



Speaking to Ambivalent Young Voters

August 2020

A candidate's playbook for engaging with untapped voters (ages 18–39) in non-urban swing districts.

Why We Created This Playbook

Clean & Prosperous America is a 501(c)(4) organization devoted to advancing smart and forward-looking environmental policies at the federal level. In researching how we could grow support for our agenda, we found a large pool of young voters who were open to environmental messages but were undecided on how and whether they would be voting in 2020. This playbook shares insights from our research on how to best talk to and motivate this large pool of undecided and reluctant voters this election cycle.

30 Million “Ambivalent” Young Voters

In our research, we came to focus on young voters outside major metropolitan areas, ones who are seldom targeted by political or environmental campaigns. The cohort we settled on is larger than you would think — 30 million eligible voters, 18–39 years old, few with college degrees, an annual household income of less than \$50,000 a year.

Registered and Undecided

We found that many of these young Americans are undecided about whom they will support this year, and some are undecided about voting at all. Sixty-three percent of these voters are registered to vote, so all in all they are good persuasion targets, and they are not progressive — many of these voters are weak partisans, unaffiliated and do not respond well to traditional progressive messaging. They need a different approach.

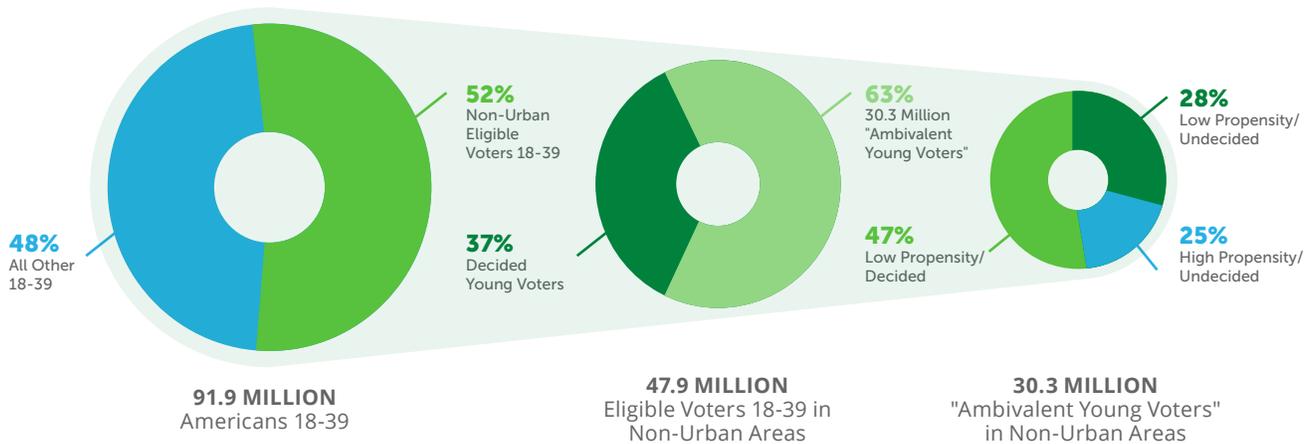
The Research

The Ambivalent Young Voters cohort came to our attention after reviewing a large selection of existing research and commissioning Hemispheres Research to conduct a study of 1,760 participants in small cities (defined as areas having populations of less than 250,000 and not near cities of more than 250,000), rural, and open-space areas. Qualitative research and a second survey of 900 participants were used to refine our messaging and test our findings.

Executive Summary

Speaking to Ambivalent Young Voters in Non-Urban Areas

AMBIVALENT YOUNG VOTER AUDIENCE SIZING¹



Who Are the Ambivalent Young Voters?

The Ambivalent Young Voters are undecided, unmotivated, and infrequent voters ages 18–39, living in small towns and cities (less than 250,000 in population) and in open country.

They represent 63% of voters ages 18–39 outside major metropolitan areas.

Why Speak to Them?

These voters demonstrate a willingness to vote for either party, but our research shows they have a strong preference for Biden over Trump.

- Talk about working across party lines
- Avoid personal attacks against Trump and his supporters
- Hold corporations accountable for pollution
- Tie pollution and climate reform to positive economic outcomes
- Make it easy to vote

What Matters to Them?

