

**POLLING** Published June 12, 2019 • 9 minute read

# The New Climate Consensus



*Josh Freed, Senior Vice President for the Climate and Energy Program*

American voters have woken up on climate change. There is now a consensus that the climate is in crisis and that action is needed to address it. A [Monmouth University poll](#) from just after the 2018 election showed that a majority of Republicans now join the overwhelming share of Democrats in supporting government action on climate change. And Third Way's [polling of the Democratic primary electorate](#) has shown that climate change is a top issue in the race to pick the party's nominee.

But there is at least one resilient divide within the Democratic Party on key issues. This divide is a product of today's digital politics, with those very active on social media holding vastly different views than the majority who are less active online. On climate, this has created the perception that Democrats who are active on social media, or *Extremely Online*, demand a narrow renewables-only approach, and on the other side, the majority of Democrats prefer a less restrictive approach that takes advantages of additional tools to fight climate change.

But are Democrats really so split on how to address the crisis? To test this, Third Way partnered with Change Research on a survey of the first voters who will weigh in on the 2020 primary: likely Democratic primary voters in the early primary states of Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada, and South Carolina, as well as the Super Tuesday states of California and Texas. Using Change's innovative recruitment process, this survey exclusively polled active users of social media channels like Facebook. This allowed us to test what *Extremely Online* Democrats actually believe we should do to address the climate crisis when they're not playing to the Twittersphere online.

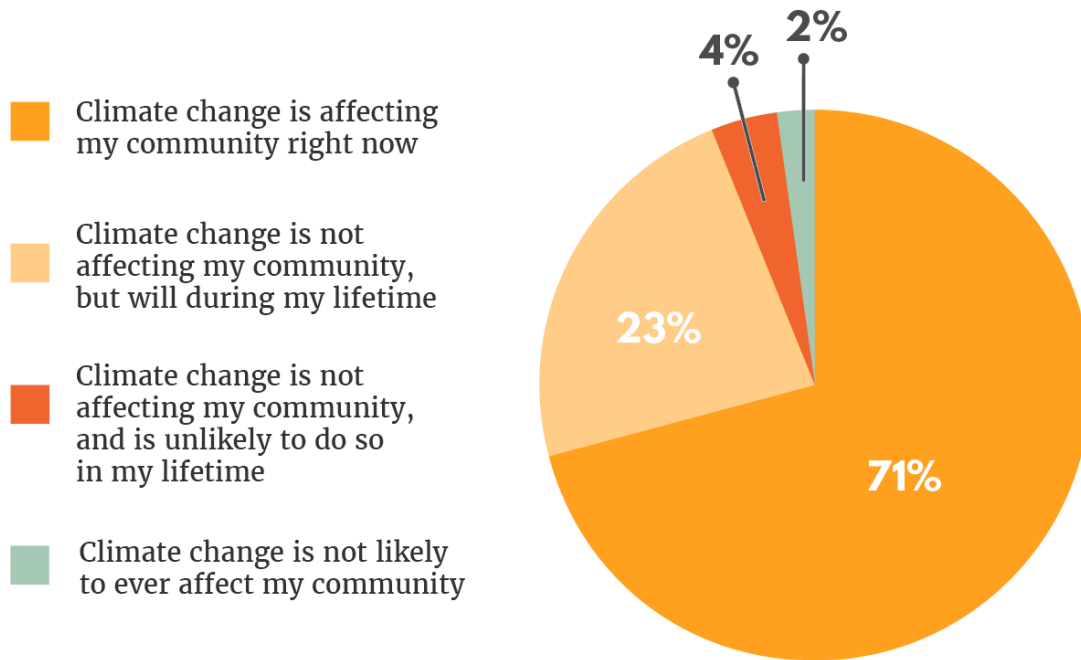
The results show that these voters feel an urgency to address the climate crisis, which is motivated by a sense that it is affecting their communities right now. They also recognize the scale of the challenge and that it cannot be "solved" in a few short years. Because of this sense of urgency and scale, even *Extremely Online* Democrats call for a technology-inclusive approach to combating climate change, including nuclear and carbon capture, over a renewables-only path. They are willing to bear financial costs to address the crisis, and they're optimistic that in doing so, we can create a more livable planet and dynamic economy. Finally, they are supportive of the Green New Deal, but to them, any plan to address climate change should focus on cutting emissions and growing the green economy.

