



Environmental groups divided on whether to hit Obama on climate change

By Ben Geman - 10/20/12 04:13 PM ET

The environmental movement is divided over how hard to pressure President Obama on climate change in the homestretch of the 2012 campaign.

The contrasting strategies were evident in statements and e-mails to members that green groups released after Tuesday's debate, which saw Obama and Mitt Romney battle at length over energy without once mentioning global warming for the second-straight onstage battle.

Some groups praised Obama for strongly touting renewable energy and efficiency, while others knocked him for battling to be seen as a staunch supporter of coal and oil.

Environmentalists nearly across the board have been disappointed that climate change has received little attention in the presidential campaign, but are split over whether Obama should be chastised for not trying to move it to the forefront.

The Sierra Club, which has endorsed Obama and is working for his reelection, sent an e-mail to members after the Oct. 16 debate that didn't wade into the climate issue. Instead, it knocked Romney's comment that "I will fight for oil, coal, and natural gas."

The group contrasted that with Obama's comments supporting green energy and fuel efficiency standards that his administration has greatly toughened.

But some environmentalists saw a different debate, and felt Obama's endorsements of oil and coal made the sting of the climate omission even worse.

The group 350.org, in an e-mail to supporters, lamented the silence, while Friends of the Earth Action's president said both men "failed America" by staying mum on climate.

"Both candidates vied to restate their commitment to more dirty oil, gas and coal production while ignoring the contradiction between an 'all of the above' energy program and reducing emissions of climate disrupting gases," said Erich Pica of Friends of the Earth Action.

Back on the gentler side, the League of Conservation Voters (LCV), which has the environmental movement's largest political operation along with Sierra Club, didn't issue a statement after the debate, but through a spokesman declined to criticize the president for skipping climate at the debate.

LCV's Jeff Gohringer said that a discussion of climate change in one of the debates would have a bigger impact than Obama's stump speeches, but said it's up to the moderators to ask about it.

LCV, like Sierra, has formally endorsed Obama and spent over \$1.1 million supporting his reelection bid thus far.

Another prominent group, the political arm of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), issued a post-debate statement calling Romney's agenda a fossil fuel industry wish list while calling Obama's green energy agenda good for the economy.

The NRDC Action Fund supports Obama's run but has not launched an outside spending campaign in the race.

While climate change has been absent from the debates and not emphasized by the campaigns, Obama has noted in a number of stump speeches that climate change is not a "hoax," saying it is an important threat that needs addressing.

The divide over how aggressively to pressure Obama comes as the movement has struggled to gain traction on some of its top priorities.

Sweeping climate change legislation collapsed on Capitol Hill in 2010 amid widespread GOP opposition, and while the Environmental Protection Agency has begun rolling out greenhouse gas regulations under its existing powers, it has yet to propose emissions standards for existing power plants, something advocates will press for if Obama wins a second term.

The administration has, however, strongly toughened auto mileage standards, drawing cheers from climate advocates.

Dan Becker of the Safe Climate Campaign called the mileage standards the biggest single step any nation has taken to fight climate change, and said he hopes there is "commensurate" action on power plants in a second term.

Becker said that while it would be nice to hear climate discussed in the debate, "what really matters to the planet and the atmosphere is what the president does, not what he says in a debate."

"The president already has the support of the vast majority of environmentalists who care about global warming, so what he is emphasizing is the jobs and the financial benefits of [mileage] standards and emissions standards and other things, rather than talking about the environmental benefits because he already has those votes," Becker said.

But Brad Johnson of the group Forecast the Facts — which has been calling for an end to “climate silence” from the presidential campaigns — said there’s a strong connection between what’s emphasized in the election and what happens afterward.

“I think that it is clear that the commitments that a candidate makes and the mobilization of citizens around the issues shapes the action that the president and Congress take after the election,” said Johnson, campaign manager with the group, which launched early this year.

After Tuesday’s debate, Forecast the Facts sent an e-mail to backers lamenting climate’s absence from the battle and noting, “President Obama and Governor Romney touted their plans to burn more oil, gas, and coal” and “fought to be the bigger Carbon Candidate.”

It steered readers to a website aimed at advocating for climate discussion in the final debate. While criticism over “climate silence” has been directed at both candidates, environmentalists have little hope for anything but a defensive struggle if Romney wins the White House.

He has called for rolling back federal greenhouse gas rules, opposes cap-and-trade and has questioned the extent of human’s contribution to global warming.