

# Climate Change & the 2020 Democratic Candidates

## Reading One: Changing the Conversation

As the reality of the global climate crisis becomes ever more clear, climate change is on the minds of many voters — particularly young voters. So what do the 2020 presidential candidates propose to do about it?

On the Republican side, President Trump has repeatedly [denied the reality](#) of human-caused climate change. In 2017, he pulled out of the Paris Climate Agreement, a major international agreement to address the crisis. Throughout his presidency, he has pushed policies that will worsen climate disruption – such as lifting limits on greenhouse gases. Meanwhile, during Trump’s term, the nation and the world have seen a series of catastrophic climate-related events, from floods and droughts to massive wildfires.

On the Democratic side, candidates in the crowded field of presidential hopefuls have offered an array of policy proposals to address climate crisis. While some have embraced social movement demands for a “Green New Deal,” others have proposed their own plans or provided less concrete commitments.

In a June 26, 2019, article for the Pacific Standard, staff writer Kate Wheeling describes how the climate crisis has gone from a virtual non-issue in the 2012 and 2016 presidential campaigns to being a significant one today. She [wrote](#):

There were no direct questions about climate change in the 2012 and 2016 debates. "This was very much not on the agenda of the Democratic National Committee on the debates last time," says [Leah Stokes](#), an assistant professor of political science at the University of California-Santa Barbara, who focuses on the environment and climate change. "We all sat around, waiting and watching and wondering when they were going to talk about the biggest problem we face as a planet, let alone as a country. And we waited forever. It never came last time."....

So how did climate change go from a non-issue to one that at least one of the presidential candidates has [designed his entire campaign around](#)?

One explanation is that climate change itself has progressed: Since the 2016 election, [fire-prone California](#) has experienced its deadliest and most destructive wildfires on record, the Midwest was hit with [historic flooding](#), and the United States experienced its most disastrous [hurricane season](#) yet—all of which were fueled by climate change....

A second explanation is that more Americans than ever are aware of climate change and worried about it, and that's especially true for Democratic voters. A CNN [poll](#) of the group from earlier this year found that 96 percent said it was important to them that their nominee take "aggressive action to slow the effects of climate change."

Democratic climate plans as a whole have become drastically more aggressive in recent years. Policies calling for a tax on carbon, net-zero emissions targets, and bans on drilling on public lands were all but absent from the 2016 election, but supported by [many, if not most](#), of the Democratic candidates today. Any of those ideas might have been considered radical just a few years ago, but today candidates who don't support all of them can be criticized for not doing enough....

A third explanation is that climate scientists have begun to sound even graver alarms. "I think grappling with the scale and timeline is a new thing," Stokes says, who notes that, since the last election, the United Nations' top climate panel [released](#) a special report showing that the world has roughly a dozen years to drastically reduce emissions if we are to meet the Paris Agreement's goal of keeping global warming below 1.5 degrees Celsius.

[\[https://psmag.com/environment/the-last-democratic-debate-had-no-climate-change-questions-this-year-that-will-change\]](https://psmag.com/environment/the-last-democratic-debate-had-no-climate-change-questions-this-year-that-will-change)

There's another reason that climate change has emerged as a major issue in 2020: pressure from social movements, including movements led by young people.

Every Democratic presidential candidate has been pushed to take a position on the Green New Deal, an ambitious proposal promoted by the Sunrise Movement and other social movement groups. (The [Sunrise Movement](#) describes itself as “an army of young people to make climate change an urgent priority across America, end the corrupting influence of fossil fuel executives on our politics, and elect leaders who stand up for the health and wellbeing of all people.”)

Under the [Green New Deal](#), the U.S. would “drastically and immediately move away from fossil fuels” and toward 100% renewable energy while providing “all members of our society... the opportunity, training, and education to be a full and equal participant in the transition [to a green economy], including through a job guarantee program to assure a living wage job to every person who wants one.”

In a February 2019 article for Vox, Politics & Policy Reporter Ella Nilsen explained how the push for a Green New Deal has changed the debate around climate change in U.S. politics. She [wrote](#):

The Green New Deal ricocheted into America's political consciousness in record time.

Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), who drew attention to climate change during a [sit-in at House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's office](#) before she was even sworn in, is releasing a [formal resolution in the House](#) this week outlining her exact policy proposal for the Green New Deal — an ambitious idea that aggressively tackles climate change to reduce carbon emissions in the next 10 years. It also includes plans for universal health care and a significant expansion of the social safety net.

