

Climate Change: Debating America's Policy Options

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David G. Victor

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Having an extensive background on environmental policy, David G. Victor is a leading expert in the technology, economics and politics of climate change, as this book remarkably shows.

Former Director of the Science and Technology Program at the Council of Foreign Relations of the United States of America, Victor brilliantly exposes a timely study of the several ways to approach one of the most controversial problems of the present foreign policy: climate change.

Experts agree that humans are causing a change in the world's climate, but does this mean that the Earth going to be affected in a dramatic way? Does the U.S. need to become aware and adopt urgent measures to confront this problem, or is it more likely that the future society will adjust to the new reality, without incurring in an expensive budgetary cost? Is the Kyoto Protocol the best strategy for resolving the climate change issue, or is rejection already inevitable? The authorized opinions are very different, but a common ground can emerge with a true effort.

The author's goal is to present the many issues involved in the global warming policy, offering three possible policy choices as

hypothetical presidential speeches, without recommending anyone in particular. The right decision has to be made considering the consequences that are likely to occur, and how they will affect Americans, by giving feedback on the options addressed here, leading to a final choice that can serve as a platform for constructing an appropriate policy in the matter.

Following the structure of the book, Part I, entitled «Memorandum to the President», is a summary of how the problem of climate change has been treated by the U.S. over the last fifteen years, struggling with the development an accurate policy in the subject. The author describes how global warming has become a significant issue on the foreign policy agenda, considering the United States is responsible for one-quarter of world emissions of greenhouse gases. In his view, the climate change policy is a complicated and polarized topic that involves many agents and great costs not without certain benefits, but in the distant future. As he puts it, at one extreme, climate change is viewed as a «conspiracy dreamed up by scheming scientists who want to usurp government control». At the other extreme, global warming is seen as a severe threat that requires an urgent restructuring of current industrial economy. Under these circumstances, Victor presents three different policy strategies, which differ in their assumptions about the magnitude of climate change risks and expenses for the U.S. economy and national security:

- «*Adaptation and innovation*»: not-to-panic approach. Hazards from a changing climate can be compared with other environmental challenges that modern society has confronted. Climate change is inevitable, and adaptation is necessary, with the help of investments in scientific research and new technologies.

- «*Reinvigorating Kyoto*»: climate change will cause great harm. Adaptation is expensive and maybe impossible, and that is why the only response is aggressive control of emissions to slow and to stop climate change. In order to achieve this purpose, the United States has to join a system of binding commitments modeled after the Kyoto Protocol, the only existing viable international framework.

- «*Making a market*»: The need for concerted international

action to control emissions is essential, but accomplishing that objective by reinvigorating Kyoto Protocol is an unrealistic approach. Most effective international regimes have emerged over many decades from the «bottom up», such as the World Trade Organization (WTO).

As the author explains, a real policy could include elements from each, analyzing the major areas where policymakers face choices, such as: the scientific assessment of causes and consequences of climate change and policies for supporting additional scientific research, adaptation to a changing climate, strategies for controlling emissions, investments in new technology, involving key developing countries and public information.

Subsequently, after briefly explaining these three policy strategies, and their advantages and disadvantages, this first part of the book ends with a Recommendation, that captures one of the key contributions of this fine effort, which is the open-minded approach to a problem of great interest, recognizing that an appropriate solution should be the consequence of a proper debate between the key economic, science and national security advisers, employing the valuable information provided above.

The second part of the book, entitled «Speech one: Adaptation and Innovation», is a thorough statement of the first policy strategy, proposed by Victor toward climate change in the manner of a hypothetical presidential speech. The simple and direct language used to explain this approach to global warming is significant, bearing in mind the complex nature of the subject matter. Victor examines, carefully, the main reasons for not considering the global nature of climate change as a reason to panic, and describes the correct actions to take for adapting, including investments in different areas to reduce emissions in the future. As the author clarifies, common sense is the clever strategy, in this first approach to the issue.

The next part of the book, entitled «Speech two: Reinvigorating Kyoto», is also presented as a hypothetical presidential speech, addressed to the United Nations General Assembly, which is appropriate for the diplomatic component of this second view of the climate change issue. The author explains the threats that global warming involves for the planet, and the need for a worldwide

effort under a new Kyoto process: realistic targets with no free rides (commitments for developing countries), reasonable and meaningful long-term goals and investments in new technologies are the main aspects to achieve, according to the author's.

Continuing in the same line, the fourth part of the book deals with the third possible alternative to confront climate change. Entitled «Speech three: Making a market», reveals how the hazards from global warming can only be successfully confronted with new thinking about the role of government in the economy. Victor explains the need of new markets which provide strong incentives for private firms and individuals to invent drastically new methods for supplying energy services, toward building a new economy that relies far less on fossil fuels. According to this view, the market itself is the only way for solving the global warming problem, through the establishment of an emission trading system for carbon and working with nations interested in doing the same. As the author recognizes this «bottom-up» alternative (instead of a «top-down» international treaty) will be controversial, yet it is necessary to avoid past mistakes, such as the collapse of Kyoto.

Finally, the book contains an ample appendix, which includes scientific reports, government speeches, legislative proposals and a significant list of the relevant literature on the causes, consequences, and policy responses concerning climate change, many of which are available on the web.

In summary, we can say that the book is a comprehensive and intelligent analysis of how the United States of America should respond to the climate change problem, providing not one, but three different strategies. We are certain that this excellent work will be read with immense benefit by all those interested in the subject matter, and surely will prove a useful tool for policymakers.

Daniel Lorenzini Aracena

Programa de Magíster en Derecho Internacional, Inversiones y Comercio
(L.L.M.) Universidad de Chile – Universidad de Heidelberg.