Climate Change, Disasters & Politics

By John Benson

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1. Introduction

As I start to write this, we are in the middle of a disaster that is playing out in Southern California. I have lived in Northern California (SF Bay Area) for most of my adult life, but lived in SoCal for a couple of years right after I graduated in 1975 (BSEE, Texas Tech).

The above disaster was caused by an unfortunate (and freaky) series of major weather anomalies, which automatically forces me to list human-caused climate change as a primary cause This situation is summarized below.

Climate change played a role in the wildfires that raged through Southern California.[1]

Ten wildfires -- the Palisades, Eaton, Hurst, Woodley, Archer, Lidia, Auto, Clay, Sepulveda, and Hughes fires – have burned through Ventura and Los Angeles counties with a combined area of >50,000 acres. Five fires were still active on Saturday (1/25), the Eaton, Palisades, Laguna and Hughes fires. At least 28 people have been killed by the disaster and over 10,000 structures were confirmed to have been destroyed, according to Cal Fire. Estimated damages are $250-275 billion per news reports. The good news as of Saturday is that Southern California is expecting rain later today.

While wildfires are a natural and necessary part of Earth's cycle, climate change and other more direct human influences have increased their likelihood. Climate change is making naturally occurring events more intense and more frequent, research shows.

In recent decades, wildfires in the western U.S. have become larger, more intense and more destructive due to a combination of factors, such as rapid urbanization and human-amplified climate change that "has produced warmer and drier conditions with prolonged droughts that stress forest vegetation facilitating pest outbreaks and tree death, leading to the accumulation of surface fuel," according to the federal government's Fifth National Climate Assessment, a breakdown of the latest in climate science coming from 14 different federal agencies, published in November 2023…

More frequent, intense and variable extreme weather events, known as compound events, are another factor currently fueling wildfires in parts of the West -- like California.

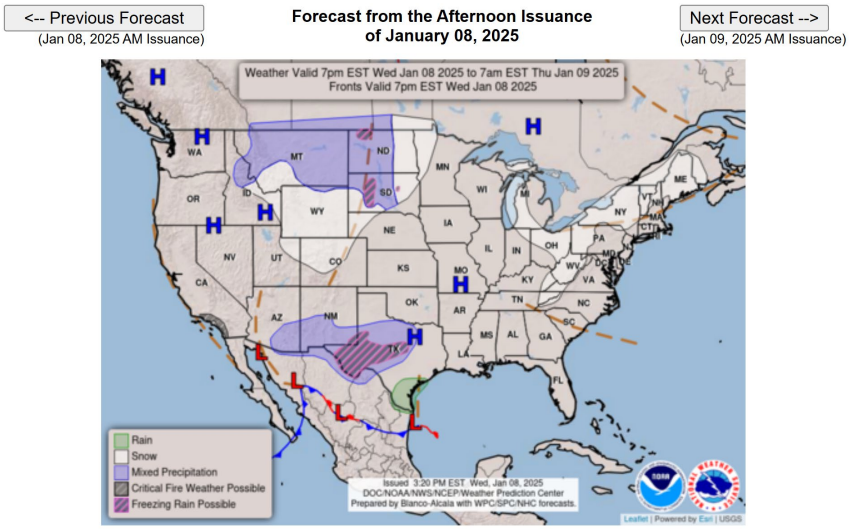
In recent years, parts of the state went from experiencing a major drought to an extended period of above average precipitation that allowed for abundant vegetation growth. A stretch of intense, record-breaking heat then followed, drying out much of this vegetation providing ample fuel for large and fast-growing wildfires.

A perfect storm of weather and climate conditions, such as Santa Ana wind gusts up to 100 mph and low humidity, allowed for the rapid spread of the flames.

Author's comment: The conditions described above were exactly what set the stage for the five wildfires now burning in the L.A. area. We have had a reasonable amount of rain in Northern California, but Southern California has been suffering from a short, intense drought for the last six months, when they normally start their rainy season.

[1] ByMatthew Glasser and Julia Jacobo, ABC News, "This is how climate change contributed to the California wildfires," January 8, 2025, https://abcnews.go.com/US/climate-change-contributed-extreme-wildfires-california/story?id=117475669

Then the final act played out. The National Weather Service Map for January 8 is below. Note the multiple high-pressure cells over Northern California and the Pacific Northwest and the low-pressure cells over Southern California and Mexico. In the Northern Hemisphere, wind rotates clockwise around the former and counterclockwise around the latter. In between these two cell clusters, these winds reinforce each other and create the classic Santa Anna Winds blowing offshore.[2] These winds accelerate as they funnel through passes in the coastal mountain range. Thus the “100 mph winds” at the start of these fires last night (as I’m writing this on Jan 9).



