News
EarthBeat



Young Evangelicals for Climate Action demonstrate in Washington, D.C., in 2017. (Courtesy)

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Only about 4 in 10 American voters say global warming will be "very important" when they vote for president in November, according to the Yale Center for Climate Change Communication. But while polls show voters are concerned with other issues, such as inflation and immigration, the environment continues to be a top concern for voters, especially younger ones, and crosses lines of faith and politics in ways that other issues don't.

"I think young people just want the issues that we care about, like our communities, our economy and jobs and God's creation, to be taken seriously," said Tori Goebel, former spokesperson for Young Evangelicals for Climate Action, founded in 2012. (Goebel is now chief operating officer of the Evangelical Environmental Network.)

Goebel's organization doesn't endorse candidates and instead works to provoke more candid discussion on the topic. "We just want young people to be informed and to make meaningful decisions for the sake of God's creation. And I don't think we could do that unless the candidates are honestly talking about the issues."

It's a misconception to think that climate change is only a concern on the left, said Katharine Hayhoe, an evangelical Christian, scientist and author of "Saving Us: A Climate Scientist's Case for Hope and Healing in a Divided World." Hayhoe, who has a record of fostering conversations across theological and ideological differences, said that climate is a bipartisan issue. The majority of Americans, including many Republicans, support action to address climate change, she said. "That is really something that we should always highlight and point out. It's almost like a public service to all of us who are concerned: There's actually more of you than you think there are."

Climate has become a political football, she added, because stakeholders, such as CEOs of fossil fuel companies, feel that the solutions threaten their bottom line.

Hayhoe, who teaches in the political science department at Texas Tech University, blames Christians who see the environment entirely in political terms, and not as a matter of biblical values such as love of neighbor. "All too many people in the United States who self-identify as Christian (have a) statement of faith written first by their political ideology and only a distant second by their theology," she said. "And if the two come into conflict, they will go with ideology over theology. And my question is, are they even Christian?"

Dekila Chungyalpa, founder and director of the Loka Initiative at the University of Wisconsin, has spent more than two decades creating partnerships between faith groups and conservationists. She said there are economic aspects to the question of climate change — not least, how people will farm and eat in changed conditions. But, she said, "there's also a conversation in which there's a sense of trying to find a better way to live in relationship to each other, to build meaningful communities.

"There's a longing for a sense of belonging, of community, of connection, of meaning and value that is really healthy and being touched on from different directions by different parts of the political spectrum," Chungyalpa said.

She suggested that one way to build partnerships across partisan lines may be to focus on disaster preparedness and on building resilience in the face of change, rather than on the issue in the abstract.

Describing the moment as "exciting and scary," Karenna Gore, founder and executive director of the Center for Earth Ethics in New York City, said that Republican nominee former President Donald Trump and his Make America Great Again movement pose "a very big challenge" to the democratic tradition of American self-government. But concerned Americans, including people of faith, are capable of meeting that challenge — and of confronting the psychological toll of environmental devastation in a constructive way, she said.

"I have been in church spaces in the past year," said Gore, daughter of former vice president and environmental crusader Al Gore Jr., "where I have been moved to tears by the integrity and the depth that people are bringing to this exact conversation, sitting with the uncertainty. Instead of approaching dialogue with a strident self-confidence, they are saying, "I can't do this all alone. I want to hear what other people have to say, so that we can actually pull it together.'"

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Kamala Harris, the Democratic nominee, has yet to put forth a detailed climate policy, but secular activists and climate groups seem to be giving her credit for casting the tie-breaking vote in 2022 for the Biden administration's Inflation Reduction Act, a history-making investment in climate mitigation efforts.

Trump, who ran on eliminating environmental regulations as a candidate in 2016 and 2020 and was partly successful in doing so while president, has said in his current campaign that he would roll back rules governing greenhouse gas pollution if reelected. In late August, he promised to rescind a rule governing power plant pollution.

In addition, though fossil fuel production is already at record levels under President Joe Biden, Trump has promoted the slogan "Drill, baby, drill" as a way in which a future administration would bring down inflation.

But Rabbi Devorah Lynn, co-chair of the Jewish Earth Alliance, an organization that helps Jewish "green" groups network with their representatives in Congress, said that down-ballot voting, for senators and representatives and lesser offices, is as important as votes for president. Climate "underlies immigration, the farm bill, conflict in the world, and health," said Lynn. Many decisions on these issues are made by those in "Congress and all of the positions that we vote for below Congress, so state and local."

Rationalist environmental advocates and traditional faith communities aren't natural allies. Baptist Pastor Ambrose Carroll, founder of Green the Church, an Oakland, California, nonprofit, said that for decades he has been "trying to get environmental justice people on the social justice bus."

In doing so, Carroll, who serves on the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council of the Environmental Protection Agency, has worked to build bridges between often largely white environmental organizations and people of color, who are often the most affected by problems such as air pollution, toxic waste and lack of tree cover.

Carroll said the Black community is skeptical whether, whoever is president, things will actually change for the better. Nonetheless, for his organization, which helps Black congregations act and build sustainably, "it's not what we are against, but what we are for." The Black church "may not own a lot of skyscrapers downtown, but

we do own a lot of church buildings. They are the largest asset of the African American community. So, we’re standing up."

Faith leaders, whether in houses of worship or working full time for climate solutions, encounter a lot of people, young and old, faithful and not, and hear how worried average Americans are about climate change. They say the most critical converts in this fight are not voters, but those running for office, who seem to underestimate the level of concern."Our elected officials, at the city level, at the state level, at the county level, and, of course, at the national level," said Hayhoe, "need to hear from their constituents about how they care about this issue and how they support action on this issue."

The only way that’s going to happen, she added, is if constituents speak out.

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. View the full series.