

The view from Marrakech: climate talks are battling through a Trump tsunami

Written by Robyn Eckersley, Professor of Political Science, School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne

Stunned. Shocked. Speechless. Devastated. Political tsunami. These were the key words rising to the surface of the babble of conversations that took place in the corridors of the climate negotiations in Marrakech on Wednesday 9 November – the day Donald Trump won the US presidency.

A climate denier, Trump has vowed to tear up the historic [Paris Agreement](#) along with the Obama administration's

[Clean Power Plan](#)

, which seeks to slash greenhouse emissions from power plants. He has also given the green light to renewed fossil fuel exploitation in the United States.

Oil and gas stocks unsurprisingly [rose](#), and coal stocks [soared](#), on his victory day. If implemented, Trump's promises would make it impossible for the United States to reach its national pledge under the Paris Agreement to reduce emissions by 26-28% relative to 2005 by 2025.

At the moment, Trump's previous declaration of climate change as a hoax perpetrated by the Chinese to undermine US industry looks particularly poignant.

His election is a dramatic turnaround from the years of constructive bilateral climate diplomacy by the Obama administration with China, which culminated in the joint [US-China statement on climate change](#) in November 2014. This joint announcement of the headline national action plans by the world's two biggest emitters (together covering 40% of global emissions) injected significant momentum into the negotiations leading to the Paris Agreement in 2015.

But now the US elections have delivered not just a presidential victory against action on climate change, but made it much easier for Trump to deliver on his plans than it was for Obama. The Republican Party is now set to control all four branches of government: the House of Representatives, the Senate, the Presidency and soon the Supreme Court (once Trump nominates a new judge following the death of Justice Scalia, bringing the number of judges back to nine, with a conservative majority). This leaves only the media and civil society to speak up for a safe climate in the face of the national government's agenda.

Turning back time

Seasoned negotiators and observers at Marrakech with long memories recalled the moment in 2001 when former president George W. Bush declared that the United States would withdraw from the Kyoto Protocol, the predecessor to the Paris Agreement. This withdrawal cast a long shadow over the negotiations, which was finally lifted with the Obama administration's re-engagement with climate change that made the Paris breakthrough possible.

Yet the world today is very different to what it was in 2001. The Paris Agreement is [now in force](#) after a speedy ratification, the US share of global emissions has declined, and renewable energy is now much cheaper. Many US states, cities and businesses will continue to work towards reducing emissions, and many Republican politicians have let go of their aversion to renewable energy in response to public and business pressure.

In short, much of America and the rest of the world will continue to build momentum under the Paris Agreement, despite the changing of the guard in Washington DC.

Given Trump's record of policy flip-flopping, it also remains an open question as to how far he will actually go to undo the diplomatic climate legacy of the Obama administration. Much will depend on who takes over as Secretary of State, and how the State Department assesses the broader diplomatic consequences of withdrawing from the Paris treaty, particularly in terms of transatlantic relationships. European Council president Donald Tusk has already [invited Trump to attend a US-EU summit](#)

. We might therefore see some easing of Trump's hard anti-climate talk, much as his social rhetoric

[softened on election night](#)

. Trump the President may not be quite the same as Trump the candidate.

Moreover, under Article 28 of the Paris Agreement it will take a total of four years for any formal withdrawal by the United States to take effect. If the US were to turn its back on these legal niceties and abandon its obligations during this period, it would be widely regarded as a climate pariah state. In contrast, China will enjoy its rising status as a climate leader.

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Meanwhile, after the initial pause to digest the shock of Trump's victory, the negotiators at Marrakech have got back down to their business, which is to fill in the implementation details of the Paris Agreement.

Robyn Eckersley receives funding from the Australian Research Council to research a project called 'What makes a climate leader?'

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