

State energy policy in the Trump Era: insights from public opinion

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Abstract In light of President Trump’s decision to withdraw the USA from the Paris Accord and reverse a number of federal climate policies, many states and localities have pledged to increase their activities to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This article discusses the policies that they are likely to consider, and uses national survey data to ascertain whether policymakers are likely to find support for each of these policy approaches among the general public.

Keywords Climate policy · State policy · Public opinion · Carbon tax · Renewable energy

President Donald Trump’s plan to withdraw the USA from the Paris climate accord and reverse a number of federal steps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions has triggered outrage internationally and domestically. Alongside numerous public protests in the USA, a growing number of states and cities have pledged to redouble their commitment to climate protection. This has included pledges from respective governors and mayors that “We’re Still In” the Paris process and that they will only intensify their commitment to maintain existing policies and adopt additional ones.

This is not the first time that federal disengagement fueled expanded state and local participation, as was evident during the George W. Bush presidency (Rabe 2004; Selin and VanDeveer 2009). But once signing ceremonies and press conferences and even a global climate summit being organized by such leaders as California Governor Jerry Brown are over, what

will American state and local governments adopt in terms of new policy? There are relatively few constitutional constraints on state governments in climate policy development, as long as those steps do not encroach on federal powers to make foreign policy or restrict commerce from moving across state boundaries. Local leaders tend to face more constraints, reflecting the authority they receive under respective state constitutions, but many have a considerable range of options. So where might these governments go next on climate policy, assuming that they want to honor their broad commitments?

One possibility would be some kind of a market-based policy, one that establishes a price on the use of carbon either through a tax or a cap-and-trade system. This approach generally has overwhelming endorsement from economists and many policy analysts, as it is widely understood to produce the least costly emission reductions per ton. Carbon pricing was enthusiastically embraced by a wide range of national leaders during the Paris accord process as the optimal path toward climate mitigation. But, it has faced a considerable set of political and managerial challenges, both in the USA and beyond over more than two decades (Rabe 2018).

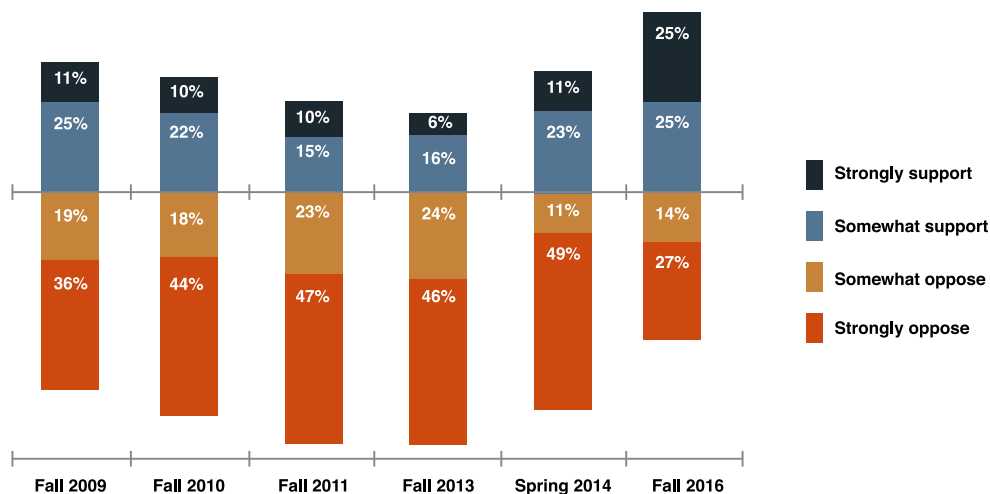
Twenty-three states had adopted some form of cap-and-trade by 2010 but only California and nine Northeastern states continued to operate these programs as of 2017 (Raymond 2016). Both California and the RGGI states have in recent months tightened their emissions caps and extended their programs through 2030. But, no other localities have ever formally established a binding cap-and-trade system. In turn, no US state has ever adopted a carbon tax and State of Washington voters decisively rejected such a tax on the very day that Donald Trump was elected to the presidency (Lenferna 2017). Boulder, CO, is the only city to have adopted a carbon tax, though the tax rate itself is set at a very low level.

