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Brookings Cafeteria Podcast: After the Paris climate accord

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(music)

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews. In June, President Donald Trump announced that he would withdraw the United States from the Paris Climate Agreement, which one hundred ninety-five nations had signed in 2015. President Trump has called the Accord a bad deal for America and has claimed that it would cost jobs in America.

Joining me in the studio to talk about climate change and the effects of this decision is Nate Hultman. He's a nonresident senior fellow in our global economy and development program, and director of the Center for Global Sustainability and associate professor at the University of Maryland School of Public Policy. Stay tuned during the interview for another installment of Metro Lens, and keep up to date with the Brookings Podcast Network on Twitter @policypodcasts. Now, on with the interview. Nate, welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria.

HULTMAN: Thank you, happy to be here.

DEWS: So you were part of the Obama administration's climate and energy policy team when the Paris agreement was concluded. Can you tell me what it was like to be part of that?

HULTMAN: Well it was I think for not only the team there, but also the diversity of teams working around the world, both in government and outside of government. It was a remarkable experience. It was a moment where the world really truly did come together around a topic that we agreed and understood was an important and urgently necessary

topic and an urgently necessary path that we discussed together and came to a conclusion together about which was the Paris agreement.

DEWS: And the only two nations that didn't sign the Accord were Nicaragua and Syria, and they both had very valid reasons for signing it.

HULTMAN: The upshot of that statement is that this was a genuine global effort and a genuine global consensus and a genuine global agreement on both the urgency of the issue and also the approach that we had outlined to address the issue which involves frankly a lot of deference to individual countries and where their situations are but also a collective process to get countries to continue to look forward to understand what they could do in their own domestic economies that was in their own interests for their own people but also then moving forward collectively toward what we knew and still know are the important global goals for addressing climate change.

DEWS: And one of the chief features of the agreement as I understand it is that each nation had a voluntary plan. It's not a binding necessarily but each nation could go and figure out its own voluntary contributions to reducing its own emissions right.

HULTMAN: Absolutely. The idea of Paris is that we all agree that there are certain goals that we aim to achieve. And it's also recognized that the individual countries have the jurisdiction over their own areas, and that they are best equipped to understand what they can do and when and part of the idea of an international approach is that you can help coordinate understanding of what's going on and you can also create a system whereby neighbors can look at other countries and say look they're doing something interesting maybe we can too. It's a way to increase the ambition of the entirety of the

global community while retaining the ability of individual countries to set their own targets, and that's of course exactly what we did in the United States, it's what all the other countries did as well. They do have as you mentioned individually what are called nationally determined contributions that are derived from within from the domestic processes within each country.

DEWS: So I want to take us out to a more global view. You said that addressing climate change is urgently necessary. What is the urgency in addressing climate change now?

HULTMAN: Yeah well the impacts are already being felt in a number of ways this is of course climate change is a multifaceted problem it has a lot of different manifestations some of those are in the ways we expect, like heat waves or droughts, and those are happening as our scientists tell us the ones that are happening are much more likely to happen under climate change scenarios. But there are other ways that climate change manifests as well. Warmer winters, melting of ice, and sea level rise, and we're experiencing the initial impacts even from those kinds of impacts in many places across the world.

DEWS: So this is a very broad question but you've addressed it. You called Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris agreement a major error. Why is it a major error?

HULTMAN: Yeah well that's probably an understatement in terms of what the actual reality is. It's an error for a couple of reasons. And first and foremost the United States has been playing in recent years a very important leadership role in the global

community. The lack of that leadership will be felt, it will in fact slow down it will harm the ability of the global community to hit its overall targets. It's not the end of the story, but it will hurt. And I think we have to acknowledge that you know the withdrawal of the United States, and the lack of leadership from the federal level in the United States is a significant if potentially temporary blow to the process. Now that said there are a number of reasons to believe that the overall process within Paris and even more broadly the all global effort to address climate change and to continue to drive for the transition in our global energy system that will not stop. There are a lot of reasons that won't stop. Not least the fact that a lot of response to Trump's decision has been to kind of double down, and increase the effort in other places to hit those targets.

DEWS: And one of the chief criticisms that President Trump and his supporters have been putting forth about this agreement, and for a long time about climate change responses in general is that; well look China and India and the developing world out they're huge emitters of greenhouse gas emissions. They're not going to slow down. Why should the United States and its economy make a huge sacrifice while these other countries aren't going to reduce their emissions. How do you respond to that?

