American Majority Project

January 5, 6 2022
Focus Groups
Gen Z: Environment
Swing Voters (Independents and Soft D&R)

Summary

- The overwhelming consensus among the groups was that climate change is a serious problem that must be dealt with deliberately and without delay.
- However, participants were aware of the need for practical solutions. They understood that climate change policies that lead to job losses and higher prices were not desirable or politically feasible.
- Given a choice between a Build Back Better type plan and one more like the McCarthy-GOP working group plan, participants overwhelmingly preferred the McCarthy plan because it seemed more practical, would not lead to higher prices or job losses in fossil fuels, incorporated nuclear, and considered how to get other countries to reduce their emissions (selling liquified natural gas).
- However, participants did say they wanted to see data that supported the methods laid out in each plan.
- There was strong anti-corporate sentiment among participants which is a quality that should be explored in more research.
- There was a surprisingly high level of knowledge about nuclear power and much more positive sentiment toward it than negative. It was viewed as a very practical, proven solution for climate change. This finding matches research from Biscondi Research that has shown that public discourse on energy and climate has positively affected public opinion on nuclear energy (76 favor, 24 oppose). (May 1-6, 2021, 1000 US Adults, Biscondi Research)[1]
- The results of these two groups suggest that the climate change issue is an opportunity to: 1. Attract young voters on an issue they care about 2. Expose the big government socialist agenda as being about power rather than a good faith effort to solve the issue due to the left's opposition to nuclear and natural gas.
- However, doing so will require an acknowledgement of climate change as an urgent problem and a willingness to put forward a solution.
- Further testing, including quantitative research, should be done to validate this.

Sentiment – Right Direction

Most participants who said things were moving in the right direction on the environment pointed to higher public and corporate awareness of environmental concerns and scientific research. Some pointed to reducing reliance on coal and oil.

> "I would say overall, I think a lot more companies are focusing on like climate change initiatives, which is nice. Um, I know a lot of like companies that sell products are working on like sustainable packaging." (Morgan, 23, Lib, Lean D)

> "I believe we've all said... that companies are taking initiative…. [Y]ou do see things on the street and you do see ESG as a focal point and you do see money being poured into this research." (David, 24, S Con, Lean R)

Sentiment – Wrong Direction

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[1] http://www.bisconti.com/articles/2021%20May%20US%20Public%20Opinion%20Report.pdf

There was much more negative sentiment about the direction of the environment. Participants mentioned natural disasters, drastic weather changes, deforestations, and increased greenhouse gas emissions. There was a sense that everyone is talking but little is being done. When pressed, some participants acknowledged that most of the increased greenhouse gas was coming from developing countries. But there was little acknowledgement that the developed world has reduced its emissions. There was strong anti-corporate sentiment.

> "Just America as a whole, I feel like... there's so much more that we could do. Um, so many more thing that we can switch up, use less plastic, um, switch over to like glass containers... just little things like that that would like significantly improve the earth as a whole..." (Bayleigh, 20, Mod, Lean D)

> "I'm not seeing the CO2 emissions go down at all.... [I]t's still going up every single year. And we haven't made any like drastic actions to change that like replanting forests or putting in strict policy changes to reduce the two missions by companies and individuals. And we're not doing that." (Emily, 19, Mod, Lean D)

> "[T]hese companies do not care about the environment. They care about their product and their image." (Jordan, 18, Mod, Lean R)

Perception of the threat of climate change

The participants were evenly divided between viewing the threat of climate change as "a potential catastrophe that outweighs other concerns and requires urgent action" and as "a challenge that needs to be balanced among other priorities, like job creation and inflation/cost of living." Nobody viewed it as "overhyped and not a big problem." Some of those who chose the first option argued that climate change will make other challenges worse. Notably, those who chose the second option (challenge that needs to be balanced) didn't seem to do so because they viewed climate change as less of a threat, but more because they were also worried about other things. Some of this group viewed climate change as a long term issue while others were short term.

> "[O]nce the earth is gone, like we don't get another one." (Bayleigh, 20, Mod, Lean D)

> "[I]f we don't have an earth or we destroy our earth, we can't really... kind of go backwards and then all those other problems seem quite small." (Morgan, 23, Lib, Lean D)

> "I believe that if you throw all your eggs in one basket, you're gonna neglect a lot of other issues that would just morph themselves into bigger issues going forward." (David, 24, S Con, Lean R)

> "[I]t's nice to live on earth, but why would I wanna live on earth if I'm miserable because I'm getting... treated differently because of the color of my skin, or I can't go anywhere, do anything, like a man can, or I don't get paid the same as a man because I'm a woman and this, that, and the other. So I just feel like everything should definitely be taken with urgency, but it should also be balance amongst other priorities because it won't let you live the life that you truly want to live if you spend all this time prioritizing one problem over the other." (Bayeligh, 20, Mod, Lean D)

Participants viewed media coverage of climate change as highly politicized, but there was a variety of opinion as to which way it skewed. Some expressed doubt that the media would cover it honestly because of corporate sponsorships. Others felt it was entirely dependent on the political leanings of the channel.

