

# Rural Attitudes on Climate Change

Lessons from National and Midwest Polling and Focus Groups

Emily Pechar Diamond, Robert Bonnie, and Elizabeth Rowe



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### CONTENTS

Executive Summary	2
Introduction	3
Methodology	4
Findings	5
Summary	19
References	20

### Executive Summary

Following a nationwide [report](#) of rural attitudes toward the environment and conservation published in February 2020, this report takes a closer look at attitudes about climate change among rural voters. We draw on findings from the national study and incorporate new research with a regional focus on the upper Midwest.

Our study finds that:

- Climate change attitudes are polarized across the urban/rural divide. Urban/suburban voters were more supportive of climate action than rural voters, even controlling for partisanship and other demographics.
- Nationally, we found that rural voters were less supportive of government oversight of the environment than their urban/suburban counterparts, even controlling for partisanship and other demographics. Attitudes toward government oversight were also highly correlated with views on climate change among both urban and rural voters (i.e., less support for government oversight of the environment was associated with less support for action on climate).
- While many rural voters voiced concern about climate change (and particularly its disproportionate impact on rural communities), they were generally reticent to talk about it with their friends and neighbors given the polarization and controversy surrounding the issue. Additionally, climate change ranked as less important than other environmental protection priorities among rural voters.

- Partisanship remains the strongest predictor of climate attitudes—in both urban/suburban and rural communities, Democrats were more likely to think it is important for the United States take action to reduce climate change than independents or Republicans. Even perceptions of weather changes and vulnerability to climate impacts depended on partisanship, with rural Republicans reporting experiencing less extreme weather changes than rural Democrats.

Despite polarization on climate change among rural voters, there are policy solutions that draw support from rural voters. We found:

- Several climate change policies received high levels of support from rural voters, including policies that reduce pollution from powerplants, those that strengthen rural communities against extreme weather events, and those that make vehicles more fuel efficient.
- Policies that incentivize the contribution that agriculture can make toward mitigation and those that offered economic (as well as environmental) benefits to rural communities were also popular. In fact, in the midwestern survey, rural voter support for taking action on climate change jumped more than 20 percent when it was explicitly tied to also helping farmers. This framing also substantially boosted support among rural Republicans.

Given polarization around climate change, communicating effectively with rural voters on the topic is critical. Rural voters in this region continue to prefer moderate, practical messaging about climate change, and were particularly motivated by messages emphasizing the impact of climate change on weather and agriculture. In particular, messages that framed climate change policies as a helping farmers continue to make a living and those that emphasized the need to protect resources for farming communities and future generations were particularly convincing. We also found evidence that such messages on climate change may increase perceived importance of climate policies, particularly among rural women.

## INTRODUCTION

The first half of 2019 was the wettest on record for the United States (Hensen 2019), and historic-level flooding inundated 14 million people across the Midwest and South (Almukhtar et al. 2019). More than one million acres of farmland in the Midwest were flooded, creating significant challenges for farmers and rural communities. While climate change has been tied to increases in extreme weather events such as this (IPCC 2018), public opinion about climate change among rural Americans in this region remains mixed.

Earlier this year, the Nicholas Institute issued a report, *Understanding Rural Attitudes Toward the Environment and Conservation in America*, that used polling, focus groups, and interviews with rural voters nationwide to analyze the urban/rural divide on the environment and environmental policy. This follow-up report adds to that national study by taking a deeper look at rural attitudes about climate change in particular. We draw on relevant findings about climate change from the national study and supplement with additional climate-focused research from polling and a focus group of rural voters in the upper Midwest conducted in December 2019. The upper Midwest is a particularly important region for understanding rural attitudes

toward climate change, both due to its recent experiences with extreme weather and its political importance as a group of battleground states for the 2020 election. Our research in the Midwest specifically focused on the relationship between climate change and agriculture to identify specific paths forward on how to better engage farmers and rural Americans in a productive conversation about climate change solutions.

Our findings show that rural Americans do feel differently about the urgency of addressing climate change than their urban/suburban counterparts, even controlling for highly predictive factors like partisanship. Rural Americans place less importance on the United States taking action to address climate change than do urban/suburban Americans. Much of this opposition, however, may stem from rural opposition to government regulations. Despite this, rural voters voiced notable support for certain types of climate change policies, especially those that strengthen rural communities, increase affordability of clean fuel, and provide incentives for agriculture to contribute to climate change mitigation. Messaging about climate change that focuses on moral responsibility to future generations, agricultural community prosperity and natural climate solutions was also very convincing as frames for climate change action among rural voters.

## METHODOLOGY

The findings in this report come from two studies.<sup>1</sup> The first study included interviews and focus groups with rural voters and stakeholder leaders across the United States, followed by a nationally representative telephone survey of urban and rural voters across the country. Through the interviews and focus groups we spoke with over 100 rural voters from 2017–2019, with representation from the Northeast, Northwest, Midwest, Southeast, and Western states. The national survey polled 1,611 voters across the country from August 6–15, 2019, including 1,005 from rural zip codes.<sup>2</sup>

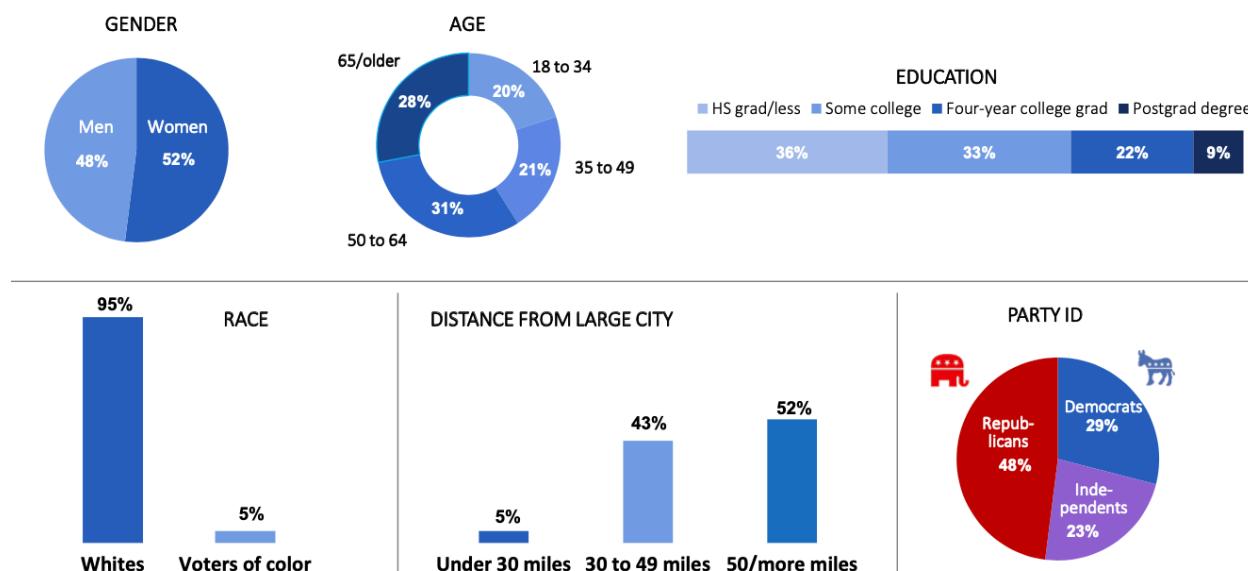
In late 2019 we extended this data collection to focus specifically on climate change attitudes, with data collected in the upper Midwest. This data captured perspectives of rural voters living in Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin through an online focus group and telephone survey in late 2019. The online focus group included 18 voters residing in rural zip codes, conducted from December 3–5, 2019. The survey polled 433 voters from rural zip codes in these states from December 13–29, 2019. The survey data was weighted to reflect the relative size of each state's rural population and other demographics of the state populations to provide a representative sample of rural communities in the Midwest. Demographic details of the Midwest survey sample are shown in Figure 1.

