



**TO:** Interested Parties

**FROM:** Dave Metz, Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates  
Lori Weigel, Public Opinion Strategies

**CONTACT:** Andy Tuck  
atuck@tnc.org

**RE:** The Language of Climate and Clean Energy

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*The following is a meta-analysis of US public opinion research data of the top messages for communicating support for clean energy and climate action to American voters. This summary is based on national, regional and statewide surveys conducted over the last decade, with emphasis on the most recent research. Most of the research was carried out by a bi-partisan research team: Democratic polling firm Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates and Republican polling firm Public Opinion Strategies. We also consulted publicly available data through the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research and other data colleagues have generously made available. We found few exceptions to the guidelines presented, although we note that it is always prudent to test language and messages to ensure their effectiveness in a specific state or local area prior to investing in public communications.*

*While what is presented here is our best research into how audiences respond to certain language, there are often reasons why groups like The Nature Conservancy would opt for a different approach based on values, identity, and strategy. Internal communications strategy documents may suggest different language than indicated here in some instances, and our recommendations should not be deemed as superseding messaging choices made by policy and communications staff.*

## **The Benefits of Action**

A wide range of research in recent years shows that a majority of the public sees climate change as real and says action should be taken. Over the last few years, that sentiment also appears to be growing again after a number of years of decline. At the same time, many voters express confusion about what is causing global warming; rank the issue as a lower priority than issues like health care costs or crime; and are highly polarized by political party on the issue. In fact, partisan affiliation is more significant than other demographic or geographic differences in accounting for views on this issue. Nonetheless, voters rank many of the benefits associated with strategies to reduce global warming as highly important, and communications should start by emphasizing those benefits.

- **Voters see clean energy as the future.** Voters view our nation on a clear path away from fossil fuels and toward cleaner energy sources, and see that as an inevitable progression. Voters may have different views of how long that transition will take, depending on their views of cost, technological innovations, and how often they see clean energy sources being employed in their state. The more our language is framed where voters start this conversation – that traditional energy sources are “old” and “outdated” and that clean, renewable energy and efficiency is the future, the better it will be received. Not going “backward” is a powerful positioning.

- **Voters like the co-benefits of action, especially the health benefits of cleaner air.** Voters see reductions in air pollution as the most important benefit of policies to reduce carbon pollution because of the impact of pollution on health – particularly asthma for kids and lung disease. Focus group participants make a personal connection to these issues. Our message work suggests that framing this connection positively (*i.e.* investing in clean energy will reduce pollution and save lives) will be more effective than framing it negatively by emphasizing the damage that will continue to be done by coal-fired power plants or other major sources of pollution.
- **Specifics about pollution are more persuasive.** “Smog,” “soot,” “mercury,” “arsenic,” “lead,” and “toxic ash waste” are all descriptive, clear ways of describing the pollutants that may also be reduced by limiting carbon pollution. Linking these pollutants to their health impacts builds a powerful message.
- **Specifics about jobs and economic benefits are more persuasive.** Voters overwhelmingly believe we can have a clean environment and strong economy at the same time, and communications should emphasize this point of connection. But vague promises of job creation with large numbers are greeted with skepticism. In addition, existing jobs in the industry are little recognized at this time, and so conveying numbers of jobs in the industry are not compelling to the public (although may be with elected officials).

In contrast, public communications about the economic benefits of clean energy should be specific and:

- 1) Highlight specific, local companies already at work creating clean energy and energy efficiency jobs;
  - 2) List a wide range of specific kinds of jobs that are being or will be supported – technical, manufacturing, administrative – white-collar to blue-collar; and
  - 3) Stress that jobs are middle-income, provide benefits, and can’t be outsourced.
- **Voters – especially conservative audiences – are concerned about reliance on foreign oil.** Reducing dependence on foreign countries is not just about national security, and security in the sense of reducing terrorism may not be the strongest aspect of this theme for many people. Energy independence is also about self-sufficiency, a desire for the United States to generate the energy to take care of its own needs. And it’s about the economy, as voters worry that purchasing oil from overseas keeps the price of gas high and unstable. The goal of energy independence even relates to jobs, as the voters see that producing energy here will create jobs for Americans.

