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ANALYSE

From Bush to Trump: 25 Years of U.S. Climate Policy Roller Coaster

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Abstract This paper studies U.S. climate policy and its impact on relations with the EU. We compare the climate policy approaches of the presidencies of Bush, Obama, Trump I, Biden, and Trump II, applying three analytical categories: climate policy approach, political and administrative structures, and the context of related sectors. We show that the U.S. has been an unreliable partner for the EU, particularly in areas such as international climate finance, bilateral partnerships, and global leadership.

Keywords Climate policy · Transatlantic relations · Energy policy · U.S. foreign policy · Global leadership

Von Bush zu Trump: 25 Jahre Achterbahnfahrt der US-Klimapolitik

Zusammenfassung Dieser Artikel untersucht die Implikationen der US-Klimapolitik auf die Beziehungen zwischen USA und EU. Er analysiert die Ansätze der Präsidentschaften Bush, Obama, Trump I, Biden und Trump II hinsichtlich des klimapolitischen Ansatzes, politischer und administrativer Strukturen sowie des sektoralen Kontexts. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die USA kein verlässlicher Partner für die EU sind, insbesondere in der internationalen Klimafinanzierung, bilateralen Partnerschaften und globaler Führung.

Schlüsselwörter Klimapolitik · Energiepolitik · Transatlantische Beziehungen · Globale Führung · US-Außenpolitik

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1 Introduction

In January 2025, Donald Trump re-assumed the presidency of the U.S. He immediately initiated major shifts in security, foreign aid and trade policy causing uncertainty and huge turbulence in transatlantic relations. The new Trump Administration denies the gravity of human-induced climate change and immediately announced that the U.S. will withdraw from the Paris Agreement again. The European Union (EU) faces multiple challenges with the new U.S. government in place. At the international level, the U.S. leaves a gap in international climate finance, leadership, and expertise. At the bilateral level, most cooperation projects, such as the U.S.-German Climate and Energy Partnership, are at risk.

This situation underscores the question raised by this Special Issue, as at the moment of writing, it is highly disputable whether the U.S. can be considered a climate policy ally at all. However, in contrast to other policy areas, setting current events into the perspective of the past 25 years shows that transatlantic climate relations have always been rather unsteady. In this article, we show that for the EU, the U.S. has always been an ally that has followed its own pathway, which often deviated from the EU's climate policy vision. Transatlantic climate and environmental cooperation was subject to past research efforts some 10 to 15 years ago (Schreurs et al. 2009). More recent research that examines the transatlantic dimension of climate policy is, however, scarcer (Wiedekind and Lemke 2023) and often falls into the category of grey literature (Elkerbout et al. 2024).

We seek to offer an updated assessment of patterns in transatlantic climate policy developments since the start of the millennium. How has climate policy evolved under the last five U.S. presidencies, and what has this meant for the EU in terms of cooperation? We proceed as follows: After a reflection on our methodological approach, we first compare the five U.S. presidencies from George W. Bush to Donald Trump's second term. Second, we relate them to a European perspective on climate cooperation. Third, we analyze a selection of points of transatlantic cooperation over time before we end the paper with a conclusion.

2 Conceptual and Methodological Approach

This paper employs a qualitative case comparison. It analyzes foreign and domestic climate policy in the cases of four U.S. presidents to explore how and why they are relevant for the EU. This analysis draws on the basic tenets of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) in assuming that a country's foreign policy ambition is rooted in domestic factors including both structures and agency (Hadfield 2024). As a result, climate policy ambition has been high in some presidencies, while in others it was (severely) limited (Thielges 2017).

The data used throughout the paper comprises academic and grey literature; data from publicly available sources including websites, media and press releases; government information; as well as empirical data such as greenhouse gas emissions.

For a systematic comparison of the four presidents, we have conceptualized three broader categories to reflect the context for climate policymaking in the U.S. for

each presidency; a) climate policy approach, b) political and administrative structures, and c) context and development of related sectors. The categories are each broken down into several practical indicators that stem broadly from the International Relations (IR) and environmental governance literatures. Although our categories are not meant as a causal explanation for policy outcomes, they serve as a heuristic for a structured case comparison and provide a perspective on the fundamental conditions for climate policy.

Our first category concerns the climate policy approach. This includes a set of typical executive and legislative structures and functions. Among them are climate targets. Ambitious goals can be a driver for policy and demonstrate internationally the willingness of a country to act on global warming. Targets, moreover, signal the bureaucracy and the legislature the intent to design policies such as climate laws or executive measures, accordingly (Meckling and Nahm 2018; Kulovesi et al. 2024). Climate laws can be considered the most binding policies, and they can strengthen a climate policy approach (Kulovesi et al. 2024). Yet, since they are difficult to achieve in polarized political settings, countries often develop a set of executive policy programs. Third, many countries also have a distinct climate foreign policy approach (Pollex and Lenschow 2024), i.e. a country's efforts in international climate cooperation such as its engagement (or disengagement and opposition) in the negotiations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) or activities in further bilateral or minilateral cooperation formats. The dominant narrative of a president on climate change, i.e., his attempt to construct a shared meaning of climate policy, is the final factor in this category. The FPA and IR literatures show how such narratives can provide a framework in which policies are established (Oppermann and Spencer 2022).

