

Climate emergency and US elections: interview with James K. Boyce

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Interview by Marianna Usuelli
[English translation from the Italian original]

During these weeks of medical emergency, everything else has gone into the background. However, there are other pressing issues that American voters will have to take into account in the November vote for the White House. Among these there is certainly another emergency, the climatic one.

We talked about this with James K. Boyce, senior fellow of the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and an expert in economic policies for the energy transition. With him we discussed the role of climate change in the US media and political discourse.

*What do American voters think about environmental protection? How to foster an energy transition that does not exacerbate inequalities? What role can the Green New Deal promoted by Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez play? These are some of the topics that we touched on in the interview with James K. Boyce, the author of [*Petit Manuel de Justice Climatique à l'Usage des Citoyens*](#) (*Les Liens qui Libèrent*, 2020) [English edition: *The Case for Carbon Dividends* (Polity, 2019)].*

1. Has the environment issue ever been important during the election campaign in the US?

It's important to recall that the environment was not always a partisan issue in the US. When the first Earth Day was celebrated 50 years ago, there was wide support for protecting the environment across the nation's political spectrum. The US Environmental Protection Agency was established under President Richard Nixon, a Republican. Other landmark environmental legislation, including the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, and the Endangered Species Act, were passed in the Nixon years, too.

As recently as the first decade of this century, climate policy had considerable bipartisan support. In the 2008 presidential primaries, for example, Republican senator (and eventual presidential nominee) John McCain backed cap-and-trade legislation, as did both of the leading Democratic candidates, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama.

What has changed in the past decade is that Republican support for environmental policies in general, and for climate policies in particular, appears to have evaporated – at least, among today's Republican legislators. The situation is somewhat different for Republican voters, a significant part of whom are still pro-environment. A [recent poll](#) found, for example, that 39% of Republicans think that the environment should be a “top priority” in Washington; one in five Republicans agree that climate change should be a top priority, too.

The partisan divide is evident, however, in the fact that on the Democratic side, the vast majority, 85% and 78% respectively, see these as top priorities. Partly as a result of the split between the two parties, the environment has become an important issue in US electoral politics.

2. According to the *Yale Program on Climate Change Communication's* study *Climate Activism: Beliefs, Attitudes, and Behaviors – November 2019* about half of Americans would vote for a candidate for public office because of their position on global warming (51%). What do you think about these results? Do you think in this election campaign the importance of this issue has been growing in comparison with the past? Do you think this issue is becoming important also for Republican voters?

This finding reflects the growing importance of climate change as a political issue. At the time of the last presidential election, in 2016, barely one-third of Americans said climate change was a top issue; four years later, the percentage up to [more than one-half](#). Again, there is a significant difference across party lines, however, with those who identify themselves as Republicans being less inclined to agree. It is important to understand the reasons for this.

It's easy to blame the outsized influence of the fossil fuel lobby, which has poured lots of money into fomenting skepticism about climate science and opposition to climate policy. This has had a powerful impact on Republican politicians and, albeit to a lesser extent, on public opinion.

But this is not the whole story. There are two other fundamental reasons for the partisan gap that we must recognize. The first is that climate policy often has been framed, not only by its opponents but by proponents, too, as presenting a painful tradeoff between the well-being of the present generation and future generations. This narrative has been a huge constraint on building broad-based support for climate policy. This is not only a problem in the US. It's a problem in other countries, too: look, for instance, at the “yellow vest” movement that swept France in response to Macron's proposed increase in fuel taxes. For this reason, I believe it is crucial that we move beyond a punitive approach that aims to protect the climate at the expense of working people, and instead forge justice-centered climate policies that provide tangible economic and health benefits to people here and now. This change in narrative and policy design is both politically necessary and [practically feasible](#).