“The major thing here is to define it before other people get to define it for her,” said Waleed Shahid, spokesman for the [Justice Democrats](#). “As multiple 2020 candidates say they support the Green New Deal, our movement is going to be defining it to ensure that what these candidates are calling for is a World War II-style mobilization of our economy.”...

Democrats have talked about climate change as the most important issue out there for some time, but there has been seemingly little urgency in Congress to take action. The last large bill House Democrats passed to address climate change was the American Clean Energy and Security Act, a cap-and-trade bill that passed the House in 2009; it failed in the Senate. Former President Barack Obama’s signature climate policy was the [Clean Power Plan](#); he also joined the international Paris climate agreement. President Donald Trump has undone both of those actions, pulling the US out of the Paris deal and [attempting to roll back](#) the Clean Power Plan....

Justice Democrats and the Sunrise Movement are clear: They won’t support a candidate for president that won’t back the Green New Deal. They’re aided by the fact that many 2020 contenders already support Medicare for All, and many — including Booker, Harris, and Sanders — have already floated some of the other components of a Green New Deal: a universal basic income and jobs guarantee.

[\[https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/2/7/18203910/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-green-new-deal-2020\]](https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/2/7/18203910/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-green-new-deal-2020)

As of July 1, 2019, [there are](#) 94 House co-sponsors and 12 Senate co-sponsors of the Green New Deal resolution, including a number of Democratic presidential candidates. Whether the presidential hopefuls choose to endorse the Green New Deal or craft their own plan, they have been forced to respond to the proposal in some way.

### **For Discussion:**

1. How much of the material in this reading was new to you, and how much was already familiar? Do you have any questions about what you read?
2. Why has climate change become a more important topic in the 2020 presidential election than in past races, according to the reading? Which explanations do you find most convincing? Why?
3. What is the Green New Deal and why has it been an important demand, according to the reading?
4. Do you think climate change will be a deciding issue for voters in the 2020 presidential election? Why or why not?

## Reading Two: What do the Democratic Candidates Propose to Do About Climate Crisis?

As the effects of climate destabilization and social movement demands for serious action have become more visible, Democratic presidential candidates have rushed to lay out substantive proposals. Suddenly, climate change has become an important issue in U.S. politics.

In response to demands for a Green New Deal, so far [six candidates](#) (Senators Bernie Sanders of Vermont, Cory Booker of New Jersey, Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, Kamala Harris of California, Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota, and Kristen Gillibrand of New York) have co-sponsored relevant legislation.

Three more who are not in the House or Senate (author Marianne Williamson, former San Antonio Mayor Julián Castro, and entrepreneur Andrew Yang) have stated their support. Meanwhile, three more (Washington Governor Jay Inslee, former U.S. Representatives Beto O'Rourke from Texas, and Tom Delaney from Maryland) have issued their own plans and voiced some criticism of the Green New Deal.

In a July 30, 2019 article for Vox, staff writers Umair Irfan, David Roberts, and Eliza Barclay [took a closer look](#) at the proposals from the six Democratic candidates who are currently leading in the polls:

Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA): Warren's focus is on corruption in politics. She believes that big-money fossil fuel donors who are vested in the status quo are putting up roadblocks to curbing emissions and deploying cleaner energy.... So far, Warren has dealt with climate change through her policy agendas for public lands, the military, and domestic industrial development.

By framing climate change as an issue of economics, public resources, and national security instead of just as an environmental issue, Warren is laying out a climate case for the general election, not just the primary. It would keep climate change as a front-burner issue, even in the event of a recession or an international conflict, while perhaps drawing in voters who don't see climate change as a top-tier concern.

Sen. Kamala Harris (D-CA):.... Harris was also one of the [co-sponsors](#) of the Green New Deal resolution. Most recently, she teamed up with Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) to introduce a bill that would rank climate change regulations based on how well they address the needs of [low-income communities](#), which are often the most severely impacted by extreme weather and pollution.

Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT):... On the campaign trail, Sanders has been strongly supportive of the [Green New Deal](#). His campaign has called for more investment in infrastructure to deal with climate impacts like flooding and wildfires. In tandem, Sanders wants to ban new fossil fuel development in the United States and end exports.

Despite his head start, Sanders has been outflanked during the campaign by other candidates, who have laid out more detailed climate policy proposals.