The second category consists of political and administrative structures. It includes characteristics of the broader domestic political system that shape countries' behavior in international relations. The first indicator concerns majorities in Congress. According to Putnam (2017), the type of parliamentary majority necessary to ratify an agreement affects the availability of options that guarantee domestic adoption. In the U.S. political system, the Senate gives advice and consent to international treaties with a two-thirds majority, while regular laws typically require a simple majority in the House of Representatives and approval of 60 out of 100 Senators to overcome the filibuster. This creates a considerable hurdle for climate legislation. IR research suggests that the government stands in an interdependent relation with political parties, public authorities, the public, the private sector, and civil society organizations. Interests, opinions, and positions involved here also shape domestic positions in international relations (Putnam 2017; Moravcsik 1997). We therefore also consider public opinion on climate change and administrative bodies, e.g., whether executive bodies were strengthened or weakened to deal with climate change; and consider major Supreme Court decisions.

Our final category is the context and development of related sectors. It focuses on general context conditions, such as greenhouse gas (GHG) developments over time, which build a starting point for positions in international negotiations but also define domestically what the country needs to tackle to achieve climate policy targets. The category also includes energy production and the power mix as decisive

factors for the successful decarbonization of all sectors and for countries' economic development (Franco and Rocca 2024). In addition, we consider the development of clean technologies, which can also be seen as part of the capacity a country has to make progress in decarbonization of its economy.

The time frame chosen for our analysis spans from 2001 to 2025—from the beginning of the George W. Bush presidency to the beginning of the second Donald Trump presidency. 2001 is a relevant starting point for a climate policy analysis as it also marks the withdrawal of the U.S. from the Kyoto Protocol. The following chapter assesses the five U.S. presidencies according to the above-defined categories.

3 Climate Policy from George W. Bush to Donald Trump II

3.1 George W. Bush (2001–2009)

In 2001, only months after taking office, George W. Bush already took a defining step with regard to the administration's *climate policy approach* by withdrawing the U.S. from the Kyoto Protocol, a move that eroded the trust of many countries in the agreement (Eckersley 2007). His government never officially recognized the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), most importantly the influential report of 2001. The presidency was characterized by attempts to thwart the UNFCCC negotiations through alternative international meetings and initiatives, e.g., the Global Climate Change Initiative (U.S. Department of State 2002). Bush fought binding international commitments and attempted to obligate developing countries to commit to international climate targets and emissions reductions, especially China and India.

The Bush Administration launched the Clear Skies and Global Climate Change Initiative in 2002, which called for a reduction of 18% during the following ten years in emissions intensity (EPA 2002). The voluntary target was expressed as a ratio of GHG to gross domestic product, instead of absolute emissions reductions. Experts argued that this goal was only slightly above the U.S. emissions according to "business as usual scenarios" and eventually allowed for a significant growth in emissions (Blanchard and Perkaus 2004).

Another measure, the Strategic Plan for the Climate Change Science Program was started in 2003. It tackled assumed uncertainties in climate change research. A second strategy aimed at low carbon technology development, mainly hydrogen-based fuels and carbon sequestration, e.g., programs like the National Hydrogen Energy Map; the US$ 1.7 billion Hydrogen Fuel Initiative that focused on hydrogen-based fuel cells in vehicle and electricity generation; or the Carbon Sequestration Technology Roadmap and Program Plan of 2003 (Blanchard and Perkaus 2004).

Mostly during Bush's second term and towards the end of his tenure, increasing numbers of eventually unsuccessful climate-related bills were introduced in Congress, e.g., the Lieberman-Warner Climate Security Act of 2008 (Harris 2009), which would have established an emissions cap for facilities that produce or consume fossil fuels, or the bipartisan Climate Stewardship Act of 2003. There was, however, one legislative success during Bush's term: In 2007, Congress, through a Consoli-

dated Appropriations Act, mandated emissions reporting from large sources of GHG (C2ES n.d.).

Overall, Bush's climate policy approach pursued a climate change skeptical vision and a narrative that called for energy consumption without limits. "The President considers Americans' heavy use of energy a reflection of the strength of our economy, of the way of life that the American people have come to enjoy" (University Santa Barbara 2001). In 2005, Bush began to consider GHG from human activities as "part of the problem".

Considering the *political and administrative structures*, it is important to note that since the late 1990s, climate policy increasingly became a partisan issue. Henceforth, climate policy was promoted primarily by Democratic members of Congress, making the partisan composition in Congress imperative for successful climate legislation (Dunlap and McCright 2008). Bush had Republican majorities in the House of Representatives until 2007 and in the Senate between 2003 and 2007 (see Table 1). While the Republican majorities, paired with Bush's lack of climate ambition, provided a difficult context for climate legislation, the tide turned somewhat at the end of Bush's term. The Democratic majorities following the 2006 midterm elections facilitated the introduction of the above-mentioned emissions reporting. Moreover, some climate momentum manifested in the creation of the new Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming in the House in 2007.

