

SELZER & COMPANY

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS UPPER MIDWEST FOCUS GROUPS

**Schaumburg, Illinois
West Des Moines, Iowa
Canton, Michigan**

Conducted March-April 2019

Moderated by J. Ann Selzer, Ph.D.

Commissioned by:



ENVIRONMENTAL LAW & POLICY CENTER
Protecting the Midwest's Environment and Natural Heritage

ENVIRONMENTAL LAW & POLICY CENTER
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2019 VERSION

In March and April of 2019, Selzer & Company conducted twelve focus groups with Trump voters in Schaumburg, Illinois; West Des Moines, Iowa; and Canton, Michigan. This study was designed to understand views toward environmental issues generally and clean energy, water quality, and climate change specifically two years into the Trump administration.

To be invited to the table, participants had to say they had voted for President Trump in 2016 and that they were not certain to vote to re-elect the president in 2020. This commonality ensured participants would feel comfortable offering both supportive and critical comments about the Trump administration because they were among like-minded voters.

In addition, the groups were recruited to be people without extreme views in accepting or rejecting policies designed to address climate change—they described themselves as a 4, 5, 6, 7, or 8 on a one to ten scale, where ten means climate change is real, humans contribute, and it is a threat, and one means it is a hoax and not real. By eliminating individuals on the extreme ends of the scale, it ensured we had people at the table who would wrestle with the issue, not combatively defend an unwavering stance.

Six of the groups were with women; six were with men. In Illinois, the groups were intentionally recruited to include more women without college degrees and more men with college degrees, and all groups had some range of ages under 65 years old. Segregating groups by sex helps set a mood for all to be equally engaged. Each group session lasted about two hours, and all were moderated by J. Ann Selzer.

This report is divided into three sections. The overview presents highlights of the narrative description and strategic sections of the report. The discussion section is mostly descriptive, summarizing the 12 conversations and showcasing key findings. The final section lays out strategic ideas that align with the findings—ideas to facilitate more effective communication with Trump voters on environmental issues.

OVERVIEW

While these Trump voters are reluctant to commit to a vote to re-elect President Trump, there is plenty they like about what has happened in the first two years of the Trump administration. None of that has anything to do with environmental issues. These issues are not top of mind, even though participants were fully aware they were invited to a session that would focus on the environment. While a few of the groups appear to have dug into a fair amount of research in preparation, others show little natural knowledge, making it clear it would be unwise to overestimate what Trump voters know, generally, about environmental issues.

They may not have facts at the ready, but they have stances. For many, their initial stance is one of resistance. Commonly heard were the talking points of the Republican Party and officeholders, of right-leaning personalities and influencers. They know to question sources and to push back against “crazy stats.” It is useful to know that, before engaging in discussion, the mood is not welcoming for environmental issues.

However, when they get into a thoughtful discussion, replete with charts, graphs, and datapoints, many eyes are opened. When they connect to local weather events, local troubles with water, soil, and air, and local progress on renewable energy, many take to heart that things are not at a standstill.

We sense pent-up goodwill. These voters are not just accepting of ideas that would improve environmental conditions while also addressing jobs and the economy, clean water and air, and renewable energy—many see such efforts as very important as they think about the candidates they will support in the next election. Here are key results from the exit questionnaire tallies:

- Ensuring clean water was rated very important or the single most important issue by 95 of the 107 participants.
- Protecting the environment came in second with 92.
- Job creation (87) ranked third.
- Developing wind and solar energy was lower at 61.
- Just 45 of the 107 said climate change is very important or the single most important issue for them.
- 77 out of the 107 say they are inclined to think climate change is happening and caused by human behavior, though they divide between those who think something could be done (40.5) and those who think steps should be taken (36.5).

These groups raise questions about what the Trump administration may be missing by not having much of a green agenda. As we learned in previous groups, these Trump voters are not anti-environment. There is plenty of common ground. There are doors to open the conversation. Tapping into the latent goodwill, offering ideas for individual action, making the case for the cost of inaction, showing what is already happening to move things in a positive direction—these are all ways of breaking down resistance.

Here is a summary of strategies that fit with the findings from these groups.

- Be respectful that the starting position for these voters is not welcoming, so lead with questions, not lectures. Use data in a way that demonstrates rather than preaches. Present data without presumptions.

- Focus on events and effects people are experiencing. Local is better. Extreme weather events are the stuff of everyday conversations, so they make an excellent place to open a conversation about how the frequency is increasing, what that portends for the future, and what could be done to alter what seems like a phenomenon beyond all human control. With recent floods in the Midwest, opportunities to link weather to climate change are plentiful.
- Clean water is a top priority, so use it to start conversations on the environment. Connect the dots so voters see how threats to their drinking water supply are related to other environmental hazards and to climate change. Participants are protective of their water sources, whether that be the Great Lakes in Illinois and Michigan or the Raccoon River in West Des Moines.
- Make the case that doing nothing costs a lot. Articulating that combatting climate change is in their economic self-interest aligns with their political sensibility. These voters are sensitive to what things cost. They can forgive cuts to the EPA budget. They can question how much a megawatt of solar energy *really* costs if subsidies are factored in. They complain about regulations that add costs. They are only occasionally cognizant of how climate change is costing them now. It is evident in the amount spent on repairing flood damage (taxes and insurance rates), for example.
- Find and tell success stories to give people a sense that humans are already having an impact in changing things that seem beyond human control. The hole in the ozone layer is one example participants could point to where making a change in their lives (reducing aerosol emissions) helped change course. Seeing the clean energy supply chains already in place in their home states was a wow moment in most groups. Participants are energized by the realization that things are already happening that are making a difference. That gives them hope.
- Promote ideas for individuals to take action. There is ample frustration with politicians who seem incapable of getting anything done. They are weary of what seems like a constant repetition of problems. It leads to cynicism which breeds inaction at an individual level. We felt pent-up goodwill: A wish to be a good neighbor, a good citizen, a good steward. But nothing—no person, no entity—is pointing them to ways to engage in a way that they see or hear. They would welcome role models—problem-solvers—to give them a reason and a method to take action.
- Play up declining costs of solar technology and advances in getting projects up and running. Participants are energized to see data that says the transition to clean energy is already underway. Many see investing in renewable energy as a no-brainer. They see no downside: “It’s a win, win, win.” Because investing in solar energy is something they could—at least in theory—do at an individual level, they

can more easily buy the case for this kind of investment by cities, states, and the nation.

