

# No Talk, Some Walk: Obama Administration First-Term Rhetoric on Climate Change and US International Climate Budget Commitments

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The stage was set for the newly elected President Barack Obama to make climate history, as Greenpeace urged at his inauguration, with stickers showing his face proudly carved into the mountain at Mount Rushmore. With optimistic words and promises of change, Obama seemed poised to direct a significant shift in US climate change policy in 2009, and to “re-engage” with the international climate negotiations spurned by his predecessor, President George W. Bush. Just days after the election, Obama addressed the Governors’ Global Climate Summit, and expressed priorities diametrically opposed to his predecessor’s. “My presidency will mark a new chapter in America’s leadership on climate change that will strengthen our security and create millions of new jobs in the process.”<sup>1</sup> Domestic expectations were high, and riding an electoral mandate, Obama had much to deliver.

The international community looked to Obama to restore a positive American identity in the world after years of obstructionist foreign policy under George W. Bush. At the Governors’ Global Climate Summit, Obama assured the audience that “the United States will once again engage vigorously in these negotiations, and help lead the world toward a new era of global cooperation on climate change.”<sup>2</sup> The Oslo-based Nobel Institute even went so far as to honor him with its Peace Prize in expectation and support of a move away from unilateralism to a new multilateralist approach, which included climate change.

However, in terms of actual climate change policy, many argue that the Obama administration’s first term was almost all talk, and no walk.<sup>3</sup> In 2010 the legislative environment turned remarkably hostile toward any real action

1. The Office of the President-Elect 2008.

2. *Ibid.*

3. The colloquialism “talking the talk, but not walking the walk” refers to how someone’s words are often not reflected in their actions—that there is a discrepancy between what one says and what one does. For a very different opinion about Obama’s strategy, see Chait 2013.

to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. The midterm elections nearly ruled out cap-and-trade or other emissions limits, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) using its regulatory powers on carbon pollution, or, most of all, the US accepting binding international treaties. The hoped-for sweeping change failed to materialize, as the administration never made a strong push for climate policy. Without congressional action in 2009, the scene of the pivotal Conference of the Parties 15 (COP-15) in Copenhagen was fraught with tension. President Obama attempted to reinvent the US international position in the negotiations, yet without the support of congressionally approved domestic policy. The resulting Copenhagen Accord was seen by environmentalists as a major disappointment, as it failed to renew the binding emissions reductions of the Kyoto Protocol, and replaced these with voluntary “pledge and review” targets. Lumumba Di-Aping, diplomat from Sudan, voiced the criticisms of many when he reflected on the Copenhagen Accord as “nothing short of climate change skepticism in action. It locks countries into a cycle of poverty forever.” As the lead negotiator of Group of 77, Di-Aping concluded grimly, “Obama has eliminated any difference between him and Bush.”<sup>4</sup>

In a landmark study of what determines national positions in international treaty negotiations, Robert Putnam described the “two-level games” nations play.<sup>5</sup> Negotiators must balance the benefits one gets at home from pleasing domestic constituencies (while infuriating others), while “minimizing the adverse consequences of foreign developments.”<sup>6</sup> Those administrations facing difficult domestic politics come to the negotiations with very small “win sets” of possible positive outcomes; the ironclad demands of their local constituents often exclude the demands of foreign states with their own domestic interest groups. This is clearly the case in the US with climate change, as coal-producing and fossil energy-dependent states have near certain veto power over any treaty, due to constitutional rules requiring sixty-seven votes out of 100 in the Senate for treaty approval.<sup>7</sup> The internal politics faced by an administration seeking to “make climate history” are a complex mix of not just entrenched fossil energy dependence and “treadmill” politics, but also growing awareness of climate impacts and cultural and political orientation.<sup>8</sup> This is a difficult tight-rope for the Obama team to balance upon: what sells in Massachusetts does not usually sell in Oklahoma.

While much has been said about the administration’s lack of legislative action on mitigation, we review two other sides of the Obama administration’s first-term efforts on climate change: its rhetoric to largely domestic audiences and its action on international climate finance. This article provides a new puzzle

4. John Vidal et al. Low Targets, Goals Dropped: Copenhagen Ends in Failure. *The Guardian*, December 19, 2009.

5. Putnam 1988.

6. Putnam 1988, 434.

7. Carson and Roman 2010; Fisher 2006.

8. Carson and Roman 2010, 400.

zle for the climate science and policy discourse work pioneered by Maxwell Boykoff, Joe Smith, Riley Dunlap, and Aaron McCright.<sup>9</sup> Both sets of authors explain the gap between the efforts required by science and those delivered by policy-makers as deeply influenced by special interest lobbying and the powerful media strategies of “denialist movements.”<sup>10</sup> Given the power of the fossil fuel lobby in Washington, we clarify why the administration was able to pass its 2010 international climate budget without much resistance by congressional Republicans, and how its rhetorical or media strategy appears to have facilitated that.

At the center of the Copenhagen Accord was a two-part promise to help developing countries reduce their emissions and adapt to a changing climate. Driven by its wish to fulfill that accord, over four years the Obama administration increased its budget requests for “direct climate assistance” four-fold, from \$321 million in FY2009 to \$1.328 billion in FY2012. Climate change funding was directed towards the three pillars of adaptation, clean energy (or mitigation), and sustainable landscapes, and was administered through the Department of State, the Department of the Treasury, and the USAID. In the administration’s first year, actual appropriations increased ten-fold for adaptation and three-fold for mitigation spending. However, since then increases have been tempered by congressional partisanship and budget battles, stemming from the power shift following the midterm elections of November 2010. This swing in Congress severely tested the administration’s commitment to maintaining its climate finance levels. Yet in the face of renewed resistance President Obama continued to prioritize stable flows of climate finance.