Sen. Cory Booker (D-NY):... Booker was an [early backer](#) of the Green New Deal; on his [website](#), he writes that he is “committed to addressing climate change with an eye toward its impact on vulnerable communities.” He has also been a vocal proponent of [nuclear energy](#), currently the largest source of zero-emissions electricity in the US....

His campaign is still short on specifics of how he intends to fight climate change, but he has warned about the impacts of sea level rise on his home state. Booker also said that [environmental justice](#) will be a top-tier issue for his campaign and has pledged not to take fossil fuel money in his run for president.

South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg:.... Buttigieg hasn’t yet released a climate-specific proposal, but his platform cites support for implementing a Green New Deal and he wants to create a Climate Corps as part of his [national service corps program](#). And in a [speech](#) on June 11, he said he would rejoin the Paris climate accord and increase investment in renewable technologies by at least \$25 billion....

Former Vice President Joe Biden:.... The [proposal](#) that was finally released earlier this month [by Biden’s campaign] ended up roughly in line with those from other candidates, pegged to the 2050 deadline [the time by which the United Nations says the world must achieve net-zero emissions to avoid the worst effects of climate change]. The mechanisms for hitting the target include changes to the U.S. tax code; job training and other equity provisions for those most impacted by climate change and the shift away from fossil fuels; and diplomatic pressure on other countries to reduce their emissions.

The agenda calls for \$1.7 trillion in federal spending over the next decade on these policies. Biden has also pledged to refuse fossil fuel funding, backed the Green New Deal, and supported holding a [climate change debate](#).

[\[https://www.vox.com/2019/6/25/18715447/green-new-deal-climate-change-first-democrat-debate\]](https://www.vox.com/2019/6/25/18715447/green-new-deal-climate-change-first-democrat-debate)

With all the different plans being floated, and all the complexity of climate change policy, how should voters decide which candidate can best tackle this issue? In a July 1, 2019 article in *Grist*, news writer Zoya Teirstein [offered](#) one way of evaluating candidates, using an assessment provided by the progressive think tank Data for Progress. She wrote:

Rather than looking at whether a given candidate has shouted “I support the idea of a Green New Deal” into a void somewhere in Iowa, the assessment is based on the cold, hard facts. Has the candidate released a climate policy proposal, and, if so, how does it stack up against 48 “essential Green New Deal components” determined by [Data for Progress]?

Those components include things like: holding polluters liable for their pollution, carbon removal technology, and sustainable farming. It also takes a look at how the plan in question aims to accomplish said issue. For example, plans that seek to enact a green agenda via “federal policies and actions” got full points, while goals without clear policies in place got half points....

In Data for Progress’ version of where the candidates stand, four candidates’ plans qualify as “thorough”: Beto O’Rourke, Elizabeth Warren, Joe Biden, and, of course, Jay Inslee (whose plan got a “very thorough,” the highest score of the bunch). John Hickenlooper, John Delaney, and Michael Bennet, the only other candidates who have released full-blown climate plans, got an “incomplete” from Data for Progress (Delaney got a “very incomplete”)....

Data for Progress’ rubric sets a new and improved standard for judging candidates’ support for the Green New Deal. Words aren’t enough anymore. Give the people what they want: climate plans.

<https://grist.org/article/how-to-really-judge-whether-2020-candidates-support-the-green-new-deal-look-at-their-climate-plans/>

Presidential candidates who have not yet offered detailed plans on climate change may soon feel pressure to add specifics to their platforms as the race tightens.

### **For Discussion:**

1. How much of the material in this reading was new to you, and how much was already familiar? Do you have any questions about what you read?
2. Which candidates have articulated positions on the Green New Deal and climate change, according to the article?
3. Spend some time looking at the Data for Progress assessment: <https://www.dataforprogress.org/gnd-candidates>. Between this assessment and the information provided in the article, what are some similarities and differences between the candidates’ climate plans?
4. Which candidate/s do you think offer the best plans for confronting climate change? Why?

### Reading Three: Should there be a climate change debate?

In the first two Democratic presidential debates, which took place in June and July, a total of 36 minutes were spent discussing climate change. Although this was more time than climate change received during the 2016 presidential debates, it hardly amounted to a thorough treatment of the issue. Because of this, advocates have called for a separate debate dedicated solely to confronting climate change.

