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## The politics of affordability rev up Trump's new auto fight

By Ben Geman  
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Auto standards are the latest energy policy fight to get subsumed into the politics of affordability that look slated to dominate the midterms.

**Why it matters:** Contra [the late Kris Kristofferson](#), freedom's just another word for ... cheaper vehicles. That's what Trump officials claim by naming their [rollback of auto mileage rules](#) the "Freedom Means Affordable Cars" plan.

**Catch up quick:** The White House and Transportation Department on Wednesday unveiled a plan to greatly soften Biden-era mileage rules — and said it would save people money.

- The new proposal would require automakers to hit an average of 34.5 miles per gallon across their fleets by 2031.
- That's way lower than the Biden-era target of over 50 mpg, which would mean lots of EV sales.

**The big picture:** How much fuel cars burn is a huge climate story, because transportation is the country's biggest CO2 source, and helps sway oil demand.

- The Biden-era rules were designed to give the market a hard shove toward EVs.

*A few things we're watching...*

**1. Money is the message — everywhere.** Decades of fuel economy fights have been about energy security, climate, pollution, what's best for domestic automakers, and consumer costs.

- Now that last one dominates. Trump officials say the plan would save people \$109 billion over the next five years and make the average new car \$1,000 cheaper.
- Critics make precisely the [opposite argument](#), citing higher lifetime fuel costs from less efficient vehicles, and the economic toll of more pollution. Several big green groups led their response with the cost argument.

**2. Rough contours of the inevitable legal fight** started emerging immediately.

- **The Center for Biological Diversity said the rules run afoul of the underlying fuel economy law that requires standards at the "maximum feasible" level.**
- But [Trump's DOT argues](#) the Biden standards illegally shoehorned EVs into the mileage-setting process.

**3. Industry wants certainty**, but good luck with that.

- The industry generally [argues](#) the Biden-era rules were impractical, so this is a win for them there, and U.S. automaker stocks [ticked up on the news](#). Trump unveiled the proposed mileage standards flanked by Ford, GM and Stellantis execs.
- But automakers are also facing years of policy and legal fights. The new move comes as EPA pulls back tailpipe CO2 rules, and EPA is also planning a brutal legal fight over its overall power to regulate vehicle CO2.

**What they're saying:** "We see no possibility that any future Dem-led Administration (2029 or later) would agree with today's proposal, elevating compliance uncertainty for [original equipment manufacturer] fleets hitting the market post-2028," TD Cowen analysts said in a note.

**What we're watching:** Whether the rule change further slows industry EV investments by taking the pressure off.

- It could give automakers some "short-term financial breathing room," Edmunds' head of insights Jessica Caldwell said.

- But while easing the mileage rules helps at the margins, automakers will be cautious about big strategy shifts that could be upended if a future White House reverses course again, she said in a note.

<https://www.axios.com/2025/12/04/trump-auto-fuel-plan-affordability>