

# The Decline of Public Support for State Climate Change Policies: 2008-2013

a report from the National Surveys on Energy and Environment

#### Introduction

The first decade of the 2000s was a period of active and largely unanticipated state engagement in the development of policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This triggered substantial social science literature that explored the drivers behind climate policy adoption. These included state reactions to more localized early effects of a changing climate, anticipated co-benefits from either improving energy efficiency or developing locally-generated renewable sources, and positioning themselves for favored status in any subsequent federal policy regime. But this pattern of policy adoption and diffusion has slowed and, in some respects, reversed in recent years. Despite the absence of far-reaching federal legislation, a number of federal initiatives to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in recent years have tended to marginalize state policy initiative and expansion.

This report tracks the evolution of public opinion on the question of state government involvement in climate change over a five-year period, from Fall 2008 to Fall 2013. It concludes that there has been some significant decline in public support for at least some of the policies that have been asked about by National Surveys on Energy and Environment (NSEE) during this period. The drop-off has been most noticeable since the Fall 2008 survey, which has also surfaced as a high-water mark for public concern about climate change. Our findings note a significant drop in public concern right after that period, at least in cases where we asked the identical question in subsequent surveys, including a further trend downward in surveys conducted during the spring and fall of 2013. Declining public concern may be a contributing factor to the stalled pace of policy development at the state level, though it also indicates variation depending upon question wording and the policy instrument under consideration. Subsequent reports will examine these issues in greater detail and will also provide insight into whether geographic regions differ from one another, or whether citizens differ on the basis of whether they live in states that have (or have not) adopted particular policies.

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## **Key Findings**

- 1. Americans have generally become more divided in their views on the proper role of state governments in addressing global warming during the past five years.
- 2. One-half (50%) of Americans now believe that it is their state's job to address global warming if the federal government fails to do so, down from 70% maintaining this view in 2008. Strong agreement with this proposition declined to 19% in Fall 2013 from 41% in Fall 2008.
- 3. Opinion has moderated on whether Americans believe that their respective states should not adopt climate mitigation policies unless neighboring states adopt similar policies. Strong expressions of agreement and disagreement have both declined significantly since Fall 2008, alongside growth in more moderate positions.
- 4. Opposition to states increasing fossil fuel taxes as a means of reducing greenhouse gas emissions increased by 14 percentage points between Fall 2008 and Fall 2013. Seventy-one percent of Americans oppose this option overall in Fall 2013, with 55% of these respondents strongly opposing it, and only 5% of overall respondents strongly supporting it.
- 5. Overall support for states increasing gasoline taxes as a means of reducing greenhouse gas emissions has dropped from an already low level of 23% in 2008 to 17% in 2013, with only 6% expressing strong support for this approach in Fall 2013.
- 6. Only one-third (32%) of Americans support state development of a cap-and-trade system to reduce greenhouse gases in Fall 2013, down from 55% five years earlier. This approach is now opposed at the state level by a 45-to-32% margin.
- 7. A large majority of Americans continue to support requirements for a portion of electricity in a state to be produced by renewable energy sources, with 79% overall in favor of this option in Fall 2013. However, there has been some decline in the strength of this support from Fall 2008, when 59% of respondents expressed strong support, compared to 46% in Fall 2013.

#### **The States Pull Back**

The decline of public support for state intervention on climate change coincides with a general deceleration of state climate policy development. In some cases, policies that had been enacted by 2008 are essentially still in place. For example, the renewable electricity mandates noted above had been enacted in 29 states by Fall 2008. While no state has since repealed this relatively popular policy, no other states have since adopted the policy and some states have considered ways to slow implementation. In other cases, states have literally withdrawn earlier policy commitments. For instance, twenty-three states had made some level of commitment to one of three regional cap-and-trade programs for carbon emissions by fall 2008, but this number has now declined to 10 states, namely California and nine northeastern states that comprise the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI). In turn, states have generally proven extremely reluctant to either establish new energy taxes or increase fossil fuel taxes, although there has been some movement on the latter front during the last year with the driving factor being funding for transportation infrastructure rather than climate change. Some states have also proven willing to expand their so-called severance taxes on the extraction of oil and natural gas, especially as hydraulic fracturing has increased yields, but these taxes may be popular due to their tendency to export costs to consumers outside the energy-generating state.

Collectively, states remain involved in many dimensions related to greenhouse gas emission reduction, including policies not included in this survey. But leadership on this front has shifted somewhat to the federal level. Despite the absence of far-reaching federal legislation, there have been new federal initiatives to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from vehicles and the electricity sector. In the latter case, the strategy of using the Clean Air Act to reduce power-sector emissions could be creating incentives for states to engage more actively and seek federal credits for early emissions reductions. This will be examined in a future NSEE. But, at this point, it is safe to note that the diffusion and proliferation of state climate policies began to stall out at about the time public opinion began to shift fairly significantly away from support for such state action. This perhaps reflects declining issue saliency, as has been reflected in other NSEE publications, and with it, incentives to support unilateral policy action at the statehouse level.