- Cite the most trustworthy sources to bolster credibility. Of course, there is no perfect source, and messengers are only as good as their messages. That said, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service scores the highest of any of a list of trusted messengers tested in all 12 groups (a mean of 7.50 on a 1-10 scale). Good ratings also went to Midwest university scientists, farmers, the Farm Bureau, Midwest-based environmental organizations, and Midwest-based clean energy advocacy organizations. Tested only in suburban Chicago, TV weatherman Tom Skilling nailed a 7.39.
- Remember that winning the climate change argument is not always necessary to win support for taking action. The best tested message summarized a point columnist Thomas Friedman has said. The tested message read: “Taking action now is a win regardless. Even if climate change isn’t as bad as we expect, building a green energy economy will only make us more resilient and independent as well as improve our air and water quality.” In past work for ELPC, a key finding has been that much can be accomplished without referencing the need to address climate change. There are good reasons to support renewable energy, clean water and clean air initiatives— vast numbers of environmental goals—without requiring them because of climate change.

DISCUSSION

This section of the report is mainly descriptive of the themes heard in discussion sessions. Along the way, key findings will be pointed out—analysis that interprets these themes and lays out markers for the strategic ideas that comprise the second major section of this report.

The Mood

In this section, we focus on findings related to the mood of these voters as we find them. That is, how do they initially approach the environmental issues and the politics surrounding them as they walk through the door? What is the cold read on where they stand before they are exposed to data and messages on water, clean energy, climate, and the federal budget?

The mood of Trump voters can best be described as one of angst. While they can easily list accomplishments of the Trump administration that are exactly what they hoped to see, they struggle with having to defend behaviors they find childish, at best, or the product of a bully, at worst. A defining reason they chose to vote for President Trump was that the alternative was untenable. We sought multiple reasons for their votes, not wanting to spend much time hearing about Hillary-hate. But there was clearly a deep reservoir of that. Most were Republicans or Republican-leaning independents, so voting Republican was what came naturally to them. Still, they back off of saying they would definitely vote to re-elect the president because of unpresidential behavior they find embarrassing. In every group, concern was expressed about the President's tweeting. "I think he just needs to shut up. If he'd stay off of Twitter and just shut up." "Twitter goes to his head. He has a hair trigger. He's very thin-skinned."

The desire for change fueled the vote for Trump; it remains a powerful force. We heard in the political parts of our discussions a continued wish for the federal government to work better and produce better results. They thought a businessman would bring discipline and a solid financial sensibility to the office. They have been disappointed. They do praise President Trump's pattern of standing up to deals he thought were not in the United States' best interest, walking away from bad deals as a good businessperson would. However, spending is not under control, and the way the President handles the media is anything but disciplined, they say.

Initially, the groups show some tiredness in approaching environmental issues. There is resistance to data showing evidence of climate change, even as there is pride in what their states are accomplishing with renewable energy. In fact, seeing the strides made in solar and wind production proves energizing for many. But some still push back.

Many are weary of politics generally and defending their vote specifically. One clear finding was the observable immediate change of demeanor when participants learned they had been selected for the group because they were all Trump voters. A few talked about problems they had talking to friends, relatives, and coworkers about politics. "I'm embarrassed to admit I may not vote for [President Trump] next time. It didn't work out." They appear battle-fatigued. "There's been terrible name-calling where I work."

Key finding. Our read is that that pushback is in part fueled by the cumbersomeness of their lives. They only have so much energy for their jobs, for their families, for the pressing business of now. “People have trouble saving for retirement; they can’t think about 30 years from now.” Getting their attention on environmental issues is job one. In doing so, communications must be respectful of that reality and meet this population where they live. They are sophisticated in ways of discounting sources and data that lead to conclusions they think they do not like. In addition, they are sensitive to approaches that carry an undercurrent of belittling them for their political choices.

Cynicism still rules. Two years ago, we were struck at the deep well of cynicism that seemed at the base of most reactions to government and politics. We see that still. Participants express cynicism that politicians care about anything other than getting elected and re-elected. They are cynical that corporations care about anything other than boosting their bottom lines. They are cynical that anything can happen that would create real change.

Throughout these groups, there was much talk of money. When participants looked at the graphs showing the declining costs of a megawatt of solar energy, they often asked about whether subsidies are factored in—that is, how much is it really costing us taxpayers to increase solar energy? “Will it be profitable?” When they read descriptions of large-scale solar projects waiting to go online, they think about costs. They are very sensitive to government spending.

Cynicism belies frustration. These are not, overall, people who fear the future or who have given up. They are frustrated with political leaders who say one thing but do not carry through. So, they defend the President. “You have to hand it to him; he is doing what he said he would do.” That makes the President unlike most other politicians, they say.

Key finding. In thinking about the mood of these voters, think resistant, angst-ridden, cynical, frustrated, and tired. This is square one for discussions on environmental issues for many, if not most, of these Trump voters. One would think finding common ground and openness to engagement would be a daunting challenge. Yet many end the two hour discussion energized to learn more, think more, and do more—as individuals and as voters. With that tease, we discuss how that happened.

Water and Soil

Water remains the most effective door to conversations on the environment. Asked to choose the most important environmental issues from a participant-created list, fully 64 of 107 participants selected clean water, far more than any other issue. It’s elemental: “Water and air are things you need to be healthy and survive.” In Illinois and Michigan, the Great Lakes are sacrosanct. Group members seemed conversant on pollution issues and on the threat to the Lakes in the form of companies (i.e., Nestlé) buying their fresh water, bottling it, and shipping it elsewhere. Flint is still top-of-mind, and not just in Michigan. West Des Moines participants

recall the lawsuit brought by Des Moines Water Works to resolve issues of agricultural runoff moving downstream.

