

American Democracy And Global Climate Change

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In early 2009, there was much optimism for climate change policy in the United States and worldwide. US voters had just elected a Democratic President and large Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress. A fairly strong climate change policy, the American Clean Energy and Security Act (ACES), was working its way through Congress. Passing ACES would pave the way for a strong global treaty in the December United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) meeting in Copenhagen.

This optimism had been building up over several years. A series of major events put climate change at the top of the national agenda for the first time ever. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina pierced the nation's sense of environmental security with an event that probably would have been less severe without climate change. In 2006, Al Gore's landmark film *An Inconvenient Truth* captivated audiences while the UK-sponsored report The Stern Review grabbed international headlines with its stark economic analysis suggesting that reducing emissions would have strong benefits. In 2007, the fourth assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) presented the most comprehensive case to date that climate change was both caused by humans and posing a massive threat to civilization. Al Gore and the IPCC also shared the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize for their work. Finally, the 2006 and 2008 US elections swept pro-climate action Democrats into power. These events, combined with the upcoming UNFCCC meeting in Copenhagen, made it seem like the time for action on climate change had finally come.

ACES passed the House of Representatives on 26 June. Then, unfortunately, it died quickly in the Senate, where there were just not enough votes for it to pass. The Senate has more difficult voting rules than the House, and while Democrats had enough votes to pass legislation within these rules, some Democrats opposed ACES, especially those from states with large fossil fuel and agriculture sectors. It turned out that after all these years, the fossil fuel and agriculture industries acting in their own self interest still had enough political clout to trump the strong scientific and moral basis for reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Since summer 2009, climate policy in the United States has taken several big steps backwards. In November 2009, private emails from a UK climate change research were hacked and published. While these emails did not actually reveal anything diminishing the quality of climate change science, groups opposed to action on climate change successfully used these emails to cast doubt about the science. Meanwhile, no investigation ever uncovered who committed the crime of the email hack itself. [Recent evidence](#) about other hacking points to News Corporation, which has a long history of tarnishing climate science. But we still just don't know. A month after the email hack, the UNFCCC meeting in Copenhagen produced a lot of disappointment and no climate change treaty of any significance. Then, in November 2010, US voters gave Republicans

a large majority in the House of Representatives and shrunk the Democrats' majority in the Senate. The public will and political votes that existed in 2009 simply aren't there anymore, and there's no sign of them coming back any time soon.

The US's story on climate policy is important for two reasons. First, the US remains a major force in both greenhouse gas emissions and in global climate change treaty negotiation. With much of the rest of world already in support of a treaty, US support might be the only missing piece. If the US passes domestic legislation, then it could show up to the annual UNFCCC meetings and make something happen. Right now, that is a very big "if".

Second, the US's story offers several important lessons for the ability of democracy to handle climate change:

The geographic scale of the democracy is important. It's no surprise that the strongest opposition to climate action within the US comes from states with strong fossil fuel and agriculture industries. These industries may have more to lose than they do to gain from climate action, though climate action would create big new opportunities. But what if the whole world voted in one unified democracy? Indeed, it is from the US democratic tradition that we have the idea that "all men are created equal". Since climate change affects people worldwide, perhaps everyone should get to vote together. Then regional fossil fuel and agriculture interests would have much less influence.

Similarly, the details of the voting procedures matter. The US came within inches of passing ACES. Were it not for the Senate's difficult voting procedures, ACES would likely have passed. Furthermore, were it not for electoral rules in which monetary campaign donations can play a large role, elected officials would cater less to fossil fuel and agriculture industries. The importance of voting procedures is an important lesson for emerging democracies in Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere to take note of. The procedural decisions made by emerging democracies today can reverberate throughout all of their future politics, not just in climate change.

The perceptions and values of voters are even more important. Climate change research has repeatedly shown that it is in society's overall interest to reduce emissions. But many people have misperceptions about the realities of climate change. These misperceptions are a major impediment to climate action. But even if they knew the realities, many people would still vote against climate action if it was in their own self interest to do so. I would guess that many people in the fossil fuel industry understand climate change research quite well but prefer advocating policies that make them richer and more powerful. If this were not the case – if people would act in society's interest – then the world would have acted on climate change a long time ago.

So, is democracy up to the challenge of climate change? Maybe. It will take more efforts to raise awareness of the realities of climate change and to promote global values. This is a massive project, but not an impossible one. Even the US, with its large fossil fuel and agriculture industries and its difficult voting procedures, came very close to passing a

fairly strong policy for reducing emissions. Meanwhile, the alternative – a more dictatorial form of government – is sensitive to the whims of the dictators. Maybe they'd care about climate change; maybe they wouldn't. At least with democracy, those of us who care have some means of trying to make a difference. For the sake of the planet and of humanity, let's hope that's enough.