## **Voters are feeling the effects of the climate crisis right now but they recognize it can't be 'solved' in a few short years**

*Extremely Online* Democrats have a sense of urgency to combat the climate crisis now because they are feeling tangible effects of it today. Seventy-one percent say that climate change is affecting their community *right now*. They are contending with a reality that includes climate-induced natural disasters, from flooding in Iowa and Houston to a year-round wildfire season in California, as well as day-to-day effects like disrupted seasons and rising food prices. Another 23% say climate change is not affecting their community at present, but it will in their lifetime. Just six percent say it is unlikely that climate change will affect their community in their lifetime or ever.



## Which statement is closer to your view?



And this urgency is shaping voters' electoral priorities. Ninety percent of these voters say they would be more likely to vote for a candidate who makes climate change a top priority, and 57% say they would be "much more likely." Those saying they would be much more likely to support a climate candidate jumps to 63% among those under 35.

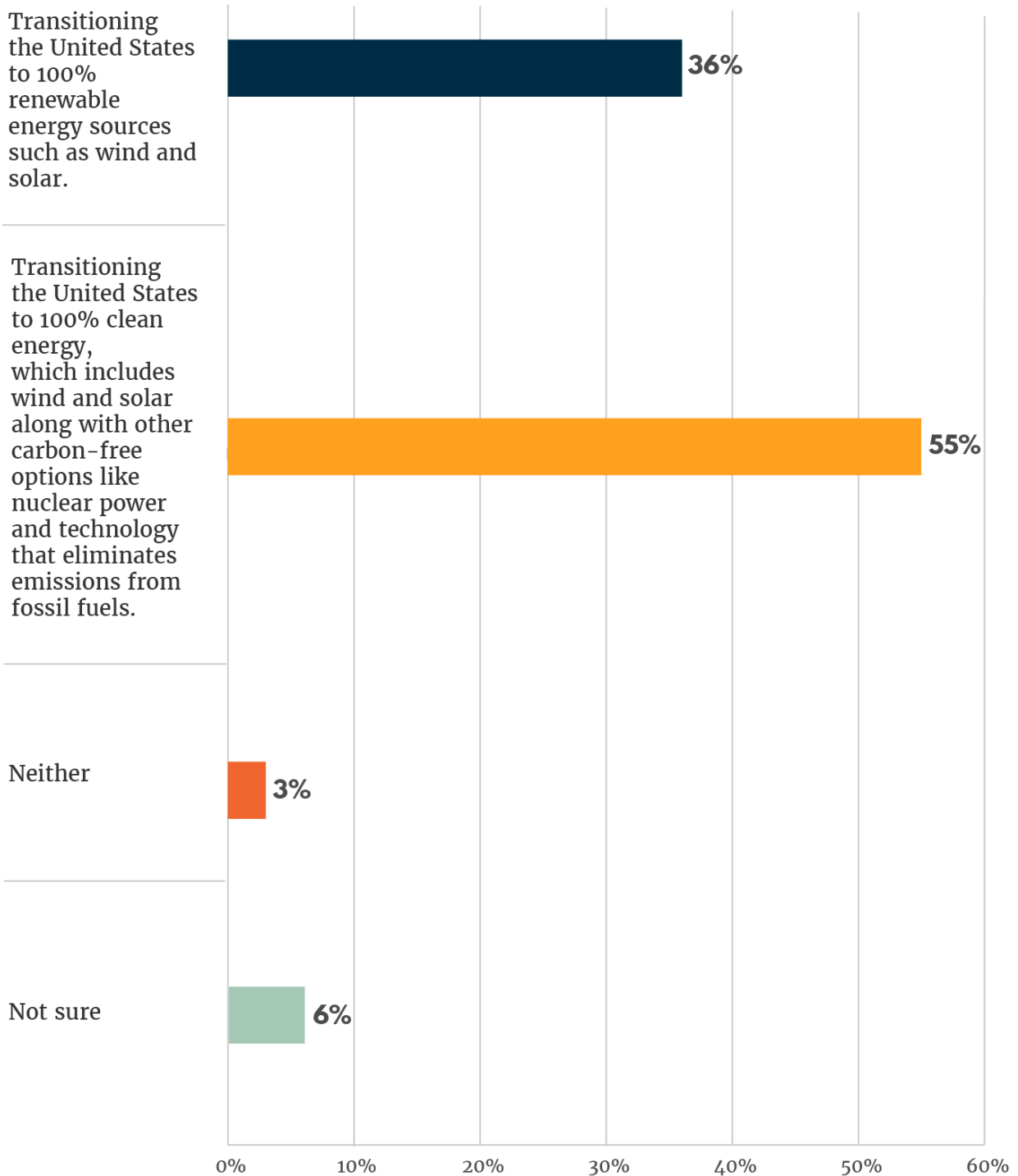
Despite this sense of urgency, these voters know that the crisis cannot be solved in a few short years. Forty-seven percent are optimistic the crisis can be solved, but they believe it won't happen until the next generation's lifetime. By comparison, just 19% say it can be done in their lifetime. But only 26% are pessimistic that we can solve the crisis at all. Most know this crisis can be solved, but also that it will require profound, structural changes to our way of life that will stretch over decades not years.

