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White House eases the gas on a clean-car rule

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By Joel Kirkland
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The White House’s retreat Friday from a more dramatic rise in fuel economy standards for SUVs could drive another wedge between President Joe Biden and many of the climate activists he’ll need in November.

It comes as Biden is defending his policies to progressives, including the young Democrats whose views on climate served as catalysts for his aggressive efforts to shift the U.S. to a net-zero-carbon economy. Now, they’re increasingly criticizing his administration for decisions that would extend the life of fossil fuels.

The new rule on car and truck fuel efficiency standards is part of a pattern, as [Alex Guillén writes](#): Democrats and other liberal politicians are getting an earful in Washington, in big American cities and in Europe. And that’s had an effect on policy.

New York Gov. Kathy Hochul just [halted a congestion pricing](#) proposal that was supposed to lessen traffic in parts of Manhattan — a progressive policy viewed as a threat to Democrats in competitive House races.

Across Europe, populist candidates have blamed green policies for rising fuel and electricity prices that occurred in part as a result of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, creating the risk of a retreat from European Union climate policies after this week’s elections.

Enter the detour

Today’s decision by the Biden Department of Transportation came amid pushback from automakers and slowing sales of electric cars. The new rule *will* force light cars and trucks to be more fuel-efficient — but the increase for SUVs and pickups will be significantly less than DOT had once proposed.

The decision to effectively live with more tailpipe pollution in the short and medium term got a mixed reaction from environmental groups: The tightened standards “will improve gas mileage, ease the burden of high gas prices at the pump for American families, and slash our nation’s oil consumption,” the Sierra Club’s Katherine García told Alex. **But Dan Becker of the Center for Biological Diversity alleged that DOT had “caved to automaker pressure” by not going higher.**

Large SUVs that U.S. automakers rely on to boost sales and profits will have to get an average of 45 miles per gallon in 2031. That’s up from the 35 mpg they get now, but less than the previous proposal of 52.2 mpg.

Not the end of the road?

Biden is building on President Barack Obama’s efforts to boost fuel efficiency requirements— increases that were ditched when Donald Trump entered the West Wing. The auto industry hasn’t held a monolithic position. Leaders of Ford and General Motors have acknowledged that the industry is moving toward electric cars, in part to address transportation’s outside role as the nation’s largest source of climate pollution. Others, notably Toyota, have been less eager.

Under Biden, car companies have argued that easing off such high standards for gasoline-fueled SUVs means the companies can spend more of their capital budgets on developing electric vehicles.

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