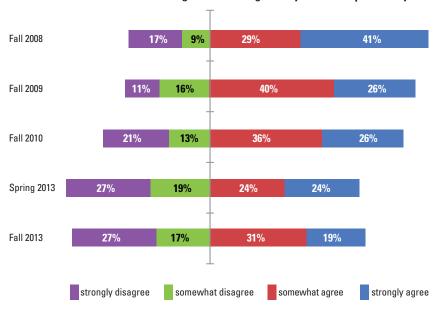
## The Public's Perception of the States' Roles

NSEE surveys dating back to Fall 2008 have asked Americans if they think it is their state's responsibility to address global warming if the federal government fails to do so. This question seemed especially relevant at the point of the Fall 2008 survey, when state policy engagement had reached what we now consider a peak and the lack of federal policy on the subject was a major issue of the 2008 presidential campaign. Since that time, there has been a significant decline in the number of Americans who believe their states have a responsibility to act on global warming if the federal government does not. In Fall 2008, seventy percent of survey respondents either strongly or somewhat agreed that their states were responsible to address global warming in the absence of federal action, and 41% strongly agreed with that statement. By the Spring 2013 survey, overall support had fallen to only 48%, with an equal divide between those who strongly and somewhat agreed with this statement. In Fall 2013, overall support nudged back up to 50%, though with only 19% in strong agreement. Indeed, strong agreement with the idea of state action in the absence of federal engagement fell by more than half from Fall 2008 to Fall 2013 (see *Figure 1*).

However, it is important to note that, even with the declines in support, more Americans support the proposition for unilateral state action in the absence of federal government engagement than are opposed. Even in Fall 2013, fifty percent of Americans are in favor of state action, whereas 44% are opposed, suggesting a more even distribution of opinion than the more lopsided support evident in the Fall 2008, 2009, and 2010 survey iterations.

Figure 1
Perspectives on the Relationship Between the State and Federal Roles in Addressing Global Warming, 2008-2013





Note: "Don't know" responses not shown

As Americans have become less supportive of their states filling the void in climate change policy left by federal inactivity, they have actually moderated their views somewhat on whether their state should act to address global warming without other states also taking action. In this case, though, there has not been such a dramatic shift as in the case of potential federal government action. In Fall 2008, sixty-two percent of Americans overall disagreed with the idea that their state's efforts to fight global warming should depend on similar efforts by neighboring states, and this declined only to 56% in Fall 2013. The more notable shift is on the extreme ends of the ledger, with significant movement away from those who strongly agree or disagree to those who somewhat agree or disagree. Consequently, one can note that strong agreement that a state's action should depend on its neighbor's actions has declined from 19%

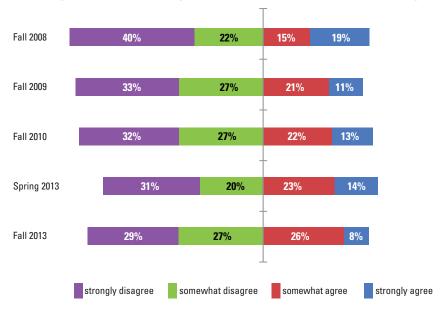


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in Fall 2008 to a low of 8% in Fall 2013. But the percentage of Americans who now somewhat agree with this position has increased by the same level as those who strongly agree has fallen, 11%, from Fall 2008 to Fall 2013 (see *Figure 2*). This shift, along with a more than doubling in the percentage of Americans who say that they are "not sure" about this issue (from 5% in Fall 2008 to 11% in Fall 2013), suggests that there may be greater uncertainty or less strongly-held positions as opposed to an outright shift against state action.

Figure 2
Perspectives on the States' Roles in Addressing Global Warming, 2008-2013





Note: "Don't know" responses not shown

In all, there remains considerable support for state action to address climate change with or without similar actions on the part of the federal government or other states. However, during the past five years, there has been a moderate erosion of public support for individual states to play the leading role on the anti-global warming front; this coincides with a stalling or reversal of state policy development after a frenetic first decade of the twenty-first century. In the next section we will examine changing public support for many of the most prominent policies that states can employ in efforts to confront climate change.

## **Declining Support for Key Policy Tools**

As the public has lost some of its overall support for state action on climate change over the past five years, there has also been diminished support for many of the most prominent policy tools which can be used to reduce carbon emissions. Economists have overwhelmingly endorsed carbon taxes as the most efficient way to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases. However, the American public has been largely and consistently opposed to any mechanism that places direct costs on its use of fossil fuels, by any level of government.