Another possibility would be some kind of a regulatory or incentive policy. This could entail performance standards to

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Fig. 1 American support for a tax on carbon-based fuels. Question text: “Next I would like to ask for your views on a number of ideas that have been proposed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and stabilize the climate. Consider a policy to reduce greenhouse gases by taxing carbon based fuels such as coal, oil, and natural gas. Would you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose this type of system?”. Note: Responses for “don’t know” not shown



increase the efficiency with which energy is used or procurement standards which mandate purchase of renewable energy. Subsidies that create an incentive to purchase less carbon-intensive products, such as vehicles, are another option. These have generally been adopted and sustained over time by state and local governments in recent decades at much higher rates than market-based policies (Rabe 2018). So they appear to have greater political feasibility than cap-and-trade, particularly in jurisdictions that are inclined to elect Republicans to executive and legislative offices.

Many factors will determine just what state and local governments do next in climate policy. Any discussion of such policy has become increasingly polarized, with strong opposition emanating from industry interest groups as well as well-

funded advocacy groups that are designed to block policy development and even challenge the existence of climate change. Policies that might impose immediate harm on an established industry or constituency within a state or city through higher energy costs are likely to prove particularly controversial.

Public opinion will also be a factor and may literally be tested in state or local ballot propositions. Just as Washington voters defeated a carbon tax in 2016, voters in three other states have taken to the ballot box to overturn previously adopted renewable electricity mandates, more commonly known as portfolio standards (Forster and Smith 2015). In turn, public sentiment can also influence the policies that elected representatives bring to the formal policy agenda for serious consideration, whether or not near-term adoption ensues.

So what can we say about the views of the American public on the issue of the next generation of state policy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions? This fall, the National Surveys on Energy Environment (NSEE) approaches its second decade of twice-annual telephone surveys on American public opinion on climate change, including numerous questions on state policy options. This survey reflects a partnership between the Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy at the University of Michigan and the Institute of Public Opinion at Muhlenberg College. What follows are findings related to a number of state policy issues spanning our first survey wave in Fall 2008 just prior to the election of Barack Obama to our most recent Spring 2017 survey, fielded after a number of Trump Administration reversals of Obama Administration domestic policies but before the Paris Accord withdrawal was announced. The focus of these questions was solely on state, as opposed to local, policy and so we do not attempt to address the latter area.

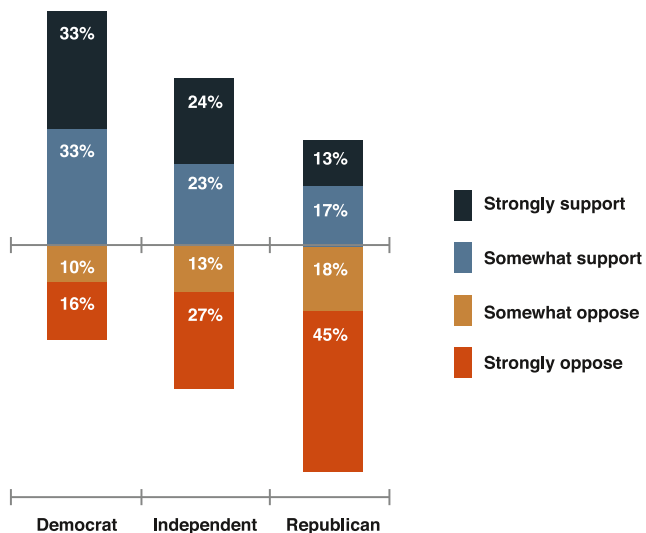


Fig. 2 Support for a tax on carbon-based fuels by political party, Fall 2016. Question text: “Next I would like to ask for your views on a number of ideas that have been proposed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and stabilize the climate. Consider a policy to reduce greenhouse gases by taxing carbon based fuels such as coal, oil, and natural gas. Would you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose this type of system?”. Note: Responses for “don’t know” not shown

Carbon pricing

Carbon pricing has been a recurrent topic in the NSEE, but the survey has rarely found majority support for either a carbon

Fig. 3 American support for cap-and-trade. Question text varies slightly across these waves. For question text, visit the NSEE webpage at: <http://closup.umich.edu/national-surveys-on-energy-and-environment/nsee-data-tables/search/>. Note: Responses for “don’t know” not shown

