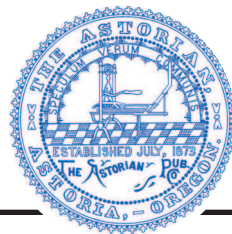


# OPINION



# THE DAILY ASTORIAN

editor@dailyastorian.com

Founded in 1873

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PRO-CON

## Is France's rollback of carbon taxes a major setback for environmentalists?



AP Photo/Kamil Zihnioglu

**A demonstrator stands at a burning makeshift barricade on the famed Champs Elysees in Paris, France. Thousands gathered in the capital and staged road blockades across the nation to vent anger against rising fuel taxes and Emmanuel Macron's presidency.**

### PRO: Push people too far and we may see Paris-like riots

**D**ALLAS — The recent French demonstrations against President Emmanuel Macron's gasoline tax increase may have been the first such uprising, but it probably won't be the last — in France or elsewhere.

Hundreds of thousands of French working-class demonstrators took to the streets of Paris and other parts of the country to protest Macron's 25-cent per gallon gas tax increase, with more increases to follow. The revenue would supposedly be used to fight climate change.

It's not like gasoline in France is cheap. The average price of gas is about \$7 a gallon, according to the Associated Press, when adjusted for the European use of liters. That's \$140 to fill up a 20-gallon tank. Ouch!

And that's in a country where the average income is about two-thirds that of America's.

Macron didn't care because he, like many progressives, wants to be seen as a leader in the fight against climate change, regardless of how much that legacy costs the working class.

But it turns out his French constituents do care — a lot.

Macron was stunned by the size and determination of the spontaneous revolt. After insisting he wouldn't cave on the gas tax, he did, and he is now promising even more concessions.

France may be the most disruptive, but it isn't the first populist pushback.

Australia became the first country to repeal its tax on carbon emissions. That's where the government imposes a tax on each ton of carbon released into the atmosphere.

Even though it was considered model legislation, the Aussies didn't want it and the Senate repealed it in 2014 — after only two years. Prime Minister Tony Abbott called the tax "a useless destructive tax which damaged jobs, which hurt families' cost of living and which didn't actually help the environment."

Sounds like the French demonstrators. Closer to home, California raised the state's gasoline tax by 12 cents last

year to 55.22 cents per gallon, the second-highest in the country.

Instead of rioting like the French, Californians forced a statewide tax-repeal vote last month. The effort failed, with 45 percent voting to repeal, but then gasoline isn't \$7 a gallon in California — yet.

But larger battles may be coming.

For example, socialist and Rep.-elect Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y., recently told an audience, it's "inevitable that we can use the transition to 100 percent renewable energy as the vehicle to truly deliver and establish economic, social and racial justice in the United States of America. That is our proposal and that is what we are here to do."

The federal government currently imposes its own tax on gasoline: 18.4 cents per gallon. Small croissants compared to France.

But the federal gasoline tax hasn't been raised in 25 years and has lost 64 percent of its purchasing power. Look for progressives to seek a significant increase in the near future.

In addition, members of Congress recently introduced a bipartisan tax on carbon emissions, like Australia's, that would force fossil fuel-producing companies to pay \$15 for each ton of carbon their products emit. The tax would rise by \$10 per ton every subsequent year.

Those two proposals would make driving a car or turning on the lights a lot more expensive, especially for lower- and fixed-income families.

Ironically, gasoline and carbon taxes are very regressive because everyone, regardless of income, pays the same price. Yet progressives support them anyway.

Imposing carbon and gasoline taxes is not about ways to pay for needed government services. It's about progressives, like Macron, trying to fund their climate change agenda.

The lesson from France is that working-class voters have a limit. Push people too far and we may see Paris-like riots in our own backyards.

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**MERRILL MATTHEWS**

### CON: Carbon taxes must address needs of ordinary people

**G**REEN BAY, Wis. — In early December, large-scale street protests forced the French government to roll back its newly imposed fuel taxes. The French president later vowed to lower other taxes as well and to increase wages. The protesters won a six-month reprieve on the taxes, which may or may not return.

The unexpected intensity of public reaction in France raises the question of whether any form of carbon tax is now politically feasible. It is, but whether the public views carbon taxes as acceptable depends largely on how they are designed and presented.

Some background is helpful. The French decision came during the same week that the latest U.N. conference on climate change began in Poland. At that meeting, delegates strongly urged nations to accelerate their efforts to reduce carbon emissions as new scientific studies underscored potentially catastrophic effects of a rapidly changing climate.

The latest U.S. study, the 1,600-page National Climate Assessment, written by more than 300 federal agency scientists and released just the week before, argued that we must act aggressively to deal with "substantial damages to the U.S. economy, environment, and human health and well-being," that can be expected over the coming decades.

There is little reason to be complacent. Other scientific reports in the past several weeks indicate that global emissions of carbon dioxide, largely generated by use of fossil fuels, are expected to continue rising this year by about 2.7 percent — 2.5 percent in the U.S. — driven by strong economic growth in the U.S., China and India.

One inescapable conclusion is that neither the United States nor most of the world is on a sustainable path in energy use, and time is running out to change direction.

While many different policies can help to reduce reliance on fossil fuels, there is no doubt that carbon taxes have a major role to play.

France simply got it wrong and its yellow vest protests reflected that.

Carbon taxes are widely and successfully used in Europe and many other nations

to reduce energy consumption and promote alternative energy sources. They also are strongly favored by economists and many policy makers as more efficient than other governance tools.

In contrast to what has been done elsewhere, the French fuel taxes were both poorly designed and carelessly imposed.

For example, only about one-fourth of the new tax revenue was directed at environmental actions that might compensate for climate change, such as investing in alternative energy technologies or subsidizing energy efficiency and conservation.

Moreover, gas prices in France already were very high compared to the U.S. The additional tax of 25 cents per gallon was simply too much for many working families, and they were angry.

The French experience nonetheless can help to inform what other nations, and states, choose to do to combat climate change, and especially for how best to design carbon taxes to make them more attractive.

For example, one of the most widely discussed proposals in the U.S. is a carbon fee and dividend system proposed by the Citizens Climate Lobby, and embraced by policy makers from both political parties. The fee imposed on carbon sources such as gasoline would be fully and directly rebated to citizens on a regular basis.

Alternatively, other taxes could be reduced proportionately so that there is no net increase in taxes.

Or, as California chose to do with its new 12-cent gas tax, the revenue could be dedicated to popular projects such as repairing highways, bridges and other infrastructure.

Polls show that most Americans favor action to mitigate climate change, which they see increasingly as a real threat to their well-being, the economy and the environment.

A well-designed carbon tax is an important tool to that end, but to be broadly acceptable it must visibly and genuinely address the needs and concerns of ordinary people.

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