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Power to the People

The first rule of advocating for climate change-related legislation is: You do not talk about “climate change.” The term has become so polarizing that its mere mention can cause reasonable people to draw seemingly immutable lines in the political sand.

“In some ways, it functions as what we would call a ‘dog-whistle’,” said UC Santa Barbara political science professor [Leah Stokes](#), referring to a term or statement that while innocent-sounding enough to most people, encodes deeper and more specific meanings to certain audiences. And it’s true: For many conservatives, the idea of enacting climate change-related renewable energy policies is fraught with fears of economic loss and major lifestyle changes. For many liberals, on the other hand, *not* enacting such policies is fraught with fears of economic loss and major lifestyle changes. It’s a tug-of-war that began at the start of the century and continues today.

“Trump is president right now and therefore we’re really unlikely to see new federal laws trying to support climate change legislation or renewable energy policy, or dealing with environmental problems,” Stokes said. States will likely become the leaders in pursuing renewable energy policy to maintain progress and deal with potentially damaging environmental effects, such as sea level rise and air quality problems, she said. But levels of support for action vary across the nation, and the challenge will be to avoid triggering knee-jerk reactions that are less about the issue and more about partisanship.

“We try to understand what kinds of messages would work with the public and how that would translate into more states actually doing something about these issues,” said Stokes, who with Christopher Warshaw of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology conducted research into how people connect (or not) with the hot-button issues related to climate change, such as renewable energy legislation. Their study, “Renewable Energy Policy Design and Framing Influence Public Support in the United States,” is published in the journal *Nature Energy*.

The good news from the results of their repeated survey experiment: Public support for renewable energy in the U.S. is very strong. According to their baseline figures, the vast majority of people in the country support renewable energy portfolios in their states, in which a certain amount of the states’ electricity comes from a renewable source. The results are what you might expect: States with an abundance of renewable resources — California, Hawaii, New Mexico and Iowa, for instance — top the list and have actual renewable energy policies in play, while the southern and mountain states tend to have little support, and no renewable energy policies.

“Overall, these findings suggest that state legislators are broadly responsive to public opinion on this issue,” Warshaw said.

But public opinion does not always cement state legislation. Florida, for example, has not only the wind and solar resources to support renewable energy, but also more public support for it than Oregon, which currently has a policy requiring that at least a quarter of its energy come from renewables. Florida has no renewable energy policy.

Meanwhile, in states where majority support decreases toward the 50 percent mark, legislatures tend to be less resolute or aggressive in pursuing renewable energy policies, and even contemplate decreasing their participation in renewable energy policies or opposing them. This population could easily sway the progress of renewable energy policy in the U.S. one way or another, depending on how they view it.

Stokes and Warshaw found that the context in which renewable energy policy is framed, particularly in terms of jobs, electricity costs and pollution, has a tremendous impact on a person’s opinion of it. As Americans favor cheap electricity, the greatest factor would be cost. Even a \$2 increase in monthly electric bills would

likely cause support for renewable energy to drop by 13 percent, shifting 13 states away from renewable energy policy. A \$10 increase would likely result in the majority of states taking an opposing view, the researchers found.

Meanwhile, substantial job creation would be enough to flip opponents of renewable energy into supporters — and the more jobs, the better. However, states with no net job increases would probably see corresponding decreases in renewable energy support. This is particularly important for the coal states, such as Virginia, Montana and Kentucky, which are major opponents of renewable energy policies.

A decrease in fossil fuel-borne pollution is another huge factor that could sway even the staunchest opponents — typically Republicans — of renewable energy policies.

“People tend to forget that when we talk about renewable energy it has benefits for air pollution, and so when you remind people of that it’s likely to increase their support because reducing air pollution is a local benefit,” said Stokes. And the key, according to the researchers, is the local benefit, because people don’t connect to broad concepts such as climate change on a personal level, often viewing it as a global and future phenomenon.

“We’ve found that climate change is not an effective frame to gauge people’s opinion about renewable energy,” she said, “so whether it’s Democrat or Republican talking about climate change, no matter how we frame it, if we talk about climate change it doesn’t move people.” The term has become synonymous with partisanship, Stokes said, and less about the actual issue at hand.

“I think it’s because they already have a pretty strong view on the connection between renewable energy policies and climate change,” Warshaw said. “Their view is already baked in, so you can’t frame the question in a way that triggers a change.”

On the other hand, political support, particularly from the political elites, often triggers public support for renewable energy.

“There’s a general finding in political science that the public tends to look to politicians to understand policy because they’re often very technical things that are not easy to understand,” Stokes said. Democrats — both politicians and voting public — are supportive of renewable energy in general. Republican voters are more likely to support renewables if their Republican legislators show support. Support

from legislators of one party does not drive down support from voters of the other.

“So the idea is that by ensuring that these policies actually reduce air pollution, increase jobs and get Republican support, and communicating all that to the public, we would find majority support — even from some of the most coal-dominated states — for these policies,” Stokes said. “That’s pretty impressive.”

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