

VIDEO

Trump and Biden clash on climate as fires rage

David Charter, Washington | Ben Hoyle, Los Angeles

Tuesday September 15 2020, 12:01am BST, The Times

Donald Trump

Global politics

US politics

US election 2020

Joe Biden



Fire crews set a backburning blaze to protect homes in Arcadia, California
DAVID MCNEW/GETTY IMAGES

Share



Save



President Trump and his rival Joe Biden clashed over the cause of wildfires consuming America's west coast as their competing views on climate change became the focus 50 days before the US presidential election.

[Mr Trump](#), on a visit to California, said that the forests should be better managed to remove kindling, while fending off questions on whether climate change was responsible. He insisted during a briefing with state officials that weather systems would “start getting cooler” after saying that fallen trees become like matchsticks that “can explode” if not removed.

When Wade Crowfoot, California’s natural resources secretary, told the president that the state wanted to work with him, Mr Trump said: “It’ll start getting cooler, you just watch.”

Trump at ceremony honouring National Guard

Mr Crowfoot said: “I wish science agreed with you.”

The president responded: “Well I don’t think science knows actually.”

Mr Biden, 77, made a speech on the blazes that have ravaged four million acres, warning that four more years of Mr Trump's "surrender" on climate policy would mean worse wildfires, hurricanes and floods across the country. "If you give a climate arsonist four more years in the White House, why would anyone be surprised if we have more of America ablaze?" he asked.

Mr Trump, 74, has drawn fierce criticism from Democratic leaders for blaming poor forest husbandry for the fires that have killed at least 35 people, destroyed several small towns and forced hundreds of thousands of Americans from their homes.

He rarely mentions climate protection measures at his rallies, whereas Mr Biden has put them at the heart of his campaign with a pledge to spend \$2 trillion over four years to switch to clean energy in transport, electricity and construction.

"Donald Trump's climate denial may not have caused these fires, record floods and record

hurricanes but if he gets a second term these hellish events will continue to become more common, more devastating and more deadly,” Mr Biden said in a speech delivered from a field in Wilmington near his home in Delaware.

SPONSORED



What qualities make the ultimate sportsperson?



The Oppo Brothers on how their dream was brought to fruition

After a week in which Mr Trump set the agenda by hammering his law-and -order message and stoking fears that the suburbs would be destroyed by violent mobs or eroded by low-cost housing projects, Mr Biden sought to turn the tables by warning that generations of Americans were not safe under Mr Trump.

“Donald Trump warns that integration is threatening our suburbs. It’s ridiculous,” the former vice-president said. “If we have four more years of Trump’s climate denial how many suburbs will be burned? . . . How many suburbs will have been blown away in superstorms?”

As Mr Biden spoke, Hurricane Sally strengthened as a category 2 storm off the US Gulf Coast. It is one of five active tropical cyclones in the Atlantic or Gulf, a number unmatched since 1971.

Mr Biden added: “We need a president who respects science . . . Unless we take urgent action it will soon be more catastrophic.”

Mr Biden also sought to link Mr Trump’s rejection of scientific warnings about climate change with his handling of the coronavirus. “We know he won’t listen to the experts or treat this disaster with the urgency it demands, as any president should do during a national emergency.”

In a Gallup poll in August, only 1 per cent of Americans named the climate or pollution as their top issue, with coronavirus by far the highest concern, cited by 35 per cent.

Mr Trump retweeted yesterday a post by the “climate science contrarian” Steve Milloy, which read: “California has a long history of megadroughts that pre-date SUVs. People can either manage forests intelligently or nature will do it indiscriminately.”

Asked in California what he would like to see done on forest management, Mr Trump said: “I think a lot of things are possible. When trees fall down after a short period of time they become very dry — really like a matchstick . . . and they can explode. Also leaves . . . I was talking to the head of a foreign country and they said, ‘We consider ourselves a forest nation. We have trees that are far more explosive than they have in California and we don’t have that problem.’”

Eric Garcetti, the mayor of Los Angeles, rejected Mr Trump’s characterisation of wildfires as simply a forest management issue, blaming “years of drought” due to climate change. “It seems like this administration are the last vestiges of the flat Earth society of this generation,” Mr Garcetti told CNN.

Gavin Newsom, the California governor, speaking in the same briefing as Mr Trump, said: “The hots are getting hotter, the dries are getting drier. Something has happened to the plumbing of the world and we come from a perspective, humbly, that we assert the science that climate change is real.”

