

Electoral Agenda and Climate Change: A Comparative Study of Media Campaign of the UK, the US and Australian Political Parties

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Abstract

Manifestation of agenda by political parties proved to be one of the most important tactics for attracting voters in certain elections. Political parties in advanced democratic countries make use of various tools such as media to reach out the public and inculcate their manifesto. These political parties focus mainly on issues of national and international importance. The developing countries are thought to be very vulnerable to climate change due to poor institutional capacities, dependence on climate sensitive sectors, and lack of funds for addressing the issue of climate change. The developed countries of the world have been supporting the climate response in the developing countries through funding and technical assistance. This paper explored the status of the issue of climate change in their media electoral campaigns of political parties of the major climate donor countries namely United Kingdom, United States of America and Australia. These countries have democratic form of governments run by political parties. International commitments and responses to the issue of climate change are largely dependent on the programs and agenda of the same political parties. So the global response to climate change throughout the developing world depends mainly upon the policies and decision of the donor countries that are governed by political parties.

Keywords: *Political Parties, Media Campaigns, Electoral Agenda, Climate Donors, Climate Response.*

Introduction

“We are the first generation to be able to end poverty, and the last generation that can take steps to avoid the worst impacts of climate change. Future generations will judge us harshly if we fail to uphold our moral and historical responsibilities” (Ban Ki-Moon, Secretary-General, UN).

Climate Change is one of the greatest challenges mankind faces in the twenty first century. It has its implications for the human survival sectors including water supply, food production and health, energy and national security (Kiran & Qurat, 2016). The leading cause responsible for climate change is the emission of greenhouses gases. Recent statistics reveal that more than half of the world greenhouse gases emission is contributed by the highly industrialized cities of the United States, China and Europe. Jointly, the top ten

most emitters' states account for almost three-quarters of worldwide greenhouse gases emissions (Friedrich, 2017). On the other hand, the impacts of climate change are more visible in the developing world which contributes less than the remaining half of the green house gas emission.

Developing societies are highly vulnerable to extreme weather events in current climatic variations. These extreme weather events descend along with huge economic costs of the developing world. For the last several decades, the developing states had to cost more than thirty-five billion US\$ to human and natural disasters around the world. This financial damage is twenty times higher than the cost climate change inflicted on the developed countries (Freeman, 2000). Such economic costs associated with climate variations could propel millions of the people in the developing words to the abyss of poverty, and diseases. International community has developed a system for the provision of finance to deal with climate linked concerns, especially, in developing countries. Since 2002, more than 20 different kinds of global funds have emerged to tackle the issue (Grant, 2011). The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change demands the developed world to give financial, technical and political support to developing states "that are mainly exposed to the fatal effects of climate change in fulfilling costs of adjustment to those fatal effects" (UNFCCC, 1992). In the coming years, the financial cost of climate change response in the developing countries is estimated to be more than over hundred billion dollars. The developed countries have pledged one hundred billion dollars per year by 2020 (Smith et al., 2011). Major climate change donor governments are, European Union, Australia, USA, Canada, Norway and others. There are democratic forms of governments in these states and are run by the respective political parties. Political parties in these countries are highly organized and have their own party agendas and programs reflecting domestic and foreign policies of the governments they represent. Hence, the scale of the donations being offered by the aforementioned states could be assessed from their party manifestos, agendas, and campaigning with relation to climate change. This study tends to explore the position and status of climate change problem in electoral campaigns and agenda of the political parties of major climate donor countries with special reference to UK, USA and Australia.

Methodology

This research intends to explore electoral agenda of the political parties with respect to the issue of climate change. Major Political Parties of the UK, the US and Australia and their respective manifestos were taken as unit of analysis. Party programs and election campaigns, especially, through mass media of the stated political parties during various general elections were considered for analysis. Focus was made on the contents which were directly or indirectly related to the issue of climate change.

This was a descriptive study in nature and involved discourses with respect to the speeches, texts, videos, and other contents of the campaigns of the political parties carried out through mass media. Any form of expression of the leaders of the mentioned political parties or other prominent members of the parties in connection with the issue of climate change was taken as the level of contribution to the issue. Likewise, statements, speeches and video of the heads of the states of the said countries were skimmed for contents relating to the issue of climate change.

