

Orange County, CA:
From Red to Purple to Green

The Politics of Climate Change

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Paper prepared for delivery at the Western Political Science Association Annual Meeting at the Manchester Grand Hyatt in San Diego, California, April 20, 2019.

Introduction

The public was first alerted to the dangers of global warming (herein referred to as climate change) in May 2006 when the documentary film *An Inconvenient Truth* was released. The film, narrated by former Vice President Al Gore, triggered a massive shift in public attitudes.¹ By fall 2008, more than half of the American people were convinced that climate change was real. However, within two years, public concern for climate change had declined dramatically: only 33 percent (33%) of the American public thought climate change was real in January 2010, and the percentage of climate change deniers more than doubled—likely as a result of the onset of the Great Recession.² It would be a decade before the majority of Americans (51 percent [51%]) were convinced climate change was real.

These fluctuations matter because stable public support is essential for combating this existential threat.³

One of the first comprehensive reports on public attitudes toward climate change was published by Yale University 10 years ago.⁴ That report identified six subpopulations in the American public that respond to the issue in their own distinct way. “The Alarmed (18%) are fully convinced of the reality and seriousness of climate change and are already taking individual, consumer, and political action to address it. The Concerned (33%)—the largest of the six Americas—are also convinced that global warming is happening and is a serious problem, but they have not yet engaged the issue personally. Three other Americas—the Cautious (19%), the Disengaged (12%), and the Doubtful (11%)—represent different stages of understanding and acceptance of the problem, and none are involved actively. The final America—the Dismissive (7%)—are very sure it is not happening and are actively involved as opponents of a national effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.”⁵

Since that time, the Yale Program on Climate Change Communications has issued a series of reports, and academic publications mostly based on the analysis of nationwide survey data have bettered our understanding of why people think the way they do about climate change.⁶

¹ According to climatologist Steve Quiring, “AIT [An Inconvenient Truth] has had a much greater impact on public opinion and public awareness of global climate change than any scientific paper or report.” The conversation: “Ten years On: How Al Gore’s Inconvenient Truth made its mark.” Retrieved from: <https://theconversation.com/ten-years-on-how-al-gores-an-inconvenient-truth-made-its-mark-59387>

² Following the mortgage meltdown, the U.S. entered into the worst recession since the Great Depression. See Lyle Scruggs and Salil Benegal, “Declining public concern about climate change: Can we blame the great recession?” ScienceDirect. Global Environmental Change Volume 22, Issue 2, May 2012, Pages 505-515. Retrieved from: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0959378012000143#!>

³ Nathaniel Rich, “Losing Earth: The Decade We Almost Stopped Climate Change” *New York Times Magazine*. August 1, 2018.

⁴ Anthony Leiserowitz, Edward Maibach and Connie Roser-Renouf, *Global Warming’s Six Americas* 2009. Report. Yale Program on Climate Change Communication. May 20, 2009. Retrieved from: <http://climatecommunication.yale.edu/publications/global-warmings-six-americas-2009/>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Anthony Leiserowitz, Edward Maibach, Seth Rosenthal, John Kotcher, Matthew Ballew, Matthew Goldberg and Abel Gustafson, *Climate Change in the American Mind: December, 2018*. Report. Yale Program on Climate Change Communication. January 22, 2019. Retrieved from: <http://climatecommunication.yale.edu/publications/climate-change-in-the-american-mind-december-2018/2/>

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The research presented here is not nearly as ambitious. This paper examines attitudes toward climate change in Orange County, California (also referred to as OC)—a former bastion of political conservatism and climate change skepticism that now overwhelmingly (81 percent [81%]) believes climate change is a serious problem. We suggest four explanations as to why this change has taken place.

