

Liberal States Like California Are Also Failing To Make Progress On Climate



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California has a well-established reputation as a national and global climate leader, but despite its remarkable successes in cutting emissions between 2006 and 2016, it has recently begun showing signs of having lost its way.

California is increasingly falling behind on its emissions reduction targets, and its existing policies have now been deemed insufficient to hit its 2030 target of reducing carbon emissions 40 percent below 1990 levels by 2030, [according to new modeling](#) from the climate policy think tank Energy Innovation.

“Compared to historical trends, California will need to more than triple the pace of emissions reductions to hit its 2030 target of reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions 40 percent below 1990 levels by 2030,” the Energy Innovation report states.

The report is disappointing news, representing a weakening of the climate action that began with California’s passage of AB 32 in 2006. Otherwise known as the Global Warming Solutions Act, AB 32 was a landmark program in the struggle to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Up until 2006, the United States was the largest emitter of carbon dioxide emissions in the world, and California was the second highest state in terms of total greenhouse gas emissions.

Under AB 32, California was required to reduce statewide emissions to 1990 levels by 2020. It also required that California greenhouse gas emissions be reduced to 80 percent below 1990 levels by 2050. The California Air Resources Board, established in 1967, became the agency responsible for the implementation of the law.

California met its goal to reach 1990 emissions levels by 2020 four years ahead of schedule. In 2016, lawmakers passed SB 32 as a follow up to AB 32. SB 32 requires the California Air Resources Board to ensure the state's greenhouse gas emissions are reduced to 40 percent below the 1990 levels by 2030.

Surprisingly enough, however, California's emission reduction efforts appeared to lose momentum after SB 32 was signed into law.

Unsurprisingly enough, an environmental group gave California a near failing grade on the climate crisis in 2021. This was the first time that California Environmental Voters, or EnviroVoters, gave a "D" mark to the state since the group began issuing its annual scorecard in 1973.

What explains California's woeful progress on climate solutions?

For one, California hasn't enacted any transformative climate bills over the past 4 years. Perhaps there is a connection between California's recent inaction on the climate crisis and the fact that fossil fuel companies "spent four times as much as environmental advocacy groups and almost six times as much as clean energy firms on lobbying efforts in California between 2018 and 2021," [according to Capital & Main](#).

Indeed, California lawmakers are failing to advance bills that include deep decarbonization initiatives. When a new bill AB 1395, a net-zero bill co-authored by Assembly Members Al Muratsuchi and Cristina Garcia, was introduced on the last day of last year's legislative session, it was [resoundingly defeated](#). It would have codified in law the state's pledge to achieve carbon neutrality as soon as possible and by no later than 2045. It was opposed by the oil and gas sector, the agricultural industry and business groups.

California's clean-air regulators are also relying on programs and strategies for reducing greenhouse gas emissions that are of questionable nature, according to experts. The California Air Resources Board released in May a proposal called [a scoping plan](#) that ignores the need for immediate action and leans heavily on carbon dioxide removal technologies to reach the 2045 carbon neutrality target. "[The plan does California a disservice](#)," said one state advisor, while more than 70 environmental justice groups called the proposal "a setback for the state and the world."

Transformative pieces of legislation on the side of climate justice are also being ditched in a state with a reputation for progressive politics. Just recently, the California Justice40 Act (AB 2419) introduced by Assembly Member Isaac Bryan, which would have ensured the equitable implementation of infrastructure investments, was killed in the Senate Appropriations Committee. The bill aimed to achieve environmental justice by investing at least 40 percent of federal climate and infrastructure funding on projects that provide “direct benefits” to low-income, indigenous, and rural communities and communities of color. The California Green New Deal Coalition and many other environmental organizations had expressed strong support for AB 2419.

This was a critical piece of legislation that would have benefitted directly the communities facing the greatest environmental burdens. Infrastructure policies in the U.S. have historically promoted and exacerbated racial and economic inequality. During the New Deal, for instance, the Federal Housing Authority provided low-interest mortgages to white families but refused to issue mortgages in African American neighborhoods. Communities of color were designated as “risky areas.” The 1956 Interstate Highway Act intentionally displaced hundreds of thousands of low-income families and communities of color. A landmark 1987 report, entitled [“Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States,”](#) revealed that race was the most significant indicator for the location of toxic waste sites.

A [study released by the Gender Equity Policy Institute](#) found that, if enacted, AB 2419 “would powerfully advance gender and racial equality in California.” The report estimated that six in ten residents of the state could benefit from infrastructure investments targeted to low-income and disadvantaged communities. The bill would benefit women of color since they are more likely to live in polluted or low-income areas. Indeed, in the San Francisco Bay area, 1.3 million women of color would benefit from AB 2419’s targeted investments, and in southern California 3.2 million women of color who live in heavily polluted communities would benefit, the report said.

But to no avail. The bill was obviously too “radical” even for the Democratic members in the Senate’s Appropriations Committee.

California is proof that simply being a liberal state is not a sufficient enough factor to secure progress in the fight against the climate crisis. Money talks. Powerful interest groups can easily hijack the policy agenda. The role of

bureaucrats also cannot be overlooked when it comes to issues of critical importance for the common good. The California Air Resources Board's view on carbon removal technology represents in reality a form of continued investment in the fossil fuel industry.

The irony is that California has at its disposal a comprehensive climate stabilization program that includes climate justice and economic growth, courtesy of a group of progressive economists at the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. Robert Pollin and some of his coworkers produced last year a commissioned program that [demonstrates that California can achieve its official greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets by 2030](#) and reach zero emissions by 2045. They also showed that the program can serve as a powerful new engine of job creation and ensure a just transition for the state's fossil fuel workers and communities.

The project was embraced by the union movement in California. Some 20 unions across the state endorsed the program, including a couple representing thousands of oil workers, so it cannot be said that there are no sustainable transition projects available to California or that such projects lack the approval of labor unions. The only obstacles in California to a decarbonized future are politicians stuck in "piecemeal approach" mode and the influence of corporate lobbying on climate policies.

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Social Change (2017); *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet* (with Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin as primary authors, 2020); *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic, and the Urgent Need for Radical Change* (an anthology of interviews with Noam Chomsky, 2021); and *Economics and the Left: Interviews with Progressive Economists* (2021).