During the Bush years, the percentage of Americans who believed in human-caused global warming was relatively constant at around 80%, with a high in 2007 of 83%. In 2008, at the end of his term, the share dropped to 78% (Resources for the Future 2020). Data availability is somewhat limited concerning the partisan divide on climate change during the early years of Bush's term. A 2006 survey shows, however, that 85% of Democratic respondents believed in human-caused climate

Table 1 Majorities in the U.S. Congress (Source: own illustration based on Ballotpedia (2025))

Congressional term (year)	Presidency	Senate Majority	House Majority	Divided/Unified Government
107 (2001–2003)	**Bush 43**	*D*	**R**	DG*
108 (2003–2005)		**R**	**R**	UG
109 (2005–2007)		**R**	**R**	UG
110 (2007–2009)		*D*	*D*	DG
111 (2009–2011)	*Obama 44*	*D*	*D*	UG
112 (2011–2013)		*D*	**R**	DG
113 (2013–2015)		*D*	**R**	DG
114 (2015–2017)		**R**	**R**	DG
115 (2017–2019)	**Trump 45**	**R**	**R**	UG
116 (2019–2021)		**R**	*D*	DG
117 (2021–2023)	*Biden 46*	*D*	*D*	UG
118 (2023–2025)		*D*	**R**	DG
119 (2025–2027)	**Trump 47**	**R**	**R**	UG

R Republican, *D* Democrat, *UG/DG* Unified/Divided Government, *= UG from 20 January until 24 May, 2001, when Senator Jim Jeffords switched party affiliation from D to R

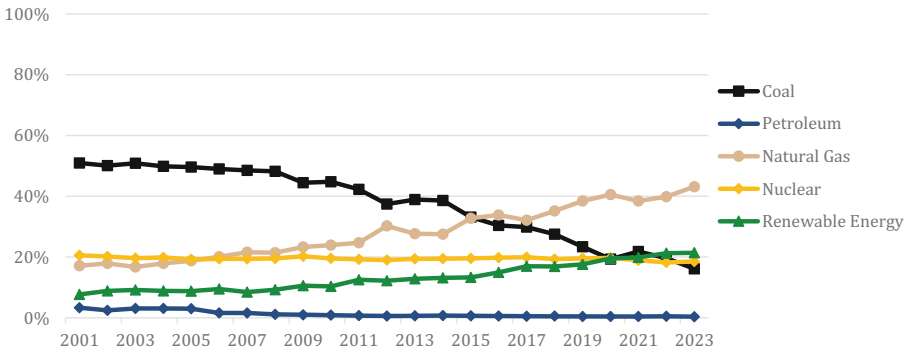

Fig. 1 Electricity mix of the U.S. 2001–2023 (in %) (Source: own illustration, based on U.S. EIA (n.d.b))

change and 72% of Republicans (Resources for the Future 2020). Compared to later years, this gap is small, as we discuss below, but already clearly noticeable.

Under the Bush presidency, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) maintained the legal position that the Clean Air Act of 1970 (CAA) did not authorize the agency to address climate change by regulating GHG emissions (Federal Register 2003). This changed in 2007 when the Supreme Court ruled in *Massachusetts v. EPA* that GHG fell under the definition of air pollutants under the CAA, opening a new avenue for GHG regulation by federal agencies. The court ruling forced the agency to open a procedure for an endangerment finding on GHG's impact on health and welfare, which it published in 2009. The endangerment finding to date still provides the foundation for executive climate regulation (Konisky and Woods 2016).

Considering the *context and development of related sectors* during the Bush Administration, GHG emissions stagnated at a very high level (around 7000 Mt CO_2e) (Our World in Data 2024). The share of renewables in the power mix was low and stagnated, as did energy production overall (See Fig. 1 and 2). As described

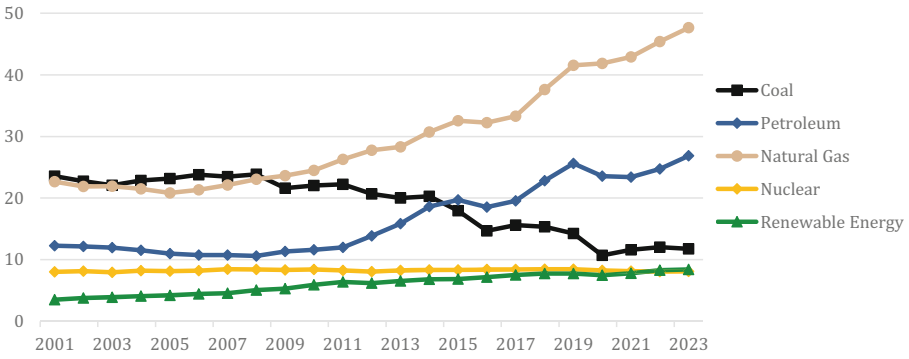

Fig. 2 Energy production of the U.S. 2001–2023 (in Billion British Thermal Units, Btu) (Source: own illustration, based on U.S. EIA (n.d.a, Table 1.2))

above, the time 2001–2009 saw a first focus on clean(er) technologies, namely hydrogen and Carbon Capture and Sequestration (CCS), which started to appear in pilot projects which received government funding.

3.2 Barack Obama (2009–2017)

In contrast to Bush's *climate policy approach*, President Obama actively promoted climate protection internationally. His early activities included the establishment of the Clean Energy Ministerial (CEM) as well as the Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate (MEF) in 2009. To work on breaking the deadlock in the U.N. climate talks in the run-up to the Paris climate conference in 2015, Obama jointly issued climate protection targets with China and issued statements with India on climate protection (The White House 2015b). The voluntary mitigation targets for all countries in the Paris Climate Agreement of 2015 were key to the Obama Administration, as an agreement with binding targets would have required Senate ratification, which, in all likelihood, would have failed. The agreement also satisfied demands made by George W. Bush on commitments from emerging economies such as India and China. At the Paris conference, the U.S. also launched Mission Innovation, an international initiative to boost public and private funding in clean energy technologies (The White House n.d.).

