

THE IMPACT OF THE 2016 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN THE US ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY AND ITS REPERCUSSION FOR THE PARIS AGREEMENT

O IMPACTO DA ELEIÇÃO PRESIDENCIAL DE 2016 NA POLÍTICA AMBIENTAL DOS EUA E SUAS REPERCUSSÕES PARA O ACORDO DE PARIS

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ABSTRACT

The US entrance into the Paris Agreement in 2015, facilitated by Barack Obama's government, was a milestone for the country's environmental history. Yet, with the 2016 presidential elections and the arrival of Donald Trump in power, there was a sudden change in the process of approaching environmental issues and, consequently, the withdrawal of the US from the Paris Climate Agreement. Herewith, this article aims to analyze, in a constructivist perspective, the impacts of the presidential elections and their consequent party change in the repercussions for the Climate Agreement. Thus, it consists of qualitative research, with content analysis based on speeches from both parties and analysis of official documents and papers. Hence, it became apparent that the securitization process and the denial of scientific studies played an important role in the decision-making and environmental policies conferred by the Trump administration, contradicting all the environmental aspects of policies based on the Obama era. Finally, it is brought to light that the impacts of changes in power and the reverberation of speeches that occurred with the 2016 elections in the US, were decisive factors for the exit from the Paris Agreement.

Keywords: United States of America; Elections; Bipartisanship; Environmental Policy.

RESUMO

A entrada no Acordo de Paris em 2015, facilitada pelo governo de Barack Obama, foi um marco na história ambiental dos Estados Unidos. Entretanto, com as eleições presidenciais de 2016 e a chegada de Donald Trump ao poder, notou-se uma mudança brusca na maneira de abordagem de temáticas ambientais e consequentemente, a saída dos Estados Unidos do Acordo Climático de Paris. Com isso, este artigo objetiva-se a analisar, em uma perspectiva construtivista, os impactos das eleições presidenciais e sua consequente mudança partidária nas repercussões para o Acordo Climático. Dessa maneira, constitui-se de uma pesquisa de caráter qualitativo, com análises de conteúdo baseados em discursos de ambas partes e análises de documentos oficiais. Resulta-se que o processo de securitização e a negação aos estudos científicos desempenharam um papel importante nas tomadas de decisão e políticas ambientais conferidas pela administração de Trump, contrariando todos os aspectos ambientais das políticas embasadas na era de Obama. Por fim, é trazido à luz que os impactos da mudanças de poder e a reverberação de discursos ocorridos com as eleições de 2016 dos Estados Unidos, foram fatores decisivos para saída do Acordo de Paris.

Palavras-chave: Estados Unidos da América; Eleições; Bipartidarismo; Política ambiental.

INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Cold War, the international community has reinvented itself, as a matter of looking to tackle increasing concerns that imposed the need for cooperation and multilateralism.

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Perhaps its most urgent, global warming and environmental issues demanded nations to engage in intrinsic discussions to build effective and coherent programs (Gorodnia, 2018). Several summits and panels undertook place with one main goal: how can nations, companies and non-governmental actors merge economic growth with a sustainable development that did not inflict too large of an impact on the planet (Portner, 2013).

The crucial event happened in the city of Stockholm, Sweden, in 1972. The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment “was the UN's first major conference on international environmental issues and marked a turning point in the development of international environmental politics” (Sustainable Development United Nations, 2020). From there on out, an array of arrangements from the following conferences began to shape the approach the international community intended to put into place; one of the indispensable components was the formal responsibility of States to conduct pro-environment policies (Stern, 2018).

The present article was put forward due to the recent shortcomings of the postulates of the Paris Agreement, as well as the United States presidential election in 2020. The nexus between security and climate change has increasingly grown over the years, and policy makers have started to manipulate the narrative over the issue, considering states dominate the more direct actions taken to combat global warming. In such, environmental discussions have taken upon merging with the matter of international security.

For the years prior to the 21st century, state security had been managed with a military approach, and as a result, the discussions had been focused on diminishing threats to the entity of the nation. However, as aforementioned, new agendas have been implemented in the international arena, opening up newer frameworks for analysis (Stone, 2009 *apud* Buzan, 1991); hence, environmental security became a key topic in addressing state security, since its multi-layer components require multiple approaches. Therefore, as policy makers such as Barack Obama and Donald Trump employ US environmental politics, it can result in dangerous germinations, especially considering it is a supranational matter.

