

From: James Gula jlgula@papugh.com
Subject: Contributor: Xavier Becerra shows that his loyalty lies with fossil fuels - Los Angeles Times
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To:



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In June 2017, with President Trump newly installed in office for the first time, one of the biggest battles with the administration was about oil. He'd just named the chief executive of Exxon Mobil, Rex Tillerson, as his secretary of State, even though great reporting — [in this newspaper](#) among others — had recently shown that the company knew all about, and lied all about, climate change as far back as the 1980s.

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Back then, the attorneys general of New York and Massachusetts were trying to take the on-giant on, initiating investigations of the company to try to hold it accountable. Environmental advocates and consumer groups were pressing hard for California Atty. Gen. Kamala Harris to join in, and she seemed to be considering it. Then she left the office to assume her new U.S. Senate seat, and the decision fell to her replacement, Xavier Becerra — now [a leading candidate for California governor](#).

As I wrote [in these pages](#) at the time, it was a great test for him, and a great curiosity that he was staying silent, “since the rest of Sacramento is hard at work dealing with climate change.” I was not the only one who noticed. Seventy thousand Californians [signed petitions](#) demanding action. Eight California representatives in Congress — including Jared Huffman and Ted Lieu — sent him a [letter](#) demanding a “vigorous” inquiry and pointing out that it was particularly important because the newly elected Trump administration was clearly favoring the oil industry. “California has led the world in responding to the dangers of climate change, and we know that it will continue to do so,” they wrote. “You now have a leading role in that effort.” But ultimately Becerra did not have a leading role, or indeed any role at all: He punted, as this editorial page [pointed out](#). What Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas) is [now trying to do by statute](#) — [immunize the big oil companies from prosecution](#) for climate liability — Becerra accomplished by sheer silence.

In the years since, of course, California has paid a huge price for our inaction on climate. Just looking at wildfire, there were of course the great blazes that Los Angeles County will never forget in 2025, but also the 2020 August Complex fire in Humboldt and Mendocino counties, the 2021 Dixie fire up north, the 2017 conflagration across Napa and Sonoma counties, the 2017 Thomas fire in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties, the 2018 Camp fire that devastated Paradise — the list goes sadly on and on and on.

Meanwhile, Big Oil and its friends at Big Utility have racked up huge profits, and Californians have faced ever higher bills. An unhobbled oil industry played a huge role in reelecting Trump in 2024 and in taking us to war with Iran.

And through it all, during his years as attorney general, Becerra did little or nothing to help. As I said all those years ago, it’s a mystery why, though I fear the mystery gets clearer with each campaign funding filing over his long career. As California’s top prosecutor, he took big donations from oil industry giants such as Chevron, and also from energy companies Sempra and Southern California Edison. As a member of Congress, he took larger checks from Pacific Gas and Electric and Edison International.

This time around, as he seeks the governor’s office, Chevron has maxed out its contributions to his campaign, the first time they’ve found a gubernatorial candidate to back in a decade. Meanwhile, across the country, leading progressives have signed a pledge refusing fossil fuel donations. Another gubernatorial contender, Katie Porter, is among them. Needless to say, Becerra is not.

The California chapters of Third Act — a group of Americans over 60 that I helped found — canvassed their members last month and issued an endorsement of Tom Steyer, on the grounds that he had worked hard over the years to address energy and climate issues. Instead of taking money from Big Oil, he’s given money, time and counsel to those of us volunteering in the fight against the industry. In fact, I think that whether one is most concerned about lowering utility bills with clean energy or protecting California’s forests, beaches and insurance rates from the global warming threat, he’d be the most climate-conscious elected official in America.

But Third Act was also founded to help protect our democracy. And that means disconnecting public policy from campaign donations. We need leaders who will do the right thing for us, not for their donors. Steyer has called on Becerra to return his donations from Big Oil. That would be a start, but it doesn’t really make up for the wasted decade we’ll never get back.

Bill McKibben is the founder of Third Act and the author, most recently, of "Here Comes the Sun: A Last Chance for the Climate, a Fresh Chance for Our Civilization."

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