

TRANSCRIPT

Environmental Insights

Guest: Coral Davenport

Record Date: November 18, 2020

Posting Date: November 19, 2020

LINK to podcast : <https://soundcloud.com/environmentalinsights/how-the-2020-us-election-may-impact-climate-policy-a-conversation-with-coral-davenport/>

Coral Davenport: Absolutely, this is the first presidential election where climate change emerged as a top tier issue. And a lot of that was because Biden as a candidate chose to do that, he chose to bring it up. And so, it is clear that the political calculus had changed on that. The campaign advisor saw it as something that would at least not drive away voters and could attract and excite other voters.

Rob Stavins: Welcome to [Environmental Insights](#), a podcast from the [Harvard Environmental Economics Program](#). I'm your host, [Rob Stavins](#), a professor at the Harvard Kennedy School and director of the [Environmental Economics Program](#) and our [Project on Climate Agreements](#). It's now more than two weeks since the November 3rd election and 11 days since the Biden-Harris ticket was declared the victor in the Electoral College by all of the major news media. But President Trump still refuses to concede, citing what I understand have been totally discredited claims that the election was fraudulent. But while related litigation continues, as well as the war of words, today we're going to examine the implications of the presidential and the congressional elections for climate change policy, both domestic and international.

Rob Stavins: Now, as regular listeners know, in this podcast I usually talk with well-informed people from academia, government, industry, or NGOs. But as I wrote in my blog last week, I worry that advocates are likely to engage in wishful thinking when making predictions about the next administration's climate policy initiatives. It's better for this purpose that I talk with people who are knowledgeable but make it their business to examine such questions objectively. I'm talking about professional journalists and not ones from the opinion pages but rather, reporters. So today I'm delighted to welcome someone whom I greatly respect and whom I've had the pleasure of working from my perch in academia for many years, [Coral Davenport](#), who covers energy and environmental policy for the [New York Times](#) from the newspaper's Washington Bureau. Coral, welcome to Environmental Insights.

Coral Davenport: Hi, it's great to be with you, Rob. It'll be fun to have the tables turned with you interviewing me.

Rob Stavins: Yeah. Exactly. So obviously I'm very interested to hear your insights about climate change policy in the wake of the recent election. But before we talk about that, what I always like to do is to go back to understand how you came to be where you are. So tell me first, where did you grow up?

Coral Davenport: Oh well, that's a complicated answer. My dad was a Foreign Service Officer so I grew up all over the world. My dad's first post was in Seoul, Korea. So I lived there through first grade and then we've kind of bopped back and forth around the world between the Washington, D.C. area when he worked at the State Department. I lived in Japan for several years and I went to high school in Athens, Greece. So I'm sort of partly a native Washington, D.C. area person and partly an all over the world person.

Rob Stavins: But from Athens, Greece for high school, you wound up at Smith College.

Coral Davenport: Yes.

Rob Stavins: So how did that occur?

Coral Davenport: My first priority, I think for going to school, having grown up around the world, was it really needed to look right. My image of what college was supposed to look like was probably formed by a combination of Dead Poets Society and J. D. Salinger stories. And so that was it, that had a lot to do with why I made my choice. And I knew and my parents had both gone to school in New England and I just kind of fell in love with Smith and it definitely ended up being the right place for me. So I definitely wanted the small New England liberal arts experience.

Rob Stavins: So Smith College certainly fits that bill?

Coral Davenport: Yes.

Rob Stavins: Now you studied English literature there, which is not a surprise. So what was your first job out of school?

Coral Davenport: I was not on my school paper but my senior year I started freelancing for the local paper, the [*Daily Hampshire Gazette*](#) covering Western Mass, the longest continuously published newspaper in the US. And I thought that I would just kind of freelance. They ended up hiring me to cover kind of one of the Massachusetts hill towns. And I thought I was just going to do that for a year or so and then go to graduate school and study Comp Lit and I thought I was going to go to Harvard. But I fell completely in love with newspaper reporting, probably my first week on the job when I went to cover a Selectman's Meeting. And you in Massachusetts know what those are. And one of the constituents of the town was so angry about a new zoning ordinance that she got up and she started yelling and she picked up an antique cash register that was sitting in the corner of the room and clocked the main selectman. His name was John Mieczkowski on the head, which led into this crazy brawl. So I wrote about it and I think it went on page one and after that I was hooked.

