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Both Sides Have It Wrong About Renewable Energy



JEFFREY BALL: The single-biggest misconception people have about renewable energy in the U.S. is that it's an all-or-nothing proposition. The misconception exists because renewable energy, like most aspects of energy, is caricatured by ideologues on both sides.

Partisans on the left often talk of renewable energy as a panacea. If only the nation spent more money on renewable energy, they suggest, renewable energy could replace coal and oil. Partisans on the right often suggest renewable energy is a farce. They paint solar, wind and other renewable energy sources as profligate green dreams that do little but divert the nation's focus on serious energy: fossil fuels and nuclear power.

Both extremes miss the reality, which is in the middle.

Renewable energy is making major progress: Its cost is falling, its reliability is increasing, and, both in the U.S. and around much of the world, it is growing fast. Perhaps the biggest sign of that growth is that, across the U.S. and globally, renewable energy is causing political and economic fights between established energy players and upstarts. The fights are erupting because the economic stakes are large.

Yet renewable energy faces major barriers. In most places it remains more expensive than fossil-fueled power, a cost hurdle reinforced by America's bounty of cheap natural gas. Moreover, the two energy sources that most people think of when they think of "renewable energy"—solar and wind power—are variable; when the sun isn't shining or the wind isn't blowing, they typically need fossil fuel to back them up. For all their feverish growth over the past few years, solar and wind power together still provide less than 2% of U.S. electricity.

The bottom line on renewable energy is this: It's a small but growing piece of a massive energy pie.

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