In November of 2009, Obama announced a target to reduce GHG emissions by 17% below 2005 levels by 2020 (Samuelsohn and Friedman 2009). This was the first ever nationwide U.S. climate target. Obama later announced a target for 2025 (minus 26–28% below 2005 levels)—alongside China in 2014 (The White House n.d.). Obama's first major climate measure was the economic stimulus package (Recovery Act) of 2009. It included an estimated sum of US$ 67 billion in clean energy investments and tax incentives (Mundaca and Richter 2015). In 2009, Congress debated the American Clean Energy and Security Act (ACES Act), which sought to introduce an economy-wide cap and trade system. But while this bill passed the House in June of 2009, it was never passed in the Senate. Furthermore, several bipartisan and even Republican-led attempts were made, without success. Some aimed to establish emissions trading (e.g., the American Power Act), some envisioned a clean energy standard (e.g., the Practical Energy and Climate Plan). The only bipartisan achievement was the extension of tax credits for renewable energy (C2ES n.d.).

Given the absence of major legislation, Obama promoted climate protection measures through executive action. He gradually raised efficiency standards for vehicles through regulations from 2012 onwards. In 2013, the Obama Administration introduced a Climate Action Plan. Its aim was to mitigate GHG, adapt to climate change and become an international climate leader (The White House 2015b). The Obama Administration henceforth finalized regulation to limit CO_2 emissions from new and existing power plants in 2013 and 2014, respectively (The Clean Power Plan). This was followed in 2015 by the regulation of methane emissions in the oil and gas sector.

Overall, Obama's climate policy was based on the narrative that climate protection and the associated clean energy technologies contribute to economic growth and job

creation while protecting the health of Americans through cleaner air and waters as well as by addressing global warming (The White House 2015a).

Looking at the *political and administrative structures*, it is clear that the first half of Obama's first term presented a unique opportunity for climate legislation. Democrats held a majority in the House and also controlled an almost filibuster proof majority of 59 seats in the Senate (see Table 1). Nevertheless, no climate legislation was passed. After the midterm elections of 2010, the Republican Party regained the majority in the House. The House nevertheless created a new structure to address climate issues through the Climate Solutions Caucus. It was formed in 2016 and aimed to find bipartisan solutions to climate change.

The percentage of Americans who believe in human-driven causes of climate change was at historic lows at the beginning of Obama's term in office in 2009 and throughout the first few years at around 70%. By the time Obama left office, the share went back up to around 80% (Resources for the Future 2020). The partisan divide over the topic, meanwhile, increased: In 2009, the share of Democratic survey respondents who viewed climate change as a major threat was at 61%, the share of Republicans at 25%. By 2016, the Democratic share had increased to 83% while the Republican share had dropped slightly further to 24% (Tyson et al. 2023). Belief in climate change thus became a much more partisan issue over the Obama years.

Based on the Supreme Court decision of 2007 and the endangerment finding, the EPA and other agencies, such as the Department of Transportation, developed into powerful climate regulatory bodies under the Obama presidency, issuing rules to reduce GHG from power plants, vehicles, and oil and gas producers (Konisky and Woods 2016).

In regard to *the context and development of related sectors*, during the Obama presidency, for the first time the U.S. economy grew while emissions dropped (6146 Mt CO_2e in 2016) (Obama 2017; Our World in Data 2024). This was related to major shifts in energy production and consumption in the U.S. (see Fig. 1 and 2). The share of renewable energy in the electricity mix began to rise consistently, starting from 11% in 2009 and reaching 15% at the end of 2016. Coal production continued to drop. Natural gas production in particular, but also oil production witnessed explosive growth, thanks to technological advancements and price reductions in the hydraulic fracturing ("fracking") technology at the time.

Obama focused government investments on clean breakthrough technologies: The Recovery Act steered federal funding towards solar panels, improved storage capacity for batteries, and an increase in U.S. manufacturing capacity for clean energy (Mervis 2010). At the end of Obama's presidency, the costs for wind energy and rooftop solar had dropped by 41% and 54%, respectively (Obama 2017).

3.3 Donald Trump I (2017–2021)

With the inauguration of Donald Trump, the U.S. *climate policy approach* shifted again. In 2017, Donald Trump announced the withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement. He also cut most of the U.S. funding for international climate policy, such as for the UN Green Climate Fund, and distanced himself from climate policy in the Group of Seven (G7) and Group of Twenty (G20). Nevertheless, the U.S.

continued promoting the development of renewable capacities in emerging and developing countries and maintained its presence in fora such as CEM. Notably, the Trump I Administration no longer pursued the climate targets announced by his predecessor.

Trump also did not champion climate legislation, but a notable exception was his support for "Carbon Management", i.e., CCS, Carbon Capture and Utilization (CCU), and Carbon Dioxide Removal (CDR) via the expansion of the so-called 45Q tax credits for these technologies. In 2019, the Democratic Party introduced the Green New Deal resolution into the House. It aimed, among other things, at achieving an electricity system based on 100% renewables but was never successfully translated into legislation (C2ES n.d.). Trump's energy policy focused on fossil fuel production and deregulation. Many deregulation measures served to promote the coal, oil and gas industry. This includes the withdrawal of the Clean Power Plan and its replacement with the Affordable Clean Energy rule, which aimed at a mere 1.5% reduction in power plant emissions by 2030 (Irfan 2021). Trump also lifted a moratorium imposed by the Obama Administration that had prohibited the leasing of public land for coal production and granted licenses for oil and gas drilling in previously protected areas. In 2020, Trump finally suspended methane regulation for the oil and gas industry.

