

DAILY COMMENT

# THE MIDTERM RESULTS BRING AN AIR OF RELIEF TO THE COP27 CLIMATE SUMMIT

*American politics is planetary politics.*



By Bill McKibben

November 10, 2022



The main entrance to the COP27 climate summit, held in Egypt, which has become, under Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's Presidency, an increasingly repressive state. Photograph by Joseph Eid / AFP / Getty

The United Nations' COP27 climate summit, in Sharm el-Sheikh, on the Egyptian coast, is meeting in a vast convention center marooned along a dusty stretch of desert and filled with



pavilions devoted to governments, companies, and N.G.O.s all proclaiming what they're doing to save the Earth. Look over one shoulder, and there's an enormous screen showing video of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, of India, noting that recycling has always been a tradition in that country; glance in the other direction, and there's a metaverse booth announcing that the virtual world is helping in the fight against climate change. Many thousands of people rush between seminars and press conferences and plenary sessions, as part of an earnest annual hustle and bustle that somehow almost always manages to accomplish very little.

On Wednesday morning, though, there was one topic on many minds: the U.S. midterm-election results. People flagged me down, since I am apparently recognizable as an American, to offer congratulations, in many accents, about John Fetterman's victory in his Senate race in Pennsylvania, and to ask if Kevin McCarthy will end up as Speaker of the House, and to generally breathe a sigh of relief that the election had not produced the predicted red wave. (Since we are on the Red Sea, there was no end of puns.)



It's a reminder that American elections matter in many ways—that who carries a stretch of the northern Virginia suburbs, or a tract of Orange County, is necessarily of interest to much of the world. Remember, work on climate change stalled for four long years, particularly after Donald Trump announced that he was pulling the United States out of the Paris climate accord. And Senator Joe Manchin, of West Virginia, sank hopes for last year's gathering, in Glasgow, by refusing to support President Biden's Build Back Better package. Manchin's willingness to sign off on the shrunk-down Inflation Reduction Act was the most positive climate development of this year, and delegates in Egypt feared that an emboldened, resurgent right-wing Congress might, in turn, try to sabotage that. (The rest of the world has to pay attention to obscure American political customs, such as using the debt ceiling for extortionary purposes.) So Wednesday's sigh of relief was entirely palpable.

That was particularly true at the Ukrainian pavilion, a small affair that is all the more moving for its modesty. (It's the first time that Ukraine has had a booth of its own at the annual climate

gathering.) The main exhibit is a small section of a tree trunk full of wartime shrapnel from Irpin, outside Kyiv. In a video address to the summit on Tuesday, President Volodymyr Zelensky said, “There can be no effective climate policy without the peace.” And when that peace comes, he promises, in a wall-mounted quote in the pavilion, Ukraine will go big on “green hydrogen.” Svitlana Romanko, a longtime Ukrainian climate activist who has become a key spokesperson on the link between fossil fuels and Putinism, was relieved, too, hoping that, even if the Republicans do win control of the House, their margin will be too slim to empower isolationist members to cut off aid to Ukraine. There was also a fair amount of giddiness in the conference center over last month’s electoral defeat of Jair Bolsonaro, whose term as President of Brazil has been devastating for the Amazon.

The general pro-democracy spirit couldn’t temper the fact, though, that cop27 is meeting in what has become, under Abdel Fattah El-Sisi’s Presidency, an increasingly repressive state. The largest demonstration so far has been in support of the jailed British-Egyptian pro-democracy activist Alaa Abd El-Fattah, who over the weekend escalated his hunger strike, refusing even water. His sister took the opportunity of the U.N. auspices to hold a press conference to try to bring attention to his case, which developed into a kerfuffle when an Egyptian legislator tried to shout her down and was escorted away by U.N. security. Naomi Klein, who wrote the foreword to a collection of Abd El-Fattah’s writing, has been tweeting about how authoritarian Egypt’s government has become—and how it has led a push for a series of potentially environmentally harmful building projects.

In other ways, this summit does feel a little less chilly than last year’s. Even the Chinese envoy, though still fuming about Nancy Pelosi’s trip to Taiwan in August, acknowledged that he and his American counterpart had begun informal talks, healing at least a bit of the rupture that threatened their budding joint efforts.

But, if there’s a small springtime for democracy, or at least diplomacy, it likely won’t extend far enough to yield much real action on what’s emerged as the main theme of these talks: “loss and damage”—in effect, payments to poor countries for the damage inflicted by the carbon emissions of the Global North. No one makes a very cogent argument against such payments, because the numbers are so stark: Somalis, who learned recently from forecasters that they may have to suffer through a sixth straight dry rainy season, emit about a three-hundredth as much carbon as Americans, and yet they are paying a far higher price. The anger of the Africans at this African cop is very real, and it will intensify as the two-week session wears on, but even the most optimistic reading of the U.S. election does not, I think, produce much hope that Congress will suddenly decide that it should offer what amounts to reparations—not to African Americans, and very much not to Africans.

Who knows why Americans voted as they did? Explanations have ranged from the slight downturn in gas prices to Donald Trump’s proposal, which he floated on Monday, that drug dealers be summarily executed after short trials. Some people may well have voted on climate change: the exit polls indicated a surge of Gen Z voters plumping for the Democrats, and there are very few issues

that matter more to that demographic. But even those young people probably weren't thinking that their vote would matter in Egypt. For better and for worse, however, it's a very small world. Or at least a very narrow envelope of atmosphere. ♦



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