

Politics must link climate action to economic and societal progress

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If we are to tackle climate change, our political debates and legislative action must move away from the false rhetoric that pits environmental action against economic and societal progress.

In the last year alone, India has witnessed an acceleration in the impacts of climate change. Devastating floods in Assam, Bihar, Kerala and Mumbai, widespread damage by cyclones Amphan and Nisarga, locust swarms and forest fires — these are warning signs that climate change has already begun to impact Indian lives and economies. Climate change is a notoriously difficult challenge to crack. Its effects are local, but the cause is global, needing all countries to get on board for action.

It is in this context that Joseph Biden's success in the US presidential elections is being celebrated by climate activists across the world. The US is the world's second-largest emitter of carbon dioxide, and a major contributor to global warming. Without their active cooperation and commitment, the world has no hope of being able to make any progress on climate change.

In December 2015, 196 countries signed the Paris Agreement on climate change, currently our best shot to keep the worst effects of climate change in check. The agreement commits all countries to keep global warming within 2 degrees Celsius. Even 2 degrees of global warming can lead to catastrophic effects — as the tropical storms, floods, droughts, forest fires and locust swarms of 2020 tell us. In reality, what we need is far more aggressive action — but the Paris Agreement provides at least a partial pathway.

Within six months of becoming president in 2017, Donald Trump announced that the US would be pulling out of the Paris Agreement. On 4 November this year, just a day after the US presidential elections, the US formally withdrew from the agreement, making it the only country to do so.

For the first time in history, in a country where the climate change agenda has been dominated by denial, the issue made it to the national elections, pushed to the forefront by young climate activists.

The Sunrise Movement, a political movement led by young Americans, organised across the US to make climate change one of the defining issues of the 2020 US elections. Middle-school children, too young to vote, but worried about their future in a climate-impacted world, held up signs outside political rallies saying, “Youths need a Green New Deal”. Sunrise supports the ambitious Green New Deal that young Democrats like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar advocate. This differs from Biden’s position in several critical ways. For one, the Green New Deal has an ambitious goal of making the US carbon-neutral by 2030 –emitting only as much as can be locked up in oceans and forests. That’s just 10 years away. Biden says this is impossible. He plans to make the US economy net-zero by 2050, 20 years later than the Green New Deal targets.

Biden has also announced that he has no plans to ban fracking on private lands in the US. Two US states, Pennsylvania and Texas, sit on top of massive shale fields, which have recently been exploited via fracking to produce “clean energy” via natural gas. This is one of the fastest growing job sectors in the US. But fracking emits methane, which is an even more powerful driver of climate change than carbon dioxide. Climate activists have called for a ban on fracking, and recent research has shown that methane leaks from shale fields have had a major global impact. Given that this is a politically sensitive issue, Biden has been hesitant to announce any restrictions on fracking.

The young people in the Sunrise movement say his plan is not ambitious enough. And they are correct. By 2050, a number of irreversible changes in the world’s ecology and environment will take place. Biodiversity loss threatens global food security. By 2050, unless we do something, most of the world’s coral reefs will be lost, impacting the ocean food system. Reversing climate change after that will not help India’s fisherfolk. Nor will such a plan save Indian islands and coastal areas from going under water — recent projections indicate that much of Mumbai’s financial and business core will be underwater by 2050.

Nevertheless, Biden’s election provides significant cause for optimism on climate action, not just for the US but for the rest of the world. His plans for combating climate change are linked to his other objectives of reviving the economy and promoting racial justice. One of the first things he is likely to do after assuming office is to ensure that the US rejoins the Paris Agreement, and reinstate a number of environmental legislation and institutions that Trump dismantled. He plans to spend five trillion dollars to combat climate change, creating millions of “green jobs” in the process in the renewable energy sector, energy efficiency and climate resilient infrastructure.

Converting these ideas into action will prove challenging. The Senate is still in control of the Republicans, and the fossil fuel lobby plays a prominent role in shaping political decisions in the US. Biden’s key to success may lie in the way his campaign has framed climate change — not as a stand-alone environmental issue, but one that is linked to the creation of millions of planet-friendly green jobs in the automobile industry and renewable energy sector, in the support of climate-friendly farming, in the clean-up of polluted air and water in the country’s poorest and most marginalised areas. This, above all, should be the lesson for India. If we are to tackle climate change, our political debates and legislative action must move away from the false rhetoric that pits environmental action against economic and societal progress. There are ways to forge alternative versions of the Green New Deal that work for India. Our clock is ticking too.

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