



Watching Obama's Every Move: Copenhagen '09

Barack Obama's presidential campaign was fueled by words like "hope", and "change". These words could just as well be used to describe the [expectations](#) that many in Germany – and across the world – are placing on the results of the 2009 Copenhagen climate treaty [negotiations](#). While it is not yet clear what the U.S. approach will be to the negotiations, what is sure is that for many Europeans, the simple fact that there is a new U.S. administration is reason enough for hope.

These hopes can be justified on many fronts. For example:

- America is lagging behind in clean technology and climate change regulations – the U.S. has recognized its comparative disadvantage, and large businesses are proactively creating strategies to combat climate change. For example, the [Climate Action Partnership](#) includes major corporations such as Caterpillar Inc., DuPont, Xerox, and PepsiCo.
- President Obama made clear signals during his election [campaign](#) that action on global warming would be a priority.
- Following eight years of policies found frustrating by many Europeans, environmentalists, and climate change activists, the Obama administration has a chance to plot a climate-friendly course from the start.
- According to recent [polls](#), there is a majority of support for limiting carbon dioxide emissions (59%) – although there are party divides. 47% of Democrats rated global warming as a top priority versus only 12% of Republicans.
- The Obama administration realizes that the world is looking for U.S. action and that it could be an important catalyst for other countries, such as [China or India](#), to partner on global climate change legislation.

However, there are also several reasons, just as valid, to temper the sometimes over-enthusiastic expectations with a healthy dose of skepticism:

- Pressing domestic concerns such as joblessness in the U.S. may trump action on environmental goals. A [recent Gallup poll](#) showed that, if given an "either-or" choice, Americans would rather see economic growth even if the environment suffered as a result – the first time this priority has shifted since Gallup started taking the survey in 1985.

- Some in U.S. politics [oppose](#) climate change regulation for business or scientific reasons. Those who demand action from China and India as a prerequisite to U.S. commitments will also be a vocal.
- U.S. policy is focused on first creating a domestic greenhouse gas policy that could provide economic stimulus, with international negotiations such as Copenhagen coming in second place.
- Obama has continually emphasized his commitments, most recently at a meeting of the Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate in April 2009 in Washington, D.C. However, his [stated goal](#) of reducing greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2020 is still far below the European Union's goal of 20% below 1990 levels by 2020 – and according to some scientists, [too small a reduction](#) to affect climate change.

Ever since Barack Obama's election in November 2008, pundits have been shooting off warnings to the global community regarding the hazard of placing too much [hope](#) for change on the new administration. While it seems the fires of enthusiasm have already been somewhat dampened as countries across the globe struggle to deal with their own festering financial crises, there still exists an unspoken expectation that Obama and his team will pull through and commit to climate action at the Copenhagen meetings.

Copenhagen is a fresh start in many ways. However, it also important to separate Copenhagen from Kyoto – an experience that left a negative impression of the U.S.'s role in climate change action for Europeans and Americans alike. The Copenhagen negotiations in December 2009 will be an extremely important chance to take decisive action on climate change. Much has changed since the Kyoto negotiations in 1997 and action is not only more [urgent](#), but more likely. Meanwhile, hopeful Europeans should look for signs of progress on the state-level, with two unprecedented possibilities of U.S. action on climate policy.

The first is the [recent ruling](#) by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) that carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases endanger human health and contribute to global warming. Because of the U.S. Clean Air Act (first introduced in 1970), the EPA ruling would give the Obama administration authority to strictly limit emissions and take other measures. However, it is more likely that the administration will support a comprehensive legislative package to deal with climate change rather than exclusively using the EPA to regulate emissions. In fact, just such a piece of legislation is currently making its way through the U.S. House of Representatives. [The Waxman-Markey bill](#), or the "American Clean Energy and Security Act", proposes to introduce a cap and trade system, improve energy efficiency, limit emissions, and create green jobs. The bill is a massive piece of legislation designed to fundamentally reshape the way the U.S. uses energy and handles its pollutants, while also focusing on economic issues – and it may linger in Congressional debate for quite some time. While Copenhagen may still be a symbol of hope, those looking to the U.S. for signs of change should not be disappointed.

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