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Some lessons on climate action from the US midterm elections

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Ten days after the US midterm elections, in which the Democrats regained control of the House of Representatives and the Republicans held on to their Senate majority, we can already draw a number of lessons from these elections. On climate and environment issues, the political reshuffle suggests a number of changes to come in the next two years: half-hearted institutional developments are to be expected in Congress, which should be seen in the light of stronger climate action at the local level. On the other hand, these elections also confirmed the victory of industrial lobbying over grassroots activism, which will mean some tough battles in the future, whether local or national.

The Democrats' takeover of the House of Representatives will only have a limited legislative impact on the climate

The Democrats' victory is real

Although the blue wave was not the tsunami some had hoped for, the new majority in the House is solid, with more than 30 seats, and heralds a wind of change. As regards the Senate, which holds the constitutional power to ratify treaties and to approve political appointments, the Republican majority has increased slightly, and we cannot expect any shift in favour of international climate action, either to stay in the Paris Agreement or to reinstate funding for the Green Climate Fund, to which Barack Obama pledged 3 billion dollars in 2014, that Donald Trump then cancelled when he entered office, depriving the fund of the remaining 2 billion dollars pledged but not yet delivered.

Congress will thus be divided for the next two years, which puts paid to any prospect of ambitious climate legislation, such as a carbon tax at the federal level or CO₂ emissions standards

Unless the Democrats succeed in forging a bipartisan agreement with the Republican senators on issues they hold dear, such as energy independence (in order to support the deployment of renewables), or tax reductions (targeting them in such a way as to make them incentives to improve energy efficiency). But this is unlikely. The last hope lies in the question of infrastructure, which is nearing obsolescence all over the country, and on which both parties claim to be willing to work together. Nancy Pelosi, former Speaker of the House (2006-2010), who is expected to return to service, said in a press conference^[1] the day after the elections that she had discussed the matter with President Trump the previous evening and was willing to collaborate with him on this crucial issue for the long-term development of the United States. However, it is still unclear what type of infrastructure is concerned (roads? bridges? airports?) and whether it can be made more sustainable, for example through projects that strengthen the resilience of coastal zones or reduce their carbon footprint.

The major change will therefore be institutional rather than legislative

The Democrats, by taking back control of the parliamentary commissions on science, for example, or on trade and energy, will be able to change the political dynamics, to give science a stronger voice against sceptics, and to build a policy programme for 2020. Nancy Pelosi even raised the possibility of reinstating the Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming,^[2] created in 2007 and scrapped by the Republicans when they took control in 2011, whose consultative role, through parliamentary hearings, could help to establish climate mitigation as a matter of social justice. The work of this committee contributed in particular to the [Democrats' bill for an emissions trading system](#), which was rejected by the Senate in 2009. These commissions will enable the Democrat majority in the House to play its role in monitoring and controlling the executive, putting an end to the frenzied regulatory unravelling conducted over the last two years by the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency), the Department of Energy and the Department of the Interior, not only for vehicle emissions standards, but also for renewable energy targets or the control of industrial methane leaks. This increased control of the administration, which can show through parliamentary hearings, committees of inquiry and reports, should also help to limit the excesses of recent years ([conflicts of interest, corruption, etc.](#)).

Geographical rebalancing of political forces: climate action will continue at the local level

The midterm elections are also local in scope, since many federal states were voting for the renewal of their legislature and/or their governor. Here, the victory was for the Democrats, who took control of the executive in seven new states, and in particular in the very industrial regions of the Rust Belt and the central and western parts of the country.^[3]

This is excellent news for climate action in the United States, because ever since Donald Trump was elected, it is local actors, and in particular cities and federal states, grouped within very dynamic coalitions such as "[We are still in](#)" or the "[US Climate Alliance](#)", that have been the only source of regulatory and legislative developments in the country in the absence of federal action. [These new governors](#), such as Steve Sisolak in Nevada or Gretchen Witmer in Michigan, have made climate issues central to their priorities and to their government platform and should therefore actively promote regulations and legislation to move forward in the low-carbon transition. They have the power to do so and the strong political will of the mandate given by their voters. Now it is time for action!

Local referendums: a defeat for climate activists

Depending on the state in which they voted, Americans also had to approve or reject certain referendums proposed by local popular initiative. Five in particular dealt with climate change issues:

1. to everyone's surprise, Washington state, one of the most progressive in the country, rejected a carbon tax on the major emitters (which was already rejected two years ago in a different form);
2. Colorado refused to impose tougher rules on hydraulic fracturing close to homes and schools;
3. Arizona rejected the proposal to set a 50% renewable energy target for electricity production by 2030;
4. Nevada, on the other hand, adopted a similar measure setting a 50% renewable target by 2030;
5. Florida approved the offshore drilling ban in its territorial waters.

Such a defeat in these three states was difficult to anticipate because the first opinion polls seemed highly favourable. It is largely explained by two combined factors: first, a US electoral system that imposes no limits on campaign spending; and, second, the power of the fossil fuel industries and especially of oil companies, which led an aggressive opposition campaign.

Since the US Supreme Court decision *Citizens United vs. FEC* of 2010, which removed any campaign spending limits for companies, unions and associations, in accordance with free speech extended to legal persons, the influence of these entities in elections has increased. Through campaign funding vehicles known as Super PACs, companies and associations can spend without any limits or monitoring to support "political causes", for example through [advertisements](#) or robocalls to fight the carbon tax, whereas climate activists are unable to mobilise similar amounts for their own causes. [Indeed, the oil industry spent nearly 100 million dollars](#), including more than 30 million in Washington state and the same amount in Colorado, making these campaigns the most expensive in their history, with spending sometimes reaching more than 40 times the amount invested by the advocates of these referendums. These elections thus highlighted the doublespeak of the major energy providers, which, on the one hand, claim to be calling for the public authorities to establish a carbon fee in order to improve their carbon footprint and to convert their business model, and, on the other, spend vast amounts to block any kind of price signal or renewable energy quota that could have a negative impact on their financial results.

The lesson to be drawn from these local elections is that the climate community in many US states needs to prepare to fight the oil sector with the same weapons if it hopes to move the energy transition forward in the United States. Once again, the expression “green always wins” is unfortunately confirmed, but this time in favour of the greenback.

With a Democrat majority known to be in favour of climate action in the House of Representatives, but a Republican majority still holding the Senate, the next few years will determine whether the climate cause has simply been on hold in the United States, and whether it can be given new momentum with the next occupant of the White House.

[1] “Last night I had a conversation with President Trump about how we could work together, one of the issues that came up was ... building infrastructure for America, and I hope that we can achieve that”.

[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_House_Select_Committee_on_Energy_Independence_and_Global_Warming

[3] From west to east: Nevada, New Mexico, Kansas, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Maine.

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