

RICHARD: On Let's Find Common Ground, we're looking at some of the most important issues facing voters as they make their choices in the 2020 election. Today, climate change: beyond the slogans, what are some of the deeper questions, and what are some ways to find common ground? I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. Climate change is a much more important issue for many voters now than it was in 2016. According to a recent poll by Pew Research Center, a record high 60% of Americans say it's a major threat to the wellbeing of the United States.

RICHARD: Lets get a deeper understanding from journalists Eoin O'Carroll and Eva Botkin-Kowacki of The Christian Science Monitor. Both Evan and Eoin are staff reporters, and they cover science, technology, and the environment.

ASHLEY: First, Eva tells us that climate change is no longer a theory. We're living with some of the early results.

EVA: You don't need to look so much at the science anymore because you can see it pretty clearly in the impacts. I mean, the impacts that were predicted a couple decades ago, we're seeing them happen now. We're seeing those severe storms, those heatwaves, and the melting of the glaciers and ice sheets. Since the mid-1990s, we've seen arctic warming faster than anywhere else, and that's having impacts that are pretty far-reaching. That area, that region is warming at two times the global average. Then, of course, with these rising temperatures, you've got the melting permafrost, which is releasing greenhouse gases, particularly methane.

ASHLEY: What about the extent to which we should be alarmed about this? Are there different opinions about that?

EOIN: Science doesn't tell us how we ought to feel. Science just tells us what is, and most of the scientists that I talk to, I think they would say that alarmed is probably not the right mindset with which we want to be approaching this. Alarmed is a great emotion for when you encounter a leopard in the wild. It's not great for climate change. So I think the word alarmed is a little bit loaded. Most scientists who have looked at the issue would say that we need to take this very seriously.

RICHARD: Public opinion on climate change has seen a real shift, hasn't it? There are detailed studies out there by researchers at Yale and elsewhere that compare how people's concerns have grown.

EVA: Yes. They did the survey in 2013, and they did it again in 2018, and the broad strokes are that it was pretty spread out in 2013 with a few more on the concerned/cautious end of things. But then in 2018, there seems to have been a shift towards alarmed, concerned, and cautious. And now you're seeing the highest number is

concerned, but it's pretty on par with alarmed, and alarmed—29% of the people surveyed fell into that category, and 30% into concerned.

RICHARD: And a clear decline in the percentage of people who either were dismissive or skeptical about the change in climate?

EVA: Exactly, exactly. You see it going down from 14% in 2013 to 9% in both the category of doubtful and the category of dismissive.

ASHLEY: Let's consider our energy needs. How much can the world rely on renewable energy as a reliable source of power? Because right now, it's only a small part of our energy supply.

EVA: Right. So I think the idea that we could go entirely renewable is, I think, hopeful, but I think you can see some signs that we are moving in the direction of including renewable energy more and more in the repertoire. I'll think we'll see more diversified sources of energy going forward. We're already seeing that in some places where you wouldn't expect—Florida, for example. I did a story on this. Florida has a reputation for being very anti-solar because the utilities down there have definitely pushed back against rooftop solar at that scale. But now they, themselves, are installing utility-scale solar installations.

RICHARD: But why is this change of perspective about solar by big utilities in Florida, why is that happening now?

EVA: It's economic. Solar has become cost-competitive because of being around long enough and enough people embracing it and starting to create the infrastructure to be part of the system. You're seeing costs come down for installation and the materials. As that happens, it no longer makes sense to leave it out of the possible options. It's purely, purely about money, in that case.

ASHLEY: What about the rest of us and what we can do to reduce the impact of climate change, Eoin?

