

## TRANSCRIPT

### Environmental Insights

Guest: Lisa Friedman

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- Lisa Friedman: We always kind of ask, like 'is this the election when climate change matters?' And it does seem that this is the election when climate change matters.
- Rob Stavins: Welcome to [Environmental Insights](#), a podcast from the [Harvard Environmental Economics Program](#). I'm your host, [Rob Stavins](#), a professor here at the Harvard Kennedy School and director of the [Environmental Economics Program](#) and our [Project on Climate Agreements](#).
- Rob Stavins: With only a day or so left to the US presidential and congressional elections on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, an election which people on all sides of the many issues, whether they're Republicans or Democrats, characterizes an exceptionally important election. Among the important policy areas that will be affected by the election is the area in which we focus in this podcast, namely environmental and energy policy, including of course, climate change policy. We realized that it would be wonderful service to our listeners, both in the United States and around the world, to talk with knowledgeable people about the election's implications, both before the election and afterward. And I thought for this purpose, rather than talking with someone from academia, or government, or industry, as we usually tend to do in this podcast, we should talk with people who make it their business to examine these key questions on a daily basis, indeed often on an hourly basis.
- Rob Stavins: And I'm referring of course to practicing journalists. So for this purpose I've gone to two people who are real leaders in the realm of environmental reporting in a real world political context, two people whom I greatly respect and with whom I've had the pleasure of working from my perch in academia for many years. Our post-election discussion, which will be in a few weeks, will be with [Coral Davenport](#) of the [New York Times](#). And for our before-election discussion today, I'm delighted to say that I'm joined by [Lisa Friedman](#), reporter on the climate desk, also at the [New York Times](#). Lisa, welcome to [Environmental Insights](#).
- Lisa Friedman: Rob, thank you so much for having me.
- Rob Stavins: Obviously I'm very interested and our listeners are to hear your insights about climate change policy and the upcoming election. But before we talk about that, let's go back to how you came to be where you are and where you've been. And when I say go back, I do mean go way back. Where did you grow up?
- Lisa Friedman: I grew up in New Jersey, North Jersey, about a half hour outside of New York. And I have been working for newspapers since I was 16 years old.

Rob Stavins: That started in high school, your working for newspapers. Is that-

Lisa Friedman: Exactly. I wanted to get a job at a record store, my mother wouldn't allow it. She wanted me to get an internship at a law firm or something dreadfully boring. And I mean, I came from a three newspaper a day family. My father always used to say things like, reporters uncover more corruption than the FBI, which I love. And I think it's true. And yeah, I went down to the *North Jersey Herald and News*, our local newspaper in Passaic County, New Jersey. And I got a job as an editorial assistant writing obituaries, and fetching coffee, and answering phones. And that was where my newspaper career and love of journalism was born.

Rob Stavins: Was that part-time while you were in school or is this after-school and a full-time job?

Lisa Friedman: Oh, it was a little bit of everything.

Rob Stavins: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lisa Friedman: It was full-time during the summers, part-time during the school year. Then in college, I worked briefly for *The Village Voice* and sort of realized that where my sort of natural tendencies and sort of passion in journalism lies, not in presenting my own opinion, but finding out what other people think and what other people are doing. And after college I really backed into environmental reporting. I never started out as an environmental reporter. I, after college got a job at the *Las Vegas Review Journal*, again as an intern covering the police beat and wanted to be Edna Buchanan and cover crime for the rest of my life.

Rob Stavins: Right.

Lisa Friedman: I went to Bakersfield and started a prison beat and eventually came to DC to cover Congress. And I was climbing the ladder of newspapers and the rungs fell out in 2008 and 2007-8, and I kept getting laid off and landed completely by accident at [Climatewire](#), a fantastic daily news outlet, focused on energy and environment policy.

Rob Stavins: Which is where we first met, certainly.

Lisa Friedman: Which is where we first met.

Rob Stavins: Right.

Lisa Friedman: In Poznan, I think.

Rob Stavins: I think that's right. I think that's right. At the *Los Angeles Daily News*, you were not doing climate or even environment. Climatewire was your first move into realm, is that right?

Lisa Friedman: That's right. I mean, yes, like I said, I worked for local papers and then I got a job as the rep, they called me Bureau Chief of the *Oakland Tribune*, but there was nobody else in the Bureau. I was chief of me.

Rob Stavins: Right.

