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Climate Change Politics in the United States: Melting of the Ice

Abstract: This article examines the efforts of the Obama administration and many other actors—ranging from non-governmental organizations, municipalities, and state governments to some Congressional representatives—to put the United States back on track towards international climate leadership. Efforts to shift policy direction, however, still face many hurdles. Over the course of the better part of a decade or more, climate skeptics and policy change opponents were able to seed doubt about the urgency of the issue in the public's mind, establish new organizations and strategies to fight against climate action, and institutionalize serious obstacles to meaningful policy change.

1. Introduction

The election of Barack Obama was accompanied by high expectations for a change in U.S. climate change policy. And indeed, compared with the eight years of the George W. Bush administration that withdrew the United States from the Kyoto Protocol, the United States under the Obama administration has been far more actively engaged with the international climate negotiations. Under the Bush presidency, the United States and the European Union frequently clashed on environmental matters, including on climate change, genetically modified foods, regulation of chemicals, and product standards (Schreurs/Selin/VanDeveer 2009; Keleman/Vogel 2010). Under the Obama presidency, the White House has made its support for action on a range of environmental issues, including climate change, chemical regulations, endangered species protection, and wilderness conservation clear.

The Copenhagen climate negotiations in December 2009 were widely viewed by environmentalists as a failure. Yet, in terms of U.S. involvement, it was a dramatic break with the practices of the previous years. Both Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton traveled to Copenhagen. The last time a U.S. president was present at one of the international climate negotiating sessions was in 1992 when George H. W. Bush attended the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, also known as the Earth Summit. At the Earth Summit, the senior Bush announced that the United States would not sign the Biodiversity Convention and also blocked efforts to introduce bind-

ing emission targets in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. In contrast, in Copenhagen Clinton and Obama came in with a one, two act. Clinton first announced U.S. plans to work with other nations to create a \$100 billion climate fund by 2020 to help developing countries adapt to climate change. While the commitment was left vague, including in terms of the share of the U.S. contribution and how precisely the funds were to be raised, it suggested a U.S. willingness to engage. A few days later, President Obama pledged the United States to about a 17 percent reduction on 2005 greenhouse gas levels by 2020 contingent upon Congressional passage of domestic climate legislation. While this is equivalent to less than a 4 percent reduction below 1990 levels (compare this with the EU commitment to reduce by 20 percent of 1990 levels by 2020), it represented an important effort to reengage the United States in the climate issue.

This article examines the efforts of the Obama administration and many other actors—ranging from non-governmental organizations, municipalities, and state governments to some Congressional representatives—to put the United States back on track towards international environmental leadership in the climate change area. Efforts to shift policy direction, however, still face many hurdles. Over the course of the better part of a decade or more, climate skeptics and policy change opponents were able to seed doubt about the urgency of the issue in the public's mind, establish new organizations and strategies to fight against climate action, and institutionalize serious obstacles to meaningful policy change. In many ways, the climate divide within the United States is reflective of many other deep ideological divides that increasingly define U.S. political culture. Making progress on climate policy has proven difficult and complicated. Still, there are signs of change.

2. George W. Bush's Anti-Kyoto Politics

George W. Bush made his dislike of the Kyoto Protocol clear early on in his campaign to become president. In a speech in September 2000, he pledged that he would regulate carbon dioxide emissions from power plants seeding some hope that he might take some domestic steps towards reducing emissions. And once he was elected president, his newly appointed Environmental Protection Administration Director, Christine Todd Whitman assured her G8 counterparts at a summit in Trieste, Italy in early March that “the president has said global climate change is the greatest environmental challenge that we face and that we must recognize that and take steps to move forward”. She announced that the president would work on bi-partisan legislation to limit carbon dioxide from U.S. power plants.¹ Europe reacted with cautious optimism. Yet, this optimism proved to be misdirected as were Whitman's assurances to her European counterparts.

¹ CNN, *Climate Talks Secure U.S. Support*, <http://archives.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/europe/italy/03/04/environment.climate/index.html>.

