

What Obama's Victory Means for the Earth

We narrowly dodged a bullet in the 2012 presidential election. Americans were presented with the choice between Mitt Romney's fossil fuel reliant 19th century view of energy and Barack Obama's cleaner 21st century low carbon vision.

Even more significant than the Obama victory is the fact that Romney was denied the world's most powerful office. The election of Romney would have had dire implications for renewable energy and it would have undermined decades of environmental protections. Romney's reliance on oil would also have dramatically increased American greenhouse gas emissions.

As we are already precariously close to a number of environmental tipping points, a Romney victory may have made it impossible to reign in climate change. It is not overstating the case to say that a Romney presidency threatened the world with the prospect of runaway climate change.

Hopes for the Second Term

President Obama has already done a great deal for the environment. In his first term, he established stricter fuel economy standards and erected more stringent requirements for coal plants. Despite his accomplishments in the first four years, his second term must be more far more audacious than his first.

The President is our last best hope, but his reelection is no guarantee that we will be able to step back from the precipice. Despite the resistance he can expect to encounter, Obama knows much needs to be done on climate change. In his victory speech, the President said, "We want our kids to grow up in an America...that isn't threatened by the destructive power of a warming planet."

One of the most important things the President can do over the next four years is to provide even more support for clean energy. Here are eight key areas that require Obama's leadership:

Clean Air: Set new (EPA) rules and regulations for pollution under the Clean Air Act including carbon dioxide regulation, mercury, lead, coal ash and ground-level ozone (smog).

Clean Energy: Move forward with a clean energy standard that would require utilities to get a greater portion of their electricity from renewable sources of power.

Fracking: Regulation of the new highly suspect natural gas extraction technique.

Wind Power Tax Credits: Extend the federal tax credits for wind power which are due to expire at the end of 2012.

Tar Sands: Move away from tar-sands oil and reject the Keystone XL pipeline.

Coal: Close U.S. coal plants, put an end to mountaintop coal removal, and prevent coal from being exported to jurisdictions with lax environmental regulations.

Oil Subsidies: Slowly stop giving money or credits to the fossil fuel industry.

Carbon tax: Hold polluters accountable based on their pollution profile.

Why the President Soft Peddled Climate Change

During the election campaign many criticized the President for not making climate change more of a campaign issue. Despite the overwhelming body of evidence supporting the existence of anthropogenic warming, the President virtually ignored the subject on the campaign trail. This is the first time global warming has not been part of a presidential debate since 1968. To understand the conspicuous omission of climate change we need to understand what happened in the preceding four years.

During his first term, the President was thwarted by misinformation and obstructionism from Republicans, the fossil fuel industry and other corporate interests beholden to the old energy economy.

The Republican war with climate science has succeeded in causing a sizable minority of Americans to doubt the veracity of climate change. As revealed by the November 2012 popular vote, almost half of Americans appear to believe in the GOP's failed rhetoric. The simple fact is that Americans do not care enough about climate change at present for it to be a compelling campaign issue.

The President's silence on climate change is due to the reality that the GOP and Big Oil have succeeded in casting aspersions on climate science and this has undermined American support for environmental action.

There are powerful interests wielding considerable influence. In the 2012 election, six billion dollars was spent trying to manipulate Americans. The fossil fuel industry alone spent 1.5 billion dollars trying to sway the results.

The President could not afford to highlight climate change in his campaign strategy. If Obama would have emphasized the environment, Big Oil would now be in control of the White House.

Who to Thank?

The Democrats benefited from Republican policy positions that proved undesirable to a majority of Americans. For example, the Republicans have suggested that they would like to privatize FEMA while increasing the nation's extreme weather causing emissions.

In addition to the American voting public, Obama also owes a debt of gratitude to extreme weather events like Hurricane Irene and the Tornadoes of 2011. Most recently Hurricane Sandy made the point that there are devastating costs associated with climate change.