

Climate change action and more drilling likely in Obama's second term

The newly re-elected President may be on course to becoming one of America's greenest.

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President Barack Obama secured a second four-year term in yesterday's vote. What is the likely outcome of that historic event on energy and environmental issues? Simply put: more of the same.

Let me rephrase that slightly. Obama will likely stay the course on his current energy and environmental policies. That means more executive orders like the one that raised vehicle fuel efficiency standards, and continued progress on regulatory efforts to restrain greenhouse gas emissions and other air pollution from coal-fired power plants.



Tweeted by President Barack Obama (@barackobama)

Even if Nobel Prize-winning Secretary of Energy Steven Chu leaves the administration, as has been rumored, innovative programs such as the Advanced Research Projects Agency–Energy will continue to attempt to invent a future of cleaner energy. And the Department of Energy as a whole will continue to push forward with its “all of the above” energy strategy, which will encourage the rise of shale gas but also continue federal support such as tax credits and loan guarantees for big alternative energy projects, from solar power to nuclear.

Both energy and environment merited brief mentions in Obama's victory speech. He spoke of “freeing ourselves from foreign oil,” a dream of every American president since Richard Nixon. That will mean more oil and gas drilling in the U.S., perhaps more responsibly done on public lands than what Mitt Romney promised. Already, U.S. oil production is on the rise, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, and imports have fallen below 45 percent for the first time in more than 30 years. Major government oil users, such as the U.S. Department of Defense, will also likely continue their bid to promote alternative fuels, such as jet fuel made from biomass (plants) or natural gas.

Obama defeated Romney in large part due to a coalition of the young, women and minorities such as blacks and Hispanics. All will be owed action on key issues: immigration reform, holding the line on reproductive rights and, yes, some kind of action on climate change. After all, a second term means the Obama administration will have to carry out U.S. commitments made in climate talks at Copenhagen and Durban to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 4 percent below 1990 levels by 2020 and to craft a global agreement by 2015 to combat climate change. “We want our children to live in an America that isn't burdened by debt, that isn't weakened by inequality, that isn't threatened by the destructive power of a warming planet,” Obama said—a key reason he earned the endorsement of New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg in the wake of global warming-exacerbated Superstorm Sandy. The mention of a “warming planet” was a departure from Obama's silence on climate change throughout the campaign.

One idea to reduce the debt burden *and* combat climate change is known simply as a carbon tax. Many versions of the idea exist but all boil down to a tax placed on fossil fuels based on the greenhouse gases emitted when they are burned. Such a tax could ensure reductions in the CO2 emissions causing climate change, spur innovative energy technologies ranging from CO2 capture and storage to geothermal power, and help balance the budget while potentially reducing other taxes.



But Republican control of the U.S. House of Representatives makes such a tax seem unlikely. That means the biggest chance to reduce U.S. emissions—a process already under way—remains turning off old coal-fired power plants and replacing them with new ones that burn natural gas, a switch that is already occurring thanks to low prices for the gaseous fossil fuel as a result of fracking.

Obama's second term may not slow the rise of the oceans or begin the healing of the planet—as predicted in an earlier victory speech—but it will give the two-term president a chance to secure his legacy as one of the greenest chief executives in U.S. history. That may include ending subsidies to the fossil fuel industry or even putting more solar panels on the White House like former President Jimmy

Carter did, as promised. At the very least, it should include talking more about the defining energy and environmental challenge facing the United States according to President Obama: climate change.

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