Lisa Friedman: And sometimes I'd bring my dog into work and then I was chief of him.

Rob Stavins: Right.

Lisa Friedman: *Oakland Tribune* in their Washington Bureau for a few years and got laid off, was hired by the *LA Daily News*, a sister paper also covering Congress, so I covered the California delegation. I did cover some climate stories in that mix, but it was really... When you're a regional reporter, you are covering everything with an eye toward what it means for your part of the country.

Rob Stavins: Sure, sure.

Lisa Friedman: Whether it's the war in Iraq or changes to the alternative minimum tax. And then I got laid off from the *LA Daily News* and there was an opening at *Climatewire*. And I mean, I'll tell you my first thought was gosh, covering just one subject. I mean, that could be really boring.

Rob Stavins: Right. Yeah I could understand that reaction.

Lisa Friedman: And I mean, it took me about... And I kind of thought, well, maybe I'll I'll work at this place until newspapers rebound, ha ha.

Rob Stavins: Yeah.

Lisa Friedman: And it took me about 20 seconds working at *Climatewire* and getting to really understand this issue, to realize this is the best and most important beat there is. That this is a beat about absolutely everything.

Rob Stavins: Right.

Lisa Friedman: And it really just changed the entire trajectory of my career.

Rob Stavins: Speaking of that beat and turning to the election. In most national elections, in the US since the beginning of a meaningful environmental policy in the US, which I would peg as approximately 1970 or so in terms of federal environmental policy, environment has always been at most a second tier, if not a third tier issue for voters. But it seems to be different this time, at least among some voters. Do you sense that or am I off base here?

Lisa Friedman: No, I mean, I think you're absolutely right. I mean, well, first of all, just to close the loop on career. I came to the *Times* shortly after President Trump was

elected, but in every election that I have covered, both presidential and midterms, since I've been focused on climate change about 10 or 12 years now, we always kind of ask, 'is this the election when climate change matters?' And it does seem that this is the election when climate change matters. Now look, I think there's two parts to this, right? There's the amount of attention that climate change is getting in the election, which is undeniably bigger and more substantive than it has ever been before. And then there's the question of whether... to what extent this is an issue that people vote on, right?

Lisa Friedman: I mean, when you go to the polls, how high is climate change or other energy issues. But to the first point I mean, yes. I mean, I have never seen an election cycle like this where climate change is consistently ranks in the top issues among Democrats. And I mean, if you remember, we had seven hours on CNN of mostly thoughtful policy debate on climate change, which my goodness, like even two years ago, if you had told me that there would be... Yes, there was some silly questions about straws and hamburgers, but you also had all of the Democratic nominees discussing very in-depth policy on managed retreat and the role that nuclear energy should or shouldn't play. And had you told me that this would be on a major news network, and we would have that kind of substantive policy discussion on climate change, I would not have believed you.

Rob Stavins: And I wonder, is this increased attention from the news media to climate change and its relationship in the context of the election – is it due to increased broad concern among the population on climate change? Is it due to a new crop of young voters who are entering the electorate for the first time? Is it a response to Trump? Because so much of this seems to really be about Trump, both the voters on one side and the voters on the other side. Or is there something else that's going on?

Lisa Friedman: No, I mean, it's a great question. And I think it's all of those things. I recently did a story looking at what it is that has caused climate change to really sort of claim so much attention.

Rob Stavins: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lisa Friedman: And there is no doubt that the fact that there is one candidate who calls climate change a hoax, and has been openly antagonistic to climate science, and has moved to roll back climate regulations, pit against a candidate who calls climate change an existential threat makes this a more salient issue to cover. I talk to folks from the Romney campaign and the McCain campaign, who if you recall, I mean, both... McCain to a far greater extent, perhaps, but both Obama and McCain agree that climate change was happening and needed to be addressed and had in some cases, similar proposals for dealing with it.

Lisa Friedman: And both said, look in the campaign, not only was there no urgency to have a platform, have a climate change platform, or there was no real pressure to even discuss it because it wasn't a point of differentiation. It didn't help voters decide who to vote for. Yes, there is that, but there's also the extreme weather events,

the wildfires, the floods, are also just having an undeniable effect in making this a front and center issue for people.

Rob Stavins: Right.

Lisa Friedman: And like you say, I mean the youth movement, the advocacy movement around climate change has been bigger than ever. The climate strikes, the Sunrise Movement, I mean, has brought this to a level of attention again, that I just don't think it's ever really had before.

