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CLIMATE & ENVIRONMENT

Boiling Point: Western voters weighed in on climate change, up and down the ballot



A pumpjack operates at the Inglewood Oil Field in Los Angeles. (Patrick Fallon / Bloomberg)



We've known for five days that Joe Biden will be the next president, and there's already a cottage industry of experts trying to predict what steps the Biden administration might take on climate change over the next four years.



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There will be plenty of time to see how that plays out. At the moment, I'm more interested in the down-ballot races that are getting relatively less attention but could have significant climate and environmental impacts at the local level.

This will not be a comprehensive accounting. But here are some results from across the West that caught my attention:

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California

The Golden State’s second- and third-largest oil-producing counties elected supervisors who have favored strong action to rein in the oil industry. In Los Angeles County, Holly Mitchell — who [swore off](#) fossil fuel campaign contributions and supports [drilling setbacks](#) — won a [landslide victory](#). In Ventura County, Carmen Ramirez overcame [heavy spending](#) by an oil industry trade group, and by the state’s [largest oil and gas producer](#) — a company she called “absolutely shameless and not accountable.”

San Diego’s newly elected mayor says reducing dependence on cars is a top priority. Todd Gloria [helped write the city’s climate action plan](#), which includes a legally binding target to cut climate pollution in half by 2035. It also looks like Democrats will have a majority on the San Diego County Board of Supervisors [for the first time in more than 30 years](#), which could mean more aggressive climate action.

The Imperial Irrigation District, which controls the largest share of Colorado River water in the West, saw two-fifths of its board turn over. Voters [overwhelmingly elected](#) J.B. Hamby, who has made aggressive calls to protect the Imperial Valley’s water supplies from outsiders, to an open seat; I wrote about the race’s [significance to the wider West](#) earlier this year. Voters also replaced incumbent Erik Ortega with Javier Gonzalez, who like Hamby [received support](#) from a prominent rooftop solar company.

A company trying to build a seawater desalination plant in Orange County spent more than \$400,000 to support water board candidates favorable to its project. Two of the candidates [won their races, and three did not](#).

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Several cities approved or rejected tax increases to fund climate programs:

- In Berkeley, voters [narrowly rejected](#) a utility tax increase that would have supported a climate action equity fund.
- In Albany, Berkeley's neighbor to the north, voters approved a [similarly climate-focused](#) utility tax increase.
- In Long Beach, voters [increased](#) the city's oil production tax, which [could raise money](#) to support sea-level rise adaptation.

And finally, a few city council races:

- In San Luis Obispo, voters [reelected](#) Mayor Heidi Harmon and City Council member Andy Pease, both of whom supported a proposal to limit gas hookups in new buildings. (I wrote about the [intense pushback they faced](#) from gas industry workers.)
- In Los Angeles, Nithya Raman [unseated](#) City Council member David Ryu. Both candidates were Democrats, but Raman supports the Green New Deal and was backed by the Sunrise Movement and Sen. Bernie Sanders.
- In Richmond, voters returned longtime Chevron critic Gayle McLaughlin to the City Council. The former Green Party politician ultimately wants to see the oil giant [decommission its massive refinery](#) on the city's waterfront.
- In Benicia, where Valero Energy runs a refinery on the waterfront, voters rejected a mayoral candidate backed by [a quarter-million dollars](#) in Valero funding. Instead they [elected](#) Steve Young, who has pushed for more regulation of the refinery.

People watch smoke rise from the Chevron refinery in Richmond, Calif., from a vantage point in the hills of nearby El Cerrito. (Brad Zweerink / Associated Press)

Alaska

There are still lots of votes to count in the Last Frontier, but a proposal to increase oil production taxes on the state's North Slope is losing badly. Proponents said increased tax revenue would be good for Alaskans, protecting the dividends they receive from the

state, while opponents said the higher taxes would drive oil companies away from the North Slope.