## **Making A Strong Economic Case**

Voters’ initial instinct is that a shift to more use of clean energy will be costly. This continues to be true despite the fact that in many cases solar and wind energy is on par or more cost effective than electricity from coal burning power plants. Voters continue to be largely ignorant of these cost changes, and perceive that shifting our energy infrastructure will entail significant near-term costs. At the same time, they do believe that in the long run, renewable energy will be more cost effective. These findings have important implications.

- **Voters understand the transition to clean energy may not be cheap, especially in the short term.** Focus on efficiency and long-term cost savings rather than trying to persuade the voters that renewables are or will be cheaper. Again, this information has just not permeated most people’s consciousness yet. Also, keep in mind that research consistently shows that voters are willing to accept modestly higher costs in the near term if they are convinced they will help to accelerate a transition to clean energy.

- **Voters believe we can have a clean environment and a strong economy at the same time.** Four out of five voters consistently express this belief, and policies that are framed as a way of achieving both environmental health and economic growth will have great appeal.
- **Voters like energy efficiency, particularly as a way of saving money.** This is a promising issue – and one that has so far largely resisted the political polarization evident with other energy issues – because it is a rare case where personal self-interest (saving money over the long term) lines up with social responsibility (avoiding waste). Efficiency is doubly powerful because individuals can exert some control over this aspect of energy in their own lives. They may not be able to affect the price of gas, but they can buy a more fuel efficient vehicle.
- **Voters are concerned about America’s infrastructure and support electrical grid modernization.** We have seen in other work that “deteriorating infrastructure essential for health safety” is something American voters want to see addressed. The electrical infrastructure fits squarely into that frame.
- **Voters want examples of clean energy success.** One concern we regularly hear in focus groups is that solar and wind may not be appropriate in all areas, because there is not enough wind or sun in a particular location. This is particularly true in northern or Midwestern states where cloudy winters are seen as a barrier to reliability. Showing examples of locations or institutions implementing renewables on large scale can help overcome this barrier. Increasingly, there is also awareness that the development of battery technology may make it possible to store and use renewably-generated electricity over a longer period of time.
- **Support for different types of clean energy varies.** While attitudes are evolving, voters are more enthusiastic about solar panels and clean electricity than they are about electric vehicles. They view both technologies as prohibitively expensive for the average homeowner, but they believe that solar power has matured and proven its practical effectiveness. Electric vehicles still seem “experimental” to many, with the prevailing worry being a lack of infrastructure for charging that fuels “range anxiety.” Voters are far more supportive of incentives for solar power than for electric vehicles.

## Talking About Climate

There is an inherent tension in addressing climate in messaging. On one hand, the data show that climate change has risen to the very top tier of concerns for voters who identify as liberal or Democratic. Messaging which focuses on climate action is highly salient and motivating for voters who are already convinced that it is both real and a serious problem.

On the other hand, we know that a focus on climate – because it is a relatively low priority for the broader electorate and deeply politically polarizing – is rarely a formula for messaging success when we need short-term, immediate wins with more ideologically diverse audiences. These audiences have been fairly resistant to adjusting their current perspective on the issue of climate change. We do recognize that that dynamic will never change if we do not continue to engage and educate the public on the realities of climate change. This tension yields the recommendations below for communications *outside* the progressive base:

- **Climate alone is not a persuasive rationale for energy changes.** The cause and effect connection is more tenuous for the voters and the benefits of addressing climate change are less tangible than other benefits of action. Crop yields and rising grocery prices can potentially be a concern, but there is less willingness to believe we can affect these problems through people making changes in their energy use.

Messages emphasizing climate are also politically polarizing, with Republicans and more conservative independents generally reacting poorly. Even conservative voters who acknowledge that the climate is changing may not always agree on *why* it is changing, often chalking it up to “natural causes.” Moreover, they may not be amenable to specific solutions, especially those that require specific government actions or costs to consumers/taxpayers.

