Yesterday, the Washington Post published a survey of the Democratic candidates' positions on climate change. The differences between candidates probably don't have a lot of immediate policy relevance, given the political and legal constraints on what a new president could accomplish. But they are very revealing about the direction of the Democratic Party today.

The Green New Deal. The Green New Deal has been the rallying cry for advocates of drastic carbon cuts. About two-thirds of the Democratic contenders said in general terms they endorsed it, but none mentioned the GND's ambitious labor and economic goals, and a few mentioned reservations or differences in emphasis. Responses to more specific policy questions seemed more moderate than the rhetoric of the Green New Deal might suggest.

"We'll always have Paris." Perhaps the largest point of consensus was about the Paris Agreement. There was overwhelming support for rejoining the Agreement. Nearly all the Democratic contenders called for more ambitious national commitments than President Obama made in 2016, most in general terms but a few with more specific targets. For instance, Jay Inslee calls for a 50% cut below 2005 carbon levels by 2030.

Ambivalent about nuclear. Although Republicans are apt to paint Democrats as anti-nuclear, the actual picture is much more nuanced. Seven of the responders called for expanding nuclear power, while six called for maintaining existing nuclear plants. Among the "pro" group was Cory Booker, who said he supported the development of "next-generation advanced nuclear reactors," and told the Post that "our best chance to keep global warming below 1.5 degrees is by investing in a wide range of zero emission, clean energy alternatives." On the anti-nuclear side, Bernie Sanders said other technologies were more cost-effective and that "the toxic waste byproducts of nuclear plants are not worth the risks of the technology's benefit." Another six equivocated, while only four forthrightly called for phasing out nuclear power. Pro-nuclear advocates may find they have more traction with Democrats than they might have expected.

The future of fossil fuels. Democrats clearly want to crack down on fossil fuels, but again the responses generally avoided radical positions. The responses were about evenly split about fracking, with nearly half wanting to ban it, another big group wanting to regulate it more carefully, and most of the remainder equivocal. The exception was Hickenlooper, who once claimed he drank fracking fluid to show how harmless it is. On another issue, only six wanted to ban exports of fossil fuels.

About two-thirds favored a ban on new fossil fuel leasing on federal lands, with only one explicitly rejecting the idea but others unclear or undecided. The most popular position was ending subsidies for fossil fuels, which was embraced by a large majority with only a few failing to provide clear answers.

Putting a price on carbon. Of the Democratic contenders, eleven favored using cap-and-trade or a carbon tax to put a price on carbon, while another seven were open to the idea. Five others were unclear or did not respond, and no one actually rejected the idea. This should make economists happy.

The Frontrunner*.* Joe Biden didn't respond to the survey. But in an early morning email today, he announced the outline of his own climate plan. It calls for a $1.7 trillion investment with the goal of making the U.S. "a 100% clean-energy economy with net-zero emissions" by 2050. His plan also calls for $400 billion over ten years to finance research into clean energy technologies (including modular nuclear reactors), working with every country to strengthen existing commitments under the Paris Accord, and ten million new jobs. The plan also includes carbon tariffs to push other countries to control their emissions. This is an ambitious plan but does not make the sweeping promises of the Green New Deal.

Vigorous but pragmatic. There has clearly been a shift among Democrats toward more ambitious climate action than the Obama Administration advocated. But compared to the more radical views of European Greens, Democrats remain much more pragmatic, if the views of the candidates are any reflection of the rank-and-file.