

CAMPAIGN 2020

Democrats and energy: 4 issues to watch

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The remaining Democratic presidential candidates have proposed various plans to accelerate the transition toward renewable sources of energy and electric vehicles.

Voters in 14 states and one territory went to the polls on Super Tuesday, including in oil-rich states like Colorado and Texas, choosing among Democrats who each offers a sharp contrast to President Trump's fossil fuel-friendly "energy dominance" agenda.

In a late surge, former Vice President Joe Biden won 9 states, including Texas, according to the Associated Press. Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) won California, Utah, Vermont and Colorado.

A source close to Mike Bloomberg said the former New York mayor would assess whether to stay in the race, while Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) vowed to continue her campaign. "I am in this fight," she told supporters in Detroit last night.

Exit polls in recent contests have shown that the environment and climate change are top concerns for Democratic voters, though not ahead of health care.

And although Super Tuesday was big, it's still early in the primary calendar. There will be Democratic primaries and caucuses until June. Next up: March 10 contests in Idaho, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, North Dakota and Washington.

Here's a look at four energy issues to watch as the race goes forward:

1. Oil and gas

The Democratic field looks to rein in U.S. fossil fuel development, though the candidates differ over how they would oversee a U.S. oil and gas industry that has grown dramatically in the last decade owing to extraction techniques like hydraulic fracturing, or fracking. Fossil fuels made up more than 62% of U.S. electricity generation last year.

Trump targeted Bloomberg yesterday, tweeting that the former New York mayor — who appeared for the first time on a Democratic primary ballot — would pose a threat to the oil and gas industry.

"Texas & Oklahoma: Mini Mike Bloomberg will kill your drilling, fracking and pipelines," Trump [said](#) on Twitter.

Bloomberg, however, has not called for a ban on fracking, as Sanders and Warren have.

At last month's debate in Las Vegas, Bloomberg said the rules on fracking need to be better enforced to prevent the release of methane, a damaging greenhouse gas. His campaign platform says, "Fossil fuels are polluting the air we breathe and changing the world we live in."

Biden also has not advocated for a total fracking ban, instead calling for banning new oil and gas permitting on public lands and waters.

By contrast, Sanders and Warren are pushing for a nationwide fracking ban, including on existing federal leases and private lands. Such a ban — which would require approval from Congress — has triggered industry opposition, including from the American Petroleum Institute. It said a fracking and federal leasing ban would have dire economic consequences, including triggering a recession, according to a report it released last month ([Energywire](#), Feb. 28).

Research firm ClearView Energy Partners LLC said it does not consider any of the Democrats to be "particularly moderate" when it comes to fossil energy and that the U.S. could expect "stark regulatory reversals" if any of the Democrats prevail over Trump.

"Each has campaigned on significantly tighter regulations governing oil, natural gas and coal," a brief from the firm said yesterday.

Biden is pushing for a commitment from Group of 20 leaders to end "all export finance subsidies of high-carbon projects," specifically targeting China to eliminate "unjustified export subsidies" for coal and other high-emissions technologies.

Sanders also calls for an end to overseas fossil fuel financing and said his administration would lead international financial groups in "advancing the equitable adoption of sustainable energy." Bloomberg has pledged to host talks with top-emitting nations to help them reduce carbon pollution and said he would work with other countries to end export subsidies for fossil fuels.

Sanders and Warren have been the most vocal about bringing lawsuits against fossil fuel producers for being purposefully misleading about how their actions have contributed to climate change. Sanders has said companies should "pay damages" for harm they've knowingly caused, and Warren introduced the idea of creating a "corporate perjury law" to go after fossil fuel companies for knowingly lying to federal regulators.

Biden's plan says his administration will act against fossil fuel companies that put "profit over people and knowingly harm our environment," but it does not mention lawsuits.

2. Electric vehicles

All of the Democratic presidential candidates agree that the days of the internal-combustion engine have to end, but their policies diverge.

