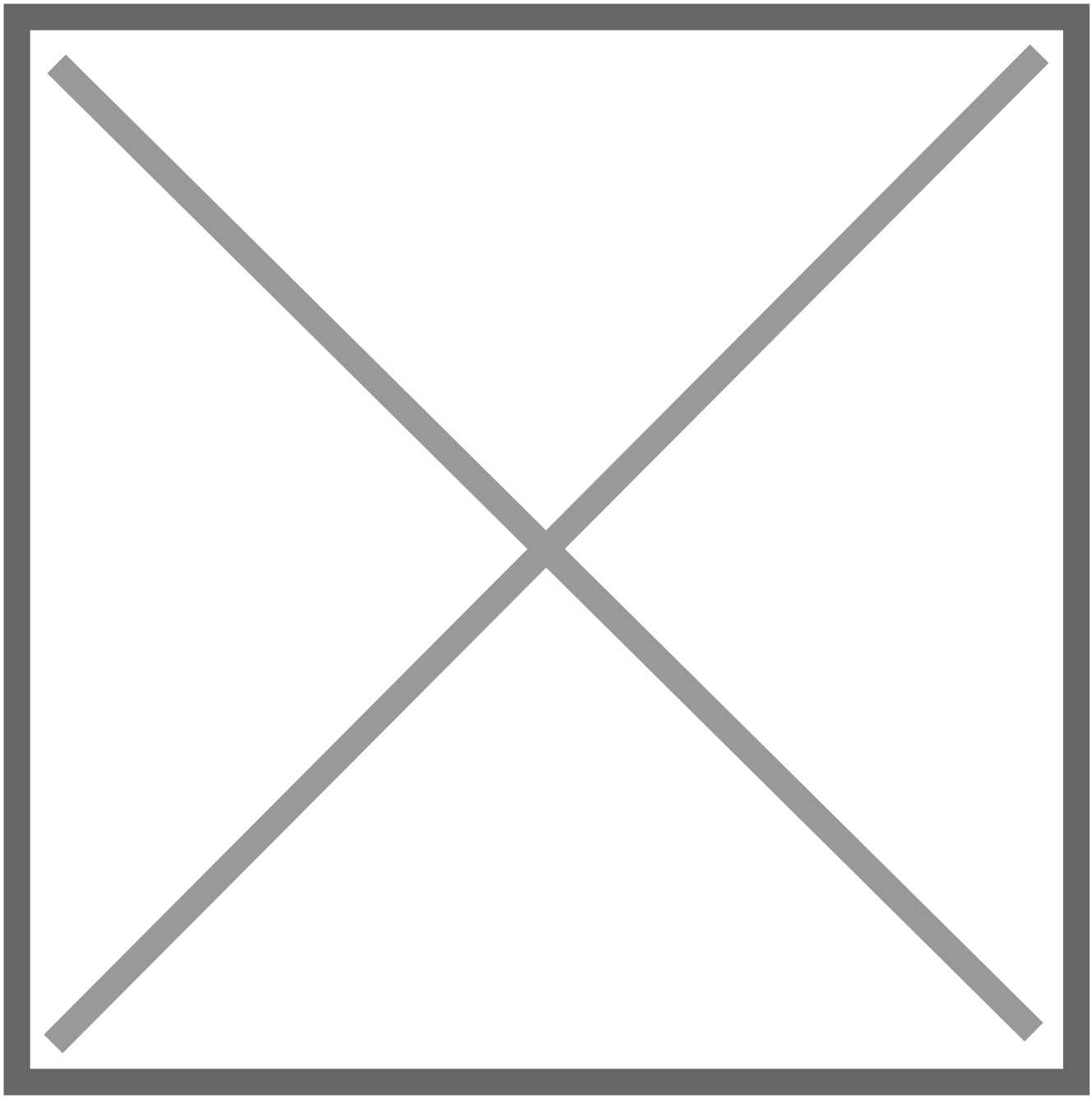


Young people take part in a climate change rally in Washington Sept. 20, 2019. In 2020, millennials and Generation Z will account for 37% of eligible voters (CNS/Erin Scott, Reuters)



by Brian Roewe

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September 22, 2020
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EarthBeat spoke with young Christian voters about the 2020 election and what it means for climate change. In this YouTube clip, they talk about where they rank climate change as a voting issue, and how their faith factors into their vote. (NCR video/Toni-Ann Ortiz)

