

US climate fears mount, but political action wanes

January 20 2013, by Jean-Louis Santini



A man walks by homes and businesses destroyed by superstorm Sandy on January 2, 2013 in the Queens borough of New York City. Climate change was thrust to the forefront of the US political agenda in the wake of the devastation caused by Sandy and record high temperatures across the country.

Climate change was thrust to the forefront of the US political agenda recently in the wake of the devastation caused by superstorm Sandy and record high temperatures across the country.

But despite President [Barack Obama](#) renewing his early promises to act, experts said [political opposition](#) would make it at least as difficult as during Obama's first, failed push to get [new legislation](#) through Congress, and said decisive measures will remain unlikely.

"All the [public opinion polls](#) show a better understanding of the link between climate change and [extreme weather events](#)," said Alden Meyer, strategy director of the Union of Concerned Scientists.

But, he added, "there is still a lot to do in the [Republican Party](#) and in the business community," to get them on board with Obama's plans for solutions, should the president launch a second offensive.

Growing [public concern](#) over the global warming threat was laid out in a recent study by the Rasmussen Institute, carried out shortly before November's presidential election, but after Sandy slammed into the US Northeast.

The study showed that 68 percent of US voters believed that climate change was a serious problem, compared to just 46 percent in 2009.

Since being re-elected, Obama has addressed climate change several times, including pledging the week after the vote to launch a nationwide conversation to find common ground, because "we've got an obligation to [future generations](#) to do something about it."



People are evacuated from a neighborhood in Little Ferry, New Jersey, on October 30, 2013, after Hurricane Sandy slammed into the East Coast. Growing public concern over the global warming threat was laid out in a recent study by the Rasmussen Institute.

The president acknowledged that his stance on climate change would require "tough political choices," and conceded that lawmakers—Democrat and Republican alike—may not be on board.

The makeup of Congress remains largely the same as before the November vote. Republicans have retained the majority in the House of Representatives, and a significant bloc come from the ultra-conservative "[Tea Party](#)." In the Senate, Democrats strengthened their majority.

Elliot Diringer of the Center for Climate and Energy Solutions think tank noted that growing public awareness of [climate change](#) "has yet to

translate into a surge in political willingness."

The issue was not a "game changer" during the election, he added in an interview.

"We still do not see any prospect for major legislation in Congress."

In 2010, amid an economic crisis, the Democrat-controlled Senate rejected the creation of a national market of greenhouse gas emissions—a so-called cap-and-trade system—that would have penalized coal and oil users in favor of those using renewable energy.

According to Diringer, "the best prospect for progress in the near term will be through executive action" by the president.

His most effective weapon lies in the Environmental Protection Agency, or EPA, which he could use to regulate greenhouse gas emissions—in particular carbon dioxide from coal power plants.



US President Barack Obama comforts a Hurricane Sandy victim as he visits a neighborhood in Brigantine, New Jersey, on October 31, 2012. Despite Obama renewing his early promises to act on climate change, experts said political opposition would make it at least as difficult as during Obama's first, failed push to get new legislation through Congress, and said decisive measures will remain unlikely.

These power plants are responsible for a third of emissions in the US, the world's second biggest polluter after China, and the top polluter per capita.

The EPA has already proposed stricter limits for new power plants—which still need to be finalized—but has not acted on existing plants.

"This is the most significant step that the president can take to reduce emissions," Diringer emphasized, saying he was hoping to get "clear signals from the administration about its timetable" soon after Obama is sworn in Monday.

"He has both the authority and the legal obligation," Diringer said, warning that "if EPA does not move forward, it's very likely that green groups will sue them in court to force the regulation."

Meyer from the Union of Concerned Scientists also noted that it might be less impossible for Obama to pass a carbon tax after 2014, with a new Congress and in the two final years of his mandate.

The tax, which could be framed as a way to cut the deficit—a priority for both parties—is popular among economists and a number of Republicans, including a former adviser to Obama's former Republican challenger Mitt Romney.

And in a different vein, Dave Hamilton of the Sierra Club, the largest environmental group in the US, said Obama could make progress pushing for greater energy efficiency, "which could really change the dynamic."

"The president has done a good job of getting resources to clean energy and we want to see that to continue," Hamilton said.

But "energy efficiency remains a huge potential energy resources that we have never captured at the kind of scale that is available," he added.

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Citation: US climate fears mount, but political action wanes (2013, January 20) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-01-climate-mount-political-action-wanes.html>

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