

Biden's Climate Plan: Hope Alone or a Turning Point?

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One of Joe Biden's first acts after he entered the White House was to sign a series of climate-related executive orders, signalling a clear intention to waste no time in reversing the destructive policies of his predecessor. Many citizens of the US, a country that is regularly affected by severe natural disasters including wildfires, hurricanes, and floods, are expected to support these moves. In 2020, two-thirds of Americans thought that their government should adopt stronger climate policies. In its latest report, the US Federal Reserve for the first time identified climate change as a serious threat to financial stability. Reflecting the urgency of the matter, the new US president has presented the most ambitious climate plan to date. What has he promised, and which measures can be implemented – and how quickly?

President Joe Biden has announced that combating climate change will be a priority for his administration and plans a cross-agency approach to tackling this challenge. His climate plan centres on the decarbonisation of the power sector by 2035 and the climate neutrality of the entire economy by 2050, and he has pledged a first-term investment of 2 trillion US dollars in order to achieve this.

Biden has proposed a broad package of climate policies affecting numerous sectors. A key priority is the electrification of the transport sector. To achieve this, Biden's government plans to introduce higher emission standards, following California's example, and to build 500 000 new charging stations for electric cars to create corresponding market incentives. Coupled with an offer of retraining and good jobs with a minimum wage of 15 US dollars, the transformation of the domestic auto industry is expected to create 1 million new jobs.

Besides the electrification of the automotive sector, Biden's most ambitious campaign promise in the transport sector is the construction of the world's most sustainable, safest, and fastest train system. After decades of focusing on individual mobility and virtually ignoring rail transport in the US, Biden's plan represents not only a paradigm shift but also a mammoth task.

To reduce the large amounts of energy consumed in heating and cooling buildings in the US, Biden plans to weatherise 2 million homes (making them resistant to cold weather, through insulation and other means) and upgrade an additional 4 million commercial buildings to increase their energy efficiency, in addition to constructing 1.5 million new homes and public housing units to the highest efficiency standards. Since energy supply is a state responsibility in the US, Biden has not formulated a target for the share of renewable energy sources in the electricity mix.

A federal research agency, the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA-C), is to be established to drive innovation in the new, advanced technologies needed to achieve climate neutrality. Research will be funded in areas such as sustainable energy, battery technology, carbon capture and storage, new building materials, hydrogen, and modern nuclear power. This should spur a wide range of innovations and lead to the creation of new industrial sectors. Biden's vision is to make the US the world leader in and top exporter of green technologies, with a clear

emphasis on their domestic production – thus boosting the US economy. In order to ensure that climate policy is an industrial policy success, Biden has announced not only investments in infrastructure and research, but also necessary tax and trade policy reforms. However, he leaves the details open. Public procurement is seen as another building block to promote sustainable technologies that are produced in the US.

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A plan with social justice at its heart

Inspired by Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps, Biden has proposed the introduction of a national civilian service programme – the Civilian Climate Corps – in which young people can get involved in nature conservation and environmental projects. In addition, 250 000 new jobs are to be created in the restoration of abandoned coal fields and oil fields. Taking a lesson from the Democrats' lost election campaign in 2016, Biden has explicitly emphasised the key contribution of the coal-mining regions to the economic rise of the US and promises to support their transition with the help of a new Task Force on Coal and Power Plant Communities.

Although Biden has distanced himself from the Green New Deal in the past, his policy proposals draw on its principles significantly. The central new feature of Biden's climate agenda is that it links climate policy and social justice. This is made clear by his promise to make 40 per cent of the investments in sustainable energy and infrastructure available to disadvantaged and low-income communities. For Biden, social participation also means that all citizens have access to high-speed internet and that schools in poorer neighbourhoods are modernised. He recognises that those on low incomes and people of colour are disproportionately affected by pollution, and as a result, they suffer financial and health disadvantages. By doing so, he introduces a new dimension to climate policy in the United States: environmental justice.

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Biden's climate policy narrative is a combination of reducing CO2 emissions and simultaneously carrying out massive infrastructural investment. The policy should result in the creation of new jobs, "made in the USA" green technologies, the development of sustainable industries, and improved social justice.

Climate 21 Project

The Climate 21 Project, a group of over 150 high-level climate experts, has developed recommendations for Biden's climate policy and advocates a broad interagency approach to address this challenge of the century. The Climate 21 Project does not formulate any substantive goals; rather, its proposals make recommendations on structures and measures to be implemented. They set out how the White House, together with 11 federal departments and agencies, should pursue and execute climate policy in order to "hit the ground running" and succeed in implementing the fundamental pillars of its climate policy in the first 100 days of Biden's term in office. In order to avoid a situation in which no one takes final responsibility due to the number of actors involved, a high-level national climate council is to be created within the White House.

Putting the plan into action

It will be possible to implement certain elements of Biden's new climate policy relatively quickly, while others will take longer. Some, however, will be difficult to implement at all. Trump's environmental rollbacks, including emissions standards for power plants and the transport sector, the regulation aimed at reducing methane emissions, and protection for water and land, will be relatively straightforward to reverse, restoring standards to their original levels. Following Biden's signing of the executive order for the US to re-join the Paris Climate Agreement, it is expected the US will regain its membership within a month. The court cases pending against states including California that embraced higher emission standards could also be withdrawn with the appropriate political will.