Rob Stavins: I can imagine.

Coral Davenport: Yes. And it just was so much fun. And, actually in that job, I ended up, I stayed at that paper for about two years, so much of what I covered, and I didn't understand that I would be getting into this was helped inform the ... It's kind of how I understand my job. There were huge stories about land use and property use and development. There was a big story, this was more than 20 years ago but you might remember it, they wanted to build this big development of McMansions on the Mount Holyoke Range, which is very important sort of in Massachusetts history. It's been painted and written about by a lot of the important new England poets and scholars and writers and sort of the uprising about that.

Coral Davenport: And I remember actually, I profiled the developer who wanted to do it and I profiled him as sort of a want-to-be Donald Trump. And so the fight over what people do with their land and their property and sort of the value, the monetary value of the environment, and sort of the intensity that people feel about their right to be able to do with what they do with their land and why, ended up being sort of a big theme of what I wrote about a lot. And I wrote about the kind of this small town that was being transformed from this old farming town to basically, all Walmarts, all McMansions. I kind of watched that happen. And so that surprisingly still really informs the way ... that helped to sort of open my eyes to writing about land and environment and the way people think about their property and individual rights, all those things are themes that still inform what I do.

Rob Stavins: Right. Now, according to your bio, anyway, you began covering the environmental beat in depth in 2006, reporting first for [Congressional Quarterly](#), then [Politico](#) and then the [National Journal](#), which is where you were when you and I first spoke, as I recall. How did you move from the [Daily Hampshire Gazette](#) to [Congressional Quarterly](#) and then begin to focus on environment and energy?

Coral Davenport: After I finished at the *Gazette*, I actually moved back abroad. I went to Greece where I'd been in high school. I freelanced for a few years. And then I had to come back to the States where both my parents were ill and I needed to quit work and live with them and help them. And they were both in D.C. And I knew I needed to get a job in D.C. I had to stay in Washington to help them. And I didn't know anything, nothing, nothing about Washington, nothing about policy, nothing about the Hill. And I got a fellowship at American University that was basically for journalists to learn all those things. I learned. I actually took a class from a lobbyist who later ended up being indicted on how to lobby. I went to the Hill.

Coral Davenport: I sat in on hearings and from that fellowship, I ended up getting a job at *Congressional Quarterly*. And the way I got into energy policy and climate policy was kind of the year that I was getting steeped in learning about policy was 2005. And you know, Rob, that was a really important year for energy and climate policy for two reasons. The reason that most of your listeners will remember is that that was the year of Hurricane Katrina. And that was a

moment that really blasted the idea, of climate change, sort of the impact the way in which climate change really could be worsening hurricanes onto the front pages. And also when Katrina knocked out the oil supply in the Gulf and gasoline prices jacked up. That was a really powerful moment to me.

Coral Davenport: And the other thing that happened in 2005 of course, was passage of the [2005 Energy Policy Act](#), which was one of the last kind of sweeping, comprehensive, big pieces of energy legislation that has really gotten through this Congress. And, so when I was learning about policy, those were sort of the things that woke me up and made me think, “Oh my God, first of all, this is going to be the most important story in the 20th century, 21st century.” And second, “Oh my God, this climate change is going to be this big story and the solution to climate change and what you do about it will totally transform our economy and everything about how our economy has been built for the last 100 years is going to have to completely change.”

Coral Davenport: And it's all going to come from policy and it's going to be so disruptive and so fraught and have so many fun, sexy political battles that will sort of be like clocking the selectman on the head with the antique cash register. Now this is a story where I want to be. So that's how I got the job at CQ and the rest is history. I've been in love with my beat ever since then I came to the *Times* seven years ago. Just about....

Rob Stavins: In 2013?

Coral Davenport: Yeah.