Overall, Trump communicated his policy stance as an "America-first" energy policy, which aimed at achieving import independence and, eventually, energy "dominance." With regard to GHG emissions, Trump emphasized that the U.S. was already "the cleanest we've ever been" and doubted the risks of climate change (BBC 2018).

In terms of *political and administrative structures*, Trump was backed by slim Republican majorities in the Senate throughout his first term. He started off with an ample Republican majority in the House, which was lost in 2019 following the 2018 midterms (see Table 1). (Bi)partisan efforts to address climate change continued, with the Republican-led Senate forming the Climate Solutions Caucus to work on bipartisan climate solutions and the House shaping the Select Committee on the Climate Crisis, both in 2019.

Throughout Trump's first term in office, Americans' belief in human-caused climate change rose slightly, to 80% in 2018 and then 82% in 2020. The partisan divide between Democrats and Republicans remained high with 94% of Democratic survey respondents and only 72% of Republican respondents stating that humans—at least partly—caused global warming in 2020. Among Republican respondents, however, this meant a significant rise from 66% in 2018 (Resources for the Future 2020). During Trump's first term, Republicans thus actually increasingly believed in climate change and, in contrast to Trump himself, a stable majority of Americans overall believed in climate change.

One of Trump's key political pursuits was to weaken the EPA. Trump selected Scott Pruitt, a climate skeptic, to head the agency and rolled back many of the agency's environmental regulations. He removed scientific advisory bodies, restricted the research results that the EPA was allowed to use for its work, and dissolved climate policy departments.

Considering the *context and development of related sectors* during Trump's tenure, GHG emissions generally stagnated at around 6200 Mt CO_2e (except for the Covid

pandemic-induced decrease in 2020) (Our World in Data 2024). Electricity sector emissions decreased as coal was further replaced by natural gas and renewable energy in the electricity mix. Natural gas and oil production continued to soar and renewable energy production grew steadily (see Fig. 2). Clean technologies were by no means a focus of his presidency, but Trump still promoted research and innovation in CCS, CCU, CDR, and nuclear energy (The White House 2021).

3.4 Joe Biden (2021–2025)

In 2021, Joe Biden led the U.S. back into the Paris Climate Agreement. His government's *climate policy approach* sought strong cooperation with international partners and attempted to establish the U.S. as a leader in global climate policy, e.g., by engaging in numerous pluri- and bilateral cooperation formats, by raising its funding for international climate finance, and through a more progressive attitude in the UNFCCC negotiations. For example, the U.S. delegation agreed to important global decisions such as the establishment of a fund for Loss and Damage at the UNFCCC Conference of the Parties (COP) 27 (2022 in Sharm El Sheikh) (UNFCCC n.d.a) and the inclusion of language on the goal of "transitioning away from fossil fuels" in the cover decision of COP28 in 2023 in Dubai (UNFCCC n.d.b). In 2021, the U.S. and the EU jointly launched the Global Methane Pledge, as well as the Transatlantic Trade and Technology Council (TTC). The TTC created a forum of exchange on (among other things) clean technologies.

Biden set the goal of reducing GHG emissions to 50–52% below 2005 levels by 2030 and achieving net-zero emissions by 2050. One month before leaving office, Biden announced a reduction target of 61–66% for 2035 as part of his country's new climate protection contribution to the Paris Climate Agreement. Other sectoral targets included the goal to achieve a 50% share in zero-emission vehicle sales by 2030 and the decarbonization of the electricity sector by 2035. Biden introduced green public procurement measures, directing the federal government, for instance, to procure "green" steel or electric vehicles. The EPA issued regulations to reduce emissions from power plants, establish strict efficiency standards for vehicles, limits for methane emissions in oil and gas production as well as a methane fee.

Biden was also the first president to succeed with major climate legislation. The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) of 2022 promotes green technologies and includes strict domestic content requirements. Its new climate ambitions were, however, not fully welcomed by international partners, including the EU, who criticized the disadvantages faced by non-American firms. Further acts, including the CHIPS and Science Act (promotion of semiconductor production and research) as well as the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (decarbonization of the electricity sector and expansion of the charging infrastructure for electromobility) included additional incentives for clean technologies (Thielges 2024).

Overall, Biden linked economics and climate protection in his climate policy narratives. One prominent narrative was "Made in all of America", which emphasized that the climate bills would result in economic opportunity in all parts of the U.S. (Federal Register 2021).

Concerning *political and administrative structures*, the Senate was split evenly during the first half of Biden's term (with Vice President Harris casting the tie-breaking vote) and the Democrats won a slight majority in the second half (see Table 1). In the House, Biden started off with a Democratic majority and in 2023, the Republican Party gained control. Biden passed the IRA without a single Republican vote in 2022 through a Reconciliation Bill, which required only a simple majority in the Senate. For the other bills, Biden succeeded in securing bipartisan support (Thielges 2024).

Under Biden's presidency, the percentage of survey respondents who believe in human-caused climate change reached a high of 83% in 2024—a number that was last achieved in 2007 (Resources for the Future 2020). However, the partisan divide increased further, with 92% of Democrats and only 67% of Republicans sharing this belief (Krosnick and MacInnis 2024). Biden was, therefore, dealing with a highly polarized public with regard to climate policy.

Especially during the second half of Biden's term, the EPA became a powerful climate regulator, once again. It issued and finalized several ambitious climate regulations. Biden further created new offices to promote climate policy in the executive: For instance, he established the Office of the Special Presidential Envoy for Climate as part of the Department of State, as well as a National Climate Advisor in charge of addressing climate protection across all executive bodies (The White House 2024).

