Why Republicans Still Don’t Care About Climate Change

Extreme-weather events represent an irresistible force for action. But an immovable object is in the way.

RONALD BROWNSTEIN 11:03 AM ET

Mary Nichols has been part of the struggle to prevent catastrophic climate change for about as long as anyone in American life. For years, she’s directed California’s pathbreaking efforts to reduce carbon emissions as the chair of the California Air Resources Board—a position she held first in the 1970s before taking it up again in 2007. Nichols has also served at the federal level, working as the chief regulator for air pollution at the Environmental Protection Agency under President Bill Clinton in the 1990s. And yet even Nichols has never seen anything that crystallizes the dangers of climate change more clearly than the historic outbreak of wildfires scorching California and other western states this year.
“Yes, absolutely,” she told me earlier this week, when I asked her whether this year’s fires are the most tangible danger to California that she’s seen from climate change. “It’s not suddenly going to reverse itself … to years when there’s no fire season, or it’s not going to happen until October. The changes are going to be real, and they are going to be long-lasting.”

Carol Browner served as the EPA administrator for both of Clinton’s presidential terms and later worked as President Barack Obama’s first White House adviser on climate. When she looks at the confluence of extreme-weather events battering the United States in recent years—not only the wildfires, but also the Gulf Coast hurricanes, Midwest flooding, and the Southwest’s extreme heat—Browner likewise sees stark evidence that climate change is disrupting American life earlier and more powerfully than almost anyone expected when the debate over these issues seriously began about three decades ago.

“What we have now is the absolute environmental demonstration or evidence of just how dramatic the impact of climate change is going to be. This is not going to stop,” Browner told me. “There is going to be something next year, and the year after, if we don’t get on it.”

Environmental scientists and policy experts around the country agree that the massive wildfires are just the latest indicator that climate change has thrust the U.S., and the world, into a dangerous new era. But it’s far from certain that the growing recognition of that threat can break the stalemate over climate policy in Washington. The accumulating evidence about climate change’s destructive power represents an irresistible force for action. But it’s colliding with an immovable object: the unbreakable resistance to any response among both Republican voters and elected officials.

Polling shows that, overall, a growing share of Americans believe climate change is happening, that human activities are driving it, and that the threat is manifesting right now. But as on many issues, the gap on all of these questions is widening between voters in the Republican coalition and other Americans. Annual polls by the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication show that although the numbers have increased markedly for Democrats, Republican partisans are no more likely than in 2008 to believe that human activity is causing climate change, and they express even less concern about its impact now than they did then. (Belief in
human causation has declined somewhat among independents, but concern about
the effects of climate change has increased substantially.)

[Read: The most important number for the West's hideous fire season]

These attitudes within the GOP coalition both reflect and reinforce Republican
officials’ rejection of any effort to reduce carbon emissions. President Donald
Trump, echoed by many prominent conservative commentators and congressional
Republicans, continues to dismiss the evidence that climate change is even
contributeing to the spike in extreme-weather events. With Joe Biden offering the
most aggressive climate-change agenda of any Democratic presidential nominee in
history, the conditions for the long-stalled debate over the issue in Washington are
becoming as combustible as the dried forest floors of California.

Anthony Leiserowitz, the director of the Yale climate program, says that in the past,
even those Americans concerned about climate change tended to see it as a remote
problem. “It was distant in time, [in] that the impacts won’t be felt for a generation
or more,” he told me. And it was “distant in space”—“this is about polar bears and
maybe some developing countries, but not the United States … not my friends, not
my family, not me.”

Seen through that lens, he said, climate “just blended in the background with 1,000
other issues out there … so we can deal with it later. That’s where more of the
country was in 2007 and 2008. Now we skip forward to today, that’s not true
anymore because of the [weather] events we’ve been talking about.”

In Yale’s polling, the share of Americans who say that climate change is affecting
weather at least somewhat reached nearly three-fifths in 2020, up from about half
in early 2013. But Leiserowitz said more disruptive weather events aren’t the only
things moving attitudes on climate. Another important factor is the broad, diverse
chorus of voices expressing worry about it. Ten years ago, he noted, Americans
might have heard concern about the climate only from “environmentalists and
liberal politicians like Al Gore”; now it’s much more common to hear concerns
raised by public-health professionals, business executives, and even faith leaders,
such as Pope Francis.

The result has been an undeniable, though not overwhelming, shift in public
opinion. In Yale’s latest national survey this spring, slightly more than three-fifths of
Americans said human activities are causing the climate to change, a new high. The share of Americans who say they are very worried about climate change’s impact is relatively modest, at 27 percent. But it’s nearly double the level it was in 2008; overall, about two-thirds of respondents are now either very or somewhat worried.

Americans’ attitudes about the imminence of the danger have changed more drastically: 45 percent in the latest survey described climate change as a threat to Americans now, a big increase from 33 percent in 2008. The share who say climate change won’t be a problem for 25 years or more is at 42 percent, down 10 points compared with 2008.