## Voters want a pragmatic, technology-inclusive approach to combating the climate crisis

*Extremely Online* Democrats have a sense of urgency to address the climate crisis, and they recognize the scale of the challenge. They understand that we need action now, but it's going to take everything we have to solve the crisis. Because of this pragmatic assessment, they strongly prefer an inclusive approach to combating the crisis, which means embracing solutions like nuclear power and carbon capture, over a narrow, renewables-only path. Specifically, 55% want the U.S. to focus on transitioning

to 100% clean energy, which means renewables but also nuclear power and carbon capture, while just 36% want renewables only. Among voters who identify climate as their top issue, this preference for 100% clean energy jumps four points to 59%. This reality contradicts the perception nurtured by many of the loudest voices on Twitter and other social media channels, where anything but 100% renewables is described as insufficient.

## Which do you think is a greater priority?



When testing messages for and against nuclear power by itself, voters favor the pro-nuclear message by a 43–30% margin. And voters under 35 prefer the pro-nuclear message by an even wider 50–22%

margin.

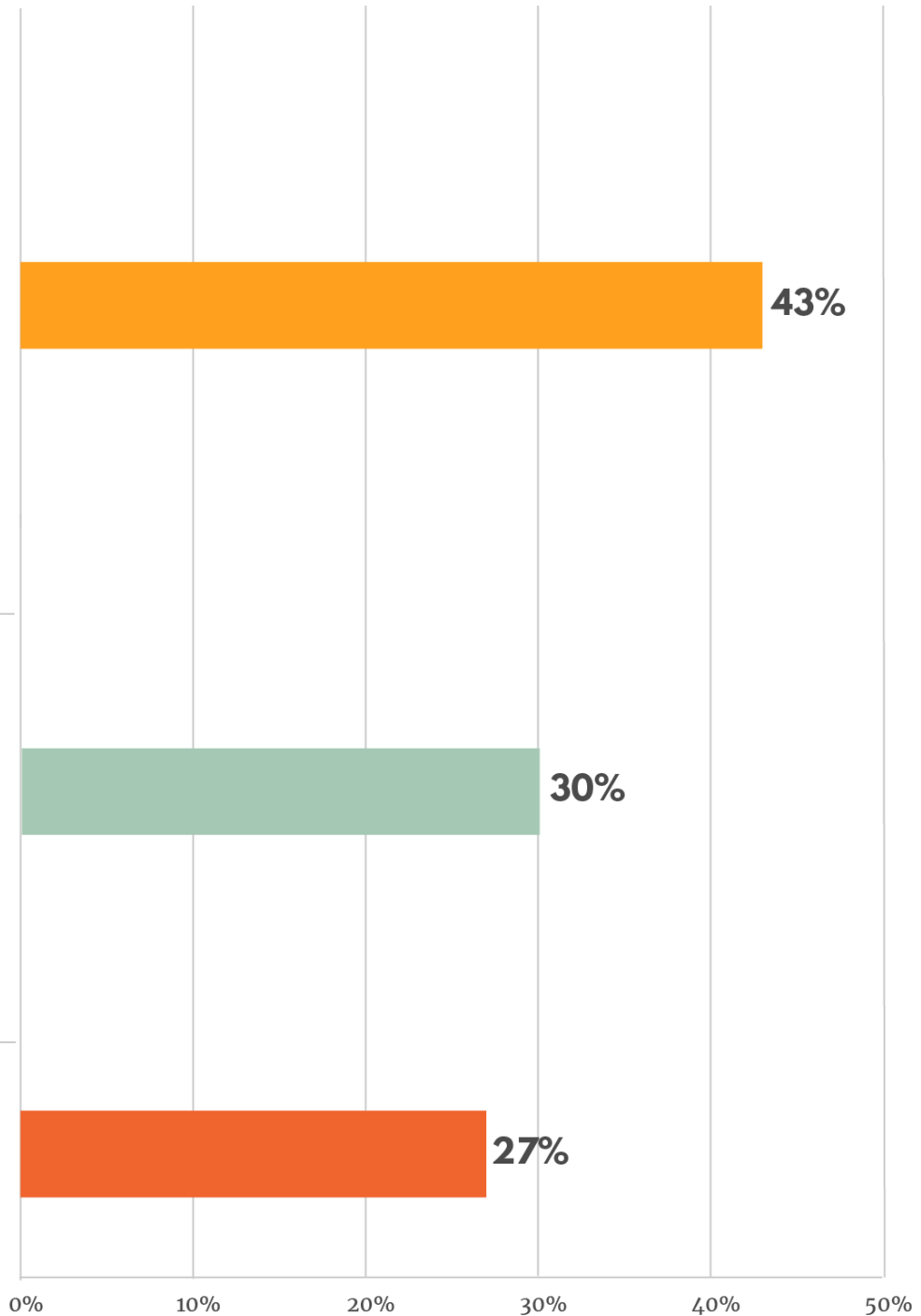


## When it comes to the issue of nuclear power, which statement do you agree with more?

Environmental organizations, like the Union of Concerned Scientists and the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, say that we need to also use nuclear power, which does not produce carbon pollution, to help address climate change.

Opponents say that nuclear power is inherently unsafe, produces toxic nuclear waste, and is too expensive to use. We should shut down nuclear power as soon as we can.

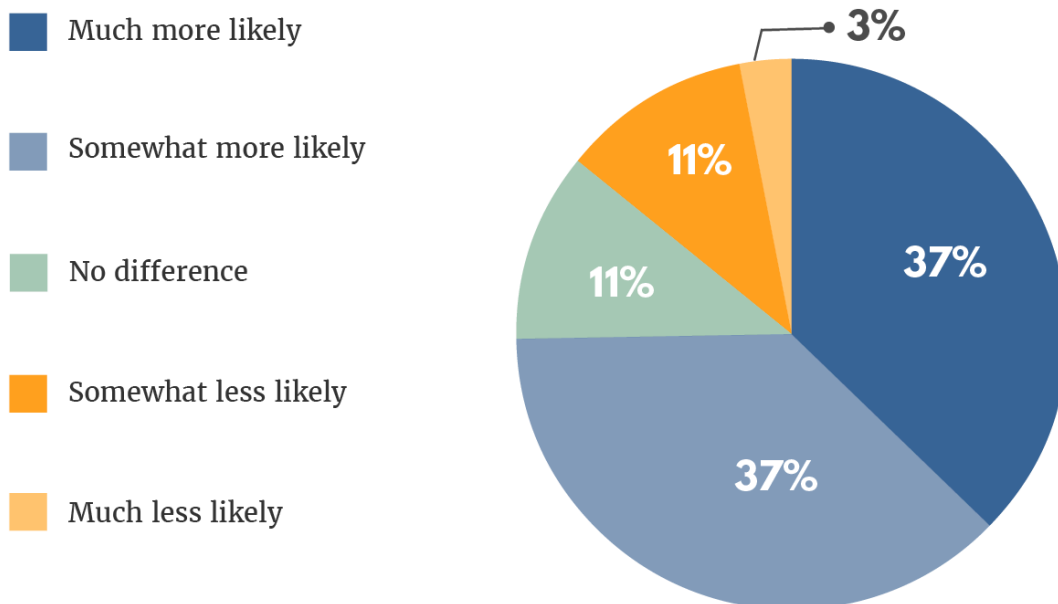
Not sure



In the same way that these voters are more likely to support a climate candidate, they are also looking for someone with a technology-inclusive plan to take on the crisis. Seventy-four percent of these voters say they would be more likely to support a candidate with a climate plan that included nuclear and carbon capture alongside renewables like wind and solar. Only 14% say they would be *less* likely to support a candidate with a technology-inclusive climate plan.



