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# Californians and the Energy Transition

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# Key Takeaways

Most Californians support the state's goals for reducing greenhouse gases and the transition to renewable energy sources. But economic and political headwinds are limiting their endorsement of state policies and their participation in the changes needed to achieve these goals. Over the past 20 years, the PPIC Statewide Survey has been tracking Californians' attitudes toward climate change policies. Today, while we see continued support for issues related to the state's energy transition, we also see growing concern.

- Majorities of California adults (62%) and likely voters (69%) believe that the effects of climate change have already begun to happen.
- Two-thirds of adults (67%) and likely voters (66%) favor reducing greenhouse gas emissions to 40 percent below 1990 levels by 2030; slightly fewer favor all the state's electricity to come from renewable energy sources by the year 2045 (62% adults; 60% likely voters).
- However, 59 percent of Californians are not willing to pay more for electricity generated by renewable energy sources. Half or more say that the current price of gasoline (52% adults) and the rising cost of natural gas and electric utility bills (55% adults) is a major problem personally for them.
- Today, fewer Californians believe that actions to reduce climate change will result in more jobs (35%; 45% July 2010) and more think they will result in fewer jobs (32%; 23% in July 2010) in the future.

State leaders will need to factor in the economic realities faced by Californians today or they may confront dwindling support for a comprehensive energy transition in the state. Going forward, meeting the state's goals of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and transitioning to renewable energy sources will require Californians to lend their voices to the decision-making process and participate in addressing the critical environmental issues facing their state.

## Introduction

California has been in the vanguard on environmental issues for more than a half century. Californians demonstrated their pro-environmental attitudes when they passed the California Coastal Commission initiative in 1972; voters reaffirmed their commitment in 2024 with a yes vote (59%) on State Proposition 4, a \$10 billion bond measure for climate change programs.

In the past, environmental issues brought together a diverse coalition with common goals and pride in the state's leadership. Today, the top-down approach to climate change and energy is more contentious.

The challenges of the energy transition now underway reflect the economic, social, and political complexities of California today. These include the cost of living and housing affordability in the Golden State, concerns about environmental justice for low-income communities and communities of color, and partisan polarization that makes it difficult to find common ground. Many Californians are distrustful of state government, dubious about its ability to deliver on promises, and skeptical about policies that raise taxes or the cost of living. And in a changing federal policy landscape, the state's goals and policies are at odds with executive actions and Congressional legislation on climate change and energy issues.

## California Climate Legislation

California's efforts to address climate change can be traced to [legislation with bipartisan support](#) that was signed into law by Republican Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger after it passed a Democratic-controlled legislature in 2006. This established a goal of California lowering its greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2020 by reducing air pollution and replacing fossil fuels with renewable energy.

The state goal was reached early. Legislation that required California to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions to 40 percent *below* the 1990 level by 2030 passed in the [State Senate](#) and [Assembly](#) was signed into law by Governor Jerry Brown in 2016. Three years ago, the legislation that was passed and signed into law by Governor Gavin Newsom set the current state goal of achieving [net zero greenhouse gas emissions](#) as soon as possible, and not later than 2045.

Today, California state government has a [2022 Scoping Plan](#) that will provide the framework for the energy transition into the foreseeable future. The current state goal has been a source of [confusion and controversy](#), and its specific energy policies have been [criticized by business organizations](#) while they are supported by [environmental groups](#).

How are Californians responding to the energy transition? To understand how the public thinks about climate change and energy policy today, we asked a series of questions in the [July PPIC Survey](#). This report explores the trends in Californians' perceptions, attitudes, and preferences with climate change and energy policies, as well as recent experiences with utility bills and gasoline costs, through the annual [PPIC environment survey](#), which was launched in June 2000 with the latest results from this summer.

## Polling Methods

The July survey included online interviews in English and Spanish with 1,736 adult residents of whom 1,165 were likely voters; it was conducted from July 1 to July 7, 2025. The margin of error is +/- 3.2 percent for adults and +/- 3.9 percent for likely voters. More information on survey methodology can be found in [the full report](#).