It is impossible to fight fires in 100 mph winds. The sparks from blazes spread for miles, starting other fires and making is incredibly dangerous for firefighters and residents, so the former are totally focused on getting the latter out of harms’ way. Also, all air support is grounded. Ditto for 50 mph winds and 40 mph winds. The only good news as winds drop below 40 mph is that some air support can go back up, depending on the specific situation. However, firefighters are still mostly focused on evacuations until the winds drop below 30 mph. The air support is mostly does some suppression, limiting the spread of major fires and attempting to dowse new spot-fires. Meanwhile, whole neighborhoods go up in flames unopposed.

1.1. 2018 & 2019

I wrote a post on a similar set of disasters in the subsection title period. This is summarized and linked below. This was in Northern California. Those named fires are listed in the post, the last one is the infamous Camp Fire.

Wildfire & 2019 Repercussions: *There has been much work to improve the resiliency of areas affected by California wildfires and help some utilities that might have liability. The former includes Public Safety Power Shutoffs, and the latter includes a new fund that might mitigate utilities' wildfire liabilities.*

And if you haven't heard about the PG&E Bankruptcy that primarily resulted from these wildfires, you're probably on the wrong website. This post will update all of the above.

https://www.energycentral.com/c/cp/wildfire-2019-repercussions

[2] See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santa_Ana_winds

In this earlier series of fires, PG&E took most of the heat for starting these via downed infrastructure. As I'm writing this, it remains to be seen what started the Southern California Fires, or even if this can be determined.

2. Political Attitude vs. Climate Change Perception

Republican leaders have staked out different positions on climate and energy issues. Some, including former President Donald Trump, have called climate change a "hoax" and downplayed the link between human activity and a warming planet. Others, including some congressional Republicans, have proposed policies to address climate change, such as supporting more nuclear power and the development of carbon capture technology.[3]

So, what do Americans who identify as Republicans or lean toward the GOP think about climate and energy issues? Here are six facts about their views, drawn from Pew Research Center surveys.

2.1. Few Republicans See Climate Change as Important

Few Republicans see climate change as a top priority for the country. Just 12% of Republicans and Republican-leaners say dealing with climate change should be a top priority for the president and Congress, according to a January 2024 survey. For Republicans, dealing with climate change ranks last among the 20 issues included in the survey.

Author's comment: I double-dare any Southern California or Angelino Republican (and there are many of them) to voice the above opinion in the immediate future.

2.2. Some Republicans Support Some Climate Issues

Despite expressing little concern about the issue generally, Republicans support some proposals to address climate change. As part of efforts to reduce the effects of climate change, majorities of Republicans support requiring oil and gas companies to seal methane gas leaks from oil wells (77%) and favor providing a tax credit to businesses to develop carbon capture technologies (67%), according to a spring 2023 survey.

More broadly, 54% of Republicans say they strongly or somewhat support the U.S. participating in international efforts to help reduce the effects of global climate change…

Republicans tend to emphasize economic factors when considering climate policies. For example, 69% say a very important consideration for them in any climate policy proposal is keeping consumer costs low, and 61% say the same about increasing job and economic growth. A smaller share (48%) says a very important consideration is protecting the environment for future generations; by comparison, this ranks as the top consideration for Democrats.

2.3. Republicans Back Fossil Fuel and Renewables

Burning fossil fuels for energy (including motive-energy for transportation) is the source of most U.S. greenhouse gas emissions. Climate scientists have urged countries to rapidly reduce their reliance on fossil fuel energy while transitioning to renewable sources to help limit the rise in Earth's temperature.

[3] Brian Kennedy and Alec Tyson, Pew Research Center, "How Republicans view climate change and energy issues," March 1, 2024, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/03/01/how-republicans-view-climate-change-and-energy-issues/

Among Republicans, large shares back increasing the production of fossil fuel sources: 73% favor more offshore oil and gas drilling and 68% favor more hydraulic fracturing.

