

2023

Community Research Agenda

ENVIRONMENTAL
POLLING CONSORTIUM

Background

The Environmental Polling Consortium (EPC) is the primary hub for aggregating public opinion research across the environmental movement. By collecting and analyzing hundreds of polls a year, we work to democratize polling data for environmental advocates. Our [Resources and Polling Library](#) contains over 1,000 polling documents that advocates can browse through for insights and data.

From December 2022 through May 2023, the EPC analyzed existing research in our library and held brainstorming sessions with a wide range of partners to identify gaps in the current body of public opinion research on environmental issues. Based on this process, we have developed this Community Research Agenda and identified **ten under-researched focus areas (topics or audiences)** that we recommend exploring further in future public opinion research.

Under-researched Topics	Under-researched Audiences
Environmental justice	Communities of color
Costs and economic impacts in the clean energy transition	Rural Americans
	Young Americans
The positive case for climate action	Pro-climate conservatives
Implementation of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA)	
The case against oil and gas corporations and continued fossil fuel expansion	
Extreme weather and climate change	

Future Work

We hope that, by calling attention to the ten focus areas highlighted in this Community Research Agenda, it will encourage more organizations to pursue public opinion research that:

- Fills gaps in the environmental movement's existing research;
- Helps advocates overcome common communications challenges; and
- Lifts up the perspectives and priorities of frontline communities

Moving forward, we urge groups that are planning or interested in research on these focus areas to [get in touch with the EPC](#). We are happy to assist in deepening our movement's understanding of these priorities in any way that we can, including facilitating joint research projects across organizations and helping to share findings with the broader environmental community.

Our aim is for this Community Research Agenda to exist as a living document that is revisited to help steer new projects.

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Topics

Environmental justice

As part of the reckoning over its history of exclusion, the national environmental movement has pledged to focus more on environmental problems that are rooted in systemic racism. For the movement to deliver on these commitments, it will need a multi-faceted strategy that lifts up impacted communities' perspectives and priorities while persuasively communicating about environmental justice to the broad public.

What's missing

We have seen specific environmental justice initiatives test well in polls, which suggests that there is a public appetite for environmental justice policy. However, there is limited research to inform public-facing communications about the topic - such as explaining how environmental justice is manifested and how it can be addressed.

In particular, more research is needed to help advocates break down environmental justice as a concept in ways that everyday people can understand and engage with. Even the term "environmental justice" is widely misunderstood by the public, indicating a significant need to educate the public on basic facets of the issue.

Related research

[World Resources Institute & Data for Progress - Voters support environmental justice two years after Justice40 \(Jan. 2023\)](#)

[Third Way, WE ACT for Environmental Justice, & GreenLatinos - Black and Latino communities' sentiment on climate change and the clean energy transition \(Jan. 2022\)](#)

Our recommendation

In order to develop clear and effective messaging on environmental justice issues, we recommend:

- Qualitative research (e.g., focus groups or online discussion boards), including among frontline communities, to understand people's reactions to specific ideas and terms, to identify any points of confusion, and to hear first-hand about the experiences and solutions put forward by impacted communities
- Polling in order to assess baseline attitudes about environmental justice and to determine the most persuasive messaging both to lift support and to build base enthusiasm for environmental justice policies

At all phases, it is important that environmental justice groups have a central role to ensure that this research reflects the environmental justice movement's priorities, lived experiences, and expertise.

Costs and economic impacts in the clean energy transition

In the debate over the clean energy transition, costs and economic impacts are consistently the two biggest sticking points for the public. On nearly every other major dimension of the debate - including public health, U.S. energy independence, and the environment - polls show that Americans are inclined to believe that the clean energy transition will have a positive impact.

What's missing

Many polls have tested arguments about cost savings and jobs as potential rationales for the clean energy transition. However, we have not seen much research that goes deeper to identify the most persuasive specific economic proof points in our favor or to assess the believability of our arguments on costs and the economy.

Existing research also does not typically differentiate between messaging about *long-term* versus *short-term* cost savings and economic benefits. Additionally, more research is needed to understand how to tailor our arguments to key geographies and audiences - including areas with significant employment in fossil fuels.