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1. Research conducted in partnership with Duke University, the University of Rhode Island, the University of Wyoming, Hart Research Associates, and New Bridge Strategy.

2. For more details on data collected and analyzed from the national sample, see the full report: Bonnie, R., E. Pechar Diamond, E. Rowe. 2020. Understanding Rural Attitudes Toward the Environment and Conservation in America. NI R 20-03. Durham, NC: Duke University.

**Figure 1. Demographic Breakdown of Rural Midwest Climate Survey Respondents**



## FINDINGS

The primary takeaways from this research are three-fold. First, rural voters are concerned about climate change but to a lesser degree than urban/suburban voters, and the extent of that concern as well as perceptions of causes remain highly polarized. Despite this mix of attitudes, there were several climate change policies that received high levels of support in these communities, particularly policies that incentivize the contribution that agriculture can make toward mitigation. However, consistent with our national study, skepticism of government tended to dominate attitudes toward climate change policies. And finally, rural voters continue to prefer moderate, practical messaging about climate change, and were particularly motivated by messages emphasizing how climate policies can strengthen the economic and environmental resiliency of rural communities. Below we detail key findings about rural climate change concern and prioritization, opportunities for climate policy in rural communities, and the effectiveness of different types of climate change messaging.

### *Climate Change Concern and Prioritization in Rural Communities*

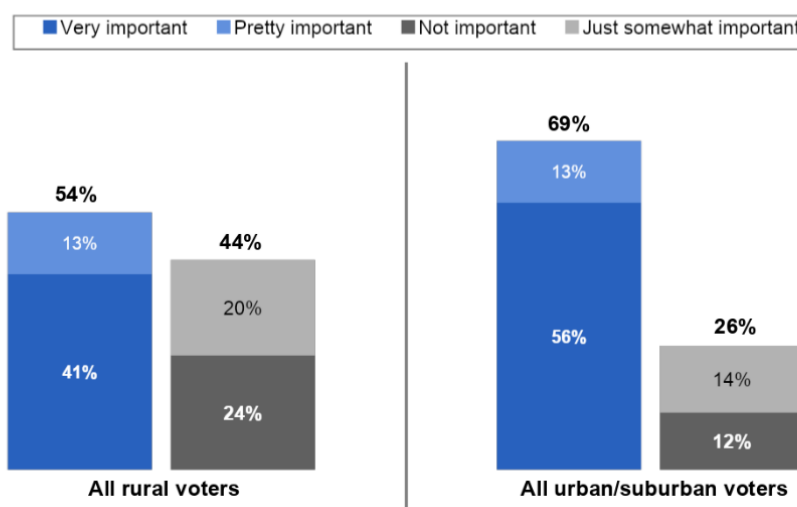
The majority of rural voters in both the national and midwestern samples were concerned about climate change, but generally felt that addressing climate change was less important than did Americans in urban and suburban areas. Like the American public as a whole, the level of concern and prioritization of climate change among rural voters varied dramatically by partisanship.

## Majority of Rural Voters Concerned about Climate Change, but Concern Is Highly Polarized

In general, rural voters were more divided about the importance of climate change action than their urban and suburban counterparts. In our national survey, 54 percent of rural voters felt that action on climate change was very or pretty important, while 44 percent felt it was less important. Comparatively, 69 percent of urban/suburban voters felt climate action was important, with only 26 percent feeling that this was just somewhat or not important. Figure 2 shows higher levels of support for climate action among urban and suburban voters than among rural voters in the national sample.

**Figure 2. Importance of U.S. Climate Action among Rural and Urban Voters (National Survey)**

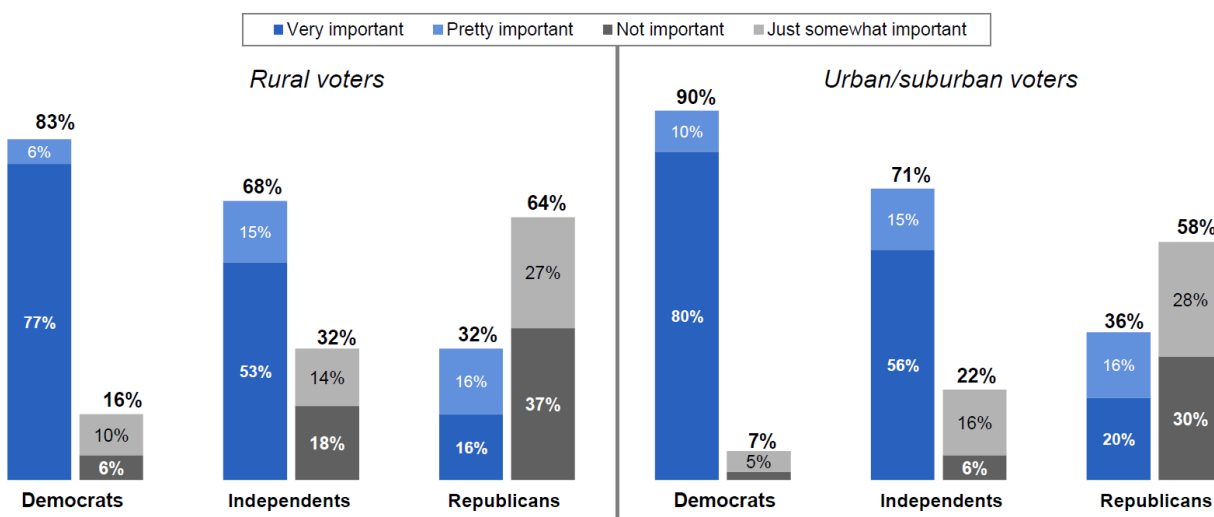
*How important is it that the United States take action to reduce climate change?*



In both the rural and urban/suburban samples, however, climate change attitudes were highly polarized along party lines. While climate attitudes were more strongly correlated with partisanship in the urban/suburban sample, there remained a significant difference in the importance of climate action among Democrats, Republicans and Independents in both samples. Figure 3 shows the partisan breakdown by rural and urban/suburban samples in the national survey.

