

## **FEATURE - Climate Change Catching Voter Attention Around World**

### **BERLIN - "It's the environment, stupid!"**

Just as Bill Clinton used the battle cry "It's the economy, stupid!" to keep his 1992 presidential campaign focused, political leaders worldwide are chanting a new mantra based on growing alarm about global warming.

Mainstream parties in Germany, Britain, France, Canada, the United States and Austria believe tackling climate change is a vote winner while established Green parties in Germany and Austria are experiencing a renaissance.

Arnold Schwarzenegger won re-election as California governor in a landslide last month after distancing himself from President George W. Bush, a fellow Republican, and championing measures to cut the state's greenhouse gas emissions.

In Britain, Tony Blair and his probable successor Gordon Brown have made the fight against climate change a priority and the leader of the pro-business Conservative Party, David Cameron, has won over voters by talking up environmental issues.

"Climate change, if presented the right way, is a topic that voters are definitely opening up to," Manfred Guellner, managing director of Germany's Forsa polling institute, told Reuters. "We're seeing you can score points with it.

"Blair has done a good job of showing how leadership on climate change can make a difference. Climate change clearly has 'hot button' potential."

In France, the need for sustainable policies has been embraced by all parties ahead of a 2007 presidential election.

Socialist candidate Segolene Royal and her likely rival Nicolas Sarkozy pepper speeches with references to the environment.

In early December, Sarkozy met former US Vice President Al Gore, whose documentary on global warming, "An Inconvenient Truth", has been a surprise box-office winner.

Sarkozy said concern about the environment was not the preserve of traditional green parties. "Sustainable development and the defence of the environment is a question so fundamental that it can't be the property of one political party, even if it's green in colour," the front-runner for ruling conservative UMP party told parliament.

### **GREENHOUSE GAS EFFECT**

This month, Canada's opposition Liberals elected former environment minister Stephane Dion as their leader. Dion campaigned on green issues and said he would focus on the need to cut emissions from the booming Alberta oil area.

It was the first time a major Canadian party had picked a leader who campaigned primarily on the environment.

Greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), produced by burning fossil fuels, trap heat in the atmosphere. Scientists say rising temperatures could raise sea levels and cause more droughts, floods and heatwaves.

The United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicts the average global temperature will increase between 1.4 to 5.8 degrees Celsius by 2100, which would lead to rising sea levels as ice caps melt.

The publication of a hard-hitting report in October by Nicholas Stern, a former World Bank chief economist, concentrated minds on climate change which he said could lead to an economic upheaval on the scale of the 1930s Depression.

## **GOING MAINSTREAM**

Blair made global warming one of the key themes of Britain's Group of Eight presidency last year and German Chancellor Angela Merkel has pledged to continue the campaign when her government takes over the presidencies of the European Union and the G8 in 2007.

"Showing a commitment for the environment has once again become fashionable and deemed worthy of public recognition," said Udo Kuckartz, a University of Marburg researcher in a recent study of the public's view for the German government.

"We haven't seen that in a long time."

Climate change was regarded as important by 93 percent and viewed as the number two issue behind unemployment, up from fourth place in 2000.

Germany is home to the Greens party, one of the world's most successful ecology parties which has had seven years in government. Their support has climbed from 8.1 percent in the 2005 election to around 11 percent in opinion polls.

"The climate issue is vital to voters of all shades and to business as well," said Ralf Fuecks, head of the Greens' Heinrich Boell Foundation think-tank in Berlin.

In Austria, the Greens got their best result in an election in October, winning 21 seats in parliament. Austria derives 20 percent of its energy from renewable sources.

Emmerich Talos, professor for political science at Vienna University, said ecology was a key issue in the Alpine republic and no party could afford to ignore it.

"There's no way a party could run an election nowadays without having green issues in their programme," he said.

(Additional reporting by James Mackenzie in Paris, Alister Doyle in Oslo, Simon Johnson in Stockholm, David Ljunggren in Ottawa, Karin Strohecker in Vienna and Madeline Chambers)

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