This study reveals why and how the administration achieved an increase in climate funding amidst significant legislative difficulties and fraught international negotiations, and looks ahead to whether these increases will be maintained. First, we investigate how President Obama navigated domestic and international constraints on climate action by shifting from “climate change” rhetoric to a “green energy”-centered agenda. The phrase “climate change” nearly disappeared from the administration’s lexicon after the months around COP-15. Second, we assess the consequences of domestic and international constraints in terms of “climate aid”: budget requests and appropriations from 2009 to 2012. This research uncovers the actual levels of climate funding requested and delivered over Obama’s first term. Informed by in-depth interviews with Capitol Hill insiders, this paper traces this evolution of climate finance and sheds light upon the years of effort to put forth ambitious climate finance requests. Climate funding faces still deeper cuts, but the administration’s efforts thus far must be placed in perspective: Obama’s calculated rhetorical shift away from climate change to green energy allowed his administration

9. Boykoff and Smith 2010; Dunlap and McCright 2008, 2010.

10. Dunlap and McCright 2010.

to quietly protect international climate funding from the line-by-line cuts of congressional opposition.

## Talking the Talk: Climate Change Rhetoric

The Obama administration has walked a narrow tightrope on climate change; it must respond to both international calls for action on the issue and those by American environmentalists, as well as to skeptical, powerful, fossil fuel-based lobbyists, and resistant domestic constituents. This balance has forced the Obama administration to be exceedingly careful in its public statements. Here its rhetorical trends are described and then contextualized more broadly.

Climate change rhetoric peaked in 2009, thanks to newly elected President Obama's popularity, the streamlined message of the Democratic party which held both houses of Congress and the White House, and the hope for legislative action before the UN climate change negotiations in Copenhagen at the end of that year. In his 2009 address to the Joint Session of Congress, President Obama explicitly called for a comprehensive energy bill to address climate change: "To truly transform our economy, protect our security, and save our planet from the ravages of climate change, we need to ultimately make clean, renewable energy the profitable kind of energy. So I ask this Congress to send me legislation that places a market-based cap on carbon pollution."<sup>11</sup> Not only did he specifically cite the threat of climate change, he called for a carbon cap. The next two years were spent negotiating and bartering to achieve such legislation, which ultimately failed.

The history of cap-and-trade in the US is familiar. In July 2009 the fairly ambitious Waxman-Markey bill passed the House by a vote of 219–212; just one year later, the Senate version of the bill failed due to lack of support and political capital without reaching the floor.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the November 2010 mid-term elections proved a resounding rejection of the past year of Democratic leadership, and ushered in divided government with a host of Tea Party politicians using rejection of cap-and-trade as a litmus test of conservative credentials. Where President Obama had so recently called for bold legislative action to combat climate change, congressional conservatives were busy turning back the clock and reviving the debate on climate change science. Representative Henry Waxman (D-CA) declared the chamber "the most anti-environment House in the history of Congress."<sup>13</sup> The House could not even agree to acknowledge the existence of climate change, hyper-politicizing a simple statement of risk. In April 2011, it rejected Representative Waxman's amendment that stated: "Congress accepts the scientific findings of the Environmental Protection Agency that

11. Pooley 2010, 326.

12. Lizza 2010, 5.

13. Congressman Ed Markey News 2011.

climate change is occurring, is caused largely by human activities, and poses significant risks for public health and welfare.”<sup>14</sup>

This paper assesses the shape and extent of change in the Obama administration’s use of climate change language over these four years. We examined the ratio of the administration’s usage of “climate change” (and similar terms) versus “energy” (and similar terms) from 2008–2011. This content analysis examined all 1,908 publicly available speeches made by administration officials over four years (2008–2011), gathered from a comprehensive campaign speech database and the official White House Speeches and Remarks Archive. Speeches include those by President Obama, Vice President Biden, First Lady Michelle Obama, and other top cabinet officials. Keyword counts were then assembled using word searches. Rhetoric was sorted by two categories: climate and energy.<sup>15</sup>

As Figure 1 illustrates, the difference in magnitude for the two classes of rhetoric usage is striking. The overall ratio for this four-year period is 7.6:1; energy was mentioned over seven times for each mention of climate change. The ratio of energy to climate rhetoric usage was 9.6 in 2008, 5.0 in 2009, 10.6 in 2010, and 11.9 in 2011. These ratios climbed after President Obama took office—more than doubling between 2009 and 2011—apparently revealing the administration’s urgency to outpace depressing “climate change” imagery with the more upbeat promise of “clean energy.” Especially noteworthy are the State of the Union speeches, meant to be indicators of the president’s agenda. These speeches favor energy to climate change messages. In 2009, climate change was mentioned only once, while energy came up fourteen times in the State of the Union; in 2010, climate change was mentioned three times to energy’s fifteen; and in 2011, while energy was mentioned nine times, climate change was not mentioned.

