

The United States and the Paris Climate Agreement

POLISCI 101: Introduction to International Relations

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Motivation:

In lecture this week, we learned about the tragedy of the commons, potential solutions to the tragedy of the commons, and the ethics of environmental cooperation. Let's apply what we've learned about environmental cooperation to make clear policy recommendations regarding climate change! In particular, we'll advise President Trump on how to proceed with the Paris Climate Agreement and climate change more generally.

Background:

Scientists predict the world will suffer dramatic consequences of climate change in the future if global temperatures continue to rise at their current rate. These consequences include sea level rise, ocean acidification, and more frequent, extreme weather conditions, like droughts and flash flooding. However, scientists estimate that if we can prevent global temperatures from rising more than 2 degrees Celsius by 2100, we will be able to avoid most of these consequences.

The international community devised the Paris Climate Agreement to reach this goal, after its predecessor – the Kyoto Protocol – failed to slow global temperature rise. Under the Paris Agreement, all countries agree to submit their own Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs) for reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, and each country will monitor and report on their emissions and progress. Over time, each country will review and try to ratchet up their INDCs. There is also a commitment from rich countries to give aid to developing countries to help them adapt to the effects of climate change and to help reduce their greenhouse gas emissions.

On June 1st, President Trump announced that the United States would withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement, but he also said that the United States would be open to renegotiating different terms in agreement. Under the rules of the agreement the United States signed on to under former President Obama, the earliest any country can leave the agreement is Nov. 4, 2020. So, the United States will officially remain part of the agreement until then.

Assignment:

Your job is to serve as a policy advisor to President Trump on how to proceed forward on climate change. You and your classmates will form two teams—each of which will discuss a different aspect of the Paris Agreement. Your goal will be to present a clear policy recommendation for President Trump regarding the aspect of climate policy your team discussed. You will present your proposal and report your discussions to the class before the end of section.

Team 1: Compliance with the Paris Agreement

You must advise President Trump on whether the United States should stay on with the Paris Agreement and comply with its terms. As mentioned above, the United States cannot officially withdraw until 2020, and President Trump is open to revising his stance if you have good reasons for the United States to stay on board.

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For your discussion, you should set aside questions about how INDCs are determined and who should bear the costs for cooperation. Your primary concern is whether the United States should cooperate on climate change with other countries under the framework laid out by the Paris Agreement.

In your discussion, you should address:

- Whether it is likely that other countries will comply with the agreement.
- Whether the agreement is likely to succeed in preventing global temperatures from rising too much before 2100.
- Whether the United States has an ethical obligation to fight or not fight climate change.

When you report your proposal to the class, you should:

1. State up front whether the United States should stay on with the Paris Agreement and comply with its terms.
2. Make an ethical case for your position. You should anticipate and counter possible critiques to your argument. In making your case for your policy proposal, you may likely find it helpful to address the practical questions listed above as well.

Team 2: Renegotiating terms of the Paris Agreement

Your job is to review different aspects of the Paris Climate agreement and determine if they should be renegotiated. In particular, you will advise on (1) how each countries' greenhouse gas reductions should be determined and (2) how the costs of climate change cooperation should be distributed among different countries.

For your discussion, you should set aside questions about whether the United States should be working to prevent climate change. Your primary focus is revising the current terms of the Paris Agreement. As a reminder, under the Paris Agreement, states set their own greenhouse gas emission reductions, and there is a commitment by rich countries to help developing countries adapt to climate change and reduced their greenhouse gas emissions.

In your discussion, you should address:

- Whether each country should have a right to an equal amount of greenhouse gas emissions or whether rights to greenhouse gas emissions should be determined in some other way. In other words, should countries be able to set their own greenhouse gas emission reductions? Should countries be required to reduce their emissions so that each country is emitting the same amount of emissions? Etc.
- Whether countries should pay for climate change (i) equally, (ii) proportional to current emissions, (iii) proportional to historical emissions, or (iv) proportional to their wealth.
- Whether the United States has any additional ethical obligations to fight climate change beyond what is covered in the Paris Climate Agreement. Does the United States have an ethical obligation to ratchet up its own INDCs if other states are not going to cooperate?

When you report your proposal to the class, you should:

1. State up front whether the Paris Climate Agreement should be renegotiated and if so, which parts. Should it be expanded to include additional terms or obligations?
2. Make an ethical case for your position. You should anticipate and counter possible critiques to your argument.