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Public Opinion Could Sway Emissions Rules

Does a pending Democratic presidency mean a new set of Draconian federal mandates on carbon emissions?

Not necessarily, says Kathleen Hartnett White of the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

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"In less than a year, many unanticipated developments have complicated the political dynamics of 'ending the era of fossil fuels' through the enactment of carbon reduction mandates," Ms. White says.

The recent spike in oil prices - and the resulting pain at the pumps - made the issue clear to millions of Americans.

"When the price of gas topped \$4 a gallon and food inflation reached almost 8 percent, most voters got it: price and security first," Ms. White says. "At least a dozen recent polls show that three-fourths of likely voters put far more importance on the U.S. oil supply than global warming."

Congress saw this sea-change in public opinion and responded, allowing the 30-year-old ban on offshore drilling to expire.

"Energy independence has become a battle cry across the political spectrum," Ms. White says. "The painfully high price of oil increased the public's recognition that there are no near-term, realistic alternatives to the dominance of fossil fuels in the U.S. energy supply. American dependence on unreliable, if not inimical, sources of foreign oil worries Main Street far more than it used to."

Another factor that could hinder implementation of new rules on carbon emissions is that they're proving ineffective elsewhere.

"The European Union's Emission Trading System, once the model for a U.S. program, continues to fail. Europe's program is not reducing carbon dioxide and has led to higher energy costs," she reports. "The United States has reduced more carbon dioxide by market efficiencies and without any complicated cap-and-trade programs. Growing numbers of EU member countries, including Italy, now want to delay (read: scratch) the system because of economic woes approaching crisis proportions."

But the real deal-breaker is the staggering cost to the country.

"Worldwide financial turmoil presents the most hard-hitting obstacle to mandatory carbon dioxide reduction," Ms. White says. "While figures may differ, no one doubts that carbon reduction mandates would lead to far higher prices for fuel, power, food, and other basic consumer goods. Until the United States and global economies stabilize, the least prudent among us might delay such regulations that would overturn our energy economy."

The new administration will have to face these new realities.

"In the last year, many policymakers and voters have learned some hard facts about energy and the economy," Ms. White says. "If an ounce of reason might prevail, climate change policymakers would acknowledge that mandates are premature and impracticable. Immediate steps should be toward extending the new empirical climate science and market-based development of energy efficient technologies."

In other words, a storm warning about global warming policy change is premature.