Even skeptics of regulation see the EPA as having a role. “You don’t want to strangle business. But not everyone has clean water.” It was in discussions about water that some frustrations with the partisan nature of environmental policies was voiced. “It does a disservice to everyone when they say Republicans don’t want clean water. Everyone wants clean water.”

Water relates to soil, especially for those close to farmland. “The best part of Iowa is in the Gulf.” West Des Moines participants talk readily about the lawsuit brought by Des Moines Water Works against upstream water districts. However, they recognize that just because people stopped talking about it, it does not mean the problem has been solved. “Somebody has to do something.” In one group, it was clear no one felt politicians could be counted on to be the somebody who would do something.

Key finding. Clean water, air, and soil are highly valued. However, it is hard for participants to feel they have power to do much about it. They have little faith politicians are capable of doing or willing to do the work they see needs to be done. Given the emotional attachment to the Great Lakes, all data linking the impact of climate change to these bodies of water will have a good shot to hit a responsive chord.

Renewable Energy

Clean energy is nice, but few are aware of the current status. Shown charts of the number of jobs in the clean energy supply chain, many respond with disbelief. Especially in Michigan, they did not think they had enough hours of sunshine to account for so much solar activity.

Some raise legitimate concerns about how subsidies may affect the look of the levelized costs. And some are concerned that the source for the numbers may not be neutral. In Illinois, there was much talk about the condition of the state budget, and that affected how some data were viewed. “When I hear ‘large-scale,’ I hear dollars.”

But many are surprised in a good way. “This is awesome.” “Yowza!” “That’s amazing!” “This is outstanding!” “We’re awesome!” “We are actually *doing* something.” “I’m shocked.” Some wonder why this information is not commonly known. “The message we get is just the opposite. We think solar is *not* taking off.”

In almost every group, there was some mention of wind turbine noise and its negative impact on humans. “Wind causes noise pollution from the vibration.” “What do windmills do to the jet stream?” Apocryphal or not, this concern is out there, along with a concern that the turbines might not last forever and so could become their own environmental problem down the road. Still, some see this as an optimal renewable source. “Wind is probably the best technology we have.” The groups include some participants who have solar panels—it is something an individual can do.

In the context of concerns for clean air and a wish for less reliance on Middle Eastern oil, the case for more investment in solar seems logical. “Most people think we should get out of coal. Why not do more solar?” “Solar is better than coal; that’s just obvious.” “Coal is a medieval energy.”

Only a few advocate for nuclear. “It’s the most powerful.” But most do not see nuclear as a viable path forward, citing Fukushima and worry about accidents. “Maybe it’s ‘clean,’ but it’s dangerous.” For many, the idea of nuclear energy as “clean” was laughable. When messages were tested, the one mentioning nuclear energy received, by far, the most negative reactions.

Key finding. What participants latch onto about supporting clean energy is this is something they can do in their own homes. They can conserve, for sure. They can also modify their homes to be more energy efficient, and some can and do install solar panels. Investing in clean energy at a larger scale seems like a no-brainer. “I don’t see a downside to renewable energy—it’s win, win, win.” If it makes sense on an individual level, making the case for cities, states, and the nation to invest in renewable energy should be easy—if questions about cost can be answered satisfactorily.

Climate Change

Terminology matters. When groups were listing specific environmental issues early in the sessions, the words “global warming” were more common than “climate change.” Asked if these were interchangeable phrases, the answer was mostly yes. Some clarified that the climate is changing in that the Earth is warming. For some, global warming is disputed in the harsh cold, heavy snows, and bomb cyclones of recent winters. So, “global warming” is something of a joke. “Where’s global warming when you need it?” Some used “climate change” to defend against the idea of a human contribution. “The climate is always changing. It always has.” Some are just turned off by any of the language: “‘Climate change’ has been politically weaponized.” “There are too many climate alarmists.” “All this does is enrich the farmongers.”

Key finding. When talking to a politically diverse audience, it is unwise to presume all will share the same meaning for phrases commonly used among environmental activists. One of the most powerful weapons in social activism is to disarm the other side’s labels. Historically, the “Black Is Beautiful” movement claimed what had been pejorative and made it appealing. In a different way, climate-deniers use “climate change” to signal to their base that this is nothing to worry about—the climate is always changing. It does not signal to them that humans contribute to it or that anything can be done about it. The phrase has a very different meaning inside the environmental community, so beware.

The changes participants see in their lives and lifetimes are the most powerful form of persuasion. “People can believe what they see.” For example, participants comment that there

are long winters and summers, but very short springs and falls. Looking at a chart showing the number of heating and cooling degree days for over 100 years, one participant says, “This is a huge gap. We have no spring and fall anymore.” They note the storms and floods that were supposed to happen every 100 years, but they observe these happening multiple times in a decade.

Some are moved by costs that hit them where they live. “This is costing me in the pocket. My homeowner’s insurance goes up every year, and I’ve never had a claim.” “I grew up on this chain of lakes; now we are flooded twice a year.”

For some, the data presented about the impact of climate change on the Midwest were “eye-opening.” “We have water sewers that overflow; I’m worried about it getting worse.”

Participants struggle to understand causation. “We understand what is happening, but we do not understand why.” This becomes a stopping point for many. If the cause is unknown, how, they wonder, could we know what will work to reverse current trends? “What did we do to cause this, specifically?”

In this context, some find the state summary of the impact of climate change unfathomable. “These statistics are unbelievable.” “Fifty years is not persuasive. Who knows what will be in 50 years?” “It is hard to feel this is an immediate threat.”

In one group, the moderator asked each to estimate how much the participants thought humans contributed to climate change. There was quite a range—from 20% to 70%; four participants gave a number of 50% or higher.

