

THIS WEEK



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Reality trumps rhetoric

As the shock of Donald Trump's election subsides, it is time for scientists and politicians alike to engage with core issues — from climate change and energy independence to social inequality.

There is a huge difference between campaigning and governing, as president-elect Donald Trump is surely realizing by now. It is impossible to know what direction the United States will take under Trump's stewardship, not least because his campaign was inconsistent, contradictory and so full of falsehood and evasion. People have not voted for his policies, because what are they? Americans have instead put their faith in an ideology, and rejected a political class and system that they feel, with some justification, has moved on without them.

In an Editorial last month, this journal argued that Trump was unsuitable for office (see *Nature* **538**, 289; 2016). His contrary approach to evidence, disrespect for those he disagrees with, and toxic attitudes to women and other groups have no place in a modern democracy. His election gives Trump the chance to prove the many people who shared that view mistaken. And that, we know for sure, is one thing Trump relishes. For those who opposed him, now is not the time to turn away from politics. There can be no normalizing or forgetting the malignant words and attitudes that Trump used on the campaign trail. But it is time to engage and to address the issues in a constructive manner.

A NATION DIVIDED

Many US citizens, including a fair number of scientists, might not like it, but Trump is a reflection of the United States today. He is a reminder of the deep schisms — economic as well as cultural — in American society and beyond. Academics, in particular, must break out of their cultural bubbles and work to understand the sentiments behind Trump's rise. There are elements of his agenda, including his attention to the plight of many working-class citizens who have missed out on the economic gains of the past 25 years, that truly merit attention. We need to better understand the causes and consequences of inequality, including how technology and globalization are reshaping the economic landscape.

In a World View on page 331, Daniel Sarewitz appeals to the pragmatist in Trump and suggests some science-based policies that he could support, if he wishes to make good on his promises to improve life in the American heartland.

Opponents should look for opportunities to compromise, too. Both Trump and Hillary Clinton called for increased spending on infrastructure, for instance, and this would be a good thing, if done wisely. As Barack Obama and Clinton said last week, the country — and indeed the world — needs Trump to succeed. But success in governance does not mean the implementation of a divisive agenda that caters to an angry minority, which is precisely what Trump's campaign was built on. The Democratic party still wields considerable power in the Senate, and it must use that power to oppose Trump's extreme agenda.

Much will depend on whom Trump appoints to key posts in the White House and the government. Trump's selection of Reince Priebus, chairman of the Republican National Committee, as his chief of staff may represent a pragmatic effort to mend ties with mainstream Republicans. But given the cheers coming from white nationalists, it

should come as no surprise that the ideologues will have their seat at the table as well. Trump has announced that his chief strategist will be none other than Stephen Bannon, who is executive chairman of the right-wing media site Breitbart News.

Trump has also selected a prominent climate sceptic, Myron Ebell, to head the transition team at the Environmental Protection Agency. Ebell, who is a policy director at the Competitive Enterprise Institute,

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an advocacy group in Washington DC, has no scientific training, and has surely been appointed only to take a wrecking ball to the Obama administration's climate regulations. Here again, researchers must remain engaged and oppose all efforts to ignore the science on this or any other issue. *Nature* will play its part.

During his campaign, Trump advocated energy independence for the United States. But he has railed against subsidies for solar and wind power, and promised to tear up regulations that aim to trim the expansion and continuation of fossil-fuel use. The response to Trump will be shaped by how he adapts such firebrand messages to political and economic realities. Like President Obama, Trump is unlikely to get everything he wants, even with a Republican majority in both houses of Congress for at least the next two years. Indeed, less than a week after the election, he was already taking back some of his pledges. The “big, beautiful wall” he promised has been reduced to a fence in some areas. And after meeting Obama, Trump announced that he may seek to maintain parts of Obama's signature health-care reform.

Trump should drop his pantomime-villain act on climate change. If he does not, then, come January, he will be the only world leader who fails to acknowledge the threat for what it is: urgent, serious and demanding of mature and reasoned debate and action.

The world has made its decision on climate change. Action is too slow and too weak, but momentum is building. Opportunities and fortunes are being made. Trump the businessman must realize that the logical response is not to cry hoax and turn his back. The politician in Trump should do what he promised: reject political orthodoxy and listen to the US people. His Republican Party's position on climate change is rooted in the past. A March Gallup poll found that public concern about the problem had reached an eight-year high: some 64% of Americans, it suggested, worried a “great deal” or a “fair amount” about global warming. That is a lot more than the percentage who voted for President Trump.

There are nine more weeks until Trump swears to faithfully execute the office of president. As he does so, the world can only hope that Trump will respect evidence and expert advice. He has proved that he can stand up to withering criticism, from Democrats and Republicans alike. But can he change his mind in the face of hard facts? This is a true test for any leader, and Trump's legacy may well ride on the answer. ■