Climate Change and Political Parties' Media Campaigns in the UK

Despite the fact that the United Kingdom is one of the major emitters of greenhouse gases, it contributes a lot to tackle worldwide climatic changes. Currently, climate change has attracted attention of all political parties in the UK, irrespective of their ideological dispositions. There has been major changes in the UK climate politics and policy in recent years because the major political parties have taken the issues seriously as compared to the past when climate change concerns were treated as low politics. From 2006 onwards, climate change came on the mainstream political agenda as the three major political parties and two nationalist parties become sympathetic to the issue. This also paved way for climate change to become one of the major issues in the political debates of the country (Carter, 2014).

Another significant aspect of the climate change elevation to national level debate is the establishment of a new political party known as the Green Party. In 2008, the Green Party elected its first individual leader, Caroline Lucas. She achieved a major breakthrough in the 2010 general elections by winning in Brighton Pavilion to become the first Green MP in the UK (Carter, 2008). In the general election 2019, the Conservative Party won majority by winning 365 seats in house of Common, followed by Labour Party which won 203 seats (BBC, 2019). Climate change remained one of the most important agendas during their media election campaigns of both the parties. Though, Labour lost the elections, it took the unparalleled move of putting green issues as the top priority of its program. Its leader Jeremy Corbyn raised the appeal to voters with strong policies on emissions and commitments on creating a net-zero carbon economy. Similarly, the Liberal Democrats also shown commitments and focused on climate change as key priority. Its leaders promised to produce 80% of the UK's electricity from renewable sources by 2030, to take forward to 2045 the target for net-zero carbon, and to make the production of electric vehicles on huge scale. According to Shaun Spiers, the executive director of the Green Alliance, even five years ago such focus on climate change in the electoral campaign was unimaginable (Harvey, 2019).

The Conservatives paid less attention to climate in their media election campaign as compared to the Labour Party still climate change was on the main agenda included in the party manifesto (UK Policy, 2019). They manifested to meeting the world-leading target of Net Zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, doubling of International Climate funding, setting up new international partnerships to deal with deforestation, investment of £500 million to help energy-intensive industries move to low-carbon techniques, supporting clean transport to ensure clean air, as well as setting strict new laws on air quality" (Conservative Party's Manifesto, 2019).

As evident from the election campaign of all key political parties of the UK, the climate change is getting attention of the masses and political actors day by day. Today, all political parties have clear stand on climate change and have included it on their main stream agenda. The first realization of climate change as problem came from the banner of conservative party. Margaret Thatcher who has remained UK Prime Minister from May, 1979 to November, 1990 openly accepted the climate change as the global as well as domestic issue of UK (Lorenzoni et al., 2008). In response to UK commitments under UNFCCC, the British government announced its first climate change program in 1994 under Premiership of Sir John Major from the Conservatives as well. The main target of the program was the reduction in the emissions of main greenhouse gases up to 2000 (Ockwell & Carter, 2007).

The Labour party is very prominent from her stand and attention to climate change problem. The second but very effective climate change program was introduced by Labour party government under PM Tony Blair. Through this program several new policies, emission trading plan, power efficiency and renewable energy system obligations were implemented on energy companies (Lockwood, 2013). One of the main features of the Blair administration was stimulation of progressive climate friendly politics that incorporated climate care along with socio-economic considerations (Jordan, 2001). The Labour governments created most of the policy and legal instruments in the country to address the concerns of climate change and meeting the international commitments (Lorenzoni, Riordan & Pidgeon, 2008). In 2008, the Labour government under the leadership of James Gordon Brown introduced and gets passed the first ever United Kingdom's legislation on climate change the "Climate Change Act 2008" (Pielke, 2009). The above discussion has revealed that Climate Change has gotten attention of all political parties. However, the main political parties, the Conservative and Labour have highlighted the issue more in their recent media campaigns.