Tired of political bickering

Ambivalent Young Voters are not die-hard Democrats and are turned off by Trump-bashing and other partisan language. They want a leader who is willing to be open-minded and compromise.

Concerned about pollution

Pollution is a potential wedge issue. Ambivalent Young Voters understand and fear the health risks caused by pollution and believe elected officials put corporate profits over human well-being.

Concerned about the future

Ambivalent Young Voters were already concerned about their futures and the economy before Covid-19. Those fears have been magnified. Forty-six percent believe that “things will be worse than before” after Covid-19.

41% of Ambivalent Young Voters report lost income due to Covid-19.

1. Hemispheres, 2020. Climate Change Messaging Survey Results. Seattle: Clean & Prosperous America.

Who Are These Ambivalent Young Voters?

Undecided, Unmotivated, or Infrequent Voters

Represents
63%
outside major
metropolitan
areas, ages 18–39.

- Eligible voters from non-urban areas, ages 18–39
- Tend to be white, less educated (62% of 25–39 lack at least an AA or technical degree)
- Approximately 30 million in non-urban USA
- 65% are registered voters
- Open to voting across party lines

Much has been said and written about motivating voters ages 18–39. They are likely to vote Democrat, are passionate about the environment, and yet failed to show up in large numbers in 2016. Closer examination suggests that this group is far from homogenous. Our research (and this document) focuses specifically on low-propensity voters ages 18–39 from non-urban areas in competitive districts who believe are being missed by traditional get-out-the-vote measures and require a different approach, which we outline here.

Why Bother?

It's tempting to ignore this audience. By definition they are harder to motivate and persuade than dedicated Democrats. Yet, despite voting for **Trump (49%) over Clinton (38%) in 2016, they are 35% more likely to vote for Biden in 2020 (42%–31%)**, and those who were of age voted for **Obama by a wide margin over Romney in 2012 (72%–20%)**.² They can make all the difference in 2020.

What's Non-Urban?

Our focus has been on highly competitive small cities, towns, and suburbs.

Defined as:

Living in towns or cities with populations of less than 250,000*

2. Hemispheres, 2020. Reluctant Non-Urban Youth Voters Survey. Seattle: Clean & Prosperous America.

* Does not include suburbs of larger cities with 250,000 or more residents.

Getting to Know the Ambivalent Young Voter

Not Active in Politics

Ambivalent Young Voters are very different from the people most politicians hear from on a regular basis. They don't go to rallies or attend speeches. They avoid political discussions when they can.

So candidates need to provide context and explanation. Don't assume these voters are aware of everything the Trump administration has done or said. And don't assume they are well versed in the political dialogue or have been paying attention to the news.

WHERE THEY GET THEIR NEWS

Among **under-35s** only

13%

got their news
direct

54%

prefer to go to **social
media for news**³

"I don't necessarily feel like my vote really counts, but I still vote. And it takes time to know what's going on and read it and everything, and I think people are also just really lazy."

In the last six months
only **28%** shared
a political post on
social media.

Less than
10%
gave money to a
campaign.

"[Many] politicians just use buzzwords. ... If a politician comes up with something ... and they actually have a plan and can tell that to an audience [about] how they're going to achieve it over time, it's a lot more reason to lean towards them."

Life in Swing States

These voters live in competitive districts. They are surrounded by people from both sides who have strong opinions, and they have learned to avoid discussing politics for fear of inflaming existing tensions.

"I just don't talk about it because I know that we have different views. So we know that each other are complete opposites and we just don't discuss it."

3. Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Kalogeropoulos, A. and Nielsen, R., 2019. Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019. [online] Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

Getting to Know the Ambivalent Young Voter

Independent Thinkers

These low-propensity voters pride themselves on not mindlessly following either party. When they think of themselves as voters, they relish being coveted “swing voters,” even if they don’t spend much time thinking about their decision.

“I guarantee a lot of people are impulse voters. People impulsively do everything and we love it.”

71%

of Millennials **strongly/**
somewhat agree

**“I vote for
the person,
not the party.”**

Distrustful of Politics and Government

But most of the time, they do not think of themselves as voters. They see voting as an exercise in futility, believing that their vote won’t count for much and that corporate interests will win in the end.