A fair number believe the trend toward warmer temperatures, coupled with extreme weather events, will self-correct. A member of one group pointed to the hole in the ozone layer. Here was an alarming phenomenon which fixed itself, they say. Others in this particular group pushed back, saying, “The Earth does not have a brain and just decides to flip a switch.”

Key finding. This exchange is especially useful for communicating to a cynical audience about climate change. The hole in the ozone layer was likely caused or exacerbated by human behavior and likely responded to a change in human behavior. It is the kind of specific action-reaction example that stands at least a chance of inducing a second thought that humans could do something that would slow or reverse the trend of global warming. “Can my little can of aerosol hair spray affect the ozone?” one asks. If the data say yes, this would be a useful lesson in how to make progress. There may be other examples of how human action reduced global threats.

The second lesson in this exchange is to keep in mind what is likely—at least partially—a religious-based rationale for doing nothing. While “God” is not literally invoked, the idea of an intelligent Earth is not far from that kind of thinking. Who are we humans to question what Earth is doing? Or, another angle would be, what are we thinking that mere mortals know best what will be the eventual right action to take today?

This brings to mind a routine by the late George Carlin about the role plastic plays in the world: “The Earth probably sees plastic as just another one of its children. Could be the only reason the Earth allowed us to be spawned from it in the first place. It wanted plastic for itself. Didn’t know how to make it. Needed us.”

Most importantly, however, is the lack of conviction that anything can be done. Even in groups eager to be a part of the solution (particularly the final group of men in Canton, Michigan), there was no strong belief that they, as individuals, could make a dent in the problem.

For example, there is little faith the nations of the world could come together and take sufficient action to have a noticeable effect. Many, if not most, are not bothered by the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement. Some have visited China, for example, and know firsthand the air pollution problems in that vast country. They believe the U.S. put itself in a position to be economically punished by what they see as excessive regulation while the developing nations were subject to lower standards and targets, and even then were likely still not hitting their marks, participants feel.

Key finding. “If you address global warming, you address other problems.” This was one participant’s rationale for choosing global warming as one of his top environmental priorities. The discussion of climate change bogs down in the data. One of the resistance tactics seems to be to argue about the validity of the data, rather than proposing ideas that could work. Many were interested in the message that said, paraphrased, we should do *something*, not just stand by. Many of these participants would take action, would be supportive, if they saw something realistic that could be achieved. Though some are fearful of what the future holds, many are hopeful things can get better. They are looking for leadership that sparks action at all levels.

There is no obvious answer to the question of whether the U.S. should lead the world.

Arguments that start from the premise that it should tended to fail with these groups of Trump voters. We sense a certain weariness of having to always be the one to take the lead, to take charge, to set an example, only to feel other nations do not do enough and just take advantage. “The U.S. could be pollution-free and it would not make a dent [in what is happening with climate change].” In another group, one saw the U.S. as a climate change martyr, picking up the slack of other countries who were not living up to their end of the bargain.

Others see an appropriate role not just for the U.S. generally, but for President Trump specifically. “The consequences are too great. One nation has to take the lead. The U.S. is well situated to do just that.” “Trump could lead. It could be epic.” “He could lead by example and put solar panels on the White House.” “He could make the planet green again.”

“We [individuals] are waiting for someone else to do something.”

Key finding. If there are data that progress is underway in China and India, it would be useful to make this part of the conversation, given the skepticism that these countries are

the worst offenders and unlikely to take action. Part of voters' admiration for President Trump is that he said he would get the U.S. out of bad deals. So, if there is evidence the Paris Agreement is taking hold, that could advance the conversation.

Trust

There is no single, perfectly trusted source. Asked to rate a couple dozen entities on a 1-10 scale of trustworthiness as sources of information on environmental issues, there are some clear findings:

- *Some* government entities are valued. Atop the list of mean scores across all groups is the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. It ties with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources at a mean score of 7.5 (though the Illinois DNR score was just among the participants in the four Schaumburg groups, of course).
- Midwestern university scientists are respected, at least in theory. Scientists from state universities across the three states take third place at 7.46. Also high on the list are scientists from Des Moines-based Drake University (7.17) and Illinois-based community colleges (6.97). Asked if there is more trust put in universities that are nearby, consensus is yes, there is a home-state advantage.
- Midwest-based environmental organizations and Midwest-based clean energy advocacy organizations both score above the mid-point (6.52 and 6.23, respectively).
- Farmers and the Farm Bureau also score above mid-range (6.74 and 6.34, respectively).
- Meteorologists can be assets. Longtime Chicago meteorologist Tom Skilling won top scores of 10 from eight participants; another three awarded him a nine. Asked about why the high scores, participants raved. That kind of enthusiasm for a likable personality offers opportunity. "He loves what he does. Anyone can call him. He has been around for a long time." "He's jolly looking."
- Politicians' scores rank them at the bottom of the list, along with labor unions (4.21). The exception was Iowa's Attorney General Tom Miller, who sits mid-list with a score of 5.65. President Trump's score was just a few hundredths of a point above governors, at 4.52. The lowest score was awarded to Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel, with 3.97.

Key finding. The low score for energy companies overall reflects variation across states and across groups. In one Michigan group, DTE was named as getting some of the highest trust scores, due to what some described as exceptional customer service.

Many if not most of these participants are cynical of any claim made by just about anyone on environmental issues. While in theory they trust scientists, when pressed on this, one particularly resistant group said, no, they cannot afford to trust information from scientists because while their data might be based in science, still they have beliefs, and those beliefs affect how they *present* the data.

An additional barrier for some is the seeming ever-changing landscape of what science says. “One week wine is good; the next, it’s bad.”

