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The cold shoulder to climate change
Neither candidate has mentioned climate change in the debates or the campaign at large, despite its obvious impact.
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Both Obama and Romney are competing with each other in their advocacy of a greater reliance on coal - Obama at least talks of "clean coal" while Romney makes no such qualification [Reuters]

The American people are exposed to contradictory political messages from the two parties' candidates as election day approaches, and - according to several polls - the gap between Obama and Romney has disappeared.

The differences between the two candidates are obvious about policy over protection of middle class, tax cuts, social policies and healthcare; and most prominently with respect to policies over women's issues such as reproductive rights.

However, there is one issue that both candidates are carefully keeping silent: "climate change". Neither Barack Obama nor Mitt Romney mentioned climate change in three TV debates, despite a summer of record temperatures, historic drought and wildfires in the US.

More surprisingly, none of the moderators asked a question about climate change or environmental protection. The American public seems eager to discuss climate change, at least in relation to extreme weather events, as they are living with its impacts on their lives.

Such weather is not a remote reality for Americans any longer and climate change concerns are not about endangered polar bears or remote islands at risk of being submerged by rising ocean waters or melting Arctic ice.

According to some media reports, of the roughly 50,000 words spoken in these three presidential debates, not a single reference was made by the candidates to "climate change", "global warming" or "greenhouse gas". Environmentalists and long-time climate change activists, such as 350.org movement run by Bill McKibben, have been critical of Obama’s silence.
In general, mainstream American media has paid much no attention to this removal of climate change from the national policy agenda. There was one recent article in the New York Times (October 25), as well as some mention of this development in alternative media outlets, including the internet.

After the third TV debate on foreign policy, Al Gore, a long-time politician and environmentalist, asked on Twitter: "Where is global warming in this debate? Climate change is an urgent foreign policy issue."

**Debating climate change**

According to the Guardian, for the first time since the topic surfaced in a presidential race in 1988, 24 years ago, nominees made no mention of environmental issues during prime-time televised debates. In 2008, for instance, the presidential candidates devoted 10 to 15 minutes to debating climate change.

Rhetorically, Obama occasionally mentions climate change during campaign speeches framing it by reference to extreme weather saying that "... the droughts we've seen, the floods and the wildfires those aren't a joke".

When he won the Democratic nomination in June 2008, Obama said future generations would recall "this was the moment when the rise of the oceans began to slow and our planet began to heal".

It was so poetic, so much the Obama style that had mobilised the youth of America. Yet, during his presidency he was not been able to deliver any progress with respect to climate change.

Moreover, Obama has even avoided making such claims in recent months. He abandoned climate change and replaced it with an emphasis on green technology and green jobs. Both candidates in 2012 are on the same page of "energy security", which is understood as overcoming the current dependence on oil imports, especially from the Middle East.

At the same time, both Obama and Romney are competing with each other in their advocacy of a greater reliance on coal. Obama at least talks of "clean coal" while Romney makes no such qualification.

In contrast to their lack of discussion of climate change, both candidates talk extensively about their plans to develop domestic fossil fuel energy. Obama disappointed many environmentalists by not turning his back on these standard sources of energy.

Apparently, with the latest discovery of huge deposits of natural gas, the US has the potential to have a large additional supply of cheap energy that emits only half as much greenhouse gasses as traditional fuels.

This availability of natural gas supplies does reduce the buildup of greenhouse gasses, but the effects are not very significant in terms of the overall threat of global warming. Nevertheless, the overall harmful
impact on environment and human health is not clear yet, and should be regulated carefully.

While two candidates distanced themselves from so-called "toxic word of climate change", a recent Pew report shows that the percentage of Americans saying that there is solid evidence that global warming is getting worse has increased to 67 per cent, its highest level ever.

Globally, there was a hope, when Obama was elected in 2008. The hope was he would exercise global leadership in dealing with climate change in a responsible manner. It was a welcome change following the disastrous eight years of George W Bush's presidency. There was the hope that international efforts to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions would be strongly supported.

This hope vanished in 2009 after the first post-Obama UN international conference held in Copenhagen showed the absence of a strong American commitment and the event ended in disappointment, if not bitterness.

This was followed by another failure of the Obama administration: the inability to win support for legislating cap and trade limitations on carbon emissions. Since then, several states in the US are working independently of Washington to address climate change in a more effective way.

**Silence of candidates**

All these separate sub-national initiatives are valuable, especially by setting an example for other countries. If the national government fails to act responsibly to reduce emission, it becomes important to develop climate change approaches on regional and local levels, and even outside of the governmental machinery.

These actors understand that they must act on their own when the central government fails to produce appropriate policies. However, such action while desirable is not nearly enough to safeguard the world from the adverse effect of the buildup of GHG emissions to dangerous level globally, in developed as well as developing countries.

Ironically, the only good news resulting from the 2008 economic recession was a temporary decline in GHG emissions.

Sir David Attenborough, the veteran English broadcaster famous for TV series such as Life and Planet Earth was quoted in the *Guardian* saying: "[It] does worry me that most powerful nation in the world, North America [sic], denies what the rest of us can see very clearly [on climate change]. I don't know what you do about that. It's easier to deny."