**Would you be more or less likely to support a candidate for president who included technologies like nuclear or natural gas, with filters to capture carbon pollution, in addition to renewables like wind and solar in their plan to combat climate change?**



Not only do these voters *expect* the climate crisis to take decades to solve, but they also *prefer* a realistic timeline over an aspirational but unachievable path that hopes to get there in a matter of years. Again, despite the perception that *Extremely Online* Democrats fall outside the mainstream on the climate crisis, they actually prefer the pragmatic timeline for action. Eighty-two percent express “strong support” for getting to 100% clean power in thirty years, but this dips to 70% when the timeline is cut to ten years. They view the former as credible and the latter as just not attainable. Half (48%) say it’s likely we can get to 100% clean power in 30 years, but this drops to 27% when the timeline shifts to ten years.

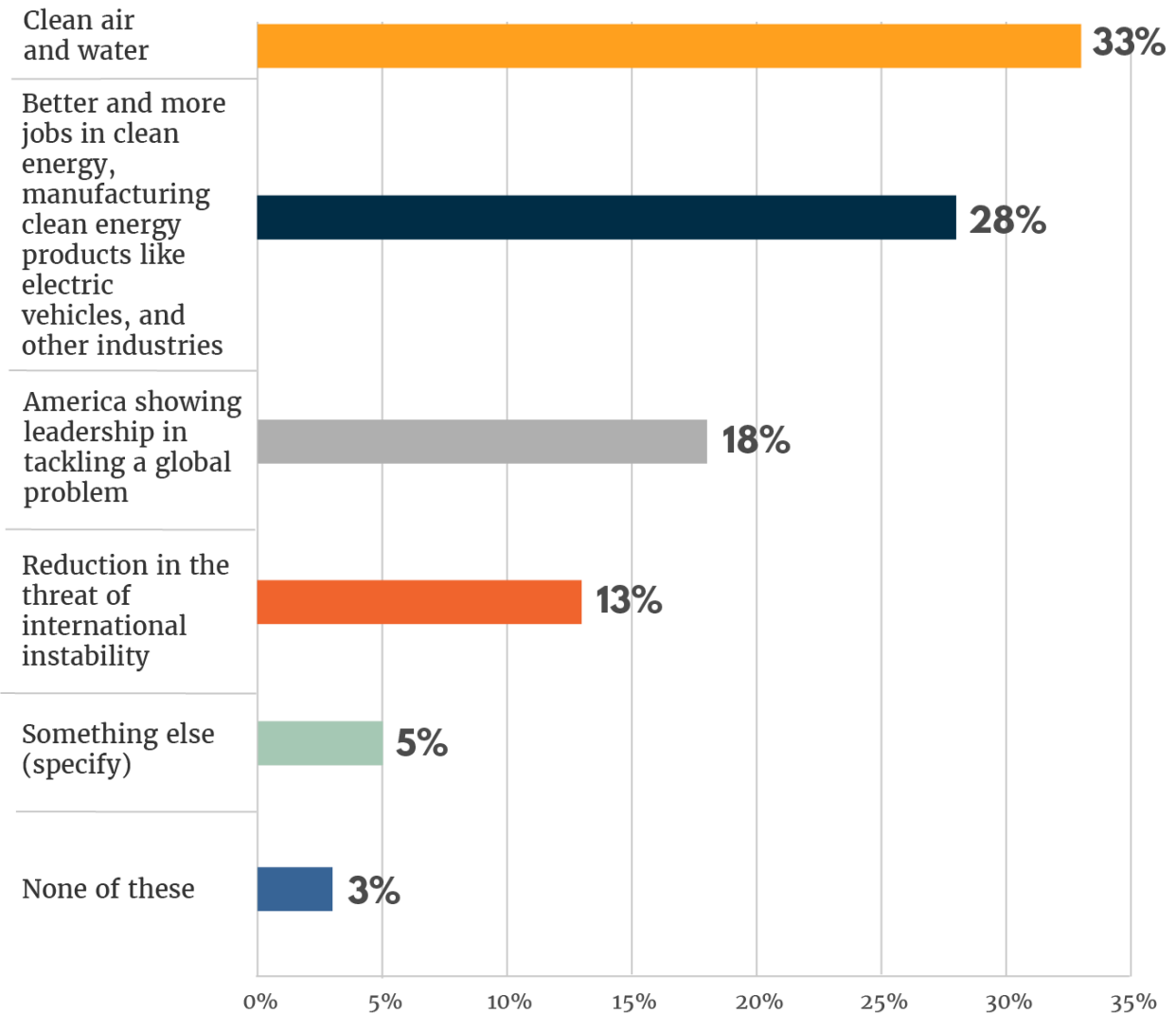
**Voters believe we can create a better future through solving the climate crisis and they will**