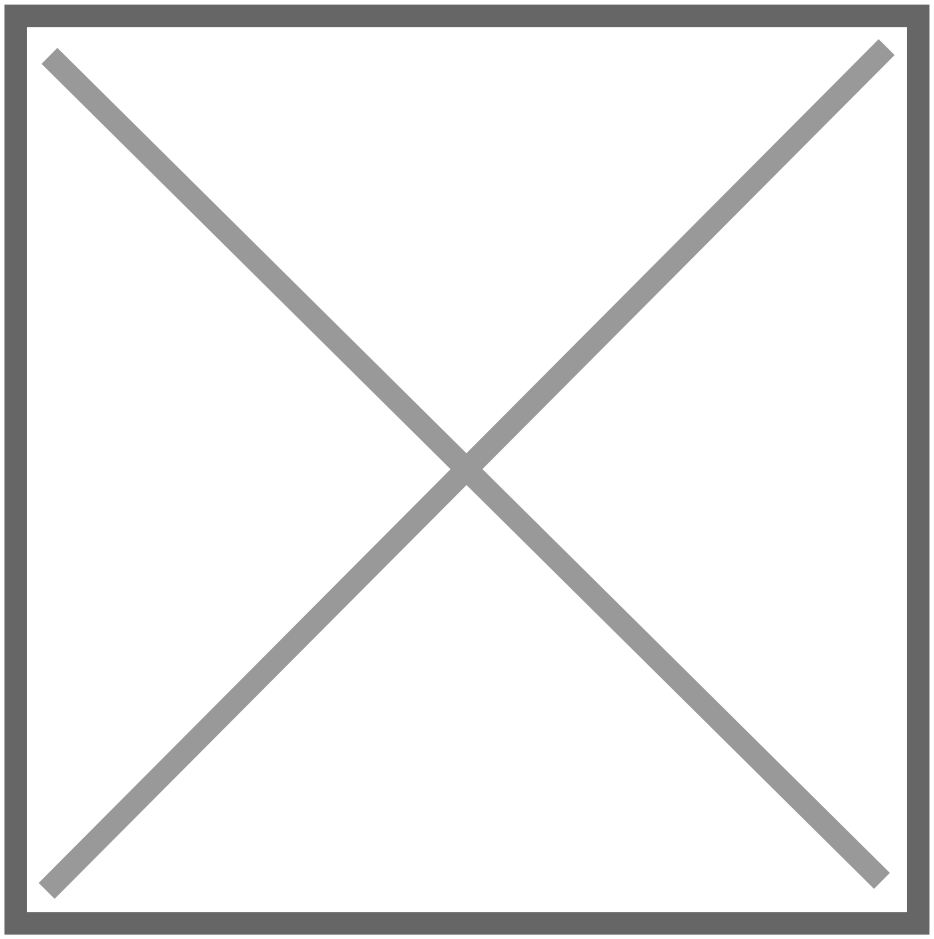
In fewer than 50 days, millions of members of Generation Z will have a chance to cast their first ballots in a U.S. presidential election in which polls show climate change and the environment ranking among young voters' top issues.

Much is at stake for climate policy in the country, and to an extent, the planet: Will a second term for President Donald Trump solidify his environmental rollbacks, or will Democratic nominee Joe Biden return the U.S. to the Paris Agreement and its position as a global leader?

