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Democrats Say California Is Model For Climate Action But Its Blackouts Say Otherwise



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Energy

I write about energy and the environment.



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At the Democratic National Convention this week, presidential and vice-presidential candidates Joe Biden and Kamala Harris will make the case for spending \$2 trillion, or \$500 billion per year, to transition the U.S. away from fossil fuels toward renewables like solar and wind.

Biden has [said](#) he would not “tinker around the edges” with his plan. “We’re going to make historic investments that will seize the opportunity.”

In many respects, the Biden-Harris plan is even more aggressive than California's. “The plan is very bold,” Leah Stokes of the University of California, Santa Barbara, [told](#) the *Financial Times*. “There is no [US] state right now that has a target this ambitious.”

But California's big bet on renewables, and shunning of natural gas and nuclear, is **directly responsible** for the state's blackouts and high electricity prices.

"We will be forced today to ask utilities to cut off power to millions today, and tomorrow, and beyond," **said** Stephen Berberich, the President and CEO of California's Independent System Operator, CAISO, on a Monday morning conference call. "Demand will greatly exceed supply."

The immediate cause of California's blackouts is a mismatch between electricity supply and demand. Higher temperatures have led to greater demand for air conditioning. And California has less electricity, including from wind energy, available.

And yet, while California is hot, weather conditions are well within the normal range for the state's summer weather.

The underlying reason blackouts are occurring is because California **lacks reliable**, in-state supply. And the reason for that is California has been closing both natural gas and nuclear power plants.

"People wonder how we made it through the heat wave of 2006," said Berberich. "The answer is that there was a lot more generating capacity in 2006 than in 2020.... We had San Onofre [nuclear plant] of 2,200 MW, and a number of other plants, totalling thousands of MW not there today."

For decades, California Democrats have argued that major economies can run mostly, if not entirely, on renewables. "We are in the future business in California and that means we're in the renewables business," **said** Governor Gavin Newsom in 2016, when he made the case for closing the state's nuclear plant, Diablo Canyon.

"The situation could have been avoided," said Berberich. "For many years we have pointed out that there was inadequate supply after electricity from solar has left the peak. We have indicated in filing after filing after filing that procurement needed to be fixed. We have told regulators over and over that more should be contracted for. That was rebuffed. And here we are."

According to California's grid operator, CAISO, demand for electricity today will climb over 49,000 megawatts, which is 6,000 MW more than yesterday.

Despite these capacity shortfalls, the state is [moving ahead](#) with plans to remove 2,200-MW of reliable electricity from the grid. That's the amount of power produced by Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant, which will be closed in stages in 2024 and 2025.

Democrats have long pointed to batteries as the way to integrate unreliable renewables onto the grid. Yes, renewables are unreliable, they admit. But if we can store energy collected during periods of peak capacity, we can parcel it out during periods of peak demand.

However, batteries are simply not up to the task. One of the largest lithium battery storage centers in the world is in Escondido, California. It can only store enough power to service 24,000 of California's 13,000,000 households.

And it can only do so for four hours. If demand surges for the better part of a day, the system will fail. Indeed, for renewables to work, batteries would need to be able to store the power for weeks and perhaps even months.

"Batteries don't generate any power," said Berberich. "And during extended cloud cover over solar fields, we will be in load shedding. We have told the Commissioners again and that solar will need to be overbuilt to serve load and charge batteries at same time."

People don't sit idly by when electrical systems fail or when reliability flags. Instead, businesses and individuals reach for tried and true methods of powering their day-to-day lives.

That has meant fossil fuels. Indeed, after California closed the San Onofre nuclear plant in 2013, both carbon emissions and air pollution spiked.

Air pollution disproportionately harms poor people. This is especially true in Los Angeles, where poor people of color have borne the brunt of increased pollution.

Now, faced with the electricity supply crisis, Gov. Newsom has [suspended air-pollution regulations](#), which may increase the use of diesel generators, and worsen air pollution in the inner-city.

The closure of nuclear plants by Democrats challenges their stated commitment to “environmental justice” and “climate justice.”

California [newspapers](#) and environmental activists, [myself included](#), urged Harris, when she was Attorney General of California, to investigate and prosecute the people involved in the forced closure of San Onofre. She never did, despite evidence of criminal activity by California regulators.

But the problem is bigger than Kamala Harris the candidate. The Green New Deal, proposed by Rep. Ocasio-Cortez last year, called for the closure of US nuclear power plants, including Indian Point in New York.

She is getting her wish: Indian Point closed one reactor earlier this year and will close the other next year. Both are being replaced almost entirely by fossil fuels.

Everywhere renewables are implemented, they drive up costs and drive down reliability.

Germany frequently boasts about its use of renewables, especially wind power. Yet [in Germany](#), when wind is 15 percent of electricity, its value drops 20 percent. And when wind is 30 percent, its value drops 40 percent.

Subsidies from consumers compensate for this value drop, meaning that as more renewables get integrated into the system, costs keep rising. The same thing occurred in California where electricity prices rose six times more than in the rest of the U.S. from 2011 to 2019.

And Germany still hasn't tried to close its fossil generation. Instead, Germany has to keep power plants standing by, ready to fire up the moment wind dies down.

Most of its plants burn natural gas and coal. All of them require extra power lines, personnel, and infrastructure to prop up fundamentally unreliable and unpredictable renewable forms of energy.

Unlike Germany, California faces severe budget deficits and lacks extra power plants to back up its grid. As a result, Californians will spend nearly as much as the Germans but will suffer blackouts to boot.

Even so, Democrats seem determined to nationalize California's experience. Speaking on the steps of the Capitol in late June, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who represents San Francisco, [called](#) a plan by House Democrats nearly identical to that of the Biden-Harris plan a "bold step for climate action now."

"I wish it weren't a fight," Pelosi said, adding, "We will turn this report into law."

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