Related research

[Climate Power & LCV - Americans' views on the Inflation Reduction Act \(Aug. 2022\)](#)

[Climate Nexus, Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, & George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication - Voters say higher energy prices show need to increase renewable energy \(Apr. 2022\)](#)

Our recommendation

In order to fully explore people's preconceived notions and the power and believability of our arguments, we recommend:

- Qualitative research (e.g., focus groups or online discussion boards) to hear people's unaided assumptions about this topic, such as beliefs about the relative costs of different energy sources, possible misperceptions about clean energy and clean energy projects, and impressions of what a "clean energy job" is
- Polling to test arguments about both the short-term and long-term impacts of the clean energy transition, including messages and proof points about the declining costs of clean energy and the growth of clean energy jobs

The positive case for climate action

Climate change can seem abstract and insurmountable to people who don't follow the issue closely, and research suggests that constant negative coverage about the issue may cause people to tune it out. Advocates accordingly need to be mindful of the line between raising concern about climate change and making people feel powerless to do anything about it.

What's missing

When it comes to inspiring support for climate-friendly policy and increasing people's willingness to take personal actions, we haven't seen research that tests the relative impacts of messaging about the benefits of climate action compared to messaging about the dangers of inaction.

Different audiences are likely to respond to different tones of messaging, and smart research can help us to determine the most effective tone for key audiences. Additionally, future research can test which positively-themed messages are most effective for persuasion and which positively-themed messages are most effective for increasing self-efficacy and mobilizing supporters.

Related research

[Global Strategy Group - Public opinion on climate: The state of play in 2023 \(Apr. 2023\)](#)

[Pew - Americans largely favor U.S. taking steps to become carbon neutral by 2050 \(Mar. 2022\)](#)

Our recommendation

We recommend that future research on this topic includes:

- Polling to test the relative persuasiveness of positively-themed messages (focused on the benefits to be *gained* from climate action) compared to negatively-themed messages (focused on the dangers to be *avoided* by climate action), and to identify messages that can increase people's senses of self-efficacy and willingness to take action
- Both qualitative and quantitative research projects that present visions of an emissions-free economy and identify the most compelling aspects of that vision - including social factors, economic factors, and geopolitical factors like energy independence, security, and international competitiveness

Implementation of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA)

The IRA and IIJA are landmark pieces of legislation in the fight to combat climate change, but their potential climate impacts are heavily dependent on how their energy investments are deployed. For these bills to live up to their promise, it will be important to build public support for new clean energy projects across the country and for the expansion of transmission capacity to connect these projects to the grid.

What's missing

There is a great deal of polling about the passages of the IRA and IIJA, which shows that these bills and their climate-related provisions are popular with the American public. This polling is important, as it shows that passing climate legislation can be good politics.

However, far less research exists on the implementation of these bills - particularly when it comes to messaging in favor of new clean energy and transmission infrastructure in people's communities or for enticing individuals to take advantage of the IRA's consumer tax credits and other incentives.

Related research

[LCV & Climate Power - Voters' attitudes about clean energy policy, development, and expansion \(Feb. 2023\)](#)

[Climate Power & Data for Progress - After the midterms, voters continue to support bold climate action \(Nov. 2022\)](#)

Our recommendation

We recommend polling at the national and state levels in order to:

- Gauge attitudes about the key climate-related provisions of these bills, including investments in new clean energy and transmission projects
- Dial up pressure on state and local policymakers to implement clean energy investments, especially in rural areas and other geographies where projects are more likely to be sited, both by demonstrating local support for new projects and by informing messaging that advocates can use to intensify that support

The case against oil and gas corporations and continued fossil fuel expansion

Oil and gas corporations are deeply unpopular with the public, but have still managed to brand themselves as indispensable for the country's energy needs - at least in the short term. Amid the energy crisis of 2022, for example, polls showed that Americans acknowledged that fossil fuel dependence was putting the country at risk while simultaneously supporting new fossil fuel projects that would prolong that dependence.

What's missing

More research is needed to dispel the common notion that fossil fuels are truly necessary for our economy. Additionally, it is important that advocates recognize the inherent appeal of an "all-of-the-above" energy strategy and develop stronger counterarguments to combat it.