Orange County

Orange County is a coastal area between Los Angeles and San Diego counties that is home to 3.2 million people. According to U.S. Census data, 28 percent (28%) of OC residents are younger than age 18, and 14.3 percent (14.3%) are 65 and older. The county is composed of 40.5 percent (40.5%) who are “White alone, not Hispanic or Latino,” 34.2 percent (34.2%) who are Hispanic or Latino, and 21.0 percent (21.0%) who are “Asian alone.” The county is culturally diverse, with 30.3 percent (30.3%) of residents being born outside the United States. This is higher than the state percentage and more than double the national percentage. The median household income is \$81,851, and 11.5 percent (11.5%) of residents live in poverty.⁷

As stated in the previous section, OC has long been a bastion for political conservatism. Beginning in 1940, the Republican presidential nominee won the county in 19 consecutive presidential elections. Richard Nixon was born in the OC city of Yorba Linda and returned to the county post presidency. Ronald Reagan began his 1984 reelection campaign in the county after the Republican Convention that year, and the airport is named after John Wayne. The county was home to the John Birch Society, and conservative firebrands John Schmitz, Bill Dannemeyer, and “B-1” Bob Dornan have represented the county in Congress. Republicans held a 22-point registration advantage in 1990, and GOP officials held a large majority of congressional, state legislature, county supervisor, and city council seats.

However, in recent years, the county, which had been written off by national and statewide Democrats, has been trending “purple” politically. Republican and Democratic registration are numbers are virtually equal today, with Republicans holding only a half percentage point edge.⁸ As of this year, Democrats hold every single OC congressional seat. Simultaneously, attitudes toward climate change have become significantly “greener,” according to a series of countywide surveys we conducted during the past decade. Our analysis provides insights into the politics of climate change, specifically how and why a community becomes more accepting of the reality of climate change.

Climate Change and the Political Right

Climate change skepticism is a staple of Republican and conservative political circles. President Donald Trump has repeatedly claimed that climate change science is a “hoax.”⁹ The president appointed former Texas Governor Rick Perry to lead the Department of Energy. Perry has denied that human beings are the primary cause of climate change.¹⁰ When a CNBC reporter

⁷ Data for this paragraph was retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/orangecountycalifornia>

⁸ We retrieved this data from <https://www.ocvote.com/datacentral/>

⁹ “Trump on climate change report: ‘I don’t believe it’” BBC News. November 26, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-46351940>

¹⁰ Steve Mufson, “Rick Perry just denied that humans are the main cause of climate change.” November 19, 2017. Retrieved from: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2017/06/19/trumps-energy->

asked him in 2017 whether carbon dioxide emissions were a main cause of global warming, Perry replied, “No, most likely the primary control knob is the ocean waters and this environment that we live in.”

Orange County has also embraced climate change skepticism. Longtime (and recently defeated) OC Congressman Dana Rohrabacher fervently denied climate change and claimed that “Global warming is a total fraud.” He once told the social justice magazine *Pacific Standard*, “The science is bogus, and the movement itself is financed and directed by leaders who are seeking global government.”¹¹

The *Orange County Register*, one of the largest newspapers in the state and the paper with the largest daily circulation in the county, has a record of climate change denial on its editorial pages.¹² As the website *Media Matters* noted, “[T]he editorial board of the *Register* claimed that global warming is a non-threat and that reducing greenhouse gas emissions is a ‘highly questionable, perhaps meaningless, goal.’ The editorial page has been filled with columns attacking efforts to reduce carbon dioxide in our atmosphere instead of acknowledging what the vast majority of scientists concur upon—that man-made climate change is real.”¹³ *Register* editorial writer Mark Landsbaum frequently attacked climate change, calling greenhouse gases “harmless.” He also stated that those who believe humankind contributed to rising global temperatures are “committing a logical fallacy.”¹⁴

The Surveys

Our public opinion surveys of Orange County adult residents in 2010 and 2019 had sample sizes of 675 and 704, respectively. The margin of error for both surveys was +/- 4 percent (4%).¹⁵ The surveys contained two questions each (1 and 2) regarding climate change. Also included in the 2019 survey is a question on California’s electric car mandate (below). The results further support our conclusion of a huge shift in public attitudes in favor of protecting the environmental.

