**GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE AND PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP: HAS THERE BEEN ANY SIGNIFICANT RESPONSE BY U.S. PRESIDENTS TO THIS VEXING GLOBAL THREAT?**

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**Climate Change—a vexing threat[[1]](#footnote-1):**

Between1990 and 2007 the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a body composed of many of the world’s leading scientists and established by the United Nations Environment Program and the World Meteorological Organization, published several reports over the years regarding global climate change. The Fourth Report, published in 2007, made the case regarding human-induced climate change. It even went so far as to suggest that “[c]limate change will affect national security. . . potentially affecting everything from economic growth to social stability” that may require “military and other government responses.”[[2]](#endnote-1)

To say this, of course, is not to suggest that all policy makers, and those interested in global climate change, agree and fully subscribe to the IPCC conclusions. In fact, there is real concern on the part of those who feel most intensely about the seriousness of global climate change that there is a general lack of public interest in the United States regarding the global consequences of climate change.[[3]](#endnote-2)

Definition in order: According to the U.S. National Academy of Science, *global warming* is characterized as “an average increase in the temperature of the Earth’s surface and in the troposphere, which can contribute to changes in global climate patterns,” while *climate change* is described as a “significant change in measures of climate (such as temperature, precipitation, or wind) lasting for an extended period” of time.[[4]](#endnote-3) Many persons use the terms interchangeably, as did Bill Clinton who referred to “global warming” 240 times from 1993 until the end of his term in 2001,[[5]](#endnote-4) and during the same period he referred to “climate change” 284 times.[[6]](#endnote-5)

My focus in this paper will be on *global climate change* since it will allow us to assess the consequences of this environmental phenomenon in a broader context. In looking at global climate change I will be able to assess the seriousness of greenhouse gases, as well as examine responses from policy makers and private and public institutions.

This paper will be divided into two major sections: Section 1 will elaborate on the seriousness and breadth of climate change; while Section 2 will look at how presidents since Harry Truman have responded to climate change and associated problems, and will conclude looking at the future actions by presidents to resolve this serious global threat.

**I.**

While most persons would agree that global climate change is a worrisome and frustrating environmental problem, what is not clear, however, is why global climate change seems so difficult to resolve. The answer, as you might suspect, includes a number of reasons:

To begin with, 1) resolution to climate change, when it comes, will come with some difficulty. Part of the reason for this is due to the “doubters” of climate change who refuse to believe human activities can intensify the seriousness of climatic conditions. This has made resolution difficult. A recent noteworthy study in 2010 by Byron W. Daynes and Glen Sussman, focused attention on the damaging political debate between advocates who wished to do something immediately about global warming and/or climate change and those who will stop at nothing to undercut the important climate control findings.[[7]](#endnote-6) The effect of this intense exchange has been to slow down any response to climate change and, unless there can be some agreement among a coalition of actors including interest groups, scientists, policy makers and presidents who believe something must be done soon, resolution might never come about.

2) Government makes it difficult: Another reason resolution of climate change has been so difficult is due to our own complex system of government as well as the fact that climate change transcends each level of government, including the global community, the three national branches of government as well as state and local governments. Christopher McGrory Klyza and David Sousa point out that one finds in the United States that environmental measures such as climate change are often delayed or prevented from coning to a vote through legislative “gridlock.” As the authors further assert, this does not mean that resolution is impossible, but it means that it must seek other routes to secure agreement among the parties.[[8]](#endnote-7)

3) A world-wide treaty agreement has come with great difficulty: The Kyoto Protocol -- the international environmental treaty agreement limiting greenhouse gas emissions signed in 1997 by Bill Clinton-- served as an important “first step” in allowing some 191 nations to come together focusing on the concerns of global climate change. But many aspects of the Kyoto Protocol terminated in 2012. While some will remain until a post-Kyoto agreement can be put into effect, yet approving such a pact to limit emissions has not been easy, as has been seen in 2007 in Bali, in 2009 in Copenhagen, in 2010 in Cancun, and in Doha, Qatar in 2012, where approximately 200 nations have engaged in discussions concerning a new treaty. No firm agreement is expected to come about until 2015 and then its adoption is not expected until the year 2020.[[9]](#endnote-8)

These struggles for resolution have come about for several reasons. First, it involves the *transboundary nature of climate change that* makes it particularly challenging for policy makers. The very fact that climate change does not respect political boundariesand is not limited to one geographic location but has a cross-national effect necessitates agreement of all countries affected.As a result, Lynton Caldwell concluded in 1990, after examining environmental problems at the international level, that “. . . global climate change could be regarded as the single greatest international environmental policy issue.” [[10]](#endnote-9)

Michael Kraft, in his 2001 research study[[11]](#endnote-10) assessed what our dominant focus has been for the past three generations. Air and water quality were particular concerns for the first generation during the early 1970s, while persons during the late 1970s were mostly concerned with toxic chemicals and hazardous waste. The third generation of environmental problems—where he puts climate change--are “global in origin and effects, are generally low in visibility and political saliency, and are characterized by significant scientific uncertainty—with experts often disagreeing about the magnitude, timing, and location of long-term impacts.”[[12]](#endnote-11) Kraft describes the third generation problems as “politically controversial,” and are more “difficult to address than the environmental issues of earlier eras.” [[13]](#endnote-12) Kraft argues that it is this category of environmental concerns that have brought the greater challenges to American policymakers.

