



TRANSCRIPT

Environmental Insights Episode #6, 2025

Guest: John Podesta

Record Date: September 9, 2025

Posting Date: September 18, 2025

LINK to podcast: <https://on.soundcloud.com/FqXM55JPk7XzWp0uz3>

John Podesta:

The push is towards trying to develop cleaner resources and less polluting resources, trying to invest in adaptation and resilience, trying to find a way to get financial flows going to support that transition.

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 program. In this podcast series, I've had the great pleasure of engaging in conversations with individuals who have played very important roles in environmental and climate change policy, whether from academia, government, NGOs, or private industry. And my guest today is certainly no exception because I'm joined today by [John Podesta](#), who has held numerous important positions in the US government and the NGO world, starting with leading staff positions in the US Senate, and then more prominently in the White House, serving in key roles under three presidents, Clinton, Obama, and Biden. Along the way, he founded the [Center for American Progress](#) and served as its president and CEO. Now, since this podcast is focused exclusively on environmental and climate change policy, I will note that among his many, many government positions, he was senior advisor to President Biden overseeing the clean energy investments as part of the [Inflation Reduction Act](#), and then he succeeded John Kerry as US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate. Welcome, John.

John Podesta:

It's great to be with you, Rob. Thanks for having me on.

Rob Stavins:

So, as regular listeners to this podcast will know, I always start our conversation by asking my guests about their personal and professional background. So, before we turn to your extensive work on energy and climate change policy, let's go back to how you came to be where you are. So, where did you grow up?

John Podesta:

I grew up on the northwest side of Chicago and went to public school there, including a public high school called Lane Technical High School, where my interest in science was sort of piqued. My career

didn't take a straight line for sure, and I've done policy across a broad range of topics, but I've always been interested in science and the natural world and then got more increasingly my career focused on climate change.

Rob Stavins:

So, I know Lane Tech High School because I went to a school not terribly far away. I grew up in West Rogers Park and I went to Sullivan High School, which was just north of that. Lane Tech always beat us in football, as I recall.

John Podesta:

Well, we were a lot bigger.

Rob Stavins:

Yes, indeed, indeed. Now you went to college at Knox College. Do I have that right?

John Podesta:

Correct.

Rob Stavins:

In Galesburg, Illinois, an excellent liberal arts college in the Midwest. What was your major or was your major working on Eugene McCarthy's presidential candidates?

John Podesta:

That's what some of my professors thought, at least based on my class attendance. I was doing a fair amount of work in presidential and then other congressional races while I was going to college. But I majored in psychology with some thought that I would pursue that. But then got off and onto a different track, kept up with the politics. I worked for Senator Muskie and then Senator McGovern in the '72 campaign. And then I ended up going to law school and headed to the Department of Justice in what was then called the Land and Natural Resources Division, which is now the Environment Division.

Rob Stavins:

So, why was it after having worked on the McGovern campaign that you decided to go to law school?

John Podesta:

Oh, it's amazing what unemployment will do for anyone's career plans.

Rob Stavins:

Really.

John Podesta:

My benefits were running out, so I needed something to do, and I ended up going there and not only ended up with substantial career that was mostly in the policy world, but legally focused. But that's where I met my wife.

Rob Stavins:

Now, the fact that you were at Georgetown Law School, so you were already in the Washington DC area. If you had been in a different law school, do you think that your extensive career in US government positions might not have unfolded the way it did?

John Podesta:

Probably I think it would. If I had gone to law school somewhere else, I probably would've had a more traditional legal career. But instead, as I noted, I went to the Justice Department. My wife Mary went to the Labor Department and she ended up at the SEC. I ended up through a succession of jobs, but landed on Capitol Hill where for the most part I worked for Senator Patrick Leahy from Vermont, who I think you know, and for Tom Dashell, who was then the leader. But it also gave me the opportunity to deepen my career around policy, and my expertise was relatively far ranging. I was both on the staff council on the Senate Judiciary Committee as well as Chief Council of Senate Agriculture Committee. And that in part what got me, I suppose, the first role I had in the Clinton White House, which was as staff secretary, which is a little-known job. I had never heard of it before I accepted it.

Rob Stavins:

But a very important position. You control the flow of paper.

John Podesta:

It's a person who controls all the flow of paper to and from the president, and it's kind of the last stop to make sure that the people who need to give the president their advice have been able to do so and to make sure that the i's are dotted, the t's are crossed, but it also gives you a unique, I think, insight into, it's almost like a historian looking at the presidency because I'm sending in all this paper and he's sending it all back to me. We talk every day too. But you'd see his thinking because of the notes that he'd make, and Clinton in particular is an extensive reader, and you could begin to understand what mattered to him, how he made decisions, what he needed to make good decisions. So, it was an interesting perch in the White House. And then in the second term, I became the Deputy Chief of Staff and then Chief of Staff in the last two years.

