

The election will end our brief moment of serious climate action

[George Dillard](#)



Donald Trump waves goodbye ([public domain](#))

The re-election of Donald Trump as the U.S. President will spark a lot of questions within the United States. The Constitution will surely be tested, as will America's identity as an immigrant-friendly "melting pot" and a strong supporter of free trade.

People around the world will be asking questions, too. If Trump follows through on his "America First" ideology, the United States will no longer be a pillar of the rules-based international order. People in Ukraine, NATO, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and many other nations will be wondering whether they can count on America to have their backs.

Some people will be affected more than others. Many Trump supporters cast their votes believing that, while life might get worse for some other groups of Americans during a Trump presidency, their lives would be fine. Maybe they're right, maybe they're not. Time will tell.

But, no matter where you live and no matter who you are, you'll feel the effects of at least one of Trump's policy goals. Donald Trump has pledged to dismantle American climate policy, and his actions will have a powerful effect on the course of global events over the coming decades.

Trump is a unique political candidate in many ways. That's what his followers seem to love about him. He thrills his fans by rejecting old political orthodoxies and attacking the sacred cows of his own political party. But, in at least one way, Donald Trump is old school: he's the last climate denier left in world politics.

Back in 2015 (!) David Roberts [wrote](#) that the GOP was the only major party in world politics that still denied climate change. Though many GOP politicians have moved away from denialism and toward fatalism (less wedded to the idea that climate change isn't real and more interested in shooting down any serious attempts to deal with it), Trump has stayed resolute in his climate denial.

Like much of what he says, Trump's reveries about climate change (as compiled in this Kate Petersen [article](#)) don't always have a lot of coherence, but he does touch on several themes over and over again.

Sometimes, he directly denies that climate change is real:

“One of the most urgent tasks, not only for our movement, but for our country is to decisively defeat the climate hysteria hoax. ... It's a hoax. The whole thing is... crazy.”
– Donald Trump, [April 21, 2022](#)

Other times, he claims that not much will happen at all:

“And I say that the thing that's an existential threat is not global warming, where the ocean will rise, maybe, and it may go down also, but it may rise 1/8th of an inch in the next 497 years they say, 1/8th.” – Donald Trump, June 28, 2024

He often argues that the existence of cold weather in the world somehow invalidates the idea of climate change:

“Climate change is one of the greatest con jobs ever because global warming didn't work because ... Remember when they sent the boats out to the Arctic, freezing, freezing cold, and the scientists were in the boat, a big ship, and they were worried

about the icebergs because they were melting. And they had a little cold wave that lasted for about two days. And it was so vicious and so cold that the ice formed around the ship and started crushing the ship like it was a little ... Remember? We had to send helicopters in to get them. The ship was just engulfed in ice. And they're talking about global warming.” – Donald Trump, [Dec. 11, 2023](#)

“They used to call it different things. Global warming, remember? That wasn't working because it was getting a little bit cooler. So they said, ‘What are we going to do? We'll call it ‘global cooling.’” No. So, they came up with the words ‘climate change’ because that takes care of everything.” – Donald Trump, [Sept. 3, 2024](#)

Often, it's not even clear what he's talking about, as when he [said](#) that “they never talk about nuclear warming” in an interview with Elon Musk — an event climate writer and activist Bill McKibben called “the dumbest climate conversation of all time.”

Though Trump's views on climate change may be incoherent, his views on American climate *policy* are quite clear: he believes that climate action is incompatible with economic growth. Thus, he has vowed to dismantle any Biden-era policies that tried to address climate change.

What will this look like? If [Project 2025](#) is any guide, he may privatize the National Weather Service and dismantle NOAA. He will appoint people hostile to climate action to run agencies like the EPA, and will seek to repeal (or simply sabotage the implementation of) any climate policies that are on the books.

This year, I installed a new heat pump water heater in my home, and I got an induction stove, too. These were the last pieces of my home-electrification project (the previous year, I bought an EV and installed a heat pump). I made sure to purchase these items in 2024 because I wasn't sure whether the Biden-era subsidies that made these purchases more affordable would still be around in 2025.

Early in his term, Biden [pledged](#) that the United States would reduce its emissions to 50% below 2005 levels. Was this enough? No. but it was a significant step toward a net-zero future.

Biden didn't just make pledges. He passed the Inflation Reduction Act, though its name is a little misleading, as the centerpiece of his administration's climate policy. It's by far the most significant piece of climate legislation in American history.

The IRA, mostly through offering subsidies to consumers (like the ones I took advantage of) and corporations, has lowered [emissions](#) — especially in the transportation and electricity-generation sectors. It was projected to get the United States most of the way to Biden's 50% goal by 2030.

By passing the IRA and issuing other, related executive orders, the Biden Administration opened a window through which the United States might have been able to squeeze, meeting emissions goals that were compatible with keeping global temperature rise under two degrees Celsius. Trump is likely to slam that window closed.

So carbon emissions in the United States won't go down as quickly as we need them to. Will other nations pick up the slack? The worst-case scenario is that Trump's victory makes global action on climate less likely, as well.

Global climate leaders are preparing to meet next week at COP 29, the annual global climate talks. Previous rounds of climate negotiations have been predicated on nations — especially the “big 3” emitters — the US, China, and the EU — working together to reduce their carbon emissions. Now that one of the Big 3 will be somewhere between disinterested and outright hostile to climate action, will the other nations hold firm to their commitments? Or will Trump's recalcitrance provide an excuse for nations that are “[wobbling](#)” on their climate commitments to back down?

While some diplomats are hopeful — it seems that a number of nations may make a [statement](#) ahead of COP 29 reaffirming their commitment to climate action — others are worried. Rachel Cleetus, policy director at the Union of Concerned Scientists, [predicts](#) that “The nation and world can expect the incoming Trump administration to take a wrecking ball to global climate diplomacy.”

It's hard to predict precisely what Donald Trump's climate impact will be, other than to say that America will now almost certainly fail to meet its climate goals and that it will become harder for other countries to stick to theirs.

We had a moment (a brief one, as it turned out) when it looked like the United States might finally step up and take serious climate action. Now we must wait and see whether market forces and the momentum built up in the Biden years can continue to drive American emissions down — or whether Trump’s mantra of “drill, baby, drill” will doom many people around the world — including Americans — to a hotter, more dangerous, and more expensive world.*

Sorry, world: America had a brief window of opportunity on climate change, and we just decided to close it.

** This doesn't mean that all is lost, or that we should give up! Yes, Trump's election has almost certainly doomed us to more warming than we would have had otherwise, but we should always do all that we can to limit carbon emissions as much as we can. Two degrees of warming is better than 2.5, 2.5 is better than 3, and so on. Every little bit helps, even if we've essentially surrendered our chance to keep warming under dangerous levels.*