BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE CLIMATE CHANGE AGENDA: THE U.S. AS LEADER OR OBSTACLE?

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Why should the global community be concerned about climate change? What are the consequences of climate change? How has the clash between science and politics in the United States affected the policy debate about climate change around the world? Why has the United States failed to offer leadership on climate change? What can be done to craft a viable climate change agenda? These questions will guide the discussion below.

Why should the global community be concerned about climate change?Climate change is one of the most important policy issues of the twenty-first century. It has potentially devastating consequences for the global environment. It is a transnational challenge that has social, political, and economic implications for the entire international community. During the first ten years of the twenty-first century, we have experienced the warmest years in modern climate history. This same decade has been characterized as one of the warmest on record. Although the scientific community has raised serious concerns about climate change, this global environmental phenomenon has not received the same kind of responsesuch as aPearl Harbor in 1941 or a 9/11 in New York City in 2001 that rallied U.S. citizens and the U.S. government to action.

The political conflict over climate change within and between countries, especially in the United States, has demonstrated three important aspects about this issue. First, it shows how the clash between science and politics delays action. Second, it demonstrates how ideology and entrenched economic interests can trump the research findings of the scientific community. Third, it makes clear that rather than offering leadership, the U.S. has assumed the role of a laggard on the issue of climate change.

What are the consequences of climate change? We are beyond the point of framing the issue of climate change as a "debate." There is no debate. As we have learned from the scientific community as reflected by the research of the Intergovernmental Panel Climate Change in its 4th (2007) and 5th (2013) reports, climate change is occurring and human activities are a major contributor to the problem, especially the burning of fossil fuels. Global reinsurance companies including Munich Re, Swiss Re, and Lloyds of London have raised serious concerns about the prospects of a warming planet and the impact on the global insurance industry. In the United States, for instance, the consequences of climate change is forcing domestic insurance companies including MetLife, State Farm, Allstate, and American International Group to reconsider their coverage of commercial and residential properties in coastal zones. To be candid and frank, global and nationally-based insurance companies are well aware of the impact of human-induced climate change. A sample of the

consequences of climate change can be described as follows.

First, carbon dioxide, one of the primary greenhouse gases associated with climate change, has been absorbed into the atmosphere, terrestrial areas, and the oceans. The oceans, in particular, face a serious threat in terms of marine life, the fishing industry, coral reefs, and increased acidification. Second, with the melting of the polar caps, a warming planet is already resulting in rising seas around the globe. For instance, the states on the East and Gulf coasts of the United States are being challenged to establish viable adaption strategies to address rising seas. At the same time, some coastal areas are dealing with the twin threats of rising seas and sinking lands (i.e., subsidence). Moreover, sea level rise is not consistent around the globe, but rather, it is characterized by its variation. In other words, we see differential impacts facing some coastal areas (e.g., Bangladesh) compared to other coastal regions. Third, a warming planet and especially warmer seas will create an environment of more ferocious hurricanes. For instance, scientists at the 2007 International Summit on Global Warming, Climate Change, and Hurricanes were less concerned about the frequency of hurricanes and were increasingly concerned about the destructiveness of Katrina-like tropical cyclones around the globe. Fourth, an increasingly important aspect of this global environmental phenomenon is the impact of climate change on public health. One aspect of this concern involves an increase in water-borne diseases such as malaria and dengue fever due to the warming of the planet.

How has the clash between science and politics in the United States affected the policy debate about climate change?The political response of the U.S. to climate change has been influenced bythe conflict taking place between the scientific community and a variety of partisans within the country.On the one hand, from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, from the Pew Center for Global Climate Change to the Environmental Protection Agency, from the World Meteorological Organization to the vast majority of climate scientists, we have learned that this global environmental phenomenon is clearly due to human actions. On the other hand, a variety of individuals and groups including members of the U.S. Congressto media celebritiesto organized interests (e.g., the fossil fuel industry) have been successful in opposing U.S. action on climate change. For instance, James Inhofe, Republican Senator representing the state of Oklahoma has been at the forefront of opposing federal and state actions in response to climate change. As a matter of fact, where Inhofe went so far as to say that climate change is the “greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American public,”conservative radio show host, Rush Limbaugh, stated that the “anti-global warmers have to go out there and get their own science to counter the science that the pro-global warming crowd is using, and they’re making it up.” In short, the clash between science and politics in the U.S. over climate change clearly shows the power of entrenched domestic interests and their impact on policy making.

During the 1990s, a variety of industries including fossil fuels, automotive, manufacturing among others created the Global Climate Coalition to oppose efforts to respond to climate change.This coalition eventually collapsed as various industries withdrew from it. Another example of opposition to action on climate change is the Heritage Foundation, a think tank that published articles in opposition to federal action on climate change. It is important to note that underlying the actions of deniers of human-induced climate change has been their position that government regulations imposed on business and industry

would be harmful to U.S. jobs and trade competitiveness. The veracity of this concern, however, has yet to be realized. Moreover, this argument set forth by the deniers overlooks the growth in green jobs and the benefits of a clean energy agenda.

Why has the United States failed to offer leadership on climate change? Until recently, the United States was the number one producer of the greenhouse gases that contribute to climate change. Notwithstanding China's recent emergence as the largest producer of greenhouse gases, the U.S. remains a key player in greenhouse gas production and it remains a laggard in taking action to reduce greenhouse gases. We now turn our attention to the role of five key players in the U.S. political system.

As far as modern U.S. presidents are concerned, where Ronald Reagan ignored the issue of climate change during the 1980s leading up to the Earth Summit in 1992, George H. W. Bush, facing pressure at home, opposed *mandatory* guidelines and timetables that emerged from the Earth Summit and used his influence to change the requirements to*voluntary* efforts on the part of industry. Having said this, the fact that Bush signed the climate change treaty lent legitimacy to the issue. Bill Clinton and his environmental Vice President Al Gore attempted to push a climate change agenda but ran into strong opposition from the U.S. Congress. Two months into his presidency, George W. Bush rejected the Kyoto Protocol arguing that it would hurt the U.S. economy and jobs.

The U.S. Congress has been a major obstacle in responding to climate change.During the 1990s until the present time, Congressional Republicans held a majority during the administrations of Clinton and Bush, the son, and have controlled the House of Representatives during the Obama administration. Congressional Republicans, along with Democrats representing energy-intensive states, have opposed action on climate change.

In a move that surprised many observers of American politics, the Supreme Court,the highest court in the U.S.,ruled in 2007 that the Environmental Protection Action, under the authority of the Clean Air Act, had a responsibility to regulate greenhouse gas emissions to protect public health and the environment. However, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives has usedits resources to thwart action on the part of the EPA to regulate greenhouse gas emissions.

One aspect of American politics that has offered hope for a clean energy future has been the importance of federalism where a growing number of states have taken actions alone and in concert with other states to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.Moreover, several coalitions of U.S. states have joined with Canadian provinces in these efforts. In short, numerous states in the U.S. are taking action in response to climate change because of the failure of the U.S. federal government to act.

What can be done to craft a viable climate change agenda? Climate change is a transnational, environmental problem that poses serious challenges to the entire international community. The U.S. must join with the developed countries of the EU in an effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and work on viable adaption strategies. However, the U.S. will first have to deal with domestic forces at home (e.g., entrenched economic interests and ideological opponents) that exercise power in opposition to federal action on climate change. At the same time, incentives will have to be employed in order to

encourage newly modernizing nations (e.g., China, India, Brazil among others) to join with the U.S. and members of the EU to work together to establish a clean energy future.

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