



ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY IN THE 2020 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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The role the United States should play in fighting climate change was one of the key topics in the Democratic primary debates. Around the world protests from the younger generation have demanded that governments hold corporations accountable for greenhouse gas emissions and other practices leading to global warming. In the United States 2020 Presidential election, environmental policy stands as the eleventh most important topic for voters¹ with around 42% of registered voters proclaiming that climate change is “very important to their vote.”² For Biden supporters, 68% claim that climate change is very important while only 11% of Trump supporters share that sentiment.

The Trump administration has emphasized the role of the federal government in its environmental policies, attempting to decrease the power of states such as California. For example, the current administration has decreased state emission targets set under the Clean Power Plan. A Supreme Court ruling in 2007 stated that greenhouse gases are within the Clean Air Act’s definition of an air pollutant, and thus can be regulated as such.³ Therefore, The Clean Power Plan

assigned states different emission reduction targets and provided them with the flexibility to reach these goals.⁴ Opponents of the Clean Power Plan also brought forth lawsuits against the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) stating it had exceeded its authority and this would cause States to, for example, increase reliance on natural gas and renewable energy sources for electricity generation. In place of the Clean Power Plan, the EPA has implemented a new Affordable Clean Energy (ACE) rule which requires that power plants meet much more modest emission targets through on-site improvements in their heat-rate efficiency.⁵ The new ACE rule was done in response to President Trump’s Executive Order 13873 – Promoting Energy Independence and Economic Growth.⁶

Additionally, the Trump administration reduced the fuel economy standards target to an average of 37 miles per gallon, down from the 54 miles per gallon set by the Obama administration.⁷ This created a large

1 <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/08/13/important-issues-in-the-2020-election/>

2 Ibid.

3 <https://www.brookings.edu/policy2020/votervital/>

[what-is-the-trump-administrations-track-record-on-the-environment/](https://www.brookings.edu/policy2020/votervital/)

4 Ibid.

5 <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R44341.pdf>

6 <https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/epa-finalizes-affordable-clean-energy-rule-ensuring-reliable-diversified-energy>

7 <https://academic.oup.com/publius/article-abstract/49/3/379/5530676?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

federalism dispute between the Trump administration and California. California had received EPA waivers during the Obama administration to create its own – more stringent – policy guidelines but that waiver was revoked in 2019 leading to an ongoing legal battle.⁸ Finally, the Trump administration has shown a desire to revise the Waters of the United States (WOTUS) to eliminate protections for more than half of all wetlands and nearly a fifth of streams that do not have relatively permanent surface water connections to nearby waterways.⁹

THE CANDIDATES

Vice President Biden:

It has been a central point of the Democratic Party to present a comprehensive environmental policy plan that would be enacted under the Biden administration. This includes a commitment to curb the effects of climate change.¹⁰ Former Vice President Joe Biden has proposed the “Biden Plan,” also known as “Build Back Better plan,” which has the ultimate goal of leading a national effort aimed at creating jobs to build modern and sustainable infrastructure and delivering an equitable clean energy future.¹¹ Along these lines, the Democratic Party Platform includes a focus on environment policy, specifically “combating the climate crisis and pursuing environmental justice.”¹² The ultimate goal of this plan is to ensure that the United States can be on track to achieve net-zero emissions, economy wide, no later than 2050.¹³

The Biden plan, with an estimated cost of 2 trillion

8 <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/17/climate/trump-california-emissions-waiver.html>

9 <https://academic.oup.com/publius/article-abstract/49/3/379/5530676?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

10 <https://democrats.org/where-we-stand/the-issues/environment/>

11 <https://joebiden.com/clean-energy/#>

12 <https://democrats.org/where-we-stand/party-platform/combating-the-climate-crisis-and-pursuing-environmental-justice/>

13 <https://joebiden.com/clean-energy/#>

dollars over his first term, will focus on creating union jobs in the infrastructure, auto industry, transit, and power sector. This plan would be spearheaded by the federal government with the intention of revolutionizing municipal transit networks and improving drinking water across the country. The Biden-Harris ticket also hopes to reinstate the fuel economy standards that President Obama implemented during his time in office. In opposition to the Trump administration, Democrats affirm California’s statutory authority under the Clean Air Act to set its own emissions standards for cars and trucks. The Biden campaign promises that a Biden administration would convene California and other states with labor, auto industry, and environmental leaders to develop executive actions that will enable the United States to build a clean infrastructure program going forward.

Biden’s “Plan to Ensure the Future is Made in All of America by America’s Workers” proposes using the full extent of the federal government’s resources from “purchasing power, R&D, tax, trade, and investment policies” in hopes of propelling America to be the global leader in manufacturing electric vehicles. Biden also plans to increase demand for American made clean vehicles by increasing federal procurement by \$400 billion.