Climate Change and Political Parties in the US

The American system of governance, started as the core commitments of its founders in liberty and democracy in 1776. The governance in USA is based on federal presidential system of democracy (Kendall & Ranney, 1956). The whole governance system has its roots in a precise and comprehensive constitution which is the supreme law of the land in true spirit. The U.S. constitution is outline of the American system

of government. It explains three separate organs of the state namely legislative, executive and judiciary, their powers, interrelation and how positions in each organ are to be adjusted (Dawes, 1885).

The founding father of the US adopted the federal system of government. In the American system, 50 original states with their own status of legal and political autonomy share power and functions with the federal government (Stephan, 1999). The US constitution also establishes the presidential system of government in which the President is both the chief executive and the head of state. The President is elected independently of the central and state legislature and principle of the separation of the power is established with some checks and balances on each other (Szilagyi, 2009). In the US there are two party systems and the whole politics revolves around the party struggle of two parties. These two major political parties are the Republican and Democratic (Ranney, 2015). Attempts were made for the establishment of third party but failed to get roots (Lause, 2015). Though US constitution is silent about the political parties but practically the two parties have ruled the country since its inception. There is always close election competition between the two parties for the office of the president (Freeman, 1986).

In historical perspective, the US climate and environment protection support has been comparatively unbiased. Both the parties had provided attention to climate related issues in their party agendas. The Republicans are honored with the role played by President Theodore Roosevelt for enhancing the protection of natural environment through establishment of artificial forests and national green parks and gardens. Similarly the supporters and voters of Democratic Party appreciate the action taken by the President Delano Roosevelt for the soil and environment conservation. Richard Nixon cooperation with the Democratic Congress in signing many of the most important environmental laws in the United States in the decades of 1970 was remarkable (Dunlap & McCright, 2008).

In America the issue of climate change and environment was initially responded from the political circles of Republican Party. Hence the Republicans can be considered the founders of climate change response in the country. At the start of 20th century, the Republican President Theodore Roosevelt was the first US administrator who took the climate problem seriously (King, 1959). Several climate friendly laws and regulations such as the Federal Reclamation Act, 1902, the creation of the Bureau of Forestry Service 1905 and the Antiquities Act of 1906 were passed by the Republican governments (Dorsey, 1995).

From the decades of 1980 the Republican Party's stance and views on climate and environment are less encouraging. The Republican Party, during the presidency of Ronald Reagan showed resentment to some of the environment laws and regulations probably due cold war with the then USSR. Likewise, the war on terror in 2001 hindered the issue of climate change which resulted in division of the party in line with climatic concerns (Lynch, 2004). In 2001, the Republican president openly denied to become party to Kyoto Protocol thus ignoring the importance of the issue (Hovi, Sprinz & Bang, 2012).

The Republican revolution of 1994 when the party got majority in both of the houses of the US congress further weakened the climate change cause in the country. The powerful lobby of fossil fuels industry, oil and coal companies, and conservative think tanks mobilized the representatives of the party to cool down the national environment on the climate change response (Aaron, McCright, Riley & Dunlap, 2011).

So far as Democratic Party is concerned, it is keener to support climate change issue in the country (Meyer, 2018). If we look into the historical response from Democrats platform, it was Delano Roosevelt who tried to include some aspects of climate change in new deal that was designed by him during his presidency from 1933-1939. The attention provided by him to climate change is still praised by many Americans (Dunlap & McCright, 2008). The Democrats have also shown their commitment when Clean Air Act 1963 was enacted. The Act empowered the Environmental Protection Agency to take actions to fight environmental pollution (Sueyoshi & Goto, 2009).

The democrat's president Bill Clinton tenure as president is truly marked as significant episode from the climate response point of view. He during his presidency together with his vice president Al Gore initiated number of interventions on climate change response in the country. They initiated cost-effective approach of new technologies, stern enforcement of climate regulations, escalation national health standards, and protection of unique national treasures. The significant interventions includes, implementation of the Safe Drinking Water Act, strict standards over soot and smog generated the cleanup of the nation's worst toxic waste sites, expanded Americans' Right to Know about environmental hazards and special attention was paid to enhance public awareness on climate change (Whitehouse Archives, 2019).

