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Democrat Town Halls Show the Climate's Changed Already

The broad approach of all the top candidates to global warming is for sweeping changes, not incremental ones.

By

Liam Denning

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Big Energy faces potentially far-reaching change in November 2020.

Photographer: Joel Saget/AFP/Getty Images

Liam Denning is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering energy, mining and commodities. He previously was editor of the Wall Street Journal's Heard on the Street column and wrote for the Financial Times' Lex column. He was also an investment banker.

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Big Energy faces potentially far-reaching change in November 2020.

Photographer: Joel Saget/AFP/Getty Images

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One telling episode late in Wednesday evening's climate-change town-hall-athon on CNN was Beto O'Rourke's argument for cap-and-trade carbon pricing instead of a tax. It was telling chiefly because, apart from those few, earnest minutes, this once-hot topic barely featured in seven hours of programming. Fossil-fuel producers tempted to dismiss the event as inchoate grandstanding should pause on that for a second.

Consider a few names: Bullock, Delaney, Hickenlooper, Ryan. Most likely, you're struggling to put faces to them. The important thing is that at the last candidate debates in July, they constituted the relative skeptics about Green New Deal-type measures. None made it to these town halls. Nor will they be at the next debate in a week.

As much as Wednesday's roster of 10 candidates sought to establish differences on topics like nuclear power and climate-change spending, the mood music was more harmonious. The Democratic debate has moved on from how to price carbon. It is still there as a tool in many plans, but the broad approach now is far more interventionist and prescriptive. As you may have expected, Senator Bernie Sanders proposed \$16 trillion of spending over a decade, give or take, and public ownership of power grids. But even more centrist figures like former Vice President Joe Biden and Senator Amy Klobuchar proposed trillion-dollar spending plans and net-zero emission targets by 2050. Needless to say, virtually all pledged executive orders to reverse President Donald Trump's own reversal of regulations on things like methane emissions and vehicle fuel efficiency.

Besides their adversary-in-chief, candidates trained their cross hairs most consistently on corporations, especially those in the business of producing fossil fuels. Senator Kamala Harris emphasized her past as an attorney general, declaring "I have sued Exxon Mobil!" with a laugh. Biden compared Big Oil to Big Tobacco and Senator Elizabeth Warren talked of fighting for an "America that's not just working for the fossil-fuel industry." Andrew Yang, in between fending off questions about his plans to move people to higher ground, summed up the theme: "There's the people on one side and the money on the other."

Potential lawsuits aren't the biggest threat to fossil-fuel companies here. The middle ground has fallen away, with the rhetoric casting them, along with Republican allies in Congress and the White House, as obstacles to be dealt with rather than potential partners with whom to negotiate a deal. For that, the industry must take a large measure of the blame. Decades of obfuscation about the threat of climate change has both shredded trust and spurred the sense of urgency pulling the climate-change debate away from the arcana of carbon pricing toward the more direct methods of protests, bans and mandates. Calls Wednesday evening to end the Senate filibuster or enact legislation to counter the Supreme Court's Citizens United ruling, as Julian Castro voiced in the first session, are the other side of this coin. Maximal outcomes like Trump's move to defang federal regulation of methane emissions ultimately beget maximal responses.

With the more moderate Biden still leading in the polls, there is of course a risk that far-reaching climate agendas alienate voters. CNN's presenters repeatedly asked candidates whether they planned to limit people's choices about which cars they drove, or eating beef or using certain types of light-bulbs. One wrong answer would spawn a thousand clips about this or that candidate taking away Americans' freedom or pushing hair-shirt environmentalism.

Such questioning is valid in the sense that it is an obvious line of attack in a campaign setting. That said, my favorite answer to it was Warren's "C'mon, give me a break," as she dismissed focusing on goods like incandescent bulbs, plastic straws and cheeseburgers as a sideshow compared with the bigger issues at stake.

Democrats' other potential weak point concerns the fate of workers in mining and other trades sidelined in an energy transition. This is a potential minefield, as demonstrated in Ohio's current fight about subsidies for old power plants (see [this](#)). On this, the canniest answer came from Pete Buttigieg, the mayor of South Bend, Indiana. Like others on the stage, he pledged money and training for such workers to mitigate the impact of profound change. But he also emphasized that their existing jobs were a source of identity and pride, not just income, and that talk of retraining grants didn't address the whole issue.

It is a nuanced message that may or may not resonate on the ground. But it is of a piece with the Green New Deal which, along with the [climate-centric campaign of former candidate Governor Jay Inslee](#), permeated the evening's proceedings. Twinning climate change with broader concerns about social equity and investment in public infrastructure has been derided by some as rampant populism. Yet it also recasts an issue cloaked in existential doom as a means of economic and political renewal that may resonate, especially if 2020 brings an economic slowdown.

Energy's incumbents may ask whether Americans would really go for such radical action. It is a valid question, but they should bear in mind that, for a growing segment of voters (especially younger ones) maintaining the status quo is [an unacceptably radical course of inaction](#). With the politics of climate change now encompassing taxation, regulation and even global trade, a Democratic victory — especially one that involved the Senate — could mark a fundamental break. And populist, interventionist platforms have found favor of late. Nearing the end of her Q&A, Warren called on Americans to "attack the corruption in Washington." It's a very different voice and a very different candidate, but the sentiment sounds strangely familiar.

This column does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the editorial board or Bloomberg LP and its owners.

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