4) Climate change is guaranteed to produce confrontation: Global climate change can almost always be guaranteed to *excite confrontation* as do other social issues such as abortion, death penalty, or same sex marriage. Climate change shows some of the same characteristics as the response to these social issues. And with each social issue we tend to find conservatives defending the status quo and rejecting change while liberals have been more apt to demand change in social values.[[14]](#endnote-13) This is the case with global climate change as well. A specific example of confrontational demonstrations focused on climate change took place in Copenhagen on the site where the climate Accord was signed in 2009. Police and demonstration organizers estimated that between 60,000 and 100,000 people turned out on December 12, 2009 representing “environmental groups, human rights campaigners, climate activists, anti-capitalists and freelance protesters from dozens of countries.”[[15]](#endnote-14)

Differences of opinion make resolution difficult: Serious differences of opinion among elites as well as the general public have made global climate change particularly difficult to resolve. Much of the confrontation has come in rhetorical exchanges among politicians, scientists, policy makers, and media spokespersons. Intense feelings on both sides of the issue have been heard. In this country, the debate over climate change has fallen into three major categories: 1) policy supporters whose views are based on scientific evidence; 2) those who are convinced that global climate change is real, but feel that it is due more to natural weather cycles than to human efforts; and 3) those who flatly denounce the idea of global climate change arguing that it is nothing but a fraud.

In the *first category* are those who wish to *respond immediately* to climatic conditions on the basis of worldwide scientific discovery. One of the strongest claims made by these persons is the recognition that the decade from 2000 until 2009 has been “the warmest decade in the modern record, dating back 150 years. . . ”[[16]](#endnote-15) These persons are particularly worried that in 2012 the “average annual temperature of 55.3º F was 3.2º F above the 20th century average, and was the warmest year in the 1895-2012 period of record for the nation. The 2012 annual temperature was 1.0º F warmer than the previous record warmest year in 1998.”[[17]](#endnote-16)

 Included in this category are those who make it clear that the need for responding to this situation came about as a result of human production of greenhouse gases that warms the planet. This warm-up does not seem to be caused by the sun’s energy, according to research published by the Royal Academy.[[18]](#endnote-17)

In light of scientific findings, supporters can look to the 191 countries that have signed the Kyoto Protocol as well as the 194 countries that signed the Copenhagen Accord in 2009 and the nearly 200 countries that met in 2012 in Doha, Qatar as evidence of the world’s interest in resolving global climate change.

 In the *second category* are those who acknowledge that climate change is a problem but who believe that it is caused by *natural weather or ocean cycles* rather than caused by human activities. Those in this category can be found in both academic circles as well as in the media who are sincere in their belief that human beings have little or no control over climate uncertainties. For instance, Professor Don Easterbrook of Western Washington University blames the earth’s erratic patterns of warmth and coolness on ocean cycles. He maintains that global cooling from 1945 through 1977 did coincide with a Pacific Ocean cycle.[[19]](#endnote-18)

Among those scientists who prefer another explanation to human-caused warming is Geoffrey G. Duffy, a professor from University of Auckland, NZ, who indicated that “Even doubling or tripling the amount of carbon dioxide will virtually have little impact , as water vapour and water condensed on particles as clouds dominate the worldwide scene and always will.”[[20]](#endnote-19)

Finally, there are those included in the *third group* who totally deny global climate change. In many ways individuals in this group become the most extreme, and most difficult to deal with those who reject all scientific findings relying, instead, on political ideology. Persons in this category often seek their support in the writings and broadcasts of such commentators as Rush Limbaugh who on November 23, 2009 contended that:

. . . the whole man-made global warming movement is a fraud. It is a hoax. Its made-up lies. I have known this since the beginning of the movement. I’m the one who said that militant environmentalism is the home of displaced communists after the Berlin Wall came down.[[21]](#endnote-20)

Limbaugh said not long ago that “there would be tremendous harm” if we took climate change seriously “because the solution to manmade global warming is communism. The solution to manmade global warming is socialism.”[[22]](#endnote-21) What is so disturbing about what he says is, as Richard Myers quotes a recent study suggesting that:

Americans have learned more about climate change from Rush Limbaugh than from anyone else. The phrase “climate change” appears 2,780 times in his talk show transcripts, and “global warming” appears almost as often, according to a Google search.[[23]](#endnote-22)

Among the prominent members of Congress in this category is U. S. Senator James Inhofe (R- OK) who in July 2003, as a member of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, indicated much the same thing as Rush Limbaugh stated, and in very similar language, stating that concern over global warming was the “greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people.”[[24]](#endnote-23) Inhofe has remained a constant critic of global climate change as well, ever since he made this statement. But even he made an interesting admission on March 16, 2012 on the Rachel Maddow show on MSNBC when he indicated:

I was actually on your side of this issue when I was chairing that committee [the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works] and I first heard about this. I thought it must be true until I found out what it cost.[[25]](#endnote-24)

 Inhofe as the leading Senate denier also made this statement on March 10, 2012 suggesting that only God can change the climate, going on to suggest: “My point is, God’s still up there. The arrogance of people to think that we, human beings, would be able to change what He is doing in the climate is to me outrageous.”[[26]](#endnote-25)

 Both Limbaugh and Inhofe may had had some influence over the new Congress persons who entered the House after the midterm election in 2010 since

Think progress (thinkprogress.org) completed research and came to the conclusion that fifty percent of the new congressmen deny the existence of manmade climate change. And eighty-six percent are opposed to any climate change legislation that increases government revenue.[[27]](#endnote-26)

**Our situation today:**

Taking these three conflicting groups into account, our situation today was best captured by Steven R. Brechin who in 2011 contended that:

Climate change in the United States has become highly politicized among the warring political parties, a growing partisan media on what has become an ideological issue and not simply a material one. Public support for policies that address climate change is declining in many countries. . . There is also mounting evidence that anti-climate-change-policy forces are organizing efforts globally. . . . So instead of growing legions of climate change voters, the opposite may become true. . . . the world may be in for continued if not greater political stalemate.[[28]](#endnote-27)

One thing that all sides can probably agree to is that climate change is a global problem and most would agree that the best approach to take would be to act in concert with our global partners. As former Vice President Al Gore recently put it, America’s reaction to global climate change will only be one such remedy but global climate change and global warming “requires a global solution.”[[29]](#endnote-28) While all sides agree with this, the method of agreement is going to differ from group to group.

