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In West Virginia, the clean-energy transition rests on Joe Manchin

Senator faces competing pressures from climate activists, coal miners and others to navigate the shift from fossil fuels to green energy



By Maxine Joselow

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Sen. Joe Manchin III (D-W.Va.). (Amanda Andrade-Rhoades for The Washington Post)



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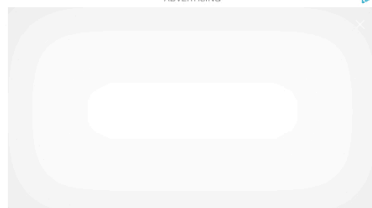
KEYSER, W.Va. — About a three-hour drive from the nation’s capital, the road snakes past a barren brown landscape where lush forests once stood. The [mountains here have been gouged by heavy machinery](#) and stripped of sugar maples, yellow birches and other trees native to this stretch of Mineral County.

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Mining for coal, the rock that gave the county its name, helped scar this landscape. But now a row of spinning windmills dots a nearby ridge, as a developer bets that mounting concerns about climate change and the coal industry’s viability will speed an energy shift here.

Renewable energy has just begun to gain a foothold in West Virginia, [accounting for 6 percent of the state’s electricity](#) in 2020 compared with coal plants’ 88 percent. Residents’ deep skepticism about the transition to clean energy — even among those working on the new Black Rock wind farm — has complicated President Biden’s push to wean America off fossil fuels.

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No figure in the country has more influence over the president's effort than Sen. Joe Manchin III, the powerful West Virginia Democrat who chairs the Senate Energy and Natural Resources panel. Manchin supports Clearway Energy Group's Black Rock wind farm, which will increase the state's wind energy generation by 15 percent. But he helped [scuttle Biden's signature climate and social spending plan](#) last year, arguing the sweeping legislation to cut carbon emissions would hurt his constituents.

Chuck Parker, an operating engineer who helped build the Black Rock wind farm, shares Manchin's doubts about a rapid shift to clean energy. He worries many coal industry workers who have sacrificed their health and well-being to power the state won't find well-paying jobs installing wind turbines like he did.

"I don't think wind is a replacement for coal," Parker said in an interview at the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the wind project in early May. "I think coal will always have a place in West Virginia, and it should. But wind is a great addition to our energy portfolio."



The Black Rock wind farm in Mineral County. (Ethan Butler for Clearway Energy Group)

Like Parker, Manchin recognizes the country's inevitable embrace of clean-energy technologies such as wind turbines, solar panels and electric vehicles. But his continued opposition to sweeping climate measures stems, at least in part, from a fear of accelerating the transition at his home state's expense, according to interviews with half a dozen people close to Manchin, including friends, lobbyists and West Virginia Democratic politicians.

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"There are some on the left who believe people will suffer greatly if we don't make this transition very, very quickly," said one lobbyist, who like others spoke on the condition of anonymity to preserve their relationship with the senator. "Manchin believes people will suffer very greatly if we make it too quickly."

"This is a problem with the Democratic Party," this person added. "They are perfectly willing to sacrifice men 45 to 65 years old, who are just never gonna retrain to work in [electric] battery plants."

Manchin spokeswoman Sam Runyon declined to make the senator available for an interview for this story.

"Senator Manchin continues to work towards solutions that shore up American energy security and reliability in the near term by using our abundant natural resources in the cleanest way possible, while also investing in technologies that reduce emissions and lead the global fight for innovative solutions to climate change," Runyon said in an email.

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Biden's social spending bill, formally known as the Build Back Better plan, contains a [record \\$555 billion package](#) of tax credits, grants and other policies aimed at cutting planet-warming emissions and boosting clean energy. The legislation would have helped Biden meet his goal of cutting the nation's carbon emissions [in half by 2030](#).



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Frustration at Manchin has reached a fever pitch among climate activists, who blame him for blocking the biggest climate bill in U.S. history at a time when [extreme drought](#), [record-breaking heat](#) and [uncontrollable wildfires](#) threaten wide swaths of the country.

Climate activists in kayaks — or “[kayaktivists](#)” — have staged several protests outside Manchin's [houseboat in Southwest D.C.](#) Others have blocked the entrance to the West Virginia power plant tied to his family business, which has made millions by taking waste coal from long-abandoned mines.

When asked whether he has a conflict of interest, Manchin cites a blind trust to justify his voting record. But documents filed by the senator show [the blind trust is much too small](#) to account for all his reported earnings from the coal company.

[\[Much income from Manchin family's coal company isn't covered in blind trust\]](#)

Dave Scott, a fourth-grade teacher in Morgantown, W.Va., who participated in the protest at the coal plant, said he is “disgusted” by what he sees as Manchin's blatant corruption, although the senator complies with congressional ethics and financial disclosure rules.



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“I don't believe that he'll ever support anything on climate,” Scott said. “His wealth literally comes from releasing carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.”

But that sentiment is not shared widely in West Virginia, a deep-red state that Donald Trump easily carried in the 2020 presidential election with 68.62 percent of the vote. Many conservative voters here approve of Manchin, who they say is joining Republicans in thwarting Biden's agenda.

“Joe Biden's policies are going to make us in really bad shape,” Mary Dolly, a Republican who voted for Trump, said in an interview outside the Walmart in Keyser. “And Joe Manchin's stopping them. He's fighting them.”

Jean Weimer, another Trump supporter who was running errands at the store, agreed. “He's been doing pretty good with the Republicans, so I appreciate that,” she said.

‘Joe forgot about us’

The competing pressures on Manchin stem not only from climate activists and conservatives, but also from factions within the coal industry.