Rob Stavins: Let's think about what the effects of the election could be on the paths of climate change policy over the next four years. And let's start by focusing exclusively on US domestic climate change policy. And then later we can talk about in the international domain with the [Paris Agreement](#) and the like. And in addressing that, why don't we assume that the Democrats hold the House and then you can tell us what you think happens with climate change policy, given who's elected. And with either scenario about the Senate, either at flipping to Democrats or remaining in Republican hands. What are your thoughts?

Lisa Friedman: Are you assuming here a Biden win?

Rob Stavins: No. I want you to take it either way. I mean, I assume the answer is relatively brief with a Trump win, but maybe it's not, maybe there's some new things that'll happen.

Lisa Friedman: Yeah. I mean, if president Trump wins, I think there's a couple of things that are going to happen. I mean, look, there's not a lot left to deregulate, right? President Trump has rolled back virtually every regulation that had existed to draw down emissions from power plants, from automobile tailpipe emissions, from the oil and gas sector. A lot of those are in the courts and how those play out will be a huge second term issue. If there is a second term for President Trump.

Rob Stavins: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lisa Friedman: And I also think in a second term, you will see, let me try to un-wonkify this. But one of the things that this administration has done that it hasn't gotten as much attention is they have worked to not just roll back regulations, but to roll back the ability to create new regulations. And I think that is something that we'll see a lot more of. There's a regulation right now that we're still waiting for a final version of, to restrict the type of science that the EPA can refer to when it creates new regulations.

Rob Stavins: Right.

Lisa Friedman: There's cost benefit regulations. I think we'll see other things like that really sort of tightening the reins on the ability of any future Democratic administration to enact air, and water, and climate regulations.

Rob Stavins: Which raises the importance, then, of statutory approaches. Because unlike what the Obama administration did when it failed with the statutory approach within the Senate from [Waxman-Markey](#) was that obviously it went to a regulatory approach, but with this new 6-3 conservative majority in the Supreme Court, and possibly even overturning the Chevron ruling, it could be that it would be much more difficult for the agencies to have the discretion. I think that's what you're suggesting of going beyond what a statute says in very literal terms. Is that right?

Lisa Friedman: Exactly, exactly. And the last thing that I would note on in a second term Trump Administration is [a piece I recently did](#) with my colleague, [Chris Flavelle](#), looking at changes to NOAA. Now, NOAA is an agency that has flown mostly under the radar these past few years, but they are one of the lead agencies that produces the National Climate Assessment, a congressionally mandated report that comes out every four years that assesses the risks to the United States from climate change. And the Trump Administration recently installed two people in high level positions who openly question the science of climate change and have been, at least one of them has been... And knowledgeable people around these folks have said that the goal here in a second term is to inject doubt into the National Climate Assessment about both the extent of warming and the implications.

Lisa Friedman: Why does that matter? It's a big report that sits on a desk every four years, but it's actually a critically important report because to have a report with the imprimatur of the United States government, that questions climate change would, could be used in courts. And most importantly, it could be used to challenge the legal and scientific foundation, known as the Endangerment Finding for your listeners, again, sorry to nerd out, but of the foundation for regulating greenhouse gas emissions in the first place.

Rob Stavins: You're not nerding out. I love it when you talk like that, Lisa, it's great from my perspective. Let me ask you then to make our listeners feel good. Let's speculate. I'd ask you now to speculate on what will we see if Mr. Biden is the next president, and to make it specific, let's assume the Democrats hold the House. For the moment why don't we even assume that the Democrats take control of the Senate, but without a filibuster-proof majority. What would you anticipate would happen?

Lisa Friedman: This is a real sort of choose your own adventure scenario, right? I mean, and again, I apologize for keep referring to the *Times*, but we do have a tremendous huge climate team at the *Times*, which I think we're all really proud of. And my colleague Coral Davenport, who you're going to be speaking with after the election, just did [a great piece looking at like what it would take for Biden's climate plan to become a reality](#). Now, just to explain it, Vice President Biden

has pledged two trillion over four years to boost clean energy, electric automobiles, energy efficient buildings. He has called for eliminating fossil fuel emissions from the power sector by 2035. That is going to be a difficult sell to get through the Senate in any configuration.

