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Michigan Voters in Focus: Insights from Key Clean Energy Focus Groups



Mary Sagatelova, Senior Advocacy Advisor, Emily Becker, Deputy Director of Communications for the Climate & Energy Program

With its rich manufacturing legacy and robust clean energy laws, Michigan is the ultimate case study for how everyday Americans see the energy transition. From NIMBYism to cost concerns to the simple fear of change, clean energy projects in Michigan, like in many parts of the nation, face an uphill battle to community acceptance.

For clean energy investments to succeed in Michigan and elsewhere, communities have to enthusiastically welcome these projects. They have to understand that the potential risks—of changing their local landscape or trying out an unfamiliar technology—are worth it and know that, when we build and deploy clean energy in America, our communities see better-paying jobs, lower energy costs, and more reliable electricity.

To understand how Michiganders are thinking about clean energy investments, we partnered with Impact Research to conduct a series of focus groups.

Conducted August 7-8, these groups included a total of 20 Michigan swing voters from three groups with significant sway in the upcoming election: non-college white women, ages 30-60, Black men, ages 18-34, and white voters from union households, ages 40-60.

Takeaways

- Michiganders, like most Americans, are worried about rising costs. They feel that the country is on the wrong track. By contrast, they almost universally express optimism about Michigan's future.
- Three and a half years later, Michiganders are largely unaware of the Biden-Harris Administration's domestic energy agenda and aren't familiar with Michigan's new clean energy laws.
- Michiganders see clean energy as the energy of tomorrow—but they're looking for candidates who speak the problems of today. Many participants felt clean energy technologies weren't yet ready for prime time.

Fearful for Country and Economy—but Michiganders Remain Hopeful for their Home State:

Across all groups, participants shared concerns that the country is headed in the wrong direction, citing skyrocketing costs for groceries, housing, and unyielding inflation. They were pessimistic and worried about the future. Many expressed particular concern about stagnant wages amid rising household costs.

However, participants felt differently about Michigan. Many expressed optimism about the state's future, its economy, and the health of its communities. Our Michiganders believe their state and local communities are faring better than the rest of the country amid rising prices. Members of our union group attributed some of that optimism to the presence of stable, good-paying union jobs in Michigan.

and expressed gratitude that their unions have made it somewhat easier to make ends meet. Where they saw strife in the rest of the country, participants saw an easier life in Michigan.

Union Carpenter from Monroe, Michigan on why things feel more stable in Michigan than in the US writ large: "If you have a good, union job, you can have a decent living wage."

Pessimism Prompts Political Uncertainty

While our focus groups were small and specifically recruited to include swing voters, we saw major frustrations with the country's current political direction.

In our group of white, non-college-educated women, only one woman in our group confidently leaned toward Trump. Two women favored Vice President Harris, while three planned to support Robert F. Kennedy Jr. One remained undecided.

Among Black men in Michigan, only half of the Black men in our group fully supported the Democratic candidate. Though participants laughed off the idea of voting for Trump, they weren't universally committed to voting for Harris, and half remain undecided.

Union households also showed hesitancy: only one respondent leaned toward Harris, one toward Trump, and five were on the fence.

Michiganders Largely Unaware of Biden-Harris Energy Record and Clean Energy Legislation in Michigan

Participants were mostly unaware of the Biden-Harris Administration's energy record, including historic fossil fuel production or the passage of pro-clean energy legislation like the Inflation Reduction Act.

Participants expressed more familiarity with the Administration's work on electric vehicles, but their perceptions weren't positive. Many expressed the inaccurate belief that President Biden has supported a national EV mandate, noting that they felt such a policy was either premature or entirely inappropriate.

Though most were dismissive of electric vehicles participants expressed more openness to other clean energy technologies. Many mentioned that clean energy technologies, like wind turbines and solar panels, are visible in their communities. Multiple participants acknowledged that the transition to clean energy seems inevitable.

But doubts persist about the efficacy, affordability, and reliability of the energy transition, with many participants raising concerns about renewable intermittency. Given these concerns, participants felt making a personal switch to clean energy (i.e. installing solar panels at home, purchasing a heat pump) wasn't feasible for their families.

None of the participants were aware that Michigan had recently passed clean energy standards.

Participants were also unfamiliar with specific changes that have made it easier to build clean energy projects in the state. After learning about this legislation from our moderators—who presented arguments in favor and against the new law—participants largely supported clean energy siting reforms, noting the importance of property owners having the final say on how they use their land, including the decision to build clean energy projects on former agricultural land. Support was strongest in the group of Black men and Union household members.