The White House Proposed 2020 Budget

Though skeptical they have sufficient knowledge to judge, most are disappointed in the cuts to environmental programs they were shown. Context matters, of course. So, in many groups, some participants were initially unwilling to express concern over the list of cuts presented in the 2020 White House Budget Proposal. They argued that perhaps the money cut from the EPA would be spent on other programs that would do a better job of protecting the environment. Many seemed unfazed by a cut of 31%; more did not mind the elimination of 2,000 jobs. “I have no problem with cutting 2000. I worked in DC for a while.” “It’s not always a bad thing for jobs to be eliminated.” One participant in Michigan noted, however, that “If GM eliminated 2,000 jobs, people would freak.”

That said, the reaction to the proposed cuts was almost universally negative. “A 39% cut for clean water is crazy.” “One-third is a big cut. It means there are less people out testing.”

Most expressed concern, and certainly, most sheets were marked in blue (indicating the participants saw the cuts as wrong-headed) with very little pink (signaling a favorable reaction to the cuts). “This means less people testing air, water, soil.” “Farmers are the backbone of America,” one said, indicating cuts to rural projects are a problem. “Without farmers, no food. We should not cut funding to them.” “Words like ‘completely eliminate’ are frightening.” “Why are we increasing something we want less of?” This is in reference to the increase for fossil fuel programs. “Increasing [the] fossil fuels budget seems silly.”

Some in the Michigan groups were aware President Trump had said he would reinstate funding for the Great Lakes when he visited the state recently.

Key finding. Though Joe Biden received a couple of favorable shout-outs, he might not be a credible source for Trump voters such as these participants. But, his quotable line of “Show me your budget and I’ll show you what you value” characterizes the meaning many participants took from a short list of proposed cuts in the White House Budget Proposal. They found it wrong-headed to give money to fossil fuels while making cuts to renewable energy. They value renewable energy, and so would prefer a defensible budget that reflects that value.

Environmental Issues

Environmental issues are top of mind for few. Asked for a main reason they voted for President Trump, not one participant in any of the 12 groups mentioned liking his stance on environmental issues. That is explained, they say, in that Candidate Trump did not speak about these issues except to perhaps mention that the Paris Climate Agreement was a bad deal for the U.S. and to say he would bring back the coal industry. Some were unhappy with this step. “I was disappointed we left the Paris agreement. It was like, if we don’t get our way, we’ll go home. If we leave because others are not doing their share, how does it get better?”

Also telling was the absence of environmental issues when asked about accomplishments of the administration. There were many comments about the tax law, Supreme Court judges, North Korea, the economy, the stock market, tariffs, and religious freedom.

In just one group—a West Des Moines group of men—was there unprompted talk about the President’s stand on these issues, and this was in the discussion of any downsides of the Trump administration so far. One mentioned the roll back of CAFE standards very specifically.

Participants were assigned to bring two articles about environmental issues, and that appeared to have prompted some to dig in and learn some things they had not known before. Others appeared to have done the minimum possible, reflecting little interest in these issues.

Key finding. ELPC and other environmental organizations face the daunting challenge of breaking into bubbles that shield Trump voters from basic data on climate change and other environmental issues. These voters accept what they can see—be it floods on their own property or rising costs of homeowner’s insurance. These groups were held in the immediate aftermath of major flooding in the Midwest, so participants were sensitive to extreme weather events. But a high degree of cynicism leaves some unimpressed with “crazy stats,” even when they come from sources participants say they would trust. Creative approaches to disseminating data through unusual channels may need to become part of every environmental organization’s communication plan, if the goal is to have more acceptance of climate change as grounded in fact.

Generational differences explain some greater interest among younger participants. We gleaned some sense that older Trump voters react to the topic of climate change differently from younger Trump voters. When asked directly if this is the case, most acknowledged it. “[Climate change] is more in the vernacular” for younger people, one older voter said. However, she was quick to say talk is one thing; action, another. “People want to rally, but they don’t want to do anything.”

A Movable Segment

Many end the two-hour discussion feeling hopeful. Several of the groups seemed observably energized by the discussion, pledging to do more to stay up on environmental issues. In their

exit questionnaires, a majority of 77 of the 107 participants say they think climate change is happening and is caused by human activity. They divide between those who are more confident in its existence and in taking steps to combat it (36.5) and those who are merely “inclined” to think it is happening and caused by human activity (40.5). Just one person said in the exit question there is little point talking about it, as there is no way to prove it is happening. The remaining 28 say they are inclined to think it is happening but are not confident it is caused by human activity.

A majority of the 107 participants across 12 focus groups endorse the importance of clean water, renewable energy, and protecting the environment in making decisions about candidates to support in their home states. Fewer than half award that status to climate change, indicative of the challenge of defining it, identifying solutions to address it, and giving hope that something can be done about it.

Protecting the environment:	78 say it is very important and 14 say it is the single most important thing to pay attention to
Ensuring clean water:	73 say it is very important and 22 say it is the single most important thing
Creating jobs:	62 say it is very important and 22 say it is the single most important thing to pay attention to
Developing wind power and solar energy:	60 say it is very important and 1 says it is the single most important thing
Addressing climate change:	37 say it is very important and 8 say it is the single most important thing to pay attention to

In the end, the majority disapprove of President Trump’s views on climate change specifically (73) and on environmental issues generally (73).

Key finding. The exit questionnaire is the last capture of participants’ attitudes. That a minority see climate change as either the single most important issue or a very important issue at the end of even some quite invigorating discussion is a sobering reality. There is an openness to the conversation we have not seen in past groups. This may be related to the way the groups were recruited, or it may reflect a broader change of views. Regardless, is there opportunity to move voters who look like these participants? Yes. Is there an opportunity to transform them into climate change enthusiasts? Probably not. However, progress is progress, and important nonetheless. “Next time I vote, I’ll do more research. I’ll watch to see if Trump says anything about this.”

Messages

Thomas Friedman is on to something. In an August 2018 essay, the *New York Times* columnist argued that the way forward for the U.S. economy is to focus on the reality of a growing global population and its impact on the environment.

“There are currently 7.6 billion people on the planet, and in 2030 there will be 8.6 billion — another one billion in just over a decade! If even half of them get cars, have air-conditioners and eat high-protein diets like Americans now do, we will devour and burn up the planet beyond recognition. So what does that mean? It means clean energy and efficiency have to be the next great global industry or we’re going to be a bad biological experiment, whether there is climate change or not.”