In the United States, domestic opponents to the agreement had the ear of the new president. Vice President Dick Cheney announced days after Whitman had left her European counterparts feeling more hopeful, that the White House did “not support the approach of the Kyoto treaty”. Then in a March 13 letter to four Republican Senators, Bush stated that he did not think “that the government should impose on power plants mandatory emissions reductions for carbon dioxide, which is not a ‘pollutant’ under the Clean Air Act”.² He also reconfirmed his opposition to the Kyoto Protocol “because it exempts 80 percent of the world, including major population centers such as China and India, from compliance, and would cause serious harm to the US economy”.³ On March 28 President Bush pronounced his determination to withdraw the United States from the Kyoto Protocol. His announcement coincided with German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder’s first visit to Washington to meet with the new president. As far as Bush was concerned, the Kyoto Protocol was an ill-designed agreement as it did not demand any commitments from developing countries and set unrealistic emission reduction targets that would put a strangle hold on the U.S. economy. Ari Fleischer, Press Secretary to the President confirmed a few days later in a press briefing: “The President has been unequivocal. He does not support the Kyoto treaty.”⁴

The sudden U.S. announcement was received with considerable indignation and disbelief throughout Europe although there were also some voices calling the move a show of realism given that it was unrealistic that the U.S. could meet its reduction target in the time remaining. When the Kyoto Protocol entered into force on February 16, 2005, it was ratified by 141 countries; the United States was not one of them.

3. Climate Initiatives during the Bush White House

International criticism of the US response to the Kyoto Protocol was intense. Under pressure, the Bush White House developed a climate policy. The Bush government announced that the United States would introduce a voluntary greenhouse gas reduction target: a reduction in greenhouse gas intensity by 18% of 2002 levels by 2012. This target basically equates to an energy efficiency improvement target. The level was set too low to lead to any reduction in aggregate emissions, however. In fact, although between 2002 and 2007 greenhouse gas intensity dropped by an average of 2.1 percent per annum and there was a total emission intensity reduction of 9.8 percent and a general stabilization in emissions levels, emissions were 14.5% higher in 2007 than 1990. This compares with

² U.S. Department of State, International Information Programs, *Bush Will Not Require Power Plants to Reduce Carbon Emissions; Letter to Senators Reiterates Opposition to Kyoto Protocol*, (George W. Bush letter dated March 13, 2001, cite created December 2, 2003), [http://usinfo.state.gov/gi/Archive/2003/Dec 02 50965.html.s](http://usinfo.state.gov/gi/Archive/2003/Dec%2002%50965.html.s).

³ Ibid..

⁴ Ari Fleischer, *Press Briefing*, March 28, 2001, The White House, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/briefings/20010328.html>.

a 5 percent reduction during this same time period for the 15 countries of the European Union bound by the Kyoto Protocol (Schreurs et al. 2009).

Beyond this, the Bush administration focused some attention on research and development of new technologies. Thus, they introduced a climate change technology program, a climate change science program, and a hydrogen fuel initiative. In addition, they began to pursue bilateral and smaller regional climate dialogues. An important initiative in this area was the Asia Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate Change.⁵ These programs focused on voluntary measures and research and development. They did not ask industry or households to take steps to reduce their carbon dependence. In many ways, this period represents a lost decade in terms of meaningful climate action.

4. Policy Framing

How issues are framed can strongly influence policy perceptions and outcomes. Lobby groups spend much time and money trying to shape perceptions and frame debates (Baumgartner et al. 2009). The media is an important transmitter of policy messages. “The White House, its supporters, and its critics peddle their messages to the press in hopes of gaining political leverage. The media’s political influence arises from how they respond—from their ability to frame the news in ways that favor one side over another.” (Entman 2004, 4–5)

Environmental skeptics have worked hard to portray climate change in the media as an uncertain science. They have poured money into campaigns aimed at making the public and policy makers believe that the costs of taking action on climate change would have strongly adverse impacts on jobs and the economy (Jacques et al. 2008; Jacques 2009; Schreurs 2002, 185; Bang/Schreurs forthcoming).

In its first year, the Obama administration worked hard to put a different spin onto the climate change issue. It began focusing attention on the relationship between America’s long-term future, its economic status in the world, and its environmental policies. The new government sought to portray climate change policy as an opportunity to weaken dependence on energy imports and as an opportunity for new jobs and innovation.

