

I've been reading a lot of executive orders (EOs) lately. Trump's orders have a special tone, combining bluster about his own authority with attacks on his opponents as ideologues who threaten the country. It struck me that this aura of imperiousness and hostility was something new in the world of presidential documents. To test this out, I compared Day One orders on climate change by Trump and Biden. It's not just the substance that differed; their language itself spoke volumes.

Both EOs begin with a framing narrative. Biden's [order](#) takes a measured tone, appeals to common values, and calls for better decision making. It opens by saying that "our Nation has an abiding commitment to empower our workers and communities; promote and protect our public health and the environment; and conserve our national treasures and monuments, places that secure our national memory." It continues: "Where the Federal Government has failed to meet that commitment in the past, it must advance environmental justice. In carrying out this charge, the Federal Government must be guided by the best science and be protected by processes that ensure the integrity of Federal decision-making."

In contrast, [Trump's order](#) takes an accusatory tone, positing a crisis caused by ideologically driven past policies. He says that "burdensome and ideologically motivated regulations have impeded the development of [natural] resources, limited the generation of reliable and affordable electricity, reduced job creation, and inflicted high energy costs upon our citizens." This is not just a matter of incrementally greater expenses: "These high energy costs devastate American consumers by driving up the cost of transportation, heating, utilities, farming, and manufacturing, while weakening our national security." What can one say in defense of "ideologically motivated regulations" that "devastate American consumers" and weaken national security? Or of the malign actors behind these misbegotten regulations?

Both EOs include announcements of government policy, but the differences in phrasing are revealing. Biden's order announces, "the policy of my Administration." Trump's is more grandiose, declaiming the "policy of the United States" — not just of its political leadership, but apparently including the government from side to side and top to bottom. It's something of a common place that, in foreign affairs, the U.S. speaks with one voice, that being the voice of the President. But Trump has extended that view to domestic policy.

Trump's order and Biden's, also contrast how they treat technical expertise. Both EOs discuss the social cost of carbon. Biden convened a cabinet-level working group to consider the subject based on broad input. "In carrying out its activities," Biden said, "the Working Group shall consider the recommendations of the National Academies of Science,

Engineering, and Medicine ... and other pertinent scientific literature; solicit public comment; engage with the public and stakeholders; seek the advice of ethics experts; and ensure that the SCC, SCN, and SCM reflect the interests of future generations in avoiding threats posed by climate change.”

In contrast, Trump’s order fearlessly takes an official position of its own on the social cost of carbon, unburdened by any of this process or expert consultation. In Trump’s expert view, “the calculation of the ‘social cost of carbon’ is marked by logical deficiencies, a poor basis in empirical science, politicization, and the absence of a foundation in legislation.” (Notice the quote marks around social cost of carbon, hinting that the whole concept is bogus.) Trump adds that it “arbitrarily slows regulatory decisions” and “render[s] the United States economy internationally uncompetitive.” He then gives EPA sixty days to fix the problem, including “consideration of eliminating the ‘social cost of carbon’ calculation from any Federal permitting or regulatory decision.” (Again, note the scare quotes around the term.) The dismissal of expertise and the effort to shortcut any deliberative process or public input have both proved typical of the Trump Administration.

It’s not a surprise that Trump has little respect for expertise and immense antagonism toward those he views as his enemies. What’s striking, however, is that way that these attitudes leak into even the most formal government documents, where they shape the official justifications for presidential actions. To borrow a phrase from Justice Scalia, sometimes a wolf comes in sheep’s clothing. But “this wolf comes as a wolf.”