



The images of a paralysed New York City at the mercy of Hurricane Sandy's wall of water have forced climate change on to the political agenda in the final week of the 2012 presidential election campaign. Even before Sandy made landfall political commentators were debating whether the storm would be better for Mitt Romney or Barack Obama. In any event it has brought forth statements from prominent Democrats and elected officials on climate change and spurred public debate about the neglected topic.

Campaigners said the devastating storm could turn out to be the October Surprise of the elections, exposing Republicans' failure to engage with an issue that is no longer a distant threat, but a present day danger.

Bill Clinton, campaigning for Barack Obama in Minnesota, attacked Romney for using climate change as a laugh line in his convention speech. "He ridiculed the president for his efforts to fight global warming in economically beneficial ways. He said, 'Oh, you're going to turn back the seas,'" Clinton told a rally. "In my part of America, we would like it if someone could've done that yesterday."

He went on to argue the local leaders from both parties were already ahead of Romney and Republicans in Congress in engaging with the issue. Michael Bloomberg, a Republican, and Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat, have both cited Sandy as evidence of climate change.

"All up and down the east coast, there are mayors, many of them Republicans, who are being told, 'You've got to move these houses back away from the ocean. You've got to lift them up. Climate change is going to raise the water levels on a permanent basis. If you want your town insured, you have to do this,'" Clinton said.

Al Gore in a statement on his website sounded a similar theme, calling for Sandy to serve as a brutal wakeup call to the realities of climate change, much as floods in Nashville hit home for him in 2010.

"For many, Hurricane Sandy may prove to be a similar event: a time when the climate crisis – which is often sequestered to the far reaches of our everyday awareness became a reality," Gore wrote.

"Hurricane Sandy is a disturbing sign of things to come. We must heed this warning and act quickly to solve the climate crisis. Dirty energy makes dirty weather."

The Republican contender had tried to cast Obama's promise for action on global warming as a sign of grandiosity.

Romney and Obama have avoided mentioning climate change on the campaign trail and the topic did not get a single mention in the televised presidential debates – for the first time since 1988. The absence has frustrated campaigners who say this year's heat waves, drought, wildfires – and now Sandy – provide ample evidence of climate change and of the urgency for action.

"Climate change used to be a science of projection. Now it is a science of attribution," said Angela Anderson, climate and energy director for the Union of Concerned Scientists. She also argued the public was ahead of political leaders in engaging with the topic.

"People are beginning to connect extreme weather events to climate change more and more at the same moment that there is this deafening silence, so that is incredibly disappointing."

Multiple studies have linked the warming of the atmosphere and the oceans to stronger Atlantic storms – though scientists balk at attributing a single severe storm such as Sandy to climate change.

"The terrifying truth is that America faces a future full of Frankenstorms," said Shaye Wolf, the climate science director for the Centre for Biological Diversity. "Climate change raises sea levels and super-sizes storms. The threat of killer winds and crushing storm surges will grow by the year unless we get serious about tackling greenhouse gas pollution."

Warmer ocean temperatures add more energy to storms. Warmer air holds more moisture, which means more rainfall. Sandy dumped more than 11 inches of rain in some parts of New Jersey, according to Nasa.

In addition, there is growing evidence that Americans are increasingly vulnerable to such severe events.

Sea-level rise, due to climate change, makes for more extreme storm surges. And sea-level rise in the north-eastern US is occurring three or four times faster than the global average, putting more Americans in harm's way. About 100 million Americans live in coastal areas within 3ft of mean sea level in cities such as Boston and Miami as well as New York.

As Mike Tidwell, the founder of Chesapeake Climate Action, wrote this week: "We are all from New Orleans now. Climate change – through the measurable rise of sea levels and a documented increase in the intensity of Atlantic storms – has made 100 million Americans virtually as vulnerable to catastrophe as the victims of Hurricane Katrina were seven years ago."