

**MEMO** *Published July 9, 2020 · 17 minute read*

# **Black Americans Care About Climate Change (But It's Complicated)**

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## Takeaways

Black Americans have long borne an unequal burden when it comes to environmental degradation and face increased risk from the impacts of climate change. But even though they're concerned about the environment worsening around them, Black Americans aren't necessarily counting climate change among their top priorities—and they're not hearing people speak to them on the issue in a manner that resonates.

Third Way held nine focus groups in three cities in February among Black Americans of different ages, education, and gender. These discussions suggest that, despite an upswell in climate dialogue among Washington insiders, policymakers have a long way to go to make climate change more widely relevant to this group and to ensure Black Americans feel included in a clean energy transition. As one man in Detroit said, climate change “needs a seller” – a person or group that makes the issue relevant to Black Americans.

## Introduction

Five months ago, when we began research on how Black Americans viewed climate change, the novel coronavirus had not yet ripped through this country and disproportionately impacted the Black community. When we started this project, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Rayshard Brooks were alive. It would be inappropriate to dissect what we learned in focus groups if we didn't acknowledge the challenges that Black Americans face and the pain and anger in communities that are confronted daily with excessive police force, educational inequities, disproportionate unemployment, and lack of access to quality healthcare. Ultimately, they will bear more than their share of another burden: climate change.

Indeed, the protests also stem from a centuries-old demand to end structural racism, which has many tentacles, including environmental injustice. Recently, Harvard researchers found that even a small increase of exposure to a common air pollutant can increase one's chances of becoming infected with COVID-19 by 8%. And due to a history of redlining, Black Americans are more likely to live in communities that are within just a few miles of

petrochemical refining plants, compromising the air they breathe. As the planet continues to warm, projections show that communities that have been systematically disadvantaged will feel an outsized impact of climate change and increasingly dirty air and water. Black communities are on the frontlines of climate change.

But Black Americans tend to be left out of the conversation around climate and the transition to a clean energy economy. There has been little research until recently exploring climate sentiment in the Black community. There are also proportionally far fewer Black people who work in this space, minimizing visibility and making inclusive solutions harder to implement.

Third Way undertook this research to understand and contextualize how Black Americans view climate and policies to address the crisis, and how those views compare across different demographics within the community. We began this work with the full understanding that Black Americans are not a monolith, and that there are as many views in the Black community about climate in this country as there are Black Americans. It is critical to understand the salience of the issue in the community as well as how those views differ across gender, socio-economic, and generational lines.

Over the course of a month, with the assistance of GBAO, we held nine focus groups—three each in Detroit, Philadelphia, and Greensboro, with participants who lived in and around those cities—to understand how each of these diverse Black communities felt about climate change, environmental justice, and clean energy.

Qualitative research presents some limitations. While we anticipate that insights from the focus groups are relevant at a broader scale, this information is not statistically significant, so the views participants expressed may vary from the overall sentiment of these demographics. Still, the focus group participants, who self-identified as voters and were not environmentally engaged, offer a window into how individual people in groups contextualize an issue.

## **Our Focus Groups at a Glance**

### **Detroit, MI: February 11, 2020**

5:30 pm – Group 1: Non-College Educated, Women, 50+ years old

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7:00 pm – Group 2: Non-College Educated, Men, 50+ years old

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8:30 pm – Group 3: College Educated, Mixed Gender, <50 years old

### **Philadelphia, PA: February 13, 2020**

5:30 pm – Group 1: College Educated, Men, Age Mix

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7:00 pm – Group 2: Non-College Educated, Women, <50 years old

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8:30 pm – Group 3: Non-College Educated, Men, <50 years old

### **Greensboro, NC: February 18, 2020**

5:30 pm – Group 1: College Educated, Women, Age Mix

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7:00 pm – Group 2: Non-College Educated, Men, <50

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8:30 pm – Group 3: Non-College Educated, Women, 50+

# Participants Know the Climate's Changing, But Other Issues Are More Immediate

“What’s climate change if I need a job?” — College-educated male, Philadelphia

“I’m thinking of whether I’m going to come back to my kids at night.” — Non-college-educated male, Philadelphia

Participants across Detroit, Philadelphia, and Greensboro were clear that they believe the climate is changing, and that the environment is getting worse. But climate change rarely arose as a top priority or concern. While it resonated as a social or environmental justice or civil rights issue for some, it did not for others.

