



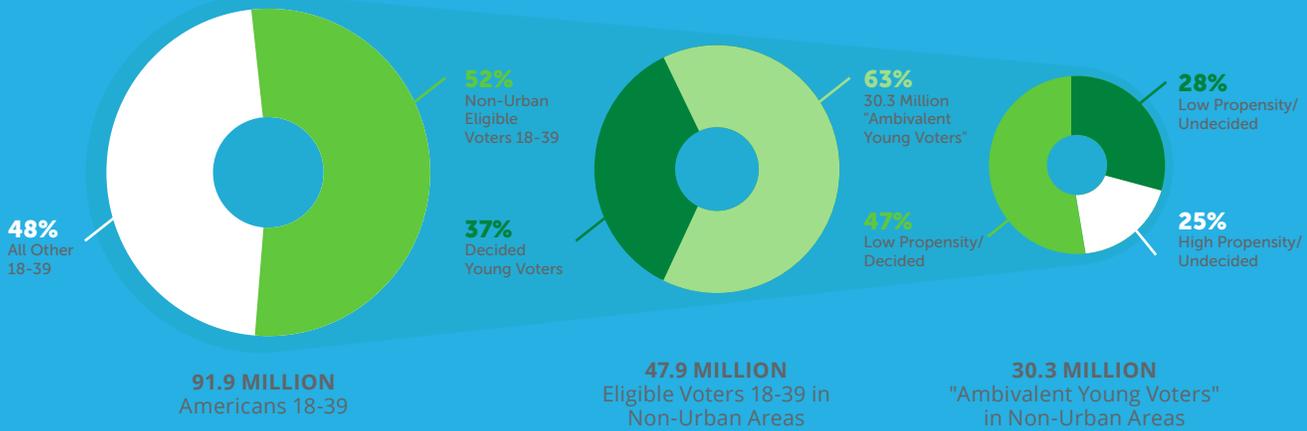
How to Reach Ambivalent Young Voters

August 2020

Tools and tips for grassroots organizations reaching reluctant suburban, small town, and rural voters ages 18–39.

Who Are the Ambivalent Young Voters?

There are 30 million eligible voters in the U.S. that we can persuade to vote for climate-friendly candidates IF we talk to them in the right way. We call these voters, "the Ambivalent Young Voters." They are 18–39 and live outside major metropolitan areas, often in competitive districts — the kind of districts where every vote matters. They're not politically active and don't closely follow the news.



The Ambivalent Young Voters

Eligible voters from non-urban areas, ages 18–39

Undecided, infrequent, and unmotivated voters

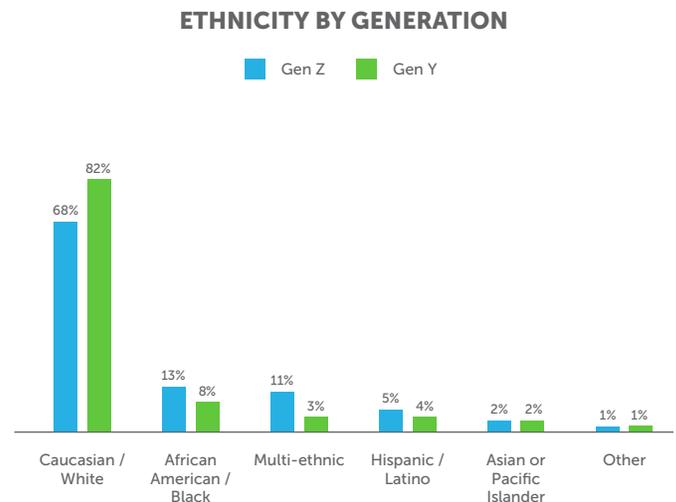
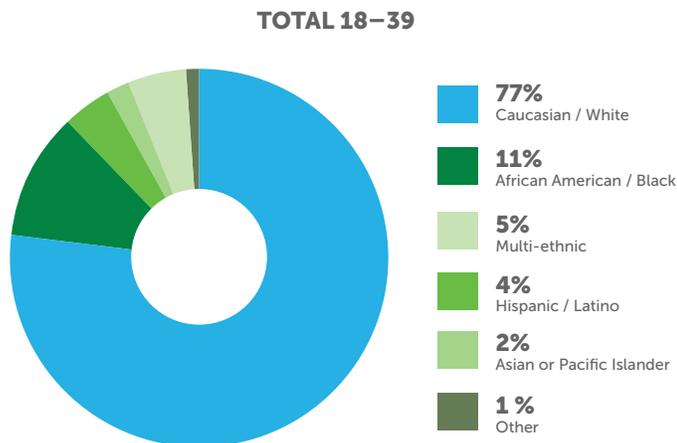
Are not politically active, don't follow the news closely

Open to voting across party lines

65% are registered voters

30 million in non-urban USA

AMBIVALENT YOUNG VOTER ETHNICITY



Why Should We Care?

