

A broader audience & greater impact

Five simple shifts for climate communication in 2026

Across 23 countries including the US, UK, Canada, Germany, France, China, India, and Japan, three in four people agree with one simple statement: “It’s essential our government does whatever it takes to limit the effects of climate change.”¹

Of course, this hasn’t happened yet. The UN Secretary General recently acknowledged that we will fail to limit global heating to 1.5 degrees Celsius, the target set by the Paris Climate Agreement in 2021. The impacts of this failure are visible already, as deadly heat and destructive storms constrain our food supply, destroy property, and cause insurance prices to skyrocket.

There are several reasons why, for decades, it’s been so hard to truly “do what it takes.”

First, a shifting global context presents competing priorities. Over the years, climate change as a priority has fluctuated relative to other citizen concerns. Of late, increasing energy insecurity, cost of living, geopolitical tension, and nationalism have complicated the landscape, making it harder to carve out space. Today, 18% of the US say they hear about climate change once a week—less than half of where we were two years ago.²

Second, the policies aren’t as easy to sell as the concept. Support for climate policies, from clean incentives to pollution standards or a carbon tax, hover around 60% at baseline in key countries like China, the US, the UK, and India.¹ The policies the climate movement has pushed hardest, like a fossil phaseout or Net Zero, are among the least individually popular.

But third, and most importantly, messaging matters. Across 1,250 tests, hundreds of focus groups, and 25 in-market campaigns, including our most recent 6-country study in partnership with The Rockefeller Foundation,³ we’ve observed the same thing: narrative is our biggest obstacle. The messages used by the climate movement have been narrow, complex, and, increasingly, politically coded. But if you replace these messages with broader, simpler language, then support for solutions leaps by double-digit percentage points.

Progress is still possible. We can still protect the people and places we love from the worst effects of climate change. To do so, it’s critical we have the right message—and messengers willing to use it. This guide is a first, data-driven step to provide the former. Our hope is that you, armed with the insights and messaging below, will be willing to join the latter.

Executive summary

Broadening support starts with broadening the message

Across our work, we've identified five specific ways to evolve the climate narrative with a focus on broadening the tent and minimizing the possibility of polarization. Each of the five shifts marks a departure from traditional climate language.

Importantly, this new approach doesn't shy away from the causes or consequences of climate change. Instead, it reframes them, addressing the most pronounced barriers that blocked progress in the past by making the problem feel more relevant and solutions feel more reasonable and rewarding.

The five shifts, which are expanded on in the rest of this guide, include:

1. From morality → to materiality.

This can't be a movement of "should" and "should not," "right" or "wrong," "good" or "evil." Instead of functioning as a moral crusade, the movement needs to feel practical, tangible, and necessary. We have to connect climate concerns to what people worry about every day, and connect climate solutions to benefits they can touch and see.

2. From luxury → to affordability.

Energy affordability conversations can be an opportunity, not an obstacle. Most people worldwide already think clean energy is cheaper than fossil fuels. It's time to celebrate the cost benefits of clean energy instead of assuming a "green premium" and playing defense.

3. From banning → to building.

In every policy test we've ever run, we see a consistent pattern: limiting is losing. Wherever possible, there should be a focus on what we're shifting towards rather than what we're shifting away from. Furthermore, outright attacks on clean energy in some countries mean climate critics are now the ones perceived as banning and blocking.

4. From global → to national & local.

Just as it's crucial to make the consequences of climate change as close-to-home as possible, it's important to make the solutions feel homegrown. People want their nation to lead, win, and succeed, and they want their community to own its future.

5. From massive → to manageable.

An emphatic majority of the planet's population already thinks climate change is a problem. One of our biggest barriers is that they aren't sure we can solve it. Concern remains an engine of public support. But we have to pair that urgency with solutions that feel achievable. It should feel like evolution, not revolution or transformation.

#1. From morality → to materiality

It's time to retire the scolding "shoulds" and "musts" of old-school environmental messaging. Righteous admonitions only alienate our audience. Climate change can't just feel like a cause. It has to feel like a cost: a financial, emotional, personal cost people are paying today and every day. Across our research, we've found four issues that drive this cost home:

Destructive weather & preparation.

As extreme weather worsens around the world, we can make climate change feel like a material problem by focusing on the damage it's already doing.

- 74% of the US, UK, Canada, Germany, Italy, and France worry about "more frequent and more severe extreme weather events... due to climate change"⁴
- In our message testing database, 8 of the top 10 messages we've ever tested focus on the consequences of extreme weather³
- 87% in those countries support "upgrading infrastructure" for extreme weather⁴

Insurance.

As premiums rise, bills, mortgages, and homeownership slip out of reach for many US families. Connecting these costs to climate brings the issue to the kitchen table.

- 68% of the US, including over 80% in at-risk areas, fear losing their insurance⁶
- In at-risk areas in the US, we see a +5 percentage point rise in baseline support for government climate action even after controlling for political ideology⁶

Health & pollution.

