



Rick Piltz

Why is there no US climate policy?

Barack Obama's statements to the UN about the potentially devastating impacts of climate change are in stark contrast to Democratic policy back home, where climate policy is negotiated exclusively in terms of US domestic interests. Rick Piltz, director of Climate Science Watch, explains how the combination of political parochialism and the effects of Bush-era climate change denial are stalling the necessary decision-making.

In June 2009 Obama Administration officials held a news briefing to release *Global Climate Change Impacts in the United States*, a new scientific assessment report developed by the US Global Change Research Program. The report, authored by a team of climate and ecosystem scientists and other experts, synthesized in clearly understandable terms the growing evidence that global climatic disruption is likely to lead to a wide range of damaging, and potentially disastrous, environmental and societal consequences.

This US impacts assessment was the first climate science report issued under the Obama Administration. Obama's scientific leadership embraced the report's strong conclusions and made unequivocal statements about the urgency of the climate change problem. Jane Lubchenco, administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, called the report "a game-changer. [...] The report is good science, science that informs policy." John Holdren, the President's Science and Technology Adviser, said: "It's time to act, after many years of dithering and delay."

How different this was from how the Bush White House dealt with the first US National Assessment of Climate Change Impacts, a four-year project completed in 2000 that resulted in a voluminous set of reports covering every region of the country. Taking seriously the likely impacts of unchecked climate change would have encouraged a type of public discourse that was anathema to them, and likely would have increased public pressure for a meaningful mitigation policy, which they had no intention of adopting. So the Bush White House, in collusion with a disinformation campaign whose operatives were both inside and outside the government, disowned and essentially suppressed official references to the National Assessment. Praise for the study by the National Academy of Sciences and criticism of its disappearance was to no avail.

The findings and conclusions of the new assessment report offer Obama and other political leaders a basis and a US-oriented vocabulary for leading the public to a greater recognition of the need and rationale for a national climate change policy that includes both long-term regulatory limits on emissions and planning for unavoidable impacts. But Obama and the Democratic leadership

have chosen to take a different approach, framing the issue in terms of "clean energy" and "green jobs". Obama's remarks to the G-8 Summit in July and his speech at the UN Climate Summit in September referred to some of the potentially devastating impacts of climate change, but in speaking in US domestic contexts he talks almost exclusively about energy policy — energy security, the job-creating possibilities of new energy technologies as a key to US economic strength in the twenty-first century, and so forth.

It appears the White House political operation has decided that the best way to enact a policy on climate change is with a message that keeps presidential communication about climate change *per se* to a minimum, and one that focuses almost entirely on US domestic considerations. In a similar vein, the climate change emissions cap-and-trade legislation passed by the House of Representatives in June is called the "American Clean Energy and Security Act," and the parallel bill now under consideration in the Senate is called the "Clean Energy Jobs and American Power Act".

Clearly the calculus of the Democratic leadership is that there is a tactical advantage in focusing on the "clean energy — green jobs" nexus. This makes sense in terms of mobilizing political support in the context of the deep recession, the US unemployment rate (10 per cent and still rising), the need to redevelop the US manufacturing base, and the US public's limited sense of urgency about climate change. The global challenge of climatic disruption is about more than energy policy, of course, and whether the current message will help to prepare the way for meeting this broader challenge effectively, or rather lead to additional avoidance and delay, is another question.

In any case, despite high hopes engendered by the election of Obama with sizable Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress, US domestic political reality has thrown up some formidable obstacles to progress and reform on a number of policy fronts, including climate policy. The Democrats have thus far been unable to enact comprehensive climate legislation that includes long-term major emissions reductions and a framework for supporting adaptation preparedness measures.

In the House of Representatives, where the Democrats have a 256-177 partisan majority, substantial compromises by bill sponsors Waxman of California and Markey of Massachusetts — for example, in the allocation of free emissions allowances and in accommodating agricultural producers — were needed in order to obtain passage of climate and clean energy legislation by a narrow vote of 219-212 in June. This was a significant step, the first time major climate legislation has passed either house of Congress. Senators Kerry of Massachusetts and Boxer of California introduced parallel legislation, including, as in the House bill, a cap-and-trade emissions reduction regulatory system extending out to 2050, on 30 September.

The effort to make legislative progress has been complicated, in part, by the Republican minority, which has adopted a strategy of hard-line, virtually lock-step opposition to all Democratic initiatives, seeking to make gains in the 2010 congressional election by maximizing the difficulty of Obama and the Democrats in governing and denying them legislative achievements. They spin up traditional arguments against "big government" and "tax increases" while part of their base engages in toxic rhetoric aimed at delegitimizing Obama altogether.

