EDITORIAL

France shows climate change battle needs public buy-in

BY THE SAN DIEGO UNION TRIBUNE
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The evidence that the Earth’s climate is changing in dangerous ways because of the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere is overwhelming, especially in California, where horribly destructive wildfires have become a common annual event, thanks to persistent dry, hot conditions. With a new report indicating that greenhouse gas emissions hit an all-time high this year, the urgent need to address climate change has never been plainer.

But governments shouldn’t presume or assume that the public is ready to bear new burdens to respond to this crisis. This complication is frustrating, yet it’s a fact of life. Economists may say it’s obvious that the best way to reduce the use of the fossil fuels that drive climate change is by increasing the cost of such fuels, but that logic matters little to families who struggle to make ends meet.

This has been clear in France in recent weeks, where the government’s plan to raise already-heavy taxes – on gasoline by about 12 cents a gallon and on diesel fuel by 24 cents a gallon – was delayed after violent protests led by rural residents who are generally poorer than the city dwellers who took President Emmanuel Macron’s plan to reduce carbon emissions in stride. The tear gas shrouding the Arc de Triomphe in Paris was unforgettable. French commentators were reminded of 1968 student protests that led President Charles de Gaulle – one of the giant figures in modern Europe – to resign.

Are Californians in a different place than the French? Seems that way. On Nov. 6, a ballot initiative that would have rolled back gasoline tax hikes approved by the Legislature and Gov. Jerry Brown in 2017 to fund improving roads and adding infrastructure was easily defeated.
But as a recent analysis in The Washington Post detailed, California may be the exception to a global backlash against climate change policies that strain household budgets and hurt the bottom line of powerful industries. In Australia and Canada, political support is dwindling for policies that drive up energy costs. In Washington state – home to a powerful environmental movement – voters in 2016 and 2018 rejected carbon taxes. A common concern in each case was that governments didn’t care about the effect of their policies on their citizens.

As pundits speculate about Macron’s future in France, Americans’ situation faces a different sort of uncertainty. House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer are signaling a new focus on climate change in the new Congress even as Republican President Donald Trump repeatedly questions the science.

So what’s all this mean? Well, since 2000, climate change and the environment have occupied only 37 minutes and 6 seconds of more than 1,500 minutes of presidential and vice presidential debates, according to an analysis by the green news website Grist. That total includes just 1 minute and 22 seconds in 2016 and a stunning zero minutes – zero! – in 2012.

If global citizens aren’t on board with the difficult decisions awaiting them on the dire and complex issue of climate change, it may be because politicians haven’t made it enough of a priority in recent years. That has to change. But France shows that public buy-in can’t be taken for granted.

**CaliforniaGeo Responds**

A foreign leader facing policy blowback or a nation’s dearth of news coverage dedicated to a clear and present danger don’t adequately tell the story here. Such a review from 30,000 feet above the fray is avoidance.

The real story here is the choice to act strategically and unify others in the effort to slow or stop a force that will overwhelm tens of millions in the future. There are two moral delimas waiting to be tested here. First, is it fair for anyone to reject some measure of discomfort or cost in their own self-interest, or is it better to embrace altruism to protect others from the worst ravages of climate change? Second, what is the level of arrogance and disinterest that is required to care little or nothing for one’s own (or anyone else’s) progeny who will suffer more in the future if action is delayed?
Ask those already wiped out by catastrophic wildfires, floods, tornadoes, and hurricanes how they feel about beginning meaningful steps to thwart climate change. Ask those who’ve lost loved ones or will pay more for home or flood insurance, or who can’t get it at any price.

And ask governments which is cheaper—to generate a responsible path to fight climate change now, or spend many times the equivalent picking up the pieces of civilization in the future? This is a bit like the Fram oil filter campaign statement of the auto mechanic—“You can pay me now [filter cost] or you can pay me later. [engine overhaul]”

Citizens take their medications, moderate bad health habits, and wear their seatbelts as a protection for themselves and family. Governments have similar responsibilities for the welfare of all their citizens, but they are the only force that can sustain an adequate effort to protect the world’s citizens from an approaching disaster. Why can’t they “man-up” and get on with it?