EOIN: My feeling is that the same thing that has made Americans so reluctant to embrace climate action will ultimately be a thing that has them embracing it, and that is the fact that our beliefs usually tend to follow our behaviors and not the other way around. Most of our beliefs, especially about the environment but also lots of other issues, they tend to follow what our behaviors are, anyway. And if you get your electricity from a renewable source, and it's fine, you're much more likely to believe that it's a good thing and that you're helping to stop climate change. None of us want to be hypocrites, and we tend to have a self-perception where we observe what it is we're doing and what we're thinking, and we try to make those two things fall in line. So I think what will ultimately save us is more people start using renewable energy, and it's fine. That said, I don't think renewable energy is going to be the whole recipe. We

are going to need to redesign systems. I find it hard to believe that a clean energy future or that a zero-carbon future will still have things like Walmart's warehouse on wheels or the salad that traveled 200,000 miles to get to your plate. In order to reach our goals, we're not going to be able to just do everything that we're doing right now but with renewable energy. There are going to have to be some lifestyle changes, but if we do it right, maybe we'll find that we like that world a little bit better than the one that we're living in right now.

RICHARD: Some energy experts and many big businesses say we really need natural gas as a bridge towards a cleaner, zero-carbon future, that it's reliable and fairly cheap source of energy. Talk about that.

EOIN: In theory, that's a view that makes sense. In reality, natural gas facilities, whether they're taking it out of the ground or processing it, they tend to leak a lot of very powerful greenhouse gases, particularly methane. Methane doesn't spend a lot of time in our atmosphere, but the time that it spends is very, very productive at trapping heat.

ASHLEY: President Trump and critics of environmentalists argue that moving toward a zero-carbon future will be disruptive; it'll be expensive and lead to a lot of job losses. Talk about the economic costs as well as the opportunities of responding to climate change, Eva.

EVA: Of course there will be growing pains. That's what happens when you change systems. There has to be shifts and changes, and that can include a lot of different things, as Eoin talked about, just mindset and behavior on an individual level, but I think, also, just reshaping systems. It can happen over time, and I think the big question is: can it happen organically, fast enough over time? This is kind of what Eoin was bringing up, this question of urgency to reduce the emissions. I think it's unreasonable to expect it to happen overnight, and I think that there will be growing pains, but I do think that there will be job creation, as well, and flexibility.

EOIN: I think it's worth noting, too, that people's beliefs can turn on a dime. It wasn't that long ago that Newt Gingrich and Nancy Pelosi sat together on a love seat for an Al Gore commercial about climate change. There was a series of ads that came out in 2008 that said there was a bipartisan consensus, and Newt Gingrich talked about a need for climate action. That fell apart with the election of Obama, and I think that radicalized the Republican Party, some sectors of the Republican Party in some ways. The financial crisis made talking about energy efficiency seem a little bit more like a luxury. So the consensus fell apart, but there was one, and it wasn't that long ago. Young Republicans tend to be very, very hawkish on climate action. People under 34 years old, there's very little difference about the need for climate action between the two parties. So the consensus fell apart. Now it looks really polarized, but demographically, it looks like there is hope for some kind of consensus, and there are a few glimmers in Congress.

ASHLEY: Let's discuss Joe Biden's plan for tackling climate change. What's new about it, and how much money would it cost?

EOIN: The Biden plan is the most ambitious climate plan ever put forth by a presidential candidate, and just last month, he supercharged it. His original climate plan was to spend \$1.7 trillion over a decade. Last month, he unveiled a new plan that expanded it. They want to spend \$2 trillion over four years. It could've been more. Bernie Sanders, he wanted to spend \$16.3 trillion over 15 years. It's not quite as ambitious as the Green New Deal, but it's pretty significant. He says he wants to eliminate emissions from the electricity sector by 2035. He says he wants to create 1,000,000 new jobs by building electric vehicles and charging stations, retrofitting existing buildings, constructing new ones. And what I think is really significant is that he wants to devote 40% of the benefits of the spending on green initiatives to disadvantaged communities. So it's really an environmental justice plan, as well as a climate change plan.

ASHLEY: Does it differ a lot from what the Obama administration introduced?

EOIN: Yeah. It's far more aggressive. The Obama administration really chipped around the edges, and this is a comprehensive plan to really transform the economy.