However, evidence suggests that Ambivalent Young Voters believe their votes matter more in local elections and that there is less corruption in local politics, with nearly 50% of those surveyed agreeing that their votes count more in local elections than in national elections.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been represented by a representative.”

**2x more
likely**

to say **their vote counts
more in a local election.**

“I think at a local level, there’s a little bit more truth to our representation—but the more you go away from your neighborhood council, your city council, the higher you go, the less and less eventually it matters.”

Getting to Know the Ambivalent Young Voter

A Closer Look at Ambivalent Women Voters

While the Ambivalent Young Voters are fairly evenly split along gender lines, the women in the group are more likely to be undecided and to be concerned about the direction the country is headed, both in terms of the environment and the economy.⁴ Many are employed in the healthcare industry, which is not only grappling with coronavirus patients but also the economic fallout from a steep decline in elective procedures.⁵

Among women ambivalent voters

29% work in healthcare

36% of women ages 18-24

That's more than **2x the national average** (13%)⁶

47%

were either undecided or "slightly leaning" toward either Biden or Trump

EXTREMELY/VERY CONCERNED BY

76% food shortages

74% air pollution



4. Hemispheres, 2020. Reluctant Non-Urban Youth Voters Survey. Seattle: Clean & Prosperous America.

5. Rogers, H., Mills, C., and Kramer, M., 2020. Estimating the impact of COVID-19 on healthcare costs in 2020: Key factors of the cost trajectory. [online] Milliman.

6. The Center for Health Workforce Studies, 2012. An Analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Projections 2010-2020. Albany, NY: University at Albany.

Key Messages

Our research reveals themes that resonate with these Ambivalent Young Voters as well as some specific tactics that prove effective in getting their attention.

The Deregulation Surprise

WHAT WE MEAN

Educate these voters on what's been happening since 2016. Air quality has gone down, pollution is up, and the rules and protections that were put in place to safeguard them are being systematically dismantled.

WHY IT WORKS

Thirty-three percent of voters we surveyed report that environmental issues have contributed to risk of poor health or sickness in their community in the past 5 years. Yet less than half know that air quality regulations have gotten weaker.

HOW TO DO IT

Just state the facts in a non-partisan way. Oil, gas, and coal companies have successfully lobbied for taxpayer-funded subsidies and have gotten crucial protections rolled back, putting thousands more Americans at risk of lung disease and other health-related problems. Avoid hyperbole or making claims that are hard to believe.

[Need a list? Here's one.](#)

"I didn't know that coal, gas, and oil companies were polluting more than they were in the 2000s, which I thought they would have been less."

"That the government actually subsidizes industries that are harmful to the planet, I don't think everybody knows that."

77%

say they **would not vote** for a candidate who wants to **roll back regulations**.

79%

say allowing coal companies to **pollute local streams is very or extremely concerning**.

"I think it's really urgent because people are getting really sick from toxicants in the air, the water."

Key Messages

Pollution or Climate?

WHAT WE MEAN

Focus on stopping pollution rather than combating climate change. The actions and outcomes are practically identical in the minds of these voters,⁷ but **pollution is more likely to drive them toward action.**⁸

WHY IT WORKS

Climate change is big and complicated and can feel hopeless. Air and water pollution are tangible local problems with addressable answers. Coal, oil and gas companies are viewed as bad actors that do not have the common good in mind, and lobbyists are seen as the root of corruption.

"Corporations should be responsible because they're the ones who are responsible for polluting the environment the most."

"There's so many things that are broken with the system that need to be fixed before we can even properly address climate change."

"I think if I was living in China with the fog of the smog around me, then I'd feel a little different about it."

62%

say billions in **subsidies to oil companies** are very or extremely concerning.

76%

say it is extremely or somewhat important to **create clean energy jobs in the wake of the pandemic.**

7. Hemispheres, 2020. Climate Change Messaging Survey Results. Seattle: Clean & Prosperous America.

8. Hemispheres, 2020. Climate Messaging Testing Research Focus Group Report. Seattle: Clean & Prosperous America.

Key Messages

Pollution or Climate?

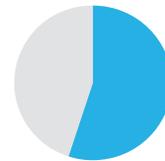
HOW TO DO IT

Turn climate discussions into pollution discussions. Some of the policies that address climate (e.g., green energy) can be reframed as pollution remedies. Use words like “soot” and “smog” to describe particulates and tie pollution to corporate greed and lobbyists.

