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Polls find global warming generating heat

Voters call it high priority, with politicians joining in.

By Peter Hecht - Bee Capitol Bureau

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Attorney General Jerry Brown, who has set out on a legal crusade to force local government agencies in California to reduce greenhouse gases through better land use planning, was upstaged recently by a talking snowman.

The former governor and national political figure made a YouTube video for last Monday's CNN Democratic presidential debate, asking the candidates what they will do about "climate disruption and global warming."

But Brown didn't make the cut. Instead, millions of viewers for days watched repeated plays of a video -- created by two Minneapolis men -- depicting a forlorn snowman and his frosty sidekick.

"I've been growing concerned about global warming," the snowman says. "The single most important issue to the snowmen of this country is being neglected. As president, what will you do to ensure my son has a full and happy life?"

The fact that would-be leaders of the free world would be answering questions from a snowman reveals just how much the global warming issue has permeated American politics and culture -- a change reflected in public polling.

"It has captured the attention and risen to the top of the charts," said Mark DiCamillo, director of the California Field Poll.

It wasn't so long ago that Al Gore's campaign advisers were telling him not to talk about global warming during his 2000 presidential bid for fear that he would turn off voters.

That's hardly the case now.

Not after the former vice president's Oscar-winning "An Inconvenient Truth."

Not after the recent Live Earth concerts, which blared rock music and concern for the planet from seven continents.

Not after a drumbeat of media coverage of melting polar ice and hungry polar bears.

John Topping, president of the Washington, D.C.-based Climate Institute, said the global warming issue began to take off in 2004 -- after years of debate over whether the phenomenon was even real. A highly publicized Arctic climate report revealed "melting of the Greenland ice sheet much faster than expected."

"Then there was Hurricane Katrina -- showing that we are one of the most vulnerable countries to extreme weather events," Topping said. "And then 'An Inconvenient Truth' came out."

So now Republican presidential candidate John McCain pens newspaper columns saying, "Global warming is happening. ... It is a serious problem, and humans are causing it." And Democrat Hillary Rodham Clinton

warns of "potentially devastating effects."

Meanwhile, Rudy Giuliani recasts his war on terrorism speeches into calls for energy conservation. And John Edwards turns speeches on reducing poverty into calls for "green-collar jobs" in clean industries.

"I think it's a fundamental shake-up for all of the candidates running for president," said Democratic political consultant Bill Carrick. "They probably didn't even include this issue two or three years ago."

According to recent state and national polls, global warming far and away tops the list of Americans' environmental concerns. And citizens are demanding more of elected officials when it comes to fighting greenhouse gases blamed for climate change.

"It's extraordinary," said Dan Schnur, a Republican political observer. "For years, offshore oil drilling was the defining environmental issue in California. You could be paving over the Mojave Desert, but as long as you were against offshore drilling, you were OK with voters.

"Now global warming has risen to that level over a much faster time period."

In California, where Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger swept to a second term after transforming himself into an action hero waging war on global warming, Attorney General Brown is now suing San Bernardino County in a controversial case that pegs local transportation planning to a global fight against climate change.

In Marin County, former environmental consultant Charles McGlashan long felt ignored in pleas to businesses and cities to reduce air pollution and waste. Now a county supervisor, he is helping plan an Aug. 9 forum on how his county can reduce its carbon footprint.

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