RICHARD: Critics of the Biden proposal say they rely far too much on government, and yet already, even before the government acts, we are seeing major initiatives among large businesses and some investors, even oil companies, about their plans for a lower-carbon or no-carbon future. Eva, could you talk about that?

EVA: I think we are already seeing shifts in business as these actions become more of the smart choice, anyway. So I think the role of business is already underway in many ways. That said, the backdrop to that has often been incentives. So some government incentives have supported it getting to the point that it was a smart decision for business.

EOIN: I think it's obvious that business needs to play a role, and any climate policy that's going to succeed needs to bring business to the table to some extent. Otherwise, it simply won't get off the ground.

RICHARD: And speaking of business, is there a role for nuclear power?

EOIN: Possibly. Potential danger from climate change is so great that even if we had a Chernobyl every year, I think many of us who are knowledgeable about the issue would choose a yearly Chernobyl over climate change. That said, it takes about 16 years to build a nuclear power plant in the United States. That process can be accelerated. In South Korea, I think they can do it in about four years, but right now, as things stand, it simply takes too long in order to achieve the emissions cuts that the scientists say are

demanded of us. The other thing is that a lot of nuclear power plants have to worry about heatwaves, and in Europe and the United States, we've seen nuke plants reduce their capacity or even shut down completely as a result of heatwaves. We're only going to be getting more of those. So, yeah, I think that this climate change does demand kind of an all-hands-on-deck situation, and nuclear is probably part of that mix, but we do need to be wary of both the timeframe and the limitations of what these plants can do in a warming world.

ASHLEY: This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard. We're speaking with journalists Eva Botkin-Kowacki and Eoin O'Carroll as part of our series of election briefings. This one is on climate change.

ASHLEY: Before we hear more from Eoin and Eva, a word about what we're doing here on Let's Find Common Ground. This is our 11th episode. Find out about other shows at commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts.

RICHARD: And we'd like to hear from you, especially teachers and others who are discussing civics and the upcoming election. Who should we talk to? What subjects do you want us to discuss?

ASHLEY: This podcast is part of the Common Ground Committee's drive to shed light, not heat on public discourse.

RICHARD: Subscribe to our newsletter at commongroundcommittee.org and find out about our videos and events. Now, more from Eva and Eoin.

ASHLEY: Often in business and science, there can be big, unexpected innovations. Eoin, could today's assumptions about technology change quickly?

EOIN: Yeah. Any person who covers climate change and technology has... If you haven't had your socks blown off, you're not paying attention. There have been some phenomenal advances in batteries, in solar power, in solar power efficiency particularly, that I would've said is not possible. If you'd asked me if solar panels would be as efficient as they are today 20 years ago, I probably would've said no. One of the problems, though, is that even though we tend to achieve energy efficiency, we don't always use it the right way. Yes, you might get a more energy-efficient refrigerator, but a significant portion of us will then take the old fridge and move it into our garage and keep it running.

ASHLEY: I have to admit we're using an old fridge in the garage. Now I feel terrible.

EOIN: Well, during a pandemic, that's probably the best thing to be doing.

ASHLEY: It's an extra, and since the pandemic, the garden... We're creating food, making food. Suddenly the old fridge, which is probably terribly energy-inefficient, has been pressed back into service as a backup fridge for all our food.

EOIN: Maybe you can balance it out with fewer trips to the grocery store. I'm not really sure. I've tried to play the game of cutting carbon out of my own life.

ASHLEY: How did that go?

EOIN: You have to look at everything from top to bottom, and even when you make big cuts like going vegan, not flying, then you're only chipping away at a few percentage points.

RICHARD: Let's talk about where there is room for common ground. Are there ways in which environmentalists and others can reframe the debate and talk about their views in a different kind of way? Is that one strategy to find common ground? Eva?

