

Keyword: climate-change

Headline: Why US polls are critical for climate change

Byline: By Ludwig O. Federigan

Published Date: October 31, 2020

Section: business

Word Count: 1134

Content:

In three days, the most powerful nation in the world — the United States — will elect its leader. A toss-up between the President Donald Trump, a Republican, and his challenger, former vice-president Joe Biden, a Democrat, the new leader will either continue or have the change to lead the most dominant economic and military power. He will eventually shape the lives of 327 million Americans and influence billions worldwide.

Trump, on June 1, 2017, announced that “the United States will cease all implementation of the non-binding Paris Accord and the draconian financial and economic burdens the agreement imposes on our country.” In a statement released by the White House the same day stated, “this includes ending the implementation of the nationally determined contribution and, very importantly, the Green Climate Fund which is costing the United States a vast fortune.”

Subsequently, on Nov. 4, 2019, the Trump administration formally notified the United Nations that it would withdraw the United States from the Paris Agreement on climate change. This is a complete turnaround from the gains of the Obama administration.

Lest we forget, during the United Nations Climate Change Conference in November 2015, then-President Barack Obama, in his remarks titled “A world that is worthy for our children,” he said that accepting this challenge — referring to the Paris Agreement — will not reward us with moments of victory that are clear and quick. He added “our progress will be measured differently — in the suffering that is averted, and a planet that’s preserved. And that’s what’s always made this so hard.”

The outcome of the forthcoming election will determine the continued participation of the US in the Paris accord.

The US should remain responsible

Commitments through the Nationally Determined Contributions to the Paris Agreement require unequivocal global cooperation. As the deadline of midnight of Dec. 31, 2020 is almost on our doorstep, we expect developed and industrialized countries to deliver more ambitious on emission reductions to keep climate change within relatively safe limits.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was very clear — anything beyond 1.5 degrees Celsius even half a degree of warming will significantly worsen the risks to health, livelihoods, food security, water supply, human security and economic growth. To rein global warming at 1.5 degrees Celsius, global net carbon dioxide emissions should be cut by 45 percent by 2030 from 2010 levels and achieve de-carbonization of “net zero” by mid-century. Based on current global emission reduction commitments, we are headed toward an uninhabitable 3-degrees Celsius world by 2100.

We have emitted over a trillion tonnes of carbon dioxide (CO₂) since 1751. With the objective of the Paris Agreement limiting the average temperature rise way below 2 degrees Celsius, we need to urgently reduce global emissions. One common argument on the table is that those countries which have added most to the CO₂ in the atmosphere —contributing the most to our ecological situation — should take on the greatest responsibility in addressing it.

To date, the US has emitted more CO₂ than any other country. It is responsible for 25 percent of historical emissions — at around 400 billion tonnes since 1751. Next is the European Union (EU) consisting of 28 countries having a combined contribution of 22 percent.

In a report by the World Resources Institute, the US, EU and China are now the top three greenhouse gas emitters contributing more than half of total global emissions while the bottom 100 countries only account for 3.5 percent. Collectively, the top 10 emitters account for nearly three-quarters of global emissions.

The withdrawal of the United States from the Paris Agreement — if and when it happens — will push other industrialized nations to press emerging powers for more commitments.

Industrialized countries like the US are classified as Annex 1 party of the Paris Agreement.

Other major polluters like China need to step up. As a developing country, China agreed to be part of the Paris Agreement because the US was taking action.

Another Trump administration

On Nov. 4, 2020, the day after the election, the US is officially withdrawn from the Paris Agreement. Trump's announcement a year ago sent a strong message that the US no longer shared our common fight against climate change.

Aside from the withdrawal, the Trump administration, according to the Sabin Center for Climate Change Law of the Columbia Law School, has scaled back or wholly eliminated over 160 federal climate mitigation and adaptation measures.

All attempts to scaled back on environmental regulations are part of the agenda to accord less importance to climate change and, at the same time, do everything to continue to degrade climate science. And if Trump is reelected, the practice will continue.

Known climate scientist Michael Mann said: "Another four years of what we have seen under Trump, which is to outsource environmental and energy policy to the polluters and dismantle protections put in place by the previous administration would make that essentially impossible."

Hence, achieving the central goal of the Paris Agreement may no longer be certain.

A Biden presidency

Biden, who called "climate change as the number one issue facing humanity," outlined his bold plan to address the growing threats of climate change and lead the world in addressing the climate emergency. He sees the US urgently needs to embrace greater ambition on an epic scale to meet the scope of this challenge and that the environment and economy are completely and totally connected.

Among others, Biden's plans include:

- Ensure the US achieves 100-percent clean energy economy and reaches net-zero emissions no later than 2050;

- Build a stronger, more resilient nation by making smart infrastructure investments and ensure that our buildings, water, transportation, and energy infrastructure can withstand the impacts of climate

change;

- Rally the rest of the world to meet the threat of climate change;
- Stand up to the abuse of power by polluters who disproportionately harm communities of color and low-income communities; and
- Fulfill our obligation to workers and communities who powered our industrial revolution and subsequent decades of economic growth.

Foremost to his plan is to rejoin the Paris Agreement and to reclaim leadership to lead us to, in the words of Obama, “a world that is worthy of our children; a world that is marked not by conflict, but by cooperation; and not by human suffering, but by human progress; a world that’s safer, and more prosperous, and more secure, and more free than the one that we inherited.”

The author is the executive director of the Young Environmental Forum and a nonresident fellow of the Stratbase ADR Institute. He completed his climate change and development course at the University of East Anglia (United Kingdom) and an executive program on sustainability leadership at Yale University (USA). You can reach him at ludwig.federigan@gmail.com.