

In a flare-up between former allies last week, Rep. Ro Khanna, a progressive Democrat, [asked](#) Nicole Shanahan to think twice about continuing as RFK Jr.'s running mate. His argument was that the campaign could ultimately send Donald Trump back to the White House, risking the destruction of U.S. climate efforts.

The resulting public exchange is revealing about what motivates independent candidates like Shanahan. It also points to a conundrum for the Kennedy-Shanahan ticket: how to address concerns about the climate implications of another Trump Administration.

Khanna's point was simple: Shanahan cares about climate change, but the RFK candidacy might help elect Trump, who would have a devastating effect on climate policy. That's an understandable concern in an election that is [still too close to call](#). As Khanna pointed out, at this point it appears from polling that Kennedy and Shanahan could pull enough votes from Biden to give Trump the edge in swing states. It may or may not turn out that way, but it's not a crazy idea. At least some Trump allies seem to [favor](#) the idea, and one Kennedy campaign official has been pitching Republicans to support him to help Trump beat Biden. From that perspective, whether or not the conclusion is correct, it's understandable that the *Economist*, a British news journal, says that Kennedy "doesn't care if he condemns America to Trump."

Shanahan passed up the opportunity to address this concern by ignoring Khanna's point rather than providing an answer. Her [response](#) was that everyone has the right to run for office and that it was anti-democratic to ask her to stand down as a candidate. Clearly, the thought that she might help elect Trump didn't faze her.

From one perspective, this could be seen as part of the longstanding conflict between pragmatists and idealists across the political spectrum. The attitude of "damn the consequences" isn't unique to the Kennedy-Shanahan ticket. On the Right, its home is the Freedom Caucus, which has insisted on the purity of its positions even when the result is to force the GOP Speaker into the arms of the Democrats. We can also see it in the unhappiness some progressives feel toward AOC because she has been willing to compromise to get things done.

Although that's one possible explanation, it's not clear whether the issue here is really idealism. After all, Shanahan has joined a campaign that hasn't made climate change [a priority issue](#) and hasn't announced a climate plan. In recent years, the leader of the ticket has been far more engaged with a campaign against vaccines than with environmental causes of any kind.

We do know Shanahan has strong feelings about climate issues, as Khanna himself referenced in his appeal. But as far as I can tell, she's never said what, beyond regenerative agriculture, she thinks we should do about climate change.

Admittedly, Shanahan hasn't shown much interest in articulating policy positions in other areas either. For instance, she was asked to comment about abortion after the Arizona supreme court resurrected the country's most restrictive abortion ban. Rather than saying what abortion policy she would support, she [responded](#) that she didn't "like the feeling of anyone having control over my body" but that she also would "not feel right terminating a viable life living inside of me, especially if I am both healthy and that baby is healthy." That doesn't provide much guidance about what abortion policy she would actually favor.

Kennedy [chose a top spokesman](#) who traffics in conspiracy theories about the climate crisis and science in general. To hear Kennedy tell it, Shanahan is just as distrustful as he is of scientists and of the federal government's approach to environmental regulation.

In [a recent interview with KCBS](#), Kennedy said he picked a VP candidate who shared his concern about government overreach. [At a recent rally in Oakland](#), he said that Shanahan understands that "the EPA is in cahoots with the polluters," and that "the scientists can be mercenaries." She didn't say that herself, so perhaps he was overestimating the extent of their agreement.

Shanahan was a virtual unknown until she was picked as a Vice Presidential candidate, so it would be a mistake to make firm judgments now. Maybe her views will come into sharper focus. Still, her seeming lack of interest in practical impacts and specific policies does create grounds for concern. Voters who care about climate and the environment deserve better answers than they've gotten so far.