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Third Way/WE ACT for Environmental Justice/GreenLatinos Polling: Black and Latino Communities' Sentiment on Climate Change and the Clean Energy Transition



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Key Takeaways

In partnership with GBAO, Third Way teamed up with WE ACT for Environmental Justice and GreenLatinos in the fall of 2021 to examine how Black and Brown communities are thinking about climate change ¹ and the policies that have passed and are being proposed to address it, such as the infrastructure and jobs package put forth by President Biden and Congressional Democrats. Amid a flurry of other crises — the COVID-19 pandemic, an uneven economy, and the erosion of voting rights — Black and Brown communities continue to exist on multiple frontlines, and through our research, we seek to unravel how these complex issues influence perceptions of climate change.

From September 30 to October 13, 2021, Third Way, WE ACT, GreenLatinos, and GBAO conducted a quantitative survey among 1,809 Black and Latino voters in Nevada, Arizona, Texas, Georgia, Florida, and Pennsylvania.

Our research provides a stark warning to policymakers, advocates, and communicators that Black and Latino communities deserve better engagement on issues related to climate change. However, there are opportunities for improvement, and our topline and recommendations offer a glimmer of hope.

Here is what we found:

- **Black and Latino communities feel the impact of climate change firsthand, but overall, say the economy and job growth demand more urgent attention when asked about their top issue priorities.** While an overwhelming majority (64%) of respondents agree that they personally experience the effects of climate change, only 6% of respondents consider tackling climate change a top priority for the Biden Administration, with stronger support for prioritizing the economy and job growth (23%), among other issues.
- **Policymakers, advocates, and communicators – defined as professionals like communications directors, consultants, and press secretaries – need to do a better job engaging with Black and Latino communities on how the clean energy transition can positively impact their communities.** Our results show that while climate change remains a secondary priority for Black and Brown communities that we surveyed, they understand the inherent link between climate change solutions and economic benefits, with 72% of respondents agreeing that a clean energy transition can reduce bills and create jobs, and 80% agreeing that the transition will create millions of well-paying jobs in underserved communities. This exposes the need for policymakers, advocates, and communicators to engage earlier and better to make these links explicit.

- To better engage with Black and Latino communities on climate policy and the benefits of a clean energy transition, it's important for policymakers, advocates, and communicators to localize climate messaging to reflect various community priorities. While more than half of respondents cite personal experience with the effects of climate change, urgency to move forward with climate action varied based on tested messaging. For example, messaging framed around top community priorities like job growth and affordability outperformed other messaging by an average of 11 points. This suggests that there is an opportunity for policymakers to engage these communities around personal experience with climate change and the accruable benefits of the clean energy transition.

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1 / 27



Black and Latino communities feel the impact of climate change firsthand, but overall, say the economy and job growth demand more urgent attention when asked about their top issue priorities.

When it comes to prioritization for the Biden Administration, for the Black and Latino communities we surveyed, tackling climate change (6%) and investing in our crumbling infrastructure (5%) were low-ranking concerns compared to other issues, like “improving our economy and creating jobs” (23%) and “handling the coronavirus” (16%), among five other specific issues.

In the context of a pandemic and an economic upheaval that has disproportionately ² impacted Black and Latino communities, sentiments reflecting respondents’ prioritization of more pressing concerns are not surprising, particularly when climate messaging remains vague and disconnected from everyday life.

Respondents held an overall 60% favorable perception of the environmental justice movement, which is grounded in the understanding that the inequitable distribution of environmental hazards is inextricably linked to racial and economic discrimination.

The overwhelming majority of our respondents (64%) have personal experience with the impacts of climate change while 69% believe climate change impacts all communities equally. The perception of climate change as an issue that must be universally addressed rather than a localized problem likely contributes to low mobilization from Black and Latino communities, where more prominent matters concentrate attention away from climate.

Policymakers, advocates, and communicators need to do a better job engaging with Black and Latino communities on how the clean energy transition will positively impact their communities.

While tackling climate change ranked lower compared to other concerns, Black (66%) and Latino (55%) communities *do* consider climate change a present-day issue rather than a remote problem only facing future generations. This builds upon existing research ³ that highlights the rising concerns these communities have around climate change.

When it comes to addressing the problem, Black and Brown communities recognize the impact that climate solutions like a clean energy transition will have on their daily lives. Across both of the groups surveyed, the most persuasive statements in building support for climate action focused on broad job growth (81%), clean energy sector jobs (72%), and affordability (78%). The following statements were most successful:

*“Investments in clean infrastructure will lead to safer roads, less traffic, and more pollution-free public transit. And building new mass transit like trains and buses can help people get to work more **easily and affordably**.*

*If we address climate change the right way, with the right policies, we can **create millions of good-paying jobs in infrastructure, manufacturing, and transportation that will help underserved communities.***

*We don't need to choose between improving the economy and tackling climate change. Right now, there are over **three million Americans working in clean energy** – more than three times the number working in fossil fuels. Investing more in new technology can **reduce energy bills** and **create new, good-paying manufacturing jobs**.*

In addition to economic benefits, Black and Latino respondents appreciate the impact of climate solutions in securing a safe environment for future generations. Results indicated that the broad majority of Black (89%) and Latino (87%) respondents cited protecting future generations as a compelling reason to spur climate action:

*We don't own the planet, we borrow it. We need to take better care of our environment and address climate change, so we can leave it **clean and healthy for our children, grandchildren, and generations to come**.*

Within Black and Brown communities, a strong sense of community and focus on altruism for the benefit of future generations is common ⁴ and are likely contributing factors to our survey results.

