

# Is Renewable Energy Trump-Proof?

Despite the president-elect's vow to ramp up fossil fuel production, solar and wind advocates say the market—and many Republicans—favor clean energy.



*A wind farm in Sweetwater, Texas. (Photo: Orjan F. Ellingvag/Corbis via Getty Images)*

NOV 16, 2016 · - 6 MIN READ · -



Erica Gies' work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Scientific American*, *The Economist*, and other outlets.

Bio



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Donald Trump's rhetoric on the campaign trail was xenophobic, racist, and misogynistic, and now that he's been elected president, many people in the crosshairs are afraid for their safety. But despite Trump's negative comments about renewable energy—denying climate change, vowing to “save \$100 billion that the United States is spending on climate policies,” dismissing wind and solar as uneconomic, and touting deregulation to ramp up oil, gas, and coal production—industry insiders say they're not too worried.

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Wind and solar prices have [decreased dramatically in recent years](#), making them competitive with fossil fuels in many markets. Between 2009 and 2015, wind electricity capacity grew by more than 100 percent nationally, and solar capacity grew by more than 900 percent, according to the [U.S. Energy Information Agency](#). Renewable energy has economic momentum and bipartisan support and will likely continue to succeed despite potential changes in federal policy.

It's impossible to know for sure what Trump's attitude toward renewable energy—or anything else—may be because he has not articulated detailed policies. His transition website has a short [page titled "Energy Independence"](#) that mentions support for renewable energy as well as “traditional” sources, but most of the text is devoted to deregulation for fossil fuels. Taking into account Trump's promised moves that would be hostile to climate progress, including support for renewable energy, his presidency could mean [3.4 billion tons more greenhouse gas emissions](#) than a Clinton one, according to a preelection report by analyst Lux Research.

Still, Trump may not be as hostile to renewable energy as he seems. “Mr. Trump, a lot of times, he will say stuff, and once he does research he will kind of backtrack,” said Debbie Dooley, a Trump supporter and outspoken Tea Party solar energy advocate who is president of the Green Tea Coalition and Conservatives for Energy Freedom, “and I fully believe that's what's happened with solar.”

Solar entrepreneur Jigar Shah, cofounder of San Francisco-based finance company Generate Capital, agreed. During the campaign, Trump “said all sorts of things that he thought people wanted to hear,” said Shah. “But when you look at the official documents coming out of the campaign right now, dismantling solar and wind are not in any of the recent documents.”

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That's also the sense that the Solar Energy Industries Association is getting, said spokesperson Dan Whitten. "It's very clear to me that at least in the people we've spoken with, they understand the important role that solar plays, that solar is a growing industry, that it's creating jobs, that it is supporting a growing economy."

Trump's enthusiasm for deregulation, which many Democrats have worried will overturn gains made against coal, oil, and gas, will also benefit solar, said Dooley. "Mr. Trump has talked about...the corrupting influence of electric monopolies and how they give to elected officials," she said. "I fully believe that he will work on removing the regulatory barriers that exist and allow solar to compete in the free market."

She added that Trump is close to New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, “and he’s very much pro-clean energy.” New Jersey has the [fourth-largest solar capacity](#) in the country.

## State Power

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A lot of energy policy happens on the state level, making states arguably more influential when it comes to choosing energy sources. “You had President Obama and a very pro-solar energy department that hated coal and all of that, yet I can’t tell you how many battles I’ve fought in the last three years in state after state,” said Dooley.

Twenty-nine states and the District of Columbia have [renewable portfolio standards](#), meaning that they require a percentage of electricity to come from renewable energy by target dates. These policies help create a market for renewables and help states to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. [California](#) and New York have the most aggressive targets: Both are working toward obtaining [50 percent of their electricity from renewable sources by 2030](#).

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Corporations and neighboring states can also influence the market, said Shah. Wind and solar facilities get built when Microsoft agrees to buy power from a

renewable energy plant for 20 years, which the software giant wouldn't be willing to do for natural gas, he said, or when Wyoming wants to export power to California, which prioritizes renewables. Solar and wind don't need to be cheaper than coal and natural gas, said Shah. They just need to be within striking distance.

## Federal Moves

Wind and solar benefit from federal subsidies: There's a production tax credit for wind and an investment tax credit for solar. At the end of 2015, [Congress authorized](#) extending those tax credits for five years. That success in a Republican-controlled Congress shows that there's a lot of red-state support for wind and solar, according to Shah.

House and Senate Republicans are “bonkers for what we're doing,” he said. “The vast majority of solar and wind investments have gone into red districts. The wind industry alone pays \$900 million in lease payments per year to landowners.”