5. The Obama Presidential Campaign: Reframing the Climate Debate

During his electoral campaign, Barack Obama staked out positions that distanced himself from the Bush White House on environmental matters. Barack Obama accused the Bush administration of a “stubborn refusal” to tackle climate change and argued that “unless we free ourselves from a dependence on these fossil fuels and chart a new course on energy in this country, we are condemning

⁵ Asia Pacific Partnership on Clean Development, www.asiapacificpartnership.org; Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen et al. 2009.

future generations to global catastrophe”.⁶ At numerous occasions during his election campaign, Obama made it clear that he planned to pursue a different energy path and a different set of climate change policies than had predominated during the Bush-Cheney White House. The prominent place given to Albert Gore in the Democratic Party’s National Convention was a sign that change was in the air.

6. Barack Obama and Joseph Biden as Senators

During their time in the Senate, Barack Obama and Joseph Biden were strong supporters of environmental initiatives. The League of Conservation Voters, the political voice of the U.S. environmental movement, gave a high environmental voting record scorecard to Barack Obama. Each year the League examines how US Congressmen and women vote on environmental issues. For the 109th Congress (2005–2006), Obama had a green voting record of 96% (with 100% being most environmental).⁷ This means that he voted in favor of green proposals almost all of the time.

Joseph Biden was widely considered one of the ‘greener’ Senators in the U.S. Congress. The League of Conservation Voters gave Biden an 83 percent lifetime scorecard during his 35 years in the Senate. He introduced legislation to eliminate subsidies to oil companies, supported raising the fuel economy standard, opposed the nuclear waste repository in Yucca Mountain, opposed drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and supported biofuels and renewable energy (calling for 20 percent of electricity to come from renewables), took a cautious view on increasing US reliance on nuclear energy and was the primary cosponsor (together with Richard Lugar) of the Sense of the Senate resolution that called on the United States to participate in United Nations climate negotiations. He also co-sponsored the Boxer-Sanders Global Warming Pollution Reduction Act, which would have established a cap and trade system for greenhouse gas emissions with a stabilization goal at 1990 levels by 2020 and an 80 percent cut below 1990 levels by 2050.

7. Obama and the Green New Deal: Linking the Financial Crisis, Energy Security, and Climate Protection

Soon after being elected into office, Obama linked his interest in a new development path to the nation’s economic and financial problems. Obama drew inspiration from Theodore Roosevelt’s 1932 speech:

“Republican leaders not only have failed in material things, they have failed in national vision, because in disaster they have held out

⁶ Barack Obama, *Energy Independence and Safety of Our Planet*, speech, April 3, 2006, <http://obamaspeeches.com/060-Energy-Independence-and-the-Safety-of-Our-Planet-Obama-Speech.htm>.

⁷ League of Conservation Voters, www.lcv.org.

no hope, they have pointed out no path for the people below to climb back to places of security and of safety in our American life. Throughout the Nation, men and women, forgotten in the political philosophy of the Government of the last years look to us here for guidance and for more equitable opportunity to share in the distribution of national wealth. I pledge you, I pledge myself, to a new deal for the American people.”⁸

In a November 21, 2008 speech Obama spelled out his vision for a Green New Deal. The links to Roosevelt’s pledge during the Great Depression were clear:

“It will be a two-year, nationwide effort to jumpstart job creation in America and lay the foundation for a strong and growing economy. We’ll put people back to work rebuilding our crumbling roads and bridges, modernizing schools that are failing our children, and building wind farms and solar panels, fuel-efficient cars and the alternative energy technologies that can free us from our dependence on foreign oil and keep our economy competitive in the years ahead. It is time for America to lead again...”⁹

In his speech, Obama was attempting to alter the image of climate change protection from the perspective taken by the Bush administration. As opposed to the Bush-Cheney administration’s argument that climate change policy would be costly in terms of jobs and harmful for economic growth, the Obama-Biden administration has pushed an image of climate action as an opportunity for change, new jobs, and a brighter, cleaner, more modern, and independent energy future.

8. Responding to Pressures from Below

Barack Obama’s embrace of climate change issues, renewable energy, and energy efficiency certainly have been influenced by the strong demands for change that have been emanating from below in the United States. Calls for action have come from urban and rural communities, states, and regions (Schreurs et al. 2009).

Early Signs of Change: The 2006 Congressional Elections and the 110th Congress

The 2006 mid-term Congressional elections swept a Democratic majority into both Houses of Congress. The 110th Congress began holding hearings on climate change and pushing for changes in U.S. energy policy. One of the biggest environmental successes of 2007 was the passage of the Energy Independence and Security Act, which raised the overall fuel economy of cars and light trucks to 35 miles per gallon by 2020. The bill passed on a vote of 264 to 163 with 8

⁸ Franklin D. Roosevelt, Nomination Address, Chicago, Illinois, July 2, 1932.