This year, millennials (ages 24 to 39 in 2020) and Gen Z (those born from 1997 onward) will account for 37% of eligible voters, equaling Baby Boomers and older generations, with Gen X rounding out the remaining quarter. Nearly half of young conservatives believe the federal government is doing too little to address climate

change, and 79% support prioritizing alternative energy sources — an indication the climate debate is becoming more generational than political.

EarthBeat spoke with seven young Christians about the election, their vote and climate change. All plan to vote. Four will do so for the first time. Five have decided between the candidates; two are holding out until Election Day. All said climate change is affecting their lives, and all see their faith influencing how they vote and why they care about the climate crisis.



"If we don't get our act together in the next decade, we're going to see catastrophic climate consequences," said Ayana Albertini-Fleurant, a 22-year-old activist with Generation Green. "So the next president is going to usher us into that decade of action."

Ayana Albertini-Fleurant, 22

A chance to choose a different future

When Ayana Albertini-Fleurant looks at everything that has happened in 2020 — the coronavirus pandemic and ensuing economic collapse, protests against racism and police brutality, record-setting wildfire and hurricane seasons — she's left with an atypical feeling: relief.

"I think I'm relieved that this is an election year," she said. "That this all sucks, but there is something that I can tangibly do this year to make a difference and to choose a different future."

Climate change is a major factor in the 22-year-old's voting decision. And she sees it rising among others her age, too, through her work with Generation Green, an organization of young Black environmentalists based in Washington, D.C. The pandemic, she says, has made them realize what a global crisis looks like, what it means to listen to science and how important preparation can be.

A nondenominational Christian, Albertini-Fleurant believes humans have a responsibility to "sustainably steward the earth," not just for future generations, but for all species. She says the next four years need to be the start of "a decade of serious doubling down action on climate." If not, the scenes across the country could be just a preview of what more warming will bring.

"The sky is orange in California. So much land is burning. And that's with 1 degree of warming. So if we don't get our act together in the next decade, we're going to see catastrophic climate consequences. So the next president is going to usher us into that decade of action," she said.

Albertini-Fleurant wants that next president to prioritize reducing emissions, but in an equitable way. That a transition to clean energy doesn't burden low-income communities and coal workers and expands access to solar and renewable technologies to people of color, "so that we can breathe and we can share in the prosperity." And she wants the U.S. to help developing nations, like her family's native Haiti, to build their own clean-energy economies.

"You can't have climate justice without racial justice. And honestly, you can't have racial justice without climate justice," Albertini-Fleurant said.

That has her backing Biden and Sen. Kamala Harris — a fellow alumna of Howard University, where Albertini-Fleurant was the first graduate of its environmental studies program. She admits Biden wasn't her first choice, but likes what he's said

on environmental justice and believes he'll work with environmental groups. As she grappled looking for that perfect candidate, Albertini-Fleurant, a Faithful Climate Action fellow, fell back on her faith, realizing politicians are public servants, not saviors. "We have to continue to hold them accountable."

She admits she's nervous with what's at stake. But the young activist's faith helps her cope and have hope "that things will change, that good will prevail" and that people will do what's needed to avert a climate catastrophe.

"Things are really scary, and they're probably going to get scarier," she said, "but I have to do the work and also have faith as I do the work. Do the work. Have faith."



Jacob Pederson, 21, is the social media coordinator of the Sunrise Movement hub in Bellingham, Washington. He is supporting Joe Biden for president and hopes one of his first actions as president would be to resurface the Green New Deal in Congress. (Provided photo)

Jacob Pederson, 21

From smoke-blocked sunsets to Sunrise

The summer that Jacob Pederson couldn't see the sun set on Lake Wenatchee was the summer he began to fully realize the scope and urgency of climate change.

For decades, his family had vacationed at the glacier-fed lake tucked in the eastern slopes of the Cascades in north central Washington. One of their favorite things to do was swim at sunset. "And usually it's just this beautiful golden or orange or red glow over the entire lake," Pederson said.