The chosen method for data gathering was to perform a study focused on analyzing the actions and speeches delivered by influential figures in both parties, with a qualitative and constructivist approach, as well as official documents and papers and a bibliographical review, in order to validate or not the foregoing argument. Buzan, de Wilde, and Weaver (1997, 1998) have extensive work on

the topic of security studies, as they understand that state security should be addressed by different levels and approaches, of which it was heavily utilized in this paper.

Hence, an in depth analysis of former president Obama and president Trump takes place, in order to disclose how their opinions and political actions contrast, with a special focus on the presidential dispute in 2016. The hypothesis affirms that there is a trend for policy makers going forward, meaning the narratives in presidential candidates shape their environmental policy for their mandate, depending on how their personal views or their parties' prospects are explicated.

Taking it into account, the decision to signalize the end of commitments to the Paris Agreement by the US in 2017, indicates the shift of foreign policy under President Trump (Johnston, 2019), considering that the Accordance is a groundbreaking international convention which positivized what states could and should do in order to achieve sustainable development (Denchak, 2018). That being said, between political figures, the decision to focus on Barack Obama's years of mandate seemed reasonable, as a prolific actor in the Agreement's construction. As for the Republican Party, Donald Trump has headlined the conservative debate since his election for president in 2016.

Nonetheless, it is examined a causal relationship between a link of the 2016 election and the withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, considering Trumps' utilization of discourse during his campaign, and for such, an explanation is made of the substantiality of a possible absence of the United States as a signatory. Finally, an analysis of the reverberations of the decommitment from the Agreement headline concludes the present article.

OBAMA'S ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY TOWARDS THE PARIS AGREEMENT

Initially, before evaluating the US entry into the Paris Agreement, it is necessary to understand Barack Obama's main environmental initiatives background. In such context, his actions called on Congress to pass wide-ranging legislation addressing the climate crisis, creating new jobs, and increasing energy security (NATURAL RESOURCES DEFENSE COUNCIL, 2010). Looking back, since the first year in office, Obama's administration pursued a nation based on a cleaner and environmentally efficient energy. That being said, the carbon emissions during his government have decreased 9 percent, while the country's economy grew more than 10 percent (THE WHITE HOUSE, 2020).

According to the Natural Resources Defense Council (2010), the boost to revitalize the American economy and put the country on a path to sustainable prosperity was the investments on clean energy. In early 2009, Congress approved the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, containing \$50 billion for cleaner US energy, greater energy efficiency, and domestic sources of renewable energy. Also, under his administration, as stated to industry analyses, employment in the solar industry has grown more than 85 percent in the period of 2010 to 2014 (Somanader, 2015).

It is important to highlight that scientific and legal issues were often overridden by political concerns, under the preceding Administration. In compliance with Haas (*apud*, 2002. Pfefferle, 2014), political reflections generally play into the evaluation of scientific discoveries, which influences the eventual translation of science into policy. From this angle, Obama's administration accentuates the importance of environmental protections, subjecting many of the policies of the Bush administration to new scientific reviews (NATURAL RESOURCES DEFENSE COUNCIL, 2010).

Besides that, even though the scientific consensus on climate change is overwhelming, similar political consensus on the issues are perceptible (Pfefferle, 2014). Albeit the Obama administration placed new rules to cut carbon pollution creating a Climate Action Plan, in addition to goals regarding its plan, were based on: the creation of new opportunities to reduce pollution of highly-potent greenhouse gases known as hydrofluorocarbons; directs agencies to develop a comprehensive methane strategy; and commits to protect forests and critical landscapes (THE WHITE HOUSE, 2013).

Furthermore, in 2015, Obama issued a Clean Water Rule under the 1972 Clean Water Act, aiming to give the federal government broad authority to limit pollution in major water bodies, like Chesapeake Bay (Friedman; Davenport, 2019). Nonetheless, in his words, its rule would help to "restore protection for the streams and wetlands that form the foundation of our nation's water resources, without getting in the way of farming, ranching, or forestry" (THE WHITE HOUSE, 2013).

In regard to Obama's direction towards the Paris Agreement, in 2014, the former US President and China's current President Xi Jinping, released their pre-Paris targets jointly. Therefore, the Obama administration's outreach to Xi Jinping helped delivered the 2015 climate deal (Chemnick, 2020).

In 2016, US and China formally joined the Paris Agreement, marking a significant contribution concerning the early entry into force of the deal (Somanader, 2016).

Thusly, in a remarkable discourse referring to the accord, Obama affirmed that the Agreement would “ultimately prove to be a turning point for our planet, (...) history will judge today’s efforts as pivotal”. In addition, he pronounced that the entrance of the two largest economies and two largest emitters on this deal “should give the rest of the world confidence, whether developed or developing countries, that a low-carbon future is where the world is heading” (Somanader, 2016).

