

CHAPTER 11



The Trump Administration and Climate Policy: The Effects of Right-Wing Populism

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Abstract

The Trump administration's renewed withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement forms part of a wider retreat from multilateralism that has defined recent US foreign policy. Beyond exiting the Paris framework – which remains the central mechanism for global coordination on climate mitigation and adaptation – the administration has disengaged from institutions such as the World Health Organization, curtailed international assistance and launched broad reviews of US participation in global governance. Climate policy is especially vulnerable under a right-wing populist presidency marked by hostility toward multilateral cooperation and scepticism of scientific expertise. Given the United States' role as the largest historical emitter, a major current emitter and a key actor in climate diplomacy, its disengagement has significant systemic consequences. Yet the most profound effects may arise from domestic rollbacks of emissions regulation and constraints placed on state-level climate action. For the European Union – committed to net-zero by 2050 and the world's largest climate financier – sustained US disengagement necessitates continued autonomous climate leadership.

Keywords: *climate change; populism; Paris Agreement; multilateralism; global engagement*

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Introduction

With the arrival of the second Donald Trump administration in January 2025, a new era dawned in the foreign affairs of the United States and the world. A goal of the Trump administration is to withdraw as much as possible from multilateral institutions and problem-solving. This stance reflects a tenet of right-wing populism: hostility to working with other nations in international platforms. The United States became one of four nations not participating in the Paris Climate Agreement. This is the second time the United States has pulled out of the Paris Agreement. The first occurred during the first Trump administration, although President Joe Biden rejoined before the withdrawal became official.

President Trump issued Executive Order 14162 on 20 January 2025, calling for a review of ‘international agreements and initiatives that do not reflect our country’s values’ as the administration defines them (The White House 2025b). As the Democratic Party-oriented Center for American Progress noted at the time, the withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and other global initiatives ‘marks a stark return to isolationism at a moment when global cooperation is needed’ (Gibson 2025). What are the consequences of the United States’ withdrawal from global platforms? What, in particular, does this shift in US engagement mean for the European Union (EU)?

The withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement was part of a larger pattern. The United States also dropped participation in the World Health Organization (WHO) (Yamey and Titanji 2025), turned on and threatened traditional allies, including Canada and the European Union; eviscerated the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and terminated funding for many international initiatives. The effect of all these actions, Stewart Patrick has observed, is that President Trump ‘is declaring independence from the world America made’ (Patrick 2025). The Trump global agenda reflects many of the views that foreign policy conservatives have long held dear: that multilateral institutions and agreements interfere with American national sovereignty; that international law is illegitimate and constrains freedom of action; and that countries should deal with each other bilaterally under a ‘might makes right’ framework. Part of this worldview is a disavowal of global development and creation of ‘destabilizing tariffs’ that upend decades of open trade policies. From a global sustainability perspective, this view also constitutes a ‘rejection of global public goods’ as the US government denies climate science, ignores biodiversity collapse, rejects global environmental

collaboration, and declares ‘war on the Sustainable Development Goals’ adopted by the United Nations (Patrick 2025).

This chapter reviews US–EU climate negotiations, how they changed during the transition from President Biden to President Trump, the direction they are moving under the Trump administration, and the prospects for US–EU relations over the next three years. Given the position of the Trump administration on climate science (and, for that matter, on scientific expertise generally), the administration’s emphasis on developing and exploiting the fossil fuel resources of the United States, and the administration’s hostility to global engagement, it is difficult to be optimistic about the prospects for climate negotiations and the US–EU relationship more generally.

Consequences of withdrawal from the Paris Agreement

On his first day in office, as he had done at the start of his first administration, President Trump withdrew the United States from the Paris Climate Agreement. So far, no other countries have withdrawn from the Paris Climate Agreement (Crowfoot 2025), although President Javier Milei of Argentina announced that he is considering it (Gibson 2025). Otherwise, what are the effects of Trump’s withdrawal from the Paris Agreement? When the largest historical emitter of greenhouse gases walks away from the principal platform for addressing the global problem of climate change, there will be consequences (CRS 2025; Paraguasso and Volcovici 2025). Not having the United States participate substantively in future annual Conferences of the Parties (COPs) to monitor progress and set Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) is, in itself, a setback. The United States is still the second-largest emitter of greenhouse gases. It is also the world’s largest economy and has been a formidable influence in global politics. Indeed, the system of relationships that Trump is dismantling was largely created by the United States in the years following the Second World War.

