

In 'remarkable shift,' four out of five Texans say climate change is real. Now what?

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During his time representing Fort Worth in the Texas House, Lon Burnam recalls a member of the governor's staff issuing a stern warning: Keep the words "climate change" in a piece of legislation, and the bill will be "dead on arrival."

A lot has changed since Burnam, a Democrat, left office in 2015 and became the chair of the Tarrant Coalition on Environmental Awareness. In a "remarkable shift from the past," a University of Houston study published in December found that 81% of Texans agree that [climate](#)

change is happening.

That result, from a survey of 500 Texans conducted in October, now matches the views expressed by the majority of 1,000 Americans, 80% of whom said that climate change is real.

Ramanan Krishnamoorti, the University of Houston's chief [energy](#) officer and an author of the study, said that the researchers were not "terribly shocked" by the change in public opinion. The expansion of wind and natural gas industries, alongside demographic changes like a growing youth population and increased migration to the state, have contributed to the evolution, he said.

"Assigning the blame as to who was responsible for some of this, that was pretty surprising," Krishnamoorti said. "We anticipated that the reliance of the Texas economy on the energy industry would mean less blame by Texans on the energy industry for climate change. But we got the majority of Texans saying that they felt that the [energy industry](#) was largely to be blamed, along with governments of developed countries."

Across the board, the majority of Americans and Texans share another trait in common: significant knowledge gaps when it comes to policies that might address global warming, including a [carbon tax](#) imposed on companies that burn fossil fuels and the possibility that consumers could pay more for carbon-neutral fuel. However, about 82% of Americans surveyed said they are willing to pay \$1 to \$5 more for carbon-neutral energy.

"For some reason, we think we've got the panacea, which is bigger, more affordable wind and solar energy, and that electricity will essentially help us decarbonize the world," Krishnamoorti said. "There's the fallacy: You need all of the above for at least the next three, four decades to get to an energy transition where we can have all of the systems depend on

electricity rather than fossil-fuel based energy."

David Schechter, a journalist for WFAA-TV, has seen that knowledge gap up close. For his documentary series "Verify Road Trip," he took a Texas climate skeptic to Alaska and captured the man's reaction to seeing the effects of climate change in front of his eyes.

"It's a combination of establishing the baseline that yes, the climate is changing, and then people start to realize that it's changing faster than it ever has in the history of the world," Schechter said. "I don't think people are thinking about policy at all, about carbon capture or credits or taxes. That's not even on anyone's radar right now."

Texans have become more informed about how environmental issues impact their lives in terms of air pollution, extreme weather events like hurricanes, and chemicals that have made waterways unfishable, Burnam said. But many Texans have continued to vote for candidates who deny climate science, he added.

"There's been some significant progress in Texas coming from way behind the nation with regards to scientific literacy, which is very limited in this state, and the issue of political literacy, which is even more limited," Burnam said. "But until people's behavior changes, what difference does it make?"

There remains a strong political bias in how Americans and Texans consider climate change, said Michael Slattery, the director of the Institute for Environmental Studies at Texas Christian University.

"One of the things that frustrates me is that there's still this perception that when you talk about these issues, people think, 'Here comes Al Gore again with his chalkboard to lecture us about climate change,'" Slattery said. "The reality is there's money to be made in renewable energy and

cleaner energy."

Between 2010 and 2012, Slattery conducted public opinion surveys on climate issues that stretched from Texas to the Midwest and found similar results to the University of Houston researchers.

Americans' willingness to support renewable energy and pay more for it was less dependent on doing it for the greater good, Slattery said, and more dependent on where the money flows. Through the state's wind production tax credit, [school districts](#) and small towns have seen tax benefits from allowing companies to use their land for renewable energy production, according to the Austin American-Statesman.

"School districts became richer school districts, even though they had to send some of their money back to the state for the Robin Hood plan," Slattery said. "They noticed that the town's football stadiums got upgraded scoreboards and school computer labs, and if you want to convince people about renewable energy, go to a Friday night football game and buy them a hot dog. These were tangible benefits to the community."

In Fort Worth, environmental organizations have found more success in using "sustainability" to describe their goals in making the school district and city more environmentally friendly, said John MacFarlane, the chairman of the Greater Fort Worth Sierra Club. Their approach with schools has been to show how buildings can conserve energy and save money, Burnam added.

"We would like to see in Fort Worth what Dallas, Houston, San Antonio and Austin have: climate action plans for their cities," MacFarlane said. "But here, we will call it a 'sustainability plan' because I think they'll be more amenable to something like that than they would be with 'climate change' in the title. There are some city council members and staff that

get it, but a majority of our city council at this point don't get it."

MacFarlane was encouraged by the recently passed COVID-19 stimulus bill, which included an extension of tax credits for residential rooftop solar panels and wind power alongside subsidies for oil and gas companies struggling during the pandemic. He and Burnam are optimistic that [climate change](#) will earn significant attention from the incoming Biden administration, but do not think it will be a priority on the local or state scale.

"At the state level, I'm extremely disappointed in the outcome of the election this year, because I had high hopes that we would at least get a legislature that would not continue to attack environmental interests," Burnam said.

With the Texas legislative session set to kick off on Jan. 12, Krishnamoorti sees opportunities for legislators to take action on policies that have earned broad support from Texans.

Some of those policies include imposing regulations on methane flaring, the practice of burning off excess natural gas because it is more expensive to collect and move the gas elsewhere. Those emissions have been linked to ozone depletion and pollution that can cause irritation to the eyes, nose, throat and lungs, according to a Texas A&M study.

Energy experts must take a more active role in educating the public about what options exist to reduce the amount of carbon being emitted into the atmosphere, which contributes to global warming, Krishnamoorti said.

"There are no free lunches in the energy and environment world," he said. "So it comes down to: What are we willing to sacrifice to get to a greener world and, perhaps more importantly, for the U.S. to lead the

energy transition? We stand right now at a point where unless we take leadership in the energy transition and come up with decarbonization and carbon management strategies, we're likely to lose that leadership. This is a global shift that has to happen."

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