How Carbon Emissions Explain Trump's Win

The states with the highest emissions levels mostly voted for the president-elect. Now, he's selecting officials for his Cabinet who likely won't try to reduce the use of fossil fuels.

For Democrats, the lingering question of whether it was demographic or economic anxiety that primarily motivated Donald Trump's coalition is a little like poet Robert Frost asking whether the world will end in fire or ice.

The answer may be the same, too. Frost, of course, concluded that either would do the job. "I hold with those who favor fire," he wrote, before adding: "for destruction ice/Is also great/And would suffice." Likewise, with Trump, the accumulating evidence suggests his core voters feel eclipsed by both the cultural and economic changes reshaping American life.

Trump's polarizing appeal has deepened the existing geographic and demographic fault lines in American politics into a chasm so imposing it could mark the border between two countries. On one side, Hillary Clinton routed Trump in the racially and culturally diverse metropolitan centers that are helping forge a globalized, information-based, and low-carbon economy. On the other, Trump posted crushing margins in the places that feel eclipsed, or threatened, by all of those trends.

The latest evidence of this widening divide comes from Trump's repeated selection of oil-industry allies for key Cabinet positions: Exxon Mobil CEO Rex Tillerson for secretary of state, former Texas Governor Rick Perry for secretary of energy, and Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt as the Environmental Protection Agency administrator. Tillerson and Perry have both displayed some nuance in their approach to energy. But, overall, with those choices, Trump has indelibly endorsed the fear that reducing carbon emissions to combat the destabilizing threat of global climate change will undermine economic growth.

Experience simply doesn't justify that fear. As Mark Muro, policy director at the Brookings Institution's Metropolitan Policy Program, calculated in an important recent analysis, since 2000 the United States increased its economic output by 30 percent while reducing carbon emissions by 10 percent. Over that period, he reported, fully 33 states grew their economies while reducing their emissions.

Yet despite these reductions, the states most bound to the fossil-fuel economy, like Oklahoma and Texas, still emit vastly more carbon per person than greener states do. And that energy divide now almost perfectly tracks the current political divide. Comparing the latest federal figures on states' per capita carbon emissions with the 2016 election results produces a clear pattern. Trump carried all of the 22 states with the most per capita carbon emissions, except for New Mexico, and 27 of the top 32 in all. (Colorado, Illinois, Delaware, and Minnesota were the Clinton-voting exceptions.) The

Democratic nominee won 15 of the 18 states with the lowest per capita emissions—with the exception of Florida, North Carolina, and Idaho.

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This divergence sharpened [the pattern already evident under President Obama](#). Among the 18 lowest-emitting states, Clinton lost only one—Florida—that Obama carried in 2012. But among the top 32 emitters, five Rustbelt states that Obama won last time flipped to Trump: Iowa, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan.

Energy policy wasn't the principal reason those states switched. But carbon emissions illuminate a state's broader economic structure. The high-emitting states, as Muro noted, are either "producers of oil, gas, and coal or big consumers of it, with a heavy manufacturing base across the Midwest." By contrast, "the bluer, lower-carbon states are much further along in the transition to a post-industrial economy," he added. "They are dominated by digital and related technology and business services, they are more urban and therefore more [energy] efficient."

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With only a few exceptions, cultural dynamics reinforce these economic contrasts. The high-carbon states—centered on the Plains, the Mountain West, and portions of the South—also tend to be more rural, more religiously traditional, and often less racially diverse than the low-carbon states. Following that trail, American politics seems destined to increasingly align the Democratic Party with voters most comfortable with the nation's hurtling economic, demographic, and cultural change—and the Republican party with voters most resistant to it.

That resistance can't reverse the change—on any front. Kids of color will comprise a majority of the under-18 population soon after 2020. Though Clinton won less than one-sixth of America's counties, Muro's research found her counties [account for nearly two-thirds of the nation's total economic output.](#) And even Trump's greatest exertions aren't likely to reverse the long-term shift from high- to lower-carbon alternatives in both energy sources—from coal to natural gas and renewables—and economic activities—from manufacturing to services and digital innovation.

The Democrats' challenge is that their coalition has crumbled in states that fear these changes, particularly in the Rustbelt, faster than it has coalesced in the states benefiting from them, which are mostly across the Sunbelt. To recapture the White House in four years, they'll need recovery on both fronts. But the Democrats' long-term prospects will likely rely on accelerating their leap across these overlapping economic, cultural, and energy divides.

Though renewable sources are gaining ground in some Midwest states, Democrats face structural challenges in a preponderantly white and older region where manufacturing powered by low-cost, coal-generated electricity looms so large. More promising for them may be racially diversifying Sunbelt states that are also decoupling from fossil fuels as they shift toward both renewable energy sources and post-industrial employment. Already, Georgia, Arizona, North Carolina, and Florida rank in the bottom 20 states for carbon emissions.

Reflected in choices like his oil-drenched Cabinet, Trump's agenda looks to mid-20th century America as its inspiration—not only culturally, but also in [its vision of an](#)

[economy](#) where manufacturing and fossil fuels play a larger role, and immigrants and imports a smaller one, than they do today. Smart Democrats will recognize that, in the process, he's leaving them an opening with the industries and regions more likely to propel growth in this century. Against the ice of Trump's restoration, Democrats may have no choice but to stoke the fire of transformation.