## Signs of Climate Change

Focus group participants variously cited poor air quality, rising temperatures, and shifting seasons as indicators that the climate is changing. One female aged 50+ in Greensboro and a college-educated male from Philadelphia pointed to rising sea levels. At least one person in each city mentioned the high temperatures Antarctica was experiencing at the time. Some Greensboro participants said they had noticed an increase in extreme weather, including tornadoes.

Asthma rates are higher among Black Americans, as they are disproportionately exposed to more air pollution. Several participants in Philadelphia and Greensboro and one in Detroit discussed aggravated asthma or worsening allergy symptoms in relation to climate change. One female from Philadelphia said that while she didn’t notice anything different about her physical environment, she was only recently impacted by the asthma she’s had from birth. Now, her chest gets tight “from going outside, smelling fumes from Lord knows what.” Multiple females from Philadelphia said their allergies now lasted all year long, while one Greensboro female aged 50+ said her doctor had newly prescribed her something for her allergies every day.

## Priorities

With the exception of two or three participants across Detroit and Greensboro, climate change and the environment did not surface as a top issue among focus group participants in the three cities. Health care, education, racism, school debt, and crime were among the top priorities named in the focus groups.

As several females under 50 from Philadelphia said, climate change might be on their mind, but it's something they can't control. To others, climate change seemed like a far-off problem, one that isn't top of mind. Males under 50 in Greensboro said they're too tired to worry about it, while one male aged 50+ in Detroit spoke of "dramatic climate change" occurring in Louisiana (where the focus group facilitator shared he was from) but said it's not a concern for him, because he's not currently confronted by it. Participants under 50 from Detroit said they didn't often see climate change discussed on social media.

Some were even more explicit about why climate did not rise to a top-level concern. "I'm worried about, you know, going to the store and back in one piece," one female from Philadelphia said.

"Basically, I'm too poor to care," said a non-college-educated male, also from Philadelphia. "Truthfully, I can go worry about global warming and all that, but that's not going to feed my kids. That's not going to pay my bills."

That climate wasn't rising to a top concern in their city did not surprise the mixed-age male college-educated group in Philadelphia. Inner-city residents aren't worried about milder weather in February and might not acknowledge it as much as those on the coast, said one.

Few participants brought up the federal government as impacting their views on climate change. But one college-educated female from Greensboro said that "you kind of know it's useless" to worry about climate change. If the administration is saying climate change isn't real, she said, "who's going to listen?"

## Personal Impact

Participants shared various ways they feel that changes to the climate or environment are impacting their own lives. One non-college educated male in Philadelphia said his landscaping business is negatively financially impacted and slowed down from April to June if the grass no longer grows until June or July. A male under 50 from Detroit said he works for an energy company that relies on outages and was detrimentally impacted by warmer temperatures in winter. One college-educated female in Greensboro said she now had to deal with stormwater washing away her road—an issue she did not face 15 years ago.

College-educated Greensboro females said climate change is an urgent issue. The group agreed with a participant who said the condition of the environment and everyone's health "are tied closely together."

Some said they were concerned about climate change or were motivated to take personal steps due to parenthood or concern for future generations. "It makes me scared for my kids," said one Greensboro female aged 50+.

Political and technical terminology associated with climate change was mostly unfamiliar in the focus groups. "The Green New Deal" barely registered with participants across the three cities. The term "fracking" was more familiar to a handful of participants, who expressed mostly negative opinions and perceptions about it. College-educated males in Philadelphia were more familiar with fracking.

## **Environmental Justice**

Focus group participants differed in the degree to which they thought that Black communities are disproportionately affected by air pollution, and only some participants saw climate change as an environmental or social justice issue. Others began to see a connection between climate and justice through the questions the facilitator posed.

Environmental justice variously invoked saving trees, cleaning up polluted water, and environmental harm caused by a person or corporation. Participants differed over who or what is to blame for climate change, citing capitalism, people at large, government, and business and corporations.

Many from the focus groups said they thought climate change affects everyone the same and did not think racism played a role. "We all breathe the same air," said one Greensboro female aged 50+. Males in Greensboro under 50 said that climate change and the environment affect everyone equally and "doesn't discriminate," while one female aged 50+ in Detroit said asthma rates are rising globally and did not think the increase was specific to Black Americans.