1. How serious a problem would you say is the threat of climate change or global warming? Would you say: very serious, somewhat serious, or not very serious?
2. Please tell me if the first statement or the second statement comes closer to your views: (A) Stricter environmental laws and regulations cost too many jobs and hurt the economy. (B) stricter environmental laws and regulations are worth the cost.

[secretary-just-denied-that-man-made-carbon-dioxide-is-the-main-driver-for-climate-change/?utm_term=.c84aec75f613](https://www.psmag.com/social-justice/inside-the-mind-of-dana-rohrabacher)

¹¹ Ross Ufberg, “Inside the Mind of Dana Rohrabacher, California’s most divisive congressman.” *Pacific Standard*. November 1, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://psmag.com/social-justice/inside-the-mind-of-dana-rohrabacher>

¹² Lisa Hymas, “California Newspaper Editorials connect the dots between climate change and wildfires.” *Media Matters*. blog. October 18, 2017. Retrieved from: <https://www.mediamatters.org/blog/2017/10/18/California-newspaper-editorials-connect-the-dots-between-climate-change-and-wildfires/218252>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Survey dates: 1/28 through 2/13/2019. Registered to vote: 87% Gender: Male: 53%, Female: 47% Party: Republican 41%, Democrat 40%, Neither 19% Margin of Error: 4% Data collected by: ReconMR, Austin, Texas. Cell phone: 75%; Landline 25%.

3. The official target for all-electric vehicle sales in the state is now 5 million electric cars on California's roads by 2030. This will mean that 40 percent of all new car sales in the state will be zero-emission. Also, the number of EV charging stations in the state will jump from 14,000 today to 250,000. The state will also beef up its incentives and rebate programs for people who buy zero emissions cars. Do you support the plan to dramatically increase the number of zero-emission cars in California?

The Results

We compared the responses for questions 1 and 2 for the 2010 and 2019 surveys. We also broke the responses down for all three questions for the 2019 survey by party, race, and age.

Our results parallel those found nationally. In 2010, when OC, as was the nation, was in the midst of a huge economic downturn, only 22 percent (22%) of residents surveyed said they felt that climate change was a serious problem. Nine years later (2019), with the economy markedly improved, that figure skyrocketed to 81 percent (81%)—93 percent (93%) for those younger than 30.¹⁶ Economic downturns result in more climate skepticism: Many fear government efforts to combat climate change—through, say, increased regulations will hurt the economy, and possibly cost them their jobs. When the economy improves, and their economic status is more secure, they are more prone to believe climate change is real.

The 2010 survey showed that 44 percent (44%) agreed with the statement that stricter environmental laws and regulations cost jobs and hurt the economy, as opposed to 49 percent (49%) who said that stricter environmental laws and regulations are worth the cost. Comparable figures for 2019 also showed greater concern for the environment. They were 31 percent (31%, cost jobs) and 62 percent (62%, worth the cost), respectively.

Republicans and Democrats

The environment has traditionally been a nonpartisan issue. Teddy Roosevelt established the National Park Service and set aside 150 acres of public lands for the national forest. It was Richard Nixon who established the Environmental Protection Agency. George H. W. Bush, when campaigning in 1988, called for the U.S. to take action on global warming. Democratic senator and environmentalist Gaylord Nelson (WI) established the first Earth Day in 1970.

Climate change has divided the parties. Republicans have been much more reluctant than Democrats to accept the scientific consensus that climate change is a major threat. Climate change is opposed by three core Republican constituent groups for different reasons.¹⁷

First, for many social conservatives, especially evangelical Christians, “[c]limate change has become enmeshed in the so-called culture wars. Acceptance of the scientific consensus is

¹⁶ These numbers are consistent with last year's survey results when 57 percent (57%) saw the threat as very serious, and a combined 79 percent (79%) saw the threat as either very serious or somewhat serious.