One of the most consistent is to phase out gas-powered cars altogether ([Energywire](#), Feb. 14).

Most see this happening by making federal emissions standards, regulated by EPA, so tight that no gasoline can be burned. Warren and Sanders have set the goal at 2030 and Bloomberg sets it at 2035, while Biden has set no date.

Another popular idea is paying drivers to retire their gas guzzlers in favor of electric vehicles.

Sanders is the only candidate to peg numbers to his plan, and they are high. He wants to spend more than \$2 trillion in grants to get low- and medium-income people and small businesses into EVs. He also advances \$681 billion for a cash-for-clunkers trade, as well as \$407 billion to fund an electric transition for transit and school buses and \$216 billion for tractor-trailers.

Warren supports many of these ideas, but she has not declared a price tag.

All of the candidates but Sanders have voiced support for extending or expanding the federal electric vehicle tax credit. Efforts to do that in Congress this year so far have fizzled.

Both Warren and Bloomberg say they would like the federal government to procure all, or nearly all, of its vehicles as EVs.

Karl Coplan, a law professor at Pace University, said that the size of that proposal, and the fact that it doesn't require cooperation from Congress, could be a big deal.

"That's an interesting executive power that a lot of people don't talk about," he said. "That could have a huge impact on the industry."

Warren is alone in endorsing a clean fuel standard, which would make fossil gases in the tank have lower emissions by requiring the blending of cleaner alternatives, or replacing a portion of fuels with battery-powered cars.

Biden and Sanders both call for hefty investments in battery research.

Biden has called for \$5 billion over five years to make batteries cheaper and speed the adoption of EVs. Sanders calls for far more: \$100 billion on an unspecified plan to make batteries cheap enough that a typical EV costs only \$18,000, or about half of what it does today. He also wants \$30 billion for a storage version of the SunShot Initiative, an Obama-era program that gets some credit for helping to lower solar costs ([Energywire](#), Dec. 12, 2019).

All of the hopefuls envision an aggressive role for the federal government in building charging stations.

Sanders suggests spending more than \$85 billion to build out a network. Bloomberg's goal is a highway charging station every 50 miles, with financing and other support to build them at rest stops, at truck stops and in rural areas.

Biden's program is the most detailed. He has pledged to build 500,000 or more chargers by 2030, along with \$1 billion of grants from the Department of Transportation to create jobs for certified technicians. He wants the Department of Energy to fund cutting-edge pilot projects, like embedding charging in the roadway. He also wants both agencies to provide grants to localities to build infrastructure.

Bloomberg and Warren each want charging stations built at rest stops, with Warren "ensuring that every federal interstate highway rest stop hosts a fast-charging station by the end of my first term in office."

Building chargers at rest stops, at least commercial ones, is currently illegal under federal law. Organizations of roadside commerce, like the National Association of Truck Stop Owners, are adamantly opposed to them ([Energywire](#), Nov. 27, 2019).

In general, there's not a ton of daylight among the candidates when it comes to EVs.

"The plans are in broad brush remarkably similar," Coplan said. "You have to look into the details to find differences."

3. Low-carbon electricity

For climate-focused Democrats, shifting the nation's power generation to renewable energy is crucial.

And primary candidates have ambitious U.S. electricity goals, though they differ on timing, tone and the role of nuclear energy.

Sanders promotes 100% renewable energy for power by 2030. His vision includes over \$16 trillion of direct public investment through a Green New Deal that covers more than the power sector. And his campaign doesn't consider nuclear a solution, pointing to an existing nuclear waste problem.

"We have more than enough capacity to produce ample reliable, affordable electricity from sustainable resources," Sanders' website [states](#). "We must pass a Green New Deal to achieve 100 percent sustainable energy for electricity and transportation by no later than 2030 and to fully decarbonize the economy by 2050 at the latest."

