



Containing Trump, Building Ambition

Elements of a “Well Below 2C” International Political Strategy

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Summary

- Trump’s election makes the politics of increasing climate ambition in 2020 extremely hard. The Trump administration will be at best obstructive and at worst actively hostile to climate action.
- There is no “like-for-like” replacement for US diplomatic leadership on climate. A more diverse global network of climate leaders is needed: from Europe to the Vulnerable Countries to Cities.
- Strategies for increasing national mitigation goals must change. National political mobilisation and practical international cooperation will be more important than high-level diplomacy.
- Countries must maintain confidence in the inevitability of the low carbon transition. The best lever to achieve this is by accelerating financial reforms in the G20, IFIs and national processes to drive investors out of fossil energy and actively towards clean and resilient infrastructure.
- Anti-climate influence from the Trump Administration must be contained through stronger international political alignment; building on the Paris success of the CBS network.
- China and Germany will need to take on an unfamiliar burden of strong international leadership. Enabling and supporting this will require engagement well beyond the climate community.
- Populist forces will be emboldened by the Trump victory to attack climate action and civil society. They will seek alliances with alienated communities such as coal miners. National strategies must seriously address just transition and attempts to close down civil society action.

1. What has changed with Trump’s Election?

The election of Donald Trump fundamentally changes the political assumptions on which civil society, funders and progressive governments have been building political strategies for greater climate ambition in 2020.

Since Paris moves had begun to direct governmental, civil society and philanthropic investment away from the politics of the UNFCCC towards driving “real economy” change; for example, through global campaigns on coal, fossil divestment and “coal to clean” investment switching.

However, there was an assumption that stronger “bottom up” activity would be complemented by international political momentum generated by an activist Clinton Administration continuing the climate diplomacy of Obama II. US diplomacy was seen as critical in creating an international “moment for ambition” in 2018-2020; as the US would be putting forward its NDC for 2030 and for domestic reasons would be keen to ensure other countries also put forward ambitious offers.

A Trump administration will not fulfil this role. The US could play a passively obstructive or actively disruptive role in global climate politics over the next four years. Early cabinet appointments suggest a worst case scenario and forward political strategies should be resilient to this.

There is no “like for like” replacement for US political leadership. No other country has the political weight, diplomatic capacity and domestic motivation to substitute this role. **Without an active US it will be far harder to put the world onto a reliable pathway to “well below 2C” in 2020 and 2025.** The absence – and potentially active challenge – of the US on global climate action requires a fundamental rethink of political strategies and investment in influencing and campaigning.

The Trump election victory means a shift away from “global momentum politics” based on a dominant global actor delivering international pressure for climate ambition. New ways of delivering more distributed international leadership must be created through networks of bilateral engagement and cooperation by government and non-government actors. These must be aligned with a stronger and more politically focused bottom-up approach to shifting national climate debates through direct campaigning and influence.

This more distributed approach will require increased resources and coordination from progressive governments and non-governmental actors if there is to be a significant probability of a meaningful increase in global climate ambition in 2020.

2. Maintaining Confidence on the Inevitability of the Low Carbon Transition

Paris created an expectation of an inevitable shift to a low carbon - if not yet a below 2C – world. Trump’s election will not derail this immediately. Positioning low carbon investment as a central solution to global economic stagnation is the strongest lever available for maintaining momentum.

The response of countries at Marrakech to the Trump election showed an initial intention to maintain current investment plans. Many expect Trump to be a one term President given his high negative ratings, narrow margin of victory and impossible election promises. Repeated communication of the likely short lived nature of Trump’s tenure should be a central tactic.

These perceptions may change before 2020, especially if Trump makes good on his promised trade policies and worsens global economic stagnation and volatility if. But even maintaining current levels of low carbon action is not enough. Major economies must significantly increase their mitigation goals in 2020 if the Paris Agreement is to maintain credibility.

Though many countries look likely to over-deliver on the NDCs, and falling costs of clean technology will lower the costs of increased targets, it is unclear whether this will turn into political commitments for greater ambition. Even the EU is currently unlikely to raise its 2030 goals - despite current overachievement - and Trump’s election has already made the European debate harder.