But the Democrats control the White House and the Executive Branch, and hold what would appear to be a commanding majority in Congress. Why has this not translated more expeditiously into enacting a climate policy? Several factors can be seen to be at work:

Procedural complexities make the US lawmaking system prone to delays and create multiple opportunities for defeating legislative initiatives. Senate rules, in particular, create opportunities for delay and obstruction. Most notably, by routinely resorting to a procedure that requires 60 votes in order to bring a bill to the Senate floor for debate and vote, the Republicans have parlayed their 60–40 minority status into a formidable blocking coalition.

Members of Congress are not necessarily responsive to disciplined party voting. They can be pulled strongly by parochial voter concerns and particular economic interests. They are influenced by the sources of the very substantial private funding that fuels American election campaigns. On major issues, the Democrats have considerable difficulty arriving at a coherent intraparty consensus. In particular, there is a minority of conservative Democrats — sometimes referred to as corporate Democrats — who, because of the need to unify the Democratic voting bloc in the Senate almost completely in order to overcome Republican opposition, can exercise disproportionate influence, demanding significant concessions on behalf of the interests they represent in return for their support.

Congress has been preoccupied throughout this year with policy concerns other than climate change, starting with the crisis of the financial system and the deep recession, and currently with prolonged consideration of health care policy reform, which is absorbing much of the attention of the leadership and key members. Health care reform is at the core of the Democratic domestic policy agenda, and inspires a greater sense of urgency among both voters and elected officials than anything to do with climate change and the Copenhagen climate summit.

It is uncertain when, and even whether, Congress will finally pass climate legislation. It will surely not happen before Copenhagen. The Obama Administration will go to Copenhagen with, at most, separate bills passed by the House and Senate, yet to be compromised by negotiation. Obama will not be able to offer a US emissions reduction cap-and-trade commitment, nor an agreed US commitment to provide funding for developing country adaptation programs or anything else. Congress controls funding for any initiative. The likelihood that Congress would ratify a strong new post-Kyoto climate protocol — an action that requires a two-thirds vote in the Senate — appears to be essentially nil.

At this point Kerry–Boxer is well short of the support needed for passage. As many as one-third of the Senate are classified as "fence sitters," neither reliably for nor against. Fence-sitters reflect a range of concerns, often particularistic, and always related to their perception of the relationship between support for climate legislation and their own individual re-electability. One Senator may support a bill only if it promotes greater development of nuclear power, another wants to ensure that his state's manufacturing industry is protected, or his state's electric power cooperatives, or the auto industry. Others aim to ensure the continuing viability of the coal industry and require more funding for "clean coal" technology and weaker targets for near- to mid-term emissions reductions. Members from agricultural areas seek greater use of biofuels and carbon offsets. A number question the

economics of cap and trade, or the timing of enacting legislation given the current state of the economy. Democrats are concerned that they are vulnerable with voters to the Republican charge that climate policy is nothing but an energy tax and an inequitable arrangement that will penalize coal, oil, and manufacturing interests and the communities that depend on them for jobs. Party leaders seek to cobble together a 60–vote majority based on trade–offs among such concerns. There appears to be little discussion of climate change *per se*.

Thus, climate policy is developed primarily in terms of domestic energy policy. The potential consequences of unchecked climate change, either for the US or globally, and the costs of inaction, are not prominent in the discourse. Adaptive preparedness to manage unavoidable impacts is included in the legislation, without a strategic approach, and treated as something of an afterthought. There is little discussion of the international situation, other than to express concern about foreign economic competition, the commitments that developing countries won't make, and potential geostrategic threats to US interests resulting from climatic disruption. Many members of Congress might find it politically risky with voters to speak in terms of multilateral commitments rather than US national interests. In the absence of focus on the global implications of climatic disruption, or of US policy, essential issues are avoided and public support is not developed on the basis of an integrative understanding.

Today, only 36 per cent of Americans say they believe there is solid evidence the Earth is warming because of human activity; 35 per cent say they believe global warming is a very serious problem. These numbers have decreased significantly since early 2008. Only 50 per cent say they favour setting limits on carbon emissions if it may mean higher energy prices; only 56 per cent say they support the US making agreements with other countries to address climate change. There are sharp partisan divisions on all these questions. One should not reify or over–interpret such snapshot polling numbers. They are subject to change. Nevertheless, they are sobering.