But that wasn't what he saw the summer of 2017. The usual display of abundant vibrant color was replaced by a single smoky gray that blocked the sun from sight. The smoke, from the Jolly Fire and others blazing in and near the Wenatchee Valley, made it difficult to see more than a couple hundred feet.

"It was just like a fog that just obscured everything," said the 21-year-old. "And that's when I realized that a lot of things that are precious to me are going to disappear with climate change."

Today, Pederson, a rising junior at Western Washington University, is the social media coordinator for the Bellingham, Washington, hub of the Sunrise Movement, the youth-led climate activist group that touts the Green New Deal and bolted onto the political scene a year ago by occupying House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's office and demanding aggressive action on climate change.

It's not just the fate of his family's favorite lake that has Pederson caring about climate change. A Methodist, he believes that God intended for all creatures, not just humans, to thrive on this earth. Climate change, Pederson said, is a violation of two of God's prime directives: to be a steward for all of creation and to be good neighbors to one another.

Climate change is central to his first presidential vote, just below racism and ahead of the coronavirus pandemic. To him, the pandemic will ultimately be ended by a vaccine, whereas climate change "will make the Earth sick forever if we don't address it."

After feeling powerless watching the 2016 election results, Pederson is energized to join the electorate this November. While he hoped to cast that presidential ballot for top Green New Deal advocate Sen. Bernie Sanders, he plans to vote for Biden. Should the former vice president win, Pederson wants him to begin his time in the White House with a phone call.

"First and foremost, I would have him talk to AOC," he said, referring to U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, another Sunrise ally and co-sponsor of the Green New Deal. "Talk to her and resurface the Green New Deal in Congress."



Kayla Jacobs, 30, attends a climate march in Chicago in 2019. Jacobs is the director of programs for Laudato Si' Ministries in the Diocese of Joliet, Illinois. (Provided photo)

Kayla Jacobs, 30

Laudato Si' points to policy

Kayla Jacobs is blunt: It can hurt to vote.

She's even cried in the voting booth while filling out her ballot. The inner turmoil comes from the reality that confronts many voters, particularly "passionately pro-life" Catholics like herself, that there are no perfect candidates.

When Jacobs speaks of pro-life, she means protecting all life and all that sustains it. And that includes advocating for measures to limit the destruction that climate change threatens for people and ecosystems alike.

"I think it's one of the most pressing issues of our time," she said. "Everything else is just so wrapped up in whether or not we're able to sustain our earth. All of the other issues are affected by climate change and are made worse by climate change."

Jacobs knows what she's talking about. She's the director of programs for Laudato Si' Ministries in the Diocese of Joliet, Illinois, possibly the only such diocesan role in the country. She's also seen how warming temperatures have disrupted weather patterns in the farming communities where she grew up and now lives.

It's her Catholic faith that helps Jacobs through difficult votes. As in the past, she says, she will approach this election prayerfully, take into account church teaching and "then hopefully make the right decision based off of my own conscience and my work of forming that."

Jacobs is that rare young Catholic who can say she's read the U.S. bishops' document on voting, "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship." She also has “ *Laudato Si’,* on Care for Our Common Home,” Pope Francis' encyclical on the environment and human ecology, which she says "has so many clear, specific policy points that the pope wrote in there that we need to focus on for the environment but then also for the poor and the vulnerable."

Ask Jacobs about the election and she doesn't have many positive things to say. She's disappointed a stronger candidate on climate isn't on the ballot. She's not hearing enough from Trump or Biden on climate change or environmental justice, either, though concedes Biden has been pushed to more aggressive action, "but not as drastic as it needs to be."

"And then obviously President Trump has his issues with science. And has his issues with believing in climate change and therefore taking action on it," Jacobs said.

Whoever is elected, she wants the next president to do "as much as possible" to address climate change. That includes investments like those outlined in the Green

New Deal, as well as the recently passed Great American Outdoors Act, while divesting from activities that harm the environment.

