Paris; a group of states called the High-Ambition Coalition were pushing for an ambitious agreement, which was opposed by developing countries such as China and India. The US elected to join the High Ambition Coalition, which helped prevent the agreement being watered down in terms of its mechanisms to ensure compliance Parker and Karlsson [2018].

With the election of Donald Trump, the US's international stance swung wildly again, with the US signaling its intent to pull out of the Paris agreement (though not pulling out of the UNFCCC). This further serves to demonstrate the fickleness of US climate policy as a result of a highly polarised political class, and the fact that many policy decisions are set directly by the executive.

Of course, as well as pulling out of the Paris agreement, Trump has also enacted a large swathe of policies aimed at boosting the national economy at the expense of the country's climate targets, including massive investment in fracking for natural gas, reducing funding for institutions such as the IPCC, NASA and the EPA (which will reduce the capacity of US institutions to engage with the climate regime), and stopped action to reduce emissions from the power generation sector Elkerbout [2017].

3 Expectations for COP25

The political climate in the US is highly polarised, with the Democrats being broadly in favour of climate action, and the Republicans being broadly against. Since the US currently has a Republican President, who doesn't believe in climate change, expectations for the US are particularly low at this COP. That said, the US remains a powerful player in negotiations; it has a huge economy which contributes massively to global GHG emissions, and vast amounts of soft power too.

One interesting aspect of the US as a delegate, is that owing to the bifurcated views of its political class regarding climate, there will a shadow delegation from the US attending COP25 in a non-official capacity. Similarly to COP23 and COP24, it will be made up of prominent US politicians and public figures who are keen for the US to take a leadership role in international climate negotiations, individual states such as California, cities such as New York, large businesses, and even US negotiators from previous presidencies when the US was more amenable to action.

Though unable to negotiate on the behalf of the US, the shadow delegation represents a large swathe of the US that is prepared to act in the absence of federal support, a feature of the multi-level and devolved governance structure of the Government. This serves to provide motivation to other parties at the conference, showing that the US can still take action on a sub-federal level despite the actions of the executive, and depending on the outcome of the next elections in 2020, the US could flip back into being a climate leader rather than a climate laggard again.

3.1 Negotiation strategies

Therefore, since both delegations from the US attending COP25 have different motivations and goals, what would be an appropriate negotiation strategy for each delegation?

Though there is little appetite for action from the current US administration, the view of the now departed Rex Tillerson (Secretary of State, February 2017 to March 2018) continues to hold; that the US should always have a seat at the table for climate negotiations Elkerbout [2017]. This allows the US several advantages over and above simply leaving the negotiations altogether; it's easier for the US to re-enter negotiations if political appetite for change increases, by being present at the negotiations, US diplomats can observe them first hand. In doing so, they can potentially reinforce the view of the executive that developing countries should have the same emissions reductions targets as developed countries (though this is certainly not a majority viewpoint within UNFCCC members).

A more aggressive and destructive negotiating strategy for the official delegation could be to curry favour with, and support, countries that are currently opposed to action such as Saudi Arabia or Brasil. This would of course be a massive setback for the negotiations as a whole, but would give the US administration an opportunity to further support the old fossil-nuclear regime on an international level.

Meanwhile, the US shadow delegation will be unable to participate in the conference itself, and as such can have little direct influence on its proceedings. Consequently, their goal could be to show the extent of support for the climate regime that remains within the US, despite the highly opposed administration, and possibly to provide logistical and strategic support to other nations.

It is likely that the shadow delegation will set up a stand outside the conference, which will aim to emphasise the amount of US support for climate action, in the face of the administration's apathy. It could highlight the fact that the shadow delegation will represent 287 cities and ten states from the US In [2019]. In terms of providing support, the delegation could, for example, take the form of providing access to some Obama-era diplomats who could help other negotiating teams develop effective strategies.

4 Conclusion

To summarise, the US has played a variety of roles in climate negotiations since the inception of the climate regime, with its appetite for leadership largely determined by the views of the White House at the time. The upcoming COP25 is unlikely to be any different, with the incumbent administration unwilling to engage with the climate regime, yet despite that, there is a significant appetite for action within the US electorate, as is shown by the strength of the US shadow delegation that is due to attend in lieu of a strong official delegation.

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