

The Calculus Behind Hillary Clinton's Big Environmental Endorsement

LCV's decision to back Clinton, which angered the Bernie Sanders campaign, shows why a stellar green record is not enough.



AP Photo/Jim Cole



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If there's anyone left who thinks environmentalists are simply a bunch of wide-eyed idealists, the last day shows just how politically tactical and calculating the green movement can be.

In case you missed it, the League of Conservation Voters Action Fund is endorsing Hillary Clinton for president, even though both Bernie Sanders and Martin O'Malley have staked out more aggressive stances on energy and climate change.

It's the first time the group, which has one of the green movement's largest and most organized political operations, has made an endorsement before any votes are cast.

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As *The Washington Post* (which broke the endorsement story) notes, the early nod is aimed at getting volunteers and donors mobilized fast to prepare for the general election. “LCV will now launch its Greenroots program to mobilize members in early primary states to volunteer for Secretary Clinton’s campaign,” the group said Monday.

Clinton has moved leftward during the campaign, coming out against the Keystone XL pipeline after long refusing to take a side, and firmly opposing any oil-and-gas drilling in the Arctic Ocean, adding to her long-standing opposition to oil-industry tax breaks. And she has drawn green cheers for an ambitious solar power plan unveiled over the summer and her comments about confronting the threat of climate change.

But her record and proposals to date, while generally quite green, don’t go as far as those from Sanders, her stiffest competition for the nomination, or low-polling hopeful Martin O’Malley. (Clinton’s campaign did not respond to a request for comment on her record compared to the competition’s.)

For instance, Sanders has pushed legislation to impose a carbon tax, a step Clinton has not taken (although the Senate Democrats’ leader-in-waiting Chuck Schumer predicts she could eventually back a tax as part of a fiscal deal). Sanders is also cosponsoring new legislation to halt any new drilling on federal lands and waters.

O’Malley has said he would “not be inclined to allow fossil-fuel extraction on public lands” and opposes all offshore drilling too, and he has also come out against exporting crude oil and in favor of legislation to require getting 100 percent of U.S. power from renewables by 2050.

Environmental movement veteran Dan Becker, a former Sierra Club official who now runs the Safe Climate Campaign, believes LCV is weighing factors beyond the candidates’ records.

“I can imagine that they recognize that the overwhelming likelihood [is] that Hillary Clinton will be the Democratic nominee,” said Becker, noting that “political reality” is driving the decision despite what he calls the stronger records of Sanders and O’Malley.

Still, while Clinton—whose campaign chairman, John Podesta, is a former LCV board member —has not made the environment her top priority during her political career, Becker said that Clinton has “generally” voted the right way.

Sanders's campaign has scored an endorsement from Friends of the Earth's political arm, but it's a far smaller operation than LCV, which according to the group, spent nearly \$15 million in the 2012 elections, including around \$2 million on the White House race, and \$30 million in the 2014 cycle.

Sanders has also received the support of activist Bill McKibben, founder of 350.org and a key force behind the anti-Keystone movement.

LCV has closer ties to the Democratic establishment. It's board chairwoman, Carol Browner, formerly served as a top climate-change official in President Obama's White House and ran the Environmental Protection Agency under President Bill Clinton.

Sanders's campaign is not happy that LCV is throwing its weight behind Clinton, especially before any votes have been cast. Clinton, as a senator, garnered an 82 percent career score in the group's vote rankings compared to Sanders's 95 percent score (though Clinton's missed votes while she was running for president as a senator eight years ago affected her average).

Mark Longabaugh, a former LCV official who currently advises Sanders, called the endorsement "disappointing" and said it's "beyond question" that Sanders is the strongest environmentalist in the race. "LCV is out of step with the grassroots of environmental activism in this country," he said.

Longabaugh flagged Clinton's decision to avoid a position on Keystone until mid-September, and contrasted it with Sanders's long-standing opposition to the proposed pipeline, a project the White House finally rejected last week.

He also criticized Clinton's comment that Keystone is a "distraction from the important work we have to do to combat climate change, and, unfortunately from my perspective, one that interferes with our ability to move forward and deal with other issues."

"The way Hillary Clinton backed into her position is not what an environmental champion does," said Longabaugh, who was LCV's political director in 2003-2004. "It was not a distraction. It was a central litmus-test issue" in the fight over climate change, he said.

Democratic activist and strategist Glenn Hurowitz says LCV's approach is consistent with how most other Washington, D.C.-centered progressive groups are approaching the race.

“Sure, Bernie has been more of an environmental champion than Hillary, but he’s also been more of a champion of labor, and that hasn’t stopped her from racking up union endorsements. For better or worse, left-leaning organizations tend to endorse based on who’s most likely to win, not who shares their values the most,” said Hurowitz, who is a senior fellow at the Center for International Policy.

“It means they’re less likely to inculcate fear from candidates, or provide an incentive for candidates to vote with them, but perhaps they do get more insider influence,” he said in an email. Still, Hurowitz isn’t attacking the move—he notes that Clinton has been broadly supportive of the environment and calls LCV a critical voice.

And the differences among the Democrats are small compared to their collective gulf with Republicans. The main GOP White House candidates are vowing to roll back Obama’s climate-change regulations, expand access to drilling on federal lands and waters, and back Keystone.

LCV, in announcing the endorsement Monday, evidenced no hesitation about Clinton. The group flagged Clinton’s work on climate change while secretary of State, her renewable-energy plan laid out over the summer, her opposition to Arctic offshore drilling, and other policies.

“When it comes to fighting the climate crisis, the stakes couldn’t be higher—and we are confident that Hillary Clinton is the right person for the job,” said Gene Karpinski, president of LCV Action Fund, in a statement. “With her proven history of leadership, strong environmental record, and a campaign committed to building a clean energy future, Hillary Clinton is without a doubt the most effective leader to stand up to Big Polluters and push forward an aggressive plan to tackle climate change and get it done.”

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