As for how this election has her feeling, she's "pretty scared" at what the results may mean for where the country moves on climate change.

"I'm not feeling good about it. But we're Catholic, so I have to have hope. And I have to apply that hope to everything that I do," she said.

In this YouTube clip, EarthBeat asked young Christian voters: How does climate as a voting issue compare with your parents and friends? (NCR video/Toni-Ann Ortiz)



Joy Semien, 27, poses at a pond in Jean Lafitte National Historic Park, in south Louisiana, while working in May 2014 for the National Park Service. Environmental justice and climate change are among the issues determining her vote in 2020. (Provided photo)

Joy Semien, 27

The view from a fenceline community

When Joy Semien looks at the 2020 election, she sees it through where she's from. While others might talk about environmental threats in the abstract, for her they lived next door.

Her childhood home in Geismar, Louisiana, part of the state's notorious "Cancer Alley," sat across the street from a chemical plant and was surrounded by dozens more, all pumping pollution into the air and water. She and her sister suffered from asthma. Relatives were diagnosed with cancer, making the area's infamous nickname all too real.

"So environmental issues just became part of our life," said Semien, now a doctoral candidate at Texas A&M University who has studied disaster recovery, urban planning and environmental policy.

Those experiences have made a candidate's approaches to climate and the environment primary factors in her voting decisions: "If you put me on a scale of zero to 100, I would go up to 110." They're also top voting concerns for her family and for friends who grew up in similar circumstances.

"When I think about who I want to vote for — representatives, presidents, all that — I try to weigh heavily on what are you going to do as far as environmental justice or climate change or any of those things. Because there are people who are able to light their faucets on fire," she said.

As much as she's been formed by her hometown, equally foundational has been her faith. A member of a Word of Faith community, she hosts a podcast called "The Holy Ghost & Me." She sees working to address climate change and environmental justice as serving as the hands and feet of Christ. It's that same standard she applies to candidates for office.

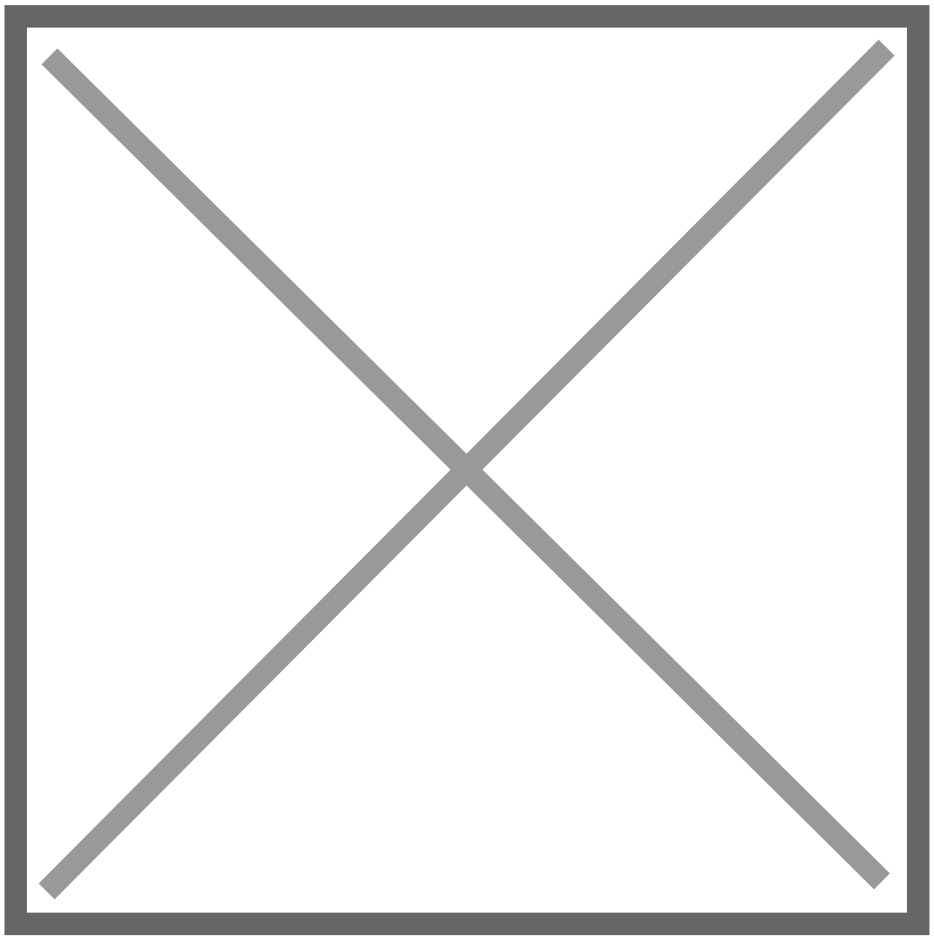
"Whenever I look at candidates, I look at do you demonstrate specific characteristics of walking like Christ?" she said.