The drafting of new laws, on the other hand, could easily take two years or more. Biden's executive order halting construction of the Keystone XL pipeline, an extension to the massive oil pipeline running between the US and Canada opposed by many indigenous communities affected, is likely to be followed by numerous lawsuits from the companies affected, delaying the final decision for years.

In order to pass the budget, tax reforms, and trade agreements, the president needs congressional approval. With the election win in Georgia, the Democrats now have the same number of seats in the Senate as the Republicans. In the event of stalemates in the Senate, the vice-president will have the deciding vote, meaning that Kamala Harris will play a decisive role over the next two years. With a majority in the House of Representatives, the Democrats can thus theoretically organise majorities in Congress. Such a majority would be wafer-thin, however, and could not be relied on – particularly when coupled with the broad range of positions represented within the Democrats, especially in terms of climate policy.

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In contrast to Biden, Democrat proponents of the Green New Deal are in favour of a phase-out of all fossil fuels, including gas. Many of them are also critical of technologies such as carbon capture and storage and nuclear energy. In recent years, many more progressive Democrats have entered Congress, and in many policy areas they have advocated much stronger reforms compared to Biden as a moderate Democrat. On the other hand, Biden emphasised during the presidential race that he was running as a president of reconciliation and wants to bridge the growing division within society. In order to create broad consensus and muster support for this project, he will have to reach across the political aisle to certain Republicans and make compromises with them. Given the significant hostility between them, Biden faces a difficult balancing act, both within his own party and in Congress, to unite the different camps as well as he can. This task would require time to build trust, but this is in short supply. From day one, Biden will be required to tackle numerous challenges, among them the pandemic, the economic crisis, and climate change. This will include passing legislation with wide-reaching implications. The strong emphasis on economic policy in his climate plan could, however, help him win broader support for his policies in Congress and within society over the coming years.

A winning team: Biden's key players

Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump, cut many government posts related to environmental and climate protection, leaving them unfilled. The new president must therefore not only redirect the administration in terms of content, but also re-staff it with experienced personnel. Biden has appointed former Secretary of State John Kerry as Special Presidential Envoy for Climate. A diplomatic heavyweight, his task will be to regain the trust of the international

community. Kerry, who played a decisive role in the Paris Climate Agreement, will be tasked with convincing other nation states to adopt ambitious climate goals. But this will only succeed if the US itself sets an appropriate example. This includes ambitious national climate goals, appropriate measures to achieve them, and a responsible commitment to international climate finance. Kerry will also sit on Biden's National Security Council, highlighting the threat to national security posed by climate change.

Central to the implementation of climate policy is the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Michael Regan, currently head of the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality, has been named as the new head. He is the first person of colour head the EPA. He is expected to strongly promote the issue of environmental justice.

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A further member of Biden's climate team will be avowed Green New Deal supporter Deb Haaland. The New Mexico representative has been nominated as Secretary of the Department of the Interior, which holds responsibility for the management and conservation of most federal land and natural resources. She will be the first Native American in the cabinet and will be a strong advocate for environmental and minority interests.

According to statements by Biden's political advisors, a convincing climate policy profile and being considered an ally in the fight against climate change were essential for the top jobs..

Not all good news

The numerous hopeful announcements aside, Biden's climate policy also has problematic aspects and will take a different course to the EU. He does not fundamentally question fracking, merely refusing to grant any additional permits for drilling on federal lands. Biden sees gas not only as a medium-term bridging technology but also grants it a place in the energy mix in the long term. He will continue with the US approach of wanting to export its liquefied natural gas (LNG) to Asia, Europe, and South America and to see it as an industrial sector for the long term. The US has invested large sums of public and private money in fracking technology, which must now pay off.

Pinning all of its hopes on carbon capture and storage, the US will fail to make a clean break with fossil fuels and will create false market incentives

Biden is pinning all his hopes on carbon capture and storage in order to make the extraction and burning of gas justifiable in terms of climate policy. The US will pump massive investments into this technology in the next few years, leading to capacity constraints in other areas. The US will thus fail to make a clean break with fossil fuels and will create false market incentives despite major climate policy concerns about carbon capture and storage and its questionable economic viability. Such a policy trajectory fails to give the impression of a consistent US climate policy. Lastly, Biden sees modern nuclear power as a climate-neutral energy source but fails to come up with a solution for the unresolved and cost-intensive final storage issue. Nor does he address the security concerns of nuclear power.

In this together? The outlook for international climate policy

In addressing the climate crisis during his first conversations with world leaders and announcing an international climate summit for the spring, Biden's climate diplomacy has already begun. But overall, Biden's climate policy rhetoric has a clear national focus. The extent to which the new US president will participate in international climate financing remains to be seen.

From the outset, the EU should approach the new US administration proactively as a renewed ally in the fight against climate change and make concrete proposals for transatlantic cooperation. The EU's progress with its European Green Deal is being followed with great interest in the US. Since Biden is also committed to massive investments in infrastructure and green technologies, an exchange between governments on both sides of the Atlantic could be valuable and inspiring. There are prospects for the creation of transatlantic working groups bringing together different ministries or departments to learn from each other's policy measures and to strengthen transatlantic cooperation. The EU Commission's proposal to introduce a climate tariff on products from countries without a (compatible) CO2 price has caused some unrest on the Hill. A large majority in Congress wants to avoid a trade policy dispute if possible. This example shows that the EU, as an important trading partner, has the weight to set climate policy standards and to push the US to take more ambitious climate action.

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