Rob Stavins: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lisa Friedman: There's a couple scenarios. One, I would say that it seems to us from having spoken with a lot of folks in and around Biden's camp is that they are thinking about this very differently than the thinking that surrounded the Waxman-Markey effort in 2009 to pass a cap-and-trade bill.

Rob Stavins: Right.

Lisa Friedman: I mean, in that, when President Obama was elected first came the Recovery Act, and yes, there was a lot of money in there for clean energy, but it was first the [Recovery Act](#) then healthcare. And then by the time Congress got around to dealing with climate change, some can quibble with my characterization here, but I think there wasn't a lot of political capital left to get that over the finish line in the Senate.

Rob Stavins: I think that's absolutely right. Yeah.

Lisa Friedman: Okay. Here, they're really thinking they really seem to be thinking about embedding climate change in everything first and foremost, in any coronavirus economic recovery stimulus.

Rob Stavins: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lisa Friedman: And that's an area, we're Mr. Biden has a lot of experience, he was essentially responsible for including about 90 billion in clean energy, spending into the [American Recovery and Reinvestment Act](#). What happens if those spending measures don't get enough Republican support? My colleague Coral laid this out in [a story recently](#) where she interviewed Chuck Schumer, now the minority leader who said openly that Democrats will use a budgetary procedure, a fast tracking procedure known as budget reconciliation to push through climate spending and tax policy if they need to, so we'll see if that is the route that they wind up taking.

Rob Stavins: Yeah. I heard that suggested a couple of days ago to Lisa Murkowski. And of course she bridled at the notion, although she's much more supportive of climate policy than almost all of her Republican colleagues, but she bridled at the notion of using budget reconciliation. Although at least there's a good connection if there was a carbon price then it actually is a budgetary issue.

Lisa Friedman: Exactly. And it has been... President Trump has used it. It's not an unheard of procedure. What we've been told by sources on the Hill is that this probably isn't the... That they will make efforts to do things in a bipartisan way first.

Rob Stavins: Right.

Lisa Friedman: But they do have this in their back pocket, if there is no appetite among Republicans for dealing with climate change.

Rob Stavins: Now one day, Lisa, after the presidential election, the United States will officially withdraw from the [Paris Agreement](#), unless the president, the administration has a sudden change of heart and tries to reverse itself. If Vice President Biden becomes president in January, is inaugurated. What will happen with regards to the Paris Agreement?

Lisa Friedman: Technically as you say, the day after the election, we will be out of the Paris Agreement. President Trump, his administration has already sent a year ago the letter that set the clock ticking. At the earliest date that he was able to, he did. And so it's an awkward time anyway. Because of the coronavirus there is not going to be a UN climate meeting in December as there normally would be. We're not going to have as sort of, I guess you'd say as visible a gap as we would if this was a normal non-pandemic time. But you know, if Biden is elected, I mean, I think you can expect to see a couple of things.

Lisa Friedman: I think you can expect some messaging very early on to the international community to remind them that throughout his campaign, he has pledged at getting back into the Paris Agreement will be a day one promise. And then comes the question of thinking, I think among his transition team about what US reentry into the Paris Agreement looks like, right. Because as I'm sure you've been giving this a lot of thought to, and getting back into Paris is the easy part.

Rob Stavins: Right. Specifying a Nationally Determined Contribution is the significant question.

Lisa Friedman: I mean, and here's where I'd also love to ask you, Rob, if I could, can I ask you a question?

Rob Stavins: Sure. Normally when you and I talk, that's the way it works. Today is the exception.

Lisa Friedman: I'm so uncomfortable being on this side of the... But I'd love to get your thoughts on what kind of hurdles the US will face in restoring the other countries' trust. I mean, countries have seen this movie now twice, right? Where the United States not only backs out of an international climate agreement, but pushes other countries toward a certain kind of architecture. And then elects a Republican, who pulls us out of a global agreement -- first Kyoto and now Paris.



Rob Stavins: Yeah.

Lisa Friedman: Why should other countries trust us when we say we're back?

Rob Stavins: You're right, there is a history of it. The [Kyoto Protocol](#) had Article 17 trading mechanism because of the United States. And then of course we never ratified the Kyoto Protocol. Similarly, with the Paris Agreement, President Obama played a very important role in that agreement and its structure of this hybrid so that it could get through the US with ratification without the US Senate, and now the US drops out. My reaction leads into your question is that our allies, particularly the Europeans, are going to be so thrilled if Mr. Biden was elected namely because Mr. Trump is not elected. Principally because of moving forward with NATO as being a significant mechanism of the world. Secondly, because of international trade and not inspiring trade wars with the European Union.