Climate Change as global and national issue has emerged in American politics as one of the key concerns. Both the major parties and their followers looks climate change as a national and global challenge. But the Democrats are more mobilized and sensitive to climate change as compared to Republicans. In 1997 forty eight percent Republicans and fifty two percent Democrats believed that global warming and climate change has already occurred and still ongoing. With the gap of eleven years in 2008, seventy six percent Democrats believed that climate change has already happened while only forty two percent Republicans owned the same view. Similarly, the Democrats consider climate change a more serious threat than Republicans. As in 2008 survey only twenty six percent Republicans consider global warming and climate change a serious threat while forty nine percent Democrats indicated it a serious threat. It is also a remarkable point that democrats shared the same views as most scientists believed while the Republicans continued to challenge the scientific community view on climate change (Riley, Dunlap, Aaron & McCright, 2008).

The recent studies on the climate change and main political parties' views and stance suggested that Democrats circles are more liberal and mobilized to initiate response on climate change than Republicans (Mason, 2015). The Democrats share more inclinations towards the reduction of greenhouse emissions and strict regulations on the climate threat sectors of economy (Marquart et al., 2011).

In the current century, the issue of environment and climate has remained insignificant in the Republicans and Democrats media electoral campaigns of 2000 and 2004 presidential elections (Super & Bomberg, 2009). However, in 2000 presidential elections media campaign, Al Gore from Democrats spoke on climate related issues. Al Gore announced his support for scrupulous government-led approach to deal with pollution and climate issues. He took pride on the contributions in Kyoto protocol, strict regulations on oil and fossil fuels business. In contrast, Bush from Republicans criticized the Kyoto protocol, encouragement of further oil exploration and also scorned on the over exaggeration of climate issue. But the issue of climate change and environment failed to get the attention and support of the public and media and completely disappeared from political debates (Bomberg, 2001). Likewise, in 2004 presidential elections, climate change issue failed to get attention of the people, media and political parties (Langer & Cohen, 2005).

The 2008 presidential elections marked the significance of climate issue in practical political history of America. Coverage of the issue by media and political parties played a central role in the elections (Heffernan, 2008). The Democrat candidate, Barack Obama mobilized the public on the dynamic government contribution in energy and green protection. He pledged liberal support for bio fuels and scientific research and to raise fuel based economy standards. He was remarkably unresponsive to nuclear power and off shore drilling for petroleum. In contrast candidate from Republican Party, John McCain was having strong motivation and support for nuclear power and off shore excavations for oil. He also showed no commitment for energetic government role in the climate and environmental safety interventions. Likewise, climate and energy also shaped one of the major policy debates between the contestants ((Super & Bomberg, 2009). It was also one of the major national policy issues for media and the voters and played significant role in shaping voter trends (Gallup, 2008).

In the 2012 elections, the issue of climate change was mostly ignored by contesting presidential candidates. Throughout the electoral media campaign, the Democrat candidate, Obama and Republicans, Romney tried to defeat each other as ardent lovers of oil, gas and coal the primary fuels responsible for greenhouse emissions. None of them indicated any policy, regulatory or legislative initiative to deal with one of the most urgent human challenge of the planet (Border, 2012). In 2016 presidential elections, the issue of climate change was moderately highlighted by both political parties. The Republican presidential nominee, Donald Trump, openly showed his commitment to withdraw from Paris agreement that is one of the most important interstate agreements on climate change. He also showed his disgust for clean power plan which attempt to minimize carbon emissions by power plants and raise the use of renewable power. While Hillary Clinton, the Democrat candidate, praised the Paris agreement and desired to scratch energy waste and methane emissions, decrease oil spending and spend in clean energy (Milman, 2016).

Climate Change and Political Parties in Australia

The government in Australia is based on federal parliamentary and constitutional monarchy system. Australia is a federation of six federating units or states such as Tasmania, South Australia, Queensland, Victoria, Western Australia and New South Wales. Until 1901, each state was a separate British settlement. The states have established their own governments with the premier as its head. Excluding Queensland, the rest of states have bicameral state legislatures. There are also two self-governing union territories. The central government implements the authority over union territories (Hirst, 2000). Australia is fully independent country but still it has symbolic constitutional monarchy. It shares a monarchy with the United Kingdom. The Queen is the titular head of the Commonwealth of Australia represented by Governor-General in the country; the real powers are in the hands of elected government. It is an established convention that the Governor-General precedes only on the recommendations of the elected government (Fraser, 1994).