Semien wants to see a future president build on the work the Obama administration did to engage communities in policy decisions affecting them, and to ensure that policies and regulations are enforced.

She wants to hear more specifics about environmental policy from both presidential candidates, including who they may appoint for key positions. While she's waiting until Election Day to determine her vote, she said it's "pivotal" to replace Trump, adding that it was "unfortunate" he is pulling the U.S. out of the Paris Agreement.

Should her ultimate choice not be elected, Semien said she'll return to her faith and pray that the winner has wisdom and puts people in positions to make a positive difference.

"I can't tell you that I'm worried or I'm concerned or I'm like really scared about this, because at the end of the day, I feel like God is always in control. And so my faith has always been pivotal in all of those things," she said.



"I think [climate change is] one of the most pressing issues, because if we don't make changes — and quickly — there is going to be a lot of negative effects that come out of that," said Abigail Knopps, 20, an environmental studies major at Saint Mary's College, in Notre Dame, Indiana. (Provided photo)

Abigail Knopps, 20

'*Something that's doable*'

Make no mistake, Abigail Knopps will not be a single-issue voter in her first presidential election. While climate change ranks near the top of her concerns, she's quick to clarify "there are a lot of issues in 2020," including the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

"But I think [climate change is] one of the most pressing issues, because if we don't make changes — and quickly — there is going to be a lot of negative effects that come out of that," said the junior at Saint Mary's College, in Notre Dame, Indiana.

She only has to look to her hometown of Toledo, Ohio, to see how even a temporary environmental crisis can disrupt life. For three days in August 2014, roughly 500,000 residents were ordered not to drink or touch their water after a toxic green algae bloom, fed by pollution from agriculture runoff, formed on Lake Erie and contaminated the area water supply.

"And that caused such a panic in our community. People were driving hours just to get cases of bottled water," recalled Knopps. "And I thought, 'Wow, if we're struggling for three days while they fix this issue, what is it like for other people who continuously live without clean water? And why aren't we doing something to help with that?' "

At Saint Mary's, Knopps is pursuing an environmental studies degree, concentrating on spirituality, justice and ethics. She too is part of the Faithful Climate Action Fellowship program that trains young leaders to bring their religious backgrounds into the campaign for climate action. In that role, she tries to help communities like her Assemblies of God community at Notre Dame understand why environmental justice and climate change should matter to them.

"God gave us dominion over the Earth, and it's our responsibility to take care of it, because it is his creation and he did call it good when he created it," she said.

It's also why she considers the 2020 election so important. She recognizes that neither candidate aligns perfectly with her values and beliefs. "But I think it's important to figure out which issues are most important, and which ones can sort of align better with my faith and with my values and with my beliefs, in terms of

climate change. And so I'm basing my vote off of that," Knopps said.