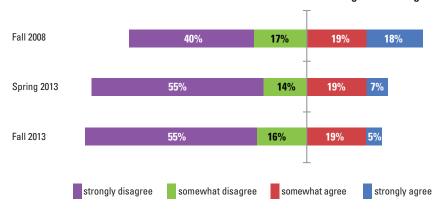
The NSEE has periodically asked Americans if they would support their state's increasing taxes on all fossil fuels as a means of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The survey results indicate that support for this policy has declined significantly from already-low levels that were measured in Fall 2008. In particular, 37% of Americans in Fall 2008 said they either somewhat or strongly supported their state's increasing fossil fuels taxes to reduce carbon emissions, compared to only 26% maintaining this position in Spring 2013 and 24% in Fall 2013. Indeed, while 18% of Americans strongly supported this option in Fall 2008, only 5% of Americans indicate the same in Fall 2013. Over this period, overall opposition increased 14 percentage points, while the intensity of opposition to state-level



carbon taxes also rose, with 55% of NSEE respondents indicating they "strongly oppose" this option in both Spring and Fall 2013, compared with only 40% of respondents in the Fall 2008 survey (see *Figure 3*). This may explain why no American state has taken this approach, leaving the Canadian province of British Columbia as the only North American jurisdiction with a carbon tax (of \$30 per ton) that cuts across fossil-fuel sources.

Figure 3
Public Support for Increasing State Fossil Fuel Taxes to Reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions, 2008-2013

"State governments should increase taxes on all fossil fuels in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions."

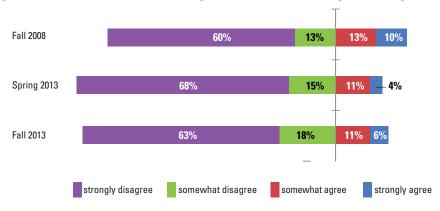


Note: "Don't know" responses not shown

While broad state taxes on fossil fuels have become increasingly unpopular as a means of reducing carbon emissions, raising state taxes on just gasoline to fight global warming has also become less popular with the American public. In Fall 2008, 73% of Americans either somewhat or strongly opposed their state's raising gas taxes to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, with 60% of respondents strongly opposed to this policy. By Spring 2013 the overall opposition to this alternative had risen to 83%, with 68% of Americans strongly opposed to their state's increasing the gas tax. However, this rebounded slightly in Fall 2013, with a 5 percentage point drop in strong opposition, and a slight increase in strong support to 6% (see *Figure 4*). This may reflect increasing discussion of state gasoline tax increases in a number of states linked largely to infrastructure funding, though opposition continues to remain overwhelming. It should be noted that prior NSEE surveys have found some shift in support for fossil fuel and gasoline taxes depending upon proposed uses of the revenue generated from such taxes.<sup>2</sup>

Figure 4
Public Support for Increasing State Gas Taxes to Reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions, 2008-2013

"State governments should increase taxes on gasoline in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions."



Note: "Don't know" responses not shown

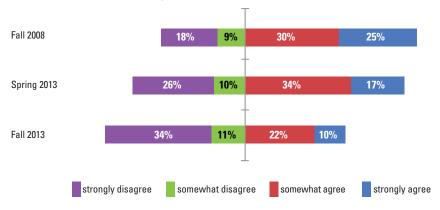


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Another market-oriented approach to reducing greenhouse gas emissions is a cap-and-trade system. Under such a system businesses can sell and trade emission permits as a means of trying to reduce the overall amount of carbon emissions released by the participants in the market. Such systems, which also receive general support from economists, have been established among northeastern states and California over the last decade. Results from the NSEE indicate significantly more public support for cap-and-trade systems compared to taxes on fossil fuels or gasoline. Nonetheless, as with energy taxes, there has been a notable decrease in public support for the cap-and-trade approach to reducing carbon emissions between 2008 and 2013. Over this five-year period, strong support for state-level cap-and-trade efforts decreased from 25% in Fall 2008 to 17% in Spring 2013, with further decline to 10% in Fall 2013. In turn, strong opposition to cap-and-trade has grown steadily over this same period, from 18% in Fall 2008 to 26% in Spring 2013 and 34% in Fall 2013. Whereas more respondents overall supported than opposed state cap-and-trade in Fall 2008 and even in Spring 2013, opposition outweighed support 45% to 32% in Fall 2013 (see *Figure 5*). This overall shift occurred as 13 states withdrew from existing cap-and-trade commitments after 2008, leaving only 10 states still active in this area and with no newcomers having committed. However, this trend might reverse, as a few states have begun to more actively consider a return to cap-and-trade and emerging federal policy in regulating electricity sector emissions may provide incentives for adopting such policies.

Figure 5
Public Support for State Cap-and-Trade Systems, 2008-2013

"State governments should allow businesses to buy and sell permits to release greenhouse gases if it results in an overall decrease in emissions."