> "[N]ews... it's a business and they... are gonna do what's gonna get them the most clicks and if that's being polarizing in one direction politically or another, that's what they're gonna do." (Celeste, 24, S Lib, Lean D)

Preference for Practical Solutions

Participants were given a choice between two plans to address climate change. One is modeled after Build Back Better, but does not mention the legislation. The other is modeled after the McCarthy working group, but does not mention the source of the plan.

Plan A: Focuses on ending the use of greenhouse gas emitting fossil fuels in the United States. It would do so by making gasoline and electricity from oil, natural gas, and coal more expensive; while offering tax credits and other incentives to encourage people and companies to switch to electric vehicles and zero greenhouse gas sources of electricity like wind and solar.

Plan B: Focuses on making fossil fuels produce fewer greenhouse gases and expanding nuclear power. It would do so with investments in carbon capture technology (which reduces carbon emissions from fossil fuels), and carbon sequestration projects that pull carbon out of the atmosphere. The plan also offers incentives to expand the use of electricity from nuclear power, which has zero greenhouse gas emissions, and natural gas, which produces half the greenhouse gas of coal and can be sold to other countries that currently use coal.

Given a choice between a Build Back Better type plan and one more like the McCarthy-GOP working group plan, participants overwhelmingly preferred the McCarthy plan because it seemed more practical, would not lead to higher prices or job losses in fossil fuels, incorporated nuclear, and considered how to get other countries to reduce their emissions (selling liquified natural gas). There was a belief that these features would make it more likely to be passed, which was a major selling point. The group was frustrated by lack of action.

> "[M]y big problem with Plan A is I just don't think it would functionally pass-through Congress because like gas taxes are like heavily disliked by both parties, especially the Republican party because of the farming communities." (Corey, 22, Mod, Usually D)

> "So I definitely think Plan B is better because... I agree it's more realistic.... [A]t the end of the day, these things are not going to stop. We're going to keep using this energy – fossil fuels, etc." (Jordan, 18, Mod, Lean R)

There was also a surprising level of positive sentiment and knowledge about nuclear power in the groups, with some participants citing France as an example. One participant, however, preferred plan A because she was opposed to nuclear due to the toxicity of the spent fuel.

> "[L]ook at France. Like they are a huge producer of nuclear energy. They actually export it. And like you, the number of events a year with nuclear are very small [but] you hear like

every year, essentially, an oil spill and like it's not like other forms of fossil fuel energies come without risk either." (Emily, 19, Mod, Lean D)

"I'm not a big fan of nuclear power because essentially you're just creating another problem later on, which is, what do you do with the waste? And that's a whole other environmental issue that you have to tackle. Most of the nuclear waste is put in low-income communities and communities of color that causes other environmental and health problems." (Bea, 25, Lib, Lean D)

Tree planting as a way of capturing carbon was seen as a practical step but participants emphasized that it would have to be one of many measures taken, not the entirety of the plan. This suggests that the Left could try to completely define a center-right plan as "planting trees" as a way of delegitimizing it, and make it not seem serious.

After hearing additional arguments for and against each plan, participants stayed with their preference. One participant added they might prefer A if it also came with a big investment in public transportation so lower income Americans would have more affordable options.

Participants said they would like to see more data, metrics and hard numbers about the plans, as well as validators from scientists. There was a particular interest in the feasibility of carbon capture and sequestration.

"I would probably say... public opinion [research] and... probably input from scientists as well." (Kareem, 24, S Con, Lean R)

"[F]or Plan A, I would probably want to know what they plan to do with all the people who currently work in the coal and natural gas industry, because all the people in [those industries] would potentially lose their jobs..." (Corey, 22, Mod, Usually D)

"I would like to see metrics, data, actual hard numbers, or at least close estimates, like visualizations." (Morgan, 23, Lib, Lean D)

Awareness of Progress Made Due to Natural Gas

Participants were shown the following facts and asked for their reactions.

- In 2019, U.S. greenhouse gas emissions were the lowest they have been since 1993.
- According to the U.S. Energy Information Association, natural gas emits almost 50% less carbon than coal.
- The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and International Energy Agency both cite increased U.S. production and utilization of natural gas for electrical power as a major reason for emission reductions.
- Projections are that close to 100% of all future emissions growth will come from developing economies, led by China, which is already the world's largest producer of greenhouse gases.

- Developing countries overwhelmingly use coal for electrical power.
- Estimates suggest that exporting U.S. natural gas to China, India and some EU countries would lead to 50% fewer greenhouse gas emissions for each unit of gas sold.

There was little awareness of progress made in reducing carbon emissions in the US due to the adoption of natural gas. Some participants were aware that it was developing countries that were going to be the major emitters in the future. Participants were aware that coal was a high greenhouse gas emitter but not necessarily that gas was better. After exposure to these facts, several participants expressed more openness to natural gas but only wanted it to be a temporary or "bridge" solution to zero emissions options.