Analyzing the *context and development of related sectors* during the Biden Administration, GHG emissions reassumed a downward trend in the U.S. (Our World in Data 2024) as renewables finally took over a higher share than coal in the power mix in 2022 and the share of natural gas continued to increase (see Fig. 1). At the same time, oil and natural gas production reached record highs during Biden's term (see Fig. 2).

Biden promoted a broad range of clean technologies through the IRA and other laws, namely renewable energies, hydrogen, electric vehicles, CCS, CCU, batteries, and semiconductors. As a result, private investments in these technologies soared and projects were established in all 50 states following the passage of the IRA in 2022 (Clean Investment Monitor 2024).

3.5 An Outlook to the Donald Trump II Presidency (since 2025)

Upon entering office, Trump recalibrated the U.S. *climate policy approach*, in particular by withdrawing from international commitments. As of March 2025, the withdrawals include the Paris Agreement; the Just Energy Transition Partnerships; the Green Climate Fund (Chime 2025); funding of the UNFCCC; and the IPCC. Trump immediately froze all development aid, including USAID programs that support energy and climate transformation in developing countries (Bearak 2025). He has no regulatory or legislative agenda for climate policy. To the contrary, Trump announced in an early executive directive to "eliminate the green new deal" (The White House 2025c) and abandoned the climate targets set by the Biden Administration.

Donald Trump yet again aims to repeal the climate policy of his predecessor. Trump swiftly began to deregulate the oil and gas industry. On the basis of the Congressional Review Act, he eliminated a methane fee for oil and gas producers.

He announced that other regulations, namely for the power sector and for vehicles, would be "reviewed". Any funds that are related to the IRA or the Infrastructure Act should be paused and realigned with Trump's new energy dominance strategy, which aims to promote fossil fuel production in the U.S. (Thielges and von Daniels 2025). Trump further halted offshore wind power permitting and has put wind power permitting on federal lands under review (The White House 2025b). He ultimately seeks to remove the legal basis (the so-called 'Endangerment Finding') for regulating greenhouse gas emissions (United States Environmental Protection Agency 2025). Overall, Trump's narrative centers around energy dominance and the slogan "Drill Baby, Drill" (The White House, 2025d).

The *political and administrative structures* ensure broad support for Trump's agenda, including Republican majorities in both chambers of Congress. The Congressional Review Act enabled him to withdraw any regulation that was finalized later than August, 2024, including the methane fee imposed by Biden for oil and gas producers, with simple majorities in Congress, i.e., without the consent of the Democratic Party. Polls conducted in August 2024 suggest that the partisan divide remains strong on the topic as Trump begins his second presidency (Young and Mendez 2025). Supporters of both parties continue to disagree markedly on the perceived risks of climate change.

Trump immediately weakened the executive bodies that govern climate change by reducing staff: Some 2000 employees in the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA); 5600 workers at USAID (Dorn 2025); roughly 2000 employees at the Department of Energy. EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin proposed that the EPA should undergo a budget cut of 65% (Friedman 2025). Congress would, however, need to pass a related budget request. In order to strengthen his energy dominance agenda, Trump introduced a new National Energy Dominance Council which aims to improve inter-agency coordination in facilitating energy production in the U.S. (The White House 2025a).

Since no data is yet available on energy sector fundamentals and GHG at the beginning of the second Trump Administration, the analysis of the *context and development of related sectors* is limited. However, clean tech investments saw a slight decline in the fourth quarter of 2024 as compared to the third quarter (Bermel et al. 2024). Clean energy and transportation manufacturing investment announcements by firms went down 51% from 2023 levels in 2024—trends that likely reflect investment insecurities in an election year in which the future of the support for clean technologies was put into question (Bermel et al. 2024).

4 Climate Policy in the EU and US: Between Cooperation and Antagonism

As the above analysis shows, climate policy and politics have experienced considerable upswings and downswings in the U.S. and have been highly inconsistent or even contradictory. They have been decisively shaped by the respective presidencies. Moreover, climate protection is a policy field where the public, political actors and structures have been deeply divided and increasingly polarized.

Climate policy in the EU emerged in parallel to the international negotiations around the UNFCCC and the Kyoto Protocol in the 1990s and early 2000s. Under the Kyoto Protocol (1997), the EU agreed to a first absolute quantitative goal: an 8% reduction of GHGs between 2008 and 2012 compared to 1990. It then decided to implement this target through a burden-sharing agreement among EU member states as well as an Emissions Trading Scheme (EU ETS). The next important climate program was adopted in 2007/2008: The Climate and Energy Package was known for its triangular target setting "20-20-20" (20% for each: GHG reductions, increase in renewable energy and increase in energy efficiency) by 2020. In 2016, the EU ratified the Paris Agreement as well as a new goal of 40% reduction in GHG by 2030. These targets were updated in 2020, when the EU set a new goal of 55% GHG reduction. This was followed by the first EU law on climate policy in 2021, which legally enshrined the target of 55% as well as a carbon neutrality target for 2050. Thus, the EU has been committed to absolute and binding targets since the early 2000s and over time has consistently increased its GHG reduction ambition.

