

US climate action at last?

Congress may finally be poised to do something, though not enough.

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Last month the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released a report that is devastating, though not surprising. It lays out in no uncertain terms the work we must do to avoid the worst effects of climate change.

We've heard all of this before. Governments and corporations alike have wrung their collective hands and shrugged their collective shoulders, all to very little effect. Is there anything different this time?

One difference might be the report's specificity. It demonstrates the impact of climate change on specific regions at 1.5 degrees Celsius of warming, 2.0 degrees, and beyond. What has almost always been cast in global terms can now be seen in terms of the losses and dangers to specific communities.

Another potential difference is how fiercely the effects of climate change are now being felt worldwide. This is no longer about some abstract future or something happening to someone else. It's about a current reality, along with a future threat. The wildfires, floods, droughts, and storms are a constant reminder that climate change is catastrophically real.

The United States is the world's second-largest producer of emissions (after China), and there has been little movement toward putting the nation on track to net zero emissions by 2050—the trajectory necessary to limit warming to 1.5 degrees. Yet we are at last seeing climate change begin to have an impact on US policy. When the UN report was released, Congress was debating two major pieces of legislation: a \$1 trillion dollar infrastructure bill and a \$3.5 trillion budget resolution. Each could have an impact.

The infrastructure bill, which passed the Senate with a bipartisan supermajority, includes tens of billions of dollars to help communities prepare for climate change. By allocating this money, Republicans and Democrats implicitly agreed that climate change is both real and damaging. This suggests that Congress may be prepared to address climate change's effects in a bipartisan manner.

Addressing its causes, however, may persist as a one-party project. The budget resolution, which passed the Senate on a party-line vote, creates a framework in which to complete a spending bill and vote on it—all within the budget reconciliation process, a filibuster-proof path the majority takes when no bipartisan path exists. This second bill includes money to address the causes of climate change. It focuses on clean energy, emissions reductions through tax incentives and fines for polluters, and electric vehicles to replace gas vehicles for federal use.

Taken together, these two bills will be the most significant climate change legislation in US history. And they do far too little. Other legislation, like the Green New Deal-oriented THRIVE Act, lays out a clearer road map—one unlikely to be enacted. But a little is better than nothing. We don't know yet if this will be a moment to celebrate or a moment to mourn another lost opportunity. The IPCC report makes it

clear that we don't have much time left to tell.