



# From shrillness to sobriety: pragmatism in climate politics

Climate change: the challenge for the US Democrats

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## Climate change: the challenge for the US Democrats

Apathy, disregard and fatigue towards combating climate change are on the rise in the US. Increasing partisan polarisation, high levels of unemployment and uncertainty over what constitutes both a progressive economic and values-based approach to cutting carbon emissions have all contributed to a maladroit and ineffective politics of climate change. In rethinking failed strategies progressives would do well to forego jeremiads, define the problem in terms of technology and advocate large-scale direct government activism.

When Barack Obama was elected president in 2008, it was widely assumed that a national consensus on the imperative to address climate change would quickly be translated into public policy in the United States. The adoption of a cap-and-trade system intended to reduce greenhouse gas emissions was supported not only by progressives, who looked to Al Gore for direction on the issue, but also by John McCain, Obama's defeated Republican rival for the presidency. It appeared that Obama had been prophetic when, accepting the nomination of the Democratic party for the presidency on June 3, 2009, he had declared that future generations would look back and conclude that "this was the moment when the rise of the oceans began to slow and our planet began to heal..."<sup>1</sup>

Those expectations turned out to be premature. In June 2008 the House of Representatives passed its version of a cap-and-trade energy bill, the Waxman-Markey bill – but only by a narrow margin of 219-212, and only after major concessions were made to the coal industry and utilities using coal-fired power plants. A Senate version that is being assembled by Senator John Kerry (Democrat–Massachusetts), Senator Lindsey Graham (Republican–South Carolina) and Senator Joseph Lieberman (Independent–Connecticut) may drop cap-and-trade, except for electrical utilities. Graham himself has said that "cap-and-trade is dead."<sup>2</sup> In the international arena, the Copenhagen climate summit ended with a weak, non-binding accord among the US and the BASIC nations (Brazil, South Africa, India and China) and disappointed those who had hoped for a binding international agreement.

Meanwhile, the mainstream progressive climate change campaign has been crippled by a number of developments. The most important is the Great Recession that began late in 2008. The centrepiece of greenhouse gas reduction policies advocated by progressives in the US and elsewhere has been putting a price on carbon, whether indirectly by means of a cap-and-trade system or directly in the form of a carbon tax. The effect would be artificial increases in the costs to consumers, not only of electricity and transportation, but also of a wide variety of goods and services. In the midst of the greatest economic crisis since the Depression of the 1930s, with official unemployment hovering around 10 per cent and de facto unemployment and underemployment reaching 17-18 per cent, there is no appetite among American politicians for deliberately increasing costs for American households and businesses in the interest of averting possible problems that are decades or generations in the future. Electoral setback for progressive parties pushing for a carbon tax in Canada in 2008 and a cap-and-trade system in Australia in 2009 suggest that programmes to mitigate climate change that involve significant increases in energy prices are likely to be difficult to enact in most democracies.

In addition, partisan polarisation has thwarted the mainstream progressive approach to climate change in the United States. With the near-extinction of conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans, America's two-party system is more polarised than at any time since the Civil War in the 1860s. Partisan polarisation has been reinforced by the collapse of mainstream media, with their effort to be neutral, and the emergence of conservative and liberal media outlets from which Americans increasingly derive their information.

1. Remarks of Senator Barack Obama, Final Primary Night, June 3rd, 2008 – see: [http://www.barackobama.com/2008/06/03/remarks\\_of\\_senator\\_barack\\_obam\\_73.php](http://www.barackobama.com/2008/06/03/remarks_of_senator_barack_obam_73.php)

2. Senator Graham – "cap and trade is dead" – Washington Post 27th Feb 2010: 'Senators to propose abandoning cap-and-trade' – see: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/02/26/AR2010022606084.html>

Conservatives have gone from arguing that global warming is likely to be real but could have many beneficial aspects, as a number did in the 1990s, to rejecting anthropogenic climate change as a hoax perpetrated on the public by liberals like Al Gore and activist scientists. This standpoint has been reinforced by the recent scandals, classed together as “climategate,” which led to a flurry of accusations about leading climate change experts engaging in vendettas against dissident scientists in an attempt to conceal important data. The American right’s opposition to climate change legislation and treaties is as a result much more effective.