- ***Climate change embedded within a broader argument is more persuasive.*** While a sole focus on climate change may alienate most conservative voters, we do not always see the same dynamic when reductions in greenhouse gas emissions are listed as part of a broader range of benefits of policy change. That said, conservative voters do tend to see this as a “signal” that the group or person communicating is more liberal than are they.
- ***“Global Warming” vs. “Climate Change.”*** While “climate change” is a more scientifically accurate term, “global warming” tends to provoke higher levels of concern among the voting public. There is little evidence that less-familiar alternative language like “climate disruption” yields meaningfully better results. The Nature Conservancy prefers to use the term “climate change” for all its public communications.
- ***Climate change messengers who are not perceived as partisan/liberal are more persuasive.*** Climate change is an issue where the public is confused, and they listen to sources they trust for guidance. To overcome the partisan division on this issue, it is critical to find messengers outside of the environmental and clean energy communities who will have credibility with more conservative audiences. These could include public health organizations, business leaders, firefighters, a religious organization like the Christian Coalition, or members of the military. One of the more respected entities we have tested with conservative voters is the National Geographic Society.

We consistently find that specific government organizations like NOAA or a state agency are well-respected – just not “government” generically. Similarly, confidence in most large institutions has withered, so careful consideration of messengers from these types of large civic groups is warranted more now than ever.

It is also important to recognize that we continue to find that scientists and clean energy researchers (especially ones at state universities) are respected and viewed as independent sources of information. We have not seen a shift in views of these messengers, even among more conservative audiences. That said, given the partisan reaction to climate change, we would advise against labeling scientists or researchers as “climate scientists” or “climate researchers.”

- ***Positive stories of how technological innovation can address climate change are persuasive.*** Americans have great faith in our nation’s technological ingenuity and ability to address problems. Descriptions of how positive technological innovation in the energy sector can benefit people resonate well, particularly among more conservative audiences. On the other hand, painting too bleak a picture of the outcomes of climate change can discourage from action even those who see global warming as real and human-caused.
- ***Voters are not connecting extreme weather – or other climate impacts – to climate change.*** We often find that it is difficult to translate awareness of extreme weather or other climate impacts into effective messaging. Voters generally recognize that weather has been becoming more extreme or seen evidence of other changes, and many cite global warming as a potential cause, though with no apparent understanding of the mechanics. However, they are skeptical – with plenty of justification – that near-term policy solutions are likely to yield significant reductions in extreme weather. Moreover, images of the

aftermath of storms or extreme weather is often viewed as a turn-off. “I am suspicious of organizations that use pictures of disasters to try and earn the public’s trust,” voiced a GOP focus group participant in reaction to an image of homes damaged by a hurricane in connection with climate change.

There are some local communities where, in the wake of an extreme weather event, such messaging may take on increased salience. But some data suggests that its primary effect is to reinforce a desire for action among those already concerned about the problem, rather than to persuade new supporters.

- ***Stressing the impacts of global warming on future generations is persuasive.*** Voters are more concerned about the impact that global warming may have on their children and grandchildren than they are about most other near-term impacts it may have. Messages invoking the need to leave a legacy for future generations test well, as well do those focused on “stewardship” and “shared responsibility.” However, it is also important, particularly when a program will have immediate costs for voters, to point out the immediate benefits as well as the quality of the environment we leave for our children. The latter can be reinforced through imagery – an image of a very young child next to a solar panel (on the ground), or a family in front of a middleclass home with solar panels visible on the roof, have both tested well with more conservative audiences.
- ***Americans feel torn between current economic concerns and the longer-term well-being of their families.*** Because most voters do not feel that global warming is causing immediate problems in their lives, they often express more concern about day-to-day problems like the cost of living, and are concerned about policy solutions that could potentially make those problems worse. Messaging which stresses the ability to both create good jobs today and leave a better world for our children tomorrow can overcome this tension.
- ***Voters understand the transition from fossil fuels to clean energy is inevitable.*** Voters may be skeptical that we can flip a switch and move from fossil fuels to clean energy in the near term, but nearly all are convinced that such a change is inevitable – and desirable – over the longer term. Messaging that articulates that longer-term vision will appeal to voters.

Even in coal country, we have seen that voters do not want or expect their grandchildren to be working in the coal industry a generation from now. While voters may disagree about the speed or mechanics of the transition, there is broad agreement that a clean energy future is both desirable and inevitable, and messaging which highlights the ways that will benefit future generations is helpful.

