

Although cities often are touted as climate change policy leaders, a close look at politically conservative Texas cities finds many lagging or faltering.

As the recent Supreme Court decision on Obama's climate regulations have illustrated, climate action at the national level in the US is a fraught affair. US cities often are touted as leading on climate, however — or at least some of them are. [Ann W. Foss](#) and [Jeff Howard](#) argue that most cities leading on climate are politically liberal, and they use the Dallas- Fort Worth area as a case study to examine a range of communities at the opposite end of the political spectrum. In this conservative region, they find far more laggard cities than leaders, and cities that have begun to emerge as leaders often have backslidened. Political aversion to climate action, they write, often means that when laggard cities pursue energy efficiency and renewable energy strategies, they do so as cost saving rather than environmental measures.



In the absence of significant national climate change regulations in the United States, cities are often viewed as key players in designing and enacting climate change policy. A handful of cities, such as [New York](#), [San Francisco](#), and [Seattle](#), have shown leadership in climate action — a history of well-funded and sustained development and implementation of climate policies. Meanwhile, however, most US cities lack formalized climate action plans or even any articulation of the need for attention to this issue.

Cities leading on climate action tend to be located in politically liberal regions and states. This reflects persistent [political polarization](#) on climate change: Democrats are much more likely than Republicans to acknowledge climate change as a reality and attribute it to human activity. While planning research and literature have focused much attention on the climate action plans of these leader cities, there has been little effort to assess climate change planning in conservative regions of the US.

To help fill this gap, we studied the Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW) region in north-central Texas, a large, sprawling, politically conservative metropolitan area where climate change policies are largely absent. A [recent study](#) found that the threats of extreme heat, drought, and wildfires in Texas are the highest in the lower 48 states, but Texas has taken virtually no action to address these future risks. We asked: what are DFW cities doing related to climate change, and why?

We searched for a wide range of initiatives that could conceivably be related to climate change mitigation and energy efficiency in the 100 largest cities in the DFW region in 2011. We found that only 18 percent of these communities had any type of action or program that explicitly referenced climate change. Sixty-one percent had actions related to energy efficiency within government operations, and 47 percent had initiatives to encourage private residences and businesses to become more energy efficient. Energy efficiency measures can easily be framed in terms of economic savings, making them more politically viable in conservative areas.

Looking more closely at initiatives related to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions reduction in 15 of the larger cities in the region, we again found that cities fairly often pursued energy efficiency and renewable energy strategies within their internal operations. According to interviews with city staff, these actions were conducted to save money for the cities, as well as reduce energy consumption to meet federal air-quality standards. In contrast, however, energy efficiency and renewable energy were largely absent in these cities' programs for private citizens, perhaps because

city budgets do not benefit directly from residents and businesses conserving energy. Cities' initiatives related to private GHG reduction focused on education campaigns, reducing water use through conservation and drought-tolerant planting guidelines, and promoting local farmers markets and community gardens. Most of these actions represented suggestions, rather than binding requirements for behavior changes.

Examination of more explicit climate-related actions in these 15 cities from 2011 to 2013, such as joining climate networks, performing GHG inventories, and developing climate action plans, gave further insight into the challenges of climate action in a conservative region.

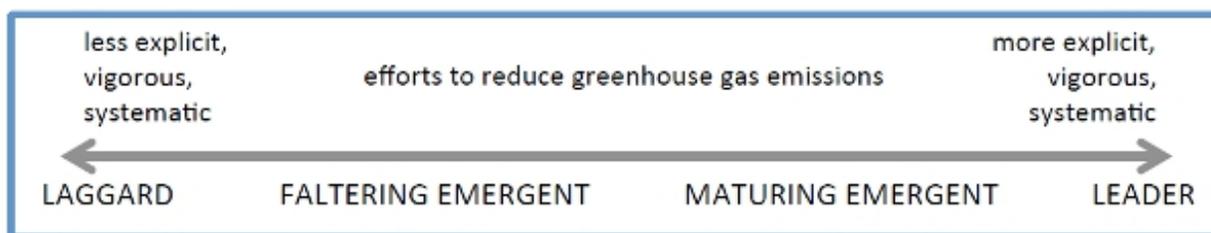
None of the cities we studied could be considered national or international leaders on climate, but we did see two cities that were making good progress toward addressing climate change. One of these cities was the sole politically liberal outlier in our conservative sample, underscoring the national tendency for climate action to occur primarily in liberal areas.

A second, much larger set of cities, which we see as lagging far behind, displayed virtually no evidence of action that they explicitly linked to climate change. When these cities did pursue actions related to climate change mitigation, such as energy conservation, they highlighted economic benefits rather than environmental benefits. One city staff member told us "it's cost savings and efficiency rather than being green that has motivated the city." Some of these cities actively avoided climate change planning, with a staffer telling us that their city council is "very pro-business and pro-development, and...they would fear that any type of climate change policy might frighten that off."

A third group of cities had some years before begun planning for climate change by making a public commitment to climate action or drafting GHG inventories and climate-related plans — but then had backed away. Several of these cities had joined ICLEI's (now defunct) [Cities for Climate Protection](#) campaign, but had let their memberships lapse. An ICLEI representative attributed these cities' retreat to political controversy surrounding climate change and pressure from Tea Party groups in the region, pressure which became [more salient](#) after 2008. Three cities in this group began climate-related plans that were abandoned in the draft stage due to efforts by conservative political groups. This reversal of action on climate change was largely attributed to politics. As one staffer put it: "we're in a very conservative part of the world, and climate change is not high on the agenda."

Evidence from our study allowed us to theorize a typology of maturation in cities planning for climate change mitigation, ranging from *leaders* to *laggards*, with *emergent* cities in between (Figure 1). The category of *emergent* can be further divided into *maturing emergent* cities, whose early efforts show signs of solidifying, and *faltering emergent* cities, whose early efforts have stalled or reversed, as we experienced in Dallas-Fort Worth. As described, cities' faltering and lagging behind can be attributed to political controversy surrounding climate change and the belief that climate action will be interpreted as a threat to economic vitality. City staff also professed a lack of knowledge about how to address what they see as a global problem on the local level and ranked addressing climate change as a lower priority than municipal responsibilities such as police, fire, and infrastructure services.

Figure 1 – Typology of climate change mitigation planning in cities



Cities, especially those in politically conservative areas, need tools and methods for incorporating climate planning into their normal operations and explicitly addressing climate change in a context-sensitive manner. We hope that

future research will move beyond studying leader cities in liberal areas to also focus on the many faltering and laggard cities in the US and other countries.

This article is based on the paper, 'The other end of the spectrum: municipal climate change mitigation planning in the politically conservative Dallas–Fort Worth region', in Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy.

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About the authors

Ann W. Foss – *University of Texas at Arlington*

Ann W. Foss is a doctoral candidate in the urban planning and public policy program at the University of Texas at Arlington. Her research focuses on the politics, narrative framing, and public participation surrounding climate change policy and action in the United States.



Jeff Howard — *University of Massachusetts at Amherst*

Jeff Howard teaches climate change mitigation planning in the regional planning program at University of Massachusetts at Amherst and is an environmental analyst in Connecticut's Office of Climate Change.



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