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The climate agenda after Trump's election

Auteur

Teresa Ribera

Minister for the Ecological Transition of Spain

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The election of Donald Trump is now a fact, as are his statements regarding his position on climate change and the Paris Agreement. As on all the other major issues of the 2016 campaign, the real policy intentions of the Trump administration are uncertain beyond the level of his campaign sound bites. The key questions are thus to what extent he will carry on his intentions at the domestic level, renouncing the Obama Administration's initiatives to develop a federal regulation on climate and clean energy; and how this could impact the international climate agenda.

The first effect of Trump´s election is uncertainty, something particularly dangerous in a moment when different players were already setting the scene to accelerate climate action. However, even if this may increase the difficulties to build coherent and mainstreamed responses to climate change, it does not imply the collapse of the climate governance system.

Not a single player supporting the Paris Agreement or climate action has done it to please the President of the United States. The main drivers for today´s climate action are the own interest of each actor (countries, cities, investors, etc.) and the conviction of the inevitability of the transformation, together with the willingness to develop the response to climate change in a cooperative way.

The economic logic of climate-proof development, the affordability of renewable energy technologies and of other technical improvements, the financial risks of carbon costs as well as the increasingly broad social demand for action are—among other reasons—sound motivations which still stand. Within the US, the climate agenda is more ingrained and robust than in the early 2000s. The social demand for action on climate change is now much stronger than it was 15 years ago. The US is engaged in a process of energy transition with its own inherent momentum, as evidenced by the strong economics of renewables, natural gas and alternative fuel vehicles. This energy transition is clearly not sufficient to put the US on the path towards decarbonisation, nor the achievement of its Paris commitments. But there is still also a huge amount of action taking place at State, city and company level: the Trump victory and the absence of further Federal policies may rather galvanise action at a non-Federal level, as it was the case under President Bush Jr. It may make more difficult for the Americans to define a coherent framework but it will not prevent action.

Mayors, Governors, business, and citizens will invest in climate and the Paris Agreement provides good platforms to ensure a smart coalition of all these players in the international arena. Indeed, the growing demands of the American population as well as the very existence of the Paris Agreement make it less likely that the US administration could be completely inactive on climate change both at domestic and international level. Such a position was untenable even for Bush in the early 2000s, at a time when international momentum on climate change and domestic demands for action were much weaker. Regarding the impacts of Trump´s election beyond US borders, it should be pointed out that this is not the first time the international community faces big challenges regarding climate action. This was the case when Bush renounced the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol in 2000 or during the frustrations raised by the Copenhagen climate summit in 2009.

These were setbacks, but did not stop progress on climate change. On the other hand, the Paris Agreement is now in force and the political engagement this represents is sufficiently strong to build on the opportunities it brings. Formally speaking, the structure of the agreement makes it unlikely to collapse in the same way as Kyoto did in the face of a reluctant American administration. Countries have proposed their nationally determined contributions on the basis of their own interests, and are unlikely to walk away from them just because of a change of administration in the US. China, India and the European Union all have inherent incentives to continue the fight against climate change, notably local air pollution and their large stake in the emerging clean energy transition.

All three have also invested very significant political capital in the Paris Agreement. A key question will therefore be to what extent China, India, and the EU will proactively invest diplomatic capital to try and exert leverage over a Trump administration and to what extent the US is ready to accept to stay inside the partnership to transform the global economy and to adapt to climate change in a mood of cooperation and risk-sharing. Indeed, the election of Trump leaves an opening for the EU, China and India to continue the legacy of Obama. This was to realize that in an era when international cooperation is hard to come by, climate change offers the surest example of our shared destiny and hence of the opportunity and necessity to cooperate to create the rules of the future. Leaving this process could have sore costs for the United States. Ultimately, the value of an international agreement is to create greater resilience in the collective effort that the agreement embodies—resilience to just the kind of shock that the Trump election represents. The climate agenda is in front of this test, but in a stronger position thanks to the efforts of the last years.

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