**Figure 3. Importance of U.S. Climate Action among Rural and Urban Voters, by Partisanship (National Survey)**

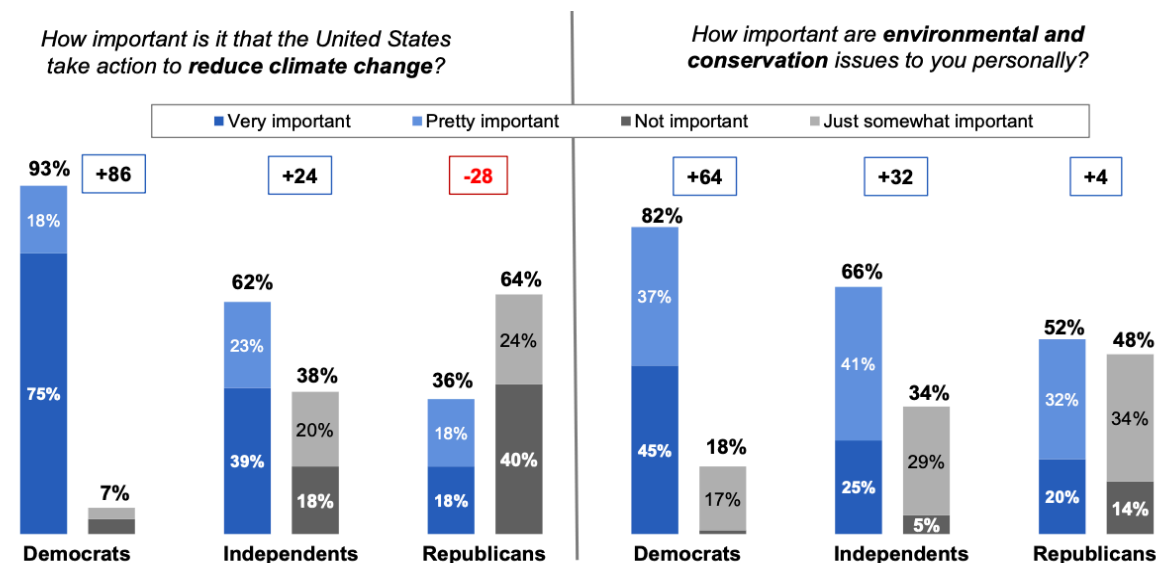
*How important is it that the United States take action to reduce climate change?*



Findings were similar for rural voters in the upper Midwest survey (which did not include urban/suburban voters): a majority of midwestern rural voters (59 percent) felt that it was important for the United States to take action to reduce climate change. However, this sentiment was exceedingly polarized. Ninety-three percent of rural midwestern Democrats felt that it was “pretty important” or “very important” for the U.S. to take action to reduce climate change, compared with just 36 percent of rural midwestern Republicans. This partisan gap of 57 points was higher than the nationwide partisan gap of rural voters (51 points), suggesting that the partisan divide on climate change may be wider in the Midwest than in other rural communities in America.

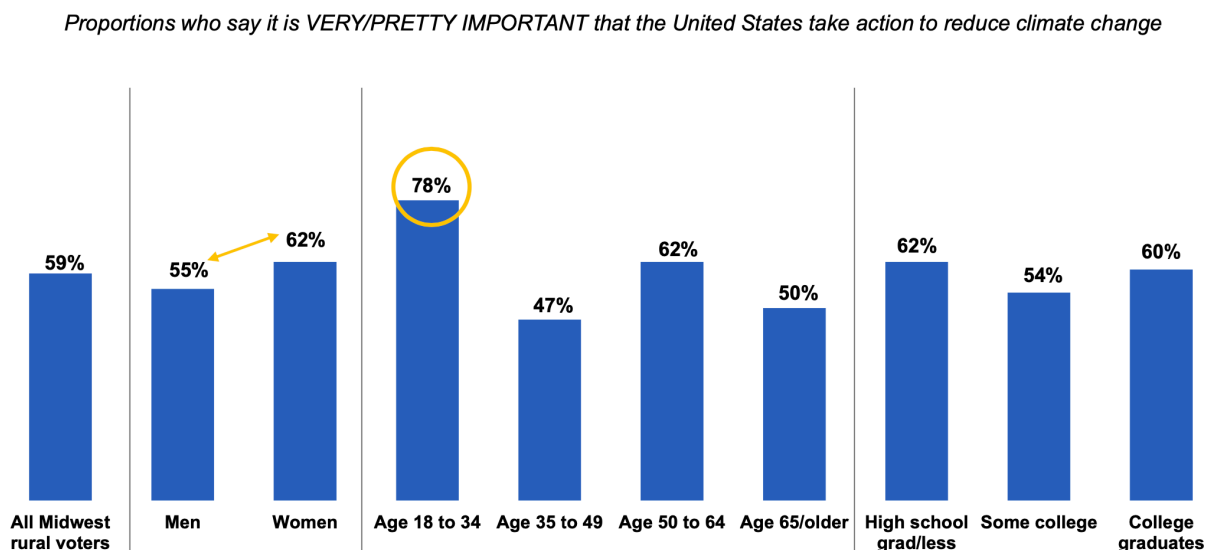
Attitudes toward climate change were also more polarized than attitudes toward environmental and conservation issues in general. A majority (52 percent) of rural Republicans in the upper Midwest survey said that environmental and conservation issues were important to them personally, compared to only 36 percent of Republicans who felt that it was important for the United States to take action on climate change (Figure 4). Notably, the percentage of Republicans who felt that climate change action was important was 28-points lower than those who did not, while the percentage of rural Republicans who felt that environmental and conservation issues were important was four points *higher* than those who felt they were not important.

**Figure 4. Rural Attitudes toward Climate Change and Environmental Conservation, by Partisanship (Upper Midwest Survey)**



Voter demographics also made a difference in rural attitudes toward climate change (Figure 5). Support for climate change action was notably higher among younger rural midwestern voters (78 percent of 18–34-year-olds, compared to 47 percent of 35–49-year-olds, thought climate action was important), and slightly higher among women (62 percent) than men (55 percent). Education levels also mattered, although the pattern was unexpected. Rural voters with some college were least likely to think climate action was important (54 percent), rising slightly among college graduates (60 percent) and those with a high school education or less (62 percent).