⁹ Text of Obama’s Radio Address, *New York Times*, November 22, 2008.

not voting in the House of Representatives and the Senate by a vote of 65 to 27 with 7 not voting.¹⁰ Although comprehensive global warming legislation did not reach the floor of either the House or the Senate in the final years of the Bush presidency, a non-binding Sense of the Senate on Climate Change resolution was issued: “It is the sense of the Senate that Congress should enact a comprehensive and effective national program of mandatory, market-based limits and incentives on emissions of greenhouse gases that slow, stop, and reverse the growth of such emissions at a rate and in a matter that—a.) will not significantly harm the United States economy; and b.) will encourage comparable action by other nations that are major trading partners and key contributors to global emissions.”¹¹

Pressures from Below: Cities and States Mobilize for Climate Action

Certainly one of the unintended consequences of the Bush administration’s obstructionist attitude on climate action was to mobilize sub-national governments into taking action independently of the federal government. During the Bush years, the United States became something of a hotbed of experimentation with climate change protection policies and programs at the local, municipal, state, and regional levels.

The Municipal Level. The United States Conference of Mayors adopted a Climate Protection Agreement that now has close to 1000 signatures. Participating cities have agreed to adopt Kyoto-type targets to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. These include policies to prevent sprawl, promote alternative transportation, and purchase cleaner energy and more efficient appliances, among many others. In addition, they have agreed to urge the federal and state governments to adopt emission trading systems.

The State Level. Numerous states have introduced climate change legislation. Oregon, for example, passed legislation that states it shall be a goal of the state to stabilize greenhouse gas levels at 1990 levels by 2010 and to reduce them by 10 percent of 1990 levels by 2020 and 75 percent of 1990 levels by 2050.¹² Colorado has a target of 20 percent below 2005 levels by 2020 and 80 percent below 2005 levels by 2050.¹³ California has been particularly active. California’s AB 32, the Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006, set a state-wide CO₂ emission target: stabilization of emissions at 1990 levels by 2020 (which is equivalent to a 30 percent below business as usual projection given California’s rapidly expanding population). The California Pavley Bill (AB 1493) introduced requirements that new vehicles sold in the state achieve “maximal feasible reduction” of CO₂ emissions, basically pressuring automobile manufacturers to reduce the carbon emissions of their entire fleet. Car makers were given until 2009 to meet the new standards (Mazmanian et al. 2008). Although in December 2007 the Bush

¹⁰ H.R. 6: Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007, govtrack.us.

¹¹ Senate Amendment 866 to the Energy Policy Act of 2005 (H.R. 6).

¹² U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Climate Change—State and Local Governments, <http://epa.gov/climatechange/wycd/stateandlocalgov/states/or.html>.

¹³ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Climate Change—State and Local Governments, <http://epa.gov/climatechange/wycd/stateandlocalgov/states/co.html#ccap>.

administration rejected the bill as going beyond California's competence, as one of his first acts as president, in January 2009 Obama ordered the Environmental Protection Agency to revisit the Bush-era ruling. The *New York Times* wrote: "Granting California and the other states the right to regulate tailpipe emissions would be one of the most emphatic actions Mr. Obama could take to quickly put his stamp on environmental policy." (Broder/Baker 2009)

At the regional level. About half of the 50 states have entered into regional climate change and emission trading pacts. In April 2003, New York Governor George Pataki initiated the idea of a regional cap-and-trade program for the region stretching from Maine to Maryland. In late 2005, an agreement to implement the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative was reached. Membership has expanded to include ten states: Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, and Vermont. In addition, the District of Columbia, Pennsylvania, Ontario, Quebec, the Eastern Canadian Provinces, and New Brunswick are observers to the process. The idea of the regional cap-and-trade program is to help states meet the individual greenhouse gas emission reduction goals they have formulated. Other regional initiatives have taken root as well, including the Midwestern Regional Greenhouse Gas Reduction Accord, Energy Security and Climate Stewardship Platform for the Midwest, Western Climate Initiative, Western Governors' Association (WGA): Clean and Diversified Energy Initiative, and Powering the Plains.