Polling data shows a significant swing in American public opinion. According to Gallup, the number of Americans who believed that the seriousness of global warming has been exaggerated rose from 38 per cent in 2006 to 48 per cent in 2010. The partisan divide on the issue is striking. While Democrats have not changed their views about the subject, the number of independents who thought that global warming concerns are exaggerated grew from 33 per cent to 44 per cent between 2008 and 2009, while Republican sceptics increased from 55 per cent to 66 per cent.<sup>3</sup>

In the aftermath of the bitterly-won and narrow Democratic victory in healthcare reform in March 2010, there is little appetite among Democratic

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lawmakers for a divisive struggle over climate change legislation. Nor is there much support for action by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which could issue regulations based on a finding that carbon dioxide is a pollutant. Such regulations would increase costs throughout the US economy, might undermine on-going economic recovery efforts by requiring new paperwork, and might well create a voter backlash and be overruled by Congress. In short, there is little prospect for significant climate change policy in the US, either in the form of legislation or executive branch actions, before the mid-term elections of 2010. In those elections the Democrats are likely to suffer losses in both the House and the Senate, so that even if they retain a shrunken majority their ability to undertake sweeping climate change legislation will be reduced.

## Design defects

The fact that climate change legislation is stalled in the US gives progressives in the Democratic coalition a chance to rethink their strategy. Even in the absence of the great recession and the climategate scandal, the conventional centre-left approach to climate change would have been doomed in American politics because of three design defects: apocalyptic rhetoric, a confusion of objectives, and unworkable neoliberal methods.

### Apocalyptic rhetoric

The climate change campaign in the US and the world has weakened itself in the political arena by its apocalyptic rhetoric. Many US politicians and progressive activists have made claims about mass famine, human extinction and even the destruction of “the planet” that are not justified by the scientific consensus that they invoke.

Instead of producing concerted worldwide action, claims by Al Gore and other prominent climate change activists that only a short time remains to “save the earth” have produced “apocalypse fatigue” in the United States. With nearly one in five Americans effectively unemployed or underemployed, the American public is even less concerned now about the possible effects of global warming in half a century or a century than it was before the global economic crisis.

3. See here: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/126560/americans-global-warming-concerns-continue-drop.aspx>

### Confusion of objectives

A campaign for reform is most likely to succeed if it focuses on one or a few issues that can serve as the basis for a broad alliance, while excluding peripheral issues that are likely to alienate potential supporters. In the case of climate change, that means defining the problem narrowly as one of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by any practical methods. The limited goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, however, has been mixed up with the quite different goals of two other movements on the left: neo-Malthusian environmentalism and the new urbanism.

Neo-Malthusians have sought to exploit the climate change campaign to promote unrelated goals like anti-natalism by, among other things, denouncing the “carbon footprint” of children. At the same time, new urbanist proponents of “smart growth” have seized on concerns about climate change to promote their own pre-existing agenda by means of tendentious arguments that apartment dwellers are responsible for fewer greenhouse gas emissions than suburbanites and that mass transit and rail are more environmentally friendly than automobile transportation. Because most Americans live in the suburbs and do not consider children a planet-threatening form of pollution, the failure of progressive climate change campaigners to distance themselves from neo-Malthusianism and smart growth has hurt the movement.

### Unworkable neoliberal solutions

The climate change campaign in the US, and similar countries, has also suffered from its adoption of the theoretical and policy framework of post-Reagan/Thatcher neoliberalism, with its attempt to describe all problems and solutions in terms of markets. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, environmentalists sought to adapt and survive in an era of market triumphalism by replacing the moral appeals of the counterculture with a technocratic language borrowed from neoclassical economics. Thus environmental damage caused by industrial activity became a market failure, for which the market solution consisted of putting a price on carbon and creating a market in tradable carbon emission rights and offsets.

Unfortunately, the credibility of the cap-and-trade system depended on assumptions about efficient and rational markets which have been

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discredited by the collapse of the global market in highly complex financial products. Many on the American left as well as the right have warned that cap-and-trade has the potential to create a new bubble, enriching Wall Street speculators who invested in a new system of government-created assets. Most economists across the political spectrum prefer a simple carbon tax to an overly-complicated cap-and-trade scheme, with the potential for financial market manipulation and political lobbying that it would create.

### The geopolitics of climate change

American progressives have been as maladroit in their approach to the geopolitics of climate change as they have been in their domestic political strategy. Beginning in the 1990s, they made worldwide negotiations like the Kyoto and Copenhagen efforts central to their campaign.