Finally, talk about fighting pollution and taking climate action in terms of creating jobs. While air pollution and climate change are areas of concern, in a post-Covid-19 era, **jobs are clearly the higher priority.**

And Democrats have a better record on the economy. [Click here for more details.](#)

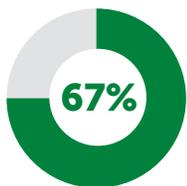
According to a poll conducted by the Strategic Victory Fund and Avalanche Strategy, “voters with conflicted feelings on Trump and Biden are open to the idea of transforming the economy.”⁹



55% answered “Build something different.”

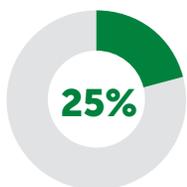
45% answered “Restore what we had.”

WHO THEY’D VOTE FOR



Candidate J

wants to reduce air pollution and **develop clean energy technologies and jobs.**



Candidate V

wants to reduce air pollution and **slow climate change effects.**

9. Arkedis, J., 2020. SVF: Today's Polling Nugget. [email] Strategic Victory Fund.

Key Messages

Unity Is Refreshing

WHAT WE MEAN

Bashing Trump can fire up the base, but it can backfire with Ambivalent Young Voters—some of whom voted for Trump in 2016, or have close friends or relatives who did. Demonstrating a positive, forward-looking attitude is even more important now that the nation is reeling from both Covid-19 and protests over racial injustice. Instead, **focus on what you'll do to help heal the nation and extend an offer to work with the other side.** That alone is enough to get attention.

"Say I voted for Trump, because I don't really know, but he sounds pretty cool. Well, now I voted for him and now every day I log in social media and I've got all of my friends bashing people who voted for Trump as being these terrible human beings. It's like, well, shit, if you just don't vote, you don't have to answer to any of that, you know?"

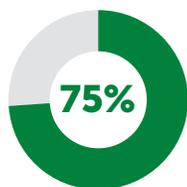
WHY IT WORKS

Our potential voters belong to neither party and are caught in the middle of a firefight. Demonstrating that you are above the fray shows them that you are interested in progress, not potshots, and can be an independent thinker.

HOW TO DO IT

Demonstrate your independence. Concede a point contrary to party lines. Appeal to our common ground as Americans and acknowledge that smart, decent people can disagree and hold different opinions. And avoid "us" vs. "them" language. Extend an olive branch and show that you are more interested in what's next instead of who is at fault.

WHO THEY'D VOTE FOR



Candidate Q

is willing to **work together with political opponents** to find **solutions that work for everyone.**



Candidate T

fights for policies he/she believes in and **won't compromise on important issues.**

How to Move Them into Action

Ambivalent Young Voters in non-urban areas are not an easy group to motivate, but **they are concerned about the environment and the health and economic well-being of the people they care about.** Most importantly, they say they are **open to the idea of voting for a candidate of either party**, and there is a **strong likelihood of them voting Democrat** if they do vote.¹⁰

Baby Steps Lead to Bigger Steps

Studies have shown that people naturally (and subconsciously) strive for consistency.¹¹ Getting these Ambivalent Young Voters to take an action, no matter how small, can help pave the way to winning their vote.

Begin with simple actions: a “like” on social media or a share; an answer to an online survey or poll; a verbal agreement with a campaign volunteer. These are easy ways for our Ambivalent Young Voters to get involved with minimal commitment. Later, reminded of this commitment, they will be more likely to want to act in a consistent manner.¹²

54% said they'd be **more likely to vote by mail.**

Simplify Their Options

Another cause of voter paralysis is uncertainty. A ballot with options they know little to nothing about can be daunting. Provide a quick reference sheet with a list of candidates and initiatives to vote for and invite them to do their own research by sharing links to more information and resources. Even if they don't do any further research, by respecting their independence, you will make them feel better about taking your suggestions.

Make It Easy to Vote

This goes without saying, but the easier it is for these Ambivalent Young Voters to vote, the more likely they will. Registering to vote by mail is a great second step. There are a variety of online tools available to make this easy and quick.

