

Democrats achieved a generational landslide victory in the 2026 midterm elections largely by campaigning on affordability, fighting corruption, and acting as a check on unpopular Trump policies.

To date, Democrats have won at least 253 seats in the House and 54 in the Senate. For the first time this century, Democrats won statewide in Texas — including a Senate seat and the governor's mansion. They won a Senate seat in Kansas, which had not happened in 94 years. Democrats flipped 5 senate seats in states that voted for Trump by double digits in 2024 — including in Iowa where Josh Turek, like many, campaigned on the cost of living and a pledge to fight corruption with an additional focus on fighting high cancer rates related to environmental harms.

When the 120th Congress convenes on January 3, 2027, Democrats will have the biggest congressional majority in years — but not a filibuster-proof majority or veto-proof majority. The House majority will be big enough to allow for intra-party divisions and debates rather than require party-line votes.

Given all this, what can and should Democrats do when it comes to climate, energy and the environment? Faculty of the UCLA Emmett Institute are thinking about the various ways congressional Democrats could tackle salient voter concerns at the intersection of corruption, pollution, and the cost of living. These include oversight authority, budgetary powers, and working on legislative priorities that might find

some cooperation from Republicans and even Trump.

Of particular note is a theme we call toxic corruption. “The phrase ‘polluter pays’ has taken on a new meaning in the Trump Administration,” **Ann Carlson** says. “It’s bad enough that the Administration has rolled back climate and air pollution regulations on cars, trucks, power plants, and landfills, but they’re also giving polluters a pass for laws that remain on the books. At least 200 industrial facilities are now allowed to spew hazardous air pollutants above legal limits with impunity; and car companies that can’t meet fuel economy standards now pay $0 in penalties for failing to comply. What are these polluters giving the Administration for their get out of jail free cards? The new Congress should use its legislative, budgetary and oversight powers to investigate why EPA isn’t enforcing toxic pollution laws; use reconciliation to reinstate CAFE penalties; and provide extra funding for EPA’s enforcement staff to go after scofflaws.”

Possible course of action include practical goals related to topics in which Democrats have a clear mandate but also more ambitious proposals that might be vetoed but set up a 2029 agenda for a possible Democratic administration. However, there is reason to exercise careful consideration around priorities and messaging. “Democrats should use the next two years to be as productive as possible,” **Julia Stein** says “They should be looking to make deals to preserve clean energy investment with the group of Republicans that were already opposed to Trump’s push to eliminate that investment on ideological grounds. And when they use oversight and investigatory powers, it should be directly linked to either affordability or public health — ideally both.”

Over the next two months, we’ll be sharing these ideas in greater detail for a new series called “Green Ideas for the New Blue Majority.” Here’s where we see opportunities worth exploring.

Oversight and investigations

Democrats will hold the full investigatory powers of Congress, including the ability to subpoena records for review and compel individuals to testify before lawmakers. They have already indicated that priorities here include corruption and public health. Efforts could center around cleaning up “toxic corruption” — where pollution and corruption meet.

What would this look like? For starters, they could investigate the “pay for play”

free passes to polluters: Representatives around the country, including some new House members, could help shine a spotlight on polluting facilities and recent exemptions (202 in 39 states) especially by holding field hearings in local districts.

They could also investigate the corporate influence of the fossil fuel industry as it relates to the coordinated industry-federal campaign to try to preempt state-level climate lawsuits, using subpoenas, hearings and GAO reviews to document such coordination. **Alejandro Camacho,** who has been closely following the recent Supreme Court case related to state climate lawsuits, says oversight is just one of the ways Democrats can help preserve climate remedies from the fossil fuel industry.

Then there's health and science: Democrats already released a report documenting how the Trump administration has undermined public health infrastructure and U.S. scientific research into chronic and deadly diseases, they could continue that investigation with a focus on HHS Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

Other possible investigations: EPA and DOE decisions to gut climate rules and revoke the Endangerment Finding; the financial deals to kill clean energy projects, offshore wind especially; the lack of environmental review behind the final "harm" rescission from the Endangered Species Act and the risk it creates for more than 1,200 habitat conservation plans.

Budget reconciliation and appropriations

Since 60 votes are required to overcome a filibuster, Democrats can use the budget reconciliation process for passing some provisions with a simple majority. They can and should consider some options for budget reconciliation even if a presidential veto is threatened. Democrats can also add extra requirements of departments through appropriation riders, because appropriations bills are "must-pass" legislation.

Some options here include: Restoration of CAFE standards and penalties, which was previously done through reconciliation; restoration of agency funding for EPA, DOE and for underfunded wildlife agencies to carry out listing and recovery under the Endangered Species Act; fund dedicated NEPA staff, the Permitting Council and digital public tracking of project reviews.

Given all the emphasis on energy affordability and project streamlining here's

another possibility: Restore funding to the Grid Deployment Office, a Department of Energy office tasked with accelerating the regional transmission buildout that is essential to meeting growing energy demand by providing upgrades. Funding for transmission planning & permitting programs fell by roughly 90% between FY2025 and FY 2027 (proposed).

Legislation and resolutions

House Democrats unarguably have a clear mandate to address affordability and Americans' bipartisan concerns about the development of data centers. They should include in any "New Affordability Agenda" or new federal restrictions on data centers, a broader focus on electricity affordability, utility rates, and renewable energy, among other concerns.

This could take many different forms. One option would be to pass a bill that establishes new incentives for renewable projects and to protect consumers from rising electricity costs due to grid demands from large energy users such as data centers. House Democrats proposed legislation along these lines earlier this year.

On the topic of climate liability, they could pass a bill expressly preserving state and federal statutory and common-law claims for climate-adaptation costs, forcing the President to sign it or veto it on the record. Congress could also adopt a concurrent resolution, and file amicus briefs from members, stating that the Clean Air Act preserves state common-law climate remedies.

Lastly, permitting reform will be hotly watched even before the new Congress is sworn in. **Alejandro Camacho** says Democrats should enter the latest round of bipartisan permitting negotiations with a Democratic framework: (1) programmatic pre-screening of clean-energy and transmission corridors, with enforceable timelines; and (2) restored CEQ rulemaking authority, adaptive management, and preserved judicial remedies, with remedies tailored to the harm rather than eliminated.