HULTMAN: Yeah well that was an argument that came up a lot after a long ago treaty was negotiated called the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, and that created a lot of discussion. In the Kyoto Protocol, things were dealt with differently and there were in fact two groups of countries under that structure that had essentially different kinds of obligations. In today's world, 20 years later 20 plus years later, it is absolutely the case that the world is no longer simply developed and developing countries. It is a world where there is a lot of growth coming from middle income countries as countries embark on their

development trajectories as we want them to do. They are facing a world of potentially increasing emissions and China and India are examples of countries that are now major emitters even though historically speaking they haven't been. But that means that from the climate's perspective, those countries are very important. The good news there is that of course we as a global community have recognized this and those countries with the rest of the global community under Paris have agreed to essentially treat all countries alike under the Paris framework.

That's not to say every country is expected to do the exact same thing. There is a diversity of kinds of countries out there and it's certainly true that the poorest countries are not expect to do the same as the richest countries under this kind of approach. But Paris covers all countries in the same way. And that was deliberately put in there to address the question that you raised which is why would one country want to do something when large emitters, in fact China's the world's largest emitter. The reality of Paris though is that those countries have agreed to take on emissions limitations of their own and different kinds of approaches that they'll take to addressing climate change in their own countries. So it was actually the United States and China hand-in-hand were the first two countries to offer a pledge in advance of Paris about what we would do with our own emissions both in the United States and in China. Each one of those targets was generated internally, they’re domestically generated targets under our own processes. But both the United States and China put forward ambitious targets and that actually catalyzed a lot of both interest in the discussions before the Paris agreement was negotiated and also a lot of ambition in other countries as they looked to the world's two biggest emitters saying that we were in this game to do something significant.

DEWS: Can you address in some more detail of what these emissions targets mean whether it's at a national level or a global level. There's a criticism that maybe the targets themselves are too ambitious and there's really nothing we can do about it anyway.

HULTMAN: Let me put it this way I don't think the targets are too ambitious. I think the targets as a whole in front of Paris I think many people looked at those targets and thought that those were actually pretty good set of targets. There was a lot of skepticism in advance of Paris that the targets would be excessively weak that there was no way we could ever get countries to kind of reach higher and try to actually solve this problem collectively. The pledges that were put down were I think again there's heterogeneity there's some difference in the kind of target that each country put forward. And of course some differences in the level of ambition across countries, but as a whole day aggregate to a relatively ambitious set of targets that keep us on a path toward the long term goals that the scientific community and the policy community have agreed we should aim for. Now you hit an interesting point which is what's the quote unquote right level of ambition and you do want a target that is achievable, targets should be credible, and in the United States we certainly aim to get a target that was ambitious but achievable are ambitious and achievable. And I think other countries tried to hit that balance. There are opportunities in coming years for countries as they start to implement their target to learn about what works for them best and what doesn't work and then they'll have a chance to put a new target down hopefully more ambitious target in 2020.

DEWS: You mentioned a few minutes ago the lack of federal leadership, you emphasized federal leadership, now that the president Trump is withdrawing us from

Paris. Something we've seen since this decision is the rise in the number of states and localities especially a bipartisan group of mayors who are saying we're still in it, we're still in the Paris agreement, and we're still going to innovate and try to reduce emissions. Can you talk about the effect that that will have, action at the sub federal level, in terms of reducing emissions, whereas the federal government may not participate?

HULTMAN: Well that's been frankly heartening, and I think to many people a kind of surprisingly ambitious response from a lot of our subnational entities in the United States, and even in other parts of the world as well, an affirmation that even without federal leadership many large states representing a significant fraction of our United States GDP, and a lot of our innovative centers around the country. California is of course the key sort of the notable leader in that case. But there's a number of other states and municipalities that are participating as well.