Rob Stavins: Yeah. Now let's turn now. Now we've gotten up to the point of where you are. And since you've been at the *Times* since 2013 to turn to the issues that we're facing. In most national elections, since the beginning of what I would consider meaningful environmental policy United States in 1970 or so, environment in national elections has been at most a second tier issue for voters, if not really a third tier issue. But at least before this November 3rd election took place, it did appear that it was different this time, that climate policy in particular was important. But what I'm interested to know is what about post-election. That is, do you have a sense or better yet any evidence or sources who have indicated how voters views on environment, energy, climate change actually affected the election, if at all?

Coral Davenport: So I'm really glad that you drew that distinction. Absolutely, this is the first presidential election where climate change emerged as a top tier issue. And a lot of that was because Biden as a candidate chose to do that, he chose to bring it up in a way that no other candidate ever has. And so that was very new. Part of the reason Obama never did that is his advisors said, “don't bring it up, don't bring it up at the conventions. Don't bring it up in ads. This is not a winning issue.” And so it is clear that the political calculus had changed on that. The campaign advisors saw it as something that would at least not drive away voters

and could attract and excite other voters. At the end of the day, I think this election was about COVID, the economy and Trump.

Rob Stavins: Right. I think that is right. So let's get to the heart of the matter. And that is, what are the impacts of the election going to be on the path of climate change policy over the next two to four years? And that could be assuming the Democrats do or do not take control of the Senate. I want to begin with the international dimensions of climate change policy and then we'll turn to the domestic. In other words, the [Paris Agreement](#). So clearly on January 20th or a day later, President Biden will submit the paperwork to the United Nations on the Paris Agreement.

Rob Stavins: 30 days later, the US will be a party again, but that's the easy part. The tough part is the US target and the means of achieving it, the so-called Nationally Determined Contribution. So my question for you is, do you think this administration can produce a nationally determined contribution that's sufficiently ambitious to satisfy US green groups and the leftist Democrats and the House of Representatives for that matter and please the international community and also be credible, that is, truly achievable with reasonably anticipated policy actions that the administration can put in place?

Coral Davenport: No. I don't think that they can produce something that will satisfy all those groups and be internationally credible but I think they are going to do the best they possibly can. The US has a long way to go Rob, to build back its credibility on the world stage on climate. And I think that the Biden Administration will be received with open arms in the international climate community. And I think that the Biden's Administration, I know from interviewing the people in the transition and the campaign, anticipate from day one, starting to move forward aggressively with executive authority to put back in place at least some of the big climate regulations that the Trump Administration rolled back. The expectation is where they can, they're going to put rules back in place and strengthen them and add new elements to them and find new ways to sort of embed climate policy across the executive branch.

Coral Davenport: And I think that that will be seen and understood as authentic as this president really is going to do everything he can at least with the lead of executive power. The problem is that people in the international community say this, absent passage of pretty significant legislation. If there's not a new law that will stick, then the US is just not going to have the credibility that it did that Obama really, really had to fight for when forging the Paris Agreement. I've talked to people in the international community say, look, yes, we love that Biden is prioritizing this but another president could come in and make it all go away again. President Trump is talking about running for president again.

Rob Stavins: So let me be specific on what you were just saying. And that sounded like you were saying so significant climate legislation is not feasible that the Biden here has climate action plan \$2 trillion over four years, all electricity, carbon free within 15 years. That's not feasible as legislation. I would agree. And if you don't

mind, I'll point out that it's probably infeasible, at least in my mind, whether or not Democrats take control of the Senate. If they have a one vote majority with the tie breaking by the vice president, I don't see that as bringing that legislation into feasibility, considering the fact that the Obama Administration, with 59 votes in the Senate, was unable to move the [Waxman-Markey Bill](#) into the Senate for a successful vote. Am I being excessively cynical in that regard?

Coral Davenport: No. You're being completely realistic. I will tell you. One thing that I have been hearing and the reason that I am paying more attention to this is, this is something I've been hearing from Republican fossil fuel lobbyists, who say, if Democrats were to get the majority and tiny little squeaky one vote majority, something that's not completely off the table, if it were crafted in a way that gave Republicans particularly from coal states a lot of what they wanted, would be a Clean Energy Standard. Well, what is that? That would be a mandate that some percentage of US electricity be produced or generated from zero carbon sources – wind, solar and probably nuclear. So maybe a 15 or 20% clean energy standard. As you know, Rob, some version of that has actually passed the house of the Senate different times over the past decade with bipartisan support.