Part of this softness in public understanding of the climate change problem and support for action is a result of the efforts over the years of a corporate–funded "denial machine," or disinformation campaign, that has had considerable success in creating an exaggerated sense of scientific uncertainty about human–driven global warming and its consequences. Pursuing a front–organization strategy to ward off regulation of emissions of greenhouse gases from fossil fuel–burning, coal and oil industry interests and antiregulatory ideologues have funded an array of operatives in activist policy groups, "think tanks," and public relations firms, as well as supporting allied elected politicians. They work in tandem with a small group of "sceptic," or contrarian, scientists with views congenial to industry interests and willing to play an active public role, whom they have selectively elevated in the media and policy arenas. They take advantage of the general public's low level of understanding of climate science and policy issues, as well as the mainstream scientific community's limited ability to counter decisively in the face of a politically orchestrated, predatory attack.

The denial machine gained a good deal of ground via manipulating the news media's typical conception of objective, "balanced" reporting as giving equal space to "both sides" of every controversy, while also providing endless diversionary talking points for pro–industry politicians to hide behind. It wasn't necessary to "win" a debate on the scientific merits, only to conjure the

impression that there was, in fact, substantial disagreement in the scientific community about the reality and significance of anthropogenic global warming. Thus, the denial machine has done much to degrade and muddy the waters of US public discourse, diffuse any sense of urgency about dealing with climate change, and weaken support for meaningful policymaking.

As Congress moves haltingly forward on climate legislation and the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) moves toward regulating greenhouse gases under the Clean Air Act, the disinformation campaign grinds on. While the position of the hard-line denials has lost traction with political and corporate elites, who have largely accepted the scientific consensus on anthropogenic warming, they continue to obfuscate and mislead public opinion. Coal and oil interests create artificial or outright fraudulent "grassroots" activity (a tactic referred to as "astroturf") in opposition to climate and clean energy legislation. Industry-funded denials and members of Congress spin up disingenuous accusations that the EPA, in pursuit of an Obama regulatory agenda, has suppressed climate science, censored internal critics, and relied on global temperature data records of questionable integrity.

As policymakers turn their attention to the economics of mitigation, the disinformation campaign shifts emphasis to contending that proposed climate legislation will be an economic disaster for the US. In addition to spinning this line, they play down, or ignore, the costs and consequences of inaction. Obama said in a recent speech that what he termed the "naysayers" are being marginalized. That may be mostly true in terms of the climate science deniers. It is less true in terms of the economic aspects of the climate policy debate.

The immediate focus of the deniers and delayers is almost entirely on US domestic policy, in other words preventing significant legislative or regulatory constraints on fossil-fuel emissions. They do not yet appear to feel threatened by anything that is likely to happen at Copenhagen, given that the US negotiating position is tied so closely to domestic policy, or the lack thereof, and to the limits of what is politically acceptable to the US public. Unless it appears that Obama's position on Copenhagen can be characterized as calling for a substantial transfer of US wealth abroad, or an abrogation of US sovereignty to a disadvantageous mitigation agreement under UN auspices, the disinformation campaign will have little to agitate about. Nobel Peace Prize notwithstanding, Obama is unlikely to make any grand gestures at Copenhagen that he expects will be defeated by parochialism and political dysfunction back home.

It is difficult to see how this situation can be substantially improved unless US leaders frame climate change as more than a matter of domestic energy policy and economic competitiveness and lead the public to a more advanced position. The American people have never been offered sustained, coherent communication about global climate change by their national political leaders. They have never heard a President discuss, other than in passing, the core scientific conclusions about human-caused climate change, the potential consequences of climate disruption across geographical regions and socioeconomic sectors, policy options for requiring emissions reductions, the need for adaptive preparedness to deal with climate change impacts, issues at stake in the climate treaty negotiations, the US international role and responsibility *vis-à-vis* climate change, and so forth. None of this.

US proponents of mitigation policy tend to portray backing carbon out of the energy system as a relatively low-cost endeavour with many "win-win"

aspects. A cap-and-trade program may be enacted in the near term, but in the longer term, implementing emissions reductions of 80 per cent or more will be a very challenging project, which may call on the public to incur considerable costs and inconvenience. When the going gets tough, how will consensual public support for a fundamental transformation of the energy system be sustained? How will public support be entrained for appropriate proactive adaptation preparedness measures? Will it take observable disastrous impacts to achieve the needed consensus? In this respect, the failure thus far of US leaders to focus public attention on the impacts of climate change is particularly regrettable. It takes a key argument for supporting a strong policy off the table and leaves the opposition needing only to fight the battle of characterizing mitigation as a burdensome energy tax.

Mitigation policy issues have, understandably, received the lions' share of attention and are analysed in great detail. In the US, at least, much less advocacy and analysis has been devoted to issues of adaptation planning and implementation, and to the research agenda and operational resources needed to support them. These are essential aspects of climate policy in need of more attention.

