



## **Biden's drilling and coal comments expose Democratic rift days before election**

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President Joe Biden exposed a rift within the Democratic Party just two days before an election with his off-the-cuff pledge to approve "no more drilling."

At the end of a rally with embattled Gov. Kathy Hochul (D-NY), Biden made apparently spontaneous comments to a heckler and opened up another midterm headache for his party.

"No more drilling," he said, waving his hand with a back-and-forth motion. "There is no more drilling. I haven't formed any new drilling."

The remarks come on the heels of a spat Biden started with Sen. Joe Manchin (D-WV) by saying he's going to shut down coal plants across the country and appear to directly contradict comments the president made just days before.

At an election rally in New Mexico on Thursday, Biden bragged that his administration hadn't slowed down any oil leases in the state and said energy companies "should be drilling more than they're doing now. If they were drilling more, we'd have more relief at the pump."

Some Republicans pointed to Biden's New York comments as confirming a hidden truth — that Democrats want gas prices to go up in order to force a transition to green energy.

"Biden just admitted his anti-American oil & gas agenda," Rep. Steve Scalise (R-LA) tweeted. "Not even his allies in the media & the phony fact-checkers will be able to cover for him on this now. It came straight out of his mouth."

House Oversight Republicans released a report detailing "Democrats' war on American energy" the following morning.

But the conflict within his own party may prove more problematic for the president. Manchin released a scathing statement after Biden pledged to shutter coal plants, which are a major economic driver in West Virginia.

"President Biden's comments are not only outrageous and divorced from reality, they ignore the severe economic pain the American people are feeling because of rising energy costs," Manchin said. "Comments like these are the reason the American people are losing trust in President Biden and instead believes he does not understand the need to have an all-in energy policy that would keep our nation totally energy independent and secure."

Across the border in energy-rich Pennsylvania, both anti-coal and anti-oil comments could be problematic in the crucial Senate race between Republican Mehmet Oz and Democrat John Fetterman, who has been vague at times about his own support for fracking.

Biden's latest remarks promising to end new oil drilling could add to the midterm headaches, as gas prices have risen sharply during his time in office, and some blame his anti-oil policies for contributing to the surge. The average price of a gallon of gas was \$2.31 when Biden took office. It peaked above \$5 per gallon this summer and sits at \$3.80 now, according to AAA.

Detractors have blamed the president for helping drive up the price, and in turn he has tapped the Strategic Petroleum Reserve and taken other measures to make gas cheaper. Biden met with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman over the summer, which generated its own round of controversy, and the kingdom announced later it was cutting production.

Samuel Abrams, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, said Biden may be saved by the fact that the remarks came so close to the end of the midterm elections, with millions of early ballots already cast, and during a relatively low-profile Sunday night appearance. Still, it is indicative of a major intraparty spat.

"Democrats are not aligned on this issue at all, that's been a big problem for the party for years now," said Abrams, a professor at Sarah Lawrence College, where the rally took place. "In Biden's case, it could be a sign of his age, perhaps not even remembering the contractions. ... This would not be the first time the White House has tried to walk back his comments."

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre responded to a question from the *Washington Examiner* during Monday's press briefing by repeating previous statements about approved drilling permits that remain untapped by the industry.

The dispute may prove to be more symbolic than real, argues Cato Institute senior fellow Peter Van Doren, due to nuances about onshore vs. offshore drilling and the fact that drilling on private land is now more important than that done on public land.

But the issue remains politically volatile, especially so long as elevated gas prices remain top of mind for voters.

A Trafalgar Group poll found that 54.4% of voters say rising gas prices will make them more likely to choose Republican candidates in the 2022 midterm elections, including 55.5% of independents. Another poll, from the *New York Times*, found that voters who were focused on the economy and inflation favored Republicans over Democrats 64% to 30%.