## Climate Change and the State's Role and Goals

Over the past 20 years, Californians have held firm when polled on their views on whether climate change is currently happening. Today, 62 percent of California adults, 69 percent of likely voters, and half across regions believe that the effects of climate change have already begun to happen—partisans, however, are divided (78% Democrats, 39% Republicans, 71% independents).

Furthermore, residents tend to be clear in their opinions about the danger that climate change poses:

- For 8 in 10 Californians, climate change is a very (46%) or somewhat (34%) serious threat to the economy and quality of life for California's future.
- Half or more across demographic groups and state regions agree that climate change is a threat.

- Partisans are divided on how serious the threat may be (very serious: 65% Democrats, 22% Republicans, 50% independents).

## Californians want the state to take charge on climate policy

Californians have maintained their belief that the state has a responsibility to take actions to address climate change. Consistent with past polling results, nearly two-thirds of adults (64%) and likely voters (66%) today favor having their state government make its own policies, separate from the federal government, to address the issue of climate change. Majorities across demographic groups and state regions agree on this active role, while partisans differ widely (91% Democrats, 23% Republicans, 62% independents).

- Nearly two-thirds of adults also say it is very important (38%) or somewhat important (27%) that California act as a leader around the world when it comes to efforts to fight climate change.
- Partisans also differ on whether the state should act as a world leader (89% Democrats, 27% Republicans, 64% independents) on climate change policies.

## Support is strong for goals that mitigate climate change

Majorities of Californians have consistently said over the years that they are in favor of the state's goals to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and transition to renewable energy sources.

- Today, 67 percent of adults (66% likely voters) are in favor of reducing greenhouse gas emissions to 40 percent below 1990 levels by 2030.
- A majority of adults (62%) and likely voters (60%) are in favor of all the state's electricity to come from renewable energy sources by the year 2045.
- Just under two-thirds of adults (63%) and likely voters (63%) favor setting a goal of achieving net zero greenhouse emissions as soon as possible, but not later than 2045.

About half or more across demographic groups and regions support the state's goals. Majorities of Democratic and independent voters are in favor of these climate change and energy goals, while fewer than one in three Republicans support them.

## The Economics of Energy Policy

Regarding energy projects the state may pursue, Californians' views align with their support for the state's goals of reducing greenhouse gases and transitioning to renewable energy sources.

- Overwhelming majorities are in favor of building more solar power stations in California (81% adults, 83% likely voters) and allowing wind power and wave energy projects off the coast (75% adults, 77% likely voters).
- In contrast, fewer than four in ten are in favor of allowing more oil drilling off the California coast (34% adults, 36% likely voters).
- About half are in favor of building more nuclear power plants in California (48% adults, 54% likely voters).

More than six in ten across political and demographic groups and state regions are in favor of solar, wind, and wave projects off the coast and building more solar power plants in California. Partisans are divided on allowing more oil drilling off the coast and building more nuclear power plants in California.

## Support is strong for state climate efforts, but people worry about jobs

A key strategy in the state's efforts to reduce greenhouse gases is a "cap-and-trade" system—recently renamed "cap-and-invest." California state government issues permits limiting the amount of greenhouse gases companies can put out. Companies that do not use all of their permits can sell them to other companies. The state revenue raised through issuing these permits is deposited in a fund for state programs related to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and the energy transition. For more than a decade, half or more Californians have said that they favor this state strategy.

- Today, 59 percent of adults (60% likely voters) favor the cap-and-trade system, including about half or more across demographic groups and regions.
- Partisans are divided (75% Democrats, 35% Republicans, 62% independents).

But Californians have mixed feelings about how the state's climate actions may impact employment.

- Today, one in three think there will be more jobs (35% adults) even as one in three think there will be fewer jobs (32% adults).
- Just under a third (29%), however, think that doing things to reduce climate change in the future would not affect the number of jobs.

