KEYNOTE · TUE, OCT 13 · 11:05-11:45 AM

The Climate Movement's Missing Voters

Nathaniel Stinnett, Founder and Executive Director, Environmental Voter Project

Few voters name climate as their top issue, so politicians rarely spend capital on it, while millions who care most stay home. Environmental Voter Project founder Nathaniel Stinnett showed how behavioral science, not argument, changes behavior, with lessons for any local program asking people to act.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. **Too few voters prioritize climate.** Only 4% of 2020 and 7% of 2024 presidential voters named climate their top issue, and local polls look similar, so even climate-friendly officials hesitate to spend political capital on it.
2. **Whether you vote is public record.** Campaigns use public voter files to decide whom to contact and whom to poll, so the priorities of people who don't vote are largely invisible to them.
3. **Millions of climate voters sit out.** EVP found 11.2 million registered voters who rank climate or the environment first and didn't vote in 2024. They don't need their minds changed, just their behavior.
4. **Treat people as social animals.** Explaining why an action matters rarely moves behavior and can backfire. Peer pressure ("everybody's voting") and identity ("be a good voter") work far better.
5. **Americans see climate as personal, not political.** Asked how to address climate, people named personal actions over political ones by about 5 to 1. Recycling and changing purchases topped the list, unlike every other issue tested.

WHAT LOCAL OFFICIALS CAN DO

- ☐ **First decide: persuasion or behavior change?** Use logic, evidence and humor to change minds. To change what people actually do, lean on social norms, peer pressure and identity.
- ☐ **Frame the action as who people want to be.** Tie the behavior to identities like good neighbor, good parent or good steward. The same applies to residents and visitors.
- ☐ **Use social proof, not scarcity.** Say most people are doing it. "No one is voting, so your vote matters" is mathematically accurate but can depress turnout. Peer pressure works.
- ☐ **Test messages against a control group.** EVP runs 300+ randomized controlled trials a year to learn which messages work with which groups, with statistical significance.
- ☐ **Reinforce habits year-round.** One-time pushes every two years don't stick. EVP works year-round across hundreds of elections, like a public health campaign, to build lasting habits.
- ☐ **Vote in every election, and say so publicly.** Politicians watch voting histories, even in small elections. Being a loud and proud voter, online too, moves friends and neighbors.
- ☐ **Run persuasion and mobilization as separate efforts.** Persuasion, like framing climate as jobs and the economy, is needed but hard to measure. Behavior change can be tested and proven.

BY THE NUMBERS

4%
2020 voters naming climate their top priority

7%
2024 voters naming climate their top priority

11.2M
Registered voters ranking climate first, home in 2024

300+
Randomized controlled trials EVP runs each year

2 to 5%
Turnout lift vs. a control group, identity messaging

5 to 1
Personal over political answers on climate solutions

WATCH OUT FOR

- ! Asking people why they don't vote, recycle or eat well invites social desirability bias: the reasons they give, like "it doesn't matter," often aren't the real ones.
- ! Climate-concerned voters skew young, lower income and people of color, groups that vote less often and are frequently targeted by voter suppression efforts.

RESOURCES

Environmental Voter Project
environmentalvoter.org

Public voter file
Public record of who voted (not how). Campaigns use it to decide whom to contact, whom to poll and whom to ignore

Randomized controlled trials
EVP's method: hold out a control group, then compare turnout months after the election, since voting records are public

Expressive choice theory
Treats people as social animals, not rational ones; the basis for identity and peer-pressure messaging

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Summarized from the session recording and presenter slides. Figures are as presented; confirm with presenters before citing.

CONTACTS

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