When pushed on this demand earlier this summer, Democratic National Party (DNC) Chair Tom Perez was opposed to sponsoring a separate debate. In a June 11, 2019 blog post on the site Medium, he [defended](#) his decision:

We learned a valuable lesson in 2016 that, in order to ensure the strength of our party and the trust of our voters, the DNC must remain neutral in both practice and perception. If we change our guidelines at the request of one candidate [Jay Inslee, who has called for a climate change debate] who has made climate change their campaign's signature issue, how do we say no to the numerous other requests we've had? How do we say no to other candidates in the race who may request debates focused on an issue they've made central to their own campaigns?

[\[https://medium.com/@TomPerezforDNC/on-debates-3f6956696e7e\]](https://medium.com/@TomPerezforDNC/on-debates-3f6956696e7e)

Organizers with the Sunrise Movement were not impressed. They staged a sit-in outside Democratic Party headquarters during the first round of debates, demanding more attention be paid to climate change. In a June 25, 2019 article for The Intercept, DC-based journalist Aida Chavez [laid out](#) protester's demands.

"It's an emergency, and we need our leaders to act like it," said Abby Leedy, a protester from Philadelphia, outside the DNC headquarters a few blocks from the U.S. Capitol....

Sunrise activists rejected Perez's framing of the issue. "When you say this is a single issue, we know that's not true," said Leedy. "We know that this affects every aspect of our lives."

[In May](#), the Sunrise Movement wrapped up its nationwide tour by calling for a mass mobilization to pressure Democratic contenders to center on climate change in the 2020 election and pledge to refuse contributions from the fossil fuel industry. So far, 18 candidates have signed the environmental group's No Fossil Fuel Money pledge, including Inslee, Pete Buttigieg, and Sens. Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Kamala Harris, and Cory Booker. Former Vice President Joe Biden is one of six candidates who have [not yet signed](#).

Climate change has emerged as [one of the top issues](#) voters care about ahead of the 2020 election. A [recent CNN poll](#) found a majority of likely Iowa caucus participants consider climate change to be the greatest threat against humanity.

[\[https://theintercept.com/2019/06/25/sunrise-movement-climate-change-debate/\]](https://theintercept.com/2019/06/25/sunrise-movement-climate-change-debate/)



Since this exchange, both [CNN](#) and [MSNBC](#) have scheduled town halls for Democratic presidential candidates specifically focused on the climate crisis. Organizers celebrated these victories as signs that their voices were being heard. But in July 26, 2019 article for Common Dreams, staff writer Jessica Corbett [noted](#) that media-sponsored town halls do not carry the same weight as a DNC-sponsored debate:

Earlier this month, Sunrise [launched](#) a seven-week slate of demonstrations at the local offices of DNC members across the country to urge them to vote in favor of the resolution calling for an official climate debate. In response to the CNN and MSNBC announcements, the youth-led movement declared in a series of tweets Thursday night, "Our pressure is working."

"But we also want to be clear: these are not climate debates," Sunrise added. "We know that only a DNC-sponsored debate—with all the candidates on the same stage, at the same time—will put the eyes of the nation on this crisis at the scale it demands."

"Americans want and deserve more than 15 minutes of discussion on the climate crisis," the group wrote, tagging Perez in its final tweet....

While groups continue to call for a DNC debate, the newly announced climate events are ultimately being framed as victories for the movement. As Justice Democrats [put it](#) in a tweet: "We won. Organizing works."

[\[https://www.commondreams.org/news/2019/07/26/our-pressure-working-says-sunrise-movement-cnn-and-msnbc-announce-climate-events\]](https://www.commondreams.org/news/2019/07/26/our-pressure-working-says-sunrise-movement-cnn-and-msnbc-announce-climate-events)

Whether or not climate change will receive its own debate—or whether it will play a larger role in existing DNC debates—remains to be seen. But public pressure is training a spotlight on the climate crisis that candidates will find difficult to ignore.

### **For Discussion:**

1. How much of the material in this reading was new to you, and how much was already familiar? Do you have any questions about what you read?
2. What are the arguments for and against a climate change debate, according to the article?
3. Do you think there should be a DNC-sponsored climate change debate? Why or why not?
4. The Poor People's Campaign, a national movement devoted to fighting economic injustice, has recently called for a presidential debate focused on ending poverty. Are there other policy areas that you think merit their own debate?