And even though many agree that a U.S. response to a global problem can only be of limited effectiveness, others feel that U.S. leadership is absolutely essential to any effective global remedy. These persons feel that if the U.S. exerts leadership toward global environmental concerns, other countries will follow the U.S. lead. When the U.S. fails to exert that leadership, the resolution of global concerns becomes problematic.[[30]](#endnote-29) For instance, two months into his presidency, George W. Bush renounced the Kyoto Protocol that 191 other countries had accepted. Instead, the U.S. acted virtually alone adopting an approach based on voluntary goals and time tables, supportive of industrial preferences regarding greenhouse gas emissions.[[31]](#endnote-30) Few other countries subscribed to the U.S. policy of refusing support the Kyoto Protocol. By contrast, President Barack Obama has offered some support to climate change legislation at home and has encouraged international allies to support a post-Kyoto global environmental agreement making more visible U.S. leadership.

The need for U.S. leadership, many feel, becomes even more important since for years the U.S. was the major emitter of greenhouse gases contributing to global warming and climate change. Consequently, the extent to which the U.S.—still a major producer of greenhouse gases-- cooperates with other countries in an effort to reduce the production of greenhouse gases will have a profound impact on the future resolution of this global environmental problem. This is why Steven R. Brechin contended, in his review of Harrison and Sundstrom’s book, that “domestic politics matter within an international context.”[[32]](#endnote-31)

It may be an understatement to say that global climate change is the collective action problem of our era. If not addressed effectively relatively soon, this mounting concern will likely dramatically affect every nation on earth—politically, economically and environmentally.[[33]](#endnote-32)

**II.**

**The Modern Presidents:**

While climate change has in many ways become a concern of all levels of government in our complex system of federalism and separation of powers, it is the president who is clearly the most visible policy maker and in many ways the most influential regarding such policy issues. Without strong leadership from the president, America’s influence throughout the world is not felt. Thus it is worth spending time examining how presidents have responded to climate change over the years. Moreover, it is worth noting how essential a supportive Congress is to presidents. Conflict can often be intense when political parties differ over climate change and where there is little consensus and minimal compromise, political gridlock is always a possible outcome. Democrats and Republicans have often found themselves on opposites sides of the climate change question, with Republicans often more likely to oppose any regulation of climate change while Democrats are often more supportive of climate regulations to limit emissions.

Although **c**limate change was not so much an issue of concern to early modern presidents, air pollution was as it related to public health, as the U.S. became more urbanized, more industrialized and more sensitive to national and global health conditions. As a result of domestic and international concern regarding air pollution, Harry Truman, in 1950, became the first modern day president to address the problem of polluted air. At this time, he organized the United States Technical Conference on Air Pollution and invited those in the U.S. who were working in areas related to air pollution to the conference with the hope that ideas could be shared as to what to do about air pollution.[[34]](#endnote-33)

 Truman’s successor, Dwight Eisenhower, also paid some attention to air pollution. In a special message to Congress as well as in his State of the Union Message in January 1955, he made a point of increasing funding for research on the public health consequences of air pollution.[[35]](#endnote-34) Congress responded by passing the 1955 Air Pollution Control Act—the first federal legislative act dealing with air pollution. Yet while Eisenhower signed this bill, it was limited in a number of important ways, in that it put the responsibility for enforcing the law not on the federal government but on individual states and municipalities.

 While in office, John Kennedy made seven references to air pollution in major speeches from 1961 to 1963. Six of these references were made to Congress including one in his 1962 State of the Union Address.[[36]](#endnote-35) Kennedy was particularly concerned about public health threats to citizens and the affect air pollution would have on the economy. That same year, in a Special Message to Congress on “Protecting the Consumer Interest” he indicated that he was going to get the Departments of Commerce and Health, Education and Welfare to consult with the auto industry regarding changes that could be made to automobile equipment and design that would both reduce accidents to human life and lessen the “pollution of the air we breathe.”[[37]](#endnote-36) In an address to Congress in February of 1963 Kennedy stated: “In the light of the known damage caused by polluted air, both to our health and to our economy, it is imperative that greater emphasis be given to the control of air pollution by communities, States and the Federal Government.”[[38]](#endnote-37) In the same speech he referred to the need for control of air pollution and preservation of environmental health as well.

In an important legislative response to Kennedy’s concerns about polluted air, the Clean Air Act of 1963, that incorporated federal governmental powers to control air pollution, was passed by Congress and signed into law by Lyndon Johnson, forty-seven days after Kennedy’s assassination. This legislation set emission standards for industry and other stationary sources, but did not include standards for controlling pollution from automobiles and trucks. However, a foundation was laid that would result in later amendments to the Clean Air Act in 1965, 1966, 1967 and 1969 that would more fully protect citizens and the economy.

Air pollution was a particular concern for Lyndon Johnson. As he pointed out in 1965:

Pollution now is one of the most pervasive problems of our society. With our numbers increasing and with our increasing urbanization and industrialization, the flow of pollutants to our air, soil, and waters is increasing. This increase is so rapid that our present efforts in managing pollution are barely enough to stay even, surely not enough to make the improvements that are needed. . . I intend to give high priority to increasing the numbers and quality of the scientists and engineers working on problems related to the control and management of pollution.[[39]](#endnote-38)

Johnson’s successor, Richard Nixon, saw clean air as one of the three conservation foci during his years in office. In his 1970 State of the Union Message, for instance, he indicated that “Clean air, clean water, open spaces—these should once again be the birthright of every American. If we act now, they can be.”[[40]](#endnote-39)And it was the last day of 1970 that Richard Nixon signed the Clean Air Act of 1970, that was to amend the previous Clean Air Act.[[41]](#endnote-40) Nixon, in fact, stated, on signing the bill, that it was “the most important piece of legislation, in my opinion, dealing with the problem of clean air that we have this year and the most important in our history.” He later added that “I think that 1970 will be known as the year of the beginning, in which we really began to move on the problems of clean air and clean water and open spaces for the future generations of America.”[[42]](#endnote-41)