Tax incentives will also be reformed and extended with the hope of creating an innovative Energy Efficiency and Clean Electricity Standard (EECES). Democrats promise to restore “protections for irreplaceable public lands and waters, from Bears Ears National Monument to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge”¹⁴ with the aim of reducing oil production on public land. Biden also intends to focus on the inequality that is caused by the climate crisis by focusing on ensuring racial and socioeconomic equity in federal climate, energy, and infrastructure programs. The Biden plan claims it will decrease cost of living by making energy-saving upgrades to two million low-income households. In addition, if elected Biden intends to rejoin the Paris Climate Agreement from which President Trump withdrew the United States in 2020.

14 <https://democrats.org/where-we-stand/party-platform/combating-the-climate-crisis-and-pursuing-environmental-justice/>

President Trump:

In his three years in office, President Trump has successfully reversed, revoked, or rolled back 68 environment rules and regulation policies to align with his stance on environment policy.¹⁵ President Trump believes that the Obama administration rules on carbon dioxide emission were unnecessary and burdensome to the fossil fuel industry and economic growth in general.¹⁶ The administration's Environmental Protection Agency has proposed less stringent rules for power plants and protections for wetlands. These rollbacks align with the goal of preventing states from enacting stricter tailpipe emissions standards than the federal government.¹⁷

In addition, President Trump's change of the National Environmental Policy Act allows for an expedited approval process of public infrastructure projects.¹⁸ President Trump has made it evident that he believes the Obama administration's policies - especially on car fuel emissions - have led to a higher cost of living for many Americans. This was accentuated in the Presidential debate on October 3, 2020, in which he emphasized that cost-benefit analysis should be at the forefront of economic policy.¹⁹ Trump claimed that due to his vehicle emissions rollbacks, more US citizens have been able to afford vehicles at a cheaper price²⁰: "the car is much less expensive and it's a much safer car. And you're talking about a tiny difference [in gas usage]."²¹ President Trump proclaimed that he is not against electric cars and does believe in "big incentives for electric cars."²² He believes that due to

California's large market, the implementation of their fuel efficiency standards will force car companies to aim for the California standard, which will increase the cost of cars for everyone in the United States. For Trump's administration, the question is: why should California be able to dictate the rest of the country's fuel standards? To achieve lower cost cars, that are safer than older models, the restrictions must be more gradual. The Trump administration's fuel-standards are projected to decrease the cost of vehicles by roughly \$1000.²³ A statement from Andrew Wheeler, the head of the EPA, emphasizes this administration's policy: "We embrace federalism and the role of the states, but federalism does not mean that one state can dictate standards for the nation."²⁴

Trump also stated the Obama-era regulations on power plant emissions have "driven energy prices through the sky."²⁵ This reasoning forms the basis behind his rollbacks of the Obama Clean Power Plan.²⁶ President Trump admitted that human pollution, greenhouse gas emissions contribute to global warming "to an extent," but blames poor "forest management" for the deadly forest fires in California.²⁷ Better forest management has been a focus of the Trump administration since 2018, where they requested that Congress pass a Farm Bill which included "robust fire protection and forest management provisions."²⁸ The 115th Congress passed two laws (Forest Management Activities Act referred to as the FY2018 Omnibus & the Agricultural Improvement Act commonly referred to as the "Farm Bill") in accordance with the administration's forest management policy.²⁹ In the

15 <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/climate/trump-environment-rollbacks-list.html>

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/09/30/presidential-debate-read-full-transcript-first-debate/3587462001/>

20 <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/09/try-be-serious-climate-policy-gets-rare-notice-chaotic-presidential-debate>

21 <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/09/30/presidential-debate-read-full-transcript-first-debate/3587462001/>

22 <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2020-05-27/>

[becerra-files-new-environmental-lawsuit-against-trump-administration](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/17/climate/trump-california-emissions-waiver.html)

23 <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/17/climate/trump-california-emissions-waiver.html>

24 <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/09/30/presidential-debate-read-full-transcript-first-debate/3587462001/>

25 <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2020-05-27/becerra-files-new-environmental-lawsuit-against-trump-administration>

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-urges-congressional-action-improve-forest-management-help-prevent-wildfires/>

29 <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R45696.pdf>

debate Trump did aim his attacks on the Democratic Green New Deal, focusing on its estimated cost, but did not mention the Biden Plan.³⁰ These actions also align with the Trump administration's withdrawal of an Obama administration order that mandated the consideration of climate change when managing natural resources in national parks.³¹

Altogether, environmental policy in a second term Trump administration would focus on energy independence, and improving the "Energy Dominance"³² initiative, which has sought to streamline the domestic energy production process,³³ lower cost of living, and decrease international vulnerability to regions like the Middle East.

30 <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/09/try-be-serious-climate-policy-gets-rare-notice-chaotic-presidential-debate>

31 <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/climate/trump-environment-rollbacks-list.html>

32 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-unleashing-american-energy-dominance/>

33 <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2017/03/how-trump-is-changing-science-environment/#close>