

Young people think climate change is a top issue but when they vote, it's complicated

Ximena Bustillo, All Things Considered, NPR, September 18, 2023 (transcript, shortened)

Tens of thousands of climate activists gathered in the streets of midtown Manhattan on Sunday with a common goal: tell President Biden to do more to address climate change.

Despite their frustrations for what they say is the current president's inaction on climate, over a dozen self-identifying Democrats marching in New York told NPR they still plan to vote for him, citing reasons like abortion protection and disdain for GOP frontrunner Donald Trump.

Over the last decade, climate change has emerged as a top political issue, particularly for younger voters. But polls routinely show climate change lags behind other items, like traditional pocketbook economic issues, that can motivate voters.

"Although the climate crisis is the most important issue facing humanity, it's not even close to being the most important voting issue when people cast ballots on Election Day and we in the climate movement need to admit that," said Nathaniel Stinnett, founder of the Environmental Voter Project. "Still, things are changing, and the data is pretty clear that climate voters are becoming a more powerful electoral bloc." For example, in 2018, a separate environmental advocacy group, the Environment America Action Fund, picked 10 close races where they believed environmental voters could make a difference in the outcome. Eight of those 10 won their races.

Because climate change has risen in political prominence, organizers and groups like the Environmental Voter Project are highlighting the growing power of climate-conscious voters. The group boasts that it mobilized hundreds of thousands of voters in 2022 in states like Arizona, Florida, Georgia and Pennsylvania. The Environmental Voter Project's goal is to increase voter turnout generally—not influence the political sway of a voter. "We think that if we can dramatically increase the number of these people who vote not just in federal elections, but in state and local elections, that will start changing policy," Stinnett predicted. "Even though none of us ever know what happens in the privacy of the voting booth."

Polling shows that young voters across party lines list climate as a top issue. The latest NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist poll found nearly 60% of those ages 18 to 29 believe climate change should be a priority, even at the risk of slowing economic growth. A larger group, 64%, believe climate change is a major threat, and 72% responded that climate change is affecting their local community.

Though climate isn't a motivating voting issue across the board, the turnout of young voters, people of color and women could make the difference in tight races—all groups that consistently rank climate as a top issue.

That's why Shiv Soin, a young climate activist in New York, is focusing his attention on local and state-level elections this cycle. Even if it means keeping Biden out of it. "As a political organizer, I don't get any enthusiasm really from people around Joe Biden," Soin admitted. "That is not how I recruit people to fight for climate change on the local level."

"Many voters are increasingly turning to state and local elections as a place where they feel like they can make a much larger difference," Anthony Leiserowitz, founder and Director of the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, said. "And candidates who are now running for office at the state and local level are getting much more assertive about saying, 'I am a climate candidate.'"

Strategists identify statehouse, public utility, mayoral, gubernatorial and House races as those where climate platforms and climate voters could have a bigger influence.

Yet, although this voting bloc is growing, many who are studying the trends warn it is fragile and should not be taken for granted.

"We're still in the early days of a rising tide of climate action," Leiserowitz said.