

Among the sleeper provisions of the new budget deal is a ban on enforcing federal lightbulb standards. This is a great example of symbolic politics — it makes Tea Party Republicans happy, has limited practical effect, and makes little policy sense.

Or to put it another way, the enforcement ban is a dumb thing to do in practical terms. The policy wonk in me quails. But at the same time it's good to know that conservatives didn't have enough leverage for something more important, like depriving EPA of jurisdiction over greenhouse gases. In fact, they haven't had enough leverage to actually overturn the regulations; the best they can do is leave them in effect but temporarily suspend funding for enforcement. If enforcement funding ever comes through, anyone who violates the regs during the moratorium will be subject to sanctions.

Unlike many GOP policies, the moratorium doesn't favor the business community. U.S. producers have all switched to modern, energy-efficient light sources, they support the ban. And they are unlikely to invest in switching back just because there's a moratorium on U.S. enforcement, especially when the old-fashioned bulbs have been phased out in many other parts of the world.

From a policy point of view, the federal standards make a great deal of sense. There are good reason that, when George W. Bush signed the legislation, the lightbulb standards had bipartisan support. Among other benefits, they save consumers quite a bit of money. By reducing energy use, they also diminish air pollution from electricity generators.

Rather than business, opposition comes from the Republican grassroots, particularly the Tea Party. The lightbulb regulations are actually a small part of the energy efficiency effort — much less significant, for example, than CAFE standards for cars. But changes in light sources are much more visible than changes in the design of car engines or electrical appliances. So they have become a convenient focal point for anti-government sentiment.

Eventually, this issue will fade away. New types of bulbs will get cheaper and better, and people will become accustomed to them. Old-fashioned incandescents will be seen as what they are: an obsolete technology. In the meantime, we will have to put up with people fighting a rearguard action against progress.