These actors collectively can in fact make a difference and they will if they continue to implement the policies that they have control of, and we have to remember we're a federal system the federal government has jurisdiction over a large number of policy levers, but cities and states have a lot of power in terms of their own energy economies. You know, cities do a lot of decision making about transportation systems and states can do a lot of decision making around electricity systems and renewable standards that they like to implement. So there are concrete specific kinds of actions that these nonfederal actors states and municipalities and other other entities here in the United States can take to try to continue to increase their ambition and to drive their emissions down. One interesting question of course arises as to how big of a gap can they fill? And I think as more players come into this space and make commitments or even new commitments or

raise earlier commitments there is a large analytical effort and a lot of interest in sort of trying to better understand how much this will actually add up to and I think that there is some hope that these numbers together can start to cobble together to add up to something close to our U.S. national target, but that's really an open question. And I think that'll be something we'll have to continue to look into, but as we do so it will be important to those states and cities to understand how they can actually contribute and what their contribution is actually making to the overall effort.

DEWS: Well are there ways that the federal government here in Washington D.C. can subvert or thwart subnational action in the United States?

HULTMAN: You know I think there are certainly some ways I mean you know even just in thinking about things like it's more the lack of regulatory support for different kinds of things. Now I'll explain what I mean in a minute, but clearly there are other elements of the federal process including most notably budget for things like infrastructure. We do know that cities are going to be replacing a lot of infrastructure over the coming decades, and that infrastructure has a very long lifetime. We do want to make sure that the infrastructure we do install is sustainable in as broad a context as we can make it including climate change. And so to the extent that the federal government isn't supporting that or is not putting federal tax dollars toward that kind of work that's negative. Equally importantly there has been a lot of regulatory effort under our existing legislation here in the United States the cleaner act and Energy Policy Act of various kinds that have been supporting deployment of cleaner energy in the United States. And of course Trump's regulatory actions of recent months have sought to roll that back and we're still in the process of observing what exactly that will mean. But it is unequivocal that without that

kind of vigorous roll out by the EPA of say the Clean Power Plan that that federal kind of guideline for where states ought to be under certain timelines will no longer be there. So it really does kind of flip back to the states to how they want to push forward with their own energy systems.

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DEWS: Let's take a quick break here in a new installment of our Metro Lens – a deep dive into the policies and economics of metropolitan regions in the U.S. and abroad. In today's edition meet the out-of-work in Western Ohio.

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ROSS: Hi I'm Martha Ross, I'm a fellow with the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program. Montgomery County Ohio, and its biggest city Dayton, have struggled to adjust to economic changes in the past few decades. The decline in manufacturing jobs has hit the area hard, and it is no longer the industrial powerhouse it once was. The county often comes out on the wrong side of various statistics with below average employment rates, and educational levels, and above average disability rates. My co-author Natalie Holmes and I examined Montgomery County along with more than 100 other cities and counties in our new analysis, "Meet the Out of Work." Our goal was to go beyond the unemployment headlines to get a better sense of the people who are on the sidelines of the labor market, and because not all places fair equally well in the global economy. We want to look at the local level since statistics at the national state and even regional level can mask substantial disparities. Montgomery County is in the southwestern part of Ohio, the same part of the state that author J.D. Vance grew up in and described in his memoir

hillbilly Elegy. It has a population of about 530,000 including Dayton. We identified different groups within Montgomery counties out of work population, and as in other jurisdictions the largest group is what we call less educated prime age people. Those with the high school diploma are less and primarily between the ages of 25 and 54. This group accounts for 41 percent of all out-of-work people in Montgomery County. They have a median age of 39. Nearly half of them are male, and about one quarter worked in the past year. Two thirds are white, 27 percent are African-American, and 8 percent are Latino. They have a median family income of about 25,000 and about a third are caring for children. Twenty five percent report having a disability. This is a group facing a lot of barriers to employment. As we outlined in the report, there are multiple strategies to help people improve their skills, get a job, and increase their earnings. These different approaches share two core characteristics. First, they offer education training and job search assistance tied to local labor market demand. They use labor market data and engage with employers to ensure that their curriculum and courses match up with current and projected job openings. And second, they tailor their programs to meet the needs of the people they are serving. They may help people improve their reading and math skills in order to succeed in college courses, job training, and apprenticeships. They may arrange childcare. They may provide coaching and mentoring, and so on, but on its own more education and training won't get the job done especially in weak market economies. As my colleague Amy Lou has highlighted, skills training and workforce preparation should be an integral part of a region's economic development strategy. This is hard, and long term work. But if regions knit together and build on their assets such as industry clusters, civic leadership, and educational institutions, they can grow good jobs prepare

and connect residents to those jobs and build or maintain a competitive advantage. This endeavor is a marathon, not a sprint, but it is not a race we want to lose.