Rob Stavins:

More than a full-time job. I guess all of those are more than full-time jobs, right?

John Podesta:

Yeah, it's an honor to do it, and I think I was raising a young family at the time, and I'm glad to say they all still talk to me. We're all quite close, but I probably ended those eight years with fewer friends. I only had time for work and family, but it was really... I'm thrilled to have been able to have done that and thankful for President Clinton for having faith in me to do those roles.

Rob Stavins:

Now rather than go through all of your professional experience, which we could do, but it would take the entire day. I'm going to now turn to climate and energy policies specifically. So, maybe we could start by your saying, how is it that you first became engaged with environmental and or climate change issues?

John Podesta:

I think it actually goes back a long ways, but then with a detour. So, as I said, I went to the Land Natural Resources Division of Justice right out of law school thinking I'd be an environmental lawyer, but I bounced out. I was a trial lawyer, mostly condemning land for the Corps of Engineers, which was not probably the highest and best use of the environment, but that's what I was doing.

Quite a bit of time spent in Eastern Kentucky and building the Washington Metro and doing this and that. But then I did a series of other things. I was very involved in technology policy and in government surveillance and semiconductors and a wide variety of computer technology policy in the 1980s. But I was always really motivated and interested and pushed to get back into environmental issues and environmental policy. And particularly when I was Chief of Staff for President Clinton, we were negotiating the Kyoto Agreement. Climate change was kind of front and center. Vice President Gore was there. He was a major actor in this. I think we were somewhat kindred spirits on the policy side of things. And I also was able to work with President Clinton and Secretary Babbitt in particular, and Secretary Glickman with respect to the Forest Service to do a very substantial amount of work on conservation. So, that was a kind of love of mine. I stuck with it, and I was fortunate enough to be able to be able to come back to it, both with President Obama and then with President Biden.

Rob Stavins:

So, when I think about the roles that you've held in particular in regard to climate change and environment, they're highly substantive and they're very much, I believe, in a political context. And you have certainly observed, as I've observed for that matter, over two decades now, that there have been huge changes in the political landscape in which energy, environment, and climate change policies emerge. Can you say something about the changes over time in terms of the political landscape for either enacting legislation, promulgating regulations, whatever?

John Podesta:

Yeah. Well, look, I think the country's obviously changed, and we're in a period of under President Trump with ideology that is definitely hostile to the development of the clean energy economy and indeed in dealing with climate change. That's different, I think, then even under President Bush, there were obviously differences between Democrats and Republicans going back then. I think there was more emphasis put on trying to deal with the climate crisis by Democrats. The proposals were somewhat different, but basically everybody was aligned that this was a serious threat to the public's health, the public's wellbeing, and that we needed to do something about it. And that was true of certainly of President Bush. I wished he had done more, but I wished all these presidents probably at some level had done more. But that was the mainstream view. If you think about the 2008 election, for example, Senator McCain was for a cap-and-trade system to regulate CO2 emissions. Senator Obama was for a cap-and-trade. Senator Obama's was tighter. He had some other policies that I think would've caused emissions to go down more quickly, but they weren't on different planets, which is where we find ourselves today.

With, I think President Biden having been successful in passing the Inflation Reduction Act, in seeing the transition to clean energy as a substantial boost to the US economy in making an effort to take the upside and the opportunity to create new industries, innovation, investment, and then you see President Trump just completely trying to reverse all of that, and it's kind of hard to think of a clean energy technology that this administration likes. Maybe you could argue that they're pro-nuclear, which I think our administration was as well, but what they've done really in the bill actually probably makes deployment and development of nuclear a little bit more difficult. So, I sometimes describe this

administration as the Empire Strikes Back. We saw a huge boost in investment in clean technology, and now we're seeing reversal of that with a substantial loss of jobs, prices rising. And it's interesting because it's happening in the middle of the first time in a generation, as you well know, Rob, of increasing demand for electricity. So, the results of data centers, ai, electrification of transportation, electrification of buildings, means that we spent the entire generation essentially being flat in terms of generation capacity because efficiency improvements were keeping up with increased use of electricity, and now we see this booming demand for electricity, and he's taken off the table the cheapest, cleanest, reliable, and deployable sources of energy. Maybe the iconic example is the war we see on offshore wind in the Northeast and New England.

Rob Stavins:

Indeed. You're describing how there have been periods of time in which there was bipartisan support as opposed to the current situation. I'll tell you, my students in Harvard College who they're 18 to 21, 22 years old, and they're shocked when I tell them about the Clean Air Act amendments of 1990, which came out of the George H.W. Bush White House, and then of course were passed by Democratic Congress and that the vote on those, as I recall anyway in the House of Representatives was something like 93 percent of Democrats and 89 percent of Republicans. And that's completely... They're shocked. They can't believe it. And so the changes we've seen are remarkable. And of course, this polarity, the separation and the falling out of the middle of people that we would call moderates. You mentioned John McCain is a great example. Moderate Republicans, moderate Democrats is broader than environment, but it certainly manifested itself. Now, that tells me....