These trends are certainly attributable at least in part to the failure of the federal government in Washington, D.C. under the George W. Bush administration (2000–2008) to play a strong leadership role in climate change politics. Frustrated by national intransigence and the decision of the Bush administration to withdraw from the Kyoto Protocol, many local and state governments started to take action on their own.

9. The Pressure of Example: Lessons from Europe

Another factor behind the changing winds in the United States has been learning from the examples of others—and in this case, the policies of various European governments and the European Union as a whole have been especially important. Following the European's adoption of a carbon emissions trading system in 2005, Barack Obama has championed the idea of an emissions trading system. He has also focused attention on renewable energy and energy efficiency, two areas where European countries have led internationally in recent years. In numerous speeches, Obama has referenced the need to regain American leadership in renewable energies comparing the current situation in the United States with those of other countries: "From China to India, from Japan to Germany, nations everywhere are racing to develop new ways to produce and use energy. The nation that wins this competition will be the nation that leads the global

economy. I am convinced of that. And I want America to be that nation. It's that simple."¹⁴

10. New Policy Directions

In his New Energy for America Plan, announced during his election campaign, Obama called for cutting carbon emissions by 80 percent by 2050, putting one million plug-in hybrids that can get up to 150 miles per gallon on the road by 2015, and ensuring that 10 percent of the country's electricity comes from renewable sources by 2012 and 25 percent by 2025.¹⁵ Obama has indicated his willingness to consider nuclear energy, but has also called for first addressing public right-to-know, security of nuclear fuel and waste, waste storage, and proliferation. Obama also opposed offshore oil drilling (a policy position that he in hindsight certainly regrettably changed under pressure in March 2010—just one month before the BP oil spill disaster in the Gulf of Mexico).

Green Stimulus Package: American Investment and Recovery Act

In response to the demands for a stimulus package to deal with the ailing economy, Obama pushed for a green stimulus package, one that would inject public funds into the economy but also green infrastructure development, green investment, and green jobs. The American Investment and Recovery Act included support for smart grid technology with the goal of enabling more efficient electricity use and management. The act provided support for the development of renewable energy and through a federal matching grant program for smart technology projects. It also supported R&D in carbon capture and storage technology. Finally, the package promoted energy efficiency improvements, alternative fuel trucks and buses, smart and energy efficient appliances, advanced vehicle battery research, renewable energy R&D, and environmental cleanup of Cold War nuclear waste, among many other initiatives.

The House of Representatives: The American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009 (Waxman-Markey Bill)

The American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009 (H.R. 2454), also known for its main authors, Henry Waxman and Edward Markey (the Waxman-Markey Bill) narrowly passed in the House of Representatives by a vote of 219 to 212 with 3 representatives present, but not voting.¹⁶ It had four sections. Title I addressed a federal renewable electricity standard, carbon capture and storage technology, performance standards for new coal-fueled power plants, a low carbon fuel standard, and smart grid advancement. Title II dealt with efficiency standards for mobile sources and other transportation programs. Title III pro-

¹⁴ Obama at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, October 23, 2009.

¹⁵ Barack Obama and Joe Biden: New Energy for America.

¹⁶ H.R. 2454: American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009, govtrack.us.

posed a cap and trade program with economy-wide coverage of emission sources over 25,000 tons per year, and emission caps that would reduce aggregate GHG emissions for all covered entities to 3 percent below their 2005 levels in 2012, 20 percent below 2005 levels in 2020, 42 percent below 2005 levels in 2030, and 83 percent below 2005 levels in 2050. Title IV dealt with domestic competitiveness and support for workers, assistance to consumers, and support for domestic and international adaptation initiatives while transitioning to a clean energy economy. For a climate bill of this kind to come into law, the Senate must first pass its own climate bill and then the two bills must be brought together in Committee.

11. The Senate: The American Power Act (The Kerry-Lieberman Bill)

In the Senate, several committees were engaged in drawing up elements of a climate bill. S. 1733, the Clean Energy Jobs and American Power Act, was introduced by Senators John Kerry and Barbara Boxer. The bill spoke to the themes Obama was pushing:

- “1.) taking control of the energy future of the United States, strengthening economic competitiveness, safeguarding the health of families and the environment, and ensuring the national security, of the United States by increasing energy independence;
- 2.) creating a clean energy future through improvements of all energy sources, including coal, natural gas, nuclear power, and renewable generation;
- 3.) enhancing efficiency in the energy sector;
- 4.) substantially increasing the investment in clean energy (also to provide economic opportunities);
- 5.) strengthening US competitiveness in environmental and clean energy technology;
- 6.) retaking a leadership position and creating jobs.”

