

## **Biden's Climate Promises Face US Political Deadlock**

**Article by Nora Löhle**

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Since taking office, President Joe Biden has spotlighted climate action nationally and pursued American climate leadership globally. But the new administration's plans are running up against the reality of a divided legislative system and a political economy hooked on fossil fuels. Nora Löhle analyses the potential for a credible US climate policy and the hurdles that stand in its way.

In April, President Biden opened the [Leaders Summit on Climate](#) with exciting rhetoric, announcing the highly anticipated new US climate target. His promise to the world: the United States of America will increase its reduction target to 50 to 52 per cent by 2030 compared to 2005. When calculated from 1990, this goal corresponds to a 43 per cent emissions reduction.

But how likely is it that the USA will make the necessary emissions reductions over the next few years to ultimately achieve this climate target? There is no simple answer. But a closer look at the past, Biden's current team, government announcements, first heated negotiations in Congress, and the measures taken so far allow us to identify certain trends – and clearly demonstrate what needs to happen for this goal to be reached.

### **A sobering look at the past**

Currently, US greenhouse gas emissions are [4 per cent higher](#) than 1990 levels. A glimmer of hope was seen between 2007, the year of peak emissions, and 2017, when emissions fell by [12 per cent](#). This development was due to two measures: the massive investments in fracking that kickstarted the shift from coal to gas, and the emissions standards for power plants and vehicles implemented by the Obama administration. The Trump administration went on to put a damper on climate policy.

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A look at the past shows that the US has so far failed to achieve any significant reduction in its greenhouse gas emissions. President Biden must therefore pull off a tour de force to achieve his climate goals. With his institutional and personnel line-up, Biden has taken an important first step, and his interdepartmental approach is convincing. Climate policy can only be successful if it is implemented by the whole government. With cabinet members such as Deb Haaland, Michael S. Regan, Gina McCarthy, John Kerry, Janet Yellen, and Pete Buttigieg, he has put together a diverse and climate-strong team that will anchor a new justice dimension in climate policy.

## **Build back better**

Biden assumed the presidency under the slogan “Build back better – stronger out of the crisis.” For Biden, economic and climate policy belong together. In his American Jobs Plan he describes how infrastructure investments should generate new jobs and sustainable industries – with a clear focus on green technologies. Over the next 10 years, 2 trillion taxpayers’ money will be channelled into road and bridge repair, clean drinking water, 500,000 electric charging stations, the promotion of electric cars, the expansion of railways and public transport, renewable energies, electricity grid expansion, and high-speed broadband. The plan is to make sure that these projects do not fail for lack of capital. A poll by the League of Conservation Voters and Data for Progress found that 71 per cent of voters support the American Jobs Plan, meaning that a large part of the US population currently backs Biden’s policies to transform the climate and economy for a better future.

However, the green economic stimulus package still needs approval from Congress and heated negotiations with the Senate have been going on for weeks. Biden is aiming to achieve bipartisan support for his investment plan – in keeping with his conciliatory political style, and because he will need 60 votes in the Senate to pass the budget. Negotiations to this effect are still underway with the Republicans, and it has been proven that finding a bipartisan compromise seems difficult, maybe impossible – the next weeks will show. The central disagreements are how to fund the infrastructure plan and what to spend it on – Republicans are specifically against the massive funding for climate change action, and research and development. Biden has already taken a painful compromise by agreeing to a much smaller funding that is now a little over 1 trillion US dollars – only about a fourth of what Biden had initially proposed during his campaign. This means most climate initiatives are already buried before they even got started. In this light, climate activists and several Democrats in Congress see Biden as already giving up on his ambitious climate plan.

If no compromise is reached, the Democrats could still take an alternative but less ideal course via a process known as budget reconciliation, which requires only 51 votes and under which Biden’s American Jobs Plan could pass the Senate with the approval of all Democrats alone.

Even if the package finds its way through Congress, the following steps remain crucial. Where exactly will the money go? Which technologies will be defined as green and forward-looking? Where can the most significant climate-policy impacts be made, while ensuring greater justice? Voices from science and civil society should be represented within this discussion to identify the most sustainable solutions and set the right priorities.

At the very least, Biden has already announced that 40 per cent of the investments will go directly to poorer neighbourhoods and regions with high levels of pollution. This fulfils his promise of environmental justice and ensures more self-determination for discriminated minorities. The local use of funds could also result in far more efficient and effective solutions that serve the climate and bring about social equality.