THE UNITED STATES IMPORTANCE TO THE ACCORDANCE

In the words of Sourgens (2018), “the Paris Agreement was built to encourage strong reliance interests”. Therefore, when signed in April 2016, the convention sought to implement restrictions on carbon emissions and limit temperature rise to 1.5 °C until the end of the century, based on “requirements that all Parties report regularly on their emissions and on their implementation efforts (United Nations Climate Change, 2020). Since signaling withdrawal in 2017, the US has reinforced its top position in pollutant gas emission. According to the World Economic Forum (2019), the United States has the largest per capita carbon footprint by any nation, with 14.95t.

Additionally, the US amounts for about 15% of global emissions (Ritchie, Roser, 2019; Global Carbon Atlas, 2020). Along with China and the European Union, they “contribute more than half of total global emissions, while the bottom 100 countries only account for 3.5 percent” (Friedrich et al., 2017). Nonetheless, Trump later fulfilled his promise of decommitting from the obligations of the Agreement (Schreurs, 2016), reasoning that it was due to “the unfair economic burden imposed on American workers, businesses, and taxpayers by U.S. pledges made under the Agreement⁴”, as cited by Michael Pompeo (2019), in a press statement. The process is due to the 4th of November 2020, a day after the 2020 presidential election (CONGRESSIONAL RESEARCH SERVICE, 2019).

One may raise the notion that “the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement as such reflects first and foremost a rejection of the multilateral climate policy process” (Elkerbout, 2017), and that of “a skeptical approach toward multilateral organizations and multilateral agreements

⁴ The US pledge to reduce emissions accounts for “more than a fifth of all emissions through 2030, that is, 21% of the total of pledged by all nations” (Johnston, 2017).

(CONGRESSIONAL RESEARCH SERVICE, 2019). Either way, it is hard to understate the effect of such action in regard to its impacts towards the Paris Agreement itself. With such a high proportion of global emissions, the United States undermines its primal position as a leader on the new agenda in international relations, opening possibilities for China and other insurgent actors to take upon necessary action, as well as create an opportunity for the country to be held accountable by carbon tariffs⁵ (Gökçe et al., 2019; CLIMATE ACTION TRACKER, 2019; CONGRESSIONAL RESEARCH SERVICE, 2019; Cozier, 2017). Not only that, it makes it difficult to compete in the emergent clean energy market (Sullivan, 2017).

In parallel, according to Dai et al. (2017), by failing to comply to the principles established by the Agreement, by 2030, the US will increase its Carbon emission, as well as witness “a significant reduction of its own carbon price”, while “other regions will face to a higher carbon price”. In other words, by unilaterally withdrawing, the US will hurt economically some of its biggest trading partners, such as China, the European Union and Japan. Moreover, Saad (2018) suggests that the withdrawal “might trigger a domino effect leading others to exit the agreement”; even if that does not prove to be the case, it prolongs the transition to a clean and more sustainable global economy (Saad, 2018; Floyd, 2010).

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN 2015-2016: HOW TRUMP’S SPEECH FRAMED HIS ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY

It is important to understand the impact of speeches in a larger context of actions. For Donald Trump during his electoral campaign, one might argue that his primary focus was the creation of a discourse in which the “American way of life” was endangered, and that external and internal forces were plotting to dethrone the US of its primal position in the international order (Mcclay, 2017). In the words of Mcclay (2017), “Trump’s speeches reveal an ideology consistent with strategic patterns of us vs them”. Thus, by utilizing Barry Buzan, Ole Weaver and Jaap de Wilde’s work in the field of securitization, a plausible reasoning for his enormous acceptance and latter complete turnaround in environmental policies can be done.

For the grand part of the presidential election, Trump was mostly seen as an “underdog”, an outsider and someone not from the traditional political establishment (Flegenheimer, Barbaro, 2016;

⁵ According to The World Bank, carbon tariffs, or carbon taxes, “gives an economic signal and polluters decide for themselves whether to discontinue their polluting activity, reduce emissions, or continue polluting and pay for it”. By taxing, it reduces the competitiveness of a product, due to a rise in pricing, resulting in less imports (Gökçe et al., 2019).

Zurcher, 2016). But with the “Make America Great Again” slogan, famously used by Ronald Reagan in his successful presidential bid in 1980 (United States Studies Centre, 2020), Trump quickly launched itself into the center of the Republican party. According to Mohammadi and Javadi (2017), his campaign focused primarily in five pillars: “Americanism; Immigration; Terrorism; Rigged system; Economy and trade”. The focus in this paper is the exploration of the first pillar, “Americanism”. In his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention, Trump states:

Tonight, I will share with you our action for America. The most important difference between our plan and that of our opponents is that our plan will put America first. Americanism, not globalism, will be our credo (Politico, 2016; Mohammadi, Javadi, 2017).

