

BUILDING CROSS-CLASS AND RED-STATE SUPPORT TO ADDRESS CLIMATE CHANGE

Reading time: About 6 minutes

“When it’s 117 degrees outside, I can’t work [in my auto shop]. I can’t pay my mortgage.” - Representative [Marie Gluesenkamp Perez](#)¹

Climate change is a far more polarized issue in the US than [abroad](#) because it has become associated with identity-based culture wars.² What follows is a recipe for countering that. The good news is that we can message climate change in ways that can broaden support; the bad news is that this will require considerable change in the ways that environmentalists currently talk about climate change.

MESSAGING DO’S AND DON’TS FOR BRIDGING THE DIPLOMA DIVIDE

DO’S

1. Transitioning to an all-electric economy means 25 million new jobs, many of them blue-collar, to restore opportunity in areas left behind. Focus not on the causes of climate change but on the solution: we need to rewire America, which will require a [World War II level of investment](#) to create [25 million new jobs](#), many of them blue-collar.³ Work by [Saul Griffith](#)² and [Jesse Jenkins](#)⁴ detail what’s needed. Blue-collar workers typically prioritize the economy [more strongly](#) than white collar workers, and climate change less, as only the [14th](#) most important issue⁵ (with the economy as the first).⁶ So far worries about jobs have worked against climate action; we need to change that. The Inflation Reduction Act does so by 1) insisting that EVs must provide well-paid jobs for Americans to qualify for subsidies and 2) highlighting job creation [in all ZIP Codes](#),² including [areas left behind](#).⁷ [Wind turbine technician](#) (median pay: \$56,200) is the second-fastest growing occupation in America: this should be on every environmentalist’s lips.⁸ Addressing climate change has high salience for college-educated Democrats, but low salience for the typical voter. Linking climate change to jobs will help.

2. Focus on wind and solar as our renewable future. A study of red-state Indiana found that 94% of respondents wanted more solar energy; 88% wanted more wind energy. Younger Republicans (78%) are dramatically more likely than older ones (53%) to prioritize [renewables](#).⁹ People greatly [overestimate](#) the percentage of power we now get from renewables, so they need to know it’s still small – but could be much higher within 10 years with the right investments.¹⁰ N.B: solar and wind cannot meet all our energy needs without other forms of energy that environmentalists like a lot less, notably [nuclear and carbon capture](#)² – but it’s still important to center wind and solar.

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3. Be attentive to concerns about higher costs. Action to address climate change has to make sense [at the household level](#)²; [the Inflation Reduction Act](#)⁵ does this by [subsidizing heat pumps and home upgrades](#).¹¹ [Saul Griffith's calculations](#) suggest that the average American household could save roughly \$1900 a year in an all-electric economy.² Remember that two-thirds of low-income Americans, and 40% of middle-income ones – but only [18%](#) of the affluent – worry about being able to pay their bills at the end of the month.¹²

4. Focus on pollution and public health. Across class, people are worried about pollution, so a strong argument is the need to shift to wind and solar energy as a way of cleaning up pollution. The Indiana study found widespread concern over air pollution from coal, oil spills, and industrial [accidents](#).¹³ By contrast, solar and wind are seen as clean and free. Shifting to an all-electric energy system will help lower rates of [asthma, heart attacks, and strokes](#).¹⁴

5. Tap the patriotism of blue-collar Americans, and their anxieties about China. Blue-collar Americans are [more patriotic than college grads](#)¹⁵. Tap this by pointing out that solar cells were first developed in America, but then China stepped in with huge subsidies and stole the market out from under our nose. We need to invest now to make sure the same thing doesn't happen with electric vehicles (EVs), wind turbines, etc. The Inflation Reduction Act takes a step in the right direction by [providing subsidies only for cars built in the US](#).¹⁶

6. In coastal and fire-prone areas, tap class resentments against big business. Insurance companies are already changing underwriting habits due to [fires](#)¹⁷ and [floods](#)¹⁸ caused by climate change: in other words, big business is making sure it doesn't get stuck with the bill for climate change. Instead, it will wipe out the life savings of ordinary Americans.

7. In rural areas, tap into farmers' loyalty to tradition and locale – and their need for cash. Use farmers as messengers to the effect that, "I can no longer grow what my grandfather grew on this land." Also, highlight how wind and solar farms can provide much-needed additional cash flow for family farms.

8. In areas dependent on fossil fuel jobs, stress the need to keep one step ahead to provide new jobs to replace declining industries. [Thank these workers](#)² for a century of service and reassure them we will have their back as the economy transitions to the next generation of well-paying blue-collar jobs.

9. Understand why environmentalism is associated with elites. From Teslas to Whole Foods, cultural elites and the 1% display their commitment to climate through expensive consumer goods; non-elites refer scornfully to Whole Foods as "whole paycheck." This strengthens the far-right's claim that environmentalism is the plaything of the elites who don't care about jobs and gas prices. So do fights over public lands in which cultural elites heap scorn on blue-collar

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traditions of leisure (RVs, hunting, fishing) in favor of keeping lands pristine or limited to white-collar traditions of leisure (hiking, backpacking, rock-climbing). Environmentalists need to make sure they don't inadvertently reinforce this narrative.

DON'TS

1. **Don't frame the issue as "climate change."** Alas, climate change has been so thoroughly demonized and politicized that it's not the best frame for persuading people who don't already agree on the need to [decarbonize](#).¹⁹

2. **Don't call people "climate deniers" denying a "climate crisis."** If you insult people's intelligence, you will not persuade them. Embrace as a working assumption that people resistant to effective climate change measures are more worried about the end of the month than the end of the world.

3. **Don't call people "science deniers."** Resistance to the authority of science is becoming part of the identity of rural people, who feel talked down to and ignored by [experts](#).²⁰ Don't blame less educated Americans for our poor science education – and recognize that suspicion of experts reflects anger of non-elites against elites who are seen as "pulling rank" on them.

4. **Don't insult people in fossil fuel jobs.** [A key reason](#) Latinos in southern Texas swung for Trump in 2020 was concerned that Democrats threatened value blue-collar fossil fuel jobs.²¹ [Adopt](#) a tone of sincere regret that coal and oil are contracting as industries.²² To quote [Stacey Abrams & Lauren Groh-Wargo](#), "A push for environmental legislation to restrict the use of fossil fuels must engage the thousands of union workers employed by industries reliant on those energy sources."²³

5. **Don't frame the issue as carbon pricing.** Carbon pricing, beloved of economists, does not work politically in the US. It is just too easy to frame this as a new tax in a country where there has been a "colossal drop" in the public's inclination to favor higher [taxes](#) (alas).²⁴

6. **No polar bears.** Messaging about polar bears and the like reinforces the message that elites care more about wildlife thousands of miles away than jobs for people here at home. Such messaging also links concern about climate change to elite [taste](#) for exotic travel, e.g., to the Antarctic.²⁵

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 - ⁴ Larson, E., Greig, C., Jenkins, J., Mayfield, E., Pascale, A., Zhang, C., Drossman, J., Williams, R., Pacala, S., Socolow, R., Baik, E., Birdsey, R., Duke, R., Jones, R., Haley, B., Leslie, E., Paustian, K., & Swan, A. (2021). *Net-zero America: Potential pathways, infrastructure, and impacts*. Princeton University. <https://www.dropbox.com/s/ptp92f65lgs5n2/Princeton%20NZA%20FINAL%20REPORT%20%2829Oct2021%29.pdf?dl=0>.
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