## **Underpin climate policy with legislation and sectoral targets**

Investments alone will not be sufficient to achieve the country’s climate goals. The US government must introduce legislation that sets standards for reducing emissions as

quickly as possible. Such standards were effective in the past and must be extended. Compared to executive orders, standards have a longer duration of effect and send a clear signal to the economy. Moreover, Biden's cabinet must formulate milestones against which their success can be transparently measured. Annual targets must be defined for each sector, including sanctions for non-compliance.

However, in every area of climate policy, Biden will face the same legislative hurdles in Congress. States like Texas, North Dakota, Alaska, and Wyoming, whose economies remain heavily dependent on the extraction and production of fossil fuels, are particularly sceptical about his climate agenda. He will also have to communicate his plans for transformation to his home state of Pennsylvania with considerable tact. There, the coal phase-out has led to painful job losses and the hopes of many communities now lie in gas production. Democratic senators and representatives will find it difficult to support climate policy proposals in certain sectors unless convincing promises are made to create new jobs in their constituencies. Moreover, in the Senate, the success of any climate bill hangs in the balance following Democratic Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia's announcement of his intention to boycott all of Biden's climate policy efforts.

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The US government recently issued a permit for new oil and gas extraction in Wyoming, while in late May the Biden administration defended the Willow project, a major oil drilling venture in Alaska, in court. Once granted, permits for new fossil fuel projects mean additional greenhouse gas emissions for decades into the future. This approach shows that Joe Biden is willing to make decisions diametrically opposed to climate protection in favour of bipartisan compromise and jobs. Civil society groups and the US's international partners need to keep a critical eye on the president's climate policy actions and the extent to which they correspond to his rhetoric. Public pressure is essential to ensure that the US makes the leap.

## **Transport and power**

The transport and power sectors are among those with the greatest potential for emissions reductions in the USA. The US transport sector currently accounts for one third of total emissions, while the power sector accounts for 25 per cent of emissions.

In the transport sector, the US is already on a promising path. States such as California have introduced emissions standards and climate-neutral vehicle quotas for car manufacturers. These measures are already having an impact and should be rolled out across the country. Technological developments in electric mobility are pointing the way to the future, and traditional manufacturers are following suit: General Motors, for instance, is aiming to stop producing petrol vehicles by 2035. Digital applications are also contributing to the mobility turnaround by offering efficient and sustainable alternatives. A massive expansion of public transport and bicycle lanes in cities would save even more emissions.

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In the electricity sector, the use of renewable energy sources must be expanded and massively accelerated through support schemes and quotas. While solar and onshore wind are already on the rise in some states, the potential of offshore wind farms is just being discovered. To achieve a carbon-neutral power sector, the US government must also announce the phase-out of all fossil fuels. This elementary building block remains elusive. The US continues to produce, burn, and export oil and gas in large quantities. Here, Biden is pursuing a debatable course of action: he has placed his hopes on carbon capture and storage [read more on [CCS technology](#)] and will pump large amounts of public money into this technology over the next few years, which will leave other budget lines lacking.

Another major problem is methane which is many times more harmful to the climate than CO2 emissions. Methane emissions from oil and gas production are much higher than previously thought, and are increasing annually. The US government urgently needs to adopt a strategy to curb methane. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is currently drafting a bill on methane emissions standards.

## **Climate policy as an opportunity**


While the US is yet to prove its actual emissions reductions, Biden already has a few achievements under his belt. He has succeeded in building a broad alliance to support his climate policy, including industry and trade unions won over to the cause by the promise of sustainable jobs and global leadership in green technologies. The president also consulted climate activists during the drafting of his climate agenda and adopted several their demands. With this type of alliance and a new unifying message that reframes climate change as an economic and social opportunity as opposed to simply being a costly problem, the necessary systemic change and a far-reaching transformation could become possible.

The Biden-Harris administration has had remarkable success in recent months in fighting the pandemic thanks to bold investments, pragmatic crisis management, and a call for civic engagement. This style of governance, coupled with a spirit of innovation, could bring about a much-needed climate policy breakthrough. For it to be far-reaching and continuous, this climate policy needs to be implemented by respective law that needs broad support by Congress. However, a bipartisan understanding that climate change must be tackled is yet to be created.

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