Gerald Ford did address a special session of Congress in 1976 to urge the passage of Clean Air Act amendments that would permit further use of coal, without sacrificing clean air standards. In addition, Ford supported the amendments that would allow for increased vehicle efficiency, without increasing the cost to consumers. His purpose in proposing these amendments was primarily to lower energy costs rather than protecting the environment.[[43]](#endnote-42) His concern with the 1976 Clean Air Act amendments, as they stood, was that many of them, he feared, might lead to a “no growth policy” in the United States. And since his primary concern was to ensure industrial growth rather than cleansing the air, he threatened to veto any legislation that came to him that might interfere with such growth.[[44]](#endnote-43)

Despite prior presidents’ interests and concerns regarding clean air, the first president who laid the groundwork for Americans’ awareness of climate change was Jimmy Carter. His concern with the global environment led him to become the first president to think in terms of interconnected climate systems. When Carter assumed the presidency, he was ready to initiate measures to protect both the domestic and the global environment. During his first year in office, President Carter announced to the Congress in an environmental message that it was his intention to organize the first comprehensive study of the global environment. As the president indicated: “Environmental problems do not stop at national boundaries. In the past decade, we and other nations have to recognize the urgency of international efforts to protect our common environment.” [[45]](#endnote-44) He then asked the Council on Environmental Quality, the Department of State, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the National Science Foundation National, Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to create a year-by-year study (that would extend through the year 2000) that would take account of the changes in the world’s population, in its natural resources, and in the environment.[[46]](#endnote-45)

Among the issues involved in this study--*The Global 2000 Report--* was an entire chapter devoted to climate change.[[47]](#endnote-46) The Study went on to warn that “[s]ome human activities, especially those resulting in releases of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, are known to have the potential to affect the world’s climate.” Further, the *Report* concluded that “[m]any experts . . . feel that changes on a scale likely to affect the environment and the economy of large regions of the world are not only possible but probable in the next 25-50 years.”[[48]](#endnote-47)

Jimmy Carter also was the first president to mention climate change in any presidential speech. In his “Science and Technology Message to the Congress,” for example, he indicated that “[a]dvances that can be made in understanding climate change, in predicting it—and perhaps in influencing it beneficially—will be of enormous help to us and the rest of the world.”[[49]](#endnote-48)

Yet Carter, in his efforts to resolve the energy crisis with which he was also dealing, advocated increasing coal production which potentially might compromise his efforts to reduce greenhouse gases. In April 1977, he indicated, in his National Energy Plan Address to a joint session of the Congress, that he wished to “increase our coal production by more than two-thirds, to over a billion tons a year” along with reducing energy consumption “by more than 2 percent,” and reducing gasoline consumption “by 10 percent.”[[50]](#endnote-49)

If President Carter’s *Global 2000 Report* set the foundation for further research on climate change, the Administration of Ronald Reagan made few contributions to promote continued support for climate research. Although Reagan signed the 1988 Global Climate Protection Act, his Administration failed in its responsibility to make a substantive effort to stabilize the “concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.”[[51]](#endnote-50)

Ronald Reagan’s most significant act was to sign the Montreal Protocol for the United States in 1989. The importance of their Protocol was best stated by John M. Broder who indicated that:

The Montreal Protocol has phased out nearly 97 percent of 100 ozone-depleting chemicals, some of which are also potent climate-altering gases. The net effect has been the elimination of the equivalent of more than 200 billion metric tons of global-warming gases, five years’ worth of total global emissions, far more than has been accomplished by the Kyoto process.[[52]](#endnote-51)

There are varying opinions concerning Reagan’s intentions regarding the Montreal Protocol. Initially he was in opposition to it. He made no public statements with reference to it prior to its signing. Yet it was during the negotiation process that Reagan’s State Department supported the agreement, persuading other nations to agree to it. This support was key to getting the president to back the Protocol.

When George H.W. Bush (41) campaigned for the American presidency in 1988, he announced that he would be an environmentalist in the tradition of Theodore Roosevelt.[[53]](#endnote-52) Environmental protection was given a much higher priority in his administration than in the two terms of Ronald Reagan. During his campaign for the presidency, Bush (41) stated that clean air was an important item on his agenda. Consequently, in 1990, he “built a coalition of environmentalists, business and industry, and government officials that eventually resulted in the passage of the clean air act amendments.”[[54]](#endnote-53) In fact, during the first half of his one term in office, he used the resources of the White House to ensure passage of the 1990 Clean Air Act Amendments—amendments that had been debated for more than a decade. He indicated forthrightly that “I have worked actively to break the legislative stalemate which has precluded early action on clean air.”[[55]](#endnote-54) This was an important accomplishment since the 1970 Clean Air Act that was renewed in 1977 languished during the presidency of Ronald Reagan, who had refused to take action and support its renewal.

 In the area of environmental diplomacy, however, Bush (41) had difficulty building an environmental legacy. In the summer of his first year in office, for example, it appears that the president was well aware of the dangers posed by anthropomorphic activities related to global warming and climate change. As he stated at the 1989 Paris Economic Summit, that there were “serious threats to the atmosphere, which could lead to future climate changes.”[[56]](#endnote-55) Yet when he had the opportunity to offer leadership to combat global warming in 1990, and again in 1992, he failed to do so. As described by Marvin Soroos, Bush (41)’s behavior at the 1990 World Climate Conference resulted in the president refusing to sign a carbon dioxide emissions reduction agreement making the United States the only industrialized country to fail to do so.[[57]](#endnote-56)

Two years later at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, otherwise known as the Earth Summit, Bush (41) attended the conference for three days, and once again had the opportunity to demonstrate climate leadership. But again he responded to the pressures at home, making the United States, as the *New York Times* described it, a “spoiler” to this agreement.[[58]](#endnote-57)And while his signature made the United States the “. . . world’s first industrialized nation to ratify a treaty on climate change,”[[59]](#endnote-58) the president was unwilling to sign the agreement until it reflected voluntary rather than mandatory goals and timetables. Bush justified his firm stance on the Agreement stating that “the ultimate objective of the Convention is to stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations (not emissions) in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous human interference with the climate system.”[[60]](#endnote-59)