Our group of non-college-educated women, however, was less open. They expressed concern about clean energy changing the landscape in their communities and felt wind and solar projects were an eye-sore. Their primary opposition stemmed from NIMBY-ism, rather than more technical concerns about the reliability of clean energy or household costs.

A non-college White woman from Parchment, Michigan, on why she doesn't see clean energy technologies as personally attainable: "I'm not going to live 100 years to be able to pay off solar panels because they're so expensive, so they wouldn't really offset what I would save in energy costs."

Michiganders Remain Skeptical of EVs

While participants were generally unfamiliar with the Administration's clean energy policies, they expressed greater familiarity with the Administration's commitment to EV manufacturing and deployment. Electric vehicles came up almost immediately among participants, and their skepticism was palpable. Many cited concerns about the high upfront costs of switching to an EV, fears about the cars' limited range, and skepticism that Michigan's electric grid can handle the added strain of widespread EV deployment. When asked to describe the typical EV buyer, participants described

affluent tech workers, not working-class Michiganders. They felt an EV wasn't a practical choice for a working family in Michigan.

Opposition to EVs fell into two distinct camps: those who were ideologically opposed and those with more practical or technical reservations. Those with ideological objections viewed EVs as symbols of Left-wing ideals and an example of government overreach. They refused to accept that there might be any benefit to purchasing an EV.

Participants with more practical concerns understood that EVs could lower their household costs and create new opportunities for domestic manufacturing. But they weren't convinced that EVs are affordable or practical for them—or that Michigan's auto industry and local infrastructure are ready for mass EV manufacturing and adoption.

None of our participants expressed straight-forward and complete support for EVs. All raised questions—but those with ideological issues with electric vehicles will be much harder to convince to support the transition than those with practical or technical concerns.

A Black male swing voter from Detroit, Michigan, on support for EV manufacturing: "We're the motor city. And if we say we aren't moving to electric vehicles, another city will. We will no longer be the motor city."

Michigan's Auto Industry Gets Mixed Reviews

Participants see value in Michigan's auto industry, especially those in union jobs or working for the Big Three—Ford, General Motors, and Stellantis—but feel that these opportunities are increasingly rare. For generations, auto manufacturing has been central to Michigan's economy. As the industry becomes increasingly automated, overseas auto manufacturers become stronger, and EVs become more common, participants fear not only losing their jobs but also their way of life. Many pointed to high turnover in the auto industry, particularly at Stellantis, and noted that the Big Three have scaled back their EV investments compared to a few years ago. Importantly, they are broadly skeptical about the role that EVs will play in the future of the auto industry and do not believe Michigan automakers would suffer if they did not invest in EVs.

When asked about Michigan's battery plants and their potential connections to Chinese government-owned companies, reactions were mixed. Some participants noted concern about relying on another country for critical technology, while others viewed international ties as necessary when it comes to

advanced technology. Overall, they want to see local job creation prioritized and for politicians to keep the auto industry strong in Michigan.

Drawn to Practical Clean Energy Messaging

We tested different arguments for supporting clean energy technologies and found that the most effective messages put consumer benefits front and center. By framing clean energy as a solution to their most pressing concerns—economic opportunity, job security, and reducing everyday expenses—the arguments feel more relatable and motivating. As we've seen in [other polling](#), we found that participants gravitated toward messages that frame clean energy as a way to achieve energy independence, create high-paying jobs that don't require a college degree, lower energy costs, and improve public health for future generations.

Environmental messaging, however, was widely rejected. Non-college-educated white women and union households were generally uninterested, while Black men were the most resistant, describing it as performative and pandering.

A Black Swing Voter in Lansing, Michigan, expressing frustration with environmental justice messaging, which highlights the disproportionate impact of pollution on Black and Brown communities: "What's the difference? If everyone is driving gas-guzzling vehicles, why do [impacts on us] have to be singled out in this situation? It sounds like a political tool."

Bottom Line

Swing voters in Michigan understand the potential of clean energy, but are cautious about moving too quickly and worried that a rapid shift would leave them paying the price. They are looking for leaders who understand their biggest concerns and are focused on addressing their immediate needs—like good-paying jobs, lower costs, and more economic opportunities. This election presents a critical opportunity for candidates to connect with these concerns.