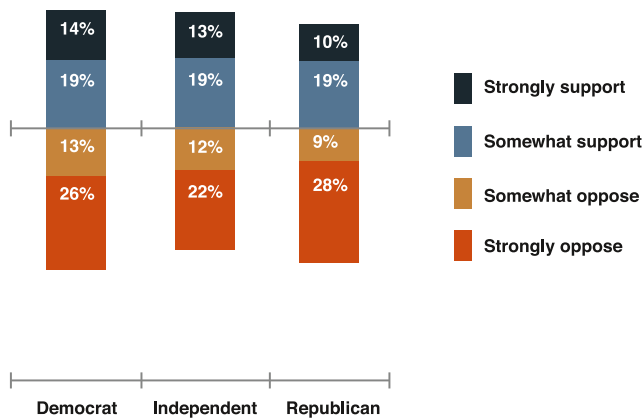
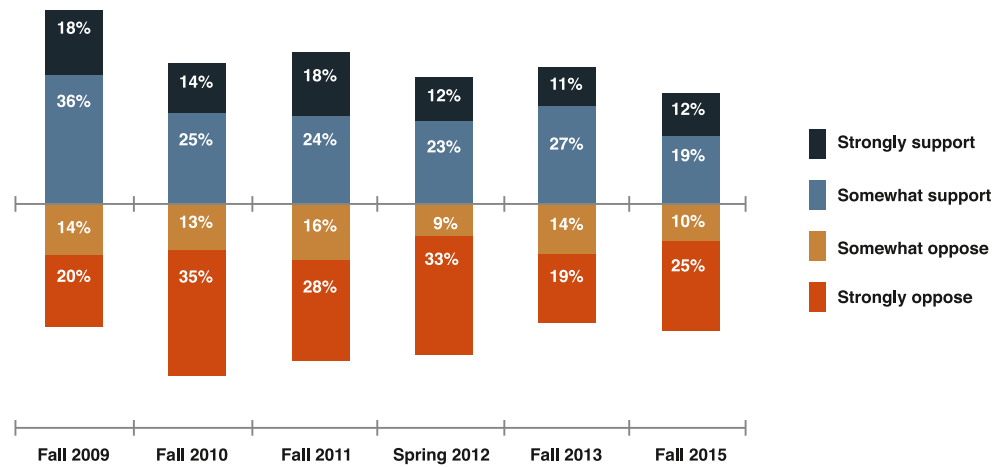


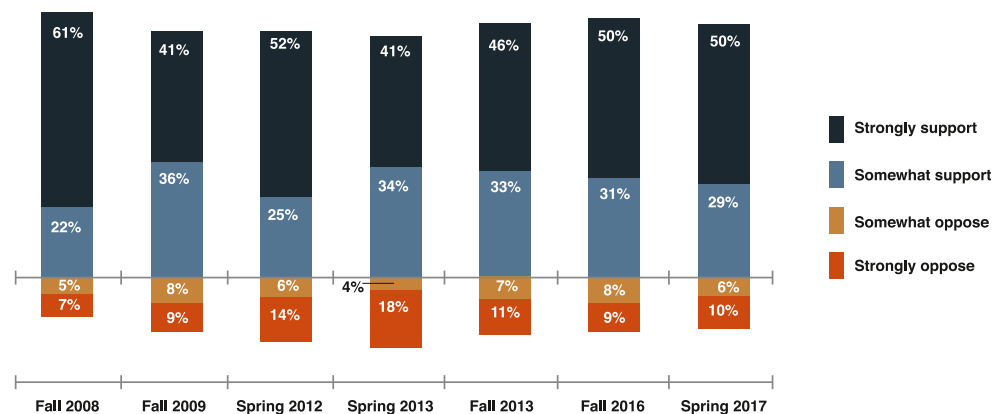
Fig. 4 Support for cap-and-trade by political party, Fall 2015. Question text: “For each of the following policy options I read please indicate if you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose your state adopting that policy as a means of reducing emissions? Allowing businesses to buy and sell permits to release greenhouse gases to reduce greenhouse gases. This policy is commonly referred to as cap and trade.” Note: Responses for “don’t know” not shown

tax or cap-and-trade. Prior to the Fall 2016 survey wave, support for a carbon tax had never exceeded 36%. In the survey fielded in the weeks just prior to the election that brought Donald Trump into power, the NSEE found a bare majority

(50%) support the carbon tax (see Fig. 1). Most of this support, however, is confined to those on the left side of the aisle, with 66% of Democrats saying they would support a carbon tax compared to 47% of self-described Independents and only 30% of Republicans (see Fig. 2). While the NSEE has consistently found that support for a carbon tax can increase when more information is given about how the tax revenues would be used (Amdur et al. 2014), in the Fall 2016 survey, Republican support peaked at 45% for a carbon tax where the revenues would be reinvested in renewable energy research and development (Puskin and Mills 2017).

