How serious is Obama about climate change?

In order to combat climate change, Obama will first have to win support at the national level.

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Obama mentioning climate change in his inaugural speech came as a surprise to many environmentalists [AP]

President Obama's "second coming" to the White House speech was subject to many speculations, not only by his fellow Americans, but by people around the world who are very much aware of the huge impact of his decisions on the daily life of ordinary people in distant foreign societies.

The winners as highlighted by the inauguration speech were climate change, gay rights, immigrants, as well as advocates of gun control. While environmentalists worldwide have lost their faith in Obama ever since the disappointing initiative he took at the 2009 Copenhagen Conference on Climate Change, which was understood at the time as undermining the multilateral approach to global warming taken by the United Nations System. Then, at home, Obama was not able to convince the United States Congress (although this is not his fault) to enact federal laws designed to curb greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) by introducing cap and trade mechanisms. Such a market-based policy had already strong criticisms from many environmentalists following the largely negative experience of the European carbon market.

Yet, the good news is that despite the federal regulatory failure, the GHG emissions of the United States significantly declined per capita, partly reflecting the economic recession and increased gas prices, partly state level initiatives, partly alternative energy use, and partly energy conservation measures. This gives hope that the US will come close to fulfilling its 2009 Copenhagen pledge, reducing the GHG emissions before 2020 by 17 percent as measured against 2005 levels. This American commitment although far from being a deal maker was at least a small step in the right direction. During the domestically and internationally very damaging eight years of George W Bush's presidency, there was a dearth of good environmental news emanating out of the United States.

**Walking the walk**

During the 2012 presidential campaign, Obama's silence about climate change was troublesome, and his
several trips to coal mining states seemed hardly reassuring. Environmentalists lost confidence in Obama on climate change policy, and for that reason, the emphasis in his inaugural speech came as something of a surprise. Perhaps, it should have been expected.

Just a few days before election day in early November of last year, superstorm Sandy devastated a portion of the East Coast of the United States, and thanks to public officials in New York and New Jersey, Obama was given a fresh opportunity to show leadership and bipartisanship in relation to an environmental crisis. This catastrophic event that comes with more than an $80 billion price tag affected a region that was already struggling to get out of an economic recession. It convinced many Americans, at least briefly, about the seriousness of climate change and its responsibility in the rising frequency of extreme weather events.

Right after Sandy, a nationwide poll conducted by Rasmussen showed that 68 percent of American voters see global warming as a serious problem, an increase from 46 percent in 2009. Moreover, just a few days before the inauguration, the "2013 Draft National Climate Assessment Report" - a domestic version of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports - was released by the Federal Advisor Committee, and supported through the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) setting forth a bleak account of the adverse impacts of climate change in the United States. According to the report, July 2012 was the hottest month of more than 1,400 measured since 1895.

These impacts take the form of drought, flood, extreme weather, and as a consequence, cause significant damage to American agriculture and the overall economy.

Backed up by convincing scientific evidence and the fact that the American public now expects reasonable attention to climate change from its government, Obama's emphasis on climate change as a growing threat to "future generations", might be interpreted as nothing very special. Many Americans and the international public now expect Obama to take some concrete steps, and only then will they will be truly impressed with his willingness to assume the mantle of environmental leader. In effect, Obama must now convince the world that he is not only talking the talk but walking the walk.

**Battling the naysayers**

Conservative media, sectors of the political establishment, and climate change deniers have been quick to respond, calling Obama an "environmental extremist", which while wildly off the mark, may be a tad closer to reality than were the earlier attacks that labelled him a "socialist".

The conservative bloc promised its followers that they will never allow Obama to sacrifice jobs or cause the American economy to decline due to his irresponsible proposals put forward to deal with climate change. Moreover, these critical voices immediately raised doubts about the validity of claims about the alleged causal links between extreme weather events and climate change.

President Obama for his part contended in his speech that climate deniers are confusing the public in damaging ways. These deniers are posing a significant obstacle to needed environmental action, and are often in the pay of powerful oil, gas, and coal lobbies that are doing all they can to block every responsible initiative undertaken to meet the challenge of climate change in the United States.
Considering all these difficulties, Obama has several issues on his policy agenda that will test the resolve of his administration in coming months. The most urgent and internationally important of these issues is the multi-billion dollar Keystone XL Pipeline Project. This calls for a single, big, symbolic decision by the President Obama that will be treated as a strong signal at home and to the world about the direction being taken by American environmental policy.

This highly proposed controversial pipeline carrying shale oil has a route that would run the length of North America starting in Alberta, Canada and passing through several states until it ends up in Texas. The approval of the pipeline is being ardently promoted by many members of Congress, including some who belonging to Obama's political party. Environmental activists are organising major demonstrations scheduled to take place on February 14.

The prominent environmentalist, writer and activist, Bill McKibben insists that if Obama is serious about a commitment to climate change he must demonstrate it by rejecting the Keystone Pipeline Project.

Restoring environmental leadership

This pipeline controversy is a clear example of the clash of competing economic and environmental interests: on one side, the promise of job creation, cheaper oil and natural gas, and energy supplies that will free the United States from its dependence on Middle Eastern sources of oil; on the other side, environmental destruction, a heightened risk of destructive oil spills, and more importantly, an increase in GHG emissions. There is intense countervailing political pressures being directed at Obama by advocates of these two opposing positions.

At the national level, members of Congress, who are long known for their environment friendly agenda, have recently announced the formation of a "Bicameral Climate Change Task Force". They urged the President to focus on three priority areas: (1) fulfilling the 2009 pledge made at Copenhagen to reduce GHG emissions by the pledged amount; (2) support the development of innovative clean energy technology; (3) give priority to the protection of the most vulnerable regions in the country that are being most harmed by and at risk due to climate change. The first issue is the most controversial for anti-globalist Republicans and oil and gas company lobbyists.

This agenda needs significant regulatory action. This will help Obama to take over global environmental leadership in November 2013 at the important Warsaw Conference of the Parties meeting of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Considering the Republican allergy to climate change related regulations, Obama most likely will have to rely on executive actions to circumvent Congressional resistance to his environmental agenda. This is not going to be an easy path, as Democrats harshly criticised reliance on such executive powers during the Bush presidency in relation to contested measures taken on behalf of the war on terror. This new confrontation over presidential authority threatens now to turn into a war over climate change.

The Federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is already one of the public institutions that Republicans do not miss any opportunity to attack, even planning to shut it down completely if their candidate had been elected last November. The EPA was given the legal responsibility following the 2007...
US Supreme Court decision to regulate carbon emissions under the Clean Air Act. Implementation of this decision was put on hold during the Bush presidency, but now the EPA seems ready, and politically able, to take on the job.

Besides the EPA, the State Department role on global climate change policy and the Energy Department approach to energy related issues are likely to be subjected to harsh attacks from anti-environmental true believers, starting at the confirmation hearings for each of the appointed heads of these organs of government. At the end of the day, Obama is likely to have a tough time whichever path he decides to follow as recourse for the promotion of environmental goals to either executive power or legislative authorisation is likely to encounter strong resistance.

There are sure to be stumbling blocks on the path to the kind of global environmental leadership that the international community has long needed. Arguably ever since the historic 1972 Stockholm Conference on Human Environment, the US lost the legitimacy of its effort to provide environmental leadership in global level. It will not be easy to reclaim it, but if Obama succeeds on this environmental battlefield first in the national level, and then pursues environmental protection goals at global level, the reputation of his presidency will rise significantly, and the prospects for a meaningful response to the challenge of climate change will greatly improve.

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