John Podesta:

Governor Romney in Massachusetts was a promoter of cap-and-trade.

Rob Stavins:

Absolutely.

John Podesta:

He had to kind of trim his sails during the campaign because of the way the, I think, Republican primaries were going. But he had been really a champion of RGGI, of the regional trading system and have climate action, in the state of Massachusetts.

Rob Stavins:

Yeah, I actually worked with him when he was the governor on that, on the design of the cap-and-trade and RGGI. It's certainly true that, I mean, he was a moderate Republican and then when he faced the pressures of the primaries, he had to, I don't know if he had to, but he did moderate the moderation, move away from it a bit. Now again, I wonder if in the times at which you've been promoting various initiatives, there must have been some tremendous obstacles. I'm thinking still about the domestic situation, then we'll get to your international work. But in the domestic sphere, were there huge obstacles perhaps in terms of the Inflation Reduction Act in terms of the implementation, the disbursement of funds or the politics of having gotten it enacted in the first place? And I guess how did you overcome those challenges?

John Podesta:

Well, I mean to the credit of the president and the administration, I mean, he was trying to pass this major legislation in the face of a 50/50 Senate and a relatively narrowly narrow majority in the House of Representatives. The House passed his original proposal overwhelmingly, and in the Senate it looked as the perils of Pauline. It looked dead several times. I think both Senator Manchin and Senator Sinema were skeptical of the depth and breadth, but in the end of the day, I think the positive case for the economy overcame that, and they signed off on it, particularly in last minute negotiations between the leader and Senator Manchin and the White House. And what came out was relatively intact of what went in, which is surprising in a context like this, in that it was an investment-led strategy, private sector-led, although government-enabled strategy to boost investment, innovation, job creation, cost reductions, and it covered every sector, every emitting sector of the economy, unlike efforts in the past that really just focused on power production or transportation when very little attention was being paid to the emissions that was the result of land use or industrial process.

This covered everything and it put an emphasis on trying to, again, create a strong dynamic where you'd see manufacturing brought back to the United States, GDP growth pushed up, job creation happen, and lo and behold, that all happened. Were there hard parts in implementation? Of course there were. Some of those were just built into the way the statute worked. For example, a lot of the rebate programs that benefited households were run through the states, which meant that the federal government had to create the criteria. The states had to apply for the money; they had to set up their own programs. That's kind of slow going just as a matter of program design. And so that happened. We obligated money to the states for a number of states in those programs, but I don't think consumers felt the effects of that as much because of that. But for the most part, if you think of development and deployment of the solar supply chain, the battery supply chain, electric vehicles, critical minerals, the market responded substantially. And I would say it's one of the reasons we saw so much foreign direct investment, and one of probably the diplomatic consequences was there was a certain amount of, I say bitching, which I think I use the term advisedly, by our allies and trading partners that we were sucking up all the investment. But I think for the most part, the world saw this as the United States really getting in the game in a very positive way and moving a big global project forward in a very positive way. And so even our European colleagues, although I spent many hours working with them to ensure them, we did not see this as a zero-sum game and that we thought that the improvements, the innovations, the ability to create a green hydrogen industry was going to benefit the world, including Europe and European companies.

That took some discussion. What you did see in that regard though, is the rest of the world deciding that this approach, this investment-led concern with making sure the technologies were effective were deployed, and that they were building domestic supply chains across the globe became the kind of operating theory for a lot of countries. So, Japan passed the so-called GX program, which is a little bit different, focused a little bit more on future technologies, but it's the same kind of investment-led strategy, the Green Industrial Deal in Europe, notwithstanding their concern that maybe we were sucking up too much of the international financial flows, they said, we're going to do the same thing. We're going to move this.

Rob Stavins:

I was just going to say, talking about other countries, it's great that you've brought us into thinking about Europe, thinking about Japan in this conversation. I want to try to steer you, because we don't have a lot of time left, I want to make sure that we talk about the international domain and diplomacy because it's striking. What I often hear when I'm at the annual Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, for example, what I often hear is the frustration of other countries that on and off the US has been a key player, as it was as you said earlier, John, in the

Kyoto Protocol, during the Clinton administration, and as it certainly was in spades in the lead up to Paris during the Obama administration. But then we had Trump I and Trump II and things closed down completely. Now, when you were playing a leadership role as you were as the chief negotiator for the US, climate change is only one among dozens of key global issues that I assume the White House has to worry about. How did you think about balancing climate leadership for the United States with other geopolitical and economic considerations? And I'm actually thinking more than anything about China, particularly given what's happened with US-China relationships. This must have been, I would think, an important challenge for you.

