

Although no one seemed to notice it while the debate was underway, political commentators are now abuzz about a “gaffe” by Biden about the future of gas and oil. Other aspects of the final presidential debate were covered in Cara Horowitz’s insightful [post](#) on Friday. I want to hone in on “the gaffe” in this post.

Here’s the crux of what Biden said, from the debate [transcript](#):

Biden: I would transition from the oil industry. Yes.

* * *

Biden: Well, if you let me finish the statement, because it has to be replaced by renewable energy over time. Over time. And I’d stop giving to the oil industry- I’d stop giving them federal subsidies. You won’t give federal subsidies to the gas and, excuse me, to solar and wind. Why are we giving it to the oil industry?

Political commentator Michael Kinsley once said, “A gaffe is when a politician tells the truth – some obvious truth he isn’t supposed to say.” Or in other words, a politically inconvenient truth. What Biden said was basically true. We do need to transition away from oil, though natural gas may be with us longer. And the oil industry does get massive subsidies, including the oil depletion allowance. After the debate, Biden “clarified” by saying that he mean that the subsidies needed to be phased out, not the entire industry.

Commentators [argue](#) that this remark may hurt Democrats in Alaska and Texas, where the party has some hope of making inroads. It would be more serious, from Biden’s perspective, if it hurt him in Pennsylvania. That state is really essential to his election strategy. We should start seeing an effect in that key swing state in polls this week, if there was any. Given that his general position on climate change and fossil fuels has long been clear, this debate statement may not move the needle much. One indication is that even the American Petroleum Institute was very guarded in its [criticism](#).

The truth is that nothing that Biden said is really new. His [website](#) calls for “developing rigorous new fuel economy standards aimed at ensuring 100% of new sales for light- and medium-duty vehicles will be electrified and annual improvements for heavy duty vehicles.” The website also makes a big push for advanced biofuels. On the other hand, by calling for a big push on carbon sequestration and storage, Biden’s plan does leave some potential room for natural gas as a fuel.

Biden’s position on fossil fuels represents a huge advance over what we’ve seen in past elections. It would have been considered politically suicide if something similar had been said by Barrack Obama twelve or eight years ago, or even Hillary Clinton four years ago. But the oil industry is weaker now, and public opinion has really shifted. What would have been a deadly blunder in the past is now at most a PR blip. That’s a welcome development in the politics of climate change.