

DAILY COMMENT

IT'S A CLIMATE ELECTION NOW

Trump's reported billion-dollar offer to fossil-fuel executives shows that this is the key year to save the planet.



By Bill McKibben

May 15, 2024



Former President Donald Trump at a campaign rally on the beach in Wildwood, New Jersey, on Saturday. Photograph by Doug Mills / NYT / Redux

The Washington *Post's* scoop last week that, at a dinner with oil-and-gas executives at Mar-a-Lago—according to people who attended—Donald Trump offered to reverse dozens of President Biden's climate rules and regulations in return for a billion dollars in campaign money should have shocked exactly no

one. Trump's hallmark has always been his willingness to do deals—in fact, as he explained to the executives, a billion dollars would be cheap, given the tax and regulatory breaks that he would provide them. And his fealty to the fossil-fuel industry has never been in doubt: he is, after all, the man who pulled the United States out of the Paris climate accords.

But Trump's request must have bemused some of the execs—why pay up when he's already said that he'll be a dictator just for Day One, when the country will “drill, drill, drill”? Everything he laid out for them (an end to Biden's pause on L.N.G-export permits and to his policies on electric vehicles) he has already loudly promised. Indeed, Politico reported last week that the industry is already drawing up “ready-to-sign” executive orders for its wish list. As one gleeful lobbyist explained, “It's going to be like shooting fish in the barrel—there's just so much to go after.” Trump's eagerness to do this deal is so great that his team didn't even bother to deny the attempted shakedown, merely repeating the boilerplate response: “Joe Biden is controlled by environmental extremists who are trying to implement the most radical energy agenda in history and force Americans to purchase electric vehicles they can't afford.”

However, Trump does have some leverage in asking the industry executives for the cash: he could lose. His fund-raising has been lagging, he's spending his days at a criminal trial where his alleged affair with a porn star is discussed at length, and, when he hits the hustings, he's making long digressions about, for example, how fond he is of Hannibal Lecter. So at this point, even with a slight lead in the polls, the election is not a lock. And if he loses it seems possible that the fossil-fuel industry might crumble during a second Biden term—because this election arrives at the most critical possible

moment in the climate fight.

It's not just that the planet's climate is unravelling, though that fact adds to the pressure to act which would be felt by any rational occupant of the White House. April was the eleventh straight hottest month on record, and the consequences of the climate crisis will likely be dominant crises during the next four years. The real issue for the industry is that, at this moment, the means for rapid and relatively painless change are finally at hand, and they present a mortal threat to the dominance of fossil fuels. Look at what has happened in California this spring: for the past thirty-one days, solar, wind, geothermal, and hydro power have provided more than a hundred per cent of the state's electric demand for at least some of the day. The state also hit another milestone when, for two hours, its vast banks of utility-scale batteries became the single largest source of power to the grid. The number of solar panels has grown sharply in California in the past few years, and the storage capacity has grown even faster; the state has taken the climate crisis seriously and begun to move. If you can do this in what is the world's fifth-largest economy you can pretty much do it anywhere—especially because the price of all these technologies continues to drop so fast, worldwide, that the Biden Administration is busily imposing tariffs in order to keep ever-cheaper Chinese technology a little at bay.

Given four years to finish the implementation of the Inflation Reduction Act, a second-term Biden Administration might finally be able to break the hold of fossil fuel's political influence. Imagine what happens if, instead of scrapping E.V. mandates, the United States gains a full network of car chargers by 2028; imagine what happens if new federal housing money flows only to buildings that dispense with gas hookups. It's not that we'd be off fossil fuels in

four years—that's impossible. But they'd be clearly on a dwindling curve, and economic and political power does not belong to declining industries.

