

Presidential Politics and the Environment

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Public dissatisfaction with the Republican and Democratic party candidates for president is - widespread. The approval ratings for the candidates are at historic lows, and voters interested in a discussion of substantive issues frequently hear only an exchange of personal attacks. The public remains jaded, and the media which benefits from highlighting colorful personalities and shrill discourse is unable or unwilling to refocus the dialogue.

In this context, the scant attention given to environmental issues during the presidential race is understandable. But it is also regrettable. According to President Obama, climate change is the greatest long-term threat facing the world. Similarly, Pope Francis has characterized protecting "our common home" as a moral imperative. He supports sustainable use of natural resources, protection of the planet's diverse species, reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, and control of toxic emissions and discharges that disproportionately burden the poor. Although people may disagree with the solutions offered, the importance of the issues raised by these world leaders is beyond dispute.

With the presidential election spotlight focused elsewhere, the potential effect of the outcome of the election on our environment may be overlooked. A brief review of the positions voiced by Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump on environmental issues helps predict our environmental future and opens a window to their broader philosophies and approaches to governing.

Hillary Clinton

Hillary Clinton's website sets forth her environmental plan. To respond to the serious risks that greenhouse gas emissions pose to our climate, Clinton supports President Obama's Clean Power Plan limiting emissions from power plants, lauds the Paris climate agreement and promotes the - transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources. Through use of grants and other incentives, half a billion solar panels would be installed, and residential solar generation by low income and other households would become widespread.

The Clinton environmental plan also seeks to reduce toxic chemicals in the environment. Key components include lowering lead exposures from paint, pipes and soil, modernizing drinking and wastewater infrastructures, and strengthening civil and criminal penalties for exposing communities to environmental harm. Clinton would use incentives and regulations to encourage redevelopment of brownfields properties, reduce air emissions from the power and transportation sectors and employ trusts, partnerships and investments to conserve and expand public access to national and local parks and public lands.

An examination of the methods that Clinton advocates for achieving these broad environmental goals reveals various themes that extend beyond environmental concerns. First, many of the programs are focused on minority communities. Clinton labels the disproportionate concentration of toxic exposures in minority communities as "environmental racism," would

expand use of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, and supports directing the financial expenditures of her environmental programs to achieve "environmental and climate justice." The EPA's environmental justice program, supported by the Obama administration, is likely to receive a more vigorous push, in part through a new task force formed to identify those low-income and urban communities facing the largest environmental risks and to integrate cumulative impacts analysis into environmental decision-making.

Second, the Clinton plan touts a clean energy economy with new jobs in solar, wind, geothermal and biomass generation. Cognizant of the loss of employment in the fossil fuel industry, particularly among coal miners in battleground states, Clinton advocates a government plan to - revitalize coal communities by making federal investments, retraining workers and ensuring health and other benefits for coal miners who retire.

Third, the Clinton plan involves significant financial expenditures from the federal government in the form of grants, subsidies, investments and tax incentives. To be sure, some portions of her plan, such as reducing subsidies to the oil and gas industry, would produce savings. These savings, however, would not be sufficient to provide full funding for her plan, particularly the expensive water system infrastructure improvements and aid to coal-producing communities. Limitations on available funds are likely to limit the aspirational goals of the plan.

Donald Trump

The Trump environmental plan is more difficult to discern because there is no "environment" category among the positions described on the Trump campaign's website and no other source setting forth a comprehensive environmental strategy. When he mentions the environment, Trump's statements to the press and at campaign events are not always consistent or precise. Although the Republican Party platform contains a section on the environment that may help elucidate Trump's position, it is unclear whether Trump fully endorses it. Nevertheless, some positions and principles that would guide a Trump administration are clear from the energy plan on his website and his speeches, and in some respects diverge dramatically from those supported by Clinton.

Trump would eliminate most restrictions on the production, pipeline transport and use of fossil fuels. His "America First" energy plan rejects the Paris climate agreement and the Clean Power Plan. Trump has stated that climate change is a "hoax," which suggests that acceptance of scientific consensus is not part of his approach. Support for coal as a viable source of fuel for electric generating facilities, and rejection of regulations of carbon emissions that would render use of coal problematic are additional elements of his plan. Under a Trump administration, the XL oil pipeline would be authorized (with a larger percentage of profits allocated to the United States), and drilling offshore and on federal lands allowed.

Economic growth, a central tenet of his plan, would be realized in part through new jobs in the oil and gas industry. Trump also supports development of renewable energy sources and jobs. Unlike Clinton, however, he would not use federal resources and policy to encourage a transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy. Instead, market forces would determine the sources of - energy deployed.

In a recent appearance in New Hampshire, Trump stated that he would not eliminate all environmental and safety regulations. Clean air and clean water, including safe drinking water infrastructure, are his stated environmental priorities. In contrast, however, on occasion he has also stated his intent to abolish the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and leave environmental regulation to the states, and more generally to reduce federal regulations by 70 percent. Plainly, he desires business to encounter far fewer environmental restrictions than Clinton advocates.

Unlike a Clinton administration, a Trump administration is unlikely to implement environmental laws with the goal of rectifying disproportionate adverse chemical exposures in minority communities. The Trump agenda views economic growth and infrastructure improvements as pathways to reducing risks to the environment.

As this brief review shows, stark contrasts exist between the Clinton and Trump environmental positions. Whether to limit greenhouse gas emissions, protect the environment through government incentives and federal regulations, transition our economy to renewable energy sources, and target federal resources to reduce chemical exposures in minority and low-income communities are among the key differences. Neither approach, however, is fully responsive to Pope Francis' call for integrated environmental and economic policies that conserve natural systems and recognize the dignity of the species that comprise them. How to sustainably use and conserve our natural resources and systems is a question our current political debate largely leaves for a later day.

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