

Desert Sun.

US Senate blocks California's electric car mandate in historic vote

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May 22, 2025

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This story was originally published by CalMatters.

The U.S. Senate voted to block California’s landmark mandate phasing out gas-powered cars, dealing a substantial blow to the state’s aggressive transition to electric vehicles.

The decision to revoke a waiver that the Biden administration granted to California could upend the state’s decades-long efforts and authority to clean up its air pollution — the worst in the nation — and reduce greenhouse gases that cause climate change.

The move by the Senate — following a vote in the House last month — sets the stage for what is likely to become a high-stakes legal and political battle between California and the Trump administration.

Republicans in the Senate and some Democrats in the House who voted in favor of blocking California’s electric car mandate said it is costly and impractical, and prevents consumers from making their own choices.

But Democrats in the Senate who voted against it, including California's Alex Padilla and Adam Schiff, said the tactic used by Senate Republicans is illegal and that the state's mandate is vital to cleaning up polluted air.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom, who has made the adoption of zero-emission cars and trucks a top priority, has denounced such a move by Congress, vowing that "zero-emission vehicles are here to stay."

"The United States Senate has a choice: Cede American car-industry dominance to China and clog the lungs of our children, or follow decades of precedent and uphold the clean air policies that Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon fought so hard for," Newsom said in a statement on Tuesday, before today's vote.

Under California's mandate, [35% of new 2026 model cars sold in the state must be zero-emissions, ramping up to 68% in 2030 and 100% in 2035](#). It builds on decades of tightening emissions standards for cars sold in the state.

California officials may now have to rely, at least temporarily, on voluntary efforts to clean up cars and trucks in order to meet federal health standards for smog and soot. For instance, state officials could offer financial incentives or rebates to persuade manufacturers to make electric cars and consumers to buy them. The state, however, faces a \$12 billion deficit.

Culminating a late-night, marathon session on Wednesday, the Senate vote highlights the growing political division over electric vehicle and air pollution policy as concerns over cost, charging infrastructure and accessibility prevent many consumers from buying them, even in California, which leads the nation in sales.

[For almost 60 years](#), California's standards for vehicle emissions have been central to cleaning up the air, particularly in the smoggy Los Angeles basin and San Joaquin Valley. Vehicles are still the largest sources of smog-forming gases and fine particles of soot, which can cause respiratory disorders, heart attacks and other serious and deadly health problems.

Because of its highly polluted air and large population, Congress gave California the power to set its own, more stringent vehicle standards under the 1967 Clean Air Act. But before those standards can take effect, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency must grant the state a [waiver](#) for each one.

Before today, over the past six decades, the EPA and Congress have never blocked any of California's dozens of car and truck rules. Eleven other states and Washington, D.C. have already adopted a version of California's electric car mandate, [according to the Air Resources Board](#).

“This is a major blow to the decades-long public health protections delivered under the Clean Air Act,” said Will Barrett, the American Lung Association’s senior director for nationwide clean air advocacy. “It is more important than ever that California and all other states...continue to cut tailpipe pollution through homegrown, health-protective policies.”

Senate Majority Whip John Barrasso, of Wyoming, said Republicans reversed a highly unpopular move by the Biden administration.

“They were losers going out the door and they said ‘we’re coming after you — the American people — with our leftist dreams,’ ” Barrasso said. “This is a whole new meaning in California of fantasy land...America can’t meet these impossible standards, not next year, not in 10 years, and the American people don’t want to meet those standards.”

Sen. Shelley Moore Capito, a Republican from West Virginia, called California’s zero-emission standards for both cars and diesel trucks extreme and a threat to the economy. “I want to be clear, I have no problem with electric vehicles. Consumers should be able to purchase the vehicle of their choice, but I do have a big problem with electric vehicle mandates that replace the will of the consumer and the will of the government,” she said on the Senate floor on Wednesday night.

The Senators mostly voted along party lines. Fifty-one senators voted to rescind the electric car mandate waiver, while 44 voted against it. Some Democrats joined Republicans in voting for it.

“I wonder if any other member of this chamber grew up like I did, where on a pretty regular basis, we would be sent home from grade school because of the intensity and dangers of smog that settled over the San Fernando Valley, the city of Los Angeles,” Padilla said during a Senate session on Tuesday, ahead of the vote.

Schiff said on X Wednesday night that Senate Republicans are [“doing the bidding of the oil industry.”](#) after Trump promised to help them if they donated [\\$1 billion to his campaign](#). He said it will mean “Californians and others will be breathing dirtier air, as will others around the country.”

Smog in the Los Angeles basin has drastically improved

Days per year exceeding current federal ozone 8-hour health standard

Line chart showing days per year exceeding current federal ozone 8-hour health standard. In 1980, there were 211 days exceeding. In 2023, there were 115. There is a steady decline, though the numbers fluctuate year to year.

The Senate today also plans to vote on blocking two other California rules approved by Biden’s EPA. One is the [Advanced Clean Trucks](#) rule, which was enacted in 2020 and requires manufacturers to meet ramped-up targets for zero-emission heavy and medium-duty trucks for

2024 through 2035. The other is a regulation [reducing nitrogen oxides](#) — a key ingredient of smog — emitted by trucks and buses.