EVA: Absolutely. I think climate change, as a phrase, has become this buzzword that people tend to get their hackles up when it's said wherever they are on the spectrum of opinion on it. They know that it's just become this heated, in many ways, topic that evokes a certain reaction in folks. I've seen in it my reporting, and some of our colleagues have seen it in their reporting and written about this, as well. One of our colleagues wrote about the Midwest flooding last year. That was pretty extensive, and he spoke with a number of different farmers in Nebraska. I believe the headline of the story ended up being something along the lines of Nebraskan Farmers Will Talk About Climate Change, But Don't Use Those Words. So I think the place to really talk about it now and to find common ground is through those effects that we're seeing, the effects and the actions. So I think if we can kind of separate ourselves from the heated debate that's happened and just talk about what's happening now and what we can do about it in a more grounded sense, I think that's really where you can start to have that conversation. When I've interviewed folks, just average folks, homeowners, farmers, not scientific experts, about climate change, often I've heard them say, "I'm not an expert, but here's what I've seen. Here's what I've experienced." I talked to fishermen about the fish that they're catching changing, how frequently they're catching them, the time of year that they're catching them. And then you can have a conversation about warming waters. But because it's become so heated, when you say climate change, it makes people think, "Oh, I don't know enough about that to say. I don't want to wade into that debate, and yet everyone does have knowledge on this. Everyone has knowledge just by living their lives and looking around and experiencing what we're experiencing living here on Earth. So I think if we speak from that place of: what are you seeing? What am I seeing? Okay, what are you experiencing? What is it like to live on Earth right now in your part of the world? and compare notes in a certain way. I think that's how we can find common ground.

ASHLEY: When you speak to people, both of you, the farmers and the people who are reluctant to attribute any climate change to the actions of humankind, why?

EVA: I think, for some folks, there is a sense, by saying, "Sure, there is climate change," that they might be categorizing themselves a certain way politically. Since we moved away from that love seat image that Eoin was talking about earlier, with people coming together on it, it has really become one of those issues where if you admit that it's real, it categorizes you in a certain way. And that's unfortunate because that's not the reality. So I think that's part of it. Then I think the other part of it is because there's been so much conversation around it of, "Listen to the experts, listen to the experts, listen to the experts," that people are like, "Oh. Well, I'm not an expert." And people have reluctance to engage.

ASHLEY: What can you and I do to limit the impact of climate change? Anything, or is this something that should mainly be tackled by politicians, government, and climate science experts?

EVA: It's interesting to engage with my friends about this because it does feel like there is a sense of, even among people who are totally on board with, "We need to make a change," a sense of guilt around not doing enough, even if it's coming from within. It might not necessarily be coming from the person who's carrying the reusable water bottle or the reusable straw. It might be a sense of, "There's a reminder that I should be doing that, too, and I'm not."

EWIN: This lifestyle shaming, it's a bit of a con job, and it doesn't really serve environmental ends. The fact is that there are about 100 corporations that are responsible for 70% of emissions. So telling people that their plastic bags or their water bottles... Yeah, you probably should use a reusable water bottle, and it's fine to use a canvas shopping bag, but to focus on those... Those aren't going to get us to a clean future.

EVA: Yeah. On the flip side of that, I wouldn't entirely go away from thinking about individual action because it does engage us in a certain way, in that if we are actively working towards something or at least feel that we are, we might be more passionate about having those conversations about, "Okay, so what is meaningful change?" So I think that there's a value in it, not just in the literal impact but in the conversation, the dialogue, engaging on that level; if you're a parent, engaging your kids in a conversation about what kind of world they want to be in and create. And I think that gets back to the common ground question as well, of... A lot of research about communicating around controversial topics shows that the way that people's minds shift is by talking to people that they trust, people they have pre-existing relationships with.

RICHARD: Thanks so much, Eva and Eoin.

EWIN: It's been lovely talking to you.

EVA: Thank you for having us.

ASHLEY: Eoin O'Carroll and Eva Botkin-Kowacki of The Christian Science Monitor. In the coming weeks on our podcast, we'll have more briefings on election issues.

RICHARD: Let's Find Common Ground is a production of Common Ground Committee. Thanks for listening.