Similarly, the NSEE has most commonly found that cap-and-trade has failed to capture support among a majority of Americans. Though a majority (54%) of Americans said they supported the policy in 2009, on all subsequent waves, support for the policy has ranged between 31 and 42% (see Fig. 3). Notably, though, the NSEE has not found majority opposition for cap-and-trade on any of these surveys. Instead, Americans have been much more likely to volunteer that they are “not sure” how they felt about the policy, especially in recent years. In Fall 2015, the most recent time the NSEE asked about cap-and-trade, there was no statistical difference in the responses of Democrats and Republicans (see Fig. 4), though earlier iterations have found Democrats to be more in favor of the policy,

Fig. 5 American support for renewable energy requirements. Question text varies slightly across these waves. For question text, visit the NSEE webpage at: <http://closup.umich.edu/national-surveys-on-energy-and-environment/nsee-data-tables/search/>. Note: Responses for “don’t know” not shown



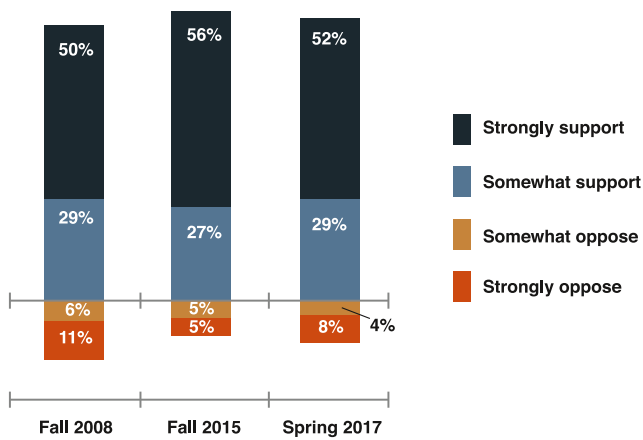


Fig. 6 American support for increasing energy efficiency standards. Question text varies slightly across these waves. For question text, visit the NSEE webpage at: <http://closup.umich.edu/national-surveys-on-energy-and-environment/nsee-data-tables/search/>. Note: Responses for “don’t know” not shown

especially when they know how revenues generated from the auction of allowances would be used (Mills et al. 2015).

Regulatory and incentive policies

By contrast to finding minimal public support for carbon pricing, the NSEE has consistently found high levels of support for regulatory policies such as state requirements for renewable energy or increased energy efficiency. In the eight times that renewable energy requirements have been asked about in the last decade, support has exceeded 70% (see Fig. 5).

Similarly, all three times the NSEE carried content on energy efficiency requirements, support was near 80% (see Fig. 6). On the most recent fielding in Spring 2017, support among Republicans for state-level renewable energy and energy efficiency requirements was at 69 and 73%, respectively (Mills et al. 2017). Furthermore, the NSEE also found support for these policies among a majority of Americans who do not think that there is solid evidence that global warming is occurring: 51% of these climate skeptics say they support their state requiring more renewable energy, and 57% say they support increasing energy efficiency standards (ibid).

Equally as popular among climate skeptics, and all Americans more broadly, are policies that provide incentives for the purchase of more efficient vehicles. On the Fall 2016 survey, 52% of climate skeptics—and 71% of Americans—said that they were supportive of providing rebates to those who purchase electric vehicles (see Fig. 7). Eight years earlier, on the Fall 2008 survey, support was similar—though slightly higher—for state governments providing tax reductions to individuals who purchase hybrid fuel vehicles (see Fig. 8).

This body of findings on American public opinion suggests that there may be a genuine constituency for at least some policy steps that states can take to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. These policies may serve to reduce emissions but may not necessarily be adopted for climate mitigation, proving attractive politically for other reasons (Rabe 2004). But public views in response to survey questions are only one of many indicators of the political feasibility of policy adoption, particularly for such contentious issues as climate change. The first 8 months of the Trump presidency included at least one

