Opinion: Calif.’s next big shift in climate change

By Joe Mathews

She calls him Eduardo. He calls her Mrs. Pavley.

She is Fran Pavley, 67, a San Fernando Valley state senator in the final months of a legislative career that established her as the mother of California climate change policy. He is Eduardo Garcia, 39, a first-term assemblyman from a working class Coachella family, who is known for focusing on the needs of his inland California constituents.



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Their fledgling alliance – over the last year they have been co-authoring each other’s legislation– embodies two tricky transitions in the world-renowned California movement to fight climate change. One involves a shift in personnel, as older champions are replaced by younger counterparts. The other involves a shift in focus: from reducing greenhouse gases to making sure poor communities get their fair share of climate-related investments.

It’s been a decade since Pavley authored AB32, the nation’s first cap on greenhouse gas pollution, and 15 years since she authored AB1493, which became the model for national vehicle emissions standards. And the coalition she helped build for those landmarks—a coalition that went beyond environmentalists

to include scientists, water agencies, local governments, labor unions, religious institutions and Hollywood celebrities—requires updating to better represent the California of 2016—more working-class, more Latino and more inland.

But the state's sprawl and diversity, in combination with the success of climate change legislation in sparking new businesses in California, have made coalition building harder. There are more constituents for climate change legislation, and thus higher expectations. Representatives of the state's poorer, inland places—among them Garcia, who represents a massive district bordering on Mexico and Arizona—-are demanding that regulations and programs improve public health and create job opportunities in their communities.

While Garcia's story – he's a graduate of Coachella Valley with UC Riverside and USC degrees—fits the new narrative, their partnership is also based on what they have in common. Garcia and Pavley took similar paths to politics, albeit a quarter-century apart: both worked as teachers (Pavley jokes that her transition from middle school to the Capitol was seamless), and both rose through local government. Pavley was elected mayor of Agoura Hills at age 32, in 1982. Garcia became mayor of Coachella at age 29, in 2006.

"Eduardo and Fran are the perfect transition," says Assembly Speaker Anthony Rendon, who suggested Pavley work with Garcia. The speaker describes visiting Garcia twice in the desert and being driven around the district, as the assemblyman offered detailed descriptions of the history and needs of even the smallest parks.

Rendon recalls the partnership coming together at the Paris climate talks in December, when Garcia was added to a California delegation that included Gov. Jerry Brown, legislative leaders and Pavley. Garcia brought his wife and very young daughter and impressed the older delegates by

eschewing sightseeing for intensive work. Garcia later said he was impressed by how other countries, particularly in Europe, are focusing climate change investments on poorer communities; he returned determined to shift California policy in a similar direction.

On a recent Friday, I shuttled between the two halves of the alliance. At her district office in Calabasas, Pavley walked me through the evolution of the climate movement in the state. She is termed out of the Legislature at the end of the year, and made clear that she sees Garcia as a promising successor on climate change.

“We work very well together,” she says. “And we’re looking for the next generation to carry this work forward.”

I met Garcia—the rumpled, stocky picture of the multi-tasking Gen X professional/father—in a restaurant near Burbank airport. He was traveling without aides, and mixed a casual bearing with an intense intelligence. We shifted between looking at smartphone video of his son shooting basketballs and his detailed description of the solar potential of Blythe and how brine from the Salton Sea can be turned into lithium for electric vehicle batteries.

“I don’t consider myself a climate change activist,” he says. “I do consider myself someone who is interested in building consensus on policies that are focused on people, especially the people in my district.”

In these closing days of the legislative session, Pavley and Garcia say they are focused on keeping lines of communication open within their broader coalition—and between members of the Assembly and Senate, whose leaders, Rendon and the Senate pro tem Kevin De Leon, both are considered leaders on the issue. They are pushing hard for SB32, which extends the greenhouse gas reduction targets to 2030, and AB197, which creates oversight of state climate programs to make sure their

benefits help the economies and public health of poorer and more polluted communities.

If these bills become law, give credit not just to the governor and legislative leaders, but also to Eduardo and Mrs. Pavley.

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo Public Square.