Biden has played both sides of this divide during his first four years; he's been fundamentally—even historically—green, but he has given each side some of what it wants. The enviros got the I.R.A., with its billions in tax credits for renewable energy, but it contains big gifts (more billions for carbon-capture schemes) for the fossil-fuel industry; Big Oil got its Willow drilling complex in Alaska. When Biden couldn't split the difference, he punted: the most important issue to the industry now is those L.N.G.-export permits, which the White House put on hold. The Secretary of Energy, Jennifer Granholm, says that a decision on whether to renew the permits could come in January. This means that, if environmentalists help him triumph over the hydrocarbon cartel in November—say, by providing millions of votes in place of billions of dollars—the frackers might be out of luck.

Another term of Trump, however—and with all that it means for undercutting global efforts at climate regulation, as well—offers an entirely plausible and entirely opposite outcome: climate chaos combined with continued fossil-fuel dependence. And, in that scenario, the industry may be able to persuade him to adopt extreme measures, such as geoengineering the atmosphere with planeloads of sulfur, so that oil can be pumped far into the future.

So the industry might well decide that defeating Biden in November is worth a lot of money. ExxonMobil made thirty-six billion dollars last year, and Chevron twenty-one billion; the oil industry has spent at least a billion on lobbying in the past decade. They'll definitely give Trump something, and the return on

investment on that donation—if successful—would be better than the luckiest well they ever hit.

And they might need to spend it. By being so blatant, Trump may be serving to bring climate voters to the race—even those discouraged by some of Biden’s stands on oil projects, or saddened by his inability to end the war in Gaza. At some level, a great many voters surely know that what happens to the earth’s temperature will outlast the immediate political issues that we face—we have six months left to grapple with the fact that a second Trump term will do incalculable damage on a geological time scale. ♦

New Yorker Favorites

- The day the dinosaurs died.
- What if you started itching—
and couldn’t stop?
- How a notorious gangster
was exposed by his own sister.
- Woodstock was overrated.
- Diana Nyad’s hundred-and-
eleven-mile swim.
- Photo Booth: Deana
Lawson’s hyper-staged
portraits of Black love.
- Fiction by Roald Dahl: “The

Landlady”

Sign up for our daily newsletter
to receive the best stories from
The New Yorker.



*Bill McKibben is
the founder of
Third Act, which
organizes people
over the age of
sixty for
progressive change,
and a contributing
writer to The
New Yorker. His
latest book is “The
Flag, the Cross,
and the Station
Wagon: A Graying
American Looks
Back at His
Suburban Boyhood
and Wonders
What the Hell
Happened.”*

More: 2024 Presidential Election

Donald Trump Clean Energy

Climate Denial Campaign Funds

DAILY

Our flagship newsletter
highlights the best of
The New Yorker,
including top stories,
fiction, humor, and
podcasts.

E-mail
address

Sign up

By signing up, you agree to our [User Agreement](#) and [Privacy Policy & Cookie Statement](#). This site is protected by reCAPTCHA and the Google [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Service](#) apply.

READ MORE

LETTER FROM
BIDEN'S
WASHINGTON

Biden's
Public

THE POLITICAL
SCENE

The
G.O.P.'s

THE POLITICAL
SCENE
PODCAST

Who
Should Be

LETTER FROM
BIDEN'S
WASHINGTON

Is 2024
Doomed to

Ultimatum to Bibi

A hostage and ceasefire deal between Hamas and Israel is “not dead,” a senior U.S. official says, but only if Netanyahu holds off on invading Rafah.

By Susan B. Glasser

Election-Integrity Trap

Donald Trump has spent years arguing that mail-in voting is fraudulent and corrupt. Now the Republican National Committee, which sees mail-in voting as essential, must persuade his base to embrace it.

By Antonia Hitchens

More Worried about Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.—Biden or Trump?

“He’s not a serious threat in terms of being able to win,” Jane Mayer says, “but he is potentially a serious threat in being able to spoil this election for one side or the other.”

Repeat 1968 or 2020—or Both?

Donald Trump has now made clear that he won’t concede if he loses the election. Believe him.

By Susan B. Glasser