George H. W. Bush (41) did have an understanding of the importance of making an effort to join with others in making an in combating climate change. In his first year in office he indicated:

Concerns like the environment—global warming, acid rain and pollution of the world’s oceans: these are problems that know no borders, that no line on a map has the power to stop. And pollution crosses continents and oceans, and it’s time for nations to join forces in common defense of our environment. The United States will do its part.[[61]](#endnote-60)

He indicated further that these were changes that would ensure that “every American, in the space of one generation will breathe clean air.”[[62]](#endnote-61)

After twelve years of Republican dominance of the White House, environmentalists were particularly elated with the election of Bill Clinton to the presidency in the Fall 1992 general election. Although Clinton did not bring environmental credentials with him, he did select important environmentalists to his Administration including Tennessee’s Democratic Senator Al Gore, selected to be his Vice President. Gore had a proven pro-environment record, as did Carol Browner, who was appointed as head of the Environmental Protection Agency and Arizona Senator Bruce Babbitt, who served as Secretary of the Interior. Clinton’s environmental agenda was slowed, however, during his first term as Republicans captured both chambers of the Congress in the 1994 midterm election, making it difficult for him to get measures through the Congress and succeed as an international environmental leader.

Clinton’s effort to address climate change also faced setbacks as Republicans, some Democrats, and the fossil fuel industry, opposed his efforts to address greenhouse gas emissions. The Clean Air Act was one of the critical acts under attack from the Republican Congress. Clinton found it necessary to often “lead by veto” in order to protect critical environmental laws.[[63]](#endnote-62)

Clinton saw a particular opportunity to make advances against climate change in 1997 during the U.N. Climate change Conference. As the President stated in September 1997:

When the nations of the world gather again in December [1997] in Kyoto for the UN Climate Change Conference, all of us, developed and developing countries, must seize the opportunity to turn back the clock on greenhouse gas emissions so that we can leave a healthy planet to our children.[[64]](#endnote-63)

The most significant accomplishment that the Clinton administration had was persuading other nations to support the Kyoto Protocol. U.S. leadership was critical during the process. Without the U.S.’ efforts, it is unlikely that the Kyoto Protocol would have been successful. Clinton sent Al Gore to the negotiations with the primary mission to encourage European countries and energy producers and coal users to accept a “workable middle ground.” [[65]](#endnote-64)

In spite of his support for the Protocol, Bill Clinton faced his greatest opposition from the Republican-controlled Senate, supported by Democrats representing fossil fuel states, and the automobile industries. In 1997, the Senate voted 95-0 in favor of the Byrd-Hagel Resolution that opposed support for the Protocol unless developing countries like China and India were included in the agreement. As a result, while the president personally signed the Protocol, he never sent it to the full Senate for ratification given this Resolution.

Even with President Clinton’s difficulty with the Congress, he still continued to express his support for the Protocol which he saw as an important step in addressing increasing greenhouse gas emissions. In his last State of the Union Message for 2000, for example, Clinton stated:

The greatest environmental challenge of the new century is global warming. The scientists tell us the 1990's were the hottest decade of the entire millennium. If we fail to reduce the emission of greenhouse gases, deadly heat waves and droughts will become more frequent, coastal areas will flood, and economies will be disrupted. That is going to happen, unless we act. [[66]](#endnote-65)

Bill Clinton’s presidency was very important for the development of climate change as a legitimate environmental issue.

In the disputed election of 2000, George W. Bush (43) won the presidency, a political result that would eventually have profound implications for environmental policy in general, and climate change in particular.[[67]](#endnote-66) Two months into his presidency, Bush (43) renounced the Kyoto Protocol arguing that it would have a negative impact on the U.S. economy and jobs and that the agreement neglected to include developing countries, especially China and India—two countries that were major polluters.

The decision by President Bush to refuse to cooperate with international partners in reducing greenhouse gas emissions resulted in world leaders visibly upset with the United States. This president preferred a unilateral approach, with Australia as the only major industrialized democracy supporting his approach. Bush’s approach not only rejected the Kyoto Protocol, but it also rejected the legitimacy of the Clean Air Act as well. He had his own Clear Skies Initiative that he was willing to put in the place of the Clean Air Act, an Act that had existed since the Nixon Administration, and had been supported by both parties as an effective guard against pollute air. [[68]](#endnote-67) Clear Skies did set limits on nitrogen oxide, which creates smog, and sulfur dioxide, the primary cause of acid rain, and limited mercury by 70 percent by the year 2018, but it did not set uniform national standards for clean air, as the Clean Air Act has done.[[69]](#endnote-68) Instead, Clear Skies would allow those polluting plants to buy and sell credits allowing these plants to “pollute” among themselves.[[70]](#endnote-69) Critics of Clear Skies such as former Vice President Al Gore, argued that the “Bush administration’s so-called ‘Clear Skies’ initiative actually allows more toxic mercury, nitrogen oxide and sulfur pollution than if we enforced the laws on the books today. It ought to be called the dirty skies initiative.”[[71]](#endnote-70)

Bush (43), therefore, selectively worked with allies in attempting to combat global climate change in his own way. With Britain, he tried to persuade the prime minister to accept an alternative market-based, voluntary approach to address greenhouse gas emissions. With Japan, the United States was willing to share “clean energy technology” to power automobiles, homes and businesses.[[72]](#endnote-71) With Germany, Bush (43) indicated that the U.S. would work with the country’s leaders to advance “climate science,” and develop “effective national tools for policy action;”. . . as well as take joint action to “raise the efficiency of the energy sector.”[[73]](#endnote-72) With Australia, the president indicated that the two countries looked forward to “. . . working actively and constructively with all countries at the U.N. Climate Change Conference in Indonesia in December,” toward “stabilizing greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system.” [[74]](#endnote-73)