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DEWS: You can find the report by Martha Ross and Natalie Holmes titled, “Meet the Out of Work,” on our web site and listen to more metro lens segments on our Soundcloud channel. And now back to my interview with Nate Hultman.

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DEWS: Another issue I’ve read bout in the regulatory sphere and it affects California is the potential rollback of California’s fuel economy standards which are much higher than nationally. Can you address that issue?

HULTMAN: Yes. This gets to sort of interesting longer term issue with the relationship of California to the United States as a whole which is that California has had since early days of trying to grapple with its own what were at the time very severe air pollution problems, relative to the rest of the country, was granted some essentially exceptions from the federal sort of regular regulatory levels to actually set its own much more stringent levels in California. And that's been kind of a regular and recognized part of our regulatory process under environment for many decades now that extends to vehicle standards and there is currently a discussion or debate about whether the Trump administration will cease giving California the opportunity to do its own thing. That discussion I think is going to play out and we'll see where that lands. But clearly that could be a way that the federal government can inhibit sort of what California would like to do. No doubt the federal government would say it has certain kinds of reasons for doing it.

But I would also not be surprised at all if we saw a very vigorous legal and other push back from California to try to defend its opportunities to continue to regulate in its own way.

DEWS: One question about the economy and jobs, I mentioned this at the introduction of the show. The Trump administration recently cited a study that claimed that the Paris climate accord would by the year 2040 cost the U.S. economy three trillion dollars and 6.5 million industrial sector jobs. Is this accurate?

HULTMAN: It's not accurate actually. That study has been addressed a number of different ways. I think addressing individual flaws with the study is probably more than we have bandwidth to deal with to talk today. But suffice it to say there are a couple of big problems that are easy to comprehend about that study. One problem in particular is that if you're going to make a policy decision you want to look at the costs and the benefits of making a decision. The whole reason we're addressing climate change is because we feel that there are going to be negative impacts of climate change and there are different estimates of what that might be. One study recently reputable study thought something like 20 percent of GDP by the year 2100 is a significant major blow to the global economy. And this is just putting things and money numbers not in terms of culture and lives and other things which are equally if not obviously more important than that. Another study looked at something like a $400 trillion global cost of climate change and again these numbers are, I don't want to fixate on any one number. There's a lot of assumptions that go into these big picture numbers and they're good studies they're robust, but the point being that the damages, the impacts of climate change are significant. If we don't do anything about it, there is significant harm in the long term and even in the short term.

The nearest that you cite pays no attention to the impacts. It just looks at the costs. So if you're making a decision about policy and you only look at the costs well you might say well that's a lot of money. We shouldn't do it, but that's a silly thing to do if you don't actually look at what essentially the benefits of avoiding climate change would be. So that's a big problem with this study. And a second sort of other problem with this study is that the estimates of costs are by far too high. They look at a very inefficient way to get the reductions. It's not the way that anybody would actually, any rational world try to get emissions reductions. And it's kind of an inflated number in that sense and it doesn't actually float in terms of reality. So there's a lot of reasons that that particular number is not reliable, and I think that for the bigger picture what we have to keep our eye on is that addressing this problem will entail some restructuring of the economy that will have some impacts on specific individual sectors that we have to pay attention to. And I'm even going to say yeah we have to pay attention to people in the coal industry who are going to get displaced. You know there's something like 52,000 coal miners, we have to think about what that community will do under a longer decadal transition away from fossil fuels, but also that's not that big a part of the U.S. economy, and there are lots of other parts of the economy that might in fact grow very quickly out of this clean energy economy transition. There's something like three million jobs that are currently supported by clean energy and energy efficiency. So we have to kind of look at the economy as a whole and what happens under an energy transition relating to climate change, and then also think about what we actually get from our investment in terms of avoiding climate change.

DEWS: We talk a lot about government response to climate change, and global agreements, regulatory action. What about the role of private sector innovation in

technology in clean energy, in terms of decreasing our emissions, and trying to decrease long term climate change danger?

