

US 2010 Elections: Bleak Prospects For Climate Change

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Tuesday 2 November 2010 is Election Day in the United States. Opposing candidates in many important races have divergent views on climate change policy. Given this and the large role that the US plays in climate change, the outcome of this election can have a large influence on the climate. We won't know for sure until then, but right now it looks like the elections will make it very difficult for the US to pass any significant climate change legislation any time soon.

US politics are almost entirely dominated by two parties, Democratic and Republican. Though exceptions abound, the Democrats (Barack Obama's party) are in general much more concerned about climate change and interested in taking action on it. Many Republicans express doubt that climate change is even a valid issue and aggressively seek to thwart any climate policy. But some Republicans have expressed concern about climate change, and some Democrats, especially in the coal-rich Midwestern states, are unenthusiastic about climate policy, so the issue does not always split along party lines.

Since the 2008 elections, the Democrats have controlled the presidency and both houses of Congress. Meanwhile, popular support for taking action on climate change was at all-time highs in the wake of *An Inconvenient Truth*, the IPCC's Fourth Assessment Report, and the UK's Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change, all of which helped put climate change high on the agenda. Hopes were thus high that the US would finally take meaningful action on climate change, a full decade after being one of the only countries not to ratify the Kyoto Protocol.

Despite these favorable conditions, the US has done relatively little on climate change since 2008. To be sure, the Obama Administration has implemented substantial clean energy and energy efficiency programs. But Congress has not passed any significant energy legislation. The reason for this is simple: incessant Republican filibustering in the Senate. A filibuster is a process allowing one Senator to speak with no time limit on an issue. By dragging out the debate without end, the Senator can effectively prevent a vote on the issue. It takes a 60% supermajority to break a filibuster. Since 2008, Republicans have been using the filibuster to delay and dilute virtually every significant piece of legislation going through the Senate, including climate change legislation. Republicans now hold 41 of the 100 Senate seats – a distinct minority, but enough to hold the US legislative system hostage.

In 2010, Republicans are expected to gain more seats in the Senate. This would make it virtually impossible for the Democrats to pass any legislation unless the filibuster is eliminated. The Senate sets its own rules by a simple greater-than-50% majority vote. While the filibuster has a long tradition and broad support, many are concerned that it is

being abused. Traditionally the filibuster was only used to thwart legislation that was strongly disliked, not every piece of legislation being proposed.

But even if the filibuster is eliminated, there is also a strong chance that Republicans will gain control of one or both houses of Congress. If this happens, then Obama and the Democrats in Congress will have to negotiate with the Republicans on all legislation. Given the strength of Republicans' opposition to doing anything on climate change, this means prospects would be bleak for any US action on climate change during 2010-2012.

Furthermore, the Republicans are expected to gain control of many state legislatures. This gives Republicans control of the upcoming redistricting process which determines the regions within a state that elect members of the House of Representatives. The number of representatives per state is determined by the Census. Louisiana, for example, is expected to lose one representative due to migration caused by Hurricane Katrina and the destruction of the coast, including New Orleans. Expect region boundaries to be drawn to maximize the political advantage of the controlling party. This makes prospects difficult for US action on climate change during 2012-2022.

Finally, US elections are now adjusting to a recent Supreme Court ruling which permits corporations to spend unlimited amounts of money to influence elections as long as they're not actively coordinating with campaigns. The 2010 elections have seen unprecedented levels of spending – and US elections were already extremely expensive. A lot of this spending is oriented towards electing candidates that oppose action on climate change. This ruling could easily remain in effect well beyond 2022.

Ultimately, it is the American people who vote, not the dollars of corporations. Regardless of how electoral boundaries are drawn and even regardless of which political party is in control (or if there's a stalemate between the two parties), the US will take action on climate change if and when its people demand it. For now, these demands are simply not strong enough.