¹⁷ See Paul Krugman, “The Depravity of Climate Change Denial.” New York Times. November 26, 2018. Opinion. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/26/opinion/climate-change-denial-republican.html>

now seen as an alignment with liberal views consistent with other ‘cultural’ issues that divide the country (abortion, gun control, health care, and evolution).”¹⁸

Second, climate change threatens big business, especially the fossil fuel and related industries, which are major contributors to Republican candidates and causes, among them groups and individuals who are climate change deniers.¹⁹

Finally, climate change is an ideological threat to libertarians and others who hate big government, such as the Koch brothers, who also align with Republicans.²⁰ The reasoning here is the effort to combat climate change will invariably require governmental expansion. To avoid this, climate change must be denied, at least publicly.

“Eco-Republicans”

Nevertheless, our data show greater acceptance of climate change among some Republicans, who we term “Eco-Republicans.”

For example, between 2010 and 2019, the percentage of Republicans who said climate change was a “serious” problem jumped 34 percentage points (39 percent [39%] to 73 percent [73%]). The comparable figure for Democrats was 25 percent (25%) (73 percent [73%] to 98 percent [98%]). Also, the percentage of Republicans who said “stricter environmental laws” were “worth the cost” increased by five points, from 33 percent (33%) to 38 percent (38%).

California’s legislature has passed among the strongest climate change laws in the world. One of these bills requires that (question 3) 40 percent (40%) of all new car sales in the state will be zero-emission vehicles by 2030. Also, the number of electric vehicle charging stations in the state will jump from 14,000 today to 250,000. The state will also plan to beef up its incentives and rebate programs for people who buy zero-emissions cars.

Respondents overwhelmingly supported the electric car mandate three to one. Both Democrats (85 percent [85%]) and Republicans (62 percent [62%]) support this initiative.

Explanations

Why have there been such significant changes in terms of OC residents’ views toward climate change from the start of the 2010s to the end of the decade? We offer four explanations.

First, county demographics are changing, and changing attitudes are being driven by the area’s young and non-White population.²¹ Those between ages 18 and 30 are younger adults who recently attended high school and (for some) college. There is a strong focus on environmental

¹⁸ Andrew J. Hoffman, “How Culture Shapes The Climate Change Debate” *Stanford Innovation Review*. April 6, 2015. Retrieved from: https://ssir.org/articles/entry/how_culture_shapes_the_climate_change_debate#

¹⁹ Nathaniel Rich, “Losing Earth: The Decade We Almost Stopped Climate Change” *New York Times Magazine*. August 1, 2018.

²⁰ Coral Davenport and Eric Lipton. “How G.O.P. Leaders Came to View Climate Change as Fake Science.” *New York Times* June 3, 2017. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/03/us/politics/republican-leaders-climate-change.html>

²¹ Michael Blood, “As demographics change in Orange County, so does it politics.” *Christian Science Monitor*. October 17, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/2018/1017/As-demographics-change-in-Orange-County-so-do-its-politics>

sustainability in secondary school and higher education science curricula. The survey data demonstrate that respondents younger than age 30 see the threat of climate change as very serious. This is consistent with national polling results. A 2018 Gallup Poll revealed that younger Americans are the most worried about climate change and its effects on the planet.²² People's minds are not changing. Rather, the people who live in the county are changing.

Second, county residents see firsthand the effects of climate change. Take Capistrano Beach in South Orange County, for example. As the polar ice caps melt, sea levels rise. In Capistrano Beach, local residents have witnessed firsthand the destruction caused by these rising sea levels, sand pulled out to sea, and continual erosion. A volleyball area, fire pits, palm trees, a walkway, and a restroom facility near the beach have been either destroyed or removed. Recent storms led to the collapse of a wooden walkway and seawall. The basketball court and nearby parking lot are now closed because of massive flooding. County officials removed the western third of the Capistrano Beach basketball court so crew members could view the damage below it.²³ "Things are changing so rapidly...once you have these visible impacts to your community, people start to pay attention," Surfrider Foundation's Coastal Preservation Manager Stefanie Sekich-Quinn told the *Orange County Register* earlier this year.

