

The US is Not a Climate Outlaw?

Written by Rodger A Payne

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RODGER A PAYNE, NOV 21 2011

As promised, this is a followup post about my October 20 talk at Cardiff University in Wales. In the original article, I argued that the US could be viewed as a climate outlaw for a variety of reasons. In this piece, I'll explain why that position is flawed.

First, what does it mean to be an outlaw in international politics? Sovereign states can freely decline to ratify new international laws and norms. Failure to obey those norms has not traditionally made them outlaw states. Such states are outside-the-law, perhaps, but that is a very different status. Moreover, given long-time US participation in climate change negotiations, it is clear that this is an issue that the US hopes to resolve with other states cooperatively. As this video demonstrates, even partisan differences inside the US could be set aside to solve major problems.

Ronald Reagan's administration took a lead role in creating the Montreal Protocol, which saved the atmospheric ozone layer. Likewise, nearly 20 years ago, the US was one of the very first states to sign and ratify the original UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

Next, as shown in this graphic, the US is certainly not the only state to increase its greenhouse gas emissions since 1990. In fact, a number of states that actually ratified the Kyoto Protocol have significantly increased emissions — in some cases, increasing emissions more than the US. Spain and Portugal, due for 8% emissions reductions under Kyoto, have instead increased emissions by 53% and 38%, respectively. Canada, Greece, Iceland, and Ireland, four other developed states that promised reductions of 6 to 8% have seen increases larger than the US. If the global community is going to start identifying climate outlaws, perhaps it should begin with these states? By the way, all these ghg emissions numbers, by the way, exclude Land Use, Land-Use Change and Forestry (LULUCF).

Since 1999, US emissions have actually been on a downward trend. In 2009, US emissions were down about 6% from the prior year. Though emissions shot back up as much in 2010 as the economy recovered, the long-term data would suggest a state seeking to limit its overall emissions.

In fact, China surpassed the US as the world's top carbon polluter in 2008. China has been building hundreds of coal-fired power plants, largely to meet the energy demand correlated with three decades of impressive economic growth — about 9% annually, on average. As an Annex II state under the UNFCCC, China has long been exempt from emissions reductions. This was a major concern about Kyoto for the US Senate and thus for the Clinton administration. If more people in Chinese buy automobiles and other modern amenities, then energy demand and carbon emissions will almost surely continue to soar — even if affluent western states reduce their emissions significantly.

Though the US Congress has failed to achieve meaningful climate change legislation and various presidential administrations have not made substantial progress creating new binding international agreements, the US has seen some other kinds of domestic policy successes. In both the northeastern and western parts of the US, states have created and implemented regional cap-and-trade initiatives. In the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, "Ten Northeastern and Mid-Atlantic states have capped and will reduce CO2 emissions from the power sector 10 percent by 2018." The Western Climate Initiative is similar:

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In 2003, California, Oregon and Washington created the West Coast Global Warming Initiative, and in 2006, Arizona and New Mexico launched the Southwest Climate Change Initiative.

During 2007 and 2008, the Premiers of British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, and Quebec, and the Governors of Montana and Utah joined the original five states in committing to tackle climate change at a regional level...In November, 2011, the Western Climate Initiative formed Western Climate Initiative, Inc. (WCI, Inc.), a non-profit corporation that will provide administrative and technical services to support the implementation of state and provincial greenhouse gas emissions trading programs.

And their plan? "The WCI Partner jurisdictions have developed a comprehensive initiative to reduce regional GHG emissions to 15 percent below 2005 levels by 2020."

President Obama's Environmental Protection Agency is also in the process of creating and implementing new regulations "for establishing greenhouse gas (GHG) standards under the Clean Air Act for fossil fuel fired power plants and petroleum refineries. This schedule provides a measured and sensible path forward that will allow the agency to address pollution from sources that make up nearly 40 percent of the nation's greenhouse gas emissions."

Finally, it is conceivable that the US could become a lead state in ongoing climate change negotiations. After all, candidate Barack Obama promised an 80% reduction in ghg emissions by 2050 and said his administration would invest \$150 billion in green technologies. Obviously, such long-term plans could be viewed as meaningless by political skeptics, but many environmentalists have certainly highlighted this commitment and seek to push the US towards making good on this promise.

In all, the US record on climate change is very far from perfect. On the other hand, imperfect states are not generally viewed as outlaws. The US has long been engaged with the international community on climate negotiations, it has been reducing emissions growth for more than a decade, and has pursued a number of domestic policy initiatives. Meanwhile, China and India have emerged as top polluters and are outside-the-law by design. As discussed previously on this blog (and elsewhere), ongoing and/or future climate negotiations will have to find a solution to the exemptions granted to Annex II states. And of course, the US and other affluent states will also have to do better in establishing and meeting long-term goals for reducing emissions.

About the author:

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