

PRESENTED AT

2017 Renewable Energy Law

January 31-February 1, 2017

Austin, Texas

Memo to Next President: Here's How to Avoid Our History of Energy Policy Mistakes

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September 19, 2016 9:47pm EDT



Domestic energy production, both fossil fuels and renewables, has surged in the past decade, yet policy priorities haven't. dingatz/flickr, CC BY-NC

With all of the hubbub surrounding this year's presidential election, something important has slipped by with little notice: Despite the fact that it affects our economy, environment and national security, the candidates aren't really talking much about energy.

In many ways their relative silence reflects the sign of the times: Most voters are happy with cheap gasoline and so their attention has turned elsewhere. But, gas prices won't stay low forever, and other long-lived energy challenges such as energy imports and climate change aren't going away. Also, trillions of dollars of investment are needed over the next one to two decades to decarbonize the energy system, maintain its infrastructure, integrate renewable energy and upgrade the power grid.

So far, the back-and-forth between the campaigns has focused on coal and whether it should be allowed to continue its decline, but coal is one part of a much bigger picture. We need a suite of policies that span different forms of energy and address multiple goals.

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To achieve that, the candidates need to address a crucial question: What does government do well and what does it handle poorly when it comes to energy policies?

From worst to best

Looking backwards, the energy debate that raged from the early 1970s until the late 2000s broke down, broadly speaking, into two ideological camps: those who believed in low energy production and low consumption (Democrats), and those who believed in high production and high consumption (Republicans).

What America ended up with was the worst of both – high consumption combined with low production. That meant we suffered the national security and environmental impacts of high energy consumption, but reaped few economic benefits because of low production.

During the past 40 years, our energy situation only worsened: Energy consumption, CO₂ emissions and imports (oil, natural gas, uranium and refined fuels) grew, while oil production fell. Every president from Nixon onwards pledged to reduce oil imports, but imports kept rising. As a nation, we plunged headlong into a pursuit of substitutes for petroleum, such as synthetic oil from coal and ethanol from corn, thinking it would be better to enrich Great Plains industrialists and Midwest farmers rather than Mideast autocrats.



Gas rationing in the 1970s, a result of the OPEC oil embargo, has shaped U.S. energy policy for years even though the

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First appeared as part of the conference materials for the
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