Surfrider Foundation's 2018 State of the Beach Report Card states, "The latest science and recent damage from coastal storms show that our nation's beaches are under siege and highly vulnerable to erosion, and our coastal cities and neighborhoods are at high risk to dangerous flooding."²⁴ Orange County is ground zero for this. Balboa Island in Newport Beach provides another example. Officials recently had to raise the height of the island's seawall, and there is talk to raise the entire island by 2050 to address rising sea levels.²⁵

Additionally, fire season is now year round in the county and state. As vegetation dries, fires spread at a more rapid pace and are more severe in California. In short, witnessing firsthand the effects of climate change in Orange County is unavoidable, and it makes it very hard to deny the scientific consensus. Residents in the county experience natural disasters (i.e., heat waves, fires, droughts, rising oceans) regularly.

A third explanation (that is related to the second) relates to the type of individual we referred to earlier in this report as the Eco-Republican. The official GOP platform discounts the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Kyoto Protocol, and Paris Agreement. The Eco-Republican is fiscally conservative, hates the idea of big government, and despises the Department of Energy. That said, this person also enjoys the quality of life in

²² Gallup, "Global Warming Age Gap" Retrieved from: https://news.gallup.com/poll/234314/global-warming-age-gap-younger-americans-worried.aspx?g_source=link_NEWSV9&g_medium=TOPIC&g_campaign=item_&g_content=Global%2520Warming%2520Age%2520Gap%3a%2520Younger%2520Americans%2520Most%2520Worried

²³ See Laylan Connelly, "Big surf, high tides flood Capo Beach basketball courts and parking lot despite 1,000-ton emergency rock wall." *Orange County Register*. December 21, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.ocregister.com/2018/12/21/big-surf-high-tides-flood-capo-beach-basketball-courts-and-parking-lot-despite-1000-ton-emergency-rock-wall/>

²⁴ Surfrider Foundation: 2018 State of the Beach Report. Retrieved from: <https://www.surfrider.org/coastal-blog/entry/2018-state-of-the-beach-report-card-released>

²⁵ Anne C. Mulkern, "The Entire Island May Have to Be Raised Up to Counter Rising Sea." *Scientific American*. March 29, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/this-entire-island-may-have-to-be-raised-up-to-counter-rising-sea/>

Orange County and sees visible changes. Note that OC Republicans are different from Republicans in places such as West Virginia and Arkansas. Our two most recent polls (2018 and 2019) demonstrate that while county Republicans approve of Donald Trump, roughly a quarter disapprove of the job he is doing as president. Trump's approval rating among OC Republicans is markedly lower than county Republicans' approval rating of George W. Bush when UC Irvine conducted similar polling in the early 2000s.²⁶

Fourth is the issue of messaging. Orange County is not an island. The governor, the legislature, and the media have helped convince people that climate change is real. Unlike the nation, Californians have received a unified, consistent, and passionate climate change message from both political parties and from the governor and the legislature for more than a decade. It began with Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger championing AB32, the pathbreaking climate change bill he signed into law in 2006. Schwarzenegger was celebrated for his environmental leadership.

Elected in 2010, Jerry Brown made climate change one of his signature policies. He built upon Schwarzenegger's environmental record, culminating in the passage of SB 100, one of the strongest climate change laws in the world. He has also signed an executive order that called for the Golden State to cut its overall emissions to zero by 2045. "Starting in 2046, California would pull more carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases from the atmosphere, year-by-year, than it put in."²⁷ As explained in question 3, the official target for all-electric vehicle sales in the state is now 5 million electric cars on California's roads by 2030. This will mean that 40 percent (40%) of all new car sales in the state will be zero-emission. Also, as previously stated, the number of EV charging stations in the state will increase from 14,000 stations today to 250,000. The state will also increase its rebate programs and incentives for those who buy zero-emission cars.

