

California keeps talking climate change, but who's listening?

By David Siders
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The outcome was never in doubt when California's Democratic-controlled Senate last week took up – and passed – the latest package of environmental bills to come out of California.

Still, lawmakers argued a familiar litany of points for their cause.

Legislation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and increase the state's reliance on renewable energy, they said, will create green technology jobs, reduce the health effects of pollution and guard against fluctuations in the price of oil.

For residents of this liberal state, the rhetoric was hardly new. It has been almost 10 years since then-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, a Republican, signed California's landmark greenhouse gas reduction law, and Gov. Jerry Brown, his Democratic successor, has made climate change a priority of his final term.

Yet while California's environmental polices have long served as a model for other governments, including on fuel efficiency and emission standards, the resonance of the broader climate change message remains unclear.

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Most Americans believe the climate is changing, according to various polls, but double-digit percentages do not. And of those who acknowledge the problem, the number of people who think humans are responsible – or who are alarmed by it – falls much lower. In California, according to a Public Policy Institute of California poll released last year, an overwhelming eight in 10 people view global warming as a threat to the state's economy and quality of life, but fewer than half – 49 percent – say it is a very serious problem.

"For many Americans, they see climate change as distant – distant in time, that (effects) won't be seen for a generation or more, and distant in space, that this is about polar bears," said Anthony Leiserowitz, director of the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication at Yale University. "Climate change, unfortunately, just as an issue, I call it the policy problem from hell. ... We're running out of time to head off the truly catastrophic consequences."

The Senate bills now awaiting action in the Assembly seek to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in California to 40 percent below 1990 levels by 2030 and 80 percent below 1990 levels by 2050. They would also require the state to generate 50 percent of electricity from renewable sources and halve the amount of petroleum used in vehicles.

Brown promoted these goals in his State of the State address in January and has signed a series of non-binding, largely symbolic agreements with other states and sub-national governments to coalesce support for emission reduction policies ahead of worldwide climate talks in Paris in December.

The Paris meeting, Brown said in an interview, "will either advance the agenda of dealing with climate change or it will absolutely be a flop. ... We don't know which."

He said, "We're talking to whoever we can, and I think at the end of the day the science is strong, and as people confront the science, they come to the same conclusion: Wow, this is ... inevitably catastrophic if we don't choose another path."

Yet even Brown has acknowledged difficulty reaching the public on climate change. At a global warming-related event last month, he looked out at a bank of television cameras and said, "I recognize that in all the many controversies and

issues in California and in all the other places in the world, climate change often takes somewhat of a back seat.”

The problem is not just lack of attention. Officials announced Friday that Brown will speak at a major climate summit in Toronto in July. But for climate skeptics, hearing once again from Brown or Democratic lawmakers is unlikely to prove persuasive.

Republicans are less likely than Democrats to express concerns about climate change, with just 26 percent of Republicans in last year’s PPIC poll calling the threat of global warming very serious. Nearly 60 percent of Democrats say it is.

Fewer than half of Californians say climate change is a very serious problem.

The division is partly because climate change “got ghettoized as an environmental issue,” said Andrew Hoffman, a University of Michigan professor who has studied social psychology of the climate change debate. He said that alienated many conservatives.

In a 2013 Field Poll, 20 percent of California registered voters said we don’t know enough about global warming and that more research is needed before taking action, while another 13 percent said concerns about global warming are unwarranted.

“From a culture perspective, it actually is a matter of belief, because most people, and I’m talking more than 90 percent, are never going to read the reams of scientific data,” Hoffman said. “What they need to do is, to a large degree, take on faith that they trust the scientific establishment, scientific institutions, to give them an explanation they can put their faith in.”

Republicans and business leaders speaking out could help, Hoffman said, as could efforts to promote climate change’s ties to extreme weather events, including wildfires and the ongoing drought in California.

In a poll released last week, the PPIC found that for the first time, a plurality of California adults – 39 percent – ranked water and drought as the most important issue facing the state. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has attributed California’s drought primarily to natural – not man-made – causes. But rising temperatures have likely worsened its effects, and advocates of policies addressing climate change have attempted to draw attention to the connection.

“In California, one of the sort of canaries in the coal mine related to climate change is the snowpack,” said Ellen Hanak, a water expert at the PPIC. “The folks that are most dependent on water for their livelihoods, or large volumes of water for their livelihoods, are farmers who live in portions of the state that tend to be painted red when it comes to election time. ... They don’t necessarily talk about this in terms of climate change or global warming ... but they’re often willing now to have conversation about how to manage water.”

Jon Krosnick, a Stanford University professor who studies public opinion on climate change, said disagreement about the issue is overstated. Majorities of Americans for years have supported various policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, he said.

In Krosnick’s polling, the public overestimates the percentage of people who believe climate change is not happening, while underestimating the partisan divide on the issue.

In the Senate last week, Republicans said more stringent environmental regulations would harm industry and have little effect on the global problem of greenhouse gas emissions.

“Those gases don’t stop at the California border, and when we stop burning ... coal for fuel, that doesn’t stop Arizona or Oregon or other states from doing it, or China,” said Senate Republican leader Bob Huff, R-Diamond Bar. “And so we have a very lofty and noble goal. But other than feeling good about it, what has it actually accomplished?”

R. Rex Parris, the Republican mayor of Lancaster who has gained attention for championing a massive expansion of solar energy infrastructure in his city, lamented that people “don’t fully understand the magnitude of the problem.”

Parris was mentioned by Senate President Pro Tem Kevin de León in a floor speech last week as an example of “bipartisan action at the local level.”

But Parris laid blame for lack of action on climate change not only on members of his own party, but on Democrats he said are timid, too. The policies promoted by Brown and de León, he said, are “not enough.”

“Climate disruption is factual, it’s not open to opinion,” he said. “If we don’t act quickly and act like everything we can muster ... the best we can hope to offer (our grandchildren) is some dystopian future that none of us want to live in. It’s knocking on our door now.”

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