That led her to Biden, who she sees as willing to adopt climate policies. Trump's dismissal of the issue, along with his Bible-toting photo op at the height of the George Floyd protests, helped solidify her decision.

She hopes Biden can be more unifying, and can lead the nation away from fossil fuels and toward clean energy. "I think that is something that's doable, at least getting started on that within the next four years."

The next four years, she added, "are really vital for the direction that we're going to take the Earth."



Mateo Gomez, 22, appears the Florida State Capitol with Barry University president Mike Allen in January. (Provided photo)

Mateo Gomez, 22

When election issues get personal

"Well I live in Miami, so it's just something that you see on a general basis. Like every single day."

That's Mateo Gomez's response when asked if climate change is important to him. The 22-year-old Catholic graduate student at Barry University witnesses it in his city's streets, like Collins Avenue where he used to live that floods regularly when it rains.

Indeed, Miami is one of the U.S. cities that climate scientists warn is most at risk from sea levels that are projected to rise from 10 to 21 inches by 2040. According to some studies, it is the most vulnerable coastal city worldwide.

So yes, climate change is among the issues he's weighing in 2020. But it's more top five than top two.

"We obviously focus on issues that impact us directly, and immigration has been one that has impacted me directly," he said.

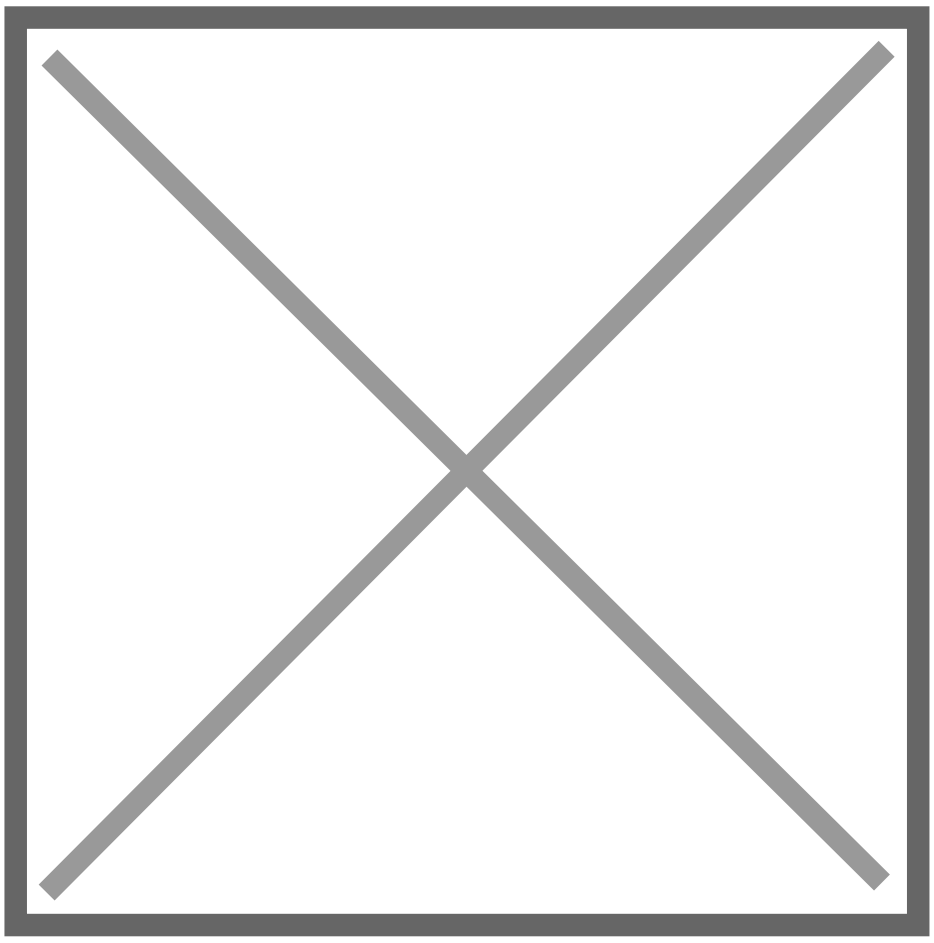
The son of Colombian immigrants, Gomez came to the U.S. in 2000, when he was 2 years old. His family left their home in Medellín, which had been the center of operations for Pablo Escobar's drug cartel. That experience, along with a teach-in organized by Barry with immigrants attempting to cross the southern U.S. border in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, makes immigration a key issue for him.