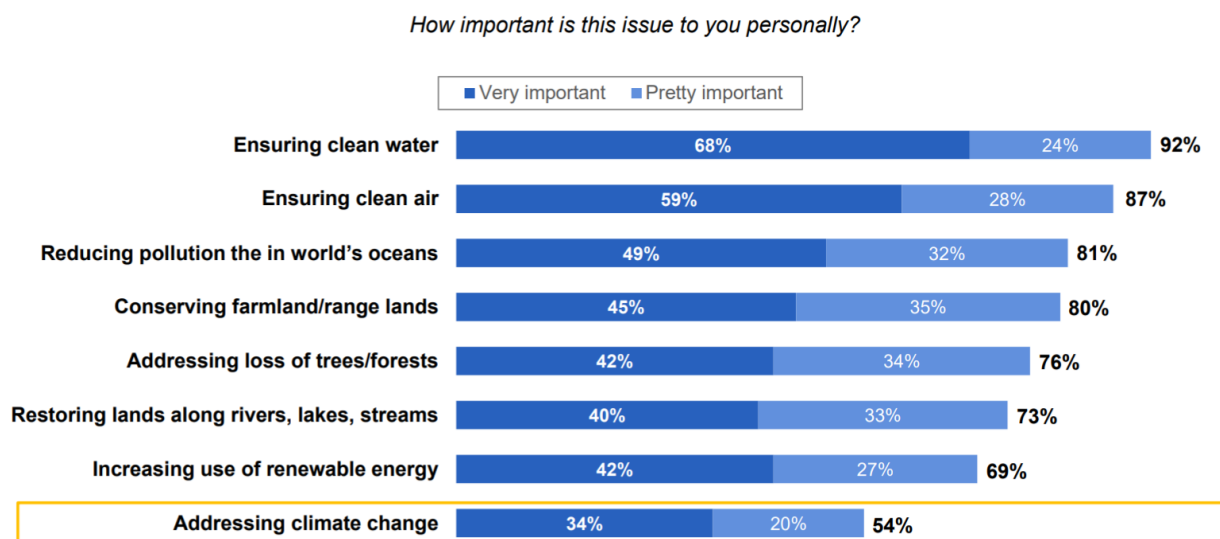
**Figure 5. Percentage of Rural Voters Who Say It Is Important That the U.S. Take Action on Climate Change, by Demographic Group (Upper Midwest Survey)**



## Climate Change Ranked Lowest Among Environmental Priorities for Rural Voters

Among rural voters in the upper Midwest, addressing climate change ranked lowest in importance compared to all other environmental issues posed to the participants. More immediately visible priorities, such as ensuring clean water and clean air, were the most important environmental issues. Environmental issues that directly impact rural communities, such as protecting farmland, forests, and riverbeds were also a higher priority than addressing climate change. Figure 6 shows the rankings of environmental issue priority among midwestern rural voters, with climate change ranked as least important.

**Figure 6. Importance of Environmental Issues to Rural Voters (Upper Midwest Survey)**



In the national survey, climate change fared slightly better among rural voters, although climate action remained less important to rural voters than to urban and suburban voters. Only 21 percent of rural voters nationally chose climate change as one of their top two most important environmental concerns, compared to 37 percent of urban and suburban voters.

## Distrust of Government Taints Attitudes toward Climate Change

In the national study, we found a strong correlation between attitudes toward government oversight of environmental issues and support for action on climate change, even controlling for partisanship, ideology, and other demographics. This association was strong among both rural and urban/suburban voters. Among rural voters in the national sample, every one-point increase in preferred level of government oversight of environmental issues was significantly associated with a seven percent increase in perceived importance of climate action (controlling for predictive demographics including gender, age, education, partisanship, ideology, and agricultural profession).

Consistent with these findings from the nationwide study, rural voters in the upper Midwest focus group were skeptical of the federal government and its ability to effectively address climate change. “For me, I naturally assume that nothing will come of it, so I am indifferent. Our

government is broken,” wrote a participant from Michigan. Others felt that politicians were not acting in the best interest of rural areas: “They care more about bigger cities where there are more likely to be more people to vote,” wrote a participant from Illinois. Reflective of findings in the nationwide report, participants were more supportive of policies that are determined and implemented at the local level: “I’ve heard about policies on setting local emissions goals that are reasonable for your community ... I like those ideas because they break it down to a local level,” wrote a participant from Illinois.

When it comes to government agencies implementing policies, rural focus group participants trusted the USDA more than the EPA. Many participants felt that the EPA had overstepped its boundaries with recent policies, but generally associated the USDA with support for farmers and agricultural communities. Some participants opposed any type of government regulation, stating that the federal government did not have a good track record in effective regulation. However, most focus group participants felt that it was part of the government’s responsibility to support small family farmers financially.

## Rural Voters Feel Frustrated and Pessimistic about Climate Change

When focus group participants were asked to describe their emotions associated with climate change, negative emotions dominated. Participants consistently felt worried and concerned, and there was also a significant amount of frustration toward the politicization of the issue. They articulated a sense of loss for animals, habitats, and way of life for farmers; sadness and regret at not taking the environment seriously; feeling overwhelmed at the enormity of the issue and the amount of damage to address; and concern about future generations and uncertainty about what a future under climate change looks like. The figure to the right shows the most common words associated with climate change in the midwestern focus group.



**Figure 14: Words Associated with Emotional Response to Climate Change**

**(Upper Midwest Focus Group)**

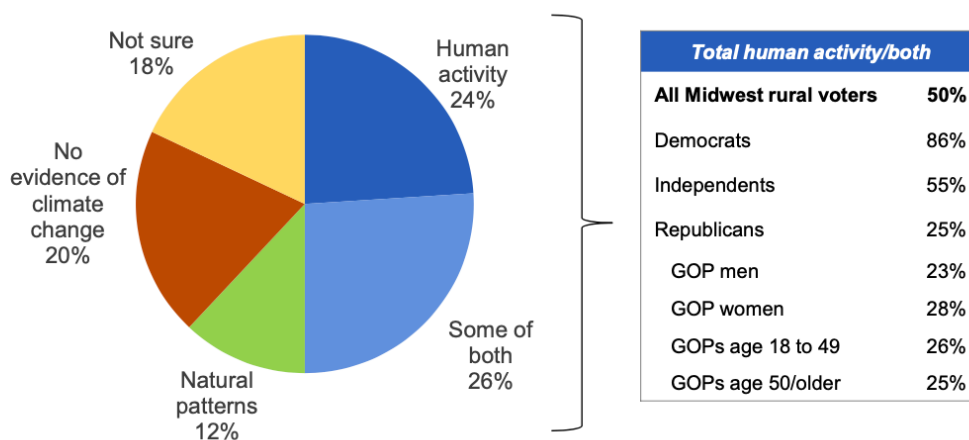
## Lack of Consensus on the Causes of Climate Change

In the focus groups, rural participants in the upper Midwest survey were easily able to identify both local and global impacts of climate change, such as changing wildlife patterns, changing weather patterns, melting glaciers, warmer oceans and extreme weather around the world. However, only about half of participants said that they believe humans are driving climate change—a significant contingent pointed to natural cycles of the earth as an explanation for the climate change impacts. “Yes, I think the climate is changing, however, the climate constantly goes through cycles of change, so I’m not sure it’s the dire situation that the media makes it out to be,” wrote a participant from Michigan.