Australia has established the system of parliamentary democracy. The Prime Minister and cabinet members need to be members of the parliament with majority in the House of Representatives call the Lower House. Australian parliament includes the queen, the Senate and the House of Representatives as provided by constitution. Together with legislative functions, the parliament holds ministers and the government accountable for their actions. The Senate is the upper chamber representing six Australian states and two union territories. Currently, there are seventy six members in the upper house. The upper house is elected for six year term excluding the union senators whose term is equal to lower house (Australian Parliament, 2007). The country is divided into 150 single-member electorates, each representing almost eighty to ninety thousand electorates and each with a Member of the House of Representatives. Each state has a number of electorates proportional to its inhabitants. Elections for the lower house are usually held every three years (Reid, 1989).

Since, the country operates under democratic system so political parties are real power holder of the country. The parties with majority in House of Representatives form government and run the country. The Liberal, the Labor and the Nationalist are the three main political parties in Australia. Practically, there is two-party system in Australia and government is being rotating in the two main parties; the Liberal and the Labor. The parties play significant role with democratic spirit political and ensure stability and economic prosperity in the country (Curran, 2004).

As per political history of Australia, majority of the governments in the country were formed by the Liberal party with Labor party runs second. The Australian Democrats assert that unlike all other Australian political parties, the two parties are organized on a national foundation (Jeans, Brent & Bowden, 2004). The third prominent and major party is National party. It was established in 1920 with the name as the Country Party. After adopting many names since 2003, it is now known as the Nationals (Australian Parliament, 2019). The Labor party has ideological commitment to democratic socialization of the production, industry distribution and exchange, and the efforts to eliminate social, political and economic exploitations (Head, 1985). Liberal party has more ideological commitment to anti socialism and favor of free market economy.

The Liberal in their party programs, political agenda and government actions follow policies of stern commitment to the ideas of liberal economy (Triver, 1976).

Climate Commission is the main legal instrument in Australia that deal with climate change. It is reported by climate commission that climate change will have several shocking effects in the country. Its effects include extreme weather incidents, alteration in precipitation patterns and rise in sea levels (Climate Commission, 2011). Due to severe implications of climate change, the political parties in Australia are mobilized and motivated on the Global climate crisis. All the main political parties present in the lower house have declared climate change as global challenge and have their respective programs and agendas on climate change. But this is also rightly remarked by several political scholars that there exists strong ideological difference among the main political parties of Australia. The Labor party (which is ideologically more inclined to liberal ideas) and Green party supporters and leaders are excessively more believer on climate crisis and its fatalities than Liberal and National parties. Similarly, the former are more believers that climate change prospects a severe threat to people's life in their life time as compared to the later (Tranter, 2011). Hence it is revealed that Australia also shares the vulnerability to climate change; and the political parties are aware and responding to it according to their ideological commitments.

The position, campaigns and actions on climate change of the two main political parties of Australia are quite different from each other. There is also slight fluctuation in their committed stance on the issue over the years. Both the parties opted and implemented some strong and significant actions but most of their promises have been remained political statements. Since 2007, the issue of climate change has been playing important role in the federal elections and people care to party policies on climate. It is also viewed that the two former political leaders lost their political prestige and position because of their policies and stance on climate change (Glover, 2009). Over the years, there is inconsistency in the Australian government response on climate change irrespective of which political party was in power or in opposition. The two main political parties took advance positions and some time lay back from the commitment. For instance, in the 1990 when Labor was in power, it strongly resisted to the emission decrease target of its own Environmental Minister. Similarly, the Liberal also criticized and resisted to the adaptation of emission targets by saying that it would negatively impact employment and industry (Thomas, 2017).