Even amid a global pandemic, respondents felt that the Biden Administration could tackle both climate change and a robust public health response, with a majority of respondents (59%) disagreeing with this statement:

*Right now we're in the middle of a global pandemic that is ending lives, costing people jobs, and disproportionately affecting Black and Brown communities. **This is not the time to take action on something like climate change that is a long way off.***

The fact that the Black and Latino Americans we surveyed did not draw a strong connection between top priority issues – job creation, for example – and issues of infrastructure investment and climate

change speaks to a larger issue with communication. Policymakers, advocates, and communicators have done a poor job demonstrating how interwoven these issues really are, especially within Black and Brown communities.

To better engage with Black and Latino communities on climate policy and the benefits of a clean energy transition, it's important for policymakers, advocates, and communicators to localize climate messaging to reflect various community priorities

Mainstream climate conversations seldom include the voices of the Black and Latino climate community. This exclusion creates a false narrative that paints Black and Brown communities as apathetic about climate change and its consequences. However, our research highlights the opposite – a vast majority of both Black (64%) and Latino (65%) respondents stated that they have personally experienced the effects of climate change.

This makes sense given what we know about both recent and historic natural disasters that have disproportionately affected Black and Latino communities. In our research we saw that events such as these have made messaging around climate policy all the more impactful and ultimately personal. In Texas for example, a surprise polar vortex burst pipes and cut power for millions, hitting low-income communities of color the hardest ⁵ due to poorly maintained infrastructure. Meanwhile, in Florida ⁶ and Georgia ⁷, inadequately prepared areas face elevated flood risks as hurricanes and tropical storms grow in intensity. Power plants across Pennsylvania have disproportionately exposed underserved neighborhoods to polluted air quality ⁸, Communities of color continue to be most vulnerable to climate change due to racist practices like redlining, residential segregation, and systemic disinvestment that leave them less equipped to absorb the shocks of climate change.

Black and Latino audiences respond well to messaging that focuses on the need for immediate climate action; an overwhelming majority (79%) found science-based urgency compelling rationale for action on climate change:

“The world is experiencing the warmest decade in history, with the temperatures in Antarctica getting close to seventy degrees. Scientists

agree we only have about twelve years to act on climate change before the effects will be permanent.

”

This suggests an urgency and desire in these communities to act now and continue to act.

Our findings highlight the importance of strategic and localized messaging when engaging with Black and Latino communities. Questions with similar themes, yet different wording, produced very different sentiments from respondents. For example, while only 23% of Latino respondents thought climate change affected Black and Brown communities disproportionately, 74% found this statement convincing:

“Climate change affects American Latinos because of where we live and work. States like Florida, Texas, and California have experienced drought, fires, heat waves, and flooding. And Latinos are even more likely to work in jobs that feel the effects of climate change, like agriculture, manufacturing, and construction.”

These findings identify a unique opportunity for policymakers, advocates, and communicators to frame the climate change conversation to better engage with Black and Brown communities in conveying how climate action, like a clean energy transition, will positively impact their communities.

Conclusion

Black and Latino voters are living on the frontlines of a changing climate, and our research shows they are continuing to personally feel its impacts, but more immediate concerns often have greater salience. This presents an opportunity for policymakers, advocates, and communicators to better understand how to more thoughtfully engage with Black and Brown community members.

Results from our survey showcase how more localized messaging, centered on personal experience and economic impacts, can elicit a greater sense of urgency from voters in pushing for climate and clean energy policies. Additionally, messaging focused on shared responsibility for protecting the planet for ourselves and future generations resonated exceptionally well across Black and Latino communities.

As we move towards just and durable climate policy, policymakers must use specific, relatable language to speak directly to Black and Brown communities’ lived experiences of climate change while also demonstrating that a clean energy transition holds concrete benefits for their communities.

TOPICS

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ENDNOTES

1. Third Way, along with GBAO Strategies, held nine focus groups in 2020 across Detroit, Michigan, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Greensboro, North Carolina, to examine sentiment and attitudes around climate change and federal climate policies in Black communities in those cities. We found that while climate wasn't a top priority for these communities, it was increasingly becoming a concern as it related to other top issues like the economy, clean air, and health. However, the respondents in our groups in 2020, felt that policymakers were not doing a good job of engaging with their communities about climate change and the policies to address the problem.
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