The best tested message is a version of this argument—saying that taking action now is a win regardless, meaning, regardless of any verifiable proof of man-made climate change.

Taking action now is a win regardless. Even if climate change isn’t as bad as we expect, building a green energy economy will only make us more resilient and independent as well as improve our air and water quality.

Twenty-two of the 73 participants who saw this message marked it as the single most impressively positive message on their sheet of more than a dozen. Some took issue with the word “regardless.” It triggered a sense that this was a call for random spending without proof that it would actually lead to solutions. Still, this message helps those who are on the edge feel okay about moving forward.

Ways of framing issues that hit close to home win favor. In Illinois and Michigan, references to the Great Lakes were commonly cited as making positive impressions. In fact, 19 said this was the most successful message rated across all groups, almost double the next highest rated message. Framing that references water, close to home, resonates.

The Great Lakes/Iowa lakes and rivers are where we live, work, and play. We need safe drinking water and we enjoy our swimming beaches and microbrews. Protecting the Great Lakes/Iowa water is a high priority for Illinois’/our economic and environmental success. The federal government should strongly enforce Clean Water Act standards, and the current EPA should not roll back safe, clean drinking water protections.

The next most successful message addressed energy efficiency (10), accelerating renewable energy (10), and making big polluters pay (10). In Iowa, mention of ag runoff sparked a favorable response when it was used to frame the harm climate change is doing. For one Michigan participant, hitting home was anything that threatened the barley crop. “I’m invested in that,” he said, meaning beer brewing.

One pro-nuclear person found a reference to it as a climate change solution very positive. Most others had a hard time with the phrase “highly radioactive waste.” That seemed at odds with the idea of “clean” energy. In total, 29 said it was the least successful message—the highest of any tested.

One other message was consistently negative—the idea that the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement amounted to it turning its back on the world. Nineteen said this was the least successful. At a basic level, participants in these groups seem comfortable with several examples of the U.S. going it alone. Here is a bit of the conversation:

“[I chose the message about the] U.S. falling behind. I’m disappointed that the U.S. left the Paris Climate Accord. If we can’t get our way, we’re just taking our ball and going home? That’s not going to help.”

“But we’re seeing that at every level.”

“Was that a financial decision? NATO, UN, we pay to belong. Did we see other members not doing anything?”

“The U.S. was contributing an unfair amount and other countries were not contributing a fair amount.”

“I’m much more concerned with India and China’s contributions than the U.S.’s.”

“I just think it’s hypocrisy.”

“They were just paying lip service. Why were we being hypocrites with you?”

“I don’t think the Paris Climate Accords are a way to solve that. More of a League of Nations, or the Justice League!”

Key finding. The above conversation shows substantial pushback on the person who expressed strong disappointment when the U.S. announced it would withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement. The takeaway from this discussion at one Iowa table is telling. The withdrawal was something Candidate Trump promised to do. This would be one more way the U.S. would stand up to the world and show it would not be taken advantage of. It was not a good deal—same as the Iran deal, NAFTA, NATO, and so on. This attracted many to vote for President Trump, and for many, if not most, those values are still holding. In every group we heard participants list many accomplishments of the Trump administration. While these were all individuals who are not committed at this point to voting to re-elect the president, this does not mean there is great regret. Messages aimed at Trump voters intending to induce them to think about taking environmental issues into consideration need to still be respectful of the values these voters hold.

Overall, the lessons to take from this exercise speak to ways of moving forward with environmentally sound programs that do not invite political resistance. So, take action. Take action to build a green economy because it is good business. Aggressively protect the precious, essential resource that is the Great Lakes. Make those who contaminate pay for clean-up. Invest in clean energy while using less overall. These messages tap logic, emotion, and a wish for personal engagement.

President Trump

As expected, these groups included a mix of opinions on the President. To be invited, participants had to say they had voted for President Trump in 2016 but were not certain to do so again in 2020. A few readily bring up the rollbacks of the EPA as troubling. “We’ve got the wolf guarding the hen house.” This is offered in the context of general concern over some cabinet hires. “There are more ex-lobbyists; that’s not draining the swamp.” “Ego controls his agenda.” “Can he turn it around and pull the parties together?”

On the trust worksheet, President Trump scored just above state governors at 4.52 on the 10-point trust scale—toward the bottom of the list. Much of participants’ concerns expressed involved style rather than substance. They most commonly wished the president would cease and desist with tweeting. They believe he is his own worst enemy, and he undercuts the good things he has done by coming off as an often childish bully, they say.

They do not see a viable contender who would claim their vote, however—not inside the Republican party and not among the Democratic candidates so far. They mainly approve of the accomplishments of the Trump administration so far, including a hard stance on immigration (both the Muslim ban and the border wall), getting tough with China on trade, reworking NAFTA, forcing NATO to live up to their commitments, opening talks with North Korea, appointing conservative judges and justices, and, of course, the tax act. They wish all this could have been done without the drama, but some question whether that would have been possible.

By the conclusion of the conversation, however, many indicated they would be hoping for (perhaps not expecting) more discussion of environmental issues at the national level. Their interest in hearing from local candidates, too, has been piqued.

Key finding. While few participants voice admiration for the President (but indeed a few do exactly that), most are adjusted to living with things they do not like because they see no viable alternative. In their tweet messages to the President, many cannot resist pleading that he stop tweeting, or stop sounding foolish, or even stop arguing just to try to prove himself. Some implore him to not shut down the government again. All of this is along with messages about reconsidering stances on the environment. In the end, they seem fatalistic. “Only if Mar-a-Lago is threatened will the president do something.”

Participants tweet their wishes for consideration. When asked to compose a short personal message to the president about environmental issues, most participants implore him to pay more attention. Here are a few examples.

