Gallup has studied environmental attitudes in America for several decades. Their historical compilation is very revealing about our present political situation. It sheds light on why it's been so hard to develop momentum for real change at the national level, and also about why there's so much more of a push for change within the Democratic Party and in Blue States.

One key indicator is a question that asks people how they would choose between environmental protection and the economic growth. The number of people who say that favor the environment was higher before the turn of the century. Since that drop, most of the fluctuations closely track change in the unemployment rate. There's no evident long-term trend since 2000. What this means is that there's no groundswell for prioritizing the environment. Consequently, environmental measures do best when they can be sold as economically beneficial or at least neutral.

There's a similar lack of a long-term groundswell in terms of attitudes on climate change. Concern about climate action has gone up and down over the past two decades. As in 2008, about 20% of the population in 2019 were skeptics, while the remainder were either concerned or had mixed views. The number of skeptics bumped up for several years before returning to its previous values. The biggest change has been a shift from people in the middle, who had mixed views, to the more concerned group. In other words, people who were at least somewhat aware of climate change before have now strengthened their commitments.

Gallup now puts about 80% of Democrats in the "concerned believer" group, whereas the middle group is the largest among Republicans. Independents are in the middle. Not surprisingly, the Democratic party has become a lot more vocal about climate change.

Hopefully, as the reality of climate change and the need to act grows, public opinion will shift more decisively. As I've written before, we shouldn't rule out the possibility of a rapid shift in public opinion on climate change, of the kind we saw for same-sex marriage. One way that this could happen is suggested by a research paper that came out a day or two after this post originally appeared. The paper shows that Americans greatly underestimate the extent to which others support climate action. When they are informed about how many other Americans are committed to climate action, their own attitudes can shift markedly. Thus, we might get a kind of bandwagon effect that could sharply change public opinion.

In the longer run, generational turnover seems likely to move opinion toward climate action. Young Americans (Millennials and younger) are the most concerned about climate changer and committed to climate action. In contrast, older Americans (mostly Boomers) are the most prone to skepticism or tepid support for climate action.

In thinking about the situation today, we can see that there is a broad base of support for environmental measures and climate action. However, this support doesn't necessarily translate to prioritizing environmental issues, including climate change. Among Democrats, however, support for climate action is more vigorous.

Given this picture, it's understandable that the Democrats are having trouble mustering a congressional majority for large-scale climate action. We shouldn't expect the Green New Deal in a country where only 51% are strongly committed to climate action. Public opinion does favor taking additional climate action, but it's hard to see support for a radical leap forward. Given the heft of the federal government, however, we shouldn't underestimate the impacts of even relatively moderate policies.

Two other political consequences are also clear: First, advocacy for climate action will do better when it can be tied to jobs, or when specific policies have particular public appeal, such as renewables. Second, given the much firmer support for climate action among Democrats, climate policy in Blue states will remain more advanced than national policy for the foreseeable future. We have to hope that the combination of moderate federal progress, aggressive state programs, and corporate initiatives can get us where we need to be.