Pollution is a less polarized topic than climate or clean energy. Improving air quality and reducing use of chemicals is considered important across the political spectrum.

- In our recent study of the US, UK, Canada, Germany, Italy, and France, 83% think we need urgent action on air pollution⁴
- In those countries, a message focused on health, toxins, and chemicals lifted support for reducing fossil fuel pollution by 13 percentage points⁵

Energy cost.

We're in a cost-of-living crisis, and energy bills are consistently listed among the top sources of financial stress for most households.

- 91% across US, UK, Canada, Germany, Italy, and France think we need urgent action on cost of living⁴
- 76% of the US thinks we're in a cost-of-living crisis, and 72% think renewable energy will be essential to meet our energy demands going forward⁷

#2. From luxury → to affordability

People tend to assume that “better for the world” means worse for the wallet, like organic milk or free-range eggs. Taking this tradeoff as a given, we’ve historically communicated cautiously around cost, messaging with the explicit or implicit assumption that clean energy has a “green premium.” But this assumption is outdated, for two major reasons:

- First, it no longer reflects technological reality. According to the World Economic Forum and IRENA,⁹ the cost of solar energy has fallen by as much as 80% since 2010. In many places, clean energy is already cost-competitive, not even factoring in advantages like solar’s speed of deployment
- Second, this assumption is out of step with the general public. A recent study of the US, Canada, and UK showed that, if anything, the public already thinks clean energy is cheaper than fossil fuels
- 38% think clean energy is cheaper, 28% think fossil is cheaper, the rest aren’t sure or think they cost the same⁷

In the same three-country survey, we tested which attributes of an energy source people most strongly associate with affordability.

| Attributes less associated with low cost | Attributes more associated with low cost |
|---|---|
| Green: good for the environment | Unlimited: an energy source that never runs out |
| Innovative: based on the latest technology | Local: an energy source that’s available locally |
| | Proven: an energy source that’s based on long-established technology |

All five attributes are, of course, equally true of clean energy. But when you emphasize the attributes of clean energy shown on the right, you lift the perception that clean energy is cheaper than fossil fuels by a further 25 percentage points (to over 65%), and boost support for a clean energy transition nearly 10 percentage points in the process.⁷

#3. From banning → to building

Historically, environmental messages have often been framed as blocking, cutting back, or taking away. The message often focuses on stopping a shopping center from being built, protesting a pipeline, or calling for an aggressive reduction of fossil fuels to reach “Net Zero.” This puts us in the unpopular position of policing or preventing people from doing things.

Gas stove “bans” and electric vehicle “mandates” are some of the most notable policies where this dynamic has been a problem. To reduce the chance of these negative frames, there are a few shifts we can make in our language:

1. Bans & mandates → standards & incentives

All else being equal, we lose 10–20 percentage points on almost any climate policy featuring the word “ban” or “mandate.” This, unfortunately, includes “Net Zero,” which is one of the single least popular climate terms we’ve tested. Instead, the more protective term “standard” or the more positive “incentive” test better.³

2. What we’re transitioning from → what we’re transitioning towards

In a policy test we ran for a specific clean heat program in the state of Illinois, we saw 5 times the lift in support when we framed the policy as encouraging a shift “towards cleaner, safer sources of heat” rather than a shift “away from natural gas.”⁸

3. Forcing change in our energy system → responding to change in our energy system

Status quo bias works against us. Today, people assume their choices are “transition” or “don’t transition.” And not doing something feels cheaper than doing it. We have to seize on surging energy demand to remind people there is no “do nothing” option. If we’re building more anyway, a strong majority consistently prefer we build clean.

4. Climate policy is blocking → anti-clean energy policy is blocking

Clean energy rollbacks, slowdowns, and attacks on clean energy across the globe are hindering progress, sometimes pulling the plug on projects well underway. In countries where this is happening, people feel the script has flipped. They now worry it’s the anti-climate movement who’s limiting choice, freedom, and growth.

- Only 19% of the US favors a “ban” on clean energy, including just 1 in 3 Republicans⁷
- 60% of the US think banning clean energy would increase household bills, and only 12% think it would decrease them⁷

#4. From global → to national & local

Nationalism is on the rise. The trend is evident in polling, political rhetoric, and election results around the world.

Climate change is typically framed as an international problem with international impact, which means solving it calls for international collaboration at a time when that is as unpopular as it's ever been.

Our data shows it's essential to avoid appeals that feel "globalist" or motivated by a sense of duty toward distant countries.

In a recent test, "helping vulnerable people around the globe" was ranked as the single least-motivating factor for climate action—and not just among ideological conservatives. A sense of responsibility towards family, community, and the natural world all ranked meaningfully higher. The implications of this emergent nationalist trend are greater than just avoiding globalist messages, however. Our testing indicates that there are opportunities to tap into pride, progress, and patriotism to sell climate and clean energy action.

