

Paths to Carbon Neutrality: Lessons from California

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Political success in environmental policy depends on crafting strong, stable coalitions around well-designed programs intended to evolve in light of new scientific information, the availability of cleaner, more efficient technologies, and variation in social consciousness. California's commitment to curbing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and adapting to a changing climate over the past decade has been remarkably successful in this respect. Its role as the nation's leading state in many economic sectors, and the world's eighth largest economy positions California well to influence domestic and international climate policy that can reduce GHG emissions and sustain economic growth.

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We provide an interdisciplinary reading of California's air quality and climate change policies with a view toward distilling lessons for rapid and effective reductions in GHG emissions well beyond the state's geographical borders. Increasing reliance on market-based incentive programs has been critical to the expansion of California's air quality and energy regulatory regimes to encompass the major sources of GHG emissions—transportation and the built environment—and key clean technologies required to cut them.

Climate policy in California also notably emphasizes regional policy-making and the centrality of cities to shaping the behavioral changes around mobility and consumption required to reduce GHG emissions. California's regions—from "mega regions" such as the Los Angeles metropolitan area to smaller regions such as the Central Coast—are often the locus of environmental issues that exceed the problem-solving capacity of traditional governing institutions at the state and local levels. Growth-induced urbanization has notably intensified conflicts between regional transportation policies and local government land use practices. Additionally, numerous federal, state, and sub-state agencies are responsible for providing air and water quality, and evaluating environmental impacts from any proposed projects. California is distinguished from other states by the popularity of climate policy at the local level, which includes emissions inventories and general planning as well as energy efficiency, green building, transit, land-use, and water-use efficiency. It is worth noting that many cities have been transitioning to more ecologically conscious programming, as much for efficiency as for the sake of social consciousness, prior to the advent of the climate crisis in the public mind.



Policy Recommendations

Our discussion suggests the following strategies for effective regulatory policy-making to reduce GHG emissions:

- ◆ Focus policies at high-profile sectors, such as utilities, to yield early and impactful successes.
- ◆ Adopt specific programs, such as rebates, subsidies, and standards, targeted narrowly at firms and households.
- ◆ Design policy to provide for its own evolution and even replacement by rewarding improvements and encouraging new approaches.
- ◆ Mainstream climate mitigation at all levels of policy making.
- ◆ Seek to improve environmental justice so that all Californians experience equitable consideration in the development, implementation, and enforcement of climate policies.