Rob Stavins: And then the question is, what about China? Because this has been... That relationship, I don't know if it's been poisoned, but it's certainly been damaged tremendously and lots of spheres on defense, on trade, and on climate change. My take is still that despite all of that, and despite the fact that there has been this in and out pattern over time, as you've identified. Is that the countries will be delighted to work with the United States, again. Maybe I'm being naive.

Lisa Friedman: I guess we'll see, right.

Rob Stavins: Yeah, we'll see.

Lisa Friedman: But that's what I'm going to be looking for if it's a Biden presidency, that's one of the questions that's heavily on my mind.

Rob Stavins: I want to take us... Let me take us beyond the election and even thinking further forward. And it's the following is that increasing political polarization in the United States has changed what was once a bipartisan issue, and I mean, environment and energy broadly, into a fiercely partisan one. As you well know and as we've talked about, the path-breaking, [Clean Air Act Amendments in 1990](#), passed the Senate with support from 91% of Democrats and 87% of Republicans and it was similar in the House. Fast-forward to the Waxman-Markey bill in 2009, passed the house with 83% of Democrats and 4% of Republicans, so do you see Lisa, this dramatic polarization on climate change and other environmental issues for that matter, do you see that as changing going forward, or is this the new reality for a decade ahead?

Lisa Friedman: It's a great question. It's hard to say. I mean, look, we have really seen in the past year Republican members of Congress sort of come to the table in some ways on climate change, right? You have Kevin McCarthy, a House minority leader, coming forward with a package of initiatives. You saw that house Republicans purposely put Congressman Graves who is not a climate denier,

who does acknowledge the science and the urgency of dealing with climate change on the Select Committee on Climate Change.

Rob Stavins: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lisa Friedman: Even President Trump made a sort of nod to climate change by getting involved in the [Trillion Tree Initiative](#).

Rob Stavins: Right.

Lisa Friedman: I'd say the thing that... This doesn't directly answer your polarization question, but I mean, one thing that is really notable about all of the efforts that Republicans are engaged in, whether it's trees, or carbon capture, or nuclear energy, is that there seems to be a consensus on the conservative side, that one can address climate change without reducing fossil fuels or that... Which is something that scientists have not backed up, and those that do acknowledge that there needs to be a serious reduction in fossil fuels essentially argue that market forces will take care of that.

Lisa Friedman: There really is a very wide gulf still. I do think that you're going to see sort of less argumentation around the science. I think with President Trump in office, this has been in some ways like the golden era for climate deniers. I don't think that there... And he has brought climate deniers into prominent positions in the White House, et cetera. I mean, this is no secret, but I do think that broadly speaking the Republican Party is ready to move on from the debate around the science. And if President Trump is not given a second term, then we'll see a lot more fights over solutions than we will over whether or not this is happening.

Rob Stavins: Well even that is somewhat encouraging. Let me finish up by asking you one other question. I'm really curious to know what's your personal reaction to a change that has taken place, at least in my view. And that are these youth movements of climate activism, both in Europe and in the United States. What's your reaction to those?

Lisa Friedman: I think it's terrific. I mean, I think it has brought so much energy both to the beat and to the issue. I think a lot of the youth activists have really challenged those of us who have been covering the issue just as they have challenged sort of the folks who were the youth activists when I started covering climate change.

Rob Stavins: Right.

Lisa Friedman: Who've really challenged the sort of conventional wisdom among advocacy have also been very forthright in challenging journalists, and our assumptions, and what we write about, and how. And I think all of those are really positive things. I've been glad to see it. And I think that seeing young people deeply engaged on this issue has been really powerful.

Rob Stavins: Yeah. I agree with you completely. And it's wonderful to conclude on a positive note after everything we've been discussing. Thank you very much Lisa, for taking time to join us today.

Lisa Friedman: Thank you so much for having me, Rob.

Rob Stavins: It's great to be with you. Thanks again to our guest today [Lisa Friedman](#), reporter on the climate desk at the [New York Times](#).

Robert Stavins: Please join us for the next episode of [Environmental Insights: Conversations on Policy and Practice](#) from the [Harvard Environmental Economics Program](#). I'm your host, [Rob Stavins](#). Thanks for listening.

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