

United States: What will a Biden administration mean for the climate?

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Many celebrated the electoral defeat of Donald Trump, danced in the streets and cried with tears of joy. For those from the progressive movements, it was a hard-earned victory born out of their collective power and strong political will to confront white supremacy and fascism.

It was a time to rejoice and give affirmation to the incredible national efforts of grassroots organising in the US by black communities and people of colour, labour groups, environmental and climate justice organisations, indigenous peoples, and the LGBTQIA communities and to build a broad popular front between them. They delivered the essential votes needed to give that narrow electoral victory to Joe Biden. Many swallowed hard and held their noses while voting for Biden, aware that the threat of a Trump victory left them no other viable choice once Bernie Sanders' candidacy was deliberately crushed by the Democratic Party itself.

Four years of Trump's racism are far too long and the policies that he put in place to normalise racism, promote rent-seeking and block climate actions are far too destructive, not just to US politics and democracy, but for the world as a whole. His approach to a still uncontrolled global pandemic and actions against various multilateral efforts will continue to have effects for many years to come.

It is indeed good to enjoy a global sense of relief that Trump was outvoted, and will not become the re-elected president of the most powerful country in the planet. As such, we should celebrate Biden's victory, but there are good reasons to remain cautious that the worst is not over. Trumpism is not yet over. Corporate America and its tentacles will not disappear with a shift of parties or politician at the helm.

In fact, US social movements and the global social justice movements should strengthen further and prepare soon for a new struggle against Biden's politics, which we fear will still result in corporations being the main beneficiaries. Unless progressive groups are able to do this, there is a big risk that the world will get another Trump, perhaps even more dangerous than the first, four years from now.

As Naomi Klein pointed out in her [post-election analysis](#), Biden's record in his four decades in public office and his political positions on crucial issues show that he is likely to only offer too little to address what people need. It would indeed be naive to think that he will push for the systemic changes needed to tackle the planetary state of emergency on health, the global economy and the climate emergency. For now, at least, it is enough that he is not Donald Trump.

Biden's pledges on climate change

Joe Biden has said he will “listen to science” and promised to take new stances on tackling Covid-19, climate change and other key issues during the election campaign. He recognises that [climate change poses an existential threat](#) not just to the environment, but also to health, communities, national security, and economic well-being.

Many climate groups appreciate that his approach on climate change will be fundamentally different from Trump's. He promised [to immediately reverse](#) Trump's withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement that came into effect on 4 November and to lead by example and call on other countries to increase their domestic climate ambition. During the presidential debate, he declared there will be a “transition from the oil industry” and an end to new drill leases for public land and water.

His transition team have said the administration will put the US on “an irreversible path to achieve net-zero emissions, economy-wide, by no later than 2050”. These US emissions reductions would lead to a decrease in end-of-century warming of around 0.1°C above pre-industrial levels. [According to estimates by Climate Action Tracker](#), that, combined with net-zero targets from China, Japan, South Korea and other countries, could put the Paris Agreement's target of 1.5°C of total warming within reach. The transition will be through the use of a broad mix of tools, which will include developing advanced nuclear power plants, as well as technologies that can capture carbon dioxide from fossil-fuel plants. In addition, he says he'll push to end fossil-fuel subsidies worldwide.

Are these appropriate measures, do they go far enough and who will benefit?

How far the new US government can go on climate, however, will not only be challenged by the Republicans' possible majority in the US Senate. There is a need to challenge Biden's definition of “boldness”.

During the first Presidential debate, Biden said the Green New Deal is “[not my plan](#)”, but his own [climate plan](#) co-opted some of the populist language of the Green New Deal. However, a ‘net zero’ emissions target by 2050 supported by \$1.7 trillion of spending over 10 years may not do the magic. ‘Net zero’ is not the same as zero emissions and [disguises climate inaction](#). Net zero simply means corporations will still have a free reign to keep polluting with the vague future promise of removals through increasingly-popular nature-based solutions (NBS). These predominantly mean forest offsets, afforestation and reforestation with [tree plantations, and other false solutions and techno-fixes](#). Forest restoration (tree-planting) has limited potential and can only offset a share of emissions. There is simply not enough land to counterbalance the rate of current and projected emissions.

Governments keep promoting concepts such as net zero. The problem with it is that the companies, whose profit margins literally depend on a worsening climate crisis, will simply keep operating as normal. The only long-term and sustainable way to stabilise the climate at any temperature target is to reduce anthropogenic CO₂ emissions to zero and that requires a radical reduction in fossil carbon emissions. Techno-fixes are unlikely to ever be rolled-out at scale.

Carbon capture, which is also in the plan, could extend reliance on fossil fuels. Biden also did not call for a ban on fracking, which is a major demand of climate justice groups. And his plan includes other measures that are rejected in climate justice circles like [climate smart agriculture](#).

On the other hand, his relations with labour unions and interest to get their support are reflected in

his plans. He promised to keep worker's right to join unions and exercise collective bargaining in all the infrastructure to be built to pursue emission reductions – building new power plants, increase clean energy capacity, and upgrading and building homes. He also pledged to create 1 million new jobs in the American auto industry, domestic auto supply chains, and auto infrastructure, from parts to materials to electric vehicle charging stations. But it will be a private sector-led process, and the private sector will reap the main gains.

He has also promised to provide every American city with 100,000 or more residents with high-quality, zero-emissions public transportation options through flexible federal investments with strong labour protections that create good, union jobs and meet the needs of these cities to improve existing transit networks and bus lines.

Yet while there are some positives in Biden's climate agenda, together they are simply not far-reaching enough, and do not go far enough in confronting the actual climate emergency we are in now. They will not disrupt the current climate profiteering and the system that is damning even his own country, which is already besieged by floods and uncontrollable forest fires. Climate action also means more than job creation.

Joe Biden wasn't the first choice or even a top choice of most climate activists. So, just as in the UK, it will take strong organising and concerted pressure from the bottom up to push governments towards fundamental change. Only then will this be a decisive step forward for the planet.

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P.S.

- Global Justice Now. 14 November 2020:

- <https://www.globaljustice.org.uk/blog/2020/nov/14/what-will-biden-administration-mean-climate>

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