Last week, Nebraska became the first state under complete Republican control to adopt a 2050 goal of net-zero emissions from the grid. No Democratic presidential candidate has carried the state in almost fifty years (and the last previous time was before World War II). Republicans have controlled the state legislature and governor's mansion since this century began. You really can't get more Republican than that. But Nebraska has a unique approach to supplying electricity that provided a different pathway to climate action.

Unlike any other state, Nebraska decided not to have private electric utilities. Instead, all of the state's power comes from publicly owned utilities. This is a holdover from the 1930s, when Nebraska was a highly progressive state. The elected board members who run these utilities did little or nothing about renewables until the past decade. That has changed quite quickly.

During the 2010s, wind power went from 1% of generation to 20%. In more recent years, there has been a quiet but concerted grassroots campaign led by Nebraska Conservation Voters to elect more climate-friendly board members. That campaign has borne dramatic results. By last Spring, more than half of Nebraskans were served by utilities that had pledged net-zero emissions by 2040 or 2050. Last week, the board of the state's largest utility, which serves rural areas, also adopted a net-zero goal for 2050.

Utah provides an interesting comparison. Utah is as solidly Republican a state as you can find. Nonetheless, it has begun to move in the direction of climate action. In 2018, as I described in a previous post, Utah funded a University of Utah project to devise a climate plan for the state. In 2019, the Utah State Legislature passed the Community Renewable Energy Act (HB 411). This bill allows Utah municipalities that are serviced by Rocky Mountain Power to achieve a net-100% renewable energy portfolio by 2030. By 2020, over 24 communities had signed onto the Community Renewable Energy Act plan, including Ogden, Orem, and Salt Lake City. Implementation of the plan is now underway. Rocky Mountain, which owns the biggest coal fleet in the West, expects to build 3.5 gigawatts of wind and 3 gigawatts of solar by 2024. What is striking is that these steps are taking place in a state where better than three-quarters of legislators are Republicans.

These state experiences may or may not be replicable elsewhere. But there are signs of movement. In North Carolina, the bitterly partisan Republican legislature joined the Democratic governor in passing a law setting targets of 70% emissions reduction by 2030 and carbon neutrality by 2050. Public opinion polls still show a lot

of climate denial among Republicans generally, but this doesn’t seem to make support by Republican officials impossible. There may be hope that the politics of climate change is beginning to detoxify. That would be a very promising sign for future climate action.