Yet, on all of these fronts, the movement has not been symmetrical. Democrats are expressing much more concern than they were a decade ago, and most independents slightly more. Republicans, meanwhile, are either no more or even less concerned. (Rigid GOP attitudes largely explain why the overall shift in public opinion on many questions hasn’t been more dramatic, despite the quickening pace of weather disruption.) Since 2008, for instance, the share of Democrats who say human activity is causing climate change has spiked from 70 percent to 85 percent; among Republicans, it’s virtually unchanged, at just 37 percent. And although nearly half of Democrats now say they are very worried about climate change (almost double the level in 2008), only about one in 14 Republicans is equally concerned. That share is essentially unchanged from 12 years ago.

This pattern of public attitudes looks very similar to opinions on racial-equity issues: Compared with a decade ago, substantially more Democrats of all races accept that systemic racism against Black Americans is a serious problem; however, many Republicans are even less likely to agree it exists compared with 10 years ago. The divergence between the parties on climate, as on race, reflects the larger resorting of the electorate along lines of culture rather than class. (Republicans, as I’ve written, increasingly rely on a coalition of older, non-college-educated, evangelical, and rural white voters, while Democrats depend heavily on young people, people of color, and college-educated white Americans.)

Just as many Republican voters have cheered GOP attacks on public-health experts during the coronavirus crisis, portraying them as “elites” who look down on and want to control ordinary people, they have embraced similar accusations against climate scientists. “Climate change is an issue … where most people don’t know
that much … and in those circumstances—especially for an abstract, seemingly far away, invisible problem like climate change—they look to their leaders to help guide them through that incredibly complicated landscape,” Leiserowitz told me. “Republicans who began talking about climate change as if it was a ‘hoax’ had an incredible impact on other Republicans.”

Many environmentalists have hoped that more and more exposure to the furious effects of weather disruption might soften resistance among Republican voters and leaders to acting on climate change. But in dramatic polling last year from the Kaiser Family Foundation and The Washington Post, even Republican voters who acknowledge that their communities are facing more extreme weather overwhelmingly reject the notion that climate change is significantly contributing to those events.

[Read: Two disasters are exponentially worse than one]

Detailed results provided to me by Kaiser underscore an astonishing gap between the parties. Among people who agree that their communities are experiencing either more hot days, more floods, or more droughts, at least three-fourths of Democrats say climate change is a “major factor” in those events; but at least seven in 10 Republicans in each case say it is only a minor factor, or does not contribute at all. Slightly more than seven in 10 Democrats living in places experiencing more wildfires consider climate change a major factor in causing them; three-fourths of Republicans see climate as little or none of the cause. Even after this summer’s searing events, an Economist/YouGov poll released yesterday found that although three-fourths of Biden supporters said “the severity of recent hurricanes and Western wildfires is most likely the result of global climate change,” fewer than one in five Trump voters agreed.

Those contrasts offer very little reason for optimism that even if Biden wins, any meaningful numbers of congressional or state-level Republicans will feel pressure to support measures to reduce carbon emissions. Among other reasons for pessimism: In both presidential and Senate elections, Republicans are more and more reliant on the states that produce the most fossil fuels, which tend to be the same states with large populations of non-college-educated, Christian, and rural white voters drawn to Trump’s message of racial and cultural backlash.
Across the 20 states that emit the most carbon per dollar of economic output—a good proxy for states’ integration into the fossil-fuel economy—Republicans now hold 35 of their 40 Senate seats. That’s nearly enough senators to sustain a GOP filibuster against climate action on its own. The final brick in the wall of GOP opposition is that fossil-fuel producers, once an important source of campaign funding for southern Democrats such as Lyndon B. Johnson, are all-in on bolstering Republican power. Over the past 30 years, oil and gas producers have directed more than 80 percent of their massive $711 million in total federal campaign contributions toward Republicans, according to the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics.

Gene Karpinski, the longtime president of the League of Conservation Voters, the environmental movement’s principal electoral arm, sees little prospect for GOP participation on climate even if Trump loses. “Because of the fossil-fuel influence on the Republican Party and the leader of the party still calling climate change a ‘hoax,’” GOP skepticism about “climate change is out of step with the rest of the country,” he says.

But others see some cracks in the resistance. Kenneth Medlock, the director of the Center for Energy Studies at the Baker Institute for Public Policy in Houston, says the terms of daily discussion in Texas and in neighboring states have changed since Houston was deluged with historic floods during Hurricane Harvey in 2017. “Even in the Gulf Coast, the conversation around extreme-weather events and the like is more the norm than it was five years ago,” he told me. “Up until Harvey happened, nobody really wanted to address the elephant in the room, which is that the climate is changing and this is a real risk.”