The main proposal of the bill was a cap and trade system that went beyond that set in the Waxman-Markey bill: a 20 percent reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by 2020 and an 80 percent reduction by 2050 relative to 2005 levels.

This bill passed through committee and became part of the basis of a bipartisan climate bill introduced by Senators John Kerry (D), Joseph Lieberman (I), and Lindsey Graham (R). This bill introduced many compromises to please industrial interests (including provisions for offshore oil drilling, subsidies for nuclear energy, and a weakening of the cap and trade provisions (although not of the 17 percent target)). Senator Graham pulled his support for the bill, however, arguing that Democrats were not sufficiently prioritizing climate matters in the Senate. (He argued that Democrats were planning to put immigration in front

of climate change on the agenda in order to draw support from Hispanic voters prior to the November 2010 election.)

With chance for a climate bill rapidly fading, Senator John Kerry and Senator Joseph Lieberman made a renewed attempt, issuing The American Power Act. This act included yet further compromises. Still, the Senate leadership was unable to muster the support needed to pass the bill. The Democratic majority leader, Senator Harry Reid announced in late July 2010 that there was not sufficient support to pass the climate bill and as a result, the House Bill too was essentially dead.

12. Voices of Opposition

Opposition to the Obama climate programs and to the international climate negotiations is clearly still strong. The National Association of Manufacturers and the National Federation of Independent Businesses launched a broadcast, radio, and internet advertising campaign to oppose the Waxman-Markey cap and trade bill.¹⁷ The conservative media is supporting an anti-Al Gore documentary, *Not Evil Just Wrong: The True Cost of Global Warming Hysteria* (Weigel 2009). The coal and oil industries launched large scale efforts to block Obama's climate change policy strategy. An email from the American Petroleum Institute outlined its plans to organize citizen rallies in 20 states against Obama's climate programs (Goldenberg 2009). This suggests that Obama's efforts to reframe the debate are meeting with substantial opposition from some powerful players. This, of course, also had an impact on the debates in the Senate where Senators from coal and oil-producing states (both Democrat and Republican) were openly opposing the climate change cap and trade bills.

13. Conclusion

Efforts to reframe the climate debate have had some success. The Obama White House has succeeded to some extent in portraying climate change as a serious problem, but one with solutions that can result in new jobs, new industries, and a cleaner future. Carbon dioxide is now viewed as a pollutant a definition the Bush administration fought against. Obama raised fuel efficiency standards for automobiles, and targeted millions of dollars in spending for renewable energies, energy efficiency, and research related to climate change.

With Obama and Biden in the White House, the United States once again became more engaged in international environmental negotiations. In their first year, they actively supported policies and positions that contributed to greenhouse gas emission stabilization or reductions.

The House of Representatives played along and passed new energy legislation promoting energy efficiency improvements and renewable energy, the introduc-

¹⁷ VMA Joins NAM and NFIB in Media Campaign Opposing Waxman-Markey Climate Change Bills, Virginia Manufacturers Association press release.

tion of a cap and trade program, stronger support for environmental and energy research and development, and stronger restrictions on chemicals.

Yet, large policy changes are difficult to achieve in the United States. The Obama administration, which chose to make health care legislation its number one priority, may not have had enough political capital to push for climate legislation as well. In late July 2010, the Senate announced it would not be able to vote on energy or climate legislation before entering summer recess. Essentially this means that the climate bill is dead, at least for now.

Of course, with Obama and Biden in office and a Democratic-controlled Congress expectations for an activist and 'green' politics were very high. This made the failure of the Senate to pass climate legislation especially disappointing. The Congressional failure to pass a climate bill complicates the Obama administration's situation vis-à-vis its international partners. Obama will have little to fall back on when the US delegation travels to Cancun, Mexico for the next climate negotiations. Still, there is little doubt that the Obama team is trying to reframe the climate debate. The United States federal government has been pursuing a far more active climate politics than was espoused by the Bush administration. Whether or not they eventually will succeed in winning Congressional support for climate legislation, remains to be seen. It does not appear that the United States will be able to reclaim a climate leadership role anytime soon.

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