Regardless of what legislation is enacted (or not), and what is agreed at Copenhagen (or not), the US is unprepared for global climatic disruption. The Bush White House's animus toward developing meaningful proactive response strategies resulted in eight years of inaction. No US government entity is currently responsible for coordinating and carrying out a national strategy to deal with the inevitable impacts of climate change — rising sea level and coastal storm surges, disrupted water resources, greater weather extremes, floods, droughts, wildfires, public health impacts, degraded ecosystems and wildlife habitat, impacts on food production, forests, transportation infrastructure, energy resources, and so on.

The legislation now under consideration contains elements of climate change adaptation, but does not yet include a comprehensive national adaptation strategy that would coordinate the actions of federal departments and agencies with jurisdictions that are relevant to the full range of expected impacts. Nor does the legislation establish a mechanism for coordination between the federal government, on the one hand, and states and local communities, on the other. In the absence of legislation, the White House has taken some early steps on adaptation planning. They are far from where the government needs to be. A few states, most notably California and Maryland, and a few local governments, most notably New York City and Seattle, have begun adaptation planning. The great majority of state and local governments have not.

Planning for adaptation to the impacts of climate change will necessitate a substantial body of research aimed at advancing understanding and supplying usable information. A committee of the US National Academy of Sciences issued a report in 2009 calling for a restructuring of climate research to meet the challenges of climate change. The report called for a mission-oriented approach, integrating natural and social science research and connecting the worlds of science and policy-making to support decision-making on a number of issues associated with climate change impacts and adaptation, including sea level rise and melting ice, freshwater availability, agriculture and food security, managing ecosystems, human health, and impacts on the economy. The US government has no real strategy for creating, coordinating, and supporting such a research agenda, nor for ensuring that research findings are synthesized and communicated effectively to policy-makers, resource managers, and the

public.

The US government supports global observing systems and scientific research on climate and associated global changes through its multi-agency Global Change Research Program, an enterprise with an annual budget of about \$2 billion. For the past 20 years the program has supported climate science research that has made essential contributions to the international assessments by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The program was damaged by the Bush Administration, which in addition to manipulating climate change communication and thereby undermining the program's credibility and integrity, also cut the research budget, allowed the satellite-based climate observing system to deteriorate dangerously, and weakened the program leadership.

Obama has pledged to respect and protect scientific integrity. His administration appears to have turned the page from the pattern of abuses documented under Bush. But the Global Change Research Program remains damaged, and as yet without a strong leadership committed to supporting and coordinating a research program on the issues identified in the Academy of Science report.

In the context of the Copenhagen summit, adaptation is addressed primarily as a matter of commitments by the developed countries to support adaptation in developing countries. Given that the US has barely begun to think about and plan for its own adaptation challenges, that thus far it has no strategy or funding for its own preparedness, it is not clear what kind of international commitment US domestic politics will support.

One US institution that has begun to think in terms of climate change impacts and preparedness is the military. US defence policy analysts have been producing reports that characterize climate change as a national security issue. The Central Intelligence Agency recently announced that it is opening a new centre to analyse the national security risks of climate change.

One report referred to climate change as a "threat multiplier," exacerbating a variety of existing stresses around the world. Another talks about the potential for climate change refugees to compromise US border security, environmental stresses further weakening marginal states, the melting of Himalayan glaciers threatening water supplies for one billion people, major urban centres threatened by rising sea levels, malaria and other tropical diseases moving into new areas with increasingly frequent outbreaks as the planet warms, food production disrupted by shifting weather patterns that limit rainfall, and regional tensions exacerbated in areas on which the US relies for oil. Security analysts contend that US national security policy must adapt to deal with the implications of the emerging threat of climate change for US foreign assistance programs and military operations.

Thus, the problem of climate security is processed through the frame of US geostrategic interests. Some US political leaders have begun to stress this climate-security connection. Arguably, it should prove useful in counteracting some of the denialism and scepticism about the need for strong climate legislation. But clearly there is more to the problem of security and insecurity in anticipating the impacts of climate change. Whose security? What are the sources of their insecurity? What resources and development do they need? Viewing the problem from a global perspective should lead US policymakers to the realization that, while climate change may pose a national security

problem, it doesn't have a national security solution.

In sum, the US does not have a climate change policy — none that can be articulated specifically and that represents the agreed position of the governing institutions. Policy is disputed and unresolved. The policy debate treats global climate change as a domestic issue. There is a legacy of denial and inaction yet to be decisively overcome. It must be understood that behind Obama's speeches there is a political struggle and a complex institutional terrain, which constrain him even as he seeks to lead it.

Published 2009-10-30

Original in English

© Rick Piltz

© Eurozine