In other words, the national interest shall prevail over previously signed multilateral (hence the word “globalism”) agreements. By doing so, the then presidential candidate creates a narrative that urges the necessity of putting the interests of the US as the main priority, without taking into accounts how other nations and non-state actors might conceive of it.

Trump then adds: “As long as we are led by politicians who will not put America First, then we can be assured that other nations will not treat America with respect” (Politico, 2016). As aforementioned, Trump constantly perpetuates the notion that, without action, the US might not be the global hegemon in the future. Consequently, it creates the perception that north American prevalence is under threat, and the acceptance of his audience is a key component in such, highlighting his “America first” policy.

Having said that, a process of securitization⁶ can be grasped in this context, when, according to constructivist authors Buzan et al. (1998), “the invocation of security has been the key to legitimizing the use of force, but more generally it has opened the way for the state to mobilize, or to take special powers, to handle/existential threats”. Trump constantly expresses that the peace and prosperity of “all Americans” is under threat, either by terrorism, “bad deals” or other nations (Politico, 2016). To extend such understanding to what once called “a hoax” (Cheung, 2020), is only natural, given that it externalizes and operationalizes the possible threats to prosperity and becomes a tool that translates into actions, in this case, the withdrawal from the Agreement.

⁶ In the words of Buzan et al. (1998: 25), securitization would be characterized as the “establishment of an existential threat with a saliency sufficient to have substantial political effects”.

The crucial component is passing a message of menace, and once a channel of dialogue is open, any subject can be securitized. The inclination that the Paris Agreement hurts the US economically (Trump, 2019) has a byproduct of securitization of the national interest, and imposes gargantuan implications for the arrangements implemented to combat global warming, and due to such, Trump's electoral victory is a breaking point on the issue, marking his approach to the subject for the remainder of his subsequent mandate.

TRUMP'S ENVIRONMENTAL ADMINISTRATION LEADING TO THE PARIS AGREEMENT WITHDRAWAL

As president elected, Trump's administration has brought an enormous amount of change to the US environmental policy. That being said, it is indispensable to demonstrate that many of the policies which aimed to curb climate change endorsed by Obama-era were reformulated or left aside by Trump's command, leading to the withdrawal from the Paris agreement.

At first, it is necessary to underscore that the President's placements emphasize the denial regarding the scientific consensus on climate change. Be that as it may, in the US, climate change has become an issue that is related with a particular political ideology (Hoffman, 2012 *Apud* Pfefferle, 2014). Enclosed by this context, it is supposed that environmental policies will interfere in the private market through climate-correlated regulations and additional taxation (Pfefferle, 2014).

Thus, Trump's first update to the US National Security Strategy removed climate change from its list of major security threats. Besides, as stated on a report released by the Environmental and Governance Initiative, websites across federal government agencies removed or substantially reduced climate change content and replaced terms such as: "climate change"; "greenhouse gases"; "sustainability" and "emissions" (Markey, Whitehouse, 2018). However, it is necessary to point out that, according to Cheung (2020), "in 2009, Mr. Trump actually signed a full-page advert in the New York Times, along with dozens of other business leaders, expressing support for legislation combating climate change".

Nonetheless, he appointed Myron Ebell, a leading contrarian of the scientific consensus on global warming, to head the EPA's transition group (Hestres, Nisbet, 2018). Furthermore, in 2017 Trump signed an executive order that seeks to dismantle the Clean Power Plant regulation and nullify Obama's executive orders aiming to support the country's preparation for worse impacts concerning

climate change (Nunez, 2017). It is relevant to expose that Trump himself visited EPA headquarters to sign its executive order target and as part of this unprecedented event, coal miners were brought onto the stage, with energy industry executives and their political allies invited to serve as audience (Dillon et al., 2018).

Therefore, the Presidential executive order on promoting energy independence and economic growth issued that:

(c) Accordingly, it is the policy of the United States that executive departments and agencies immediately review existing regulations that potentially burden the development or use of domestically produced energy resources and appropriately suspend, revise, or rescind those that unduly burden the development of domestic energy resources beyond the degree necessary to protect the public interest or otherwise comply with the law (THE WHITE HOUSE, 2017).

