

reading the tea leaves for the 2016 presidential elections. For some, the fact that any Republicans, however few, felt compelled to endorse basic climate science is a positive sign that the party is once again worried about how the issue of climate change will play with US voters. We can only hope that it will at last get the attention it deserves in a major US election, but it is hard to get too excited.

The five Republicans who voted in favour of the Democratic amendment that made the strongest connection between human activity and climate change deserve credit for doing so. But the flip side is that 49 out of the 54 Republicans in the Senate voted against an amendment that merely states mainstream scientific theory, as vetted by countless researchers, studies and assessments over the course of more than a quarter of a century. And 39 refused to agree to a statement that linked human activity and climate change in any way. Moreover, it is not clear that any of the Republicans, or indeed many of the Democrats, are prepared to actually do anything significant about it.

The upshot is that little has changed. Obama has started to bypass Congress to push forward with his own climate regulations wherever possible, and he is right to do so (see page 535). If there is any criticism to be laid at his feet, it is not that he has been too ambitious with his regulatory powers, as suggested by Republicans, but that he has not been ambitious enough. His administration could certainly be more aggressive with its planned rules for power-plant emissions, as well as with methane regulations it is developing for the oil and gas sector. These regulations will help to determine whether the United States can capitalize on the shift from coal to natural gas and renewables, such as wind and solar, that has helped to reduce the nation's emissions in recent years.

For their part, Republicans have focused their energy on the Keystone XL oil pipeline from the Canadian tar sands to the US Gulf Coast, with leadership in both houses of Congress putting legislation approving it at

the top of their agenda. Environmentalists have done the same, arguing that Keystone represents a step in the wrong direction that will merely drive up greenhouse-gas emissions by promoting the development of a dirty energy source. The reality is that the pipeline, on its own, would not have a significant impact on either the US economy or the global climate.

It will be up to Obama to decide whether the pipeline is in the national interest, once the state department finishes its review of the project.

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The president has said that the pipeline will benefit Canadian oil producers rather than US consumers, given that petrol prices — already lower than they have been in a long time — are driven by the international oil market. He has also said that he will approve the project only if it does not “significantly exacerbate” the problem of carbon pollution.

In the end, Obama has plenty of wiggle room in terms of how he defines both ‘national interest’ and ‘significant exacerbation’. There are surely better places to invest from a public perspective, but there are also better ways to guide private investments, including oil pipelines. One of them is to enact comprehensive climate legislation that clarifies the cost of carbon and the basic economics for all energy and infrastructure investments. That he has not done this is Obama's biggest failure on the environmental front.

All is not lost. If the United States can continue to reduce its own emissions and help to secure meaningful action abroad, then historians may yet look back at Obama's presidency as a turning point in the battle against global warming. One thing, however, seems clear enough: the president's environmental legacy will not be determined by his decision on the Keystone XL pipeline. ■

Technical support

Technicians are often under appreciated, but without them there could be no research.

An old trick for book reviewers who have little material with which to judge the temperament of the author is to scrutinize the acknowledgements. Usually raw and unedited, the way these few pages of thanks are presented — gushing, self-centred or brief — can often say as much about the writer as the preceding 300 pages. The same is true for the process of science. Beneath the polished exterior of published academic papers and university press releases lies another world. And it is a world that can be glimpsed, more often than not, in the brief acknowledgements of a PhD thesis.

Alongside the praise (through gritted teeth?) for a (largely absent?) academic supervisor and the earnest gratitude showered on parents, spouses and pets for pastoral support, there is usually a list of thanks for Angela, Juan, Denise, Samuel, Ernie and a directory of other essential first-named extras. This cast of thousands is made up of the support staff and lab technicians who work behind the scenes to hold up the entire research enterprise, and who rarely get the attention they deserve.

On page 542, *Nature* makes a small effort to address this common oversight. A News Feature places a handful of these support staff front and centre, and offers details on not just their surnames, but also their crucial role. They might have more eye-catching job descriptions than many of their colleagues. But they represent an army of essential workers who are just as valuable and just as deserving of thanks.

The featured four all have very different occupations. Sarah Davis creates laboratory glassware; Jim Harrison collects venom from deadly snakes; Bill Klimm sifts the seas for squid and other inhabitants of the deep; and Dawn Johnson keeps the digital wheels turning

in a global bioinformatics archive. What they have in common is their close ties with the researchers they assist, and their remarkable and specialized skills.

Given that technical and support staff are such an important pillar of academic life, it is perhaps surprising that so little academic attention has been paid to their lot — and whether they are content with it. In 2011, researchers at King's College London did publish a rare survey of skills and training in the United Kingdom, which raised a series of red flags (see go.nature.com/n74jsb). Technical staff are exposed on the front line when funding cuts bite: numbers working in university departments had decreased across the disciplines, both in absolute terms and relative to the number of academics and students whom they are expected to support.

One academic said: “We're skating on thin ice — if people are away ill, or on a conference, or on training ... it's a nightmare. If the academic department is an engine, then technicians are the engine oil that keeps the department running smoothly. Low technician numbers now mean that the department is in danger of seizing up.”

University managers should take note: the report warned that the increasing trend for centralizing services and technical support could weaken the bond between academics and technicians, and so threaten research. For example, shared mechanical workshops, formed by consolidating the facilities of several departments to save money, are unpopular and demoralizing. “University managers sometimes seem not to appreciate the vital contribution that workshop technicians make to research,” the report said. “It is important to highlight the scope for centralisation to generate problems.”

We know that PhD students appreciate the efforts of support staff, but do more senior scientists? Almost certainly. But do the technicians know that? Tell them! Do it today. Print out this editorial and pin it up in break rooms and on staff notice boards. Let technicians everywhere read the following: Angela, Juan, Denise, Samuel, Ernie — and all the rest — we salute you. ■

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