Rob Stavins: But wasn't that more possible with Lisa Murkowski running the committee in the Senate than with Senator Barrasso now taking over?

Coral Davenport: Yes. So Barrasso is very interesting in this space and here's why. As you may or may not know, Barrasso of course, represents Wyoming, the largest coal producing state in the US. And so that kind of makes it seem like why on earth would he in any way endorse legislation that is basically designed to slowly start to push out coal? Also, in Wyoming is this giant carbon capture and sequestration facility that Barrasso has really pushed a lot of legislation to get money for carbon capture and sequestration, to get incentives. If there were a Clean Energy Standard that had a lot of incentives and a lot of stuff for carbon capture sequestration plus sort of a lot of provisions to help transition coal and it allowed electric utilities to include nuclear power to be counted, I think that you could get a John Barrasso to the table on that and I think that you could get a Lindsey Graham to the table on that.

Rob Stavins: So bipartisan climate legislation in the Senate is possible with healthy dose of tax incentives, which we call otherwise called subsidies for wind and solar, carbon capture and storage, and also some kind of program for nuclear. Is that right?

Coral Davenport: I would say that there is a bipartisan conversation to be heard about that. At the end of the day, it's always really hard when you're counting votes. But the reason that I listen to this is that it is Republicans who have said, this is something we can play ball on. I mean, the Republican new matters most of all is Mitch McConnell, who's from a coal state of Kentucky, and if he decides that it ain't going to happen, I don't think it will.

Rob Stavins: Right. Well, let's put aside climate legislation for a moment and think about other legislation that has greenhouse gas emissions impacts. Two types, economic stimulus and infrastructure. What are the prospects with either of those to have a green tinge in the economic stimulus and a green tinge in the infrastructure?

Coral Davenport: Deep green, lots of green. Green, environmentally and green money. So the first thing out the gate in the new administration, it's pretty clearly going to be a large COVID economic relief package. And already the transition is working to get as much, it's basically working to echo and expand upon what Obama did at the beginning of his first term. He came in and they did a financial crisis relief package, the stimulus package that was 787 billion dollars. And I think it included about 42 to 57 billion dollars for solar, wind and energy efficiency, all kinds of green infrastructure, which to this day stands as sort of like the single largest expenditure the federal government has made on those kinds of things all in one shot.

Coral Davenport: So the expectation is to see something like that probably double or triple those numbers. That will almost surely be a big part of a COVID relief package. And then you brought up infrastructure. We're expected to see an infrastructure bill pretty soon. That too is expected to see certainly a lot of money for trains. Joe Biden's personal green infrastructure and that is near and dear to him. But I mean, his campaign proposal included, I think it was construction of half a million electric vehicle charging stations across the country. I might be wrong on that number.

Rob Stavins: And certainly, upgrading the electricity grid.

Coral Davenport: Upgrading the grid, a big push. One idea that I've heard is the idea of creating electric vehicle corridors across the country. So, you would have spaced out electric vehicle charging stations so that you would know that you could drive safely across the country. So, all of that is expected to be definitely a big part of an infrastructure. And there's an expectation that there will be climate environment, energy efficiency, green provisions, baked into everything else that goes through. They'll update the tax package; that will definitely include extensions for wind and solar tax credits, regular spending bills, we'll see it. When they do a farm bill, we'll expect to see kind of a lot of climate green provisions and that. They're going to try to tuck it in wherever they can.

Rob Stavins: Coral, given all the political challenges we've been talking about for climate legislation, there is clearly going to be interest and approaches that can be taken unilaterally by the new administration, that is so-called regulatory approaches, including both executive orders, oval office directives and more difficult, rulemakings. My concern, which is perhaps misplaced, is that such rulemakings are going to be much harder for the Biden Administration than they were for the Obama Administration because of increased court challenges and successful ones. I mean, Trump has appointed 220 federal judges and more importantly, the Supreme court now has the 6-3 conservative majority which in

particular seems to favor a literal reading of statutes, less flexibility given to the agencies to interpret the statutes in innovative ways, such as concluding that the Clean Air Act article that focuses on localized air pollution can apply to CO2 and climate change. I've also heard some legal scholars say that the Chevron Doctrine of deference to agency's interpretations may itself even be overturned. Am I once again being excessively pessimistic, Coral?

