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Red Light, Green Light: The Do's and Don'ts of Clean Energy Communication



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

Third Way's Climate and Energy program has led the conversation on clean energy messaging in the 2024 election, using public opinion polling to help focus messaging on how clean energy can uplift our communities and strengthen our economy, not simply cut emissions. Below, we've included insights on winning the conversation on climate and clean energy, securing support from the broadest possible coalition for pro-clean energy policy. Green means go; yellow means handle with dexterity; red means stop.

Green Light: Be 'Economy First' on Climate

Climate activists dominate messaging here, emphasizing environmental impact and emissions reductions. That's a losing strategy since Americans don't rank climate as a top priority and instead

rank reducing the cost of living as their number one priority for policymakers.

Our polling shows Americans are more supportive of climate initiatives when economic benefits lead the conversation. Frame clean energy as a gateway to jobs, growth, beating China, lowering consumer costs, and energy independence—and nix the messaging on emissions reductions.

Green Light: Promote All-of-The-Above on Energy Strategies

Americans want a diverse, affordable mix of energy sources—right now, that means clean and fossil fuels. The Biden-Harris Administration has presided over an energy boom on both. Lean into those wins as wins for families' wallets, and don't succumb to pressure from those in the environmental movement who dismiss the importance of lowering the cost of fossil fuels. Americans' first priority for energy is reliability and cost, not climate.

Green Light: Show Up and Highlight ALL Energy-Producing Communities

The US produced more oil in 2023 than any country in history. Pennsylvania produced more natural gas in 2021, 2022, and 2023, respectively than ever. These are Biden-Harris accomplishments while helping America become cleaner and less carbon-intensive. Visit energy communities revitalized by clean energy investments—like the Palisades nuclear plant in Michigan, natural gas sites in Pennsylvania, and factories in the Battery Belt.

Green Light: Energy Independence

By any objective measure, America is an energy-independent nation under Biden-Harris, and energy independence is popular and a GOP talking point. Don't shy away from talking about it just because it may offend some environmental activists. Embrace permitting reform that increases US capacity to produce, transport, and transmit energy, especially since most of it will be clean.

Green Light: Bashing the Oil Industry

Despite record gas and oil production, voters feel they are being pursued by oil and gas interests. You can be pro-all-of-the-above and still hammer big oil.

Yellow Light: The Words “Climate Change”

As noted above, climate change is, unfortunately, not a priority for most Americans, with just 4% listing it as their top issue facing America today. A plurality are worried that climate solutions will cost them money and, if so, feel the US shouldn't act on climate at all. That's an outcome we can't afford.

To build support for clean energy investments, steer clear of worn-out messaging on climate change and lean into the economic benefits of clean energy manufacturing and deployment, emphasizing high-paying jobs, a manufacturing boom, and lower energy costs in the future.

Yellow Light: EVs

EVs are comparatively unpopular in the US, with over a third of Americans saying there is no chance they'd even consider buying an EV in the next ten years. And there's a heavy partisan split among these folks, according to the Republican-led EV Politics Project, which highlights Republican skepticism toward electric vehicles. Americans are skittish about spending their hard-earned cash on a car they view as untested and unpredictable. But they're open to the idea that EVs can help revitalize America's manufacturing core and uplift the Heartland.

We don't recommend leading your clean energy message with talk of EVs. But if you choose to highlight electric vehicles, emphasize their contribution to our economy and value in the US's ongoing economic competition with China in the global auto market.

Red Light: Declaring a Climate Emergency

A plurality of Americans do not support this new authority even when provided with positive information explaining what it could mean. They believe it is an overreach and radical. That's the diametric opposite of what Americans are looking for from the US energy strategy—affordable, reliable, and diverse energy that keeps costs low and lights on.