One consequence of the US withdrawal from international climate negotiations is a reduction in funding for mitigation and adaptation in developing and other countries. EO 14162, discussed earlier, ended any financial commitments made under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). On 4 March 2025, the United States also withdrew from the Climate Loss and



Damage Fund, which was designed to compensate countries for climate change-related damages and to help fund adaptation. The administration is not only eliminating financial support for climate-related initiatives but also reducing assistance across the board, including humanitarian aid.

The pattern of the Trump administration is to disrupt relationships with traditional allies. The administration has not only insulted allies; it has also imposed tariffs that undermine the global economy and those of many nations, with the EU generally seen as losing in the trade agreement (FitzGerald and Geoghagan 2025). The asserted goal is to revive domestic manufacturing with high tariffs on imported goods. That is unlikely to prove effective, according to most experts. The tariffs have been directed especially at China, which the administration sees as the United States' principal economic and military competitor. They have also been directed at many other countries.

Jennifer Lind and Daryl Press (2025) see an effort to refocus American resources on China as at least part of the motivation for this strategy of global disengagement. The catch is that this effort to refocus on China, which the administration perceives as the primary global threat to US primacy, could cede the role of international technology and economic leader to the Chinese government. Certainly, withdrawing from the Paris Agreement risks ceding global climate leadership to the EU and China if it aspires to play that role. Combined with the significant reductions in climate, scientific and other research, these actions put the United States at a disadvantage relative to China in the coming decades.

Yet the main effects of Trump's actions, at least in the short term, may be in the domestic policy arena (Brown and Stevens 2025). Before November 2024, assuming the continuation of Biden's climate mitigation policies, the United States was likely to meet the goal of a 50–52% reduction in emissions by 2030 relative to a 2005 baseline. The tax credits and incentives in the Inflation Reduction Act (enacted in 2023) and the Investment and Infrastructure Jobs Act (passed in 2022) were expected, if implemented, to get the United States most of the way toward that goal. Efforts at the state and local levels, supplemented by corporate and other actors, could have carried the United States the rest of the way toward that goal (King et al. 2024). With Trump's reversal of provisions in those laws and a range of other domestic policy changes, that emissions reduction goal is now out of reach.

The Trump administration not only set out to reverse legislative and other policy

changes taken by its predecessor; it also declared an ‘energy emergency’ to justify and facilitate the further development of fossil fuels (The White House, 2025a). This executive order claims that US energy capacities ‘are all far too inadequate to meet our Nation’s needs’. In a dig at wind and solar generation, it asserted that the country had come to depend on ‘a precariously inadequate and intermittent energy supply, and an increasingly unreliable grid’ (The White House 2025b). Among the measures outlined in the executive order were expanding oil and gas production on federal lands, facilitating the production of corn-based ethanol, and removing regulatory barriers to expanded fossil fuel infrastructure from laws such as the Clean Water Act (enacted in 1972) and the Endangered Species Act (enacted in 1973).

In addition to declaring an ‘energy emergency’, the Trump administration has taken steps to promote the expansion of fossil fuels, which are the principal source of greenhouse gases. In an order titled ‘Unleashing American Energy’, it committed to expanding fossil fuel production on federal lands, including the outer continental shelf; stated an intent to eliminate what it called the ‘electric vehicle mandate’ in order to ‘promote consumer choice’, proposed to eliminate ‘unfair subsidies and other ill-conceived market distortions that favour electric vehicles (EVs) over other technologies and effectively mandate their purchase’, and directed officials ‘to safeguard the American people’s freedom to choose from a variety of goods and appliances’, a threat to revise federal product energy efficiency standards (The White House 2025c). In a direct challenge to the scientific consensus on climate change, the Trump administration has also proposed to overturn the ‘endangerment finding’ that underpins authority granted in the Clean Air Act (Joselow and Friedman 2025). If this effort succeeds, it will not only directly affect vehicle emission standards but also undermine the legal basis for future administrations’ climate mitigation actions.