When we first asked this question 15 years ago, in the July 2010 Survey, Californians were somewhat more optimistic: 45 percent thought there would be more jobs while 23 percent said there would be fewer jobs (24% wouldn't affect jobs) in the future.

## Few see limiting gas-powered vehicles as an answer to climate concerns

When the question turns to the impact that the state's climate policies might have on vehicles, Californians give more measured responses.

- Fewer than four in ten Californians (35% adults, 39% likely voters) are in favor of banning the sale of all new gasoline-powered vehicles in California by 2035.
- About half of Californians (47% adults, 50% likely voters) are in favor of banning the sale of all new diesel-powered heavy-duty and medium-duty trucks in California by 2036.
- Majorities with incomes under \$100,000 are opposed to the bans on gas-powered vehicles in California.

## Few would pay more for renewable energy, and fewer now want an EV

Is there a public buy-in for paying more for electricity and changing driving habits to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and transition to renewable energy?

- Today, 59 percent of Californians say they are not willing to pay more for electricity if it was generated by renewable energy sources.

- Today, 52 percent have not considered getting an electric vehicle.

About a decade ago, far fewer Californians said they were not willing to pay more for electricity if it was generated by renewable energy sources (July 2016: 40%) and far fewer said they had not considered getting an electric vehicle (July 2013: 35%).

Taking a closer look at Californians who are willing to pay higher electricity prices reveals that people in this group overwhelmingly favor the state policy for achieving net zero greenhouse gas emissions and 100 percent renewable energy by 2045. Those who are not willing to pay higher electricity prices are divided in their views about the state's goals.

A deeper dive into those who are considering or already have an electric vehicle reveals that majorities favor banning the sale of all new diesel-powered trucks by 2036 and all new gasoline-powered vehicles by 2035. Two in three or more who have not considered getting an electric vehicle oppose these specific state policies.

## Energy Costs and the Cost of Living

Californians chose the cost of living when asked about the most important issue facing people in California today in our June survey. As part of this context, home electricity rates are high compared to other states and have been rising in recent years; gasoline prices at the pump are also relatively high in California. We asked four questions about perceptions of energy costs in the July survey.

### Californians are frustrated by energy affordability

Many in the state are keeping a close eye on costs related to their daily living expenses: fueling their cars and providing power to their homes.

- For half or more (52% adults, 50% likely voters), the current price of gasoline at the pump is a “major problem” personally.
- As is the rising cost of natural gas and electric utility bills (55% adults, 54% likely voters).

The cost of energy, such as gasoline and utility bills in their part of the state today, raises concerns for many Californians—now and for the future:

- These costs are a big problem for 54 percent of adults (54% likely voters).
- Over half of adults (54%) and likely voters (55%) think energy prices for gasoline and utility bills will hurt the California economy “a great deal” in the future.

Majorities with incomes under \$100,000 hold these views about energy costs for themselves, their region, and the state's future.

We see strong opinions on the costs of energy among the 59 percent of Californians who are not willing to pay more for electricity generated by renewable energy sources:

- Majorities (65%) report that the rising costs of their utility bills are a major problem personally.

- Furthermore, the cost of energy in their part of California is a big problem (62%).
- And majorities (63%) believe that energy prices will hurt the California economy a great deal in the future.

Among the 52 percent who have not considered buying an electric vehicle,

- majorities say that the rising costs of their utility bills is a major problem personally (58%),
- the cost of energy is a big problem in their part of California (57%),
- and that energy prices will hurt the California economy a great deal in the future (60%).

Moreover, 58 percent of adults believe that gasoline prices at the pump around the state will increase as a result of California doing things to reduce climate change in the future (18% decrease, 20% wouldn't affect gas prices). The results have been similar since we first asked this question in a [July 2016 Survey](#).

## Californians are pessimistic about the energy future

We find a large “confidence gap” when it comes to the public’s views about the state government’s actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and transition to a renewable energy future.