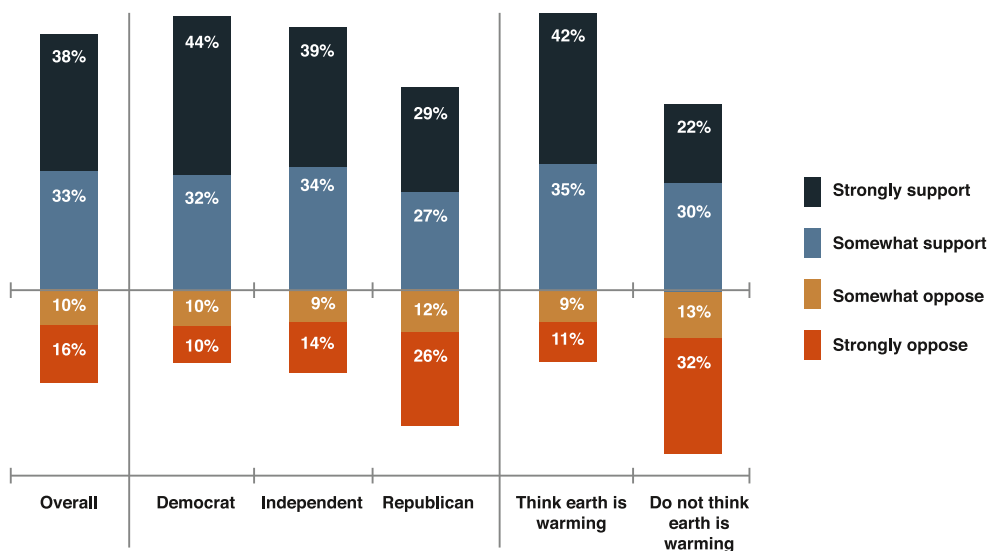


Fig. 7 Support for providing rebates to purchasers of electric vehicles, Fall 2016. Question text: “There have been a number of ideas proposed for how governments can reduce the emissions of greenhouse gases. For each of the following policy options I read please indicate if you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose that option. Offering rebates to business and households that purchase electric

vehicles.” For establishing if they think earth is warming: “Next, I would like to ask you a few questions on the issue of global warming. From what you’ve read and heard. Is there solid evidence that the average temperature on earth has been getting warmer over the past four decades?” Note: Responses for “don’t know” not shown

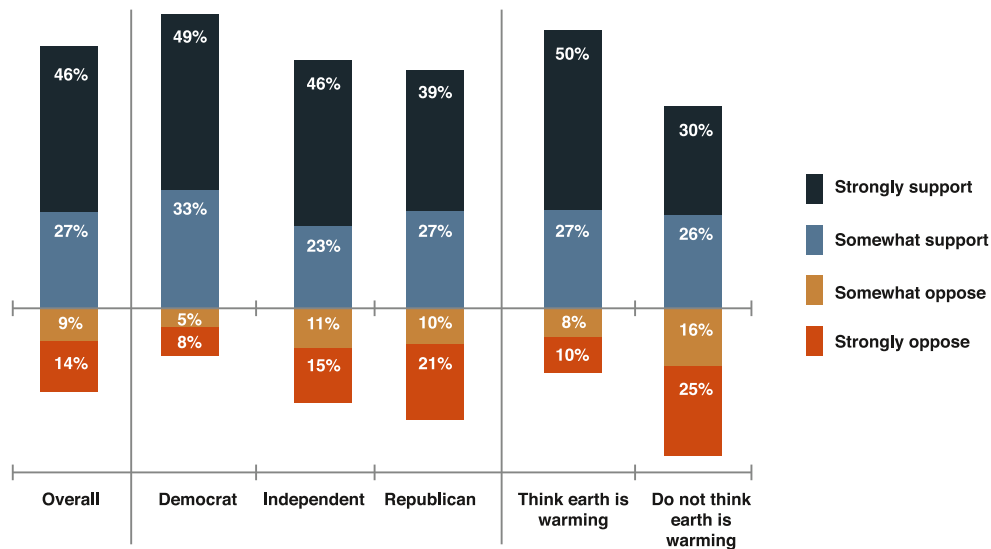


Fig. 8 Support for providing tax reductions to purchasers of hybrid fuel vehicles, Fall 2008. Question text: “There have been a number of ideas proposed for how state governments can reduce the emissions of greenhouse gases. For each idea that I mention please tell me if you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose or strongly oppose the proposed ways states can reduce greenhouse gas emissions:

State governments should give individuals who purchase hybrid fuel vehicles a tax reduction.” For establishing if they think earth is warming: “Next, I would like to ask you a few questions on the issue of global warming. From what you’ve read and heard. Is there solid evidence that the average temperature on earth has been getting warmer over the past four decades?” Note: Responses for “do not know” not shown

legislative session in every statehouse, creating an initial window of opportunity to respond to Trump’s climate reversals with new policy commitments. However, aside from a major extension of the California and RGGI cap-and-trade systems through 2030, few other state legislatures or governors gave serious consideration to any new form of carbon pricing. In contrast, there was far greater legislative output in those policy areas where public support appeared more robust, reflected in considerable new legislation related to renewable energy and energy efficiency, with 254 new renewable energy policies and 107 new energy efficiency policies adopted or enacted at the state-level in 2016 alone (National Conference of State Legislature 2017). In this case, public opinion may serve as a reasonable barometer of political feasibility that transcends mere pledges and instead takes the form of policy.

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