Even state-level policies are being threatened. Using authority granted under the Congressional Review Act, the Republican-controlled Congress and the president revoked the California waivers issued by the Biden administration, allowing the state to mandate zero-emission vehicles. First included in the Air Quality Act of 1967 and later incorporated into the Clean Air Act in 1970, the State of California has the legal authority to set stricter motor vehicle standards than the federal government. In 1977, amendments to the Clean Air Act extended that authority to other states wishing to adopt more stringent California standards, which more than a dozen states have adopted. The administration wants to revoke that authority as part of its defence of the fossil fuel industry. California and other states are



challenging this decision in court (Rosenhall and Friedman 2025). California has been especially aggressive in its climate policies.

Prospects for the US-EU relationship

The long-standing collaborative relationship between the United States and the European Union is particularly fraught in the light of these developments. President Trump is unlikely to be persuaded to change course regarding multilateral institutions and agreements. This view is firmly ingrained in the Trump administration's worldview. The United States is out of the Paris Climate Agreement (CRS 2025). Some in the administration are even calling for the United States to withdraw from the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), although that would require ratification by the US Senate and would be more difficult. The EU's strategy is to 'wait it out' while continuing to exercise international climate leadership, as it has for years. The EU should continue to make an economic and security case for mitigating emissions and for strategically adapting to the impacts of climate change. Renewable energy is the most efficient way to generate electricity in most of the world; the environmental, economic and national security benefits are compelling. Energy innovation delivers more jobs per unit of investment, provides economic benefits to national and regional economies, improves air quality and contributes to global reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. The public policy case for committing to a clean energy transition is strong.

The case for EU climate leadership is compelling (Zito 2024). The European Commission views climate change as an existential threat. It aims to be the 'first climate-neutral continent' and has committed to a net-zero-emission economy and society by 2050, relative to 1990 levels (European Commission 2025a, 2025b). The EU has an Emissions Trading System covering 40% of emissions, which recently expanded to include aviation and maritime sources (European Commission 2025c). It has adopted an intermediate goal of a 55% reduction in emissions by 2030, with a 90% target for 2040. The EU adopted a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism and is (alongside the member states and the European Investment Bank) the largest source of funding for developing nations. The EU has set targets for carbon removals for 2030. Although progress toward net-zero was recently deemed 'insufficient', it has adopted goals and is making more progress than any other group among developed economies. It plays a leading role in the annual

Conferences of the Parties to the UNFCCC, and the EU actively participates in efforts to implement the Paris Agreement (Zito 2024).

The EU has been a global climate leader and must continue to play that role. Although it has experienced difficulty in cutting emissions, as all countries have, it has made as much or more progress than any other part of the world. Indeed, in the most recent 'Climate Change Performance Index', which compares countries across a range of mitigation indicators, EU members held 11 of the top 20 positions (CCPI 2025). Although some experts are calling for a suspension of democratic norms and procedures in light of the urgency of the problem, the research suggests (although not uniformly) that democratic systems, like most in the EU, are better at mitigating emissions than more authoritarian states (Fiorino 2018).

The United States is balanced between two competing coalitions: one accepts the need for climate action; the other rejects it. US policies are also evenly balanced, with about half of the states preferring progressive policies to mitigate emissions and the other half avoiding them. The pattern in midterm congressional elections is for the party of the sitting president to lose seats in the US House of Representatives; the Senate is harder to predict. This pattern, combined with President Trump's low approval ratings, makes it likely that Democrats will gain a majority in the House in 2026. And of course, there is a new presidential election in 2028. Exercising its leadership on climate change may be the EU's best strategy over the next few years. Following this approach is arguably the most sensible way to 'wait out' the Trump presidency.

With this administration unlikely to change its views on climate change or on multilateral commitments, the best course for the European Union is to continue to exercise climate leadership, to muddle through and hope for a more favourable US position on climate change and on multilateral problem-solving.



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