Because We Need These Votes

It's no secret swing districts hold disproportionate influence over national policy. Want to change the world? You have to start in swing districts. And the Ambivalent Young Voters are the key to getting climate-friendly candidates elected. And when they do get elected, these freshman legislators are given a louder voice by party leadership so they can bring wins home to their district (and get re-elected). In other words, climate-friendly legislators elected with Ambivalent Young Voters votes can make big things happen.

Because Minds Can Change

Major policy shifts happen when an idea or cause moves from a handful of passionate advocates to reach a broader audience. Look at gay marriage. When he was running for the Senate in 2004, Barack Obama was opposed to it¹. But his mind changed. And so did the minds of millions of other Americans. Today, 67% of Americans support gay marriage². What happened? Advocates moved away from messaging designed for the "base" and embraced messages designed to appeal to moderates and disengaged Americans³. It worked. Minds changed.

Because The Ambivalent Young Voters Haven't Made Up Their Minds

The Ambivalent Young Voters are a huge group of people that share an important thing in common: they are politically uncommitted. In fact, 72% of non-urban voters 18–24 years old are undecided, infrequent, or non-voters. But they do care about the environment and climate-related issues.

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**.

76%

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

1. Steinmetz, Katy, 2015. See Obama's 20-Year Evolution on LGBT Rights. [online] Time.

2. McCarthy, Justin, 2020. U.S. Support for Same-Sex Marriage Matches Record High. [online] Gallup.

3. Ball, Molly, 2015. What Other Activists Can Learn From the Fight for Gay Marriage. The Atlantic.

Getting to Know the Ambivalent Young Voters

Not Active in Politics

The Ambivalent Young Voters are not politically active. They don't go to rallies or attend speeches. They avoid political discussions when they can.

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

So when you talk to them, remember that they'll need some background and context. Don't assume they are aware of everything the Trump administration has done or said. And don't assume they know much about climate change or have been paying attention to the news.

"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."

Amongst under-35s only **13% got their news direct**



with over half

54%

preferring to go to social media for news⁴

"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."

Life in Swing States

Many of the Ambivalent Young 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

4. 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 Voters

Independent Thinkers

They 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 these voters believe that their votes matter more in local elections and that there is less corruption in local politics, with nearly half 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 elections.**

“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 Voters

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.⁵ Many are employed in the healthcare industry, which is grappling with not only coronavirus patients but also the economic fallout from a steep decline in elective procedures.⁶

29% work in healthcare

more than **2x the national average** (13%)⁷

47%

were either **undecided** or **“slightly leaning”** toward either Biden or Trump

EXTREMELY/VERY CONCERNED BY

76% food shortages

74% air pollution

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

6. 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.

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

Why Do We Need to Talk to Them Differently?

Suspicious of Politics

They are tired of partisan bickering and are distrustful of politicians. From their perspective, both sides bend the truth to serve their goals and are looking for “gotcha moments” when they can score quick points against their adversaries. **If what you are saying sounds like “politics as usual,” they will assume you are cherry-picking your facts.**

Avoiding Conflict

Ambivalent Young Voters frequently live in competitive districts and have friends and family on both sides of the political spectrum. They empathize across party lines and have learned to avoid politics as a way to keep the conversation friendly. **If you slam the opposition, you’ll be slamming their friends and family (and remember: they may have voted for Trump).**

“Climate” Is Political

Unfortunately, even words like “the environment” or “climate” have become political footballs. So, while the Ambivalent Young Voters may sympathize with your ideas, **if you don’t choose your words carefully, they’ll quickly assume you are talking politics and are trying to score points (see Suspicious of Politics).**

They See It Differently

Remember: the majority of people in America are far more moderate than the average climate activist. What might seem obvious to you may be up for debate for the Ambivalent Young Voters. **If you have an open mind and are ready to respect different points of view, then they’ll be more likely to hear your side of things.**

How to Talk to the Ambivalent Young Voters

“When They Go Low, We Go High”

Insight: Taking the high ground and being willing to work with groups you normally might disagree with in order to achieve a common goal is the kind of behavior that will stand out and impress them. It’s different from what they expect, so it gets their attention.

