

Climate change

Climate Consensus - the 97%

126

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Thursday 28 September 2017 11.00 BST

Climate and energy are becoming focal points in state political races

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/climate-consensus-97-per-cent/2017/sep/28/climate-and-energy-are-becoming-focal-points-in-state-political-races>

The latest example, Minnesota gubernatorial candidate Rebecca Otto has a strong clean energy proposal



Wind turbines and solar panels in field. Photograph: Alamy

As soon as Donald Trump won the presidential election, people in the US and around the world knew it was [terrible news for the environment](#). Not wanting to believe that he would try to follow through on our worst fears, [we held out hope](#).

Those hopes for a sane US federal government were misplaced. But they are replaced by a new hope - an [emerging climate leadership](#) at the state level and a continuation of economic forces that favor clean/renewable energy over dirty fossil fuels. In fact, it appears that some states are relishing the national and international leadership roles that they have undertaken. Support for sensible climate and energy policies is now a topic to run on in elections.

This change has manifested itself in American politics. One such plan stems from my home state, but it exemplifies work in other regions. I live in the state of [Minnesota](#) where we are gearing up for a gubernatorial election, which is where this plan comes from.

My state is well known as somewhat progressive, both socially and economically. The progressive policies resulted in a very strong 2007 [renewable energy standard](#), which helped to reduce carbon pollution and create 15,000 jobs.

As an aside, it is really painful for me to have to describe sane energy policies as “progressive.” The fact that conservatives in the US have largely [attacked](#) clean energy and the science of [climate change](#) is deeply disappointing, but it is a reality nonetheless.

Consequently, it is not surprising that one of the candidates for Governor, [Rebecca Otto](#), has outlined what may become the trend among other states. She is not yet elected, but [her clean energy proposal](#) has many people talking.

The proposal presents a two-part focus on clean energy-based economic development and climate-change mitigation. Basically, in my state (and in many other states), the clean energy economy is a major contributor to the creation of new, high-paying jobs. Here wind and solar power are king. If you drive through the farm fields of southern Minnesota, you will see wind farms that stretch as far as the eye can see. With solar, there are some large-scale solar farms but the real excitement is the small-scale commercial and residential solar generation that is complementing the large-scale wind turbines.

From an energy production standpoint, this makes sense. A diversified renewable energy portfolio is one that includes large wind (which provides intermittent power) along with solar that also is intermittent but often generates power when the wind isn’t blowing (and vice versa). Also, the small-scale nature of solar makes it more reliable, less subject to local weather systems.

So the proposed clean energy plan would leverage the fast-growing and high-wage industries in energy. It also brings to bear perhaps the best financing mechanism to spur clean energy growth (the so-called “fee and dividend”). The way fee and dividend works is a fee is charged to companies that produce greenhouse gas emissions. No longer would society be [subsidizing the costs from carbon pollution](#).

The revenue from the fees would be returned to citizens so that it becomes a revenue-neutral tool. There is no net increase in cost or increase in income. What the fee and dividend method does, however, is reward people and companies for good choices. If you make choices that reduce your greenhouse gas contributions, you end up with extra money at the end of the year. On the other hand, if you make poor choices, you end up with less money. I think of this as a tax that advantages the smart over the, well, less smart.

What is also exciting about the plan is that a portion of the fees would go to fund clean-energy technology and tax credits. For instance, residents would get funds to offset the costs of energy purchases. So when residents insulate their house, buy solar panels, or install high-efficiency heat pumps, part of that cost is covered.

It will be interesting to see if similar plans emerge nationally. Most importantly, it will be interesting to see whether the climate change and energy topic becomes something that political candidates actively run on. In the past, this issue has been low on voter priorities lists. But, if proposing bold new plans can get votes, that may change - and quickly.

I will also be watching how people on the right side of the political aisle view these plans. In truth, this plan has a lot that so-called libertarians or even fiscal conservatives would like. It creates a reward system that is revenue neutral. It penalizes bad choices and rewards good choices. It also reflects the fact that not charging the polluters means that the rest of us pay for the costs.

Whether it is more severe hurricanes, crop-killing droughts, intense storms and flooding, or sea-level rise, these impacts cost us. And it just isn’t right that the industries that have created the problem (and fought to have us neglect the problem) should be getting a free ride. I don’t know any conservatives who think that. I also don’t know any conservatives who want a dirty planet to hand our children. While conservatives often dislike solutions for handling climate change, “fee and dividend” is a concept that many support.

In full disclosure, I have endorsed Rebecca Otto in her election contest, because of her nation-leading climate and energy plan. This article is not intended to be a further endorsement, but rather a reflection on how exciting new proposals to truly handle the climate/energy problem are being developed and used by candidates for office.

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While conservatives should (in theory) be onboard with carbon pricing, the part of this plan where 25% of the dividend must be used to pay for clean energy improvement is probably not going to be popular. Conservatives tend not to like the government telling them how to spend their money.

Also, looking at the things that 25% can be spent on, it doesn't seem that wise. Can't argue with efficiency measures, but it looks like the only means of generation is rooftop solar. The roof of a house is generally a pretty bad place for a solar panel, and boosting solar and nothing else seems a bad idea if you're trying to decarbonise. Allowing investment in community generation projects seems like it would be a good addition.

It also seems like this would penalise people who have already made these kind of improvements - they would have nothing to spend this money on.

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