

ENABLERS AND INHIBITORS

OF THE EU AND US RESPONSE TO CLIMATE CHANGE

How the EU Pulled Ahead

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ABSTRACT

Climate change is by far one of the most significant issues facing the world today, yet still lacks the comprehensive multilateral response needed to address it. The EU has substantially increased its relevance on the global stage by assuming a leadership role in international climate mitigation efforts. Through enacting ambitious climate policy across its member states, the EU aims to spur similar action within other major greenhouse gas-emitting countries such as the US. With this in mind, to what extent has the EU been more successful than the US at addressing climate change through policy initiatives? Additionally, what are the underlying factors that have enabled this? These questions will be explored through a comparative analysis of the current emissions trajectories, climate policies, and public perceptions of climate change in both the EU and the US to determine what circumstances allow for meaningful climate action.



Although the EU has thus far successfully curbed its emissions according to its internal standards, it has struggled to meet the rigorous emission standards agreed upon in external forums, such as those of the Paris Agreement. The 2020 objective of a 20% reduction in emissions below 1990 levels was attained several years earlier due to a vast expansion of renewable energy implementation within Europe.¹ However, recently this growth in renewables has slowed considerably. In 2017, the EU's investment in clean energy was the lowest it had been in over a decade, with the UK and Germany spending 50% less than in 2007.² This has resulted in predictions that the EU's longer-term goals, including 40% emissions reduction and 32% renewable energy use by 2030, will not be met.³ Additionally, the current policies of individual EU member states lack the rigidity needed to enforce the 2030 targets.⁴ The emission standards that the EU committed to meeting in the Paris Agreement are even more demanding than its long-term goals, and as a result seem implausible considering current policy direction. According to the Climate Action Tracker, which measures countries' alignment

with the Paris Agreement, the EU's progress is rated insufficient.⁵ If all countries were to follow the EU's emissions path then warming could be expected to exceed the 2-degree limit set by the Paris Agreement and possibly reach 3 degrees by the end of the century. The EU has struggled to sustain the momentum it built up earlier in the decade to reduce emissions at the rate needed to prove its reliability as a frontrunner in the global fight against climate change. Waning commitment by key member states coupled with insufficient climate policies threatens the EU's ability to adhere to the emissions objectives it has committed itself to.

Meanwhile, in the US, emission reduction efforts have oscillated dramatically over the past decade between that of a country fully dedicated to its obligation to lead climate change mitigation to a country abandoning all international climate commitments in the name of conserving American preeminence in the global economy. The recent shift in the presidency has featured a deliberate unraveling of policy from the previous administration, adopting a new stance that is most zealously against climate initiatives. In 2016, at the

end of Obama's term, the US's status towards meeting its NDC (Nationally Determined Contributions) of 26-28% emissions reductions a part of the Paris Agreement was rated medium defined as "not quite sufficient but not also not inadequate."⁶ Two years later, in the midst of the Trump administration, the US was determined to be "critically insufficient" towards meeting its emissions target, with predictions of only 15-19% emissions reductions.⁷ This new designation meant that if all countries were to follow the example of the US, warming would exceed 4-degrees Celsius by the end of the century.⁸

The rapid decline in the US's compliance with the Paris Agreement is largely due to the repeal of key climate legislation by the Trump Administration.⁹ In the absence of effective national climate policy, 14 Climate Alliance states have taken the initiative to meet their share of the US's pledge under the Paris accord.¹⁰ Although they are on track to reduce emissions by 24-29% through local mandates, these 14 states only represent 36% of the US's population and will not have a large enough effect to bring the country as a whole into compliance.¹¹

While the EU has been hindered by the lack of

progress within some of its member states, the US has experienced the opposite phenomenon, where the national government's leadership is lacking and states have had to fulfill a large part of its role. Under the Trump presidency, the US has undergone a shift from a country with emission reductions on par with those of the EU to a country refusing to cooperate in international action on climate change. Unless comprehensive national climate policy is reinstated, the US will continue to fall behind the EU, undermining its authority on the global stage.