[Looking for voter resources? Try here.](#)

10. Hemispheres, 2020. Climate Change Messaging Survey Results. Seattle: Clean & Prosperous America.

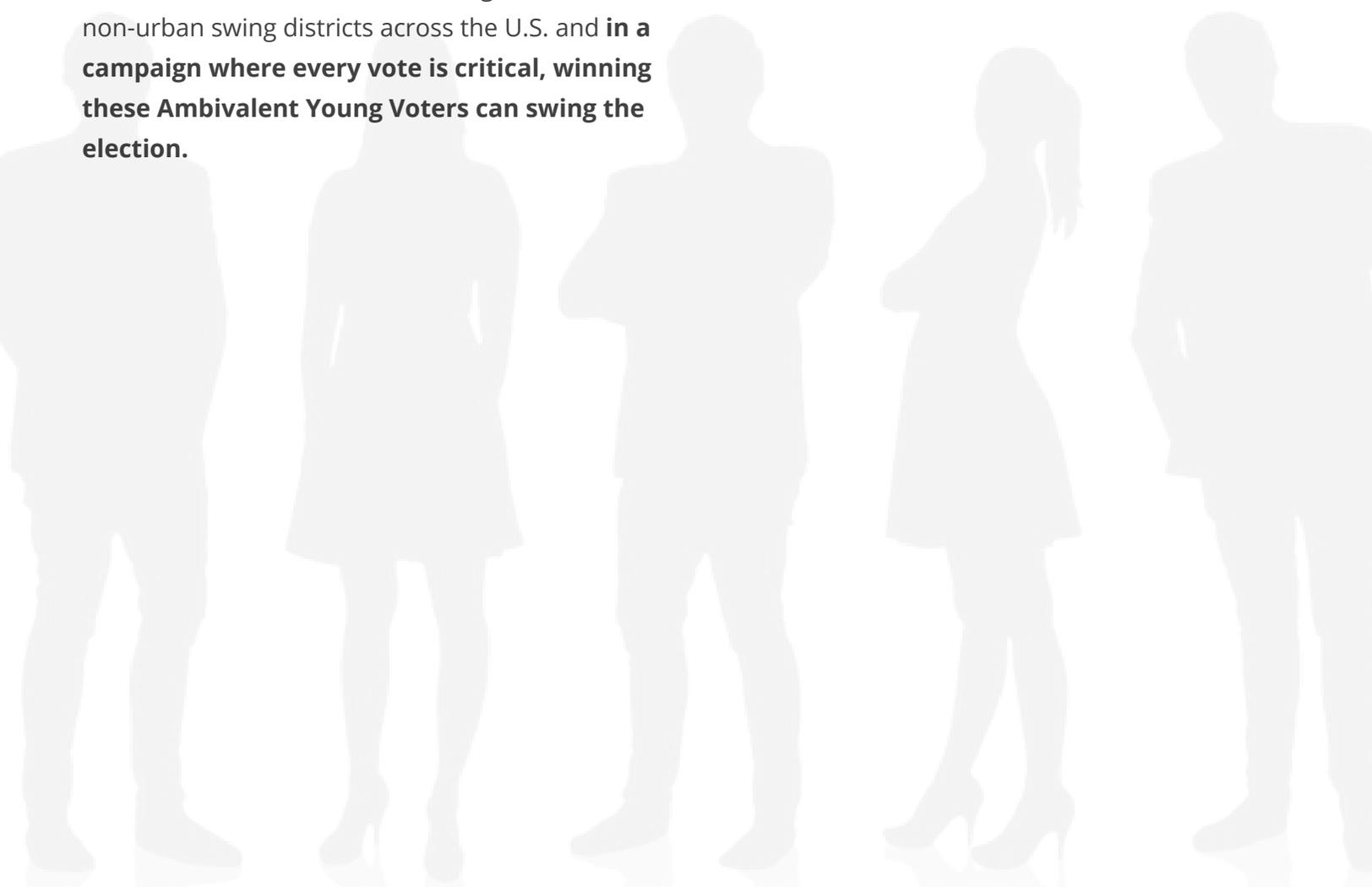
11. Cialdini, Robert B. Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion. New York: Collins, 2007.

12. 2019. Exploration of U.S. Voting Behavior and Attitudes. Environmental Voter Project.