> "I had no clue that the greenhouse gas emissions were the lowest they've been since 1993." (Kareem, 24, S Con, Lean R)

> "A lot of times with difficult issues like this, there's not going to be a perfect solution, and so I think a solution that makes like good progress towards where we need to be at the end [is good] …. [I]f using natural gas is going to reduce our carbon emissions and also be something that… is agreeable to a lot of people and that we can get a lot of people on board [with] and it's the fastest course of action to making real change, then even though it's still a fossil fuel, I'd rather take the non-perfect option…" (Emily, 19, Mod, Lean D)

Awareness of Cleanliness and Safety of Nuclear Power

Participants were shown the following facts and asked for their reactions.

- Nuclear power produces zero greenhouse gas emissions.
- Nuclear power generates about 20% of US electricity, and more than 70% of US emission free power.
- American nuclear energy facilities are the highest regulated plants in the world, subject to scrutinous observations and regulations.
- Nuclear fuel is extremely dense. Because of this, the amount of used nuclear fuel is not as much as you think. All of the used nuclear fuel produced by the U.S. nuclear energy industry over the last 60 years could fit on a football field at a depth of less than 10 yards.

As mentioned, there was a surprising level of unsolicited awareness of nuclear power in the groups. Still, when presented with these facts, some of those who were not aware expressed surprise.

> "I think based on these facts, nuclear power seems like a great option, and I think we should take advantage of it, at least in the interim while we're figuring out like a long-term solution. I mean, I think anything we do to combat climate change now is better than doing nothing." (Morgan, 23, Lib, Lean D)

> "I think there's a lot of misinformation on nuclear energy and… the positives far outweigh the negatives… even in terms of dealing with the byproduct of the waste." (Keegan, 23, Mod, Lean R)

"I'm not concerned about the amount of waste that's produced. I'm more concerned about the toxicity and the location in which, and the manner in which it's disposed..." (Bea, 25, Lib, Lean D)

"Even if there aren't as many accidents [involving nuclear energy] when the accidents happen, they are really bad. But also, the fact that there is waste that is produced that generally still impacts low-income people longer term, and the medical costs associated with having any exposure to nuclear radiation is really bad and that's a cost that would still have be picked up by low-income people." (Bea, 25, Lib, Lean D)

When informed that many environmental and climate change activists oppose nuclear power, some participants theorized they were misinformed or that it was because nuclear sounded scary. One participant remained opposed to nuclear power due to concerns about the toxicity of the waste and the belief that was often stored near poor neighborhoods.

Perception of the Republican and Democratic Party

There was a general sense that the Republican party does not take climate change seriously and the Democratic party fails to uphold their campaign promises. They bemoaned the politicized nature of the issue, saying this is an issue that affects everyone and it should not be partisan.

"I would just, instead of even basing it as Republican and Democrat, just go down to them on a human level. Like if you want to stay on this earth and you want to keep living out your life and doing what you're doing, you gotta do better. Like the severity of your actions, everything that you do has a reaction. So just do better and think about what you're doing to the earth..." (Bayleigh, 20, Mod, Lean D)

"I would tell the Democratic party to following through... on the campaign promises they made about not approving pipelines and actually doing those things.... I actually wouldn't really say anything to the Republican party. Maybe [I would tell them], 'Don't make this a political issue.' But, they're not really gonna listen. (Bea, 25, Lib, Lean D)

"It's not political. The earth is not political. Our health is not political. The earth's health is not political. Just go based on what you know, your facts, what you know is real, what you think is right, not what your party believes or anything like that. No matter what it is, just do what you think is best for the earth." (Jordan, 18, Mod, Lean R)

"I would say to the Republican party, there's more that matters than just big business and you need to think of that.... [T]o the Democratic party I would say there's no need to create a virtue signaling culture in which we try to do individual things that aren't feasible for 75% of the country to actually do when, in reality, it is like big business that needs to make the changes." (Keegan, 23, Mod, Lean R)

Individual Responsibility

Participants had a myriad of ideas about how individuals can help personally to combat climate change, but there was a general sense that the problem is so large that collective action through the government was required. There was a strong desire to hold corporations and the government accountable for their actions.

"[A] conversation has started, but it's really not enough. We still have big businesses that don't care.... [L]ike big brands, like H&M and Rue21 – online shopping brands that everyone goes to – they all use fast fashion and things like that that are harmful to our environment. There's been awareness about recycling and cleaning up oceans and beaches but not about all these other things that play such a big part in climate change." (Jordan, 18, Mod, Lean R)

"[A]s long as we're actively doing small things to reduce our carbon footprint, that adds up when you have millions of people doing the same thing – reducing waste, not buying from companies that are harmful to the environment, doing your part, reducing plastic, using reusable utensils..." (Morgan, 23, Lib, Lean D)

"[W]e just have to be more conscious about our carbon footprint, especially when it comes to like trash and recycling and plastic. Like it could be as simple as going to the grocery store and bringing a reusable grocery bag... or getting a glass water bottle or a reusable plastic water bottle instead of buying them in cases..." (Bayleigh, 20, Mod, Lean D)