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# Joe Biden and climate: A green new way?

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After four years of systematic dismantling of US climate policies, Joe Biden's arrival in the White House should breathe new life into climate action, both in the United States and for the rest of the international community. Climate change was a key issue during the campaign, particularly during the Democratic primaries, allowing Biden to expand his platform to rally all corners of his party. His agenda is ambitious since he proposes to reinstate the climate rules of the Obama era, to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050 and electricity neutrality by 2035, and it is necessary to catch up and bring America back on a pathway compatible with 2°C. But it will be difficult to deliver because of political constraints that reduce the new President's room for maneuver.

Everything is in place for an American return to the front line of the fight against climate change. Biden had announced during his campaign that climate would be a cornerstone of his foreign policy, starting with rejoining the Paris Agreement on his first day in office. A symbol, he tweeted about on November 4, the day after the election but also of the United States' official withdrawal from the Agreement. His international commitment goes in pair with a clear ambition for his country. After a Democratic primary campaign in which the contenders competed on their climate ambition, Joe Biden, rather moderate and little known for his ecological activism, has nevertheless managed to gather behind him all the progressive forces, particularly those who had campaigned for a Green New Deal. The appointment of Ron Klain this week as chief of staff to the White House raised enthusiasm in the progressive camp: Senator Elizabeth Warren praised the choice of the one who was the activists' favourite pick, as shown in a poll conducted by Data for Progress, a think tank behind the Green New Deal. A collaborator to Vice President Al Gore and then Senator Ed Markey<sup>1</sup>, his choice confirms the intention of the Democrats and their newly elected President to integrate the fight against climate change as a cross-cutting issue in all federal policies. Beyond energy and environmental protection, the new administration intends to further integrate climate considerations into other departments such as the Department of agriculture, the Treasury, or the Department for Housing and Urban Development, in order to act as quickly and decisively as possible. To this end, he envisions creating a climate position at the highest level of the White House, with a panoramic view to ensure a policy coherence<sup>2</sup>.

Beyond rallying the progressive wing, Biden's vision of innovation, jobs, economic growth and infrastructure modernization is likely to appeal to more moderate Democrats who will have to fight again in Republican districts in two or four years. Despite the strong polarization in Congress, public opinion is shifting rapidly, and the Democrats hope to attract young conservatives who are sensitive to the climate crisis and disappointed by the lack of Republican concern. On election night, Fox News revealed in an exit poll that 70% of Americans would be supportive of more federal funding for renewable energy. [A recent study by the Pew Research Center](#) shows that a majority of Republican voters would support tougher emissions restrictions for both vehicles and power plants and would be willing to tax corporate emissions.

Finally, the Biden Administration will be able to rely on coalitions of American stakeholders, such as the US Climate Alliance, which includes half of the states, 55% of the population and of the national wealth, and thus reap the benefits of the last four years of effort, experimentation, regulation and progress. California decided in September to ban the sale of diesel and gasoline powered vehicles from 2035. A standard that is likely to spread to other States and convince American car manufacturers to speed up their conversion to zero emission vehicles. The America's Pledge initiative, which measures the impact of these decentralized actions carried out by companies and subnationals, estimates that by collaborating with the federal government, emissions reductions could reach 45% to 50% by 2030 compared to 2005<sup>3</sup>.

Transforming the country will require to use all the necessary levers and face the significant political headwinds. Even if the Democrats claim that their climate mandate is clear and unequivocal, their task will be difficult as the context is unfavourable: Joe Biden will be the first elected Democratic President since the 19th century not to have a parliamentary majority when he takes office. Indeed, not only has the Democratic majority in the House of Representatives shrunk, but Republicans are expected to retain the Senate<sup>4</sup>. This means that a choice will have to be made among the many Democratic priorities. Climate action could thus suffer from unfavorable trade-offs in times of health and economic crisis. It will be very difficult, in this context, to tackle shale gas, a subject on which the Democratic candidate remained very cautious during the campaign.

Moreover, the outgoing administration leaves a gloomy institutional landscape: it has weakened all the government agencies supposed to regulate climate<sup>5</sup> by losing offices, reducing budgets and staff, or not replacing vacancies. Therefore, repairing the environmental damage incurred in recent years means rebuilding federal capacity for action,

in order to prepare the next US climate plan that will drive the transition in the United States and achieve the carbon neutrality envisaged for 2050. As with Obama, Biden will have at his disposal regulatory instruments such as executive orders which will enable him to limit greenhouse gas emissions from vehicles, power plants and or restrict fossil fuel production. However, the limits of these provisions were just made evident, as President Trump reversed the hard-won gains of his predecessor with the stroke of a pen. Recent change to the face of the Supreme Court, which is more conservative, will not facilitate the prerogatives of the federal government and its agencies, favoring those of the states.

Constrained in his national options, the new President could, like many of his predecessors, choose to invest his energy and engage his leadership on the international front. This would be great news for the Paris Agreement, since the world's largest economy - and second largest emitter - is missing to collectively address a common problem. Five years after COP 21, when the time has come for all countries to raise their ambition, the Paris Agreement could benefit from a second wind. Recent announcements by China, Japan and South Korea to make carbon-neutral commitments, one year after Europe's extended hand with its Green Deal, show that the political momentum of the Agreement is working, even without the United States, but progress will be more effective and may offer hope for a positive irreversible momentum by bringing them back on board. Nevertheless, expectations are high, and it will not be enough to declare "America is back" to content multilateral partners. After the flip-flops of the last two decades, the United States will have to give some guarantees. First, in the short term, the United States will need to mobilize funding<sup>6</sup> to support developing countries, especially the most vulnerable in their transition, and to their fair share<sup>7</sup>. Secondly, they will need to come up with robust and sustainable climate plans that can survive a new shift majority in the country. The Senate plays a crucial role in both of these areas and may limit the claims of the new White House occupant.

The next administration is mobilized in the face of the climate emergency and is prepared for an institutional scenario under constraints for tackling these domestic and international challenges. To succeed, it will also have to show its capacity to engage in policies to overcome bipartisan divides.

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<sup>1</sup> Sponsor of the Green New Deal, Senator Markey was also one of the designers of the abortive legislation to establish a cap-and-trade system for CO2 emissions in 2009 at the beginning of President Obama's term.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2020/11/11/biden-climate-change>

<sup>3</sup> As a reminder, the current US commitment for 2025 is a reduction of 26-28%, compared to 2005. The reality is closer to 20%.

<sup>4</sup> The Republican Party currently has a majority (50-48). The last two seats are still at stake in Georgia and will be determined in a second round on 5 January 2021. It is highly unlikely that the Democrats will be able to win both seats.

<sup>5</sup> The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Department of Energy (DOE), the Department of State (DOS), the Department of the Interior (DOI - in charge of managing natural resources and protected areas).

<sup>6</sup> When the Green Climate Fund was initially capitalised in 2015, President Obama promised \$3bn. Only one payment was made before his successor denounced this policy and opposed further payments. \$2bn is therefore needed to meet the initial commitment.

<sup>7</sup> The Green Climate Fund was recapitalised in 2019. The main contributors such as France, Germany, the United Kingdom and Norway have doubled their contributions. In order to align with the efforts of its main partners, the United States is expected to double its initial pledge and match the \$6bn in the second round.