At the same time, comparable shares of Republicans support renewable energy production, including more solar power farms (70%) and more wind power (60%). In addition, two-thirds said they favor building more nuclear power plants, according to a June 2023 survey.

Still, when placed in competition with each other, Republicans prioritize fossil fuels over renewable energy sources. By a 58% to 42% margin, Republicans say expanding production from fossil fuel sources like oil and gas is a greater priority for the country than expanding renewable sources like wind and solar…

2.4. Republicans Don't Support a Move to Renewables

One of the Biden administration's top priorities is to shift the U.S. toward more renewable energy, with a goal of reaching net-zero emissions by 2050. Republicans express broad concern about such a shift: 87% say a transition away from fossil fuels and toward renewable energy sources would be very or somewhat likely to lead to unexpected problems for the country.

Specifically, Republicans worry that a renewable energy transition would increase prices and hurt the reliability of the electrical grid.

Author's comment: The middle ground here would seem to be continued use of natural gas thermal generation with greenhouse gas capture and sequestration, while also expanding renewable and nuclear energy (nuclear energy, in general is not considered renewable, although it does have near-zero carbon life-cycle emissions).

2.5. Age Differences Within GOP Views of Fossil Fuels

Younger Republicans stand out from their older GOP counterparts on some climate and energy issues. For instance, a large majority of Republicans ages 18 to 29 (79%) say human activity, such as the burning of fossil fuels, contributes at least some to climate change – including 35% who think human activity contributes a great deal. A much smaller share of Republicans ages 50 and older (47%) say human activity contributes a great deal or some to climate change.

Younger Republicans are also far less supportive than their older counterparts of using more fossil fuel sources for energy. For example, half of Republicans ages 18 to 29 favor more offshore oil and gas drilling, compared with 87% of Republicans ages 65 and older.

Two-thirds of Republicans ages 18 to 29 also back prioritizing the development of renewable sources like wind and solar over expanding fossil fuels. The oldest Republicans take the opposite view: By a margin of 75% to 24%, Republicans ages 65 and older give priority to expanding the production of oil, coal and natural gas over renewable sources.

2.6. Few Republicans say Climate Change Impacts Their Community

A minority of Republicans (36%) say climate change is affecting their own community a great deal or some, according to a March 2023 survey. By contrast, 85% of Democrats believe it is affecting their local community at least some.

Perceptions of extreme weather differ by party as well. Republicans are less likely than Democrats to report that their local community has experienced at least one of five forms of extreme weather – including droughts, intense storms and wildfires – in the last year (58% vs. 79%). These partisan differences hold even when looking at Republicans and Democrats who live in the same region.

Studies have found that extreme weather events, such as intense storms, are expected to become more frequent and intense with climate change.

3. Final Author's Comments

For the record, I am a moderate, and was a Republican for most of my life. About a decade ago, some unfortunate comments by Republican-leaders caused me to contact the California Secretary of State's Office and re-register as a Democrat. These comments had nothing to do with climate change, wildfires nor energy, but I found them offensive enough for me to terminate my affiliation with this party.

One final comment, my home-state appears to have moved further away from the Republican party in the last decade. The following are the last several governors of California, starting with the incumbent, and the number of terms each served (4-year term). Governors are limited to two successive terms (since 1990).

Gavin Newsom, Dem	Elected for two terms in 2019, final term ends in Jan 2027
Jerry Brown, Dem	Two terms, 2011-2019, Jerry Brown was also elected earlier
Arnold Schwarzenegger, Rep	Two terms, 2003-2011
Gray Davis, Dem	Elected for two terms, 1999-2003, but recalled shortly into last
Pete Wilson, Rep	Two terms, 1991-1999
George Deukmejian, Rep	Two terms, 1983-1991
Jerry Brown, Dem	Two terms, 1975-1983
Ronald Reagan, Rep	Two terms, 1967-1975

I would guess that today, assuming Governor Newsom makes no major bad moves, a Republican candidate has little chance of being elected California governor in 2026.

California has a Democratic trifecta and a Democratic triplex. The Democratic Party controls the offices of governor, secretary of state, attorney general, and both chambers of the state legislature. A state government trifecta is a term to describe when one political party holds majorities in both chambers of the state legislature and the governor's office. A state government triplex is a term to describe when one political party holds the following three positions in a state's government: governor, attorney general, and secretary of state.[4]

[4] https://ballotpedia.org/Party_control_of_California_state_government