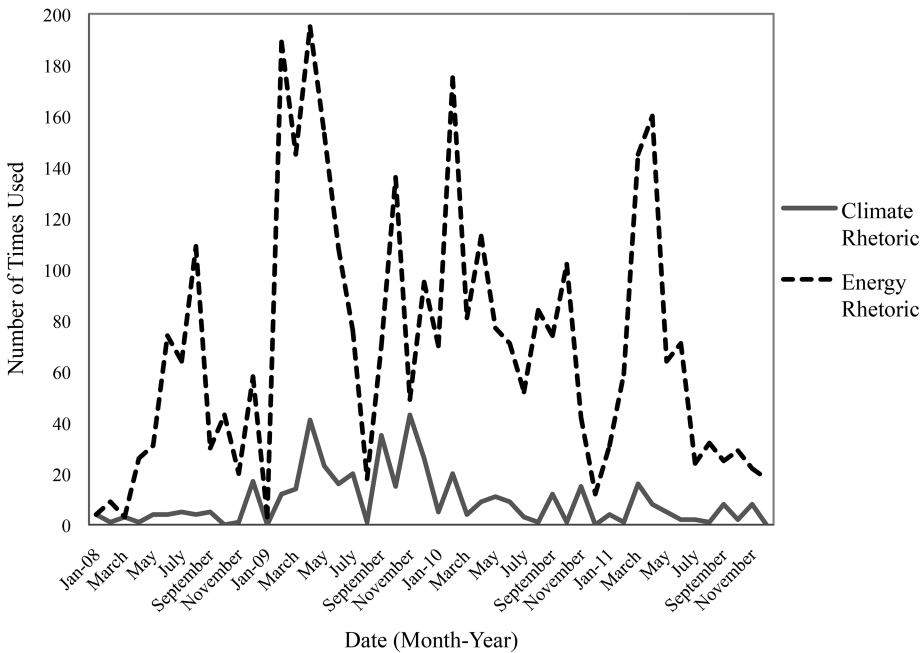
As the graph and ratios indicate, climate change rhetoric was most prominent during 2009, when it was mentioned 246 times; the months with highest frequency were April and November. Interestingly, the only point at which the levels of climate and energy rhetoric were equivalent was in November of 2009—the month COP-15 began.

Since then, the ratio of energy to climate rhetoric steadily increased, and the phrase “climate change” appears to have been routinely expunged in favor of clean energy-related diction during the latter years. The phrases “climate

14. ThinkProgress 2011. *GOP-Led House Rejects Science*, 240–184. April 6. Available at [thinkprogress.org/climate/2011/04/06/207842/gop-led-house-rejects-science-240-184/](http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2011/04/06/207842/gop-led-house-rejects-science-240-184/), accessed June 22, 2013.

15. “Climate” includes the phrases climate change, changing climate, climate negotiations, climate bill, and global warming. “Energy” includes clean energy, renewable energy, green energy, energy economy, energy technology, energy independence, energy dependence, energy efficient, energy efficiency, energy security, energy capacity, energy supply, energy-saving, energy plan, energy policy, energy bill, energy jobs, energy industry, energy production, energy use, energy grid, energy future, energy development, energy revolution, energy prices, and energy needs.

## Obama Administration Rhetoric, 2008-2011



**Figure 1**  
Climate and Energy Rhetoric

change” and “global warming” became all but taboo on Capital Hill, stunningly absent from the political arena from 2010 until the fall of 2012. As Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) said in October 2011, “It has become no longer politically correct in certain circles in Washington to speak about climate change or carbon pollution or how carbon pollution is causing our climate to change.”<sup>16</sup> A political nonstarter, a doomsday issue, climate change was rebranded by the administration under a clean energy and energy independence discourse.

The transition was already apparent in 2010, when US leaders downplayed the domestic legislative failure of cap-and-trade. In the lead-up to COP-15 in Copenhagen, Special Climate Envoy Todd Stern stated, “it is just not the case . . . that everything hinges on US legislation.”<sup>17</sup> President Obama echoed this sentiment in November, casually dismissing the collapsed cap-and-trade bill as “just

16. ThinkProgress. 2011. Video: Senator Whitehouse’s Must-Watch Speech on Climate Change and the Senate’s ‘Failure of Duty’ October 18. Available at [thinkprogress.org/green/2011/10/18/347070/video-senator-whitehouses-must-watch-speech-on-climate-change-and-the-senates-failure-of-duty/](http://thinkprogress.org/green/2011/10/18/347070/video-senator-whitehouses-must-watch-speech-on-climate-change-and-the-senates-failure-of-duty/), accessed June 6, 2013.

17. White House Briefing Room 2010.

one way of skinning the cat," and assured the audience he would look for other means to address the issue, through the EPA's administrative action on power plants or fuel efficiency standards.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, in November 2010 Stern shrugged off the pressure to draft a treaty at COP-15: "it is now widely understood that a legal treaty this year is not in the cards."<sup>19</sup>

Behind the administration's silent front on climate change, the EPA quietly developed a regulatory system. The Supreme Court's 2007 *Massachusetts v. Environmental Protection Agency* ruling declared that the EPA has the authority and obligation to determine whether CO<sub>2</sub> "may be reasonably anticipated to endanger public health or welfare."<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, the EPA published an Endangerment Finding that concentrations of greenhouse gases threaten the public health and welfare of current and future generations, and a Cause or Contribute Finding that emissions from motor vehicles contribute to GHG pollution.<sup>21</sup> By declaring the danger of CO<sub>2</sub>, the court ruled the EPA now had the authority to regulate GHG emissions. Furthermore, the EPA proved one of the only official government agencies to explicitly acknowledge the threat of climate change.

Through the period of this study, only for select audiences did the Obama administration actually mention climate change by name. For example, in September 2011, the only uses of climate change in speeches were at events at the UN, the Clinton Global Initiative, and the California Democratic National Committee. Furthermore, from the summer of 2011 through the 2012 campaign season, the president's speeches favored vague references to "the environment" rather than specifically mentioning climate change.

