

# Seize the Initiative, Avoid Falling Into Traps

**T**he surge in turnout and impressive popular-vote edge that enabled Democrats to capture the House of Representatives signified deep disaffection with White House leadership. Anti-Trump sentiment had many sources but the unravelling of EPA and scandal-plagued tenure of former Administrator Scott Pruitt touched a nerve with both activists and moderate voters. It's also not a stretch to conclude that a large segment of the electorate was unhappy with the administration's lurch to the right on the environment and wanted to rein in its excesses.

Newly empowered Democrats now face the challenge of delivering on expectations in a divided government. Unfortunately, there's little chance that the president will soften his positions on the environment to conciliate moderates. Instead, he may double down in an effort to repeat his 2016 electoral success.

The main tool of the House majority will be aggressive oversight. But putting political appointees on the hot seat, while important to shine light on the administration's transgressions, will not moderate its actions. The many air, water, and toxics rollbacks already in motion at EPA will grind toward final decisions. On the climate front, efforts to dismantle Obama's emission-reduction policies will likewise move forward, and the president will remain dismissive of mainstream climate science and the Paris Agreement.

Activists and newly elected progressives have already sent a strong message that the party leadership must embrace a proactive climate and clean energy agenda. Incoming Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi has responded by proposing to resurrect a special committee on climate change to spearhead new initiatives. Not content with

merely pushing back on Trump policies through the oversight process, many Democrats will demand legislation.

However, the House should avoid falling into the trap of passing "message" bills that die in the Senate and are seen as outside the mainstream. Legislative efforts should instead be designed to create a thoughtful policy blueprint for action on climate and clean energy that will have broad voter appeal in the 2020 election and can withstand Republican attack if the Democrats regain the White House and add seats in Congress.

Paradoxically, while the Trump administration has pulled federal policy sharply to the right, the environment for progressive climate and energy policies has become more favorable. The technological trends that are reducing the carbon footprint of the American economy are accelerating. Power-sector emission

reductions have outperformed expectations, with coal's share of generation dropping precipitously and wind and solar gaining a competitive edge over fossil fuels. Investment in electric vehicle production and charging infrastructure is rising at a steep rate.

At the same time, the public is increasingly aware of the link between rising greenhouse gas levels in the atmosphere and cataclysmic events like wildfires, droughts, severe storms, and flooding. Even as the president has provided a bigger platform for climate skeptics, more Americans are expressing concern about climate change and supporting policies to reduce emissions. Recent scientific reports have underscored the imminent dangers of rising GHG levels in the atmosphere and the urgency of taking action.

These developments present Democrats with both opportunities and challenges. The growing political constituency for clean energy, waning influence of coal, and rising alarm about climate impacts can mobilize voter support for faster deployment of renewables, reduced fossil fuel dependence, and more funding for resiliency and adaptation. At the same time, in our toxic political environment, proposals that can be portrayed as expanding the reach of federal bureaucrats, raising energy prices, and stifling business will be exploited by opponents.

The success of Republicans in using the backlash against cap-and-trade legislation to recapture the

House in 2010 should remind Democrats that "big government" solutions to climate change can become political liabilities. Democrats should be bold but smart and take the time to design a legislative strategy that not only will bend the

curve on emission reduction but will win support from business interests and voters of diverse persuasions.

With Democrats gaining governorships in the heartland, new opportunities for policy innovation will exist outside Washington. Incoming governors in these states may be able to gain traction for climate-friendly policies with culturally conservative and populist voters historically tied to heavy industry and fossil fuels. This could broaden the political base for adopting these policies at the national level and forge alliances between the progressive and moderate wings of the party that can pay dividends in 2020 and beyond.



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