

[Harris used her big climate moment to talk about ... insurance?](#)

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The vice president was asked one climate question at the Tuesday debate. Her answer surprised analysts.

When Vice President Kamala Harris was asked about climate change at Tuesday's presidential debate, she used an unusual example to emphasize its importance.

Property insurance.

Harris' description of how climate change is increasing insurance costs departed from a well-honed script that focuses on carbon levels, property damage and growing disasters. It also comes as the price of insurance has soared in areas that are being battered by intensifying floods, storms and wildfires.

It could mark a new strategy to convey the economic impacts of climate change, which has been a relatively minor issue for voters and whose existence remains disputed by some Republicans, even as conservative states face crippling financial losses from the insurance crisis rippling across the country.

"It's super smart because it brings the issue and threat of climate change down to the level of the kitchen table and kitchen-table budgeting," said Anthony Leiserowitz, director of Yale University's Program on Climate Change.

"I'm not aware of anyone else at the level of a vice president or a presidential candidate who has ever said something like this," he added.

Harris' warnings about property insurance and climate change came near the end of the debate Tuesday that largely ignored environmental issues.

“It is a way for climate change to resonate politically,” said Alex Flint, executive director of the Alliance for Market Solutions, a conservative-funded climate advocacy group. “Climate change has economic consequences. Those consequences become personal when they affect what people pay for insurance.”

Harris highlighted the struggles of homeowners to find and afford property insurance to make a point that climate change “is very real.” She also jabbed former President Donald Trump, her Republican opponent, for claiming in the past that global warming is “a hoax.” Harris was replying to a question by moderator Linsey Davis about how each candidate would fight climate change.

“You ask anyone who lives in a state who has experienced these extreme weather occurrences, who now is either being denied home insurance or is being jacked up,” Harris said. “You ask anybody who has been the victim of what that means in terms of losing their home, having nowhere to go.”

Harris then boasted about the Biden administration’s massive spending on clean energy and increasing natural gas production “to historic levels.”

Trump, answering after Harris, did not address climate change.

When he was president, Trump appeared to tacitly acknowledge the political importance of insurance costs when he postponed until after the 2020 election a plan to increase premiums on flood insurance that the federal government sells to nearly 5 million people.

Insurance costs have drawn national attention as insurers sharply raised rates and stopped covering properties in areas prone to wildfires or overpowering winds.

“Insurance seems to be evolving into a measuring stick for how climate risk is affecting day-to-day life and has potential to become an affordability and availability issue,” Sridhar Manyem, senior director at credit-ratings agency AM Best, said in an email. AM Best focuses on the insurance industry.

The industry itself has openly linked climate change — and factors such as inflation — to unprecedented financial losses in recent years as hurricanes, wildfires and other disasters became more destructive.

“Insurance companies were early to recognize climate change as a reality,” Amy Bach, executive director of the California consumer group United Policyholders, said in an email. Insurers have started to “adapt

their business operations accordingly.”

But adaptation involves increasing premiums, declining to insure risky homes and reducing coverage by raising deductibles, and refusing to pay for certain storm damage, Bach said.

“Climate change is the underlying driver. So VP Harris was spot on to acknowledge it,” she said.

Jerry Theodorou, an insurance expert at the libertarian R Street Institute, said, “The science on the existence of climate change is settled.”

Concern about property insurance began to increase in 2020 after wildfires destroyed hundreds of thousands of buildings in California and Hurricane Laura caused huge amounts of damage in Florida, Louisiana and Texas.

The damage, combined with labor shortages and supply-chain bottlenecks stemming from the pandemic, led insurers to sharply increase premiums, leaving hundreds of thousands of people unable to find or afford coverage.

“The insurance industry is the first mechanism to price climate change into the real estate market,” said Jeremy Porter, head of climate implications research at the First Street Foundation, which models climate impacts. Insurance “is the first process by which the climate debt we’ve built up over the past half-century is starting to be realized by homeowners.”

In Florida, 1.25 million people now buy coverage through a state-chartered insurer of last resort that has become the largest underwriter in the state. The program had 420,000 policies in late 2019. Florida Keys residents pay \$8,500 a year on average, according to the state.

Hundreds of thousands of people have flocked in recent years to state-run insurance programs in California, Louisiana, North Carolina and Texas.

“Where it was first really isolated to a few states, insurance cost and availability issues are now much more widespread,” University of North Carolina land-use expert Miyuki Hino said in an email. “Climate change can feel abstract and remote, but insurance turns ‘risk’ into a very real, concrete dollar figure.”

Harris' comments linking climate change and property insurance "really reflects how rapidly insurance issues have grown in the last year or two," Hino said.

The federal government has no oversight of insurance companies, which are regulated by the states. The Biden administration has used a small Treasury Department agency to highlight climate change and property insurance by issuing reports and collecting insurer data.

But the administration has also contributed to rising insurance costs by moving forward with the federal flood program that Trump postponed as president. The National Flood Insurance Program is projected to increase premiums by thousands of dollars — and possibly cause policyholders to drop coverage — in areas such as the Louisiana coast as it adjusts rates to better reflect climate change and flood risk.

"Where Harris mentions 'losing their home, having nowhere to go,' that could refer to folks who don't have flood insurance," Theodorou of the R Street Institute said.

Scientists, officials and advocates have warned the public for years about climate change, often using abstract concepts about atmospheric carbon levels or the number of events each year that cause at least \$1 billion in property damage.

"Much of the conversation around climate change to this point has been about things happening at the global scale — parts per million of carbon dioxide, tons of carbon emissions, policies in India and China," said Leiserowitz of Yale. "What people really care about is what's happening in real world terms."