Broad support for this transition does not mean that clean energy advocates won’t encounter NIMBY sentiment in some communities. In particular, we have seen voters distinguish between off-shore wind turbines and those on land, or have concerns about safety of turbines sited near homes. Community research can often help assess how widespread those NIMBY concerns may be, as they are often fairly limited in scope yet vocal.

## **Explaining Why Change Is Not Happening**

When something extremely popular – such as clean energy investment or reducing pollution – fails to happen, the public can start to wonder why. Children of the 1970’s who remember a push for solar energy during the energy crisis question why, decades later, the progress appears to have been so slow. Some begin to question whether there is a serious flaw in the policy or the technology of which they are unaware; still-high costs typically come to mind. Given these questions, voters need a clear narrative which explains the real reasons for a lack of progress.

- ***The role of special interest groups.*** Explaining that entrenched interests have an interest in maintaining the status quo, and their lobbyists spend millions to ensure politicians do not make these changes, makes sense to voters frustrated by inaction in other policy arenas. This can help resolve this confusion for voters. Note that while voters harbor distrust of oil companies, they hold generally positive views of their electric utility.
- ***Voters support reasonable mandates on energy companies.*** Despite these initially positive views of electric utilities, voters do consider them to be big, profitable corporations that can and should offer their consumers fair pricing for the energy they produce (i.e. net metering), and efficiency rebates that help consumers waste less and be more efficient.
- ***Voters like corporate accountability.*** Messaging that talks about holding major polluters accountable for the damage that their pollution does to the public is very well-received; even very conservative voters have negative attitudes toward large, polluting businesses.
- ***The role of government in policy solutions.*** Given that many voters are even more cynical about government as they are about oil companies, detailed conversation about how policy changes are implemented can end up diminishing support. It is particularly important to avoid discussion of specific elected officials – notably the President – as that only serves to further polarize voters.

## **Messaging for Political Conservatives**

Nearly all the message recommendations detailed so far also apply to conservative voters, though with perhaps somewhat less impact than with other audiences. There are, however, a number of important communication considerations for voters at this end of the political spectrum:

- ***Conservatives like energy independence.*** “Reducing dependence of foreign energy” often places as a top tier priority, whereas producing energy “that does not pollute our air and water” is far lower in conservative voters’ concerns. It is important to note that this concern about “foreign” energy has a specific focus on powers hostile to United States’ interests. Voters have little concern about importing energy from Canada, in contrast.

This theme of “independence” is not limited to the national context, but also on an individual level. For example, GOP and conservative independents gravitate to language that asserts that “instead of just relying on large utilities for electricity, we need to allow more Americans the freedom to produce energy at their home, business, or on their property.”

- ***Conservatives support accountability for the energy industry.*** Conservatives are just as cynical about big business – and big energy companies – as they are about big government.
- ***Emphasizing “American Made” is persuasive to conservatives.*** Conservative voters recognize renewable energy as inherently American-made. Voters across the spectrum – but especially those on the right side of the political spectrum – respond to the idea that “If we want to build a stronger economy and a stronger nation, we need a comprehensive, ‘made in America’ approach to energy.”
- ***Natural gas is nearly as popular among conservatives as renewables.*** Conservatives generally view natural gas as positively as any energy source. They have internalized industry communications that natural gas is abundant, domestically produced, and cleaner than many fossil fuels. That said, they often

think of natural gas from a “use” aspect, and less about it being produced except in areas of the country where fracking is prevalent. Messaging in those areas may be highly localized and dependent on recent events, the economy and other issues.

- **Conservatives can be skeptical about the economic benefits of clean energy.** There is risk in sounding too much like an economic cheerleader; voters believe clean energy will create jobs, but doubt the U.S. will be a leader in this area. Notably, showing images of clean energy workers has been resonant with conservative audiences, be it veterans being put back to work installing solar panels or young workers on top of a wind turbine.
- **Climate change is almost always an ineffective message to use with conservative audiences.** Honestly, it should almost never be referenced as a rationale for action among conservative voters. References to climate change constitute a clear political “dog whistle” that an effort or policy initiative is being pushed by voters who are in a different “tribe” than their own.

### Cheat Sheet on Language

In summary, the following table provides a short reference – building on all the research we examined – for helpful and problematic language that can be used in developing support for action to address climate change and promote clean energy.