In terms of strategy, this never made any sense. International alliances that seek to preserve the status quo should have as many members as possible, while alliances that seek to overturn the status quo should have as few members as possible, in order to minimise disagreement and delay.

The goal of the climate change campaign – rapid, dramatic change in global greenhouse gas emissions – inevitably was subverted by its chosen method, a coalition including most or all of the nearly two hundred states in the world. The strategy made no sense for another reason: only a handful of large industrial countries, like the United States and China, produce far more emissions than the majority of the world’s countries. The irrelevance of most countries in the world to the solution of the climate change problem was brutally underlined by the non-binding agreement among the US, China, India, Brazil and South Africa at Copenhagen, which more than 100 nations subsequently endorsed despite having had no say in its negotiation.

Appeals to patriotism - “America must lead the world toward clean energy” - are more likely to be effective

In domestic politics, the appeal to international public opinion of progressive climate change campaigners failed to move the American public. Notwithstanding the post-1945 role of the US as the global military and financial hegemon, American culture remains deeply marked by generations of pre-1945 isolationism. The American right specialises in drawing on centuries-old American fears of foreign autocracy and corruption. The belief of many American progressives that the US could be shamed into undertaking expensive and controversial climate change policies by appeals to the superior example of foreign countries showed a profound misunderstanding of American nationalism.

Appeals to patriotism – “America must lead the world toward clean energy” – are more likely to be effective. However, when they are joined with notions of “competitiveness,” such appeals tend to reinforce the idea of the world economy as an arena of international economic conflict, rather than to promote transnational cooperation.

## The way forward

From the failure of the climate change campaign in the last two decades, progressives in the US and other countries can draw useful lessons. The mainstream centre-left approach to climate change was doomed by apocalyptic rhetoric, multiple objectives and neoliberal methods. It follows that a movement to address climate change that hopes to succeed in the United States must forego jeremiads, define the problem in terms of technology, and advocate direct government activism.

### Forego jeremiads

In the early years of the cold war, Senator Arthur Vandenberg told President Harry Truman that in order to obtain public support for the policy of containing Soviet expansionism he would have to “scare hell out of the American people.” The attempt to mobilise public support for sweeping measures to combat climate change by scaring hell out of the American people has backfired. Since the 1960s, the US environmental movement has argued for reforms it favours by invoking one imminent catastrophe after another that never materialised, from overpopulation to critical resource depletion to the alleged depletion of oxygen in the atmosphere resulting from logging in the world’s rainforests, “the lungs of the earth.”

A new approach to climate change requires, first and foremost, a change in tone from shrillness to sobriety. In addition to being inaccurate, apocalyptic rhetoric is more likely to demoralise the public than to inspire support for collective action. In this as in other areas, an unceasing barrage of bad news is less likely to inspire civic cooperation than to convince people that problems are overwhelming. They may respond by retreating into apathy, rather than mobilising and uniting. No progressive political campaign, on this or any other subject, can succeed without an optimistic and empowering vision of human agency.

### Define the problem in terms of technology

Progressives in the US and other democracies should reject arguments that in order to “save the earth” from climate change, radical changes in the social order or individual lifestyles are necessary. It is political poison for any progressive programme to address climate change to be associated with radical leftist denunciations of capitalism, decades-old schemes to replace cars with railroads and trolleys, or calls for economic austerity and personal asceticism motivated by nostalgia for the pre-industrial past or a moral objection to consumerism. Pragmatic progressives should insist that climate change caused by greenhouse gas emissions is a technological problem with technological solutions.

The renewable energy sources that most progressives have favoured, such as solar energy and wind energy, may need to be downplayed in favour of a focus on others that many environmentalists have demonised. Together solar and wind energy account for less than one per cent of US electricity production. There is no realistic way to scale them up to make a significant dent in greenhouse gas emissions from the US in a reasonable period of time. Major reductions in CO2 emissions in the US in the next few decades may require greater reliance on natural gas, which produces far less CO2 than coal or gasoline, and nuclear energy, which generates no greenhouse gases. Many leading environmentalists such as James Lovelock and Stewart Brand have argued that building more nuclear power plants must be part of any effort to address climate change. Agreeing with this logic, the Obama administration supports loan guarantees for new nuclear power plant construction in the US.