Coral Davenport: Not at all, Rob. I think a lot of people that I've talked to have said another one of the most profound legacies of the Trump Administration will be the judiciary, will be the fact that there's this more conservative Supreme Court. And as you say, more conservative justices all the way through the federal judiciary. So, when Obama tried to do some of these rulemakings, these climate rulemakings, there were signs even then that they might not have been held up by the Supreme Court, which was conservative but not as conservative as it is now. And so, I think that on some of them, we will actually see a Biden Administration being even more cautious and more limited than Obama was. And there's two big climate rules that I'm thinking of when considering, what will they use executive authority to reimpose with rules?

Coral Davenport: The first one is the rule, and this was the biggest rule that Obama did on climate change. The rule on fuel economy, it increased corporate average fuel economy, which would have had the result of dramatically decreasing CO2 emissions from vehicles, which are the largest source of CO2. And Trump didn't eliminate it but he rolled it so far back that essentially basically canceled it out. That rulemaking, we do expect to see a Biden Administration come in and reinstate it very quickly, probably with some new stronger terms. That one is actually pretty straightforward. The federal government has imposed fuel economy standards for decades. And I don't think it's ever been questioned that it has the legal authority to do that. There was a lot of opposition from the auto industry back when the Obama Administration first put it in place.

Coral Davenport: But some of that has changed in the decades since. Some of the major auto companies, including Ford have actually come out in favor of somewhat increased fuel economy standards. Technology is very different from where it was 10 years ago. I think some of the car companies will say, well, this is not as hard to meet as we once thought. So that rulemaking, I think they probably will just be able to use executive authority and put it back in place. The other major Obama climate rule, this is the rule known as the [Clean Power Plan](#). I think that that will be much harder, much more legally difficult. So that of course was the Obama rule that was aimed at cutting emissions from coal fire power plants or power plants generally, that's the second largest source of emissions. But the way that rule was written was very creative, unprecedented interpretation of the [Clean Air Act](#).

Coral Davenport: And that was understood at the time. Instead of just saying, power plants need to pollute less. Really, that rule was designed to cause states to fundamentally reshape our entire electricity sector, shutting down coal plants, building new wind and solar and creating statewide cap and trade. It was very

transformational and it gave the agency, the EPA, a lot, so much power and authority. And that rule was given a stay by the previous Supreme Court. Justice Roberts looked at it and said, the fate of this rule is so legally uncertain, we're going to say you can't even implement it until it finally comes before us and is resolved.

Coral Davenport: So, the current more conservative Supreme Court is just very unlikely to look sympathetically on this. And so, I think for power plants, the Biden Administration is going to look at that Obama rule and say, we cannot try to do that again. We will have to try to do something much more narrow and modest, not something that would get at a creative interpretation of the law that would transform the electricity sector. And so, something that could be upheld by the Supreme Court but would take a much smaller bite out of emissions and would not kind of have that big transformative effect.

Rob Stavins: Right. Creative interpretations of existing statutes just may not be possible. So lastly, there's a lot of talk about a so-called whole of government approach. My question is, is there any evidence that you've heard of what it will actually accomplish in terms of actual emissions reductions?

Coral Davenport: Well, so we're definitely seeing, and I'm talking to folks in the transition saying, look, "we are looking to put people who care about climate change all across the government, in the Defense Department, in the Justice Department, in Transportation, in Agriculture, in Treasury, in financial regulation. And the point of your question is right, that can be a good thing but what does it mean in terms of like, is that going to get the US to zero emissions in 30 years? The answer is probably no, but it can have some substantive impact. And again, it could be in the form of rulemakings. One such example would be if you put in place financial regulators who are sort of given a charge, use financial regulations on Wall Street in a way to force companies to be more accountable to their climate impact.

Rob Stavins: This is a disclosure requirement.

