

Obama's Chance to Change (Political) Climate

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By James Gerstenzang (/author/itemlist/user/45039) and Dan Becker (/author/itemlist/user/45040), USA Today (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2012/11/30/carbon-tax-green-jobs-sandy-obama/1735461/>) | Op-Ed



Hurricane Sandy and the 2012 drought (<http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/in-the-news/us-drought-2012-farm-and-food-impacts.aspx>) drove home the need for President Obama to lead the fight against global warming. Freed from the political constraints of the re-election campaign, he holds three tools. Wielding them successfully, he will make bold action against the world's most pressing environmental problem a legacy of his second term.

The president can sharply curtail power plants' emissions of carbon dioxide, the largest global warming pollutant, by using existing law to require that utilities start converting from coal to cleanly extracted natural gas and introduce more renewable energy. To cut demand for electricity, he can set standards that increase the efficiency of power-gobbling appliances.

But scientists warn that far more will be necessary. The deadly hurricane, devastating drought and 332 consecutive months (<http://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/sotc/global/2012/4>) of above-average global temperatures are just the sort of conditions they say will accompany global warming.

So, taking a page from the nation's first environmental president, Theodore Roosevelt, Obama can use his third tool — the bully pulpit — to change the political climate on climate. He must mobilize public pressure on Congress to adopt far-reaching measures that he cannot enact on his own, including steps that begin to end our addiction to oil.

Certainly, passing such legislation will be a challenge in the toxic political arena. But even before Sandy struck, 77 percent (<http://environment.yale.edu/climate/files/Policy-Support-September-2012.pdf>) of

those surveyed in September by the Yale Project on Climate Change said global warming should be a priority of the president and Congress. Leveraging such broad support into pressure on the House and Senate, Obama can demand strong congressional action, from phasing in renewable energy to phasing out subsidies for fossil fuels.

And, if we are really serious about breaking our reliance on coal and oil, Congress must enact a carbon tax. It would discourage reliance on fossil fuels and raise revenue, helping solve another problem. Only a concerted campaign by the president that builds on public concern about global warming will generate the necessary support.

Scientists at the U.N.'s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warn (<http://securegreenfuture.org/content/what%E2%80%99s-right-target-350-or-450-ppm>) that the world must cut carbon dioxide emissions more than 80% by 2050 or face dramatically higher seas, the spread of tropical diseases and more severe floods and droughts.

The United States has a special responsibility to act. Burning coal, oil or natural gas creates carbon dioxide. Cumulatively, we have pumped more of it (<http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/Global/usa/report/2009/8/america-s-share-of-the-climate.pdf>) into the atmosphere than any other nation. And more than any other nation, we have the affordable solutions to cut this planet-threatening pollution.

Obama understands the need to protect America from what on election night he called "the destructive power of a warming planet." Last summer, he ordered that new cars in 2025 average 54.5 mpg

(<http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2012/11/30/carbon-tax-green-jobs-sandy-obama/1735461/>), the biggest single step any nation has taken against global warming. The decision demonstrates how a president can use congressionally-authorized executive powers. Under the Clean Air Act, he is cutting automobiles' carbon dioxide emissions by 570 million metric tons

(http://switchboard.nrdc.org/blogs/ltonachel/strong_clean_car_and_fuel_econ.html) annually by 2030.

By using the same legislation to force the power industry to phase out the dirtiest fossil fuel, replacing coal with natural gas and, increasingly, solar and wind power,

he can more than match the auto program's emissions reductions.

Appliance standards have cut carbon dioxide emissions by more than 200 million metric tons

(<http://efficiency.lbl.gov/drupal.files/ees/Impacts%20of%20US%20Appliance%20Standards%2045825.pdf>) since 1990. Extending more-stringent standards under federal energy laws to such ubiquitous items as televisions and their set-top boxes, water heaters and electric motors, among others, could nearly double (<http://www.appliance-standards.org/sites/default/files/The%20Efficiency%20Boom.pdf>) those savings by 2035, according to the Appliance Standards Awareness Project. This would cut electricity consumption by 7%, the equivalent of shutting 49 coal-fired power plants. The technology to deliver more-efficient appliances is sitting on manufacturers'shelves.

The goal: We lower demand for electricity by improving efficiency to the point that the sun and wind meet most of our electricity needs, as outlined in a 2007 report (<http://www.renewableenergyworld.com/rea/news/article/2007/02/ases-report-renewable-energy-can-curb-global-warming-by-2030-47351>) by the American Solar Energy Society.

These steps will also help the economy. Just as improving automobile efficiency saves oil and cuts costs at the pump, reducing energy waste lowers household and business bills. And the production of green energy technology will create good jobs.

With the nation reeling from Sandy and the public favoring action, what better time than now for the politically secure president to take full advantage of the executive and persuasive powers of his office?

In his first term, President Obama cemented his legacy protecting the health of individual Americans. By cutting emissions and setting an example that will lead other nations, the president can seal his second term legacy: protecting the health of the planet.

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