The second piece of the puzzle is more distinctive to the US. Put simply, many Americans are distrustful of the state in general, and the federal government in particular. This mistrust has deep roots. It is not merely the result of “free market” propaganda. It is also a response to the perception that the ruling elite often has put its own interests ahead of the public interest, treating working people with disdain if not outright contempt. The public's cynicism about government was boosted by the duplicitous and disastrous American wars in Vietnam and then Iraq. The paradox, of course, is that government – “of the people, by the people, and for the people,” in Abraham Lincoln's famous phrase – is itself required to effectively counter the power of the elite. This feature of American politics makes it important to detach climate policy, as much as possible, from contentious debates over the right size of the government. One way to do this – and at the same time advance the goal of climate justice – is to recycle the revenue from carbon pricing back to the people as equal per person [carbon dividends](#), rather than putting the carbon revenue into the state's coffers.

3. According to the CBS News Poll (September 2019), 91% of Americans think climate change is real. Do you think this percentage has been growing in the last 2 years, thanks to the climate protests?

At the end of the day, reality always triumphs over obfuscation and denial. The evidence of climate change grows ever more inescapable with intensified hurricanes, disastrous floods, unprecedented wildfires, and hotter summers. Climate protests have been both a cause and a reflection of the rising public awareness of this reality.

4. How do you interpret Trump's proposal to plant one trillion trees?

Well, it's refreshing to see that even Donald Trump is not entirely blind to the problem of climate change. Protecting and restoring forests, and plant biomass more generally, must be part of the climate solution. But the most important part of the solution is to free ourselves from fossil fuels and build a clean energy economy. Trump shows no sign of opening his eyes to this basic fact.

5. According to the [Sunrise Movement](#), the Democrat candidate who is more concerned with climate change is Bernie Sanders. What do you think about this?

Bernie Sanders is seriously concerned about climate change. Among other things, he [calls for moving](#) to 100% renewable energy for electricity and transportation by 2030, and complete decarbonization of the economy by mid-century. He proposes a \$16 trillion public investment program to support this transition, comparable to the mobilization of public resources for the New Deal and World War II.

What Sanders has not proposed, as far as I know, is an absolute limit on the amount of fossil carbon that is allowed to enter the nation's economy. A predictable effect of such a hard limit would be rising prices for fossil fuels, which in turn would help to speed the clean energy transition. But higher prices would also be unpopular with consumers, as we have seen in France, unless the money is returned to the people in a fair and transparent manner. Back [in 2016, Sanders embraced carbon dividends](#) as a solution to this dilemma, but in this election season he hasn't talked about this.

I would add that concern with climate change is, in fact, widely shared among the Democratic candidates. The real question is what the Democrats will do if and when they reclaim the White House and the Senate.

It's also important to recognize that climate change will not be solved by a single presidential administration. An effective climate solution requires policies that will endure over the decades needed to complete the clean energy transition. This means that climate policy, like Social Security and Medicare in the past, must secure public support that is wide and deep enough to prevail over the years, no matter what party is in power in Washington. Whether the Democrats will be able to craft a policy that meets the dual challenges of environmental sustainability and political sustainability remains to be seen.

6. What space does the Green New Deal have in the political and media discourse among the Democrats?

The Green New Deal [resolution sponsored](#) by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Edward Markey calls for achieving "net-zero greenhouse gas emissions through a fair and just transition for all communities and workers." Its language has helped to reframe climate policy as something that can benefit the American people here and now, rather than imposing sacrifices upon them. That is a positive step.

But as one of the resolution's co-sponsors (all of them are Democrats) recently told me, "The truth is that even if the bill passed today, tomorrow nothing would have changed." The resolution is a statement of good intentions, but not a practical plan for how to get from here to there.

The [litmus test](#) for an effective climate policy, in my view, is whether it keeps enough fossil fuels in the ground to limit global temperature from rising more than 1.5 to 2 degrees Celsius above its pre-industrial level. Many policies, including public investment and smart regulations, can contribute to this objective, but the only way to achieve it with absolute certainty is to place a hard limit on the amount of fossil carbon that is allowed to enter the economy and ratchet this steadily down over time. We will know the discourse on climate policy has really changed when politicians and media pundits start talking about this.