While the EU is often viewed as a political dwarf in the amount of influence it exerts over international affairs, the role it has taken in spearheading the fight against climate change is a major exception. The EU's motivation for assuming this leadership role has been dual; to make a significant difference by dynamically addressing the issue, while simultaneously using climate change as a platform to, "establish itself as a leading actor on the global political scene."¹² To retain its status on climate-related issues, the EU has sought to lead by example, employing the use

of soft power to encourage other countries to join in the fight against global warming. Its aggressive energy and climate plan has shown how a low-carbon economy is not only compatible with energy security, but also with sustainable economic competitiveness.¹³ The EU presenting itself as the case study for effective climate management is undoubtedly its strongest mechanism in garnering support for universal climate policy. It also possesses the ability "to act as a gatekeeper for those who want access to the EU market", meaning it can "enforce EU standards on trading partners."¹⁴ Through both an indirect approach, inspiring through successful regulation, and a direct one, imposing environmental standards on trading partners, the EU has leveraged its position as a prominent economic power to influence climate policy internationally.

Perhaps most notable of all EU climate initiatives is the European Union Emissions Trading System (EU ETS), a necessary component of attaining the directives set by the 2020 goals. The EU ETS created an emissions trading system between high-emitting industry sectors, covering around 45% of total EU

emissions, to encourage the utilization of less carbon-intensive production methods.¹⁵ The program features several unique, key features including an "Innovation Fund" to spur development of renewable energy technology and a "Modernization Fund" to assist poorer EU countries in a transition away from fossil fuels.¹⁶ These aspects are vital to ensuring the longevity of the EU ETS and enable less wealthy EU countries to participate in a future economy based on clean energy. The EU has further catered to its less developed members by including an "Effort Sharing Regulation" which includes national emissions reduction goals that account for the GDP and resources of each specific country.¹⁷ Bulgaria, for instance, is expected to reach "emissions stabilization" while Sweden has a much loftier expectation of 40% emissions reduction.¹⁸ Between 2005 and 2016, the EU ETS caused emissions from heavy industry to decline 26%, exceeding its expected target of 23% reduction by 2020.¹⁹ The EU ETS was a major enabler in procuring the EU's 2020 goals which aimed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 20% below 1990 levels, increase the capacity of renewables by 20%, and improve

energy efficiency by 20%.²⁰ Motivated by the swift achievement of the 2020 goals, the EU built out longer-term emissions objectives for the year 2030 and 2050. These objectives are even more ambitious than those of 2020 and require a significant escalation in the execution of current policy. While the EU hopes that the EU ETS will assist in reaching emissions targets by lowering the cap on available emissions annually, the program, even in conjunction with current climate policy, falls short of the EU's designated reductions for 2030 and 2050. Further innovative policy measures are needed if the EU is to be brought in compliance with its future emissions ambitions.

The capricious nature of the US's political system has prevented the establishment of any climate policy as coherent and enduring as that of the EU. Changes in administration within the US are frequent and often marked with a complete reversal of the previous administration's policy direction. This turbulence in American political ideology causes innovative policy, such as the Clean Power Plan, to be immediately repealed upon the inauguration of a new president, making it increasingly difficult

for the US to make any progress on issues like climate change. The Clean Power Plan was an unprecedented act of legislation that would have played a critical role in curbing US GHG emissions and bringing the country further into compliance with the Paris Accord. Enacted by President Obama, the CPP's objective was to reduce emissions by 2030 to 32% of 2005 levels.²¹ This was to be achieved by regulating carbon pollution of US power plants, the largest source of emissions domestically while individual states were given the authority to develop their own plan for emission reductions with regulatory mechanisms of their choosing.²² Inherent in the provisions of the CPP was a broader goal of the Obama administration for the policy to serve as a catalyst for a transition to an economy reliant on renewables as opposed to fossil fuels. The US was clearly inspired by the EU's economic prominence as a low-carbon economy and the myth that economic growth is linked to high carbon emissions began to unravel within the American mindset. Due to its potential to reestablish the US's position in global mitigation efforts, the CPP was not only an important step in achieving international

emissions targets but also a necessary one.

One of the first items on the Trump Administration's agenda was to repeal much of the environmental commitments of the previous presidency, including the Clean Power Plan and the US's commitment to uphold the Paris Agreement. Support for Trump's repeal of the CPP can largely be attributed to the rhetoric he used throughout his campaign that described climate policy as an overreach of government power and a threat to American economic competitiveness.²³ His proposed replacement for the plan weakened many of the original standards and gave states so much autonomy that compliance with the act become voluntary. This particular action by Trump completely reversed the progress the US had made over the past several years toward meeting global emissions trajectories. The populist rhetoric within the administration manifested itself in one of the most politically significant actions taken by President Trump, the withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. Citing his signature slogan of "America First", Trump announced that the agreement was an unfair deal on the US's end, despite it being non-binding and