The Washington insiders interviewed suggested that this change in message was necessary politically. One congressional staffer told us that the "climate change" term "needed some time off because it had gotten so tainted and polluted."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, according to many insiders and analysts on the Hill, if climate change were the lead message, "you can ensure that bipartisanship is out the door."<sup>23</sup> Administration and congressional staffers supported the idea that the administration responded to increasing hostility (on one end of the political spectrum) towards the effort to address climate change by scrubbing words like "global warming," "cap-and-trade," and "climate change" from agency communication. Climate change became a hard sell amidst the economic downturn, when the environment took a backseat to job concerns.

After September 2011, President Obama began referring to the US' lack of a "real energy policy" in many campaign speeches, framing the topic as a major campaign issue (albeit a vague one). Yet the December 2011 COP-17 negotia-

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Chait 2013; Pooley 2010, 167.

21. US EPA 2011.

22. Interview with congressional staff member (1), July 20, 2011.

23. Ibid.



tions in Durban saw little effort by the president to shift attention to the issue. President Obama sent Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Busan, South Korea, for a conference on foreign aid, instead of to South Africa for COP-17. The administration's decision to devote little public attention or political capital to climate change elicited some criticism, particularly as environmental groups, scientists, and politicians responded to the arguments of climate denialists. One congressional staffer called it a "travesty," arguing that these actors have not pushed back hard enough, or responded too slowly to attacks like the "Climategate" email leaks.<sup>24</sup> To the American audience, President Obama never fully articulated the threats of climate change or the need for action, choosing instead to transition into pacifying "clean energy" rhetoric. While "clean energy" is easier to accept, it decidedly avoids the hard reality of climate change.

The 2012 presidential election season elicited an uneven strategy from the Obama administration, as it sought to distinguish itself from Republican challengers without alienating key voters in swing states like Ohio, dependent upon coal extraction and energy-intensive industries. During the Republican primaries, President Obama took a few notable digs, such as this one at Governor Rick Perry: "I mean, has anybody been watching the debates lately? You've got a governor whose state is on fire denying climate change." Then, one week after being ridiculed by Republican Mitt Romney at the party's Tampa convention for promising to "slow the rise of the oceans . . . and to heal the planet," Obama shot back that it was irresponsible to ignore the issue: "Climate change is not a hoax, more droughts and floods and wildfires are not a joke; they are a threat to our children's future."<sup>25</sup> Yet for the first time since 1984 the three presidential debates saw no mention of climate change, even after a summer of record-breaking droughts across much of the Midwest.

The October surprise of "Superstorm Sandy," just before the presidential election, brought floodwaters into Jersey Shore neighborhoods and the subway tunnels of New York, killing over 100 Americans. Suddenly it was politically safe again to talk about climate change, as national polls reported an upswing in public acceptance of the issue. Furthermore, the storm provided Obama an opportunity to use federal disaster response to distinguish himself from Mitt Romney's denial of the problem and self-help message to victims (Romney was reported to have proposed cuts to the Federal Emergency Management Agency the year before). Observers debated whether the storm tipped the election for Obama. After the election, Obama's victory speech and 2013 State of the Union address both mentioned climate change prominently. More detailed statements and announcements of administrative efforts followed in the summer of 2013.

There are many ways to understand Obama's nearly complete avoidance of the term "climate change" over the final three years of his first term after Copenhagen. Sociological theories of the "treadmill of production" suggest that

24. Ibid.

25. Suzanne Goldenberg, Barack Obama swipes at Mitt Romney over climate change jibe. *The Guardian*, September 7, 2012.



under capitalism, production and economy will nearly always come before addressing their impact upon the natural environment.<sup>26</sup> The constitutional rules in the US Senate make it exceedingly difficult for presidents to advance their own agenda in the international realm when just thirty-four powerful senators can block the signature of treaties. Putnam's "two-level games" approach is useful in explaining how, even in the face of seemingly global accusations of being obstructionist abroad, the administration *must* appeal to constituencies at home who could label climate treaties or national regulatory action as "job killing."<sup>27</sup> Dunlap and McCright describe the evolution and strength of the climate denial movement, and its strategy of "manufacturing uncertainty" through amplifying the voices of a few skeptical "experts."<sup>28</sup> Scholars of the media describe the complex pressures on those industries, which lead to the issue being framed in a way that limits public awareness and understanding, also limiting the "perceived range of possibilities for action."<sup>29</sup> While blocked on the high-profile issue of reducing emissions through a legislative package (such as an omnibus cap-and-trade bill), the Obama administration pivoted and presented a very different approach, instead attempting to increase funding for poor nations in order to help them adapt to apparently inevitable climate impacts and to green their economies. The following section turns to that agenda.

### Walking the Walk: Appropriations

Amidst domestic and international challenges, the Obama administration's State and Treasury Departments succeeded in maintaining substantial international climate change finance each year since 2009. While this paper shows that in the public realm the administration has been conspicuously quiet, it worked behind the scenes to secure climate funding. Fiscal Year 2010 was the first budget submitted by the Obama administration, and the increase in international climate finance was dramatic: from a total of \$321 million to a request of \$1.218 billion, an increase of over 279 percent (see Table 3c, p. 57). Funding for FY2012, the last of Obama's first term, stands at \$773.1 million. We can look at these four years and the amount of climate finance appropriated in two ways: as a major increase over past levels, or as a grossly inadequate attempt to deliver the nation's "fair share" in meeting the promises made at Copenhagen.<sup>30</sup> This section explains both approaches, but first describes the structure of US climate funding under Obama. The concluding section places this paper's findings in a broader context.

