

Opinion | Democrats Don't Have to Campaign on Climate Change Anymore

Matthew T. Huber, Guest Essay, The New York Times, May 9, 2026

Sam Forstag, a Democrat running for Congress in Montana, is in many ways a familiar kind of progressive: He is a union worker calling for taxing the rich and expanding Medicare for all Americans.

But there's one topic he appears to avoid, in his platform and in public forums. When asked recently about the growing threat of wildfires and drought in the West, he discussed a terrible ski season and record-high temperatures but did not name the climate crisis directly. [...]

For the past several months, Democratic elites have been debating how much to talk about climate change, if at all — in part because these new candidates have narrowed their focus to energy affordability to win back the working class. It is a striking shift from a few years ago, when many Democratic politicians thought the promise of a Green New Deal would build a coalition based on green jobs and fighting inequality.

Candidates like Mr. Forstag have the right strategy. The kinds of policies they support — for example, public investments in infrastructure like housing and electricity — will help address climate change, but there is little reason for politicians like them to focus on the issue anymore. The candidates' first task must be to regain credibility with working people by tackling their more immediate, material concerns.

The voters who already prioritize climate action are firmly in the Democratic camp and highly educated and affluent, or as the economist Thomas Piketty calls them, the “Brahmin left.” What candidates like Mr. Forstag seem to understand is that for blue-collar voters, energy is an end-of-the-month issue and affordability should be the overarching policy goal. This is all the more important today, given rising electricity rates and war-fueled spikes in gasoline prices. [...]

The Pew Research Center routinely asks Americans to rank their top concerns, and climate change is consistently near the bottom. The Searchlight Institute found that 59 percent of voters in battleground states are “bothered that climate change has become such a political issue,” while only 42 percent are “motivated to do more and support policies to address climate change.” Instead of building a broad coalition necessary to enact something like a Green New Deal, climate change has become yet another issue fueling polarization.

By advancing a more populist message, candidates like Mr. Forstag might be able to peel off some of Mr. Trump's supporters. If Democrats reclaim the House and Senate, their first priority must be to materially improve workers' lives, rather than propose a grand vision of an energy transition.

To be clear, this does not mean an abandonment of climate goals. Fortunately, as I've argued, the heart of any affordability agenda — housing, energy, transportation — overlaps with the sectors we must decarbonize. Even though Mayor Zohran Mamdani of New York rarely mentioned climate in his 2025 campaign, one of his core policies of expanding public transit — “fast, free buses” — will reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

The Democratic Party remains deeply unpopular. The way out is to stop elevating a litany of single-issue policies that appeal to the already converted. When it comes to climate change, for now, it might be better to say nothing at all.

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