Last Words

Ambivalent Young Voters in non-urban areas (18–39) are not easy to connect with, but **they have demonstrated a willingness to vote for either party and could be essential in a tightly contested race.**¹³ At the very least, a campaign should consider how messages designed to motivate the base could be received by these potential voters and take their perspectives into account.

There are a lot of Ambivalent Young Voters in non-urban swing districts across the U.S. and **in a campaign where every vote is critical, winning these Ambivalent Young Voters can swing the election.**



13. Hemispheres, 2020. Climate Change Messaging Survey Results. Seattle: Clean & Prosperous America.

Methodology

Primary Research

In developing this playbook, Clean & Prosperous America commissioned a series of quantitative surveys as well as qualitative focus groups, described below.

[Click here to view the original research reports](#)

SURVEY 1

15-minute online survey, fielded Jan 24–Feb 3, 2020

Total of 1,760 responses:

- Male and female U.S. eligible voters living in rural/suburban areas with populations less than 250,000
- 1,510 responses — 16–39 years old; 250—over 40

Objective: To understand voter attitudes regarding climate change in order to craft messaging for motivating voters.

Survey Topics: Issue importance, environment and climate attitudes, political behaviors.

FOCUS GROUPS

Four 2-hour groups in Spokane (WA 5th district), Mar 8–12, 2020

Tested reactions to short videos with different climate messages and statements about various current climate issues.

29 Participants:

- Males and females ages 18–39
- Undecided voters (lean slightly Democrat or Republican in 2020 or are completely undecided)
- Infrequent voters (lean Democrat in 2020 and did not vote in 2016 and/or did not register; voted Democrat in 2016 but are not planning to vote in 2020 and/or are not registered)

Objective: To understand how target voters respond to proposed messages to motivate voting for climate-friendly candidates, and gather insights into optimal messaging strategies.

SURVEY 2

15-minute online survey, field dates: May 15–26, 2020

Total of 900 responses:

- Male and female U.S. eligible voters
- Live in target campaign districts in AZ, MI, and PA, or in remaining statewide rural areas or suburban areas with populations less than 250,000
- Undecided voters (lean slightly Democrat or Republican in 2020 or are completely undecided)
- Infrequent voters (lean Democrat in 2020 and did not vote in 2016 and/or did not register; voted Democrat in 2016 but are not planning to vote in 2020 and/or are not registered)

Objective: To quantify insights learned in qualitative testing; to understand voter attitudes in the context of the coronavirus pandemic; and to test specific messages and messaging components.

Survey Topics: Issue importance, environment and climate attitudes, political behaviors.

All playbook results published for all candidates to adopt. We need leadership toward a clean and prosperous America from all levels of government and political parties.

Methodology

Secondary Research Review

In addition to the primary research conducted, Clean & Prosperous America also consulted a wealth of available published studies, which include:

[Pew Research](#)

This Pew Research Center report analyzes multiple surveys concerning public opinion on environmental issues. These seven surveys provide a fairly cohesive idea of the current attitude toward climate change and the environment in the United States.

[Pew Research: What We Know About Gen Z So Far](#)

The attached article from the Pew Research Center lays out a comprehensive profile of Generation Z and the environment they are growing up in. Information ranges from demographic breakdowns to use of technology.

[Pantheon Analytics: Utah 2016. Evidence for the Positive Turnout Effects of "Vote at Home"](#)

The Utah 2016 Voter File Analysis examines voter propensity data to show that the implementation of a vote-by-mail system has the potential to increase voter turnout by 5–7 percentage points.

[All-Mail Voting in Colorado](#)

A *New York Times* editorial provides evidence for how voting by mail has the potential to increase voter turnout and why its use should be expanded beyond the Covid-19 pandemic.

[Driving Voter Turnout in 2020: Research on Effective Messaging Strategies for Each Generation](#)

Research from the Ad Council provides insights into the nuances of messaging to the four generations of eligible voters for the 2020 election cycle.

[CAP: How Voters Think About the Economy, Government, and Poverty Ahead of the 2020 Election](#)

This report by the Center for American Progress examines the political landscape of voters entering the 2020 election cycle. It focuses primarily on the American electorate's perspective of the economy, government, and poverty.

[EVP: Exploration of U.S. Voter Behavior & Attitudes](#)

Research by the Environmental Voter Project examines voter priorities, voter reliability, and opinions on Donald Trump.

