

Like many others, I breathed an enormous sigh of relief when the presidential race was called for Joe Biden. Like many others, I will not entirely relax until Biden is actually sworn in. The failure of our current norm-breaking President (and his enablers) to accept the election results is both frustrating and frightening. It also helps explain why the most important early steps the Biden administration can take to protect the environment and restore environmental law are not directly environmental. Effective environmental policy requires effective government.

Here are my top three priorities for the new administration:

Re-emphasize the common good. America has always been more individualistic in its orientation than the rest of the west. But as a nation we used to openly acknowledge the notion of community, and that the community's needs should come before any individual's. In his 1961 inaugural address, JFK called on citizens to "ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." Somehow, in my mind beginning with the Reagan years, we turned badly away from the notion of shared national purpose in the mistaken idea that rampant individualism would somehow magically serve the common good.

Donald Trump, who has never served anyone's interests but his own, is the ultimate embodiment of excessive individualism. The sad state of our nation, awash in a pandemic, failing to even try to battle the climate crisis, and internally at each other's throats, should be the ultimate repudiation of the "greed is good" philosophy.

Joe Biden, with his long record of selfless service to the nation, is an excellent messenger for putting more emphasis on community. His administration should make that message its top rhetorical priority. It won't be an easy or quick task — it has, after all, been decades since this message has been publicly powerful. And it might seem like a distraction from taking needed action. But in the end, winning the rhetorical battle is essential. Only a nation that believes in community can believe in government as a power for good. And only a nation that believes in the common, rather than just the individual, good as a measure of success can or will protect common resources like the climate, the air, the water, and the nation's remarkable landscapes and wildlife.

Reinvigorate the civil service, and public service more generally. As President, Kennedy put his notion of public service into practice. He [created the Peace Corps](#) to provide opportunities for those willing to offer short-term public service to advance the cause of global peace. That's a model that should be repeated. In addition to reviving the Peace Corps (which has been mostly shut down by coronavirus concerns this year), Biden

should expand AmeriCorps. Our own Ken Alex and Jordan Diamond's [Grizzly Corps](#), which emphasizes community resilience and climate action, provides a great model.

But even more important than the temporary service track is the career Civil Service. Kennedy recruited thousands of the country's best and brightest to dedicate their careers to the public good. Since then, Republicans in particular have made a sport of villainizing and ridiculing hard-working public servants. Trump, of course, is the apotheosis. He has attacked the federal workforce relentlessly since his inauguration, most recently issuing an [Executive Order](#) that seeks to convert large numbers of civil servants to political positions terminable at will.

Government, especially government at the scale of the United States, simply cannot function at the whims of one person. Nor should it; that way lies authoritarianism. The US [employs more than 2 million people](#). Most of those have jobs that should not be subject to political oversight. A career in government needs to be attractive to capable people dedicated to the public good. Career staff keep the government functioning from one administration to the next, and help hold agencies to their appointed missions even when the White House is openly hostile to those missions. Requiring, as this administration would prefer, or even allowing, public employees to be political hacks is antithetical to effective governance. It can only further erode already low public faith in government. Which will further impede work that can only be done by government, notably protection of common resources.

Restore the role of science and expertise. For environmental policy (and, of course, other areas including health policy), both recognizing what our goals should be and achieving them require honest, and trusted, recognition of what the available scientific evidence tells us. And what it does not tell us. The Trump administration has been openly at war with science generally, and with federal scientists in particular, since taking office. The Biden administration has a great deal of work to do to reverse those efforts. It will need to revamp science advisory committees, assure agency scientists that their independence and work will be respected, recruit new staff to replace those chased out by the hostility of the Trump crew, and return to the Obama administration's laudable work to ensure scientific integrity in agencies.

There is much to do. It obviously would be easier with the help of Congress, but that doesn't look likely at the moment. Indeed, at every step the Biden administration looks likely to encounter active resistance. But failure is not an option. The new president and his administration must put reviving commitment to community, and restoring our battered governing institutions at the top of their priority list. If they cannot succeed in that task they will have little hope of accomplishing anything else.