Another major topic regarding the Trump administration's State Department, was granting a permit for the construction of the Keystone XL pipeline. In short, the 1,200-mile pipeline would connect Alberta's oil sands to refineries in Texas and, consequently, President Obama had rejected the project in late 2015, concerned about costs of the pipeline's economic benefits and fears that the project would exacerbate future carbon emissions (Greshko et al., 2017). As such, Trump signed a memorandum in keeping with his campaign promise of initiating the process for approving the Keystone XL Pipeline (THE WHITE HOUSE, 2017).

It is preeminent to express that, in 2017, the Trump administration first attempted to lift an Obama-era ban on coal leasing on public lands. However, a federal judge ruled that the government's policy did not include sufficient evaluation of the environmental effects of coal mining. As follows, the Government announced in 2019 the restarting of coal leasing, followed by a Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM) statement, exposing no significant impact from lifting the ban on processing applications for new coal leases (Hall, 2020).

In concern to the Paris climate deal, Trump has formally started the process of withdrawing the US in 2019. Howbeit, he first announced his intention to withdraw from the agreement in 2017. It is indispensable to notice that once formally out, the country will still be able to attend climate talks and participate in Paris-related discussions as an observer, without the ability to make-decisions or block consensus (Farand, 2019).

In this perspective, President Trump alleged that the Paris accord would affect US sovereignty and then, was applauded by his White House audience (Goldstein, Greenberg, 2018). Also, he endorsed that the US would cease all the “draconian financial and economic burdens the agreement imposes”, including ending the implementation of the “nationally determined contribution and, very importantly, the Green Climate Fund” (Garden, 2017).

Within the US domestic political context in mind, in conformity with Pfefferle (2014), the process of interest generation works on two levels: the first implies policy makers and negotiators involved in climate change discussions; and the second is encoded by general discourse, mostly shaped by public opinion. Taking this into account, a 2018 survey by the Yale Programme on Climate Change Communication found that 77% of Americans believed the US should remain in the Paris Agreement, including 60% of Republicans (Farand, 2019).

It is necessary to point out that the US presidential elections in 2020, shall play a decisive role in dictating the future of north American management, since the official pullout of the Paris Climate Agreement is scheduled to take place a day after the balloting. Notwithstanding, the decision on leaving the Paris agreement reflects a broader attack by the Trump administration on multilateral commitments, weakening US influence in world affairs, and in a certain way, encouraging China to play a more significant role. Although there is a great risk that other countries will withdraw or weaken their commitments with the climate deal, the US decision is unlikely to reverse the global trend towards decarbonization and environmental sustainability (Robinson, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the Barack Obama era was a milestone for the advancement of US environmental policy. As such, it is indispensable to stand out the articulation of the former administration with China in the formulation, and later, the entrance into the Paris Agreement. Moreover, it was conceived with boundless attention for the scientific apparatus and consensus on environmental studies.

As follows, it was noticed that elections are points of inflection in international politics and discourses may very well have powerful reverberations for a policy maker. In the case of Donald Trump, his enormous acceptance made it viable for an unprecedented move, that is, the withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement. As argued prior, by decommitting of the Agreement, the US

loses diplomatic leverage when negotiating; however, escalations can derive from other nations adopting a more combative tone when trading with the United States (Gökçe et al., 2019).

Noteworthy is that even though President Trump addresses the topic in his speeches by saying that it represents a major stepping stone for the US, his administration sees it as a non-threat in practical terms, as mentioned on section four of this article, meaning it downplays the severity of the issue. As noted, the merging of politics and economics with environmental security triggers turbulent, in some cases, yet fruitful results. On the contrary, as discussed during the presidential election, it became an effect of personal leverage for policy makers such as Donald Trump, as well as it translated into his latter presidency. To this degree, the trend for narratives by presidential candidates shaping their environmental policy for their mandate has been confirmed in this particular case, but it does not conclude sufficient causal relations for a more general allegation.

Bearing that in mind, the shift of approach when dealing with climate change propelled the United States to a role of an international pariah, especially considering the lack of consensus regarding the seriousness of the situation inside the White House. As demonstrated, the ability to conduct the debate around the topic is what will, eventually, lead to a no turning back point. Consequently, by reframing the threat that climate change and the postulates of the Paris Agreement seek to address, it prolongs the necessity and closes the gap for a reevaluation of the global economy and the industrial system, in order to achieve a sustainable production (Falkner, 2016; Floyd, 2010).

Nevertheless, due to the enormous change in the US administrative focus, the world witnessed a complete turnaround of the pro-environment and multilateral policies being implemented under President Obama. The historical background of President Trump before entering office shows that, even he was not sure if climate change is actually a threat, so one can assume that, either way, the topic was and still is heavily used when deemed fitting to its purposes.

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