Existing polling also indicates that there is great promise in a "people vs. polluters" framework for messaging, and advocates would benefit from more research to hone this type of argument. By positioning regular people on the same side against a common enemy, we may be able to re-frame the energy debate to be less polarizing.

Related research

[Climate Power & LCV - Messaging on clean energy and gas prices \(Mar. 2022\)](#)

[Make Polluters Pay & Data for Progress - Voters support holding fossil fuel companies accountable for addressing climate change \(Aug. 2021\)](#)

Our recommendation

We recommend multi-phase research on this topic that includes:

- Qualitative research to assess the perceived feasibility of ending new fossil fuel projects and to probe any anxieties people have about transitioning entirely away from fossil fuels, their byproducts, and fossil fuel-powered vehicles and appliances
- Polling to quantitatively test different messaging approaches, including messaging about holding fossil fuel companies and other high-emissions business sectors accountable, arguments about the need to make a clean break from fossil fuels, and potential counterpoints to the "all-of-the-above energy" talking point

Extreme weather and climate change

Public urgency around climate change hinges on people understanding it as a here-and-now issue, and extreme weather is often the most tangible way that the problem impacts people's lives. Amid the myriad extreme weather events of 2021, for example, polls showed the public's climate concern reaching unprecedented heights.

What's missing

Existing research shows that most Americans understand that climate change is connected to the weather. However, it appears that the public more readily understands climate change as a factor behind certain types of weather events than others. Additionally, partisan audiences are diverging in their self-reported experiences with extreme weather.

Current research also doesn't tell us much about how to strengthen the link between extreme weather and climate change in people's minds, what kinds of arguments to use with audiences who are skeptical that this relationship exists, or how to persuade people that the effects of climate change on the weather can be slowed or mitigated.

Related research

[Yale Program on Climate Change Communication & George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication - Climate Change in the American Mind: Beliefs & Attitudes \(Dec. 2022\)](#)

[Pew - Most Americans who have faced extreme weather see a link to climate change - Republicans included \(Aug. 2022\)](#)

Our recommendation

Given the complex nature of this topic, we believe it would be beneficial to conduct multiple phases of research including:

- Qualitative research to help us to determine what kinds of weather events are most intuitively related to climate change and to hear directly from participants about any first-hand experiences that made them more cognizant of the climate/weather connection
- Polling to identify the most persuasive proof points to use in communications, both for demonstrating that weather patterns are changing and that climate change is the cause

Audiences

Communities of color

Communities of color are at the forefront of the environmental movement, both in their support and activism and in their particular vulnerability to environmental threats. As the environmental movement works to become more inclusive and increases its focus on environmental justice, it is important that we elevate the experiences and perspectives of frontline communities.

What's missing

Environmental polls often report out results by race and ethnicity, and oversamples of specific demographics can help to make these results more robust. However, environmental polls rarely focus specifically on audiences of color such as Black Americans, Hispanic Americans, AAPI (Asian American and Pacific Islander) Americans, or Native Americans in a way that allows results to be disaggregated *within* racial and ethnic subgroups.

Without large-scale polling of these audiences, polls will tell an oversimplified story about them and fail to capture how factors such as age and education contribute to the diversity of opinion within communities of color.

Related research

[Green 2.0 - Nationwide voters of color polling results on climate change \(Oct. 2022\)](#)

[Climate Power & Data for Progress - Latino voters support holding oil and gas companies accountable for high prices and taking action on climate change \(July 2022\)](#)

Our recommendation

We recommend conducting separate, large-scale nationwide polls of specific audiences of color - including Black, Hispanic, AAPI, and Native Americans. Only a large-sample poll of Hispanic Americans, for example, will be able to reliably measure differences in environmental attitudes by demographic variables such as generation or geography.

It is important that these projects are led by organizations and researchers who focus on the populations being studied. Additionally, given that communities of color are disproportionately impacted by environmental problems, we recommend that these polls thoroughly examine respondents' experiences and perceptions of environmental injustice.

Rural Americans

Rural Americans experience and perceive environmental issues in different ways than urban and suburban Americans, as policies related to agriculture and conservation often impact rural communities most directly.