From Biden, there's talk of a 100% clean energy economy and net-zero emissions no later than 2050. But he frames it differently. His campaign proposes to accelerate the development and deployment of carbon capture and sequestration technology. It also suggests identifying "the future of nuclear energy."

"To address the climate emergency threatening our communities, economy, and national security, we must look at all low- and zero-carbon technologies," Biden's website [says](#).

A climate and environmental justice proposal from Biden includes a \$1.7 trillion federal investment over 10 years that seeks to leverage private, state and local investments to reach a total of over \$5 trillion.

Bloomberg discusses a goal of having nationwide power 80% from "clean sources" by the end of a potential second term, according to [a campaign website](#). He suggests working with Congress and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to develop a 100% clean energy standard on the fastest possible timeline.

"Mike's top priority is to move the U.S. off of fossil fuels and he's open to all zero-carbon options so we can tackle climate change as fast as we can," Bloomberg's campaign said in a statement to E&E News. "The quickest, cleanest way to transition to a clean-energy economy is through renewable energy, because it's carbon-free and already cheaper than fossil fuels."

The campaign said there is "no reason to make the job harder by prematurely retiring existing nuclear plants — as long as they are safe and reliable."

Like Sanders, Warren has aggressive timelines. Her [goals](#) have included all carbon neutral power by 2030 and "100% renewable and zero-emission energy in electricity generation" by 2035. The U.S. Energy Information Administration [said](#) preliminary data suggests that 62.7% of U.S. utility-scale generation came from fossil fuels last year — including coal, natural gas, petroleum and other

gases. Renewables were around 17.5%, EIA said, while nuclear energy was 19.7%. There also are small-scale solar power systems on some rooftops that would add to any renewable total in the U.S.

But trying to move to all renewable or clean power won't be a simple task.

"It's a good conversation to have, but all of the candidates should be cognizant of the cost," said Ed Hirs, a natural resources fellow at BDO USA LLP and an energy fellow at the University of Houston.

Aspirations in the campaign don't match up with realities in the near term, he said, and there's a question of developing better energy storage. A key factor also is the continuing low cost of natural gas.

The challenge will be "squeezing out" the fossil fuels plants, Hirs said.

4. Energy efficiency

Democrats have criticized the Trump administration for failing to update energy efficiency standards for household and industrial appliances, and nearly all of them say they'd speed up the process and boost spending. The White House's 2021 budget proposal calls for cutting research into energy efficiency.

Biden's plan calls for directing the Department of Energy to "redouble efforts" to speed up new efficiency standards for household appliances and equipment.

His campaign says it would introduce a national program to target a package of affordable energy efficiency retrofits in homes, and he'd direct the Department of Housing and Urban Development to make housing for low-income communities more energy efficient.

He has set a target of reducing the carbon footprint of the U.S. building stock by 50% by 2035, creating "incentives" for retrofits that would include efficiency, appliance electrification and on-site clean power generation.

Bloomberg's plan says he'd seek to increase the use of low-carbon, energy-efficient homes and businesses through rebates, tax incentives, low-cost financing and the expansion of federal grant programs.

His [plan](#) would provide block grants to states to support clean energy, tax credits for new appliances, low-interest loans and federal programs to help people with their home mortgages. It would also set efficiency standards for utilities and provide weatherization assistance for lower-income earners.

Sanders calls for spending \$2.18 trillion for sliding-scale grants for low- and moderate-income families and small businesses to invest in weatherizing and retrofitting their homes and businesses. He'd also replace the mobile housing stock that he calls "leaky and often very old" with zero-energy modular homes. And he calls for a federal mandate through DOE to ensure that new and existing commercial buildings and wealthy homeowners meet energy retrofit goals.

Warren would create incentives for private investment in energy efficiency and electrification in residential and commercial buildings, including through tax credits, direct spending and regulation. She'd also expand refundable credits for installing energy efficiency upgrades and "accelerate" the development of new appliance energy efficiency standards.