Half of the midwestern survey respondents reported belief that the climate is changing either primarily due to human activity, or due to a mix of human activity and natural causes. This means that 50 percent of the sample either believed that climate change is completely due to natural causes (12 percent), that there is no evidence of climate change (20 percent) or was not sure (18 percent). While this was highly partisan, there was no significant difference in attitudes based on age or gender (Figure 7).

**Figure 7. Perceptions of the Cause of Climate Change among Survey Respondents (Upper Midwest Survey)**

*From what you've heard, is there solid evidence that the earth's climate has been changing over the past few decades? If so, is it mostly because of human activity (fossil fuels) or mostly because of natural patterns in the earth's environment?*

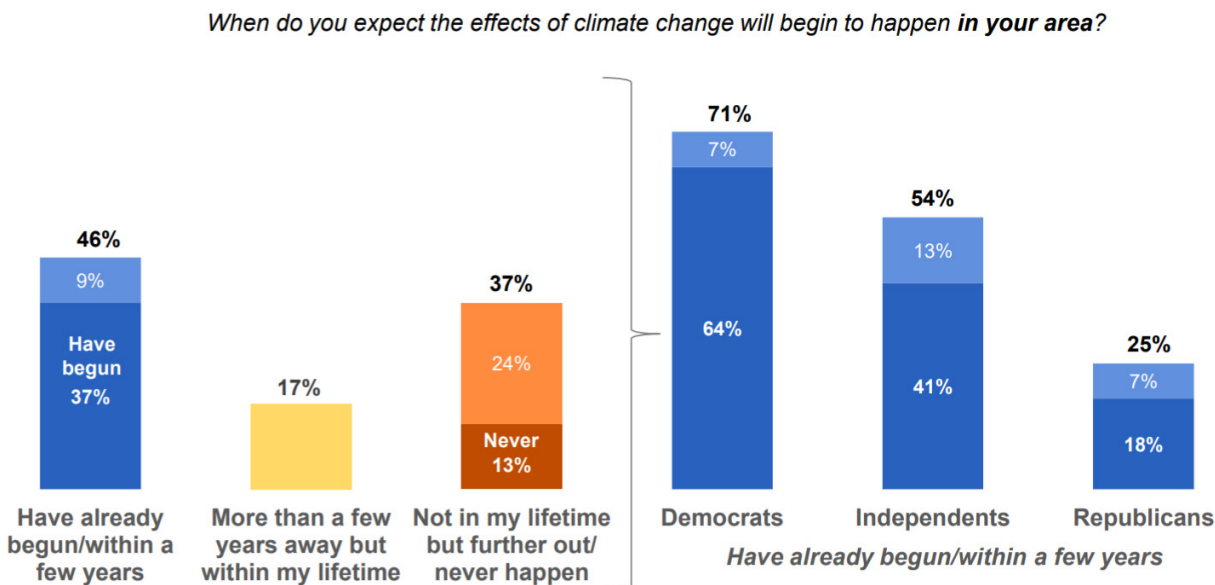


## Perception of Climate-Related Impacts Highly Partisan

In the surveys, both attitudes toward climate change and partisanship seemed to influence how rural voters perceived climate impacts in their area. Less than half (46 percent) of midwestern rural voters felt that the effects of climate change have already begun or will begin within a few years in their area. Of this, 71 percent were Democrats and 25 percent were Republicans. Figure 8 shows the distribution of how vulnerable to the effects of climate change rural voters in the Midwest perceived themselves to be. Focus group participants, especially those identifying as Republican, were also more likely to identify climate change impacts happening in other parts of the world than in their own region: “I am not sure we are seeing much climate change around

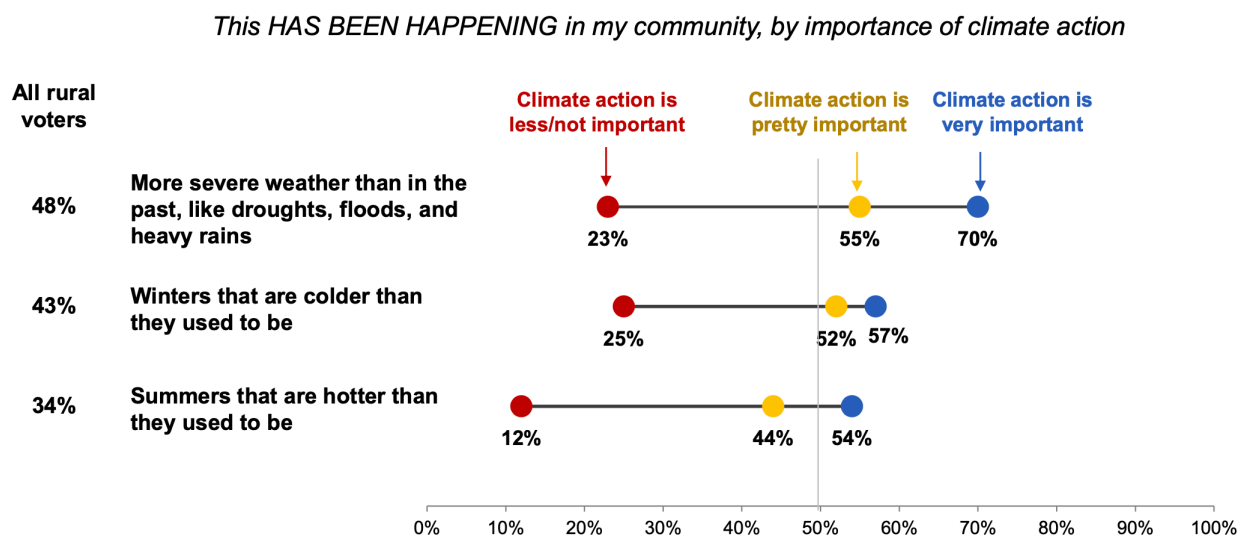
my area. But I have heard and seen pictures of how the ice is melting at a faster rate now,” wrote a Republican participant from Indiana.