John Podesta:

Sure. Sure, it was, and we tried to make progress where we could. We pressed them to go even faster. I saw just new information that China in the first six months of the year seems to have finally peaked in their emissions.

Rob Stavins:

That's right.

John Podesta:

We told them that our analysis showed that they would peak in '24 or '25. They have peaked in the first half of 2025. That's because of the rapid deployment of clean energy, and particularly in transportation and renewables. One of the things, though, that that presented was a big challenge and presented a challenge not just to us, but to the rest of the world. So, I think we had a good story to tell that we wanted to partner with our friends to create strong economies that were built around clean energy technologies. And we ended up with policies around supply chain development with Kenya, with India, with Brazil and others. We kept a dialogue going, first under Secretary Kerry, and then under my leadership with the Chinese, and in the context of the multilateral negotiations, we actually ended up in a place where they weren't blocking ambition and we were pressing for ambition across the globe, but we needed to be very concerned with the fact that they were dominating and they were using practices to dominate these technologies of the future. It was a very explicit policy of the Chinese government. They executed it. As you know, they control a significant portion, particularly in the critical mineral supply chain. We were beginning to reverse that. We saw a lot of investment in the whole solar supply chain here, certainly in the production of modules, but also in cells, Hanwha Qcells, Corning doing full supply chain investments in the US. That's good for the US national security as well as for the US economy.

But I think what we also found was that it gave us a way to partner with others who were also worried about economic domination in these sectors, that they would be left out and left behind, and notwithstanding that some cheap Chinese clean technology was flooding the market. It was also kind of undermining domestic investment in places like Brazil, like India. And they saw the US as a kind of reliable partner in saying that we need to kind of share a vision but we also need to attend to our own domestic populations and make sure we're building strong economies. And so, it was complicated, but I think we were managing that. Now we're sort of offending all our partners.

Rob Stavins:

Yeah, it's the opposite.

John Podesta:

Not sure what our policy is vis-a-vis China.

Rob Stavins:

But let me ask you, because you're absolutely right. The world has changed tremendously since Inauguration Day in the United States and globally, and certainly in terms of US positions and energy development in the US and obviously the Trump administration with regards to international diplomacy, not just on climate change, but international trade, military, everything else. But I don't want to end on such a negative note, which I often am tempted to do when I think about where we are now. So, to avoid the negative note for our conclusion, I want to ask you, is there anything that gives you hope that meaningful progress on climate change is actually achievable, let's say in the next decade, the next 10 years?

John Podesta:

Well, look, I think there's just, as I noted, there's a tremendous focus on developing technology that's going to both provide abundant and cheap clean energy, and that is happening across the globe. I mentioned China, their deployment, if you will, of wind, of solar, et cetera. That's a challenge to us but it also shows that even the country that's by far now, the largest polluter can begin to deploy technologies that are going to reduce those emissions. And I think we'll see the dispatch of coal-firer power go down in China. We'll see more development there. But the overall picture across the globe is to spur investment innovation in these technologies as opposed to polluting fossil fuels and that is happening virtually everywhere except the United States, and maybe there are a few others who we're in a rather suspect lot with Russia and a couple of others who are resisting that trend. But I think at a political level, and certainly at a technical and scientific level, the damage that is resulting from a warming planet is obvious and people are trying to do something about it. And so, I think, again, whether that's in the big economies in Europe or the big economies in Asia, the push is towards trying to develop cleaner resources and less polluting resources, trying to invest in adaptation and resilience, trying to find a way to get financial flows going to support that transition. That's a big job, but I think most of the world is lined up to do that and I am proud of the world of the United States played in sort of setting that direction. Now it's more than, I think, the current administration hit the brakes. They're trying to throw the car into reverse, I don't think really possible globally, but they're going to have a dramatic effect which will increase emissions in the United States.

Rob Stavins:

Yeah, it's quite remarkable that at the time at which so much of the world is moving towards clean energy, and in many cases actually because of the lower cost of adoption, certainly compared to some building a new gas-fired or God knows, coal-fired power plant, the administration in the US really wants to move backwards rather than forward. Some many people have referred to this as a period of anti-science, which manifests itself, obviously not just in terms of climate change, but in terms of health policy, in terms of CDC and vaccine policy, and so much else. I apologize because I just finished up on a negative tone and I didn't want to do that. But listen, John, I want to really thank you very much for having taken time to join me today. This has been great.

John Podesta:

Rob. I have faith in your students. They're going to fix this.

Rob Stavins:

Okay, well, that's the ending that I wanted to have and you provided it. So, my guest today has been [John Podesta](#), who has held numerous important positions in government, including key roles regarding domestic climate policy, and international climate diplomacy. I hope you will all join us again 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.

Announcer:

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