Although he could not be considered a leading climate change advocate, George W. Bush knew how to appeal to some of those adhering to this position. He spoke at length regarding climate change in at least two State of the Union Messages. In his 2007 State of the Union Message, he talked about the need to increase alternative fuels, and reduce gasoline usage and setting up oil production in an “environmentally sensitive way.”[[75]](#endnote-74) In his 2008 State of the Union Message he was more specific suggesting that we needed to develop new “technologies that [could] generate coal power while capturing carbon emissions;” further, that there was a need to develop “emissions-free nuclear power,” and advance “battery technology and renewable fuels to power the cars and trucks of the future.” He then encouraged developing an “international clean technology fund” to help such nations as India and China to make greater use of clean energy. He went on to state that “The United States is committed to. . . confronting global climate change and the best way to meet these goals is for America to continue leading the way toward the development of cleaner and more energy efficient technology.” [[76]](#endnote-75) Indeed, George W. Bush spent extended time in an attempt to win adherence to his approach to climate change—without much success.

After eight years of Republican control of the White House, the environmental community was encouraged when Democrat Barack Obama won the 2008 presidential election. In the election campaign, both Republican Senator John McCain and Democratic Senator Barack Obama agreed that climate change was a critical issue. The two candidates recognized the urgency of the issue, and both supported strategies to encourage clean energy and reduce U.S. emissions.[[77]](#endnote-76) The 2008 election of Barack Obama was highly anticipated by environmentalists looking for someone to fill the president’s chair who was willing to advocate policies to limit climate change, and it was Obama who had promised “a new chapter in America’s leadership on climate change.”[[78]](#endnote-77)

The new president began to move quickly on several environmental fronts. On March 28, 2009, for example, he announced that he would launch a Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate inviting delegates of the seventeen major economies to convene in Italy in July 2009. The president then agreed to set a goal to “limit global warming to levels recommended by scientists” and to include emerging economies—including China—in “limiting global warming.”[[79]](#endnote-78)

By the end of his first year in office, however, little meaningful progress had been made domestically on climate change. While the president tried working with Congress to agree to an energy and climate bill, he was unsuccessful. A major reason for this was based on a 2011 Environmental Scorecard drawn up by the League of Conservation Voters that suggested that the 2011 House of Representatives was the most “anti-environmental in our nation’s history”[[80]](#endnote-79) In the years since 2011, the House has been just as resistant to Obama’s efforts.

Confronting such opposition in Congress led the president to begin stressing other policy options related to climate change including a focus on clean energy legislation to avoid further confrontations with lawmakers. But this time he chose to rely on his own presidential authority.[[81]](#endnote-80)

He hinted at this in his 2012 State of the Union Message, where he rather timidly stated:

The differences in this chamber may be too deep right now to pass a comprehensive plan to fight climate change. But there’s no reason why Congress shouldn’t at least set a clean energy standard that creates a market for innovation. So far, you haven’t acted. Well, tonight, I will.[[82]](#endnote-81)

In addition, the constant resistance that President Obama has faced from the Republican Congress during his first term, encouraged the president to place more and more responsibility on the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in the hands of Director Lisa Jackson, who served during Obama’s first term. With authority received from the 2007 Supreme Court case, *Massachusetts v. EPA* (549 U.S. 497)(2007), Section 202 of the Clean Air Act, [[83]](#endnote-82) the Administrator of the EPA was required to set the emission standards for any “air pollutant” from cars or any motor vehicle engines which contributes to air pollution and/or that may endanger public health. Jackson was quite active in her role but became frustrated with the opposition from Congress, and refused to serve during Obama’s second term. The position has yet to be filled. Bob Perciasepe is the Acting Administrator while we wait for a new one to be appointed. I’ve seen a few people mention Gina McCarthy as a strong candidate for the position.

Internationally, the president has had several opportunities to demonstrate strong leadership with others around the world. He has not always taken those opportunities, however, and/or followed through on those that he has had. In President Obama’s first speech before the United Nations General Assembly, for example, he emphasized the domestic programs that the United States was and would be developing to “move from a bystander to a leader in international climate negotiations.”[[84]](#endnote-83) While his rhetoric tried to signal to the world that the United States would no longer impede progress in producing a climate agreement,[[85]](#endnote-84) resistance from Congress has prevented much of this from happening.

His greatest effort at showing some leadership internationally was in his address at the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Summit. This summit was highly anticipated as having the potential of producing a binding climate change agreement. Elisabeth Rosenthal, in an article for the *New York Times*, noted that delegates who attended the Copenhagen conference became convinced that the U.S. was now serious about climate change, and that “set off a flurry of diplomacy around the globe.”[[86]](#endnote-85) Near the conclusion of the conference, President Obama flew to Copenhagen to advocate united action towards a climate agreement. There, he said:

The time for talk is over. This is the bottom line: We can embrace this accord, take a substantial step forward, continue to refine it and build upon its foundation… Or we can choose delay, falling back into the same divisions that have stood in the way of action for years. And we will be back having the same stale arguments…all while the danger of climate change grows until it is irreversible.[[87]](#endnote-86)

President Obama saw the Copenhagen Accord as groundbreaking, because it was the first time in history when all of “the world’s major economies have come together to accept their responsibility to confront the threat of climate change.”[[88]](#endnote-87) There was the potential for goodwill and progress as 194 nations participated in the two week summit sponsored by the United Nations. Despite President Obama’s optimism, however, the formal result of the meeting came down to these nations endorsing a “non-binding agreement” including the intention to provide “$100 billion per year in climate aid for developing nations” but it lacked a “timetable of emissions limits.”[[89]](#endnote-88)

