ECONOMY AND ECOLOGY 13.03.2024 | Andrew Rosenberg

Leading in reverse

The possibility of a second Trump presidency paints a bleak picture for US climate policy — and could undermine America's leadership role

The 2024 presidential race in the US is almost certain to be between the incumbent president, Joe Biden, and his predecessor, Donald Trump. Since both have served one term in the White House, we should have a clearer view on how they will address critical issues. Chief among them, environmental policy and the climate change crisis.

Recent attention has focused on Trump's disturbing, ill-conceived comments regarding NATO and Russian aggression in Europe. However, his cavalier approach to global security, key alliances and the role of the US in the world is consistent with his professed views on most issues. That is, a mixture of ill-informed opinion, grievance, bravado and bullying aggression. Generally, Trump's policy approach, or lack thereof, seems to be diametrically opposed to Biden's cautious statements and practical policy actions on climate and environmental policy.

If Trump is elected this November, what would the American electorate have voted for when it comes to addressing global warming and environmental degradation? The question is all the more urgent as the world approaches several likely tipping points for catastrophic changes affecting human society. Scientists have stated, regarding another Trump term, that 'the climate cannot survive', and policies would be 'horrific'. Based on Trump's first term as president, it is possible to go beyond the candidate's campaign statements and consider not only what policies he might talk about but how policies might be enacted, if at all. To do that, it is useful to break down the role the president himself might play versus the executive branch of the US government, the Congress and the courts.

Trump the autocrat

Trump recently proclaimed that he would be a dictator for 'one day', raising alarm bells. Leaving aside that dictators seem never to relinquish absolute power after a first taste of that drug, what is it that Dictator

Trump could actually do, assuming the American Constitution, to which he would swear an oath on that first day, would remain in force?

He could issue executive orders and proclamations. President Biden has issued quite a few regarding climate change, including the need to consider climate impacts in evaluating federal actions under the US National Environmental Policy Act, as well as accounting for environmental justice and social equity, creating an Ocean Climate Action Plan and more.

When Trump was president, he used the power of his office to revoke actions taken by his predecessors to combat climate change. He allowed the expansion of drilling for fossil fuels, stopped requiring federal agencies to explicitly include climate impacts and so forth. In other words, he moved climate policy backwards.

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But note that while candidate Trump might say 'drill, drill, drill' on day one, fossil fuel extraction doesn't happen by executive order, nor does it happen in a day, nor is it under the control of the president. An executive order instructs the executive branch, the US federal agencies, on what the president wants them to do. But agencies can only act within the context of their statutory mandates and constraints including funding, which is decided by Congress, not the president.

Can an executive order do damage? Sure, by pushing the limits of legal authority in a certain direction. But an executive order is not a statute, nor can it waive legal requirements. Nor can a president rescind the current finding that greenhouse gases endanger human health and the environment. A president can tell the Environmental Protection Agency to consider rescission, but achieving this would require a long and arduous legal process including developing justification for rescission based on the best available science. That science is now overwhelming concerning the anthropogenic nature and impacts of global warming.

So, what could President Trump, therefore, do by executive action? He could withdraw from international agreements like the Paris Accord… again. He could refuse to appoint a climate change envoy and rescind and revoke previous executive actions. In other words, Trump could reverse course and undo the progress the US has made to combat the climate crisis.

Rolling back regulations

At the operational level, if the first Trump Administration is any guide, appointed leaders will be ideologues and hired industry functionaries from the fringes. Again, they will focus on rescinding rules, halting progress, rolling back the clock, halting research and denigrating science and technology.

Trump has proven to be famously immune to science, dismissive of scientists, expertise and evidence, as well as dismissive or hostile to international norms and collective action. He has displayed no understanding of climate change, despite all that has occurred. Apparently, the climate is literally all about him — he endlessly disparages renewable energy because he didn't want windmills near one of his golf clubs. His appointees will be bound and determined to carry forward those views.

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Candidate Trump's influencers are busy drawing up plans that will attempt to turn back the clock on climate action, as they did during his first presidency. And as before, they will run smack into the American legal system of checks and balances. In the first Trump Administration, the federal government prevailed in about one-third of litigation cases on environmental regulatory policy. That is the reverse of previous administrations, where the federal government prevailed in two-thirds of cases. The legal requirements won't change unless Congress takes action to modify the underlying statutes. In a divided government, as the US has now and more than likely will have for the next term, change is hard to come by. Any regulatory action must be justified based on the legal requirements and the scientific basis. Despite what Trump might think, the courts don't generally view him as a scientific expert on many, or any, issues.

But moving backwards could, unfortunately, be easier than leading progress. Even with legal challenges, the damage is done. The first Trump Administration had a real impact on climate change. And if he is elected again, perhaps the Inflation Reduction Act won't be rescinded, but its funding will be slowed, and its provisions misapplied. Precious time will be lost, laws won't be enforced, greenhouse gases will continue to be

emitted, climate impacts and disasters will multiply and leadership opportunities will be squandered.

Trump on the far right

In a very real sense, the nationalist far-right environmental agenda of a second Trump Administration is based on a narrative that government actions on climate change, pollution and public health aren't justified to serve the public good, but instead are part of a deep dark conspiracy to control people. In this view, government regulations and incentives aren't needed because the 'free' market will meet the needs to serve the public trust. As Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway show in their most recent book *The Big Myth*, it is a compelling, although false, constructed narrative that is nevertheless potent in American politics.

Trump has been described as a 'projector'. That is, he accuses others of what he himself does. His political rhetoric is one of a government ruled by a 'deep state' political agenda and operating without checks and balances. If you believe that narrative, the government essentially does whatever it wants based on some complex conspiracy irrespective of the rule of law. And Trump has been decrying the deep state for years now.

So, it isn't surprising that, in his plan for a second term, there are plans afoot to create a deep state by restructuring the civil service to be loyal to President Trump rather than the constitution. This would be done by transferring large numbers of career employees to a new civil service classification, so-called Schedule F, who will be directly responsive to the political leadership and the White House. Schedule F employees can be tasked, moved and removed based on how well they serve the president's agenda, rather than the agency's mission.

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For issues like climate change and the environment, the consequences are potentially dire. Creating this new political civil service layer risks the expertise and stability of the scientific and policy capabilities of the government for years to come. Rather than having durable capabilities that are valued for their expertise, loyalty to a political agenda will be valued above all else as the road to advancement. In any government, that's a recipe for disaster.

Finally, Trump and his far-right campaign have made it clear on many, if not most, issues that he cares little about international relationships and

global governance. His remarks concerning NATO noted above are part of the picture and emblematic of what he means by 'America First'.

Like global security issues, addressing climate change relies on international partnerships. And if Trump is elected to a second term, it seems unquestionable that America's standing as a reliable international partner will take a critical blow. If the US' political leadership swings so wildly every four years, how can the global community expect shared commitments for global warming mitigation and adaptation to be viable? If America First is the policy of the next US administration, in what sense can it help lead the global response to climate and environmental crises?

The US is a leading nation internationally because of a huge economy, a huge military — and because it is a huge greenhouse gas emitter. But will that leadership be advancing to a safer, more sustainable future, or regressing as the globe warms and the impacts mount unsustainably?



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