<b>Bad / Confusing Words to Avoid</b>
<i>Permits</i>
<i>Auctions</i>
<i>Cap and Trade</i>
<i>Extreme Weather</i>
<i>Allowances</i>
<i>Regulation</i>
<i>State Government / State Law</i>
<i>Low Carbon Fuel Standard</i>
<i>Markets</i>
<i>Green Energy / Green Jobs</i>
<i>Revenue</i>
<i>Gas Prices</i>

  

<b>Good Words to Use</b>
<i>Accountability</i>
<i>Clean Air</i>
<i>Clean Energy</i>
<i>Energy Efficiency</i>
<i>Leadership</i>
<i>Action</i>
<i>Polluters</i>
<i>Safeguards</i>
<i>Choices</i>
<i>Innovation</i>
<i>Technology</i>

## Carbon Tax Communications

These communications guidelines are suggested by FM3 Research, which has conducted extensive research regarding carbon tax proposals throughout the nation.

- **Accountability for oil companies, lobbyists, and politicians.** Oil companies are viewed very negatively by the public, and voters intuitively perceive them as blocking action on clean energy. At the same time, two caveats must be kept in mind:
  - 1) Many swing voters have a somewhat fatalistic attitude toward oil companies. They do not have the same kind of ideological, anti-corporate pre-disposition against them that more progressive voters do, and they have largely resigned themselves to oil companies' political influence and control of fuel prices.
  - 2) Coal companies do not provoke anything like the same kind of negative reaction that oil companies do. Voters would be hard-pressed to name a coal company, and do not see them having the same kind of negative impact on their day-to-day life that oil companies do.
- **Price on carbon as a mechanism for accountability.** The pricing mechanism itself should be framed as one that will be levied on large polluters, as both a penalty on pollution and an incentive to shift to cleaner alternatives. One effective strain of messaging highlights all the actions consumers take to reduce their own emissions (have car emissions checked, not burning firewood, etc.) and stresses the importance of holding major corporations to the same standard.
- **Voters believe that every penny of a carbon tax levied on industry will ultimately be passed on to them.** No matter what legal restrictions are embedded in the legislation (price caps, legal penalties for passing costs along, supply and demand arguments insisting that oil and coal are priced globally, etc.) voters will believe that any financial cost imposed on industry will ultimately be passed on and paid by consumers.
- **Voters believe that the benefits of carbon pricing are worth the price.** Ultimately, if voters are forced to pay the cost of a price on carbon, but are rewarded with cleaner air, better jobs, and cheaper energy over the long term, polling shows they will be willing to pay a little bit more in the short-term.
- **Voters are easily confused about the details of how carbon pricing works.** No matter how artfully defined the policy is, voters will neither understand nor appreciate the rationale for a given price per ton of carbon; the merits of tradeable credits; or the economic efficiency of an auction system to allocate allowances. The more messaging delves into explaining these details, the more red flags it tends to raise for the public. Messaging should focus on the outcomes carbon pricing will deliver, and not the mechanics of the system that will deliver them.
- **Voters support funding allocations that reduce pollution.** While voters may see K-12 education as a worthy target of investment in absolute terms, they would prefer that money from a carbon tax go toward purposes that further the goal of the tax itself – reducing pollution and promoting cleaner forms of energy.
- **Voters want specifics about the funding allocations.** It is helpful to be as clear as possible in describing specific programs to which carbon tax dollars will be dedicated. Vague references to a “clean energy fund,” for example, tend to heighten voters' suspicions that their money is going into a piggy bank for politicians' pet projects.
- **Voters are less supportive of rebates.** The data generally shows that those voters most supportive of a “clean energy dividend” or a “revenue-neutral carbon tax” are the ones who most virulently oppose such a tax in the first place. While they may prefer refunds or rebates to other uses of carbon tax dollars, as it is the closest they can come to nullifying the policy entirely, there is little evidence that it is effective in converting them into supporters. A revenue-positive tax, on the other hand, offers the opportunity to make investments that may firm up the support of some swing voters. Of course, this observation only addresses the perceptions of voters, not legislators. There of course may be cases where revenue neutrality is the key to winning over the support of a swing bloc of legislators – in which case it may very well make sense to embrace it.