While Copenhagen was certainly the most eventful climate change conference of President Obama’s tenure, several other negotiations that have since taken place, including the 2010 Climate Summit in Cancun. The Cancun Climate Accord represents “the first time all countries [were] committed to cutting carbon emissions under an official UN agreement.”[[90]](#endnote-89) While the agreement in Cancun represents an additional step beyond Copenhagen, the commitments made by the signatories are still based on voluntary compliance, until a “legally binding global deal is achieved.”[[91]](#endnote-90) The president and his Administrative spokespersons took a strong position at Cancun on the agreement and was a chief advocate for it. "This is very good from our point of view," Todd Stern, U.S. envoy, indicated that: "This was the U.S. strategic vision and plan we had in 2010 when we returned from Copenhagen." [[92]](#endnote-91)

The 2011 Climate Change Summit that occurred in Durban, South Africa, once again, produced no immediate binding agreement that resulted in stopping global climate change. The Durban Platform for Enhanced Action brought the 194 participant countries together but the most important aspect of the gathering was that the three nations that are the major polluters-- the United States, China, and India—agreed with the other nations on the need to cut carbon emissions. The question, of course, became “how much” and “when.”

The Durban Platform called for a legally binding agreement from the 194 countries by the year 2015 to be implemented by 2020. It also called for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, limiting temperature rise, and helping developing countries make the transition to cleaner energy economies. The agreement also does not decipher or give preferential treatment to rich or poor countries but states that it is applicable to all parties.[[93]](#endnote-92) While EU countries wanted a legally binding treaty, the rest of the world represented at Durban was not ready to support this.[[94]](#endnote-93)

Obama joined with the EU in promoting progress in Durban. In a joint statement made by the U.S. and EU prior to the meeting in Durban, the U.S. and the EU stated:

We affirm that Durban should deliver on operationalizing the Cancun agreements and helping the international community move a step further towards a comprehensive, global framework with the participation of all, including robust and transparent greenhouse gas emissions reduction commitments by all major economies, recalling the 2°C objective agreed upon in Cancun.”[[95]](#endnote-94)

At the latest U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change in Doha, Qatar in December 2012, more than190 nations found it increasingly difficult for the wealthy nations to come up with its promises to secure $100 billion to assist developing nations in responding to climate change. Observers of the meeting seemed to indicate it was unclear whether any money would exchange hands. What came of the meeting, however, was a commitment to extend the Kyoto Protocol that should be extended to 2020, covering not more than 15% of global emissions. A new Treaty is to be drawn up in 2015 to be adopted by 2020, but so far no one knows the details of what the agreement will entail.[[96]](#endnote-95)

Meanwhile, President Obama has adopted a new program, again using the authority of the presidency. He directed the State Department to contact other nations on a program to reduce non-carbon pollution. On Thursday, February 16, 2012, Hillary Clinton, United States Secretary of State, announced the Climate and Clean Air Coalition, a new program to reduce the emissions of common pollutants that contribute to rapid climate change and increased health problems.[[97]](#endnote-96) The purpose of this program is to facilitate rapid action on climate change. As Durwood Zaelke, president of the Institute for Governance and Sustainable Development, said, this initiative “if expanded and adequately financed, would have more impact on the climate than the United Nations climate change negotiations, at least in the near term.”[[98]](#endnote-97)

The president, even though tangible results have not always come from his effort regarding climate change, and even though he has not followed through on all of his climate change promises he made in his first campaign, he has made a major effort to keep climate change visible before the public. In the first three years of President Obama’s Administration, for example, he has made reference to climate change 229 times, in both major and minor speeches.[[99]](#endnote-98) The vast majority of them—193 in all—came during the first year of his Presidency. Since 2010, climate change has been referenced much more sporadically. Yet he did spend some time suggesting that something should be done about climate change in both his Acceptance speech on November 7, 2012 and in his 2013 State of the Union Message. As he indicated in his November 7 Acceptance Speech: “[w]e want our children to live in an America that isn’t burdened by debt, that isn’t weakened by inequality, that isn’t threatened by the destructive power of a warming planet.”[[100]](#endnote-99) In his 2013 State of the Union Address the President spent more time in talking about the imminent dangers of climate change, stating:

. . .the fact is, the 12 hottest years on record have all come in the last 15. Heat waves, droughts, wildfires, floods, all are now more frequent and more intense. We can choose to believe that Superstorm Sandy, and the most severe drought in decades, and the worst wildfires some states have ever seen were all just a freak coincidence. Or we can choose to believe in the overwhelming judgment of science and act before it’s too late. . . . I urge this Congress to get together, pursue a bipartisan, market-based solution to climate change, like the one John McCain and Joe Lieberman worked on together a few years ago. But if Congress won’t act soon to protect future generations, I will. I will direct my cabinet to come up with executive actions we can take, now and in the future, to reduce pollution, prepare our communities for the consequences of climate change, and speed the transition to more sustainable sources of energy.[[101]](#endnote-100)

What President Obama will actually accomplish one must take account of future climatic disasters and public demands for remedies to those disasters. Moreover, his accomplishments will also depend on the politics and the political environment that exists during the next four years. One of the severest critics of Obama’s lack of assertiveness regarding climate change came from former Vice President Al Gore who indicated in his Climate Change article in *RollingStone*, June 11, 2012 that:

. . . without presidential leadership that focuses intensely on making the public aware of the reality we face, *nothing will change.* {italics added by this the author of the paper] The real power of any president, as Richard Neustadt wrote, is “the power to persuade.” Yet President Obama has never presented to the American people the magnitude of the climate crisis. He has simply not made the case for action. He has not defended the science against the ongoing, withering and dishonest attacks. Nor has he provided a presidential venue for the scientific community—including our own National Academy—to bring the reality of the science before the public.[[102]](#endnote-101)

It is important to take Gore’s criticism seriously in terms of what he felt was Obama’s failure regarding his response to climate change. As he indicated if the president is unwilling to exert “presidential leadership that focuses intensely on making the public aware of this reality we face, *nothing will change*.”[[103]](#endnote-102) (*italics* were added by the author). Certainly environmentalists sensitive to the gravity of the climate crisis hope this is not the case.