### Advocate direct government action

The cap-and-trade approach to climate change mitigation betrays the influence of neoliberal economic ideology in its three premises. The first premise is that breakthroughs in energy technology and efficiency must be funded by private capital, not public investment. The second premise is that if they are to fund energy and efficiency research, private investors must be guaranteed a profit. From these two premises follows a third premise: governments should deliberately rig energy markets in order to encourage private venture capital investment in renewable or clean energy. Clean but expensive energy should be subsidised, by direct means like tax credits or indirect means like feed-in tariffs and mandates that power utilities derive fixed percentages of their energy from clean or renewable energy sources. At the same time, inexpensive, dirty energy sources must be made artificially expensive by direct means like taxes or indirect means like cap and trade systems.

If the first premise – that the primary responsibility for funding energy and efficiency R&D and deployment belongs to private capital – is rejected, then the entire complicated, rickety Rube Goldberg system, with its tax breaks and feed-in tariffs and mandates, comes crashing down. Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus of the Breakthrough Institute, a controversial but influential progressive environmental thinktank in the US, have argued that the goal should be not to make dirty energy expensive but to make clean energy cheap.<sup>4</sup> They observe that political resistance by voters in the developed world and by the governments of developing countries like China and India, doom the idea of artificially rising energy prices in order to incentivise private sector investors. What is needed, Shellenberger and Nordhaus and like-minded progressives insist, is not an elaborate system of incentives to encourage Wall Street speculators to invest in clean energy startups, but rather massive programmes of public R&D and deployment like the Manhattan Project and the Apollo Project.

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4. See: <http://thebreakthrough.org/ideas.shtml>

Because of the huge federal deficits produced by the revenue shortfalls that have accompanied the Great Recession, it may be unrealistic to expect Congress to provide the necessary large-scale funding in energy research and development by means of appropriations. Bond finance, however, is a tried and true method for channeling private capital into investment in public projects like infrastructure, public utilities and school construction. Instead of promoting complicated, easily-gamed cap-and-trade schemes that promise windfalls for private investors, the centre-left in the US and other nations should support proposals for mechanisms like public energy banks and new kinds of municipal bonds that access capital from sources like pension funds and sovereign wealth funds to fund public sector energy innovation and deployment. Direct government regulation, in the form of greenhouse gas emission standards for utilities and fuel efficiency mandates for cars, trucks and buses, provides another alternative to the pseudo-market solutions pursued by the mainstream climate change movement in the US and abroad.

## Climate change and centre-left values

The need for rethinking the center-left approach to climate change goes beyond short-term political tactics to questions about centre-left values. In recent decades, the social democratic left has tended to assume an identity of interest between their movement and mainstream environmentalism. But the two movements have radically different origins and intellectual genealogies.

Both the liberal and former Marxist strains of the centre-left are based in the Enlightenment, with its optimistic vision of the transformation of nature by human agency and the rational reorganisation of the economy and politics by ordinary people acting collectively in their own interest. In contrast, much Green thought is rooted in nineteenth-century European romanticism, with its distrust of technological, urban civilisation and idealisation of agrarian and hunter-gatherer existence. Consequently, much of what the traditional centre-left has viewed as progressive – the introduction of economic democracy to large-scale productive enterprises in sectors with economies of scale, and the industrial development of the global South – is viewed by many environmentalists as a fall from an Edenic situation in which preindustrial peoples allegedly lived in harmony with nature. The tensions between the Enlightenment vision of social democracy and the Romantic vision animating mainstream environmentalism may grow if environmentalism opposes the shared economic growth and technological progress that the centre-left favours. As Jurgen Kronig has observed, “the adoption of a radical green agenda that will have large-scale detrimental effects on the poorer segments of our society, while condemning nations in the developing world to economic hardship, does not sit comfortably with traditional centre-left principles of social justice and collective prosperity.”<sup>5</sup>

Traditionally the centre-left in the United States has favoured the provision of public goods by activist government, so bold programmes of direct, large-scale public investment in clean energy R&D and deployment would be in the spirit of earlier eras of American liberalism. However, it will not be easy for progressives in the Democratic coalition in the US, along with members of the centre-left in other democracies, to concede that the failure of the mainstream approach to global warming requires rethinking of strategy, tactics and rhetoric, or to acknowledge the tensions between social democratic liberalism and activist environmentalism. In the absence of such rethinking, the campaign for action by the United States to avert climate change may be sidelined indefinitely or reduced to ineffectual symbolism.

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5. See Kronig, Jurgen, “Regrets, they’ve had a few: where now for climate politics”, Policy Network, March 2010 <http://www.policy-network.net/publications/publications.aspx?id=3680>