The murder of 17 people at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in nearby Parkland two years ago, as well as his own family's encounter with violence in Colombia, has him focused on gun control, too. And his grandmother's battle with cancer has him concerned about health care.

"I think those three issues would be higher than environment," he said, adding that values of family and faith are important factors driving his vote.

When it comes to climate change, the breakdown for Gomez is simple: Biden has a plan and Trump doesn't. He's holding out until Election Day to decide his vote, but knows that no matter who wins, they must take climate change seriously.

"If Biden wins, that can't be ignored in four years," he said. "And if Trump wins, that obviously has to be brought into the conversation."



For Bianca Pahler, 18, a camping trip to Yellowstone National Park during her freshman year at Bishop O'Dowd High School, in Oakland, California, "changed my whole perspective on nature." She said climate change will weigh heavily on her presidential vote. "We have only about 10, 11 years before the climate crisis becomes too much to handle. And I think we have to start now." (Provided photo)

Bianca Pahler, 18

'*We can't go back to what we were doing*'

This summer's massive wildfires haven't tinted the skies above Bianca Pahler's hometown of Livermore, California, to the same apocalyptic shades as in the nearby Bay Area.

"I've been having tan skies, not really orange," she said. "But my friends who live in Oakland, it's really orange there. San Francisco is a sauna. It's like a volcano in the sky. It's pretty creepy."

The record-breaking wildfires and corresponding drops in air quality are ways Pahler sees climate change playing out in her young life. Then there are the more frequent 100-degree days that used to come only once or twice a year.

All that has spurred her to become the environmental activist in her family. So too has her time at Bishop O'Dowd High School, where she's been part of the Eco Club and member of Eco-Leaders, a group of seniors who promote sustainability on the Catholic campus. She's attended climate marches with friends who too view climate as a critical issue.

The summer after her freshman year, she went camping for the first time with classmates in Yellowstone National Park. The trip, Pahler said, "changed my whole perspective on nature." They conducted research, visited the park's iconic springs and learned about the importance of balancing environmental and economic values with the park's bison herds and area farmers.

While she is still figuring out her faith identity, she includes St. Francis of Assisi among her role models. When it comes to her vote, she says her faith leads her to evaluate candidates and issues on a simple yet ancient principle: the Golden Rule.

"My faith tells me to choose what's best for others," she said.

It's led her to become more aware of environmental racism in her community. Her home isn't near polluting sources, but she knows that's not the case for all. "I have to see myself in other people's shoes. And as Jesus went around helping other people, I want to vote for someone who will help people."

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Climate change and environmental justice rank high for the first-time voter, alongside health care and immigration. She wants the next president to take steps to reduce emissions and promote environmental sustainability in schools and workplaces. More than anything, she wants the nation's leader to acknowledge climate change as a crisis and realize "that we can't go back to what we were doing 10 years ago."

On the presidential candidates, Pahler has made up her mind: "I'm going to vote for Biden because of his stance on climate change," and in particular, his support for elements of the Green New Deal, even if he doesn't directly refer to it, and his willingness to work with climate activists.

And while Pahler is all ready for her first election, she has advice for everyone before they mark their own ballots.

"Do your research before you vote," she said. "Make sure you read up on both sides and really understand what they're fighting for."

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This story appears in the **Election 2020** feature series. View the full series.