

Poll finds Californians back climate change efforts despite cost

Jeremy B. White, Sacramento Bee, 7-28-16

Climate change policies appeal to a majority of Californians despite the possibility of higher energy costs, a new Public Policy Institute of California poll has found.

“Californians tend to have a hesitancy to support policies that are going to impact their pocketbooks, but in this case they seem to be willing to do so,” said PPIC president Mark Baldassare, calling the findings an endorsement of “the direction (the state) has taken in the last ten years to be a leader in reducing greenhouse gas emissions.”

Environmentalists laud California for its ambitious efforts to fight climate change, and Gov. Jerry Brown has placed the issue at the center of his fourth-term agenda. Last year Brown signed a measure vastly expanding the state’s use of renewable energy.

But the road ahead for California’s cap-and-trade program, which requires businesses to buy permits for the carbon they emit, has become unclear. A recent auction reaped a comparatively tiny amount of revenue. Its legal foundation has come under question. And the program sunsets in 2020, spurring politically fraught efforts to extend it.

Those headwinds notwithstanding, California residents still support cap-and-trade (54 percent) and the underlying goal of reducing greenhouse gases, according to the poll. Around two-thirds of likely voters (62 percent) back the goal of reducing emissions to their 1990 levels by 2020, a target that is central to cap-and-trade’s mission. Helping explain that support are the large majorities (81 percent of adults and 75 percent of likely voters) who called climate change a serious threat.

As elected officials push to expand on climate goals, they have the public’s backing. A bill before the Legislature would have California diminish emissions to 40 percent below 1990 levels by 2030. More than two-thirds of adults (68 percent) and a majority of likely voters (59 percent) favored that idea.

Opponents of far-reaching climate programs have warned that Californians will endure higher energy costs. Moderate Democrats concerned about higher gas prices, echoing the oil industry’s criticism, helped block a proposal last year to cut petroleum use by 50 percent.

According to the PPIC survey, most Californians (59 percent) expect higher gas prices as a result of environmental laws. But many are willing to pay: just under two-thirds of those anticipating higher prices favor both the current emissions reduction goals and the expansion proposal. A majority of likely voters (56 percent) said they’d pay more for electricity generated by renewable sources like solar or wind.

A partisan divide runs through the responses. Majorities of Republicans opposed expanding the emissions reduction targets and the cap-and-trade program. And Republicans, unlike Democrats or independents, were not willing to pay more to support climate policies.