Since 2005, the EU ETS has functioned as the central EU climate policy instrument and covers 40% of the EU's emissions in energy, industry, aviation, as well as maritime transport sectors and from 2027 also the transport and building sectors. Since 2023, it is complemented with a mechanism that sets a carbon price on the import of industrial goods, the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM). The EU ETS has been paired with a portfolio of regulatory measures such as emission limits for vehicles or measures for renewable energy development. Since the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, climate protection has been legally enshrined as an environmental policy objective (Thielges 2017). Climate policy has moved from a niche topic to a crosscutting endeavor. The Green Deal of 2019 as well as the Clean Industrial Deal of 2025 address the climate transformation as a central driver of economic growth in the EU (European Commission 2024).

4.1 Diverging Approaches on Climate Policy in the EU and the U.S.

The climate policy approaches of the EU and the U.S. have differed significantly over time. The EU has typically pursued a top-down policy style which includes binding emissions reductions targets. The U.S., on the other hand, has cultivated an incentives- or market-based style with as little state intervention as possible (Thielges 2017). At the federal level, the creation of incentives such as tax breaks for "clean" technologies and/or renewable energies has dominated the policy approach. As the above analysis underlines, setting absolute GHG reduction targets proved a major difficulty for U.S. presidents.

In terms of instruments, the EU has consistently promoted emissions trading. In the U.S., although several cap-and-trade bills were introduced in the Congress, this instrument was never successfully implemented at the federal level.[1] Also, administrative climate governance differs fundamentally. In the EU, since 2010 Directorate General Climate has been an agency with a sole focus on climate policy. In the U.S., there is no dedicated climate change institution in the executive. As noted above,

[1] There are some emissions trading schemes in the U.S. states.

the different presidents' influence on the agenda of the EPA has been strong, which meant that under climate skeptical presidents, there was no leverage for the EPA to release climate policy regulations.

U.S. climate legislation depends strongly on the majorities in Congress. Generally, Democrats are more favorable towards climate legislation than Republicans. Table 1 shows frequent periods of divided government, which limited the president's leeway for climate policy endeavors. In addition, as supermajorities of 60 votes in the Senate are required to pass most legislation, major laws typically require bipartisan cooperation, which has become rare in an era of hyperpolarization. In the EU, there has been a broader and consistent political consensus on the necessity of the climate transformation and it has been pushed by EU Commissions for many years (Pollex and Lenschow 2024).

Comparing public opinion on climate change across the Atlantic proves somewhat difficult, as opinion polls differ considerably in methodology. Overall, however, Eurobarometer polls show that since 2009, more than 63% of Europeans believed climate change is a *very* serious problem. In recent years, this number has increased to levels between 80 and 90% (European Union 2023). Overall, it can be argued that U.S. policy makers deal with a strongly divided public (see Chap. 3), whereas their EU counterparts operate in a political environment in which the public is overall strongly convinced that climate change is a pressing issue.

In the EU, as in the U.S., the share of renewables in energy production and the electricity mix has increased since the early 2000s. In the EU, however, renewables have assumed much higher shares of 45% of electricity consumption in 2023 (Eurostat 2025b). The EU's fossil fuel production has decreased consistently. Meanwhile, the EU's imports of fuel oil and especially natural gas have increased significantly (Eurostat 2025a). Additionally, the EU has consistently promoted further clean technologies, including energy efficiency technologies and e-mobility through various funding mechanisms.

4.2 Points of Cooperation Between the U.S. and the EU

Over the past (roughly) 25 years, the U.S. and the EU have shared broader interests in climate policy, mostly when Democratic presidents were in office. Both pursued policy approaches that were unique to their individual context. The remainder of this chapter discusses more in-depth climate cooperation and conflict in select transatlantic cooperation formats and topics yielded by the analysis in Chap. 3.

Even at times when transatlantic partners agreed on the broader common environmental and climate goals, it was often difficult to find common ground in UNFCCC negotiations—a fact which also reflects the general ambivalence of the U.S. towards multilateralism (Viola 2020). EU-US relations in the UNFCCC context have been shaped by a somewhat competitive and "in parallel" rather than a cooperative atmosphere and only after 2016 started to show more alignment. Diverging climate policy approaches have made cooperation challenging and only possible for certain topics.

With the Kyoto Protocol, the EU took the lead in international climate policy. It institutionalized the EU's political style, which pushed for binding climate protection

commitments for industrialized countries. The U.S. afterwards failed to ratify this treaty. This led to an open conflict in transatlantic relations over climate protection, with the EU reacting to the U.S. President's decision with clear criticism (Thielges 2017). The U.S. reaction, in turn, was the establishment of an alternative to the UNFCCC, the Global Climate Initiative and the Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate. The main position the U.S. pushed forward from an early beginning was that developing countries, first of all China and India, should be included into the group of countries with emissions reduction obligations under the UNFCCC (Harris 2009).

The UNFCCC COP in Copenhagen in 2009 marked a turning point. This time, the EU unsuccessfully campaigned for the adoption of a binding follow-up agreement to the Kyoto Protocol. At the same time, the Obama Administration began to become internationally active and involved emerging and developing countries stronger into the process. In the 2015 climate negotiations in Paris, traditionally conflictive positions between the EU and the U.S. resurfaced: While the EU again aimed for a binding agreement, the U.S. was ultimately successful in demanding non-binding climate targets and in making all countries participate. The Paris Agreement was adopted in 2015 and both the U.S. and EU ratified it in 2016.

The first Trump Administration marked a turning point in common transatlantic climate ambition. U.S. delegations managed to block efforts by the EU and other parties to take important decisions to further implement the Paris Agreement. This period only ended, when the U.S. reentered the Paris Agreement under Biden in 2021, which facilitated important progress on its implementation. On several occasions, the U.S. government successfully worked together with China, paving the way for upcoming decisions at the COPs. Biden's governance was clearly oriented toward multi- and bilateral cooperation and held the ambition to find common ground on climate policy with the EU.