Under President Obama, climate funding has been implemented through the Global Climate Change Initiative (GCCCI), a strategic platform within the

26. Schnaiberg 1980; Schnaiberg and Gould 1994.

27. Carson and Roman 2010.

28. Dunlap and McCright 2010.

29. Boykoff and Smith 2010, 216.

30. Ciple et al. 2012.

President's 2010 Policy Directive on Global Development.<sup>31</sup> The GCCI aims to "integrate climate change considerations into relevant foreign assistance through the full range of bilateral, multilateral, and private mechanisms to foster low-carbon growth, promote sustainable and resilient societies, and reduce emissions from deforestation and land degradation."<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, the GCCI is administered through programs at the Department of State, Department of the Treasury, and USAID, and is divided according to three categories: assistance for adaptation, clean energy, and sustainable landscapes (REDD+).<sup>33</sup> In general, the Treasury Department funnels funds to multilateral agencies handled by the World Bank like the Global Environment Facility and the Climate Investment Funds, while the State Department provides funds to international agencies like the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and the Montreal Protocol Fund, and USAID delivers climate funds for projects in recipient countries.

Administration staff responded to requests for budget information, but much presented in Table 1 is not widely publicized. This research was compiled using three primary sources: a Congressional Research Service study with budget information through 2012, the US' published "fast start finance" reports, and, most importantly, in-depth interviews with administrative and congressional staff. These interviewees greatly assisted in unearthing budget information and illuminating the Obama administration's dynamic struggle to pursue climate change policy. Due to the contentious nature of the subject at the time of this study and their sensitive job positions, all eight interviewees requested to remain anonymous.

Each fiscal year tells a different story, complete with a unique context, tasks and objectives, players and advocates, and final outcome. This section details the rise and fall of climate finance by beginning with FY2010, the first budget proposed by President Obama in early 2009. Each case shaped the ability of the US to make good its 2009 Copenhagen promise to deliver, alongside other developed nations, \$30 billion by 2012 to the developing nations of the world to address climate change.

### *Fiscal Year 2010*

As Table 1 shows, President Obama achieved a substantial increase in climate funding in 2009 (FY2010), and budget requests from his administration stayed above the new FY2010 baseline, hovering around \$1.3 billion each year. While the gains since FY2010 were not as sizeable, nor do they represent a large portion of total spending by any of these departments, US climate finance policy

31. Lattanzio 2011, 1.

32. White House 2011.

33. REDD+ refers to the UN Collaborative Programme on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) with an additional emphasis on the conservation and sustainable management of forests.

**Table 1**Global Climate Change Initiative: Core Agencies' Budget Authority FY2009–12, by Category (in Millions)<sup>a</sup>

Category/ Core Agency	FY2009 Actual	FY2010 Request	FY2010 Actual	FY2011 Request	FY2011 Actual	FY2012 Request	FY2012 Actual
<b>Adaptation</b>	24.0	313.0	245.7	334.0	194.0	255.0	197.0
Treasury	0	80.0	55.0	90.0	10.0	40.0	12.5
State	0	233.0	68.0	57.0	47.0	49.0	43.0
USAID	24.0	*	122.7	187.0	137.0	166.0	141.5
<b>Clean Energy</b>	169.0	719.0	531.1	711.0	402.9	652.0	387.1
Treasury	26.0	500.0	328.0	508.0	218.4	457.0	227.1
State	43.0	219.0	94.6	74.0	60.5	66.0	68.0
USAID	100.0	*	108.5	129.0	124.0	129.0	92.0
<b>Sustainable Landscapes</b>	128.0	186.0	232.0	346.0	222.4	421.0	189.0
Treasury	20.0	56.0	40.0	146.0	68.0	180.0	52.0
State	10.0	130.0	40.0	25.0	17.0	28.0	22.0
USAID	98.0	*	152.0	175.0	137.4	213.0	115.0
<b>Total Treasury</b>	46.0	636.0	423.0	744.0	296.4	677.0	291.6
<b>Total State</b>	53.0	582.0	202.6	156.0	124.5	143.0	133.0
<b>Total USAID</b>	222.0	*	383.2	491.0	398.4	508.0	348.5
<b>Total</b>	321.0	1,218.0	1,008.8	1,391.0	819.3	1,328.0	773.1

\*The FY2010 request aggregated State and USAID funds together; here they are listed under State and USAID is left blank.

a. Interview with administration officials, February 1, 2012 and May 14, 2013; Lattanzio 2011, 8; Lattanzio 2012, 10.

under President Obama reveals significant development: the administration prioritized the GCCI.

Our interviewees argued that the initial and critical increase in FY2010 could be attributed to various factors. First, as one federal staffer informed us, the Obama administration was immediately confronted with the need to increase the country's credibility on climate change in anticipation of the Copenhagen meetings.<sup>34</sup> The international community expected a new approach from Obama. As one source put it, the administration could *not* afford to take the stance of President Bush and demand, "if you want us to act, then you need to do X, Y, and Z."<sup>35</sup> This required both pushing for domestic legislation and

34. Interview with former administration official (1), July 14, 2011.

35. Interview with Washington NGO staff member (1), August 9, 2011.

“making good” on financial commitments. Yet the Obama administration was hamstrung by the US Senate, which in 1997 voted 95–0 on a “Sense of the Senate” resolution to refuse to sign any treaty that did not include India and China in the group facing binding emissions cuts. The Byrd-Hagel Resolution and the current congressional politics in late 2009 put the administration in a bind, needing to shift the terms of the deal going forward.