Increased “real-economy diplomacy” between countries will help increase confidence that more action is possible. This will be driven by stronger bilateral engagement and technical cooperation, and through international platforms on NDC Implementation and 2050 Roadmaps. But this deeper engagement – though vital – is unlikely to deliver significantly higher ambition on its own.

Countries are only likely to increase their overall climate ambition in 2020 if they see this as increasing short-term investment and growth. The world currently faces a significant shortfall in necessary infrastructure investment which cannot be filled through public spending. At the same time there are huge amounts of liquid private capital looking for higher long term returns. This is failing to flow to profitable infrastructure investment due to structural barriers and risk aversion.

There is an opportunity to align these forces by reforming public and private finance systems in order to make investment in low carbon and resilient infrastructure the solution to economic stagnation and low investor yields. This view is increasingly held by influential “insider” economic figures such as [Mark Carney](#).

Campaigning is already targeting the worst investment in coal power stations and unburnable oil exploration through the financial system reforms. Government initiated green financial reform processes are already underway in China, the EU, Mexico, Indonesia, the G20 and the International Finance Institutions. But progress is as yet too slow and patchy to deliver major ambition for 2020.

With concerted campaigning and diplomacy, it is a credible objective that financial reform could deliver a world where major countries believe that creating pipelines of low carbon infrastructure opportunities is the best way to mobilise increased domestic and international flows of capital.

Investment in political mobilisation to accelerate public and private sector financial reform – nationally and internationally – offers the largest “real economy” lever to make faster progress towards low carbon economies by 2020 appear a clear short term economic benefit.

3. Containing and Counteracting Trump Contagion

Containing the influence of an anti-climate Trump Administration on politics in other countries will require a more concerted shaping of the global debate than seen even in the run up to Paris.

The universal - and surprisingly categorical - support for the Paris regime by leaders at COP22 sent a signal to the Trump Administration that there could be a political price for reneging on their climate obligations. However, for a nationalist America First politician this may well be a price Trump is willing to pay in order to play to his support base.

Despite the initial display of defiance, countries will be under extreme pressure to accommodate the Trump Administration in order to protect their interests in trade, security, intelligence cooperation etc which are often dependent on a strong relationship with the US. Populist opposition interests will incorporate Trump’s anti-climate rhetoric to attack their governments; as has already been seen in Germany, Australia, the UK and France.

This drift towards normalising Trump’s positions on climate change needs to be counteracted by stronger and deeper engagement between countries, cities, businesses, investors and impacted communities to build a counter-narrative on the benefits of low carbon transition and the experienced impacts of climate change. Projecting the voice of those actors and regions of the US which intend to continue delivering their Paris commitments will be particularly important to counter act the chilling effect of Trump on global climate action.

Amplifying millennial voices in all countries – who are highly aligned with climate action and international cooperation – will be vital. This engagement will need to extend far wider and more deeply than the networks created to drive Paris Agreement; reaching beyond the climate bubble to position climate change as the key symbol of effective global cooperation which must be protected.

There will also be a need to build more aggressive voices – inside and outside the US – attacking Trump’s policies and surrogates. It will take time and investment to develop communication strategies which actually inflict political pain on the Trump administration.

The networks created to drive the Paris Agreement – aligned by the Climate Briefing Service – need to be reanimated, expanded and strengthened in order to build an effective counter-Trump narrative, engagement and campaigns over the next 12 months while the Trump Administration is still finding its feet. Only by getting in front of the Administration – and its international allies – and avoiding a solely reactive stance can the worst contagion be contained.

4. Supporting New Poles of Climate Leadership

While a good defence is vital to minimise the political impact of Trump, it is not sufficient to put the world on the path to well below 2C. Key countries and actors must step up to deliver more climate leadership at home and internationally if the Paris Agreement is to be seen to be delivering in 2020.