On Sunday night supporters at Mr Trump’s rally in Nevada targeted Barack Obama, chanting

“lock him up” in an echo of a slogan used about Hillary Clinton in 2016. Mr Trump told the crowd that Mr Obama “got caught spying on my campaign”, despite a bipartisan Senate committee’s conclusion that there was no evidence the Obama White House instigated an FBI investigation of the Trump campaign.

The flames are fanning bitter debate

As he surveyed the damage from weeks of west coast wildfires Gavin Newsom, California’s Democratic governor, declared that the debate over climate change was “over” (Henry Zeffman writes). “Just come to the state of California. Observe it with your own eyes,” he said last week. “The debate is over, around climate change. This is a climate damn emergency. This is real and it’s happening.”

For President Trump, though, the debate is not “over” at all. The wildfires, he contends, are attributable to poor forest management. “You’ve got to clean your forests — there are many, many years of leaves and broken trees and they’re so flammable,” he said last month.

For his part Mr Newsom concedes forest management failings, but insists that they are “not the point” in this instance. His

disagreement with Mr Trump reflects deep partisan differences over how seriously the US should take climate change.

Clearly climate change is not a priority for this administration. Within six months of his inauguration, Mr Trump announced that the US would withdraw from the Paris climate agreement, and other environmental regulations have been rolled back.

Insofar as this relates to the election, the reality is that many voters who care deeply about the issue are already Democrats. Polling by Pew Research Centre shows that concern about climate change has risen substantially over the past decade, but mainly among one party. Among Democrats, the rise in concern since 2009 was from 61 per cent to 88 per cent. Among Republicans, it was from 25 per cent to 31 per cent.

So it seems that Mr Trump is reflecting the prevailing winds among his own party's support base.

Nevertheless, Joe Biden put climate change at the centre of his campaign yesterday, in a speech in Delaware. He has promised to eliminate

carbon pollution from power plants by 2035 and net-zero emissions altogether by 2050. Why? One reason is that even if there is only about one third of Republicans seriously concerned by climate change, that may offer a small number of potential switchers to be peeled away. But the Democratic grassroots would also expect nothing else.

Should Mr Biden win the presidency, Mr Newsom and his fellow west coast governors would welcome the introduction of the measures he has pledged. But unless there is a sea change in Republican attitudes, the climate debate is far from “over”.

[Donald Trump](#)[Global politics](#)[US politics](#)[US election 2020](#)[Joe Biden](#)

Share



Save



Related articles



WORLD AT FIVE

What a Biden presidency would mean for the world

Joe Biden plans to try to turn the clock back on America’s international relations to the pre-Trump era with a “global summit for democracy”...

August 18 2020, 5.00pm BST

David Charter, Washington



WORLD AT FIVE

What happens to the ‘special relationship’ under Biden?

President Trump sees Boris Johnson as such a kindred spirit that he described him as “Britain Trump”. The problem for the prime minister is that...

July 06 2020, 5.00pm BST

Henry Zeffman, Washington



US ELECTION EXPLAINED

Can Biden’s luck hold all the way to White House?

Joe Biden might be the luckiest politician in America. He won his party’s nomination by launching an unprecedented comeback that rocketed him...

August 20 2020, 5.00pm BST

Josh Glancy, Washington

PAID PROMOTIONAL LINKS

Promoted by **Dianomi**



Motley Fool Issues Rare “All In” Buy Alert

The Motley Fool



Ron Paul’s Urgent Message for Every American

Stansberry Research



The Only Card that Rounds Up to the Nearest 10 Points

Citi Rewards+SM Card



Resilience in Credit
Aviva Investors



See How Some Retirees Use Options Trading As A Safe Way To Earn Income

TradeWins

BACK TO TOP



THE SUNDAY TIMES

GET IN TOUCH

[About us](#)

[Contact us](#)

[Help](#)

[The Times Editorial Co](#)

[The Sunday Times Editorial Complaints](#)

[Place an announcement](#)

[Classified advertising](#)

[Display advertising](#)

[The Times corrections](#)

[The Sunday Times corr](#)

[Careers](#)

MORE FROM THE TIMES AND THE SUNDAY TIMES

[The Times e-paper](#)

[Times Currency Services](#)

[Times Print Gallery](#)

[Times Crossword Club](#)

[Times+](#)

[Times Expert Traveller](#)

[Schools Guide](#)

[Best Places to Live](#)

[Sportswomen of the Year Awards](#)

[Podcasts](#)

© Times Newspapers Limited 2020.
Registered in England No. 894646.
Registered office: 1 London Bridge Street, SE1 9GF.

[Privacy & cookie policy](#)

[Licensing](#)

[Cookie settings](#)

[Site map](#)

[Topics](#)

[Commissioning terms](#)

[Terms and conditions](#)