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Coal miners have urged the senator to support the social spending bill, which would extend an increased excise tax that funds benefits for miners suffering from black lung disease. Coal mine owners, however, oppose the legislation.

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Roughly 25,000 coal miners suffer from black lung, which is caused by inhaling toxic coal and silica dust in underground mines. Doctors have not found a cure for the deadly disease, and Biden’s bill provides a four-year extension for a [tax on coal sales](#) funding benefits for sick miners.

Gary Hairston, president of the National Black Lung Association, worked in West Virginia coal mines for more than 27 years before retiring at age 48, when he was diagnosed with the disease. He and other advocates held a rally in Charleston, W.Va., last week to urge Manchin to support Build Back Better.



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“It seems like Joe forgot about us,” Hairston, who has been prescribed oxygen and medication to keep his airways open, said in an interview. “He ain’t doing nothing for the coal miners at all.”

In a [memo](#) last month, the Labor Department noted that black lung patients will continue to receive benefits even if the excise tax is not extended. But it warned that the Treasury Department would need to borrow money to pay for them, meaning that “taxpayers are footing the bill for black lung benefits, not the coal mining industry.”

Manchin has introduced legislation to provide a 10-year extension of the black lung excise tax rate and will “continue to work to shore up the black lung excise tax to address the needs of our brave miners,” Runyon said.

West Virginia Coal Association President Chris Hamilton, whose group represents mine owners, argues that the administration’s proposal would take away the jobs of the same miners advocating for it.



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“They’re Little League coaches. They’re Bible school teachers. They’re spouses or teachers or nurses,” Hamilton said. “I mean, they just make up such a huge portion of our nation’s industrial fabric. And to simply put them out of work or try to force them to take up some other occupation, in my opinion, it’s just extremely callous.”

Autumn Long, a project manager at the Appalachian Solar Finance



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Anthony Long, a project manager at the Appalachian Solar Finance Fund, which provides financial and technical assistance to solar energy projects in coal communities across Central Appalachia, disputed that notion.

“Not only is it possible for former workers in the coal industry to transition into clean-energy industries, it’s already happening in West Virginia,” Long said. “And I think it’s fair for the state to ask for the resources that we need to successfully make this transition to a 21st-century energy system and to not get left behind.”

Intraparty tensions

On Capitol Hill, Manchin has voted against Democrats’ efforts to not only combat climate change, but also [codify the right to abortion](#) and change Senate rules to pass a voting rights overhaul. His utterances have caused a near-daily headache for Senate Majority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.), who is responsible for shepherding Biden’s priorities through the evenly divided chamber.



Manchin grew frustrated in mid-December when Schumer publicly declared that the Senate would vote on the social spending bill before Christmas, according to two people familiar with the matter. That timeline was at odds with private assurances from Biden a day earlier that the negotiations would continue into January, they said.

The relationship between Manchin and Schumer has improved since that low point, they added. The two met in April to discuss strategies for getting inflation under control: Schumer described the meeting as “preliminary and good” and said the pair would continue talking.

National Economic Council Director Brian Deese, who plays a key role in legislative negotiations, visited West Virginia with Manchin in March. After going [zip-lining](#) with the senator near the New River Gorge, Deese [took to Twitter](#) to extoll the state.

“Coal and energy communities helped make America what it is, the strongest economy in the world and the global leader of democracy,” Deese wrote. “Nobody should forget that, and President Biden certainly doesn’t.”

The White House declined to comment for this story. When asked about Manchin last month, White House spokeswoman Karine Jean Pierre told reporters, “We’re just not going to negotiate in public.”

A ticking clock

Since negotiations over the spending bill collapsed, Manchin has been meeting with a small group of Republicans to discuss the possibility of a bipartisan energy package that could attract 10 GOP votes in the Senate. The push is typical of Manchin, who believes that reaching across the aisle leads to more durable policy, confidants said.

But his efforts to bridge the partisan divide have their limits, even in West Virginia. This month, Manchin backed Rep. David B. McKinley in the state’s GOP primary over Rep. Alex Mooney, whom Donald Trump endorsed. In a [30-second video ad](#), Manchin called it an “outright lie” that McKinley supported the Build Back Better bill, as Mooney and his supporters had claimed.

Last week, Mooney [prevailed in the primary](#) over McKinley, demonstrating Trump’s enduring appeal in West Virginia and signaling the dilemma Manchin could face if he runs for reelection in 2024.

Hoppy Kercheval, the longtime West Virginia radio host who often has

Manchin on his show, noted that West Virginia Attorney General Patrick Morrisey (R) or Gov. Jim Justice (R) could pose a serious challenge.

“There is virtually no chance for a successful challenge to him from the left,” Kercheval said. “But West Virginia’s gone deep red, and there are several Republicans champing at the bit to run for the Senate in 2024.”

At the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the Black Rock wind farm, meanwhile, some investors argued that Manchin’s current approach could harm his state’s economy. Clearway Energy Group CEO Craig Cornelius declined to comment on the senator’s actions but warned that if Congress fails to extend the tax credits for clean energy, the company’s plans for additional West Virginia projects will suffer.

“Those incentives are the difference between whether a project gets built in the next two years or the next eight,” Cornelius said.

Manchin’s state projects coordinator, Keith McIntosh, hailed the Black Rock wind farm as a boon for West Virginia in brief remarks to the crowd of clean-energy advocates and state politicians.

“For generations, West Virginia has powered our nation to greatness,” McIntosh said in an apparent reference to coal mining. “And investments like this will ensure our state will remain an energy superpower for generations to come.”

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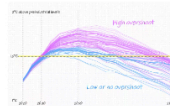
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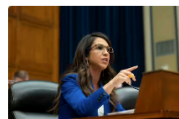
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