

Over the past three presidential elections, the battle lines over energy and climate policy have shifted. Coal, once a political flash point, has almost disappeared as an issue, with oil and gas production in unchallenged first place for Republicans. Clean energy subsidies, a side-issue in 2016, have now taken center stage, while EPA regulations get much less attention. The one thing that remains unchanged is the gulf between the parties.

The Eclipse of Coal in Favor of Oil and Gas

Coal was a major focus of Trump's rhetoric in the 2016 campaign. As I [wrote](#) in 2020, One of Trump's iconic campaign photos showed him with a sign saying "Trump Digs Coal." He vowed to bring back the coal industry. Even after his election, he delighted in photo ops with coal miners (many of whom turned out to be coal company executives) wearing their helmets. "But," I wrote four years ago, "those days are gone," and I couldn't remember the last time Trump had referred to coal.

That remains true today. If there was once a political war over coal, it no longer figures in the national debate.

Instead, oil and gas production is now the dominant issue in GOP energy discourse, exemplified by the 2024 platform's [boast](#) that "Under President Trump, the U.S. became the Number One Producer of Oil and Natural Gas in the World." In his nomination speech, Trump pledged, "We will drill, baby, drill." Later in the speech, he said:

"So much starts with energy. And remember, we have more liquid gold under our feet than any other country by far. We are a nation that has the opportunity to make an absolute fortune with its energy. We have it and China doesn't. Under the Trump administration just three and a half years ago, we were energy independent. But soon we will actually be better than that. We will be energy dominant and supply not only ourselves, but we will supply the rest of the world."

"Drill, baby, drill" goes back at least to John McCain's presidential campaign, but it didn't used to be the alpha and omega of Republican energy policy.

The Rising Focus on Subsidies Rather Than Regulations

In another important development, government regulations are getting less attention than spending programs. In his 2024 acceptance speech, Trump said, "They've spent trillions of dollars on things having to do with the Green New Scam. It's a scam." He singled out government support for charging stations as a prime example.

As to EVs themselves, Trump said, “I will end the electric vehicle mandate on day one. Thereby saving the U.S. auto industry from complete obliteration, which is happening right now and saving U.S. customers thousands and thousands of dollars per car.” Still, he couldn’t bring himself to completely condemn EVs: “And by the way, I’m all for electric. They have their application. But if somebody wants to buy a gas-powered car, gasoline-powered car, or a hybrid, they’re going to be able to do it.” [Not a typo: the transcript refers to both “gas-powered” and “gasoline-powered” cars. A charitable explanation is that he meant to refer to hydrogen.]

In contrast, Democrats unsurprisingly trumpet their clean energy spending:

“His [Biden’s] landmark legislation has unleashed a clean energy boom that’s reducing pollution, lowering energy costs, and has already created over 300,000 good-paying American jobs. He is on track to protect more of America’s lands and waters than any president before him, and he has restored our global climate leadership.”

According to Democrats, it’s the fossil fuel industry that is sucking up money with no public benefit: “We’ll also eliminate tens of billions of dollars in unfair oil and gas subsidies and hold oil and gas executives accountable for potential collusion or price gouging.”

In this election regulations have been pushed from center stage, other than Trump’s diatribe against the so-called electric vehicle mandate. Trump never mentioned EPA, once a Republican *bête noire*. Trump did call in very general terms for slashing regulations of all kinds, but without specifying environmental regulations. On the Democratic side, regulations have also faded in importance. Apart from a passing reference to energy efficiency standards, the lengthy section of the Democratic platform on energy and environment says little about regulation and a lot about investment in clean energy.

The changes in discourse mirror shifts in the focus of environmental and energy policy. No one expects coal to make a comeback. The Supreme Court implemented Trump’s 2016 platform by striking down the Clean Power Plan. EPA regulation is no longer the central battleground in climate policy. Instead, the biggest force for change – and therefore the biggest focus of opposition – involves the huge funding for clean energy subsidies in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Inflation Reduction Act. Emission regulations are serving as auxiliaries to green industrial policy but are no longer the driving force of change.

Thus, the current debate reflects victories on both sides: Trump’s success in appointing Justices hostile to environmental regulation, and Biden’s success in passing major climate

funding.