Subsidies should remain for all energy technologies, Dooley said, or be removed for everybody. “I've talked to conservatives in the solar industry who say, ‘Look, we'll gladly give up our subsidies if all the energy sectors will give up their subsidies, because what solar has received pales in comparison.’ ”

Another part of removing barriers to allow true free market choice, Dooley said, is to charge polluting energy industries, not taxpayers, for environmental cleanup. “Why should I pay to have to clean up a coal ash pond that an electric monopoly is using for a coal plant?” she asked. “I think it's more fiscally responsible to prevent damage than it is to clean it up.”

Trump has said he will eliminate Obama's Clean Power Plan, which has been [driving U.S. utilities to replace retiring coal plants with wind and solar](#). Still, even if he does that, “that's not going to bring back the coal industry because you still have the abundance and low prices of natural gas,” Dooley said.

The U.S. Department of Energy has been investing in research and development that has led to innovations in wind, solar, energy storage, and smart grid

technologies, but that funding could be on the chopping block. Trump's statement that he would cut money the Obama administration has allocated to fighting climate change [likely includes Energy Department research investment](#), especially considering that Trump has appointed utility and fossil fuel lobbyist Mike McKenna to handle the transition at the department.

The president-elect has said that he wants to invest \$1 trillion in infrastructure over 10 years, and Shah, Dooley, and Whitten all said that will likely include transmission and smart grid upgrades—improvements needed to expand wind and solar. However, the [proposal by Trump adviser Peter Navarro](#), a public policy professor at the University of California, Irvine, doesn't mention the grid, nor does [Trump's transition website](#). Navarro's plan relies entirely on private financing lured by tax breaks, a strategy that [the pro-business \*Wall Street Journal\*](#) said would fall far short of attracting \$1 trillion.

Trump's transition team did not respond to a request for comment.

## Jobs

One of Trump's frequent campaign promises was to bring jobs back to the U.S., despite the fact that his companies have manufactured products abroad.

The solar industry [employed 209,000 people](#) in the United States in 2015, according to a [report](#) from the Energy Department, growing by 20 percent last year. "That's more than the fuel industry, more than the cement industry, more than oil and gas, more than coal," said Shah. "If Trump really wants to bring jobs back, the most reliable way to bring jobs to rural American is clean energy."

Wind power supports [88,000 jobs](#), according to the American Wind Energy Association. "We're putting money in the pockets of farmers who host wind turbines, keeping the farm in the family and the family on the farm," the association's chief executive, Tom Kiernan, said in a [statement](#) about the U.S. election results."

Added Whitten: "Those are the sorts of things that no president would want to

stand in the way of."

## Global View

If the U.S. backs away from renewable power, it could lose out economically to other countries, particularly China. In 2015, worldwide investments in renewable energy were more than double those for new coal and gas generation. For the first time, developing countries invested more in renewable energy than developed countries did, according to a [recent United Nations report](#).

“By 2020 wind and solar are expected to outcompete fossil fuel electric power generation nearly everywhere,” said Sue Reid, vice president of climate and energy programs at Ceres, a nonprofit organization that encourages businesses to act sustainably.

She attended the

[United Nations](#)

[climate change conference](#), or COP22, in Marrakech, Morocco, last week. She found that low prices for renewables and the Paris Agreement reached last year added up to “global commitment and momentum around renewable energy deployment, momentum that will not be thwarted by any election results in the U.S,” said Reid. That might not have been true four years ago, she said, but it’s true today.

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“What’s really at stake now is the United States’ potential for seizing and maintaining a major piece of the global clean energy market,” she said. If the United States doesn’t move, China likely will. “China is the talk of COP22 in terms of its promise to step into the breach and expand its clean energy leadership even if U.S. political leadership should falter,” she said. “That’s a very big deal globally.”

## **Changing the Conversation**

When it comes to clean energy, Democrats and Republicans might not be so far apart in their end goals, although they have different motivations and different ways of reaching those goals.

Dooley also works with environmental groups, such as the Sierra Club. She said that while environmentalists tend to advocate for more regulation, she wants Trump and Republicans to argue that renewable power can deliver energy independence from oil-producing countries and enable property owners to generate their own power and sell the excess.

Renewables, particularly rooftop solar, also aid national security, she said. She cited a government report that said a terrorist would only have to take down nine key substations out of 55,000 to cause a [coast-to-coast blackout](#). Newer solar installations have inverter switches that allow people to disconnect from the grid in such a situation, she said.

Prospects for renewable energy are bright, Dooley said. “It’s not going to be the doom and gloom that people think. The message will be a little bit different, but it will flourish under a Trump administration, based on free market choice and national security.”



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