The EU has been the traditional leader of global climate action, but the shocks of the financial crash, refugee crisis and Brexit vote has undermined its confidence and coherence. The departure of the UK will shift the balance of EU politics towards lower climate ambition. Before the Trump victory the EU Commission was settling into a position of letting the US take the lead, with little push back from even “progressive” Member States. Unless this changes there is no chance of success in 2020.

Despite the risks posed by Brexit and populist candidates in 2017 elections the fundamental political economy factors underpinning the EU’s potential for climate leadership remain strong.

European climate leadership cannot be led from Brussels only from Berlin. A range of other high ambition EU countries must align with this, but only Merkel has the experience, interest and stature to shape a global agenda. However, this will require Germany to move from its traditional – and understandable - reluctance to lead on international affairs. This shift was already happening, and has been accelerated by Brexit, and so is a natural evolution which can be supported and accelerated by focused action in Germany.

China faces a similar challenge. Trump’s election will accelerate their need to take more responsibility for the global system. Xi Jinping seems to have grasped this opportunity with bold statements at Marrakech and in his first meeting with the new UN Secretary General on China’s future global role. China has already massively increased its contribution to UN peacekeeping , a move that follows major investment in new international institutions – with a strong low carbon focus – and leadership of the G20 process on green finance. A more assertive China is, of course, a double edged sword given its past support for polluting investment globally and export of repressive politics towards civil society. However, Chinese leadership in global governance is now a reality and climate change is an area where it will look to make its mark.

The strategic relationship between China and Germany – starting with their joint Cabinet meeting in 2017 – will become one of the fulcrums of the new climate politics. However, both countries need to significantly investment in climate diplomacy and cooperation architecture if their potential political weight is to be turned into effective global influence. This will require engagement strategies in both countries which reach well beyond traditional climate actors.

5. Countering Populist Attacks on National Climate Action

Trump's victory will politicise national climate debates in new ways. National climate campaigns will need to be based on deeper political analysis and embedded in wider alliances in order to resist push back from emboldened populist forces allied with incumbent fossil asset owners.

Trump's victory was enabled by underlying political forces present in all developed, and some emerging, economies. Distrust of elites and a feeling of being left behind by global economic change are driving economic nationalism and a retreat from international cooperation.

Populist forces – such as the National Front in France – have followed the US lead by identifying climate action part of a “liberal internationalist elite” project at odds with their core beliefs. They are trying to position climate action – along with immigration, globalisation, feminism and multiculturalism – as the enemy of national autonomy and culture. These voices are being emboldened by Trump's victory and will increase their attacks on national climate action.

National mobilisation strategies to raise ambition in 2020 must respond to these forces. Even where these views are held by a relatively small electoral minority, attacks on climate action are shifting mainstream parties – on both the left and right – to more sceptical positions. This will be most politically dangerous where populists can form alliances with asset owners and communities who feel they are being negatively impacted by climate policy, such as: coal and lignite miners; oil workers; chemical plants; steel communities and car workers. Populist parties in many countries are actively seeking confrontation with environmentalists in these areas.

Experience shows that, whatever the factual merits of these cases, the emotional and political resonance of “left-behind” communities tends to result in knee jerk responses to dismantle the climate policies deemed responsible and result in more subsidies to dirty industries.

National climate campaigns will need to get in front of these issues. Undertaking deeper political economy analysis in order to pro-actively identify future specific crisis points, supporting stronger just transition policies, forming alliances with trade unions where possible and working directly with impacted communities. But not all battles will be winnable. Clever and flexible politics and communication will be needed to avoid climate action being seen as being on the wrong side of the economic justice and national interest argument. Recent moves to align EU climate action with consumer groups and union campaigns are examples of such emerging approaches.

These more expansive tactics will need to be achieved in an environment where the space for civil society action is being systematically closed down by government and corporate action. Repression of civil society, often aimed specifically at groups campaigning against dirty development projects, has spread in the past decade from authoritarian regimes in China and the Gulf to democratic countries as diverse as India, South Africa, Poland and the UK.

Trump's election - especially if followed by economic turmoil and trade wars - will embolden other countries to strengthen restrictions on civil society. Climate actors will need to build alliances across other areas of civil society, and across borders, in order to maintain their ability to operate.