- ✓ **Action:** Demonstrate your independence. Show them you are also open-minded by making it clear that you are not affiliated with a political party. Talk about working together, regardless of political affiliation.

Keep Trump Out of This

Insight: Trump fatigue is real. The Ambivalent Young Voters are tired of the bickering and tired of Trump being a flashpoint for both parties. In fact, Trump bashing can even push them to his side.

- ✓ **Action:** Instead of blaming Trump, focus on the powerful interests that brought him to the White House and want to keep him there. Talk about corporate greed and fossil fuel lobbyists.

Pollution as Proxy

Insight: “Climate change” is a loaded term, but our research shows that to the Ambivalent Young Voters “pollution” is nearly synonymous with climate change and far more personal and meaningful. Climate change is global and can feel overwhelming or hard to change with a vote. But local pollution is a tangible issue that they believe can be addressed at the local level.

- ✓ **Action:** Use words like “soot” and “smog” to describe particulates and tie pollution to corporate greed and fossil fuel lobbyists.

The Deregulation Surprise

Insight: The people we met with were surprised and disappointed to hear that pollution regulations had been relaxed under the Trump Administration. They assume no one would do that.

- ✓ **Action:** Just state the facts in a non-partisan way. Oil, gas, and coal companies have successfully lobbied to get regulations rolled back. Need a list? [Look here](#).

How to Talk to the Ambivalent Young Voters

Green Prosperity

Insight: Environmental messages were much more interesting to the Ambivalent Young Voters when they were paired with an economic message. Investing in technologies that will reduce energy bills and create jobs is a policy the Ambivalent Young Voters can support.

- ✓ **Action:** Make it tangible. Talk about new jobs and saving on fuel bills or utilities. Show them how it could work and tell them we have the technology to do this today, if we elect people who will make it happen.

Keep It Local, Personal, Present

Insight: The Ambivalent Young Voters are disengaged from politics for a variety of reasons, but a big one is because they don't see how these issues relate to them personally. If you can frame issues or opportunities as local or personal, the Ambivalent Young Voters are more likely to pay attention and get involved.

- ✓ **Action:** If you're talking about the economy say, "You'll save an average of \$15 next year," instead of, "We'll save millions over the next decade." Avoid big numbers and give local examples.

How to Move Them Into Action

This is not an easy group to motivate to action, especially the older group (25–39). But like all of us, they care about the planet and the health and economic well-being of their loved ones and communities. While they are unlikely to become passionate activists, they can become dependable climate voters if properly encouraged and reminded.

Baby Steps Lead to Bigger Steps

Studies have shown that people naturally (and subconsciously) strive for consistency⁷. Getting the Ambivalent Young Voters to take an action, no matter how small, can help pave the way to getting them to vote for climate champions.

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 get-out-the-vote volunteer; these are easy ways for these reluctant voters to get involved with minimal commitment. Later, reminded of this commitment, they will be more likely to want to act in a consistent manner⁷.

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

Make It Easy to Vote

This goes without saying, but the easier it is for the 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 now available that make this easy and quick.

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

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 you support and invite them to do their own research, 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.

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

Last Words

The Ambivalent Young Voters are not easy to connect with. There are reasons why most get-out-the-vote campaigns don't spend resources on them: they are not geographically dense, they are disengaged and distrustful, and they are distracted by the challenges of daily life. But there are a many of these voters in swing districts across the U.S. **Reaching, convincing, and motivating these reluctant voters can make all the difference in an election where every vote is critical.**

About Clean & Prosperous America

Clean & Prosperous America (CaPA) is a Washington State-based nonprofit 501(c)(4) devoted to advancing environmental policies at the federal level. CaPA recognizes that healing our country requires a multifaceted approach, which is why we are promoting solutions that increase economic activity while reducing environmental degradation. By encouraging youth to vote, and support environmental candidates, we know we can move together toward a cleaner and healthier economy.

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.