Recently on 18 May 2019, federal elections for the Australian House of Representatives were held. In these elections the issue of climate change attracted the media and the public, and all the contesting political parties included it in their political programs. The issue was broadly highlighted in the electoral media campaigns of the three main political parties. The leaders of all political parties travelled throughout the country and raised their slogans and commitment on climate change as vast tracts of eastern Australia have faced their most horrible droughts in a century. Similarly, last year, the Australian people witnessed record summer. The two contenders for the position of Prime Minister Mr. Scott Morrison from Liberal-National Coalition party and Bill Shorten from Labor party widely discussed the challenge of climate change and their agendas to address it. But both the leaders had different views and different stance in dealing with climate change (McDonald, 2019).

The Liberal party maintained its conventional conservative position on climate change in the elections. In his speech to the parliament, Morrison words; "Don't be fear. Don't be afraid. It won't harm you. Its coal" openly supported the use of fossil fuels that provoked the opposition (Murphy, 2017). Likewise, many leaders of Liberal –National Coalition doubted the scientific predictions on climate change but still they talked about climate change in the media electoral campaigns of the elections. During their media campaigns, they widely talked about their agenda in terms of dealing with climate change issue. In several constituencies, especially, in rural areas, the Coalition candidates had to face severe public criticism on account of their conservative stance on climate change and policies adopted in their previous government. In cities, the candidates also faced great challenge from environmental groups who were being ignored in their government. The former Liberal Minister of Environment, Melissa Price was named as hidden minister, especially, known for her absence at the environmental calamities sites, and her denial to congregate with environmental groups and persons (Lyons, 2019).

In these elections, the Labor party of Australia retained its former liberal position and pledged considerable actions on climate change. The Labor's main leader and PM candidate, Bill Shorten in the opening address of official media election campaign said "If we have the privilege to serve as the next government of Australia, I will not bring lumps of coal to parliament for a chuckle while temperatures soar and bushfires rage and flood and drought assault our land." The party has now openly announced the reduction in emissions up to 45% by 2030 though a tough and big target to achieve (Lyons, 2019). A set of new climate and energy related policies including most debated tax reform policy was announced by the Labors. During media campaign, the Labor also announced a scheme to decrease emissions from heavy manufacturing units identified as the 'safeguard mechanism. Corporate sectors were permitted to increase their pollution under the scheme's present execution. The party says it would also lessen greenhouse emissions by introducing vehicle emissions principles, set limits on agricultural land-clearing and introducing incentives so to attract public adaptation of solar system (Morton, 2019).

During the elections period, the Australian public also showed significant concern on the climate change mainly because they are increasingly experiencing its corresponding implications. Different surveys conducted during election process reveals the high percentage of public concerns on climate change. In March 2019, a survey was conducted by Sydney Lowy Institute. In this survey, 2130 people from different walks of life were interviewed. It was found that 64% people consider global warming and climate change a major threat to the national interests of the country (Slezak, 2019). During the elections, the people paid significant attention to the debates on climate change and global warming. Several political and media circles reckoned the issue of climate change to play a vital role in the elections. According to Kelly Albion, the head of Australian Youth Climate Coalition, the climate change issue was proved as leading issue in the federal elections. Many people protested on the launching ceremony of election campaign of the Liberal party as they were considered against the climate actions in the country (Walden, 2019).

Conclusion

The main political parties in all the three countries; the UK, the USA and Australia are mobilized on the issue of climate change. These parties have raised the issue of climate change in their party programs as well as in electoral media campaigns. In past few elections, the issue of climate change have played significant role in the electoral campaigns of political parties of the three countries. A large segment of the society in the countries has paid much attention to climate change while deciding their votes. Similarly, the political parties have specific stance on climate change and it is included in the top items of their agendas and party programs.

Though, all main political parties in the stated countries are found keen in the issue of climate change but still one political party in each country is more mobilized, clearer, more responsible and more active as compared to other political parties. In the UK, the Labour Party, in the US, the Democratic Party, and in Australia, the Labor Party are more responsive and keen in playing major role at national and international level to deal with the climate crisis. In case, these political parties come into power in the UK, the US and Australia, there would be better chances to secure climate finance to deal with the climate crisis for the developing and poor economic countries around the globe.

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