Some disagreed. A non-college educated male aged 50+ in Detroit said the situation in Flint, Michigan proves that Black Americans are affected differently by these issues. He cited a disparity in proportion and speed in response to wildfires in the Amazon compared to Louisiana, where issues predominantly affect Black Americans.

Among Detroit females aged 50+, several participants did not think climate change impacts Black Americans differently. But one female in the group said factories are more likely to be in poorer neighborhoods than the suburbs: "Anything that's negative is going to impact Black people more so than white people." Similarly, college-educated participants in

Philadelphia and Greensboro said city waste disposal sites are located where minorities live. “When you think about it that way, I think it is a social justice [issue],” said a male in the Philadelphia group.

Asked whether Black Americans are impacted differently by these issues, one non-college educated male in Philadelphia pointed to the oil refineries in Southwest Philadelphia that had exploded, where Black Americans near it “all grew up with asthma.” Another in the group said he has a harder time breathing in West Philadelphia than in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. “It’s the air quality.” Still another nodded and replied, “I only have asthma inside of this city.”

Similarly, a few others thought of climate change as a class issue. A male under 50 in Greensboro said wealthier people can afford to go green or clean up their community, while others can’t do much about it.

But others bristled at the question of whether climate change affects Black Americans differently than others. One non-college educated female aged 50+ in Greensboro said it affects “poor people, period,” adding that specifically saying “Black people” are impacted differently places Black Americans in a bubble. Non-college-educated males in the city also rejected placing climate change in the same realm as social justice; one called them “water and oil” and said climate change can’t be called “more important than Black people getting killed in the streets.”

## **Perception of Political Parties**

Participants in the focus groups often expressed disillusionment with both political parties, both in general and on the issue of climate change. They described the Democratic Party as “divided,” “middle class,” “inclusive,” “fair,” “greedy,” “weak,” “bipolar,” “bipartisan,” “taxes,” and “better of two evils.” In contrast, they described the Republican Party as “racist,” “upper class,” “money,” “greedy,” “united,” “modern-day gangster,” and “Not very concerned with African-Americans.”

One non-college educated male under 50 in Greensboro said he is “actually quite fond of the Republican Party...I agree on, if you work for what you work for, that’s what you get, and if you don’t work, then you should not eat.”

Many said that neither party does a better job on environmental issues than the other. “They’re both the same,” said a non-college educated man under 50 in Greensboro, while a college-educated male in Philadelphia said, “Democrats are claiming to be more aware and more active, but it’s just talk to me.”

“It’s probably not a priority to them because, like, it’s not a priority to us,” a female under 50 from Detroit said of both parties.

A male aged 50+ in Detroit also said that Democrats do a better job on the environment. “Under the Republicans, they’re dismantling everything that was put in place to try to save the environment.” A college-educated female in Greensboro said that Democrats are better on these issues, adding: “I’m not going to say that they’re where they need to be.”

Another female in the same group said that Democrats are “not pretending that it doesn’t exist.”

## Participants Said Few People Talk to Them About Climate Change

**“Climate change in general needs a seller.”** — College-educated male under 50, Detroit

**“I only hear of it when it’s election time.”** — Non-college-educated man under 50, Greensboro

Our focus group research suggests that climate change has a significant visibility problem in Black American communities.

Participants said no one is talking specifically to them about climate change or the environment. Multiple participants said that when they hear people address climate change, the people say things like “it affects us all” or speak in terms of global climate change. Still others said they only hear it addressed when election season comes around, as a talking point.

A college-educated male in Philadelphia said he had heard several politicians—who didn’t win, he clarified—discuss environmental racism in the South. A college-educated female in Greensboro said candidates bring it up at political forums she attends, but she wonders whether they do so because they really care or because they’re running for office.

Others suggested they were too disengaged on the issue to have their viewpoints heard. One non-college-educated male in Philadelphia said that no one speaks for him on climate

change since “I don’t even speak for myself because I’m out of the loop,” while a college educated female in Greensboro said: “I don’t think I’ve voiced my opinion, so I haven’t given [elected officials] the opportunity to hear.”

Participants variously suggested an effective climate message would be one that addresses their community’s individual needs, conveys the impact of global climate change on local communities, engages more closely with local residents, and places action over words.