**Figure 8. Perceptions of Vulnerability to the Effects of Climate Change among Rural Voters (Upper Midwest Survey)**



There was also a direct correlation between attitudes toward climate change and perceptions of climate-related weather (droughts, floods, heavy rains, hotter summers) among midwestern rural voters. Figure 9 shows how attitudes about climate change influenced perceptions of increased severe weather. Seventy percent of rural midwestern voters who thought climate action was very important perceived more severe weather than in the past, compared to only 23 percent of voters who believed climate action was less/not important. Similarly, 54 percent of rural voters who felt climate action was important also thought that summers are hotter than they used to be, compared to just 12 percent of voters that believed climate action was less/not important.

**Figure 9. Perceptions of Severe Weather among Rural Voters, by Importance of Climate Action (Upper Midwest Survey)**



## Rural Communities Feel More Vulnerable to Climate Impacts than Urban Communities

While perceptions of weather changes were highly partisan, focus group participants felt that rural areas were more vulnerable to the effects of climate change than more urban/suburban communities. “I feel like inhabitants of rural areas feel more attune to nature and consider themselves stewards of the forests and waters. As we continue to feel the detrimental effects of climate change, although small at first, our way of life will be harmed,” wrote a participant from

Michigan. Many participants associated climate change with agricultural difficulties, especially wetter springs and colder falls reducing the ability of farmers to get crops in the ground. However, others noted that “people in our area, as far as I know, don’t spend much time thinking about climate change. If we have changes in weather that are unusual, we just deal with it, try to make the best of it,” (focus group participant from Illinois).

## Opportunities for Climate Policy Support in Rural Communities

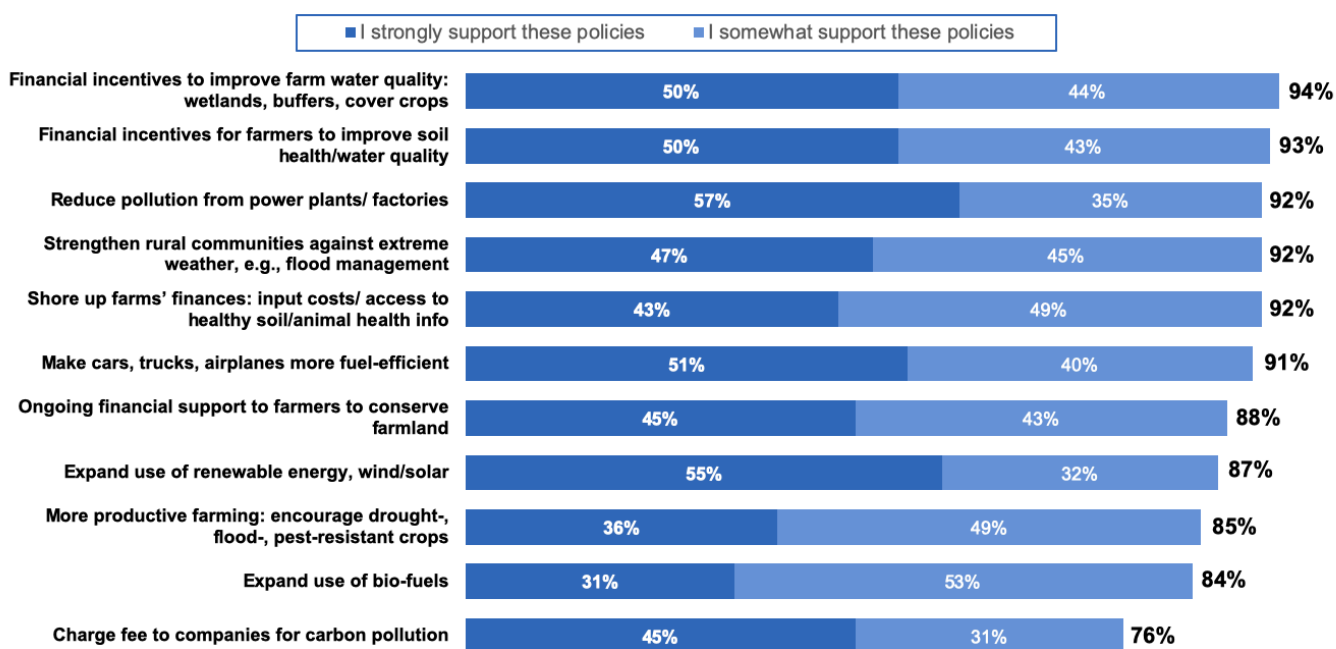
While attitudes toward climate change remain partisan, this study identified several opportunities to build broad support for climate-related policies in rural areas. In particular, policies that have both economic and environmental upsides and policies that incentivize and invest in agricultural and rural solutions to climate change have potential to attract rural voters, even those who have low levels of concern about climate change.

### Broad Climate Policy Support among Midwest Rural Voters

Survey respondents in the Midwest reported a high level of support for a range of policies that address climate change (but weren’t labeled as such). Figure 10 presents the levels of support for various policies tested among rural midwestern voters. The broadest support went to policies that directly incentivize farmers to protect the environment or strengthen rural capacities to

manage climate change effects. However, “traditional” emissions-reduction climate change policies received the highest percentage of rural voters who “strongly supported” them. Notably, 57 percent of rural midwestern voters strongly supported policies to reduce pollution from power plants, 55 percent strongly supported an expansion of renewable energy, and 51 percent strongly supported policies to make vehicles more fuel-efficient. This suggests that while rural voters may be broadly attracted to policies that directly support rural communities, more traditional climate change mitigation policies can garner significant support from rural voters. While these traditional policies show substantial rural support, there are reasons that this support may be less robust than it appears. In particular, if opponents of these traditional policies appeal to rural voters’ skepticism of government oversight of environmental policy, we suspect these numbers may soften.

**Figure 10. Support for Climate-Related Policies among Rural Midwestern Voters (Upper Midwest Survey)**



\* Note: policies were not characterized in the question as being climate-related.

Even so, evidence from the midwestern focus group expands on the motives behind rural support for the more traditional types of climate mitigation policies. Reducing pollution from power plants and factories appealed to rural voters because they felt that environmental regulations should focus on wealthy companies. Participants generally felt that corporations were far too likely to put profits over public safety. Participants also felt that expanding renewable energy was a “no-brainer” policy—they believed that we are using up the (fossil-fuel) resources that we currently have and need to invest in new, more sustainable solutions. Finally, policies to increase the fuel-efficiency of vehicles appealed to rural voters’ preference for policies that help the environment and their pocketbooks, with participants recognizing that these standards would also help them save money at the gas pump.