Across the US, UK, Canada, Germany, Italy, and France¹⁰:

- 71% of respondents say "my country should lead the world" on clean energy, rather than "waiting until other countries act"
- 60% would prefer "investing in homegrown energy projects," rather than "whatever solves the problem fastest"

Taking this a step further, it's possible to localize messaging down to the state, city, or community level. In our state-level US campaign work, we've seen significant differences in the performance of messaging when we shift:

| From frames like... | To frames like... |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Keep it in the ground | No drilling near daycare |
| Transition to clean energy | Powered by [specific state/community] |
| Clean energy siting reform | Trust farmers with their land |

These reframes emphasize local autonomy, pride, and protection of community self-interest rather than expansive, collective benefits or responsibility.

#5 From massive → to manageable

Climate change is one of the greatest threats humanity faces. It's not surprising to see that threat reflected in the data.

In a 2023 survey of 23 countries, we found that on average 71% of any given country supports "immediate government action on climate change," with no country below the mid-50% mark and most above the 60% line. Globally, supporters outnumber opponents 8 to 1.¹

In our more recent survey in the US, UK, Canada, Germany, Italy, and France, we saw upwards of 61% of people in all six countries think global warming will "pose a serious threat to me or my way of life in my lifetime."⁵

Yet despite this significant support and concern, progress is still slower than it needs to be. Part of the problem is that, relative to other issues, climate change simply does not feel easily solvable, and people are less inclined to prioritize issues with no clear answer. Across those same six countries:⁴

- 73% think high energy costs are definitely or probably solvable
- 65% think pollution is definitely or probably solvable
- 55% think climate change is definitely or probably solvable

Traditional climate messaging has contributed to this perception. Anchoring on abstract goals like temperature thresholds or gigaton reduction feels unattainable, compared to concrete actions like reducing pollution or building clean energy.

Across 23 countries surveyed in 2023, the majority of citizens also said they specifically prefer a step-by-step solution to a big transformation. Common terms like "transition" and, especially, "transformation" or "phaseout" reinforce the magnitude of the task at hand, making it feel less manageable rather than more.¹

We need to make the pragmatic point that we are well underway. The move to a cleaner, less-polluted world is not a daydream. It's taking place. 2020 marked the first year that the UK ran predominantly on clean energy¹¹; the International Energy Agency projected that, while energy demand has grown by 60% since 2000, global demand for fossil fuels will likely peak within the next decade.¹²

The stakes are high and the task is daunting, but it's crucial to communicate continued progress and paint a clear pathway forward. The best frame is continued evolution, not revolution.

A final word on words

Reducing the complexity and polarization of the climate lexicon

Words matter. The climate lexicon is littered with landmines that can alienate those who aren't already climate-engaged. To reach a wider audience, choose your words carefully.

First, avoid **complex climate jargon**. Focus less on concepts like climate, economy, or technology and more on weather, cost, and, especially, on pollution.

| Less about | | More about |
|----------------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| Emissions/GHG | → | Pollution |
| Anthropogenic | → | The pollution we're creating |
| Planetary boundaries | → | Unsafe levels of pollution |
| 1.5 degrees | → | Stop overheating |
| Decarbonization | → | Eliminate pollution |
| Net Zero | → | No pollution |
| ZEVs | → | Clean cars |
| Heat pumps | → | Clean heat |
| Extreme weather | → | Destructive storms Deadly heat |
| ESG | → | Responsible business |
| Scope 3 emissions | → | Customer & suppliers' pollution |

Second, avoid **liberal-coded language**. Where possible, lean into alternatives that are more coded to conservative values.

| Progressive words | | Conservative words |
|--------------------|---|----------------------------------|
| Save | → | Protect |
| Equity, justice | → | Fairness |
| Action | → | Problem-solving |
| Community | → | Neighborhood or town |
| Global cooperation | → | Protecting [country's] interests |
| Progress | → | Solutions |
| Transition | → | Opportunity |
| Sustainability | → | Conservation |
| Inclusive | → | Unifying |
| Renewable/green | → | Clean |
| Sustainability | → | Conservation |
| Policies | → | Values |

Conclusion & looking ahead

This guide represents the synthesis of five years of ongoing message testing and public opinion polling on climate change and clean energy, including two recent polls from Fall 2025.

We believe the basic shifts in framing and vocabulary outlined here can be valuable to anyone who's hoping to communicate effectively about climate change with the broadest possible audiences.

But we don't think the work is done. Heading into 2026, we're continuing to conduct research in conjunction with The Rockefeller Foundation. We're looking to answer:

1. What is the single most unifying pro-climate narrative that works across topics and policies?
2. What are the positive and negative impacts of the phrase "climate change," specifically—and how do we continue to evolve our language?
3. How do these findings extend beyond the US and Europe, with a large-scale survey across the entire G20?

If you're interested in learning more about our work or how to use it, please reach out to Potential Energy Coalition (partnerships@potentialenergycoalition.org) and Joseph Peralta (jperalta@rockfound.org).

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