[Influencing Young America to Act](#)

The 2019 Influencing Young America to Act report examines how Americans ages 18–30 (Generation Z and millennials) at any given time are influenced by and influence others to intentional action on social issues, and analyzes how those actions become a community of supporters for an issue.

[Data for Progress: Climate Change Is Wedge Issue](#)

Data for Progress analyzes the Cooperative Congressional Election Study in an effort to understand what will convince swing voters who voted for President Trump in 2016 to vote against him in 2020.

[Navigating Coronavirus](#)

Prompted by the rise of Covid-19, Navigator Research studies the Americans' response to current issues, especially President Trump's handling of the pandemic.

Methodology

Population Calculations

To calculate the number of Ambivalent Young Voters in non-urban areas nationwide, we used the following methodology:

POPULATION OF PEOPLE IN U.S. AGES 18–39

According to the U.S. Census, 2010, the total U.S. population 18–39 is approximately 91.9 million. (<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/data/datasets.2010.html>)

NON-URBAN

Using the Housing Assistance Council's (HAC) rural data portal, we estimate there are 59.1 million adults 18–39 living in non-urban cities, towns, and open spaces. (<http://www.ruraldataportal.org/index.aspx>)

Non-urban is defined by Clean & Prosperous America as living in cities, towns, or open areas with fewer than 250,000 people and not near cities with populations of 250,000 or more. The HAC regional sizing definitions use designations collapsed into three general classifications of: 1) small town and rural tracts, 2) suburban and exurban tracts, and 3) urban tracts. Clean & Prosperous America used classifications 1 and 2 from HAC. These specific HAC classifications are as follows:

The HAC rural tract classifications are specifically defined by the following characteristics.

1 = Rural tract – Less than 16 housing units per square mile (.025 housing units per acre).

2 = Small-town tract – Sixteen to 64 housing units per square mile (.025 to 0.1 housing units per acre) and

a low degree of commuting to a metropolitan core area identified by a USDA ERS designated Rural Urban Commuting Area Code (RUCA) score of 4 or higher.

3 = Exurban tract – Sixteen to 64 units per square mile (.025 to 0.1 housing units per acre) and a high degree of commuting to a metropolitan core area identified by a USDA ERS Rural Urban Commuting Area Code (RUCA) score of 3 or lower.

4 = Outer Suburban tract – 65 to 640 housing units per square mile (0.1 to 1.0 housing units per acre).

5 = Inner Suburban tract – 641 to 1,600 housing units per square mile (1.1 to 2.5 housing units per acre).

For further information about HAC's "rural" definitions, please see

<http://www.ruraldataportal.org/geoterms.aspx>

ELIGIBLE VOTERS

Based on the screening incident from a survey of non-urban voters conducted in January 2020, Clean & Prosperous America found 81% of the non-urban population to be eligible to vote. Clean & Prosperous America estimates there to be 47.9 million eligible non-urban voters in the U.S.

- Gen Z eligible non-urban voters: 15.9 million people
- Gen Y eligible non-urban voters: 32.0 million people

Methodology

Population Calculations Continued

AMBIVALENT YOUNG VOTERS

Clean & Prosperous America defines Ambivalent Young Voters as eligible voters who are either undecided (completely undecided about 2020 presidential candidates or slightly lean Democratic or Republican on a 6-point scale) or exhibit infrequent voting behavior (rarely to never vote in any election) OR are unregistered (eligible voters who have not registered) as of January 2020.

The rate of Ambivalent Young Voters differs between Gen Z (18–24) and Gen Y (25–39).

The incidence of ambivalent Gen Z voters is 72% among eligible non-urban voters as determined by the Clean & Prosperous America survey conducted in January 2020.

Clean & Prosperous America estimates there are 11.4 million ambivalent eligible non-urban Gen Z voters.

The incidence of ambivalent Gen Y voters is 59% among eligible non-urban voters as determined by the Clean & Prosperous America survey conducted in January 2020.

Clean & Prosperous America estimates there are 18.9 million ambivalent eligible non-urban Gen Y voters.

Clean & Prosperous America estimates there are in the U.S. a total of 30.3 million ambivalent eligible non-urban voters.