Survey results also suggested that 25 percent of Midwest rural voters who did not believe that climate change is a problem still strongly supported at least one of the tested policy solutions. This signifies a notable opportunity to engage rural voters on climate change. Seventy-four percent of these voters were Republican, and 44 percent said that there is no evidence that the climate is changing, yet they still supported policies designed to mitigate the effects of climate change. These voters were also more likely to say that it is very important for the government to take action to help farmers, suggesting that climate policies directed at supporting farming communities can garner the support of voters who are even skeptical of climate change.

### Rural Voters Want Policies That Balance Economic and Environmental Protection

In the focus groups, participants preferred climate policies that both strengthened environmental protection and created opportunities for economic growth. A participant from rural Indiana noted that while renewable energy was becoming popular in rural areas, it was often driven by economic opportunity as opposed to environmental concern. “I think for many it is a business decision to install turbines, grow corn for ethanol, etc. ... as an income producing necessity. Some farmers I’ve spoken with talk about ethanol as a lower cost, and perhaps environmentally better, fuel source but for others it has nothing to do with better energy or saving the planet. They just want a market for their corn crops.”

Respondents also emphasized the need for policies to be implemented slowly so as not to disrupt the economy. “I would support putting policies in place to improve our environment, however, they can’t be expected to happen overnight, and they can’t be so restrictive to stop the economy,” wrote a participant from Michigan. Others supported policies that primarily impacted large businesses who have the biggest impact on emissions and can best afford the changes.

Concerns about rural flight and corporate farms eradicating small family farms was also a major anxiety among rural midwestern voters. Policies, such as renewable energy subsidies, that promote jobs in rural areas and create new income opportunities on family farms are likely to be strongly supported by rural voters.

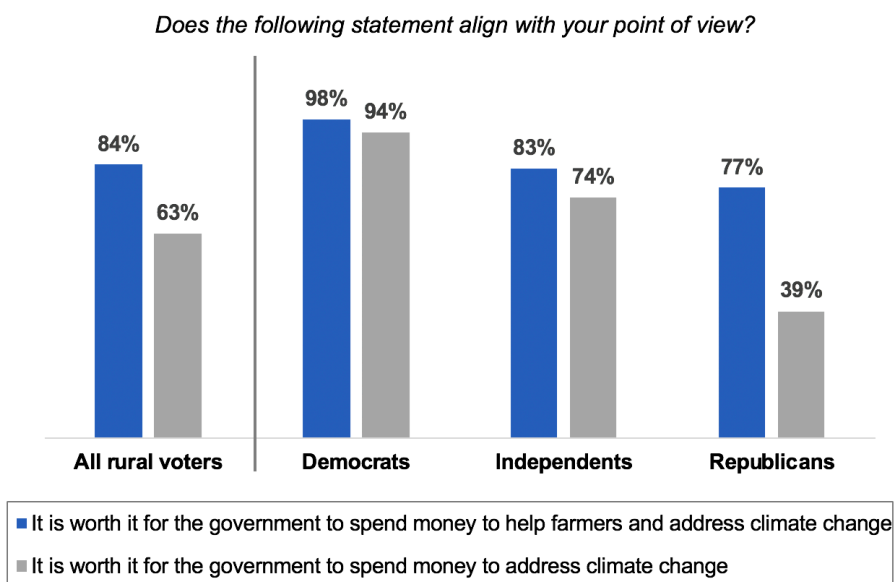
### Agriculture-Focused and Incentive-Based Climate Policies Could Win Support of Key Groups

While rural respondents were skeptical of regulation-based environmental policies, they were much more likely to support policies that provided incentives for farmers to protect the environment. Seventy percent of midwestern survey respondents preferred a policy when it was framed as “providing financial incentives for the agriculture and forestry industries to expand their use of technologies and practices that help address climate change,” instead of setting rules requiring the use of such technologies and practices.

The recipient of government spending on climate change also mattered. When government spending on climate change was framed as helping farmers address climate change, 84 percent of rural midwestern respondents thought that this kind of government spending was worth it. However, when farmers were not mentioned and voters were asked more generally whether it was worth it for the government to spend money to address climate change, support dropped to 63 percent. This difference was particularly dramatic among Republicans. While only 39 percent of

Republicans supported the government spending money to address climate change in general, 77 percent of rural Republicans supported the government spending money to help farmers address climate change. Figure 11 shows how rural voter support varied based on the target of government spending.

**Figure 11. Percent of Rural Voters Agreeing That Government Spending on Climate Change Is Worth It, Depending on Whether Farmers Were Mentioned (Upper Midwest Survey)**



Focus group participants also supported policies that might help families keep their farms profitable. “I think farmers honestly want to try to do everything they can to help the environment, but their funding is so limited and they work so hard they just don’t have the means to do this, so a policy to assist in this would be wonderful,” wrote a participant from Minnesota. This support for policies that help shore-up agriculture could be parlayed into climate change policies such as incentives for farmland conservation, subsidies for renewable energy installations, and increased vehicle fuel efficiency resulting in savings on gasoline. However, it would be important to make sure the farmers are aware of such policies, “I also feel like many of the programs in place aren’t communicated to farmers in a direct way that they can understand, so I fear the changes would make no difference because they wouldn’t hear about them,” wrote a respondent from Michigan.

### ***Messaging on Climate Change for Rural Communities***

We also tested a wide array of messages on climate change to understand what types of communication frames resonate best with rural voters. Participants were strongly in favor of moderate language and shied away from extreme views on either side of the climate change debate. Messages that emphasize the benefit of climate policies for agricultural communities and

future generations resonated with rural voters, reflecting rural voters' strong values of place-based identity, community, and stewardship of their land and resources.

### Moderate, Pragmatic Climate Communication Most Effective for Rural Voters

Rural voters had strong negative reactions to both climate change activists and climate change deniers. While most participants labeled people who say that climate change is a big problem as “forward thinking,” climate activists were described as emotional, “off their rocker,” and perceived as using climate change as a political tool. Meanwhile, climate change deniers were described as uninformed, wrong, and ignorant. “To say there is no issue is just as bad as those saying we are on the verge of environmental disaster,” wrote a participant from Illinois.

From a messaging perspective, rural voters preferred climate change messages that emphasized honesty and recognized that there is no silver-bullet solution. They appreciated when messages acknowledged that there are many different opinions on the issue, and broadened the appeal to more than just climate change—specifically when how policies can support agriculture, the economy, and rural life in general. Overall, participants were drawn to messages with a pragmatic tone, implying incremental changes and improvements, without a complete overhaul or rapid, dramatic changes. “While I personally know climate change is real and a problem, I know lots of people who don’t believe that to be true. By addressing other issues along with climate change, you will get much more support,” wrote a participant from Minnesota.