## **bear financial costs to make it a reality**

Voters are clear-eyed about how the climate crisis is affecting their lives today, as well as just how big of a challenge it is to solve, but they also believe we can create a better future by doing so. Voters' top motivation for addressing climate change is a more livable planet. When asked about the "biggest reward" for successfully addressing climate change, 33% cite clean air and water. Twenty-eight percent name the economic benefits of addressing climate change, such as jobs in clean energy and manufacturing like electric cars. By small margins, women are likely to cite the environment as their top motivation while men side with the economy. Fewer voters identify showing America's global leadership or reducing international instability as the main benefit of climate action.



## Which of these do you think would be the biggest reward if America was able to successfully lead a global effort to address climate change?



Importantly, these voters are willing to make personal financial sacrifices to help solve the climate crisis now, because they see long-term benefits from taking climate action. A plurality, 40%, say they would pay an extra \$20 a month (\$240/year) on their utility bill to support climate policies that work to eliminate carbon pollution. Twenty dollars a month was the top of the range provided to respondents; meaning, some number would have been willing to pay even more. Twenty-seven percent would pay an extra \$10 a month (\$120/year), 20% would pay \$5 a month (\$60/year), while just 13% say they would not support any bill increase. And when asked about the economic impact of addressing climate change, 82% say they will be better off (68% “a lot better off”) if we take action, indicating they see climate solutions as a financially smart investment, not just an expense.

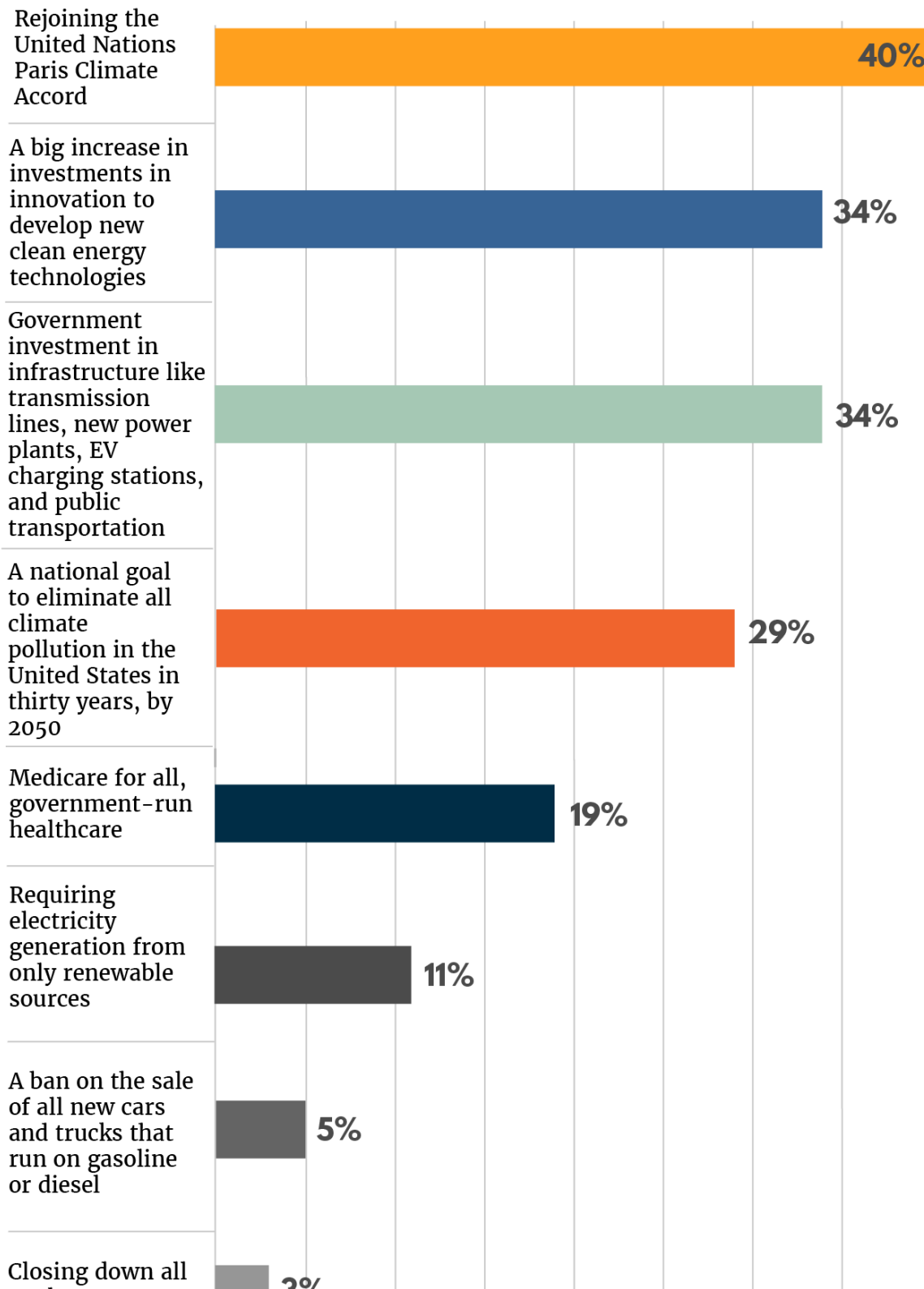
# **Voters are supportive of the Green New Deal, but when it comes to policies in a climate plan, they want to keep the focus on the *Green* part**