Brown was quick to link the huge fires in the state to climate change.²⁸ He has also directly challenged President Trump's environmental record. Brown has ridiculed President Trump for calling climate change a "hoax" and for pulling out of the Paris Climate Change Agreement.

Gavin Newsom, Brown's successor, is committed to hitting Brown's ambitious greenhouse emissions targets.²⁹

Legislature

Exploring this issue from a statewide perspective, the California legislature is one of the most progressive worldwide on environmental issues. Democrats have dominated the state legislature in the last decade. This has made it impossible for Republicans to block the passage of landmark climate change legislation. Unlike the national government, climate change deniers

²⁶ See <http://ocsurveys.lib.uci.edu>

²⁷ David R. Baker, "Gov. Brown's new climate goal: Less than zero global warming emissions" San Francisco Chronicle. September 10, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.sfchronicle.com/business/article/California-to-go-100-percent-clean-energy-by-2045-13218236.php>

²⁸ Paige St. John, "Governor Brown's link between climate change and wildfires is supported, fire experts say." Los Angeles Times. October 15, 2015. Retrieved from: <https://www.latimes.com/local/politics/la-me-pol-ca-brown-wildfires-20151019-story.html>

²⁹ Nathanael Johnson, "Gavin Newsom talks tough (with pie charts!) about California's climate goals" Retrieved from: <https://grist.org/article/gavin-newsom-talks-tough-with-pie-charts-about-californias-climate-goals/>

have not been able to gain a foothold in the state capitol. There is every reason to believe that future sustainability legislation will be forthcoming under Governor Gavin Newsom.

Media

On the national level, even though approximately 98 percent (98%) of all climate scientists believe in climate change, the media create false equivalencies suggesting that the negative side (climate change deniers) is as powerful as the positive side (those who believe in climate change). However, on the state level, with the notable exception of the *Orange County Register*, the editorial pages of the leading newspapers believe in climate change and support aggressive action.³⁰ There is no equivalent to *Fox News*, which has repeatedly questioned the science behind climate change.³¹

Conclusion: What Does This All Mean?

Orange County is losing its distinctive political reputation. As the county trends more Democratic, we will see greater acceptance of climate change along with a growth of Eco-Republicans as residents continue to witness the effects of climate change. The county is also looking more like California politically, which means it will blend in with the Southland instead of being a conservative outlier among California's coastal communities. Ultimately, this might imperil existing Republicans, such as State Sen. John Moorlach, who are climate change skeptics. In a feature for his website titled "Climate Change Policies in California," Moorlach stated, "It is unclear to me how significant human activity is in climate change, since change is an inherent characteristic of climate. From what I have seen, the data does not convince me that human activity is a primary or significant driver in warming the globe."³² Thus, the county could continue to see changes in ideological views of the officials it elects and media it consumes.

Above all, the county's significant shift in views demonstrates the seriousness of the climate crisis humankind faces. If traditionally conservative Orange County can change so dramatically in less than a decade, it is indicative of the fact that the threat is dire and inaction is not an option.

³⁰ See Lisa Hymas, "California Newspaper Editorials connect the dots between climate change and wildfires." Media Matters. blog. October 18, 2017. Retrieved from: <https://www.mediamatters.org/blog/2017/10/18/California-newspaper-editorials-connect-the-dots-between-climate-change-and-wildfires/218252>

³¹ Laura Feldman, "Effects of TV and Cable News Viewing on Climate Change opinion, knowledge and behavior." Oxford Research Encyclopedias. Climate Science. Grist. January 17, 2019. Retrieved from: <http://oxfordre.com/climatescience/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228620.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228620-e-367>

³² The full report is here: <https://moorlach.cssrc.us/content/climate-change-policies-california>