“Dear President Trump, please consider more attention to global climate issues. In the U.S. we can always do more but I feel that other countries need us to lead them in the right direction, especially China and India. Thank you for your service.”

“Hey D.T. —Please reconsider your environment budget cuts and lead our nation by standing up for our beautiful world by helping preserve and protect it. #HugOurEarth”

“While I understand that environmental issues are not a concern of yours from your past comments, it does have serious consequences. Please rethink that!”

“If you care about MAGA, then you need to start with taking care of the U.S. environment ASAP.”

“Dear Mr. President, what you are doing with the U.S. economy is outstanding, but I have to express some concern over your perceived lack of interest in/support of environmental issues. We need clean water!!!”

“Future generations depend on the emphasis you place and the resources you provide to our government. #MakeTheEnvironmentGreatAgain”

“Use your business acumen to make solar and wind energy mainstream. Transform America economically and make us energy independent.”

“Pres. Trump, listen up! We must protect our earth and therefore the USA and all people within. Election time right around the corner — time to get on board and start adding protections, not removing them.”

“President Trump—I know money is important, but when it comes to keeping our water safe and food edible, there should be no price. There should be no political side—this is a human issue.”

“Investing in and developing renewable, clean energy policies, practices and businesses not only makes for a cleaner, more livable world; it also stimulates innovation, business growth and helps the United States remain at the forefront of technological and energy innovation in the world.”

“Keep the Great Lakes great! Review the effects of climate change on our Great Lakes and how it impacts our water supply, farming/agriculture, making sure it’s part of the ongoing budget.”

“The Great Lakes are the most important body of fresh water on earth. Need to protect.”

WHAT WORKS

This section offers strategic ideas on how to best put the findings from these groups to use.

Civil discussions are a welcome, if novel, exercise in hashing out issues. Many groups found these discussions rewarding. Just doing the homework assignment of bringing two articles sparked interest in learning more. And, many predicted they would be trying to stay up on some of the issues discussed at the focus group table. That was more obvious in some groups than others, of course. “Everyone can be a good steward—farmers will be good stewards as they live off the land. But how do we get the whole world on board?”

Getting scared moves some participants to sit up and take notice. “A decline in crop yields would have a huge impact,” for example. However, it is the scare tactics that have turned so many off from even listening to any conversation about climate change. This is part of the weaponization of the issue, they say. The recent floods and participants’ personal experiences with changes they can see has lasting impact.

Key finding. Tone matters. Many participants tune out when they hear what seems like an endless litany of problems that seem overly alarmist. Inviting them into a discussion that is more questioning than lecturing may better capture attention and result in more thinking and talking that is not overly defensive. There is an old adage that talking about the weather is conversation’s last refuge.

It is an excellent place to start a conversation. It is connected to water, which is considered an important environmental issue. And, people are generally knowledgeable about and interested in extreme weather events. That combination offers an opportunity to raise awareness of how what is happening relates to climate change. If extreme storms are to become more common, that may be a realistic scare-factor that induces some to think harder about the importance of addressing climate change.

Leaders need to use data presented without presumptions. A stumbling block for these Trump voters is that they do not see politicians they can trust. Commonly, group members reported that they gave the lowest marks for trustworthiness to people holding elected office. Straight data with careful conclusions helps, at least for some. A few facts stayed with participants: the rising sea level, the cost of floods, a coming change for crop yields, their state’s involvement with renewable energy. Presented as realistic expectations, data can be absorbed and retained and can influence voting decisions.

“I’m going to educate myself to be more informed about the stance of leaders and candidates.”
“I’m going to pay more attention—I have a friend who wants to run for office, and I’m going to talk about this.” “I want to elect more people we can trust.” “Every voter should go to a group like this.”

Key finding. If ever there were a time for a clarion call to new leadership, it is now, and on this issue. Leadership is what they thought they would get with President Trump. On some things, they got it, but not when it comes to the environment. One group imagined a “new statesman” who could make a believable claim, such as, “By the end of the decade, we will be energy efficient.” It would be a modest version of the man-on-the-moon vision.

Telling success stories helps overcome the resistance to doing anything without perfect proof. These voters crave good news, and there are probably a fair number of stories to tell. It is clear most are not used to good news generally, hence the cynicism and resistance. But specifically when it comes to what is happening with the environment and climate change, few are knowledgeable. So, they are not thinking about climate change as a problem to be solved. The more the enormous concept of climate change can be broken down into specific problems and the more specific solutions can be offered, the more likely those who want to resist doing anything will bend a bit.

Some know individuals can make a difference, and we heard pride in some of these efforts. The list included a bottle law that has made the states that have them less litter-filled and increased recycling. Also, one noted the progress made on invasive species coming into the Great Lakes by requiring boats to be scraped. These are examples of specific problems with specific solutions and results they can see with their own eyes.

Key finding. These anecdotes serve a powerful purpose in reminding skeptics that real change *can* happen. It takes leadership, organization, and individual action. The shrinking hole in the ozone layer sets an example for how to potentially harness the latent interest in taking action among Trump voters. Imagine if an organization had taken this on as a challenge decades ago when it was determined aerosol sprays were a major contributing factor. People could have been called to action to vote with their feet and switch from spray cans to other delivery devices. Perhaps to a certain extent they were. What does the chart look like: decreasing sales of aerosol plotted against the size of the hole in the ozone layer? It turns out this was a realistic project that would not bust the budget in which people could take incremental steps and achieve a long-term fix. Hurrah.

If China is making progress in combatting air pollution, that kind of data would likely be eye-opening, since most believe China is the biggest polluter and likely to do little or nothing to address climate change.

Granted, it is easier to showcase success stories of small environmental victories than for global matters such as climate change. However, just chinking the armor of those who believe they can and should await perfect proof before they sign on for any spending on any sort of effort to combat climate change is probably worth the effort. What is needed is more open minds. These groups show minds can be opened, but it is not always easy. It certainly does not happen without thoughtful effort.