- Two in ten California adults (20%) and likely voters (20%) think that California is “ready and prepared” to meet the state goals for reducing greenhouse gas and renewable energy.
- Fewer than three in ten hold this optimistic perception across political and demographic groups and state regions.
- About four in ten Californians (41% adults, 43% likely voters) think that California’s renewable energy plans will provide a “reliable and adequate” electricity supply.

Fewer than half hold this optimistic view across demographic groups and regions while partisans are divided (60% Democrats, 14% Republicans, 38% independents).

## Moving Toward Energy Transition in California

In sum, the energy transition is at a crossroads today. Most Californians continue to support the state’s goals for reducing greenhouse gases and the transition to renewable energy sources. But there are economic and political headwinds that limit their endorsement of state policies and their participation in the changes that will be needed in order to achieve the current goals of the state’s energy transition. Moreover, the rapid adoption of artificial intelligence is raising issues that state policymakers must soon navigate, especially given the electricity required to power this growing industry and the impact the [surging demand](#) may have on the environment and [consumer costs](#) in the future.

## Concerns about wildfires reflect concerns about climate change

It’s noteworthy that Californians chose both “wildfires” or “climate change” as the most important environmental issues for California today in our July survey. About half of Californians are concerned that one of the possible impacts of climate change is that wildfires may become more severe.



In the wake of the destructive Los Angeles wildfires in January, most Californians today say that wildfires are a problem in their part of California and a serious threat to their own personal and economic well-being. Furthermore, they worry about the impacts of wildfires on their utility bills as well as the impacts of climate change risks on the cost of home insurance and even their ability to even get insurance.

Most Californians have “only some” confidence in government’s readiness to respond to wildfires, with majorities believing that state and local governments are not doing enough about wildfire prevention and recovery. State leaders will now need to connect the dots between their wildfire efforts, climate change policies, and the energy transition.

## State actions may diverge from federal priorities

In 2025, the changing federal policy landscape has had fiscal, legal, and political implications for the state’s goals of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and transitioning to renewable energy. While US policy has created new obstacles for the state’s environmental goals, it’s important to keep in mind that most Californians have views that differ from the course taken by federal policy.

- About six in ten think that global climate change is a major threat to the well-being of the US and that the federal government is not doing enough to address climate change.
- Three in four support the US participating in international efforts to help reduce the effects of global climate change.
- When asked about what energy policy the US should prioritize, most Californians choose developing alternative energy sources such as solar, wind, and hydrogen power over expanding exploration and production of coal, oil, and natural gas (71% to 27%).

Approval ratings for the US president (27%) and US Congress (22%) are lower than for the California governor (53%) and California Legislature (47%) when it comes to handling environmental issues. While partisans hold different views, Californians’ preferences align more closely with the state’s policies on climate change and energy.

## Addressing climate change will require citizen engagement

Going forward, citizens will need to become more engaged for the state to meet its goals of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and transitioning to renewable energy sources. Today, legislation and top-down planning has not fully accounted for the public’s concerns about high energy costs and their lack of confidence in the state meeting its goals.

As in the past, Californians want their voices heard; residents do want to participate in the decision-making process about important environmental issues facing their state. Fortunately, several options for citizen engagement are highly popular in our recent surveys.

- Sixty-two percent of California likely voters are in favor of having a citizens’ assembly that is convened to make recommendations to the governor and legislature on environmental issues in California.
- Seventy-one percent of likely voters are in favor of the “Engaged California” state government program that invites Californians to join online group discussions on current issues.

➤ And 49 percent say they are willing to participate in an online forum on California's environmental issues.

Californians can also envision a role for civic education, with 71 percent of likely voters saying they would vote "yes" on a proposed citizens' initiative for the November 2026 ballot that would require California's K-12 public schools to offer students education and training on environmental issues. Eighty-one percent of likely voters say that it is very important to them personally to vote on ballot measures on environmental issues in California.

In closing, we expect the energy transition to be a major issue for candidates running for statewide offices and legislative seats in the 2026 election. At this pivotal moment, PPIC will be following new developments on this topic through our polling and research on understanding California's future.

## About the Authors

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