

It's natural, in reflecting on the recent election, to ask whether and to what extent the results reflect public values about protection of the environment. (Well, at least for me, since I spend my time thinking about these things.) My answer: not much. But the election's impacts on environmental issues will still be significant.

While some commenters (such as [Joseph Romm, here branding the California election a "climate trifecta"](#)) view the defeat of [Proposition 23](#), the election of Jerry Brown, and the reelection of Barbara Boxer as signs that Californians are embracing efforts to be proactive in combating climate change, I have a somewhat different view.

The No on 23 campaign studiously avoided framing AB 32, the landmark climate-change law that Proposition 23 would have suspended, as a greenhouse gas regulation law. Instead, the election was framed as "green jobs vs. out-of-state oil interests." While this framing wasn't inaccurate, and was certainly a winning strategy, it doesn't leave me convinced that our voters truly understand, or care about, our state's efforts to deal with climate change. Nor do I believe the other statewide races were really about the environment; Brown and Boxer, in the end, were just better candidates, with experience in government and ideas closer in general to those of the electoral majority, than their Republican challengers, who lacked both experience and concrete ideas. In the end, Brown's election will, at least, guarantee that we will retain strong environmental leadership; his efforts on energy and climate in particular, both as [Attorney General](#) and in his first stint as governor three decades ago, bode well for his commitment to those issues now. (And the [race to replace him as AG](#) is still too close to call!)

And what about [Proposition 26](#)? My guess is that its victory didn't reflect a negative feeling toward environmental regulation. The "no" campaign framed the issue as closing a "loophole" that, they claimed, used to allow legislators to enact "stealth taxes" with only a simple majority vote, by disguising the "taxes" as fees. As a result, it's hard for me to see the initiative's victory as reflecting any particular view of environmental protection. But it surely will have negative impacts on future state environmental initiatives for years to come, as [our report](#) explains, though the precise contours of the law's impact are as yet unclear.

Finally, on the national scene, the midterm Congressional election results, restoring a Republican majority in the House of Representatives, may have destroyed any last hope of serious greenhouse gas reduction regulation on the federal level. While I don't believe the election was in any way a referendum on environmental protection or on climate legislation, the election's impact on these issues will be serious.

Obama is [retreating from cap-and-trade as a mode of regulation](#):

“Cap-and-trade was just one way of skinning the cat,” Obama said at a White House news conference yesterday, referring to a system in which companies buy and sell a declining number of pollution allowances. “It was a means, not an end,” he said. “I’m going to be looking for other means to address this problem.”

This backing away from cap-and-trade is ironic because the early support for cap-and-trade stemmed from the belief that it would be politically palatable, or even advantageous, to large and powerful segments of American industry. At the same time, Obama continues to indicate, even as the EPA gears up for the gradual implementation of its PSD permitting program to regulate greenhouse gases from large emitters, that legislation would be preferable to EPA authority. And it’s clear that EPA’s efforts on the issue will be under [intense negative pressure from Congress](#). So what would legislation palatable to both houses of Congress be able to accomplish? Not a lot, I’d guess. I’m not holding my breath for any federal leadership at all on this issue.

On the other hand, it’s [not like we had serious, successful leadership on climate change](#) in the first two years of Obama’s presidency, with a friendlier Congress, either.