



The Daily Dish

The Recent Record on U.S. Greenhouse Gas Emissions

DOUGLAS HOLTZ-EAKIN | JANUARY 8, 2020

Eakinomics: The Recent Record on U.S. Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Climate change and policies to address emissions of greenhouse gases promise to be a hot topic this (election) year. Where does the United States stand? The Rhodium Group released its preliminary [estimate](#) of 2019 emissions, which showed a decline of 2.1 percent. Since emissions rose in 2017 and 2018, they remain slightly above their 2016 rate.

As a result, emissions are only 12 percent below the U.S. level in 2005, making it difficult to imagine that the United States will meet its Copenhagen Accord target of a 17 percent reduction by the end of 2020. Under the Paris Agreement, from which the United States withdrew under President Trump, the United States had pledged to reduce 26-28 percent from 2005 levels by 2025. (And even meeting those targets [does not guarantee](#) that climate change is addressed.)

The remarkable part of this story is that emissions from the electric power sector dropped by almost 10 percent, largely due to the sharp, 18 percent decline in emissions from coal-generated power plants. In other U.S. sectors, emissions rose. If the United States is to meet its goals, it cannot rely on eliminating coal from the power sector (which is responsible for just over a quarter of all emissions). The United States will require some fundamental changes in policy.

Presumably, the electoral debate on climate change will focus on two issues. First will be the right targets (if any) for the United States. Second will be which policies can meet those targets. On the latter, one hopes that the debate will migrate away from the [overly expensive regulatory approaches](#) and toward using [price signals in a market framework](#) to achieve those goals without sacrificing continued increases in prosperity.