

US presidential candidates far apart on environmental health

The Republican and Democratic campaigns have polar opposite policies on environmental issues important to health. Susan Jaffe, *The Lancet's* Washington correspondent, reports.

Republican and Democrat party loyalists have nominated their candidates for US president, approved their political platforms, and wrapped up their conventions. Now comes the hard part: persuading a polarised and widely diverse electorate that their candidate deserves support.

Republicans have finally settled on Donald Trump, a billionaire real estate magnate with no government experience, who still triumphed over 16 competitors to win his party's nomination. Democrats are fielding Hillary Clinton, who has been in and around government for decades, as a former Secretary of State, US Senator from New York, and as the activist wife of Bill Clinton, who won the presidency twice.

"The difference between the two couldn't be more stark", said Kevin Curtis, executive director of the NRDC (Natural Resources Defense Council) Action Fund, the political arm of the NRDC, an environmental group with 2 million members and a staff of 500 lawyers, scientists, and policy experts. The candidates' views on the environment and climate change—reinforced by their respective party platforms—offer a prime example of just how far apart they are (table).

Climate politics

"I think there's a change in weather", Trump told *The Washington Post* in March when asked about climate change. But he added, "I am not a great believer in man-made climate change". He has called global warming "a hoax" and promises to scrap the climate change agreement reached last December in Paris, in which the leaders of 195 nations pledged to keep average global temperatures from rising above 2°C compared with preindustrial levels. Trump would also end US support

for the UN's anti-global-warming programmes. The Republican party platform states, "Climate change is far from this nation's most pressing national security issue".

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If elected president, Trump could not unilaterally undo the Paris accord, said Curtis. But he could withdraw the USA from participation, which would encourage other nations to do the same and slow progress on future agreements to expand and build upon the Paris consensus. "The Paris agreement was tremendously important as an important first step, but solving climate

is going to take more than one deal", Curtis said. "It is a multidecade effort, so continued US leadership is key."

Republicans have long disputed the role of human activity in creating the greenhouse gases that most scientists agree have contributed to the earth's warming temperatures. But in any event, they say it is not the proper function of government to intervene in the energy market and promote a shift away from the use of fossil fuels toward renewable energy sources. Democrats, meanwhile, advocate various federal policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Such a strategy would undermine a fundamental Republican tenet that values the least possible federal government intervention because an abundance of government regulations

For the **Republican** platform see <https://www.gop.com/the-2016-republican-party-platform/>

For the **Democratic** platform see <https://www.demconvention.com/platform>

	Republicans	Democrats
Climate change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Climate change is far from this nation's most pressing national security issue." • Reject the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris climate change agreement. • End funding for the UN's Framework Convention on Climate Change. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Climate change poses a real and urgent threat and a defining challenge of our time." • Implement the Paris Climate Change agreement. • Reduce carbon pollution and emissions of other greenhouse gases to exceed the Paris agreement goals.
Environmental protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Republican Party "reaffirms the moral obligation to be good stewards of the God-given natural beauty and resources of our country". • The Obama administration has created "an avalanche of regulation that wrecks havoc across our economy and yields minimal environmental benefits". • Make the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) an independent bipartisan commission and give states more responsibility for environmental regulation. • Prohibit the EPA from regulating carbon dioxide. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Democrats believe clean air and clean water are basic rights of all Americans." • "Democrats reject the notion that we have to choose between protecting our planet and creating good-paying jobs. We can and we will do both." • End lead poisoning "which disproportionately impacts low-income children and children of color and can lead to lifelong health and educational challenges".
Energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The nation's energy supply is "clean, affordable, secure and abundant". • Eliminate the Clean Power Plan, "the centerpiece of the president's war on coal". • Develop all energy sources including coal, oil, natural gas, nuclear power, hydropower, and allow hydraulic fracturing. • Develop marketable forms of energy, including coal, oil, natural gas, nuclear power, and hydropower without subsidies. • Oppose a carbon tax. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All energy needs must be met by clean renewable energy by 2050; install 500 million solar panels within 4 years. • Implement the Clean Power Plan to reduce coal plant emissions and "make new investments in energy-producing communities to help create jobs". • Eliminate tax incentives for fossil fuel companies and provide tax subsidies for clean energy.

Table: Highlights of climate change, environment, and energy policies in the parties' platforms

can strangle the economy and stifle individual freedom. These arguments have also fuelled Republican opposition to the Affordable Care Act, President Barack Obama's signature health law, and their unsuccessful efforts to eliminate it.

Most Democrats have a strong belief in government's obligation to slow climate change. Earlier this year, an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) spokeswoman told *The Lancet* the USA has "a moral responsibility"—and the legal authority under the Clean Air Act—to require coal plants to reduce emissions under the administration's Clean Power Plan. The Obama administration estimates the new rules would prevent up to 3600 premature deaths, 1700 non-fatal heart attacks, and 90 000 asthma attacks in children by 2030. However, Republicans cite the Clean Power Plan requirements as another example of how the Obama administration has overstepped its authority by issuing burdensome regulations. Earlier this year, the Supreme Court temporarily barred the EPA from enforcing the Clean Power Plan until a lawsuit filed by more than two dozen states against the limits is resolved.

"Climate change poses a real and urgent threat", the Democrats' platform claims. Officials at the US Centers for Disease Control

and Prevention report that climate change is already affecting Americans, extending the pollen season in some parts of the country by as much as 26 days, increasing the risk of allergy and asthma attacks, and contributed to heavier rainfalls that can jeopardise drinking water quality.

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Clinton has vowed to fulfil the Obama administration's commitment in the Paris climate change agreement by requiring reductions in coal plant emissions, ensuring that fossil fuel production is safe, ending what she called "the giveaways to big oil companies", while investing in clean energy and help for communities dependent on coal production to shift to alternative industries, along with other proposals.

Energy and environment

Trump has characterised the Democrats' response to climate change in dramatic terms: Hillary Clinton "will shut down energy production in this country", eliminating coal companies and millions of jobs in the process, he said in May. She will continue President Obama's environmental protection

policies which he called "death by a thousand cuts through an onslaught of regulations".

Because the Obama administration has been thwarted by Congress on many of its environmental initiatives, the president has resorted to accomplishing his goals through executive orders and EPA actions, said Paul Knappenberger, a climate scientist and assistant director of the Center for the Study of Science at the Cato Institute. The Republican platform would roll those back and specifically prohibits the EPA from regulating carbon dioxide.

It goes further by reducing the EPA to an independent advisory commission, "with safeguards against politicized science", and would give states more responsibility for protecting the environment. "I don't think much would be lost by eliminating the EPA", said Benjamin Zycher, an energy and environmental resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. But a better approach would be keeping the agency and requiring its regulations to be approved by Congress, he said.

The Democratic platform goes in almost the opposite direction, echoing Clinton's pledge to implement the Paris climate agreement, taking additional steps to exceed the Paris agreement goals, and declaring that "clean air and clean water are basic rights of all Americans". The party would address lead poisoning, "which afflicts low-income children and children of color and can lead to lifelong health and environmental challenges".

As further evidence of the gulf between Republican and Democratic proposals on climate change and the environment, the NRDC Action Fund didn't attempt to offer testimony to the Republican platform committee. "Everything we read in the Republican platform is the antithesis of what we believe needs to happen", said Curtis. "There's not much room for much rational conversation."

Susan Jaffe



Ralf Brodtkvar

The Republican and Democratic campaigns have opposing views on the future of the Clean Power Plan