Even with that evolving dialogue, Medlock doesn’t expect big changes among Republican elected officials in Texas. He predicts that, to the extent that they acknowledge climate change, they would be more likely to talk about fortifying communities against its effects (an issue he considers important too) than to talk about reducing carbon emissions. But Medlock anticipates that position will become more and more untenable for Republicans over time—not because their voters necessarily demand more action, but because the business community and institutional investors will keep moving ahead without them to cut carbon.
The dialogue among elected Republicans, he told me, “has kind of quietly shifted.” He explained that the Baker Institute, which is based at Rice University, is involved in several initiatives aimed at reducing net-carbon emissions in the region. “What's really interesting about [those] efforts is that when we talk to state lawmakers and federal lawmakers [including Republicans], there's no resistance,” he continued. “You open the conversation with, ‘The world is changing; consumers and investors are demanding lower carbon footprints; this is an economic opportunity for Texas …’ and immediately the conversation becomes very lively. So, in some ways, it's about how you approach the conversation.”

Sean McElwee, the Data for Progress pollster who analyzes progressive causes, sees a similar opening. Although most Republican voters still recoil from measures presented as addressing climate change, more are open to promoting clean-energy sources, he says. (Yale's polling has found that too.) “When we do testing … clean energies are very popular among Republican voters, and people are really interested in the jobs framework,” he told me. Just as important: Relatively few Republican voters intuitively embrace arguments from Trump and others that defending oil, gas, and coal is a culture-war statement against “elitists” promoting solar and wind energies. “I don’t think voters have an allegiance to coal and oil the way Republican politicians have,” he said.

Browner, the former EPA head, is also a voice of relative optimism. “If Biden wins and they start moving forward” with a climate agenda, she told me, “there will be Republicans calling. Maybe I’m a minority on this, but when they see you are serious and you want to do something, they want a seat at the table.”

[Read: This is the future that liberals want]

Even if Republicans remain obdurate, unified Democratic control of Congress and the White House is more likely to produce climate action than the last Democratic trifecta in 2009 and 2010, most experts I spoke with said. At that point, the House Democratic Caucus still contained a large number of southern and rural “blue dog” members who resisted cap-and-trade climate legislation the chamber passed in 2009. (Forty-four Democrats voted no.) Now the House Democratic Caucus is overwhelmingly centered on urban and suburban districts where acting on climate is popular. As Karpinski said: “If you look at 2018, the key reason why Nancy Pelosi is now the speaker [is because] it’s mostly suburban and some of the semi-
urban districts. It’s a combination of young people, communities of color, and suburban women. They are the most supportive of this issue and want action.”

If Biden wins and Democrats gain the Senate majority, he could drive a big part of his climate agenda through a coronavirus-relief stimulus package; his plan includes massive spending to promote renewable power, electric cars, and energy-efficiency upgrades for homes and businesses. Obama did the same thing in the stimulus package he signed to counter the Great Recession, tucking in huge investments in clean energy (that Biden as vice president was assigned to oversee).

But to secure Senate approval for measures that directly limit carbon emissions, Democrats would almost certainly have to end the filibuster, which empowers what I’ve called the “brown blockade” of Senate Republicans who represent the fossil-fuel-producing states. (Unable to overcome a filibuster, the Senate never considered the cap-and-trade climate bill the House passed in 2009.) And even if Democrats do end the filibuster, serious climate legislation could face a tight squeeze to reach a simple majority, with Joe Manchin, from coal-producing West Virginia, and possibly other Democratic senators having to take a very tough vote.

All of those outcomes are impossible to predict. But what’s clear is that the tension will grow between a sluggish political system locked in a partisan standoff and a climate system that is poised to generate disruption at an accelerating pace. “This is not some ‘new normal’ that we can plan around … it’s a system that continues to spiral out of control,” says Vijay Limaye, an environmental epidemiologist at the Natural Resources Defense Council. “There definitely is a signal in these record-setting months that … we are heading into a new era when we will see records set, and they will fall just as quickly … It’s hard for people to wrap their heads around now, but as bad as things have been this year, unquestionably, they will get worse.”

Nichols, the veteran climate regulator, is just as stark in her warning: Even today’s extreme weather may soon seem like the (relative) calm before the storm. “The rate of change is accelerating, so it is absolutely possible that we’ll see more visible signs of bigger storms,” as well as higher temperatures and sea-level rise, she said. “All of those things could happen much faster.”

She explained that the famous apocalyptic scene from the movie *The Day After Tomorrow* still isn’t likely to happen, where big waves wash over the skyscrapers of
New York City. “But bigger storms and more damage and loss of property and loss of life as a result absolutely is likely going to continue—not just in a gradual slope, but at a rate of acceleration that is greater than was predicted before,” she said.

The biggest message of the California wildfires may be that not only the terms but the tense of the climate debate is changing. Climate change has evolved from something that will threaten America to something that is doing so today. “The people who used to talk about how they were trying to save the world for their grandchildren need to start thinking about their children and even themselves,” Nichols said.

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