President Donald Trump has long opposed California's unique authority to set its own limits on emissions from cars and trucks. On his first day in office, Trump issued [an executive order](#) that aimed to eliminate federal and state electric car regulations and subsidies and restore "consumer choice in vehicles."

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The Senate action follows [an April 30 vote in the U.S. House of Representatives](#) that shocked environmentalists because [35 Democrats](#) joined Republicans to block California's electric car mandate.

Included were two California House Democrats, both of whom represent districts in the smoggiest part of the state: [Rep. Lou Correa](#) of the 46th District in northern Orange County, and newly elected [Rep. George Whitesides](#), from the 27th District in northern Los Angeles County.

"As Americans, we all want to do our part to protect the environment. As a lawmaker, my primary job is to listen to my neighbors and respect their choices to do what is best for their families and their circumstances. That means protecting consumers' rights to drive whatever vehicle makes sense for them and their pocketbooks," Correa said in an emailed statement.

California's mandate has come under fire from [auto dealerships](#) and some car manufacturers who once were more in line with the goals of aggressively requiring more sales. Sales of electric cars have undergone [a bumpy road](#), taking off in the post-pandemic years, but they did not increase [last year](#).

About [23% of all new cars](#) sold in California were zero emissions during the first three months of this year, compared to 25% for all of 2024 and 2023, mostly because of a drop in Tesla sales. Californians own 2.2 million zero-emission cars; about 150 models are now sold in the state, 40% more than a year ago, according to the California Energy Commission.

John Bozzella, CEO of [an alliance of automakers](#), in a statement earlier this month welcomed the move by Congress, saying it would "prevent the inevitable jobs and manufacturing fallout from these unachievable regulations." The Biden administration's EPA [granted the waivers](#) for California's electric car mandate and nitrogen oxides truck rule late last year, and for the zero-emission truck rule in [March 2023](#). Under the federal Clean Air Act, the EPA can only

legally reject a waiver if it's "arbitrary or capricious," unnecessary for addressing air pollution or technologically infeasible due to inadequate lead time.

Californians have bought 2.2 million zero-emission cars

New California car registrations that were battery electric, plug-in hybrid or hydrogen fuel cell, by quarter

Column chart of new California car registrations that were battery electric, plug-in hybrid or hydrogen fuel cell, by quarter. The trend begins with 1,680 in 2012 Q1 and increases steadily until dipping in 2020 Q2, then increasing to 119,554 in 2023 Q2. In 2025 Q1, there were 100,326 sales.

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The Senate's votes could set up a legal challenge from the Newsom administration. Experts say the state could sue claiming improper use of the Congressional Review Act.

That law is meant to allow a new administration to revoke rules recently enacted by the previous administration. But it applies only to regulations, and experts say the waivers are not regulations so they cannot be revoked by Congress. In addition, the three waivers are already in effect, and one was issued more than two years ago, outside the time limits of the review act.

The U.S. Senate's Parliamentarian and [the Government Accountability Office](#) said Congress cannot review Clean Air Act waivers. The Senate voted to evade their Parliamentarian's ruling in a [51-46 party line, procedural](#) decision on Wednesday night.

UCLA law professor Ann Carlson said Congress is violating its longstanding practices. She called the decision "totally norm-busting."

"We're just in a completely new territory," she said. Congress "seems to be willing to use a statute that doesn't apply, which is highly unusual. We've never seen this before."

Carlson said by using the Congressional Review Act, lawmakers are seeking to move fast — bypassing the courts and a potential filibuster.

During the first Trump administration, California [sued to reverse other actions that blocked air pollution regulations](#) for cars.

Combined, the three regulations are designed to eliminate tons of soot and gases from cars and diesel trucks that pollute California's air by requiring manufacturers to switch to cleaner vehicle technologies.

The stakes are high: The state still has [some of the worst air pollution in the country](#), and failure to meet federal health standards for smog and soot could trigger economic penalties, including the loss of highway funding. People in low-income communities of color are particularly exposed to the unhealthiest air.

California is also considered a leader on climate policy, and zero-emission trucks and cars are critical to meeting its targets [to phase out nearly all fossil fuels](#) to achieve [carbon-neutrality by 2045](#), which are mandated by state law.

Congress' repeal of the rules follows an earlier blow to California's efforts to clean the air. Days before Trump's inauguration, the state Air Resources Board [abandoned two of its groundbreaking standards](#) because Trump's EPA was unlikely to grant waivers for them.

One of them would have amped up California's earlier zero-emission truck rule by [ending the sale of new diesel trucks](#) in 2036 and requiring large companies to convert their fleets to electric or hydrogen models by 2042.

The other abandoned rule would have required railroads in California to transition new diesel [locomotives](#) to ones powered by electricity. Under that rule, only locomotives less than 23 years old could operate in California after 2030 unless they were zero emissions.

<https://www.desertsun.com/story/news/environment/2025/05/22/california-electric-car-mandate-blocked-by-senate/83790575007/>