Messaging on Climate, Energy and the Environment in the Era of Trump

To: Interested Parties  
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RE: Messaging on Climate, Energy and the Environment in the Era of Trump

This memo summarizes key takeaways from a variety of polls conducted by Global Strategy Group for several pro-conservation groups, including a new survey completed just this week. It is also guided by recent public polls that are relevant to the current debate over climate, energy and environmental policy.

The Current State of Play on Climate, Energy and The Environment

The Trump environmental agenda is deeply unpopular, and Americans from all parties believe he should not pull the U.S. out of the Paris Climate Agreement. In a just-released Quinnipiac poll, Donald Trump’s poorest marks on any issue came on the environment (31% approve, 61% disapprove). In the previous Quinnipiac poll, a 62-28% margin said Trump should not “remove specific regulations intended to combat climate change.” Trump’s ratings could fall even further if he decides to pull the U.S. out of the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement. According to a November poll from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 71% of Americans – including 57% of Republicans – say the U.S. should continue to participate in the treaty.

Trump’s proposed EPA cuts are overwhelmingly opposed and pose a serious threat to Congressional Republicans who support them. In a just-completed GSG poll of 42 swing House districts, 67% of voters oppose Trump’s proposed 31% cut to the EPA’s funding, including 47% who oppose it strongly. Moreover, 52% of voters in these swing districts say they would be less likely to vote for their member of Congress if they supported Trump’s EPA cuts, vs. just 16% who said they would be more likely.

Americans’ concern about climate change is at an all-time high, but the issue is still polarizing. A recent Gallup poll shows that Americans’ belief that climate change is already happening (62%) and is caused by human activity (68%) is at an all-time high. The percentage who worry “a great deal” about the issue is also at a record high, up 8 points in the last year. However, the issue remains deeply polarizing. Concern about climate change has increased significantly among Democrats and independents, but Republicans remain less concerned, resulting in the largest partisan gap among any issue tested by Gallup.

There is a broad and intense cross-partisan desire for a move toward renewable energy. While the issue of climate change is polarizing, government support for renewable energy is not. According to a post-election survey by Public Opinion Strategies, 86% of voters support action (59% strongly) to “accelerate the development and use of clean energy in the U.S.” including 72% of base Republicans. Meanwhile, GSG polling shows that 83% of Americans support setting a binding goal for the U.S. to “transition completely away from fossil fuels and getting all of our energy needs from renewable sources like wind and solar by the year 2050.”

The Case Against the Trump/GOP Environmental Agenda

The core frame against the Trump administration’s agenda ties the self-serving special interests in Trump’s cabinet to the impact their policies will have on the health of our families and children.

- Emphasize how Trump has packed his cabinet with corporate polluters, Big Oil CEOs, and their enablers who are now putting profits ahead of people’s health. The fact that Trump has packed his cabinet with these self-serving special interests – including putting a politician who is in the pocket of corporate polluters in charge of protecting our children from polluted air and water – is a big problem for voters. But it is not enough to focus on the bad actors without connecting them back to the impact on regular people – that these special interests will use their power to boost their own profits at the expense of the health of our families and children.

- Focus on the specific actions (undermining cherished safeguards) and their impacts (unlimited amounts of specific, named pollutants in our air and water). The above lays down the values-based motivation for the Trump administration’s actions, but then we need to make the impacts clear: The Trump administration is trying to undermine or eliminate safeguards like the Clean Air and Water Acts that protect our health and, instead, allow power plants to spew unlimited amounts of toxic pollution like mercury, arsenic, and sulfur dioxide in our air and water.
Underneath that core frame, several specific messages have strong resonance with voters:

- **Hammer Republicans who would privatize public lands – particularly in the West.** In both GSG polling and a survey done for the Center for American Progress by our friends at Hart Research, proposals to sell off our public lands are among the most wildly unpopular throughout the country, but especially in the West. Highlighting how Republicans are threatening the ability of our children to enjoy our outdoor heritage is a strong critique of their agenda, and Trump’s new executive order on national monuments provides a good opening on this front.

- **Avoid a solo focus on Trump’s fealty to fossil fuels and instead juxtapose his administrations’ opposition to clean energy with support for more subsidies for oil companies.** Simply attacking Trump and Republicans for wanting to “double down on fossil fuels” falls flat. But messages that focus on how Trump and his cabinet want to end incentives for clean energy and instead give billions more in taxpayer subsidies to oil companies resonate strongly.

- **Highlight Trump’s habit of putting ideology and politics ahead of science, particularly with white collar, suburban voters.** While climate change itself isn’t the most salient attack on Trump, his insistence that it is a “hoax,” while the military and NASA say it is a threat to our country, is beyond the pale to many voters. When combined with his administration’s gag rule on EPA scientists talking to the public, this can be a powerful narrative, particularly with college-educated voters.

### General Messaging Takeaways on Climate and Clean Energy Policies

**Terminology is important:** “carbon pollution”, not “climate pollution”; “clean/renewable energy”, not “alternative/green energy”. And never “green jobs.” GSG polling over the last few years has shown that terminology can be important in increasing public support. While there is strong support either way, support for actions to reduce “carbon pollution” is stronger than support for reducing “climate pollution,” as the latter terminology drops support with center-right voters. Similarly, “clean energy” or “renewable energy” are stronger terms to use than “alternative energy” or “green energy.” And we strongly advise against ever using the term “green jobs” as voters have no idea what that means.

**Here are the four messages to use in support of pro-climate and clean energy actions and policies.** Based on the dozens of surveys, focus groups and online discussion boards that GSG has conducted over the last few years, we’ve seen four main arguments consistently emerge as the strongest ways to persuade voters to support pro-climate and clean energy policies (depending on the situation and specific policy in question).

- **Aggressively stress the potential long-term cost savings using Stanford researchers as a validator.** Invariably, the best chance our opponents have to undermine support is convincing voters that these policies will mean money out of their pockets. But voters are now much more open to arguments that these policies will save them money in the long-term. Several GSG surveys show that one of the most effective ways to make this point is by noting that Stanford University researchers say that moving to renewable energy will save the average family $1,700 a year in health costs and energy savings.

- **Go beyond just jobs to emphasize the impact on American innovation and the economy broadly.** A broad based economic message is at the top of the list, but this needs to go beyond simply talking about the creation of new jobs. The strongest messages talk about how these policies will help restore America as a leader in innovations that revolutionize industries, create news businesses, drive economic growth and, yes, create hundreds of thousands of new jobs.

- **Highlight the health benefits of reduced pollution – with a focus on specific pollutants and diseases.** By encouraging a shift to clean energy, these policies will sharply reduce toxic pollutants like carbon, mercury and sulfur dioxide. Doctors say this will dramatically reduce the rates of heart disease, asthma, respiratory diseases, and even cancer - especially for children and seniors.

- **Underscore the obligation we have to future generations to act now.** Voters are less certain that climate change will impact themselves, but are significantly concerned it will impact their children and grandchildren. A message that argues that we have “an obligation to do something now, so we don’t leave them a planet that’s damaged and polluted” resonates strongly. Depending on the situation, this message can also be strengthened by arguing that waiting to take action will make the cost of action much higher when we eventually act – a cost that our children will be forced to bear.

**With center-right voters, focus on the economic side of things; with the base, focus on health, legacy and climate.** For center-right voters, debates on these issues come down to pocketbook issues. They are much more sensitive, and also somewhat more skeptical, to how these policies will impact the economy and their own pocketbook. Therefore, the economic innovation, cost and accountability messages are particularly critical with them. When the goal is activating progressives, however, the health and legacy messages are more important, along with specific appeals about the dangers of climate change.