Coral Davenport: Right. We're expecting a very early rule to be from the Securities and Exchange Commission that would require firms to disclose their financial risk to shareholders. And this is the kind of thing where if shareholders, in theory, if this is done really well, and I think it will be very hard to do well, but shareholders could see, well, these kinds of climate risks, whether property or factories that are exposed to sea level rise or a lot of investments in fossil fuels that may end up being sunk costs further out. Shareholders might say, well, maybe that's more risk than I would like and I'll put my money elsewhere.

Coral Davenport: And that's the way to start to shift the financial sector, not because companies want to be seen as green but because the money isn't there. So I think that is something that, if it's done really rigorously and well, could have an impact but not without, I mean, a bunch of really absent a law or some very strong regulations, those kinds of changes alone will not add up to reducing emissions

from the power sector in 15 years and from the entire economy in 30 years. I don't see a path to getting those numbers from all this but it tilts you a little more in that direction.

Rob Stavins: Right. And hope springs eternal. So, before we go, there is one other thing I'd really like to ask you about, Coral. We've witnessed quite dramatic rises in youth movements of climate activism, principally in Europe, in United States and mainly in 2019 before the pandemic struck. Of course, a question in my mind is whether or not this youth activism for climate change is a cohort effect or an age effect. As these people get older, do they get more conservative or is this something about youth that is going to carry right through? What's your reaction to these youth movements of climate activism that we've been seeing?

Coral Davenport: I mean, the first reaction that I had when we started seeing it spread out beyond my ... I was initially cynical as I always am but as it grew so substantially and as the sunrise movement in particular started to gain real political clout, and that's really fueled by young people, and was able to sort of force the Biden campaign's hand to change their policies. I started paying more attention. I do think that one thing that is different and that is significant and that is driving this, is that this is the first generation of people to grow up on an already climate changed planet. They will not know life without climate damage.

Coral Davenport: This used to be, I think one reason why we haven't seen meaningful policy on climate for so long is that it was always something that was going to affect people generations away. It was going to affect your kids and grandkids and it was easier to kick the can. So, these are the people who are living it and for that reason, maybe it will stay. I mean, I think that that really is sort of fundamentally one of the biggest differences. This is not an issue that they will have to fix for their kids. I think that they'll see that this is something that is hurting us in our lives right now, and will be much worse for our kids but that we are living now. And I think that is significant in the political dynamic.

Rob Stavins: Yeah. And also, when your son is old enough to start primary school, when he's in first grade, I think you and he will discover that they're talking about climate change in the classroom. God knows that wasn't the case when I was in primary school, and when my children who are now in their twenties were in primary school, that was not the case. So, things are really changing in terms of education of youth in this regard as well.

Coral Davenport: Absolutely. Yes. And I think about this, obviously from the perspective of a mom whose kid will never know a planet that has not been afflicted by climate change, he will not see the coral that I am named after because it has already been bleached by a warming and more acidic Pacific Ocean. So that's there now. And I will have to explain that to him. And he will he'll experience that at a pretty young age. So, I think that that has an impact on how this generation is going to address this, even as the passionate advocacy of youth fades. This is going to be something, people go into policy because of things that affected them when they were kids. If they had a parent who died of cancer, they have

strong views on health policy. So, they grow up to have strong views on health policy. So, I think this maybe it's something more that people feel from their lived experience more than just ideological passion.

Rob Stavins:

Yes. And I certainly see it, I'll tell you in terms of Harvard students. Each succeeding year, the level of interest among the students, the demand for courses on climate change, in my case, climate change economics but across the board science, all aspects of climate change, the demand increases every year. We're certainly seeing it in the universities. So, with that, I want to bring things to a close and thank you so much Coral for taking time to join us today. You're great. So thanks again to our guest, [Coral Davenport](#), who covers energy and environmental policy for the [New York Times](#).

Please join us for the next episode of [Environmental Insights: Conversations on Policy and Practice](#) from the [Harvard Environmental Economics Program](#). I'm your host, [Rob Stavins](#). Thanks for listening.

Announcer:

[Environmental Insights](#) is a production from the [Harvard Environmental Economics Program](#). For more information on our research, events, and programming, visit our website, www.heep.hks.harvard.edu.