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Guest Essay

## Biden Must Get Tough on Carmakers to Slow Climate Change

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As President Biden finalizes his road map to steer America toward a cleaner car fleet and safe climate, he should ignore the auto industry's push for weak fuel efficiency and emissions rules and strengthen the tough standards imposed by the Obama administration that were shredded by Donald Trump.

As a first step, he should reimpose auto emissions reductions for new cars and S.U.V.s and other light trucks to 5 percent a year as called for under the Obama rules. Because those regulations went through the full rule-making process in 2012 and were reviewed in 2017, we believe he should be able to do this with a minimum of red tape.

Then, he should instruct the Environmental Protection Agency to write rules that phase out sales of gas-burning versions of those vehicles by 2030. Annual emissions reductions should be raised to 7 percent a year through 2030. These steps, which could take at least a year to make their way through the federal rule-making process, would guarantee the transition to electric vehicles so that cars and trucks are virtually emissions free by 2050.

Mr. Biden, who [plans to announce his proposal this month](#), can adopt those changes through the executive branch's administrative rule-making power. And Congress can help accelerate this transition to an all-electric vehicle fleet by investing in charging stations nationwide.

Car and truck makers want rules substantially weaker than those they [agreed to nearly a decade ago](#) during the Obama administration that over time would have nearly doubled gas mileage and cut emissions in half.

Now, as a [template for a national standard](#), carmakers have latched onto an anemic deal that five of them [finalized](#) last year with California. That state has long had authority to set its own air pollution rules, and because more cars and trucks are sold there than in any other state, California has substantial clout in setting standards nationwide. But even as an initial measure, extending the California rules to all the states would be a grave mistake. Loopholes would limit their effectiveness. Halfway steps won't solve the climate crisis.

Mr. Biden understands the threat that climate change poses. The transportation sector emits [even more](#) greenhouse gases than electricity generation does in the United States; S.U.V.s, pickups, minivans and cars spew the [bulk of this pollution](#). The president has set a [goal](#) of cutting greenhouse gas emissions by up to 52 percent below 2005 levels by the end of the decade — though not nearly enough given the huge scale of the climate emergency.

But he won't get there by listening to the car companies. Their retrograde environmental behavior demonstrates that only tough standards will protect the climate.

The agreement the car companies reached with Mr. Obama in 2012 to cut emissions in new cars would have delivered a new-car fleet averaging about [36 m.p.g. on the road](#) by 2025. Because each gallon of gasoline burned releases [some 25 pounds](#) of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, those emissions reductions would have cut global warming pollution by [six billion tons](#) and saved consumers more than \$1 trillion at the pump — far more than the fuel-saving technology would have cost. It was the biggest single step any nation had taken to fight global warming.

But once Mr. Trump took office, automakers immediately sought a rollback. In March of last year, Mr. Trump gutted the Obama standard to an annual gain in fuel efficiency of a mere 1.5 percent — essentially zero when loopholes are factored in. The result was a projected new vehicle fleet averaging [29 m.p.g.](#) on the road by 2026 — seven miles per gallon less than what the Obama plan would have achieved over a shorter period.

Automakers still had to contend with California. So last summer, the state's Air Resources Board [reached a compromise](#) with Ford, Volkswagen Group of America, Honda, BMW of North America and Volvo. The California deal would cut roughly half as much pollution as the Obama rules, Dave Cooke, a senior vehicles analyst at the Union of Concerned Scientists, told us. If applied across the country and to all automakers, its mileage and emissions savings would be so slight that they would put at risk any chance Mr. Biden has to reach his critical 2050 near-zero emissions target. Tougher federal rules would supplant the California regulations.

Mr. Biden's auto rules must be aggressive. Many climate scientists warn that vehicles must be nearly emissions free by 2050 to avoid climate catastrophe. With many on the road for [at least 20 years](#), the phase out of sales of new gas-burning cars and S.U.V.s and other light trucks is critical. So is the boost in emissions reductions, to make up for progress lost to the Trump rollback.

With consumers increasingly demanding clean vehicles globally, the Detroit Three — GM, Ford and Stellantis, formerly Fiat Chrysler — need to see the writing on the windshield. Officials in China, for example, are aiming for a new-car market made up of [40 percent electric vehicles by](#)

[2030](#). U.S. automakers will be gazing in their rearview mirrors at a lost market if they continue to rely on gas-fueled S.U.V.s and pickups.

The technology that delivers necessary efficiency sits on automakers' shelves: safe, high-strength, lightweight aluminum to replace steel; continuously variable transmissions; and fuel-saving turbochargers and electric motors, among other innovations. A number of automakers are dipping a toe in the electric vehicle market. GM, for instance, has announced a [goal](#) of eliminating the production of diesel and gasoline-powered vehicles by 2035. But as one auto writer [put it](#), "That's a goal, not a commitment."

The automakers are stuck in reverse. Only strong rules will ensure that the nation makes the shift from gas guzzlers to clean electric vehicles with sufficient speed and in ample numbers — and that the new gas-powered vehicles sold for the rest of the decade are cleaned up enough to protect the climate.

Mr. Biden must avoid the hesitant measures California enacted last summer. The political climate has changed tremendously since then. The prospects for the global climate have not. It's time, as the president says, to "go big."

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