“I think they could go into the neighborhoods and ask the people what they want to see,” said a female aged 50+ in Detroit. A non-college educated male from Philadelphia said someone specifically of influence could hold a neighborhood town hall meeting on the issue, which he said he would be more likely to attend than a regular meeting.

Participants did not see Black American climate leaders in the climate movement; the people they named as messengers on climate were often white. They often named former Vice President Al Gore as someone they either heard speak about the environment or as someone they would trust or listen to on it. Females in Philadelphia and Greensboro said they would trust Barack Obama on the issue. Even so, said one female in Philadelphia, for Black Americans, “actions speak louder than words.”

Participants in Greensboro also named, as future potential messengers for climate, the Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II (president of the North Carolina State Conference of the NAACP) and anyone brought in to talk at the local YMCA, while participants in two groups from Detroit said they trust Rep. Rashida Tlaib on the issue. A non-college educated male in Philadelphia said he trusted their local energy company, which had already aired commercials about how they could reduce power usage in residences, while another in the group cited the Clean Water Coalition. But non-college-educated females aged 50+ in Greensboro did not trust their utility on climate change. Scientists did not often come up as trusted figures on climate, but some associated them with the term “environmentalist.”

A college-educated male under 50 in Detroit said a celebrity or actor, such as Denzel Washington, George Clooney, or Leonardo DiCaprio in particular, would be successful climate communicators. Another in the group said that LeBron James would resonate: “He could transcend White, Black, everybody—kids, adults.”

## **Clean Energy Resources Seemed Out of Reach to Participants**

**“I think you need space, and I think that’s something that Philadelphia doesn’t have.”** — College-educated male, Philadelphia

**“See, you got to follow the money in things like this. Where are the rich people at? There sure will be clean energy jobs.”** — Non-college-educated male, Greensboro

The clean energy industry lacks diversity. Despite constituting 13.4% of the US population, out of the 3.3 million workers in clean energy in 2019, Black Americans only made up only 9.1% of that workforce, which includes solar, wind, biomass, hydroelectricity, nuclear energy, energy efficiency, transmission, distribution, and storage. (This number does not reflect employment in low-carbon vehicle production and maintenance.)

Participants differed over whether clean energy resources and jobs are available to them. While some participants in Detroit said that there are clean energy jobs in their area, one college-educated female cited recruitment problems in one company’s effort to enroll students in a related work program. College-educated females in Greensboro did not know of clean energy job opportunities in the area; one said it’s “not common knowledge” whether these jobs exist.

A male aged 50+ in Detroit said he did not see the “educational component” present to train younger people into the jobs. And even if clean energy jobs are available in their area, “the problem is, you’ve got to go to school for them,” said one non-college educated male in Philadelphia, adding that he didn’t intend on being a “smart, broke person for those couple of years” to obtain that one job. But he later added that if he received that training during high school, “that makes more sense.”

Males under 50 in Greensboro agreed that that there were not many clean energy jobs available in their area, or in the South generally, as opposed to somewhere like California. One male in the group said it’s expensive to go completely green and that he can’t afford solar paneling. The group agreed these kinds of resources should be provided to people.

Multiple participants in Philadelphia cited companies calling or knocking on their door to offer solar installations for sale. While participants’ perceptions of renewable energy were positive, most had concerns about nuclear power, which they variously called unsafe or dangerous, with long-term waste disposal problems. For some, nuclear energy evoked nuclear bombs. One male under 50 in Greensboro said in the documentaries he watches,

“they always put the nuclear plants in impoverished areas.” But in Greensboro, two college-educated females said they had grown up next to nuclear plants. “It worked,” one said of the plants. “It’s a source.” One non-college-educated male in Philadelphia, describing a senior project he’d conducted on nuclear energy, called it “50-50” and said “it’s a great renewable energy source, if you know how to regulate it.”

## **Conclusion**

This qualitative research only scratches the surface on what can be learned about Black Americans’ sentiment toward climate change and the environment. But it is evident that while Black Americans care about climate change, advocates, policymakers, and business and community leaders have an enormous amount of work to do in ensuring that Black communities have access to clean energy resources and jobs and that their voices are heard regarding health issues from pollution in their communities.

We need additional research to explore the sentiment among Black Americans around specific clean energy policy preferences and the best messages and messengers to engage and activate Black communities on climate, as well as whether the coronavirus pandemic has altered Black Americans’ trust in science and elected officials. We hope to explore this and other topics in future research.

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