At the contentious Copenhagen COP in December 2009, the Obama administration succeeded in defining a new path for international climate finance. The final deal of COP-15 included a major promise of funding from the major developed countries: \$30 billion in fast start finance by 2012, “scaling up” to approach \$100 billion a year by 2020. Following the pattern of promises made at earth summits since 1972 at Stockholm and 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, this funding was to be “new and additional;” that is, not taken from aid money already promised for health, education or infrastructure so badly needed in poorer nations. Many inside sources suggested that these Copenhagen commitments framed the administration’s budget approach from 2009 onwards.<sup>36</sup> That is, the administration sought to deliver the US’ “fair share” of the collective commitment, without defining exactly what that share was.

The US’ share of the so-called fast start finance is a matter of contention, but administration officials reported to us that a range of 15–25 percent, \$4.5–7.5 billion over the three years, was an appropriate amount.<sup>37</sup> Our own analysis using criteria of the US’ historical responsibility for the problem of climate change due to emissions over the past half century, plus its level of “respective capabilities” as reflected in its GDP per capita, led to a fair share of \$10.5–13.5 billion, 35–45 percent of the fast start countries.<sup>38</sup> At the 2012 UN climate negotiations in Doha, the Obama administration came ready to show they had met their Copenhagen promise by delivering \$7.5 billion in climate finance over the three years.<sup>39</sup>

Second, 2009 was an ideal year to pursue this new financial commitment. Because President Obama had to make good on his campaign promises regarding climate change and clean energy, he took advantage of his electoral mandate and momentum through the transition period to develop a progressive budget request. As one agency staffer suggested, there were “no staffers there to get in the way” yet, so the administration could write the budget it desired, and “smart and thoughtful folks put [climate finance] in.”<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, the budget had good chances of passage: President Obama held a Democrat-controlled govern-

36. Interview with Washington NGO staff member (2), August 8, 2011.

37. Interview with administration officials, May 14, 2013.

38. Cipler et al. 2012.

39. The congressionally appropriated funding discussed in this article is a subset of the larger category of “climate finance,” which the Obama administration reported to the UNFCCC as including very different types of funding: insurance to US firms through the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, loans through the Export-Import Bank, and country “compact” funds through the Millennium Challenge Corporation.

40. Interview with former administration official (2), July 27, 2011.

ment and an expansionary economy. The President acted upon his newfound political capital and turned the budget request into a real accomplishment, laying the groundwork for the next four years *and* stepping up to international scrutiny, proving that he would “come out strong” on this issue.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, according to a former administration official, the FY2010 increase was critical in determining the budget outlays through 2012: once the program was in, it wouldn’t be zeroed out, for opponents are “always looking at deltas,” or year-on-year adjustments.<sup>42</sup> According to this strategy, once the President set the bar (relatively highly), congressional Republican attacks on the budget would focus on eliminating notable increases in line item programs since the previous year’s request, rather than eliminating the programs entirely.

This year was also pivotal in determining the unofficial formula for aid, balancing funds by agency and across the three pillars of adaptation, clean energy, and sustainable landscapes. Initially, adaptation and forestry funds received more support than mitigation. Some administration officials argued that, while mitigation was “probably the best-spent money” with the highest long-term payoff, it required a “long, hard slog” of tricky negotiations with the energy industry.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, adaptation and forestry funding were an easier “get,” as they were more immediate (funds could be deployed sooner) and more influential with key negotiating partners of the developing world.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, adaptation and forestry both benefited from a stronger domestic lobbying presence: funding for adaptation brought in a great number of humanitarian and church groups, and environmental groups lined up on sustainable landscapes. On the other hand, USAID had done substantial clean energy work in the past, while adaptation was still poorly understood, so adaptation projects often took longer to get underway. By 2010, however, a more even unofficial formula had been adopted: 50 percent of aid was planned for clean energy, 25 percent for adaptation, and 25 percent for sustainable landscapes.<sup>45</sup>

Beyond his budget requests, President Obama required solid congressional allies in order to successfully translate his requests into actual appropriations. Throughout budget negotiations for FY2010, the climate finance elements of the budget maintained a strong congressional support base. Staffers explained that adaptation aid received support from the religious community, such as the National Council of Churches of Christ, Evangelical Environmental Network, and Catholic Relief Services; clean technology aid was promoted by a mix of environmental and industry groups; sustainable landscapes was supported heavily by domestic environmental and conservation groups, such as The Nature Conservancy, Conservation International, and Environmental

41. *Ibid.*

42. Interview with former administration official (1), July 14, 2011.

43. Interview with former administration official (1), July 14, 2011; author’s interview with Washington NGO staff member (1), August 9, 2011.

44. Interview with Washington NGO staff member (1), August 9, 2011.

45. Interview with former administration official (1), July 14, 2011.

**Table 2**NGO Supporters of Climate Finance Elements of FY2011 Budget<sup>a</sup>

ActionAid USA	Lutheran World Relief	Progressive National Baptist Convention	The Union for Reform Judaism	UN Office
CARE USA	Natural Resources Defense Council	Population Action International	Union of Concerned Scientists	United Methodist Women
Church World Service	National Catholic Rural Life Conference	Refugees International	Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations	US Bangladesh Advisory Council
Institute for Sustainable Communities	National Wildlife Federation	Sojourners	Unitarian Universalist Ministry for Earth	Wildlife Conservation Society
League of Women Voters	Oxfam America	The Nature Conservancy	Unitarian Universalist	World Wildlife Fund

a. Letter to Senators Leahy and Graham of the Senate Appropriations Committee from various non-governmental organizations, March 8, 2011.

