

As fires rage, climate change is back on the election agenda

15 September 2020, by Jenesse Miller



American voters may finally find themselves unable to ignore the increasing evidence of climate change. Credit: [Magnus Hagdorn](#)

This was supposed to be the election year when climate change finally became a priority for American voters. And then the world, along with the 2020 election, was rocked by the COVID-19 pandemic. Dealing with climate change took a back seat to facing down a new existential threat.

Now, [climate](#) change is back on the political agenda as wildfires rage unchecked across California, Oregon and Washington, [hurricane season](#) continues with a record number of early storms and midwestern farm states are reeling from an unusual [derecho that flattened cornfields](#).

Wildfires remind us of consequences of ignoring science

Climate impacts are increasingly impossible to ignore, according to Antonio Bento, a professor at the USC Price School of Public Policy whose research interests include environmental and energy economics, transportation policy and [climate policy](#).

"The fires and the heat waves here in California provide a rationale for [climate action](#). The levels of ozone were the worst in 30 years," he observed.

"This is just one of the many 'penalties' that climate change will continue to create in our communities, affecting the well-being of our populations, especially the most vulnerable ones."

In recent days, the air quality in West Coast cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, Portland and Seattle ranked among the worst in the world. Experts have pointed out there are still months left to go in the fire season.

"The calamitous 2020 wildfire season, which has burned 3 million acres in California before the official start of the 'dangerous' period, is a stark reminder that climate action can suffer no further delay," said Julien Emile-Geay, an associate professor of Earth sciences at the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences.

Emile-Geay, whose research focuses on the interface between climate modeling, data analysis and geoinformatics, draws a comparison between political leaders' denying the science on climate change and ignoring the facts about the coronavirus pandemic.

"If the past few months have taught us anything, it is that when we choose to ignore science, everyone loses—no matter the age, demographic or party affiliation," he said. "COVID infections and deaths rise, pollution gets worse and climate extremes push things to the breaking point."

Solutions for COVID-19 and climate crisis

There are other parallels between the climate crisis and the coronavirus pandemic, said Shannon Gibson, a USC Dornsife associate (teaching) professor of international relations and environmental studies.

"Dealing with COVID-19 and climate change aren't mutually exclusive; they can be dealt with together," she said. "If you look, for example, at some of the plans for reinvigorating the U.S. economy, those billions or trillions of dollars could be spent on green jobs, on training for the new green workforce, on building roads, on mass transportation and on buildings that are energy efficient and environmentally friendly."

"Unfortunately, some of the plans right now are to double down on fossil fuel investments," she said. "But if states and cities get to choose how that money is spent and they make sustainable decisions, this could actually help the United States get back on track to meet our Paris goals."

The Paris Agreement to which Gibson referred is a nonbinding, voluntary pledge by more than 200 countries, including the United States, to reduce carbon emissions in order to keep Earth's climate from warming more than 2 degrees Celsius by the year 2100. But last November, President Donald Trump's administration sent an official notification to the United Nations that the U.S. would withdraw from the agreement.

The exit will be official on Nov. 4, 2020—the day after the [presidential election](#).

Gibson doesn't believe it's too late for the United States to make a difference in the global battle against climate change. She noted that the pandemic has led to the postponement of the Paris Agreement's five-year anniversary talks, originally scheduled for November.

"No matter who was elected, a Trump delegation would have gone to those very important talks," she noted. "Now that the talks will take place in 2021, this opens up space for the U.S. to reengage if we have a new administration. It could really be a game changer."

Will 2020 voters grapple with the human contribution to climate change?

If there is a change in administration, the immediate realities of climate change won't be transformed overnight, said Daniel Mazmanian, professor of

public policy at USC Price and the chair of the USC Presidential Working Group on Sustainability.

"The 2020 election cannot reverse the tragedies today being met upon us by the raging forest fires in California and throughout the West," he said. "It cannot reverse the failure to respond by local officials, state and national policymakers, property owners and developers to the forecasts of unimaginable fires by forestry and climate change scientists for nearly two decades."

"The issue for the election," he added, "is whether enough people cast their ballot in favor of vigorous and informed legislative and executive leadership committed to grappling with the significant human contribution to climate change and the imperative of mitigating the causes and adapting to the new realities of forestry management."

Election 2020: A tale of two wildly different approaches to climate change

Bento observed that the two presidential candidates could not be more different: "President Trump is essentially a climate denier whose administration had some of the most consequential actions to delay climate action: leaving the Paris Climate Agreement and dismantling environmental regulations, including the fuel economy standards."

In contrast, "Biden has indeed created a climate action coalition that brings together the most progressive wing of the Democratic Party, including Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and the more centrist wing with former Secretary of State John Kerry."

But, he said, the path forward for climate action under a Biden administration remains unclear: "The Green New Deal proposal is a good start, but the discussion has ignored for the most part how this 'deal' and its programs will be funded. Without embracing either a carbon tax or a comprehensive cap-and-trade program, it is not clear to me how the country will move forward."

What is clear, Emile-Geay said, is that on [climate change](#), the choice between the two candidates comes down to who embraces the science.

"Voters will soon have to choose between an administration invested into denying objective information—including, but not limited to, all the science it finds inconvenient—and a Democratic ticket that, for all its faults, at least acknowledges this reality," he said. "This is what political choice has turned into in 2020: a referendum on objective reality."

Provided by University of Southern California

APA citation: As fires rage, climate change is back on the election agenda (2020, September 15) retrieved 24 October 2020 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-09-rage-climate-election-agenda.html>

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