With the second Trump Administration, global cooperation on climate change is again experiencing a sharp turn. His position of blocking, stopping, and counteracting global efforts has unfolded with increased speed and force. The renewed withdrawal from the Paris Agreement will be concluded in early 2026.

The ups and downs of agreement over climate issues between the EU and the U.S. also manifested in smaller cooperation formats over the years, as selected examples underline. The G7 and the G20 have both established a climate agenda over the years and became the stage for conflicts between the EU and the U.S. but also promoted common stances on climate change. At the G20 summit in Pittsburgh in 2009, the Obama Administration launched the G20's work on climate and clean energy policy by putting the phase-out of inefficient fossil fuel subsidies on the agenda. The U.S. and the EU both joined energy and climate-related working groups under the G20 and G7. The exception to this cooperative approach, however, was the period 2017 to 2020: In the G20 and the G7, summit documents featured a special clause indicating that the U.S., unlike the other members, does not support the Paris Agreement (G20 Information Centre 2020). In the G7, Trump skipped environmental ministers' meetings and added paragraphs in the summit documents to promote fossil fuels (Inside Climate News 2018).

Democratic presidents also established specific formats in which the EU and the U.S. cooperated over the years. Among them is the Major Economies Forum on Climate and Energy (MEF), which was launched by the Obama Administration in 2009 to promote progress on a follow-up agreement to the Kyoto Protocol. Early on, the forum began to tackle different positions on issues such as climate finance and mitigation commitments by developing countries. MEF was dormant during the Trump I Administration and then reconvened throughout the Biden Administration.

Another example is the Climate Club, which Germany initiated during the Biden presidency under the G7. This voluntary climate alliance focuses on industrial decarbonization, e.g., through exchange on common standards for the carbon content of industrial goods like cement and steel (BMWK n.d.). The U.S. and the EU were also part of the Just Energy Transition Partnerships (JETPs), a plurilateral initiative which began in 2021 and aims to accelerate the phase-out of fossil fuels by offering financial support to its partner countries (South Africa, Vietnam, Indonesia, Senegal). In March 2025, however, Donald Trump announced his withdrawal from all activities related to JETPs (BMZ n.d.).

Finally, three climate-related topics can be identified, in which stronger cooperation between the U.S. and the EU has emerged over the years, especially during the Biden Administration.

Methane emissions emerged as an issue of cooperation between the EU and the U.S. at the beginning of the 2020s and which was institutionalized through the Global Methane Pledge. As of 2025, this alliance has grown to include 159 countries and aims at reducing global methane emissions at least 30% from 2020 levels by 2030 (Global Methane Pledge n.d.).

Trade relations in Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) have also become an important transatlantic issue. U.S. LNG exports were instrumental in replacing Russian pipeline gas once Russia started the war in Ukraine in 2022. The EU imported 45% of its LNG from the U.S. in 2024 (IEEFA 2025). For the U.S., in turn, Europe (including Türkiye and the UK) is the largest target market for LNG exports. While trade of energy (mostly petroleum) between the EU and the U.S. has a long tradition, the LNG relationship has gained much importance since the Biden Administration.

A third area of cooperation pertains to technology development and innovation for decarbonization (Thielges et al. 2022). Cooperation was launched under Obama, who established Mission Innovation to jointly promote clean technologies. Under Biden, for example, the Trade and Technology Council (TTC) was launched together with the EU. This forum aimed at coordinating on key trade and technology issues and deepening transatlantic cooperation, including decarbonization (e.g., hydrogen, CCS/CCU, and carbon measurement standards).

5 Conclusion

Our analysis has shown that the U.S. cannot be considered a reliable and stable climate policy ally for the EU during the past 25 years. Under Democratic presidents, the U.S. and the EU typically found more common ground on broader (climate) objectives and created cooperation opportunities. However, even then, policy ap-

proaches differed significantly, for instance with regard to binding vs. non-binding climate targets or carbon pricing. Even under Democratic presidents, fossil fuel production soared in the U.S. And, finally, there was always the looming risk that the next U.S. president would reverse his predecessor's course of action. Climate cooperation with Republican presidents was often difficult or not possible at all for the EU.

The second Trump presidency, nevertheless, is a departure from previous patterns. It signals a more extreme divide and potential for transatlantic conflict. Trump's vision of reversing climate policies, reinvesting in fossil fuels, and his dominance- and threat-oriented narrative is a reason for concern in the EU. EU climate policy, meanwhile, has also become subject to economic and security challenges in the aftermath of the pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which exposed the EU's continued heavy reliance on fossil fuel imports.

A divide between the two important players does not bode well for global climate policy. While Trump's policy will set the U.S. back years in terms of emissions reductions, the EU will struggle to fill both the financial and the power gap that the U.S. leaves in the international climate regime. It remains open whether the EU will pursue new forms of climate cooperation, e.g., with China or other major emerging economies, and what this will mean for its overall relationship with the U.S.

In sum, this article provides insights into several elements of climate policy of the past 25 years. There are many more factors that would be interesting to analyze in future research, such as the role of interest groups in enabling and blocking climate policy. Another important aspect to consider is the climate policy activity of U.S. states. They are an important driving force in the political structure of the U.S. Many states have adopted specific GHG reduction targets and introduced measures to support renewable energies.

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