

The Democratic and Republican parties have very different ideas about the 640 million acres of land owned by the federal government, mostly in the West. It's not just that the party platforms disagree about the balance between preservation and resource exploitation. It's also that Democrats have a much different vision of the future of the American West.

These differences reflect some political realities. The GOP's support is heavily rural and its funding base is tied to extractive industries. Democrats are much more urban, and their funders are more likely to favor environmental causes. More subtly, the different approaches may reflect distinctive views of the future of Western economies. As Democrats seek support in Western states like Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico, they rely not only on demographic shifts but also on a changing economic mix.

It's no surprise that the [GOP platform](#) calls for expanded exploitation of public lands, or that they want to narrow the Endangered Species Act and limiting the President's power to create new national monuments. Continuing a theme dating back to the "Sagebrush Rebellion" of the 1980s, the platform also calls for turning federal control of public lands over to the states. The GOP platform demands that Congress to "immediately pass universal legislation providing for a timely and orderly mechanism requiring the federal government to convey certain federally controlled public lands to states." Another call for state control relates to oil drilling and coal mining: "Congress should give authority to state regulators to manage energy resources on federally controlled public lands within their respective borders." Even better, the platform says, would be returning lands to private ownership, which is "the best guarantee of conscientious stewardship."

Apart from resource exploitation, the only uses for public lands that are mentioned in the platform are "hunting, fishing, and recreational shooting." The Democratic vision reflects a strong emphasis on the non-resource uses of public lands. This may reflect not just the interest of the party's urban base in recreational use, but also the possible transition to a new western economy - one that views public lands as an asset for tourism and as enhancing real estate values, as much as source of extractable resources. One [study](#) shows that in New West counties - those where there are lots of jobs in tourism, recreation, and tech - were far more likely to vote for Obama in the last election than those in the Old West, where primary production dominated.

The [Democratic platform](#) speaks directly to the New West population. It calls for an effort "to establish an American Parks Trust Fund to help expand local, state, and national recreational opportunities, rehabilitate existing parks, and enhance America's great outdoors—from our forests and coasts to neighborhood parks—so "America's Best Idea" is held in trust for future generations, and all Americans can access and enjoy natural spaces."

Focusing specifically on the New West economy, it adds: “Democrats are committed to doubling the size of the outdoor economy, creating nearly hundreds of billions of dollars in new economic activity and millions of new jobs.” The platform also promises to phase down fossil fuel extraction on public lands and instead work “to expand the amount of renewable energy production on federal lands and waters, from wind in Wyoming to solar in Nevada.”

Clinton’s website is even more explicit in addressing the New Western Economy. For instance, she pledges to “ask the Small Business Administration (SBA) to dedicate a portion of SBA loans to entrepreneurs seeking to launch small businesses in the outdoor industry as well as existing business owners in gateway communities.” She also says she will “designate outdoor recreation cluster communities where federal agencies will work in partnership with community and business leaders to improve outdoor recreation infrastructure, attract visitors, new businesses, and workers, and promote the area for its outdoor amenities.”

As I’ve discussed previously, the two parties have very different visions of the energy future – one anticipating continuation and even strengthening of the reliance of fossil fuels that characterized our past; the other betting on a future based on newer technologies. There is a similar conflict between the parties in terms of public lands – one seeing a future based on primary industries like mining, oil, and logging; the other seeing a future based on outdoors activities, real estate amenities, and clean technology. It remains to be seen which vision will prevail.