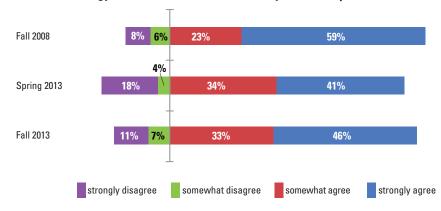


Note: "Don't know" responses not shown

One state-level policy tool for reducing carbon emissions that has historically received very strong public support is the Renewable Portfolio Standard (RPS). Under an RPS, state governments require a set portion of all electricity used in that state to come from renewable energy sources such as wind, solar or hydroelectric power. Such requirements have been widely established over the past decade with 29 states currently maintaining such requirements, although no additional states have adopted this policy in more recent years. Even though RPS policies have traditionally been well-received by the public, the NSEE has found that even these policy tools have suffered a decline in support over the past five years. In particular, strong support for RPS policies has fallen from 59% in Fall 2008 to 41% in Spring 2013, with strong opposition more than doubling (8% to 18%) during that time frame. However, RPS support rebounded a bit in Fall 2013, returning to a level of 46% strong support. Overall support for the policy at the state level continues to overwhelm opposition, unique among the policy tools included in this survey. In Fall 2013, for example, overall support was 79% while opposition was only 18% (see *Figure 6*).



Figure 6
Public Support for State Renewable Energy Requirements, 2008-2013
"State governments should require a set portion of all electricity to come from renewable energy sources such as wind, solar or hydroelectric power."



Note: "Don't know" responses not shown

#### **Conclusions**

Since the turn of the 21st century it has been the states, and not the federal government, that have been the leaders in efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. But just as the federal government under the Obama Administration has emerged as a more aggressive player in climate change policy, the states have entered into a period of more limited effort and even modest decline in terms of policies targeting global warming. This less engaged era of state activity has come as American public support for state-level actions regarding global warming has declined from where it was five years ago. To be clear, most Americans still prefer an active role for states in pursuit of greenhouse gas reductions and they support some policy tools such as renewable portfolio standards. Yet the high levels of public support for state action on global warming that once aligned with strong policy efforts has waned, and the states now appear to be in a holding pattern as activity in Washington edges forward. A subsequent NSEE report will explore this phenomenon in greater depth, with particular attention to whether public opinion on state policy engagement differs markedly by geographic region or whether the respondent lives in a state that has adopted the type of policy being explored in the survey question.



#### **Notes**

- 1. Question wording regarding taxes on fossil fuels and gasoline has changed slightly over time. Contact the authors for more information.
- 2. Rabe, B. G., & Borick, C. (2012, November). *Public opinion on climate policy options*. National Surveys on Energy and Environment. Ann Arbor: Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy of the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan. Retrieved from http://issuu.com/closup/docs/nsee-climate-policy-options-fall-2012/1?e=1661894/3907098

## **Methodology for the National Surveys on Energy and Environment (NSEE)**

The National Surveys on Energy and Environment (NSEE) are designed, conducted and financed by the University of Michigan and Muhlenberg College. This research initiative began in the fall of 2008 and was formerly known as the National Survey of American Public Opinion on Climate Change (NSAPOCC). This key findings report summarizes data collected in telephone surveys of residents of the United States conducted during Fall 2013. The survey included interviews with 948 adult residents of the United States between October 3 and 14, 2013. There were 627 interviews conducted by land line and 321 by cell phone. The survey had a margin of error of +/- 3.5% at a 95% level of confidence and an AAPOR RR3 response rate of 12%. Percentages throughout the survey have been rounded upward at the .5 mark; thus, many totals in the results will not equal 100%. Interviews are conducted by personnel under the supervision of the Muhlenberg College Institute of Public Opinion in Allentown, Pennsylvania. The data has been weighted by the following categories: age, gender, educational attainment and race. The instrument was designed by Christopher Borick of Muhlenberg College and Barry Rabe of the University of Michigan.

Survey Iteration	Fielding Dates	Sample Size	Margin of Error
Fall 2008	September 8 - 24, 2008	603	+/-4%
Fall 2009	September 21 - October 20, 2009	988	+/-3%
Spring 2010	March 22 - April 9, 2010	726	+/-4%
Fall 2010	November 15 - December 9, 2010	916	+/-3.5%
Spring 2011	March 18 - April 5, 2011	712	+/-4%
Fall 2011	December 4 - 21, 2011	887	+/-3.5%
Spring 2012	March 27 - April 14, 2012	729	+/- 4%
Fall 2012 (Early)	September 26 - October 11, 2012	917	+/-3.5%
Fall 2012 (Late)	November 26 - December 5, 2012	996	+/-3.5%
Spring 2013	April 1 - April 14, 2013	853	+/-3.5%
Fall 2013	October 3 - 14 , 2013	948	+/-3.5%

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