Defense Fund.<sup>46</sup> Table 2 shows this to be a wide-ranging coalition, representing millions of members and with lobbying staff in Washington. Furthermore, the administration held allies on the appropriations side of Congress. One source confirmed that there are “a lot of people who care about this issue,” such as Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT) of the Senate Appropriations Committee, then-Senator Kerry (D-MA), Senator Whitehouse (D-RI), Representative Waxman (D-CA), and then-Representative Markey (D-MA).<sup>47</sup>

### *Fiscal Year 2011*

The budget for FY2011 did not come so easily. Prospects were positive in early 2010: following the Copenhagen Accords of December 2009 and the critical agreements articulated there, “the Fast Track Finance commitment was highly salient to the administration” in developing its FY2011 budget.<sup>48</sup> In fact, insiders

46. Interview with congressional staff member (1), July 20, 2011.

47. Interview with congressional staff member (1), July 20, 2011.

48. Interview with Washington NGO staff member (2), August 8, 2011.

suggest that the FY2011 budget request was largely developed internally during the lead-up to Copenhagen and immediately afterwards. That September, the President reaffirmed his commitment to climate finance with the release of the Presidential Policy Directive on Global Development, which included among its three Presidential initiatives the Global Climate Change Initiative. As one NGO climate analyst suggested, "This helped strengthen those within the administration advocating for international climate finance."<sup>49</sup> The administration had a brief legislative respite between the passage of Waxman-Markey and the failure of the subsequent Senate bill.

This moment was fleeting. Climate finance was soon challenged by a shift in legislative power and domestic priorities. First, the White House redirected its legislative efforts to passing comprehensive health care reform rather than climate policy. As Rahm Emanuel stated that spring, "We want to do this climate bill, but success breeds success. We need to put points on the board. We only want to do things that are going to be successful. If the climate bill bogs down, we move on. We've got health care."<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, the 2010 November mid-term elections ended the Democrats' control in the House of Representatives and were widely viewed as a backlash against Obama's progressive agenda. The elections were interpreted as an expression of voters' frustration with the severe economic downturn, and cutting the deficit became the priority of the newly elected Tea Party Republicans. One former administration official remarked that the administration gave up on climate change, deciding that it was "more important to cut the deficit than pursue any number of other initiatives."<sup>51</sup>

Other analysts argued that "the administration continued to want to fund its international priorities and pushed with appropriators to make that happen," but a hostile congressional environment tempered its efforts.<sup>52</sup> Facing vocal House Republicans, the administration recognized it was extremely risky to highlight the climate change programs in the FY2011 budget. Some Republican House staffers were reported to be conducting word searches through the budget request for the word "climate," eagerly eliminating line items. The administration was quiet about exact budget breakdowns, for providing too much detail was a serious risk. As one former administration official put it, "the money survives because it's buried in the details."<sup>53</sup> Thus what had been a selling point of the FY2010 budget became a critical target to be hidden within the FY2011 budget.

The administration downplayed the climate change elements in its budget while attempting to increase overall GCCI funding. Yet because this funding was never "sold" publicly, it never gathered the constituent support it needed. Instead, this strategy was accompanied by an ever-shifting message to the public,

49. Ibid.

50. Pooley 2010, 361.

51. Interview with former administration official (1), July 14, 2011.

52. Interview with Washington NGO staff member (2), August 8, 2011.

53. Interview with former administration official (1), July 14, 2011.



focusing on “clean energy, protecting forests, and extreme weather preparedness and resilience, [each] as distinct elements separate from ‘climate’ per se.”<sup>54</sup> While the State Department and USAID annual reports to Congress and the Congressional Budget Justification included sections on climate change, to many observers international climate finance was largely reframed without overarching explanation from the President.

The resultant budget loss was tangible: the FY2011 appropriations represented a cut of over \$100 million from FY2010, and over \$500 million cut from the president’s request (see Table 3a–c). Still, the final FY2011 climate budget was an increase of over 155 percent from the final Bush administration budget (FY2009).

### *Fiscal Year 2012*

The impact of the continued climate finance struggle was felt in the final FY2012 budget. The President’s \$1.328 billion request became part of the political battle over the debt ceiling, resulting in last-minute negotiations and huge cuts at the demand of House Republicans. The administration continued to face extreme difficulties with Congress, and the internal level of support for climate finance appeared to have dropped significantly. One appropriator working on the FY2012 numbers at the time of this research stated that “any expression of support for climate adaptation funding is useful,” but sadly “virtually no Senators—neither Democrats or Republicans—express support to us for these programs.”<sup>55</sup> In fact, the GCCI program specifically attracted negative attention: in summer 2011 the relevant House Appropriations subcommittee cut all but \$70 million for international climate assistance, and the House Foreign Relations Committee completely eliminated climate funding in an amendment to the authorization bill led by Rep. Connie Mack (R-FL). Because most appropriations bills had not passed the Senate, the permanence of these cuts was not yet known. Their symbolism, however, was crucial: the fact that climate finance remained a target and was repeatedly highlighted by Republicans in summer 2011 portended a gloomy future.