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Arizona

I mentioned last week that Arizona regulators had tentatively approved a 100% clean energy requirement. But that might change. While the Grand Canyon State appears to have narrowly voted for Joe Biden over Donald Trump, voters also elected two Republicans and one Democrat to the Arizona Corporation Commission. The newly reconstituted board [might have the votes to overturn the 100% clean energy requirement](#), as Ryan Randazzo reports for the Arizona Republic.

Arizonans also elected Mark Kelly to the U.S. Senate, a rare bright spot for activists hoping for more support for climate action in Congress. Kelly is an astronaut who has [talked about his experience seeing Earth from space](#) when discussing the need to tackle the climate crisis. His opponent, Martha McSally, described Obama-era climate programs as federal overreach.

In Phoenix, 28-year-old climate activist Yassamin Ansari is [headed for a runoff in the race for an open City Council seat](#). She [previously worked on](#) the Global Climate Action Summit, and in the United Nations secretary-general's office.

Colorado

Coloradans elected John Hickenlooper to the Senate, giving Democrats their only pickup outside Arizona. Progressives weren't exactly thrilled; Hickenlooper is a former petroleum geologist [whom climate activists called "Frackenlooper"](#) during his tenure as governor of the Centennial State, due to his support for fracking. His opponent, Cory Gardner, [sponsored the Great American Outdoors Act](#) but also advocated for more drilling and opposed the Obama administration's Clean Power Plan.

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Coloradans also narrowly voted to [reintroduce wolves](#) on the state's Western Slope.

The controversial ballot measure was opposed by farmers and ranchers who worry that wolves will kill their livestock, and supported by conservationists who see wolf reintroduction as necessary after the animals were nearly driven to extinction by hunters.

In Denver, voters approved a 0.25 percentage point tax increase to support climate action. The tax is [expected to raise \\$40 million annually](#) for clean energy and sustainable transportation. Meanwhile, in Boulder, residents voted to approve a 20-year franchise agreement with Xcel Energy and pause efforts to form their own city-run electric utility. Xcel Energy is [targeting dramatic emission reductions](#), but it's not enough to satisfy some activists.

Montana

The Treasure State's newly elected governor is Greg Gianforte, who [campaigns on a promise](#) to increase logging, coal mining and oil and gas production.

Conservationists are worried Gianforte's policies will diminish the world-class trout streams and other natural wonders that give the state its nickname.

Montanans also reelected Steve Daines to the U.S. Senate, choosing the Republican incumbent over Democratic challenger Steve Bullock in a closely watched race.

Daines, like Cory Gardner in Colorado, helped shepherd the Great American Outdoors Act through Congress, although he [opposed U.S. participation in the Paris climate agreement](#).

Bullock's support for renewable energy and climate action as Montana's governor was a pretty big deal in a conservative state with a powerful fossil fuel industry.

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Nevada

Voters added a 50% renewable energy mandate to the Silver State's constitution.

This is the second time voters [approved the measure](#); in Nevada, the electorate must approve constitutional amendments twice before they take effect. Even with the clean energy requirement, though, environmental groups say Nevada [isn't on track to meet its long-term climate change goals](#).

New Mexico

Democrats maintained their majorities in both houses of the state Legislature. The Land of Enchantment is a major oil and gas producer, and the industry is worried it will [continue to face stricter regulation](#) under Gov. Michelle Lujan-Grisham. Joining the state Senate will be Carrie Hamblen, who leads the Las Cruces Green Chamber of Commerce and [supports a fracking moratorium](#).

New Mexico voters also approved fundamental changes to the state's Public Regulation Commission, which oversees the utility industry. Rather than a five-member elected board, the agency will now be led by three political appointees. The restructuring was supported by Lujan-Grisham and environmental groups including the Natural Resources Defense Council, which [said the agency](#) “should be led by experts, not politicians” and would now be better positioned to promote clean energy.

Utah

Beehive State voters overwhelmingly approved a constitutional amendment guaranteeing the right to hunt and fish. No one is trying to ban hunting and fishing at this time, but supporters said the measure would [help ward off potential future efforts](#) to outlaw those activities. Critics said the constitutional amendment could interfere with science-based wildlife management.

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And now, here's what else is happening around the West:

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