Additionally, the path to achieve a clean energy transition goes directly through rural communities where new clean energy projects will need to be sited.

What's missing

Polling projects focused on rural America are not common, whether on environmental issues, energy, agriculture, or other topics.

Future research should examine the extent to which geographic factors can be separated from ideological factors in shaping rural Americans' environmental attitudes. As we continue to see a growing urban/rural divide in political attitudes, and a growing left/right divide on climate and environmental issues, advocates would benefit from understanding how appeals to rural Americans should differ from appeals to other conservative-leaning audiences.

Related research

[Colorado College - State of the Rockies 2023 poll shows widespread support for conservation \(Feb. 2023\)](#)

[Duke University Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions - Understanding rural attitudes toward the environment and conservation in America \(Feb. 2020\)](#)

Our recommendation

Because limited polling exists on the environmental attitudes of rural Americans, we recommend survey research that thoroughly:

- Explores rural Americans' beliefs and attitudes about a broad range of environmental priorities - from climate action and clean energy to conservation and agricultural policy
- Probes the personal experiences of rural Americans with environmental threats that are particularly acute in rural communities, including extreme weather, water scarcity, and water pollution

Where possible, we also recommend increasing rural samples in polls so that we can better understand differences in attitudes across geographic and ideological segments (e.g., urban/suburban conservatives vs. rural conservatives).

Young Americans

Younger generations are the future of the environmental movement, and high rates of activism and political engagement among millennial and Gen Z Americans are promising signs for the movement. Youth turnout in recent elections, for example, ranks among the highest on record.

However, it is critical for the movement not to take these generations for granted. There is an unprecedented amount of competition for their attention, and research suggests that younger generations may be especially prone to feelings of despair and helplessness about climate change.

What's missing

There is a good deal of polling on young Americans' environmental attitudes. More than other groups, however, research into this audience quickly becomes stale - both because new cohorts are aging into young adulthood and because young people are still forming their political identities.

Additionally, future research can help us to better understand how to convert the environmental concerns of young Americans into concrete action and long-term engagement.

Related research

[Sunrise Movement & Data for Progress - It's time to listen to young voters on climate action \(Mar. 2022\)](#)

[Pew - Gen Z, millennials stand out for climate change activism, social media engagement with issue \(May 2021\)](#)

Our recommendation

We recommend multi-phase research with young Americans, including:

- Qualitative research to help us understand how to convert climate concern into activism among young Americans and to hear how this audience places climate and environmental issues in the context of other issues and movements that they are engaged with
- Polling to test specific messages to motivate young Americans to take action on climate and environmental issues, including messages intended to raise self-efficacy and appeals that speak to intersectional issues and values such as social and environmental justice

Pro-climate conservatives

Right-of-center audiences are often the “swing” constituency on climate and environmental issues, as polarization on these topics has seen Democratic audiences shift increasingly in favor of climate action while strongly Republican audiences tend to oppose it.

However, beyond the furthest-right segment of the party, Republicans - especially young Republicans - tend to be fairly fluid in their attitudes about energy and the environment. Polls also show a notable wedge between the national Republican party’s positions on climate change and the stances of Republican voters.

What’s missing

We have not seen research focused specifically on pro-climate conservatives, which would allow us to better understand how to activate and grow this segment.

Polls also indicate that Republican voters underestimate the extent to which those around them care about climate change, which suggests a need to create more of a permission structure for pro-climate conservatives to express their views.

Related research

[Yale Program on Climate Change Communication & George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication - Climate Change in the American Mind: Politics & Policy \(Dec. 2022\)](#)

[Pew - On climate change, Republicans are open to some policy approaches, even as they assign the issue low priority \(July, 2021\)](#)

Our recommendation

We recommend multiple phases of research with this segment, including:

- Qualitative research to better understand what motivates pro-climate conservatives to support climate action and how they believe climate action fits with conservative values and priorities
- Polling that tests the relative impacts of common messaging on climate action (e.g., messages focused on public health and future generations) and more conservative-coded messaging (e.g., messages focused on energy independence and economic competition)

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