Asked what was needed to wake people up Attenborough added: "Disaster. It's a terrible thing to say, isn't it? Even disaster doesn't do it. There have been disasters in North America, with hurricanes and floods, yet still people deny and say 'oh, it has nothing to do with climate change'. It visibly has got [something] to do with climate change."

Despite an alarming increase in extreme weather events affecting America, most of the public still remains in denial.
Recently, academics from around the world came to the University of Sussex to discuss "Rethinking Climate Change and Security". They asked whether using alarmist language to describe the future of climate change is an effective way to develop public awareness of the risks that exist.

By referring to an impending "disaster" or "catastrophe" to highlight the urgency of climate change policy was questioned by some of the participants. They were worried that climate change deniers would gain credibility because the perceived impacts of climate change were mainly slow, sporadic and speculative.

As a result, it was feared that a majority of the public will more likely believe climate deniers rather than the climate alarmists. Psychologically being in denial is much easier than changing life styles to reduce per capita energy use.

If we rely on the metaphor of "disaster" for climate change, we come closer to thinking of global warming as a security issue. Invoking "security" to discuss climate change policy might get some high profile attention, especially in countries that base their security on "hard power".

Apparently, several reports from the EU and the US military emphasise national security implications of climate change. We don't want to allow concerns about climate change to become a justification for humanitarian intervention. However, how else can we persuade leaders and governments to take climate change seriously unless they come to believe that the security of the country is at stake?

Politicians would not like to talk about increasing tax, or being Cassandra telling the bad news to voters that a grim future is about to become real. Politicians do not want to say: "Give me your vote, I will prepare you to face the coming disaster!"

Therefore, silence of the candidates about climate change is understandable, but it gives the climate deniers a sense that their views are prevailing, of course, with the help of generous funding by the coal and oil lobbies. They are spending millions of dollars to support the Republican candidate. They don't trust Obama, yet, that they have managed to achieve their goals by obtaining his silence.

It would not be surprising if we find out that the oil and coal companies also reached out to the Obama campaign. After all, Obama is promoting an energy revolution and recently even stopped talking about "clean energy". Coal and oil companies are paying for many TV advertisements to help their candidates win.

Climate change policy

The PBS' Frontline programme recently aired an hour-long report on climate policy over the past four years, focusing on the climate skeptics, and more specifically, Heartland Institute, the home base of the climate deniers or skeptics. Apparently, these deniers are very pleased that now both presidential candidates are ignoring the climate issue despite the warnings from most scientific experts.

We learned from the PBS' "Climate of Doubt" that during the last four years, the momentum was lost by those who called for climate action and gained by a small group of skeptics who rallied the Tea Party grassroots movement to push the issue off the agenda.

"He [Obama] abandoned climate change and replaced it with an emphasis on green technology and green jobs."

The programme explains that this silence by reference to the "financial collapse, the rising of the Tea Party, and also suggest that making Al Gore the poster child of global warming did a perfect job of rising the right".

It seems to be a reasonable explanation of the silence of the candidates. But hopefully, this is just a
temporary failure that would change again, god knows, maybe as a result of some unpredictable event, not necessarily a major disaster, but enough of a breakdown to give a rise to a new responsible leadership with strong public backing.

Many independent Americans feel frustrated by the two candidates of both parties. Because, neither confronts the real issues affecting people, such as minimum wage, labour rights, jobless people, single mothers, people who are not being able to have health insurance, immigrants without any rights and students with huge loans.

This segment of American society is questioning why third party candidates are not getting a chance to participate in the debates and challenge the main contenders.

The Green Party candidate, Jill Stein was arrested trying to gain entry to a presidential debate. She said Obama was "another climate denier who basically sold out with just a little bit of window dressing". The Guardian reported:

A second Obama term, Stein said, would amount to "climate devastation with a friendly face and a warm endearing personality".

She went on to argue that a Romney victory in November would not be that great a loss for the environment - despite the Republican's promises to do away with environmental protections and Obama's pledge to curb coal plant emissions.

Her arrest has focused attention on the exclusion of third-party candidates from changing the political discourse. These dissenting views can only be heard via alternative media outlets such as Amy Goodman's influential Democracy Now.

Even it is considered as an alternative media. Many young Americans and progressive middle agers are receiving their daily news from these sources, together with the "Daily Show", a hugely popular TV programme that raises some of the issues that are not being discussed in the electoral process.

The Green Party is on the ballot in 38 states, but it is still polling at only about 2 per cent. It is still viewed negatively by many on the left for its role in costing Al Gore a victory in the 2000 election.

So in 2012, the same danger of enabling a Romney victory exists, at least in those of the 50 states where the presidential vote seems close, what are called "the battleground states".

Go ahead and vote for whichever candidate your heart whispers to you. Whoever wins, a responsible climate change policy will not be forthcoming, but of course, there are other issues of importance for Americans, leading them to vote for one or the other candidate.

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