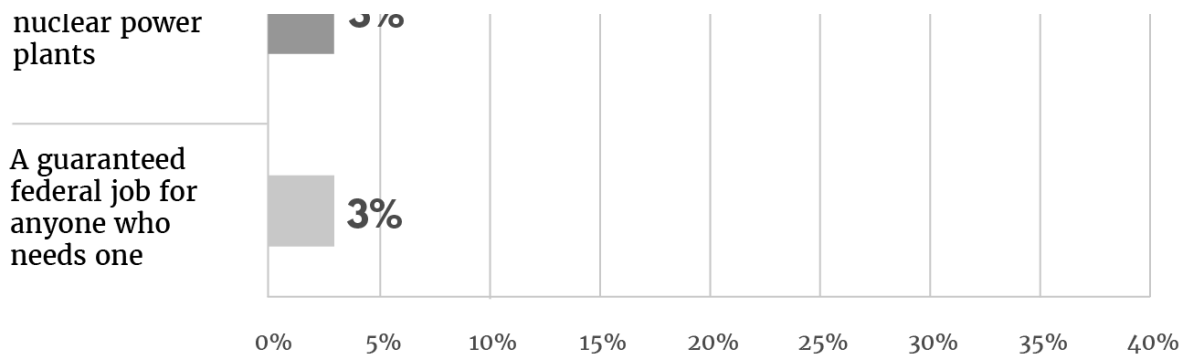
*Extremely Online* Democrats are extremely supportive of the Green New Deal. Seventy-four percent support the Green New Deal while just seven percent oppose it. A comparable number of these voters say they would be more likely to support a candidate who backs the Green New Deal (75%).

But when these same voters were asked which policies should be in a plan to combat climate change, the top choices were those that directly address emissions and the green economy. At 40%, the top priority is to rejoin the Paris Climate Accord, followed by increased investment in clean energy innovation (34%) and government investment in green infrastructure (34%).



## Which of the following do you think should be the highest priority for any plan to address climate change? Pick no more than three





## Conclusion

*Extremely Online* Democratic voters care deeply about the climate crisis that is affecting their communities right now, and because of this, they want to use every tool available to solve it. That means unleashing the power of renewable energy, but also breakthroughs in advanced nuclear and technologies like carbon capture. They also recognize the scale of the crisis, and so they know we need a real timeline for solving it that is measured in decades rather than a few short years. They are willing to bear a financial cost to solve the crisis because they remain optimistic we can create a better planet and revolutionize our economy by doing so. Finally, they support the Green New Deal, but they want a climate plan that focuses relentlessly on cutting emissions and spurring the green economy.

Climate change is one of the defining challenges of our time, and it will be one of the deciding issues of the 2020 election. The results of this poll make clear that *Extremely Online* Democrats align with the majority of Democrats on wanting a real, inclusive path for solving the climate crisis.

## Methodology

Third Way and Change Research partnered to conduct a survey of likely 2020 Democratic primary voters in the states of Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada, South Carolina, California, and Texas. The sample included 1,157 likely 2020 Democratic primary voters. This gave a margin of error of 3.6%. The survey was conducted online from April 8–13, 2019.