therefore posed little harm towards the US. The seemingly unfounded claims made by Trump to justify the US's withdrawal from the largest international agreement on climate change has severely hindered the US's ability to contribute to mitigation efforts on a global issue that has only become more serious since the start of his term. There is no secret formula that has enabled the EU's success at addressing climate change through policy measures. In fact, past presidencies have clearly demonstrated the capability the US has to emulate the EU's success. Unlike the US, the EU is a relatively stable entity that, when it comes to climate change, has been able to act unilaterally and rationally. The unique political structure of the US combined with its increasing political polarization has made progress on controversial issues such as climate change increasingly challenging. If every new administration did not make it a primary objective to eradicate the policies of the previous president, perhaps the US would be a more active participant in global mitigation efforts.

The EU's adoption of the issue of climate change as one of its key policy priorities has

created an atmosphere among its citizens of general support for climate mitigation action. This congruence between the objectives of the government and its citizens has in part been enabled by the already existing social capitalist ideals within Europe that allow for “economic experimentation”, such as investment into renewable energy.²⁴ The EU has demonstrated its ability to combine social endeavors with economic growth by expanding the renewable energy market to reduce its contribution to climate change which has, in turn, created

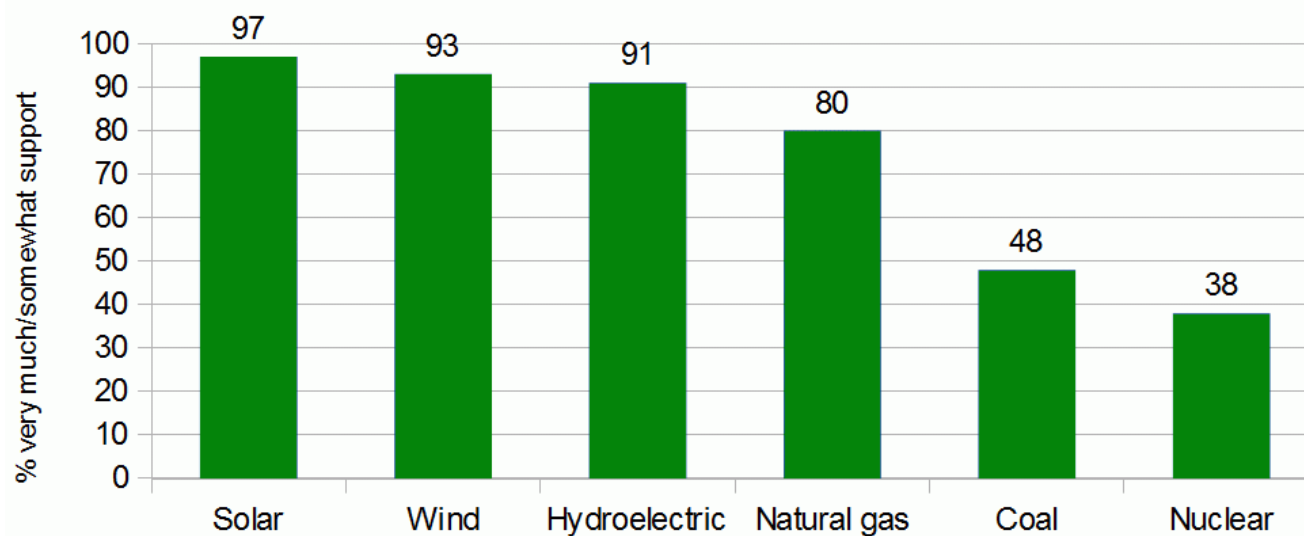
more jobs and exportable technologies. It has shown its commitment to the renewable energy industry through numerous financial incentives that have allowed for the large-scale implementation of these technologies.²⁵ The EU has singlehandedly disproven the belief among Americans that emission regulations hurt the economy and have even demonstrated how such regulations can stimulate the economy.²⁶ The EU’s unwavering efforts to mitigate climate change through strict regulation have set a precedent that enjoys widespread support

among its citizens. The generally high level of trust in government evident in its members makes climate change a much less contentious issue among EU citizens compared to Americans. According to a survey conducted by the European Commission, 92% of EU citizens see climate change as a serious issue and 89% think their governments should be setting targets for increasing renewable energy.²⁷ The political salience of the climate change issue among EU citizens is also demonstrated by the fact that 80% of those surveyed believe that fighting climate change will bring economic benefits.²⁸ Europeans do not see climate action as a necessary evil, but instead as an opportunity for securing future market competitiveness through the creation of a sustainable economy.²⁹ Such a system will be undisturbed by the increasing instability of the fossil fuels market, minimizing their risk of involvement in future international conflict. A fundamental difference between the European and American perspective towards climate policy is that while Americans fear economic repercussions of such regulation, Europeans regard it as an imperative social and economic opportunity.