**Conclusion**

 This paper has shown the importance of presidential leadership in making air pollution and climate change key presidential agenda issues and identifying climate change, in particular, as a national priority. Although earlier presidents beginning with Harry Truman were concerned with air pollution, they did not have a global sense of its far reaching implications. In response to the threat of a warming planet, in the United States, not all presidents have been instrumental in seeking far-reaching, effective climate change policy. Presidents who made a positive contribution were Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, as Figure 1.1 indicates. In contrast, Ronald

 (Insert Figure 1.1 about here)

Reagan and George W. Bush led the nation in a direction away from effectively responding to the dangers of climate change. The president who made a contribution that was more positive than negative was George H. W. Bush (41), as Figure 1.1 suggests, but clearly still on the negative side of the vertical axis. It is hard to say in what category Barack Obama will fit by the end of his second term. If I was to make a judgment now, before his second term has ended, I would put him on the horizontal axis well behind Clinton and Carter.

 Whether these presidents have offered positive or negative actions regarding global climate change, one thing we might all agree on is that they all exhibited the difficulty of leadership in this area and how easily such leadership can be frustrated if a president does not have Congress and the public in support of the Administration’s climate policy goals. This was particularly clear during the presidencies of Bill Clinton, and now, Barack Obama.

 Among the modern presidents, those who were less likely to exhibit positive leadership often found that other elements of the political system were waiting to fill that leadership void—including the Congress or state and local leaders. This was particularly the case during the tenure of George W. Bush where hundreds of cities and a number of states—California in particular—were going their own way in attempting to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

 These modern presidents also showed how rhetoric can both advance global climate change in interacting with other heads of states and other domestic policy makers as it did during the tenure of Barack Obama, Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter, or frustrate it as occurred during the tenure of George W. Bush. These presidents also showed that if rhetoric is not accompanied by action of some, the president will lose his leverage of leadership among other heads of states or with other domestic policy makers. Both are essential for adopting an effective approach to global climate change and to convince other heads of state.

When focusing on global climate change as an important policy issue, presidential leadership and presidential-Congressional relations are linked together in the U.S. system of government. When both are attuned, then progress, both nationally and globally, is more likely to occur on this transnational environmental problem. The climate change process has been criticized by members of the scientific community who have become very frustrated with the slow pace of progress by political actors in the United States. Richard Alley, one of the authors of the 4th Assessment Report of the IPCC (2007) made his frustration quite clear in 2007 when he lamented that “Policy makers paid us to do good science, and now we have very high scientific confidence in this work - - this is real, real, real. So now act, the ball’s back in your court.”[[104]](#endnote-103)

Looking at the modern presidents’ attitudes toward climate change, only Presidents Carter and Clinton could be considered “active supporters,” with president Obama being a more passive supporter, joining the earlier six president—Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, George H.W. Bush (41) and Nixon—who would also qualify for this category of

(Insert Table 1.1 about here)

Of passive support since much of what they did regarding clean air led the way to later recognition of the need to do something regarding climate change. Table 1.1 also points out how Presidents Ford and Reagan could be considered passively opposed to climate change since development came first for these two presidents, while George W. Bush (43) was really the only president one could consider an active opponent of climate change given his reluctance to support regulation of emissions, that the nearly 200 other countries were willing to do. He focused his efforts on his own version of climate change remedies based on volunteerism.

 In terms of a level of involvement with climate change, as pointed out in Table 1.2,

 (Insert Table 1.2 about here)

 again, Presidents Carter and Clinton seem to be the only activists as far as tangible policy results are concerned, even though Clinton never submitted the Kyoto Protocol to the Senate. Yet his activism in terms of other aspects of climate change were positive enough to put him in the category. President Obama’s involvement has not yet been enough to look on him as an activist in terms of tangible results. Ford was the only president who could be considered avoiding climate change, while Bush (43) would be the only president one could consider a president who rejected the approach taken by nearly 200 other countries. Ronald Reagan, because he signed the Montreal Protocol, allows him to move into the symbolic category along with those other presidents who were sensitive to the need to respond to polluted air and those who recognized that polluted air did not stop at any one country’s borders.

 In essence few of our presidents have been major contributors in stressing the need to do something against climate change, as Figure 1.1 suggests. Only Presidents Clinton and Carter

(Insert Figure 1.1 about here)

are deserving of the first two spots on the positive horizontal axis, with President Obama a distant third. It remains to be seen regarding President Obama whether he lives up to his own words regarding the needs he has articulated in his most recent statements and avoids the sort of all-out climatic crises predicted by the Fourth Report of the United Nations Environment Program and the World Meteorological Organization as indicated on page 1.

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**Figure 1.1**

**Presidential Responses to Climate Change**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **+** | **-** |
| **------------------------------------------------** **Clinton Carter Obama** | **----------------------------------------** **Bush (41) Truman Ford Bush(43)** **Eisenhower Reagan** **Kennedy** **LB Johnson** **Nixon** |

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Source: The author

**Table 1.1**

**Presidential Attitude and Actions Toward Climate Change**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Active | Passive |
| Supportive | CarterClinton | TrumanEisenhowerKennedyLB JohnsonBush (41)NixonObama |
| Opposition | Bush (43) | FordReagan |

Source: The author

**Table 1.2**

**Presidential Action on Climate Change**

 **Level of Involvement**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Policy Outcomes** | **Tangible** | **Activism** | **Avoidance** |
| CarterClinton | Ford |
| **Nominal** | **Symbolic** | **Rejection** |
| ObamaReaganBush (41)TrumanEisenhowerKennedyNixon | Bush (43) |

Source: Table terms came from: Byron W. Daynes and Glen Sussman, *The American Presidency and the Social Agenda* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2001), 159. [↑](#endnote-ref-102)
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