Indeed, the estimated final budget for FY2012 of \$773.1 million represented a slight decrease from FY2011, and a 41.8 percent drop from the President’s request. As Table 3a shows, the final budget represented the second year of a disappointing 40-plus percent cut from the budget request to the actual appropriations. While this final budget request of President Obama’s first term continued climate funding’s downward trend, the Nature Conservancy’s director of international government relations, Andrew Deutz, argued, “only getting slightly cut or being basically flat . . . is nothing to cry over at this point.” Similarly, David Waskow, international climate change policy director for Oxfam

54. Interview with Washington NGO staff member (2), August 8, 2011.

55. Interview with Congressional staff member (2), July 6, 2011.

**Table 3a**

Percent Change in Funding, Request—Actual

<i>Comparison</i>	<i>FY2010</i>	<i>FY2011</i>	<i>FY2012</i>
Percent Change	-17.2	-41.1	-41.8

**Table 3b**

Percent Change in Funding, Actual—Actual

<i>Comparison</i>	<i>FY2009–FY2010</i>	<i>FY2010–FY2011</i>	<i>FY2011–FY2012</i>
Percent Change	214.3	-18.8	-5.6

**Table 3c**

Percent Change in Funding, Actual—Request

<i>Comparison</i>	<i>FY2009–FY2010</i>	<i>FY2010–FY2011</i>	<i>FY2011–FY2012</i>
Percent Change	279.4	37.9	62.1

International, emphasized that the administration must “stand firm based on the numbers they put forward.”<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, the final FY2012 appropriations represented only a 5.6 percent decrease from the final FY2011 budget, which was itself an 18.8 percent loss from FY2010 (see Table 3b). Thus in stemming deeper cuts, the FY2012 budget was a modest success, at best.

#### *Preliminary Notes on Fiscal Years 2013–14*

President Obama’s FY2013 budget request proved to be an excellent indicator of the final FY2012 appropriations. The president requested a tempered \$769 million for the GCCI program, the lowest request of his first term. This broke down to roughly \$469.5 million for the combined State Department and USAID, and \$300 million for the Treasury Department.<sup>57</sup> This FY2013 allocation was mirrored almost exactly in the estimated appropriations of FY2012.

Moving into his second term, President Obama set a positive tone with his budget request for FY2014. He requested \$837 million for the GCCI, a slight increase over the FY2012 actual appropriations and FY2013 budget request.<sup>58</sup> At the announcement of his request in April of 2013, the president combined his first term “clean energy” rhetoric with an explicit call to address climate change:

56. Friedman 2012.

57. US Department of State 2012; Interview with administration officials, February 1, 2012.

58. Staats, 2013.

"We'll continue our march towards energy independence and address the threat of climate change."<sup>59</sup>

## Conclusion

This article illuminates two different stories, which are critically connected. The surprising story of the sharp rise and gradual decline of US international climate funding to developing countries since FY2010 is remarkably positive, given the political and economic context in which the Obama administration found itself. Research in the second half of this paper shows that in the face of international tension, domestic legislative hostility, public apathy, and a fiscal crisis, President Obama elevated climate finance within the US' budgetary agenda. Presidential budget requests for climate programs increased dramatically over 2008, most notably with the FY2010 budget, rising from \$321 million to \$1,008.8 billion actual. At this writing, funding stands at roughly \$773.1 million, far above 2008 levels. It is a story of success that the administration was able to maintain elevated funding at fairly constant levels since 2009. As one Congressional staffer put it, "the ability to hold even in a climate like this is actually winning."<sup>60</sup>

This battle took place largely behind the scenes, with very little of the administration's public political capital spent on the cause. President Obama's advisors have long advocated this "stealth strategy" for climate change finance policy, whereby the administration's energy team works furiously behind the scenes and the president is publicly deployed sparingly.<sup>61</sup> In fact, the first half of this article chronicles how the Obama administration has consciously shifted their rhetoric to focus on "clean energy" messages, rather than the explicit (but politically tainted) "climate change." Yet these are vitally important words, for the president's rhetoric signaled his political intentions as he sought to frame the issue in order to build his constituency for his 2012 re-election campaign.

The President's intentions at the end of his first term were revealed by his weak language and avoidance of nearly any issues tainted with the terms "climate change" or "global warming." This represents a lost opportunity at best, and a grave risk at worst. The real power of any president is "the power to persuade," as Richard Neustadt wrote.<sup>62</sup> The bully pulpit could provide an effective medium to push the US to further progress on climate change, yet over four years Obama failed to deliver even a single rousing speech to convince the American people of the need for action. As Raymond Murphy puts it, the environmental education of leaders is a critical missing link, and sometimes

59. White House Briefing Room 2013.

60. Interview with congressional staff member (1), July 20, 2011.

61. Pooley 2010, 361.

62. Al Gore, *A Climate of Denial*. *Rolling Stone Magazine*, June 22, 2011, 9.

climate-related disasters can drive their awareness and ability to speak.<sup>63</sup> To his domestic audience, President Obama rarely strayed from oblique references to climate change, without articulating the profound dangers of climate change.

By not explaining explicitly that climate change underlies spending, President Obama risks being boxed into a distorted policy that can be self-defeating. Some actions taken to create energy independence for the US will greatly worsen future GHG emissions pathways. Opponents of international climate finance criticize spending for adaptation in poor nations, without being countered by a full accounting of the benefits of such support. Hanging in the balance is the direction of arguably the most important nation for global action on climate change, and whether our species will anticipate the worst impacts and avoid them with strong mitigation action.

It is unlikely that international climate change funding can be maintained—given negative American attitudes about foreign aid<sup>64</sup>—without a modicum of valuable “face time” devoted to the issue from the presidential bully pulpit. Together, the Obama administration’s first-term climate rhetoric and climate funding strategies present a picture of *some* walk, as funding levels increased, with virtually *no* talk. This is hardly a recipe to sustain climate change policy success in the longer term. President Obama’s announcement of regulatory action in June of 2013 is a step in the right direction for his second term, signaling escalated talk *and* walk on climate change policy.

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63. Murphy 2010, 154.

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