Participants seem receptive to positive ways to take action. Finding ways to elicit positive action may help move some to make everyday adjustments. In one group, there was clearly a hunger to feel a part of making a difference. They worked out a vision of what they wanted to do. It involved a set of realistic projects that would not bust the budget (very important). They could take incremental steps toward achieving a long-term fix. They'd want to see progress to feel they personally were making a difference. "We'll get it started," they claimed, laughing at the absurdity, but still expressing the wish to do something even if it was small. They might respond well to join a community looking to be more energy efficient. They would benefit from lower utility bills, but also help their community overall achieve energy efficiency goals.

A second group came up with something similar—a GoFundMe approach to meet a goal to fund projects. They were looking for ways to channel their passions, plural, recognizing that each of them might be interested in something different. Some of this idea-generation was triggered by data on Michigan cities deciding to take specific goals toward having their city buildings 100% powered by renewable energy by certain dates. "Municipalities are trying to make progress." They see small government solutions as more accessible and easier for them to feel a part of.

Key finding. We sense a reservoir of pent-up goodwill. Many are *eager* to be a part of something like this. They need several things, though. They need to 1) know this is a goal, 2) learn how they can be part of it, and 3) observe progress in action. Ann Arbor and Grand Rapids are not the only cities having made a pledge, so making efforts more visible helps tell the story that major initiatives are already underway.

This is really Positive Reinforcement 101. If you want to increase behaviors, individuals need to see progress is being made to feel rewarded.

Making the case that doing nothing is costing us — as a nation, as a species, but also as individuals — will likely resonate. Participants made a few references to increased costs they are having to pay for because of extreme weather events. One person says her property now floods twice a year. Another mentions that even though she has never had a claim, her homeowner's insurance goes up and up. It is because insurance claims are becoming more expensive, so the insured pool pays for it all.

Many fear big government programs to combat climate change because it sounds enormously expensive. But what is it costing individual taxpayers to do nothing? Better, what has it already cost taxpayers? "The average Joe cares about his bank account, not about the polar ice caps."

Key finding. There seems to be a common attitude that doing nothing costs nothing. Maybe the data already exist that would demonstrate how much it has already cost the average Joe in rising prices for food, energy, homeowner's insurance, and so on. This list is likely lengthy and potentially impressive.

Making the problem real and local—connecting the dots—has an impact. In one group, a woman talked about having pine trees in her back yard, and that her father told her they would die because of a particular bug. That species of bug cannot survive cold, but warmer weather means more bugs are surviving. Her trees are gone. This is just one example of things people could note in their own lives if they had knowledge of the connection to climate. For most, climate is an abstract—and therefore debatable—concept. For some, YouTube videos raise awareness. “I see it on media—plastic in ocean. For the first time handheld cameras can take videos and you can see it on YouTube. I may not agree politically, but it makes it personal—seeing a turtle strangled.”

Key finding. This is where having local stories that get high visibility can make a difference. When the issue is framed as “global,” then individuals feel small and powerless. If they can be shown how global trends are affecting them locally, then there is a chance to open minds. In these groups as we saw in 2017, renewable energy supply chain maps energize many participants. It gives them new knowledge that progress is already underway and helps lessen the inclination to feel helpless and hopeless.

Participants are energized to see data that says the transition to clean energy is already underway. Many see investing in renewable energy as a no-brainer. They see no downside: “It’s a win, win, win.” Because investing in solar energy is something they could—at least in theory—do at an individual level, they can more easily buy the case for this kind of investment by cities, states, and the nation.

Key finding. There is particular ground to be gained in playing up declining costs of solar technology and advances in getting projects up and running. Many have what appear to be outdated ideas of what solar costs. If the data realistically show it is now less expensive than coal, that can be a key point to leverage. These participants seemed to want to be done with coal, but it was one of President Trump’s campaign promises—to get the coal miners working again. If it could be shown that it is simply bad economics, that would likely sit well with these voters.

Trustworthy sources bolster credibility. Of course, there is no perfect source, and messengers are only as good as their messages. That said, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service score the highest of any of a list of trusted messengers tested in all 12 groups (a mean of 7.50 on a 1-10 scale). Good ratings also went to Midwest university scientists, farmers, the Farm Bureau, Midwest-based environmental organizations, and Midwest-based clean energy advocacy organizations. Tested only in suburban Chicago, TV weatherman Tom Skilling nailed a 7.39.

Key findings. Effective communication combines sources and messages to maximize credibility. No one source is perfect, but these groups suggest a good ground to be gained with data from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. And, if Tom Skilling is a willing spokesperson for climate change, he stands a chance to reach a reluctant audience.

Winning the climate change argument is not always necessary to win support for taking action. The best tested message paraphrased a point columnist Thomas Friedman has said.

The tested message read: “Taking action now is a win regardless. Even if climate change isn’t as bad as we expect, building a green energy economy will only make us more resilient and independent as well as improve our air and water quality.”

Key finding. In past work for ELPC, we learned that much can be accomplished without referencing the need to address climate change. There are good reasons to support renewable energy, clean water and clean air initiatives—vast numbers of environmental goals—without requiring them because of climate change.

In closing, the groups generated a considerable willingness to think about things differently. There is goodwill to be cultivated and potentially harvested. There is common ground and shared goals. Radical language and stances will stop any progress cold. Here are some final thoughts.

“We have to do something now for future generations.”

“If everyone had ideals, we could make a difference.”

“What can we do that is realistic?”

“We all vote. We all spend money. We can make a difference.”

“Data aside, we should live in a more clean manner.”

“Just because we voted for Trump, we are not out to wreck the environment.”

These discussions make clear that there is a logical progression to creating a useful conversation about climate change. There are some basic steps. Step one is to draw attention to things that are happening. Step two is to define these things that are happening as problems that can be solved, and step three is to offer specific solutions. Of course, it is more complicated, but the order matters. If talk turns too quickly to solutions, some will be hung up on whether there is even a problem. In the end, these participants want to feel there are solutions, and many express willingness, and maybe eagerness, to do their part. At the end of the day, there is daylight.