### Agriculture-Focused Climate Messaging Resonates Strongly with Rural Voters

A clear winning tactic for climate change messaging among rural voters was relating the issue to agriculture and opportunities for rural communities to flourish. “If it’s good for farmers, it’s good for us!” wrote a focus group participant from Minnesota. Respondents particularly found the following three messages to be persuasive reasons to have policies addressing climate change:

- (1) **Future Generations Frame:** Eighty-one percent of rural midwestern voters found the following message, that emphasizes the opportunity to use climate change policies to support family farmers and promote economic vitality in rural communities, to be convincing (including 74 percent of rural Republicans):

*“If we help family farmers, they’ll be better able to pass their farms on to the next generation. If we increase development of renewable energy in rural areas that will mean more good-paying jobs in those areas. More financially secure farms, more and better jobs, and a better quality of life with cleaner air and more flood readiness, will encourage our kids and grandkids to stay in their communities and make a life.”*

- (2) **Win-Win-Win Frame:** Seventy-eight percent of rural midwestern voters felt that the following message, which frames farmer prosperity, quality of rural life, and addressing climate change as three goals that can coexist, was convincing. This suggests that rural voters are drawn to positive messages about how policies can help them maintain a high quality of life.

*“We have an opportunity to do three things at once: help farmers continue to make a living, improve the quality of life in rural communities, and reduce climate change.”*

*Things like new farming practices, better flood management, and leasing some land to produce wind energy will improve farmers' finances, result in cleaner water, reduce destruction from major storms, and reduce climate pollution. These are worth the investment because they will ultimately benefit all of us."*

- (3) **Natural Climate Solutions Frame:** Another powerful message focused on natural climate solutions, specifically how conserving farmlands and forests can be an effective way to combat climate change, provide clean water, and protect wildlife. Offering farmers financial incentives to protect this open land was a popular way to frame climate change policies (76 percent of rural midwestern voters found it convincing, including 66 percent of Republicans).

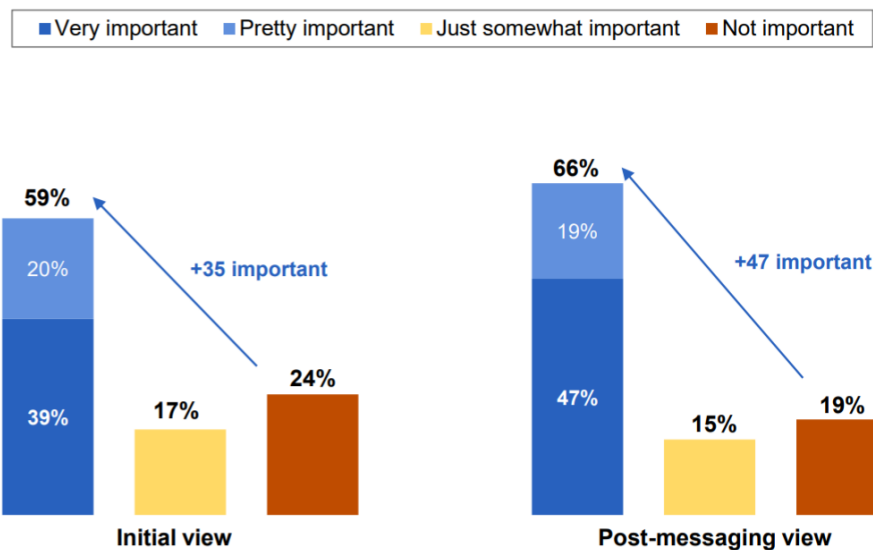
*"Scientists believe that one of the most effective tools to address climate change is conserving farmlands and forests. Healthy farms and forests can remove pollution from the air, thereby reducing the threat of climate change. Conserving farms and forests also provides clean water and habitat for wildlife. We should provide financial incentives and other assistance to help farmers and forest owners protect the environment."*

### Climate Messaging May Be Most Effective among Rural Women

Finally, we measured whether presenting survey participants with all of the messages on climate change had any noticeable effects on how important they felt the issue was for the United States to address. The messaging resulted in a modest (but noticeable) strengthening of support for U.S. climate action (Figure 12). While only 39 percent of rural survey respondents thought that it was very important that the U.S. take action on climate change before the messaging, 47 percent of respondents felt this strongly after receiving the various messages on climate change.

**Figure 12. Change in Climate Attitudes after Messaging (Upper Midwest Survey)**

*How important is it that the United States take action to reduce climate change?*



While the overall change among respondents from not or somewhat important to pretty or very important was fairly modest (a 12-point shift), the effect of the messaging was significantly stronger among certain demographic groups. In particular, women were much more likely to shift their attitudes than were men, and non-college grads and voters with some college were also susceptible to attitude changes after messaging. Importantly, Republican women showed a 26-point shift in net importance of taking action on climate change (from not/somewhat important to pretty/very important) after receiving the messages about climate change. Figure 13 highlights the notable shifts by demographic group.

**Figure 13. Shift in Favor of Climate Policy after Messaging (Upper Midwest Survey)**

	<i>Net Importance</i>		<b>Shift</b>
	<b>Initial</b>	<b>Post-messaging</b>	
All Midwest rural voters	<b>+35</b>	<b>+47</b>	<b>+12</b>
Women age 18 to 49	+50	+70	+20
Women non-college grads	+38	+58	+20
Voters with some college	+28	+49	+21
Independents	+44	+61	+17
Republicans	-3	+14	+17
Republican women	-4	+22	+26

## SUMMARY

As one of the most polarizing issues in modern American politics, climate change continues to create partisan cleavages in rural America. In this study, we used a focus groups and survey of voters in rural communities in the upper Midwest to understand how rural voters feel about climate change, climate policies, and messages designed to promote support for climate action. We found that, while the partisan divide on the issue reflects that found in nationwide polls, there are opportunities to engage rural Midwestern communities on climate change. Specifically, voters respond well to messages and policies that emphasize how farmers and agricultural communities can benefit from climate change policies such as incentivizing low-carbon practices and the production of renewable energy on rural land.

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## Author Affiliations

**Emily Pechard Diamond**, Assistant Professor,  
Department of Communication Studies and  
Department of Marine Affairs, The University of  
Rhode Island

**Robert Bonnie**, Executive in Residence, Nicholas  
Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions, Duke  
University

**Elizabeth Rowe**, Master's of Environmental  
Management candidate, Nicholas School of the  
Environment, Duke University

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## Contact

Nicholas Institute  
Duke University  
P.O. Box 90335  
Durham, NC 27708

1201 Pennsylvania  
Avenue NW  
Suite 500  
Washington, DC 20004

919.613.8709  
nicholasinstitute@duke.edu