HULTMAN: Well you're absolutely right to highlight this and I use the term earlier this energy transition, and while it is true that we have some technologies that are currently cost competitive right now off the shelf solar panels will become very cheap when power is cost competitive in many locations around the U.S. we have an advent of potentially electric vehicles becoming much more widespread over coming years with dramatic advances in the integration of the systems but also the battery costs have come down dramatically. So we have a number of technologies that have become cost competitive, but even those won't be enough, like we will need more ideas and we will need more and better kinds of technology. As we look at this process that will really take several decades to take place. We do need to aim for a world where we reduce emissions globally by something like you know in the U.S. at least by something like 80 percent by mid-century and globally something like 80 or 90 percent by the end of the century. And so this is a big job requires a major transition in the, you know finding new technologies is a key element of that.

One thing that I think is important for us in the particularly in the United States to remember as we're having our debates and conversations about how we want to move forward under the current situation and what individual actors whether it's private sector companies or states or cities or other even individuals want to do is that we in the United States have always been a locus of innovation, and we are frankly we are good at it. We have good capital markets.

We have elite universities that sort of feed into this process we have a well-established culture of entrepreneurship and innovation and we ought to be the place where a lot of the solutions to these problems are being found, and I'm confident that our entrepreneurs even today are hard at work on those problems. And we just want to be sure that our infrastructure, our government infrastructure, regulatory infrastructure, and our policies are aligned so that when these inventions kind of come out when the innovations are made that there's enough of a symbiotic relationship between market development and the innovations that are coming out that those good ideas thrive here and that we can grow our industries here we can grow our jobs here and actually turn this into something that is not only globally beneficial but also helps our own economy significantly.

DEWS: I'd like to finish Nate by asking you to respond to what I think of as kind of a philosophical question, and that's why do you think there's so much opposition to the established science of anthropogenic or manmade climate change in the U.S. when we just recently saw the secretary of energy Rick Perry doubting human contribution to climate change. Why do you think that is?

HULTMAN: Yeah that's a great question. As you note, it is an issue here in this country about climate science and the associated scientific disciplines that touch on climate change. We are essentially unique globally in having such a public controversy about what ultimately is science, and is something that the scientific community has essentially reached about as strong a consensus as a scientific community can that what we're doing to the atmosphere is going to have consequences and is having consequences now. So it's not really a question about the science itself, it's more of a

question about us, and how we understand and interact with expert knowledge in the scientific community and the scientific output that we're seeing. I would read it sort of less about the science, and maybe more about our current politics, and I know that that's a broad topic it's a topic that many of us on both sides of the aisle are frustrated with right now. But it is the case that the scientific questions become meshed in a lot of the political perspectives.

And in a time when we have even difficulties establishing basic facts in the media and that there is controversy, and actually disinformation out there coming from various political angles that that makes it very hard for the reality of climate, and reality of what the climate crisis to actually manifest in the public debate. So what I'd like to do is sort of end on a slightly more positive note on that which is to recognize that we do have this controversy and you know you're right to point it out, but also to kind of say look for those of us who are serious about trying to address our politics and sort of try to stitch together some of those problems that have been kind of rending us apart, this is an area where we ought to look and I think it's important to look not only at the science and the facts of climate change, but also to kind of think carefully and talk to each other about our values and how those values are affected by the potential impacts that we're looking at. And those are some things that I think many people many Americans can relate to thinking about how it affects our communities how it might affect our elderly how it might affect public health, and how it can of course affect our broader environment.

DEWS: Well I want to thank you for sharing your time and expertise today.

HULTMAN: My pleasure, thanks.

DEWS: You can learn more about Nate Hultman, and his research on our web site brookings.edu. You can also visit the Center for Global Sustainability at the University of Maryland.

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DEWS: Hey listeners, want to ask an expert a question? You can by sending an e-mail to me at BCP@brookings.edu. If you attach an audio file, I'll play it on the air, and I'll get an expert to answer and include it in an upcoming episode. Thanks to all of you who have sent in questions already.

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DEWS: That does it for this edition of The Brookings Cafeteria, brought to you by the Brookings podcast network. Follow us on Twitter @policypodcasts. My thanks to audio engineer and producer Gaston Reboredo, with assistance from Mark Hoelscher. Vanessa Sauter is the producer, Bill Finan does the book interviews. Out interns are Sam Dart, Chynna Holmes, and Brian Harrington. Design and web support comes from Jessiva Pavone, Eric Abalahin, and Rebecca Viser. And thanks to David Nassar and Richard Fawal for their support. You can subscribe to the Brookings Cafeteria on Apple podcasts or wherever you get podcasts, and listen to it in all the usual places. Visit us online at Brookings.edu. Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.