Another aspect of the climate change issue that has stalled dialogues on the problem within the US but not the EU is the US’s reluctance to acknowledge their contribution to and subsequent responsibility for climate change. According to a Pew Research study on global attitudes towards climate change, while 60% of Europeans believe rich countries should be doing more than developing countries on mitigation, only 40% of Americans feel the same.³⁰ This illustrates the clear hypocrisy of the American mindset towards the issue; even though the US’s development over the past century has been a considerable variable in global warming, it now refuses to recognize its part. The attitude of thoughtlessness within the American psyche leads to the general disillusionment Americans have with the issue. The US is the highest carbon emitting country per capita, yet is the least concerned with the potential impact of climate change. Only 41% of US citizens believe that global warming is currently harming people around the world, in contrast to 60% of EU citizens.³¹ The effects of warming are already playing out in every country around the world, but because of the

Global public support for energy sources

"Please indicate whether you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose each way of producing energy"



Source: Ipsos, May 2011

widespread skepticism towards climate change that exists in the US, Americans are unable to make the necessary connection between increased natural disasters and climate change. Instead, many Americans incorrectly view global warming as a distant and low-priority nuisance that deserves little attention by today's political leaders.

The partisan nature of climate change in American politics is the single largest inhibitor of action on the problem. Climate change has become symbolic of one's stance toward a number of other things including the role of government, trust in science, and concern for the environment. Instead of considering the issue at face value, politicians deliberating on climate policy let their personal values and party affiliation prevail over any productive and rational solutions that might be reached. Climate change is much less contentious within the EU because it is viewed primarily as a scientific issue on which action must be taken. In the US, the severity of the issue is not unanimously agreed upon throughout the population, so the solutions are not evaluated in terms of merit but instead on whether or not they seem to overestimate the

problem. Republicans are unwilling to allow government intervention into economic policy and infringement into citizen's personal lives, giving them a clear incentive to downplay the effects of global warming. Democrats, however, take a much more European approach; believing that regulation on the economy and personal consumption can coexist with the American way of life.

Party loyalty is so dominant within the American mindset that people often default to the opinion of their leaders rather than science and evidence. When asked in 2017 if the US should remain in the Paris Agreement, an overwhelming majority, 77%, of Americans said yes. However, when told that Trump planned to pull out of the agreement only 64% of respondents supported US involvement in the accord.³² In this case, a significant percentage of personal opinions on a specific policy issue was completely transformed upon learning about Trump's plan. Global warming is not important enough of an issue to many Americans for them to form a concrete view on, so they instead adopt the outlook of whichever party they most identify with.³³ As Robinson Meyer explains in

his article "What Americans Really Think about Climate Change," "the heart of the climate issue" is that people do not change their voting patterns based on global warming.³⁴ Economic fear, social privileges, and defense policy are policy concerns with much more of an impact on American voting patterns.³⁵ According to Meyer, the way to achieve effective climate mitigation policy in the US is to make adjustments to energy, tax, foreign, transportation, and industrial policy.³⁶ Concentrated changes to multiple sectors of the US economy could be an effective substitute to the alternative of a single US climate policy, which so far has proved to be difficult to establish and short-lived even when it is. The US government is a body dependent on the will of its citizens to a much greater extent than the EU, which makes constructing a climate action plan in the US a more turbulent process. If the current partisan divide on the issue cannot be bridged, it is unlikely that the US will be able to act on a level consistent with what is needed under the Paris Agreement and US emissions will continue to be a threat to climate security. Over the past decade, the EU has enjoyed success in achieving many of its climate

mitigation targets due to its strict regulation and the support it holds from its member states. Although it currently faces challenges in meeting its longer-term emission objectives, these obstacles are surmountable and can be addressed through heightened policy initiatives. Former US climate policy, such as the Clean Power Plan, has had the potential to elevate the country to a position on the global stage, rivaling that of the EU, but due to the volatility of the US political system, such policies have been fleeting and failed to realize its potential. The partisan divide within the country threatens to undermine any considerable action taken on climate change, crippling the US' ability to emerge as a global leader in climate change mitigation – a status currently held and very much deserved by the EU.

ENDNOTES

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