

MESSAGES FROM THE MARCH: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEWS AT THE NEW YORK CITY PEOPLE'S CLIMATE MARCH

Yale Project on Climate Change Communication
November 2014





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RADIO CITY
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The Great Radio City Music Hall
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PREFACE

This report is based on interviews conducted by Yale graduate student volunteers and staff, under the auspices the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication (<http://environment.yale.edu/climate-communication>), at the People's Climate March in New York City on September 21, 2014. This report differs from other Yale Project on Climate Change Communication reports in that it does not present scientific findings and is not a research report. It is journalistic in nature, capturing the major themes that the authors identified in the interviews conducted that day.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On September 21, 2014, the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication (YPCCC) joined over 310,000 people in the streets of New York City for the People's Climate March (PCM) to fight for a safe climate. Participants carried signs and props, wore costumes or t-shirts, and steered floats. We came with audio recorders to capture their stories. The YPCCC graduate student research team conducted 167 interviews with the demonstrators to learn why they were marching and whether they were hopeful that solutions are available. This report presents the major themes that emerged in answer to these questions.

When asked, "Why are you marching about global warming today?" participants were most likely to tell us that they are here with a group (27 respondents), or that this is simply what they do because they are passionate about the issue or global warming is a fundamental part of their work (27 respondents). Other commonly heard reasons for marching included to create public pressure for action on global warming (24 respondents) and for children and future generations (23 respondents).

We also asked people if they are hopeful about the issue and, if so, what gives them hope. When they said they are not hopeful we asked "Why aren't you hopeful?" Three major themes emerged in their responses: (1) doubtful – the situation is grave; (2) hopeful – because of today, and because I have to be; (3) very hopeful – change is happening all around us.

When those whom we interviewed carried signs, wore costumes or otherwise displayed any sort of message, we asked them about it. In the visual messages, a number of popular themes emerged, including Replacing Fossil Fuels with Clean Energy (19 messages), Environment and Nature (14 messages), and Food and Farming (10 messages). When we asked people with visuals, "Why this particular message?" a somewhat different set of primary messages became apparent. Not surprisingly, Replacing Fossil Fuels with Clean Energy was the top theme. In addition, many spoke about Politics and Government (16 responses), Corporate Accountability (15 responses), and Public Health (14 responses).

In some interviews, we asked, "When you think of 'global warming,' what is the first word, phrase, or image that comes to your mind?" We found the major associations of "global warming" were consistent with a nationally representative survey in which we asked a very similar question. People frequently referred to Icemelt (e.g., "north and south poles melting"), Flood (e.g., "coastal inundation"), Alarm (e.g., "catastrophe"), as well as Emotion (e.g., "worry"), Nature (e.g., "extinction"), and Weather (e.g., "weather extremes").

Lastly, we asked, "When you think of global warming solutions what is the first word or image that comes to your mind?" People most often told us they thought of Energy (e.g., "solar power"), People (e.g., "people power"), and Politics (e.g., "how we vote" or "carbon taxes"). The people at the People's Climate March came with a variety of motivations and messages. We hope that those working for a safe climate will find the report useful to inform their communications strategies and better mobilize segments of the population that are willing to take action.



INTRODUCTION

On September 21, 2014 more than 310,000 people flooded the streets of New York City for the People's Climate March (PCM) – deemed the largest climate march in history.¹ Families, students, environmentalists, community leaders, indigenous tribes, scientists, interfaith groups, and others traveled from all regions of the country to New York City to display a variety of messages, conveyed through an array of media, including signs, costumes, bicycle-powered floats, and songs and chants. The Yale Project on Climate Change Communication captured their stories.

Under the auspices of the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication (YPCCC), a team of Master's and PhD student volunteers and staff spread throughout all sections of the march and collectively conducted 167 interviews with PCM participants. The team asked questions aimed at uncovering participants' motivation to attend the march, their feelings about global warming, their sense of hope in solving the issue, and explanations for the signs they carried. All of the interviewee's responses were recorded and transcribed for analysis.



This report presents the major themes that emerged from the interviews, offering insights into what motivated this group to march and which messages about global warming they found to be most salient on that day.²

Support for clean energy solutions and putting an end to the prolific use of fossil fuels, as well as politics and government, and the environment, were among the top themes that participants referenced. It is our hope that this report will help those working in the fight for a safe climate to effectively communicate with people motivated to take action, such as those who came to the People's Climate March.

¹ Foderaro, L. W. (2014, Sept 21). Taking a Call for Climate Change to the Streets. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/22/nyregion/new-york-city-climate-change-march.html?_r=0

² The questions were coded according to one or more themes. (Thus, when the number of responses for each theme is given, the total will generally be higher than the number of times the question was asked.) This was not intended to be a rigorous analysis, and the interviews were simply a snapshot; not representative of all participants at the march.



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HARVARD
TAUGHT ME
TO KNOW BETTER

HARVARD
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KEY FINDINGS

1. “Why are you marching about global warming today?”

When asked, “Why are you marching about global warming today?” participants pointed toward a range of personal motivations, from their active membership in a group or their profession, to family members or future generations.

We asked this question in a total of 143 interviews. The top themes emerging from the answers were:

I AM HERE WITH A GROUP (27 respondents) Many respondents said they came with a group or were at the PCM primarily because of their membership in an organization or club.

In their words:

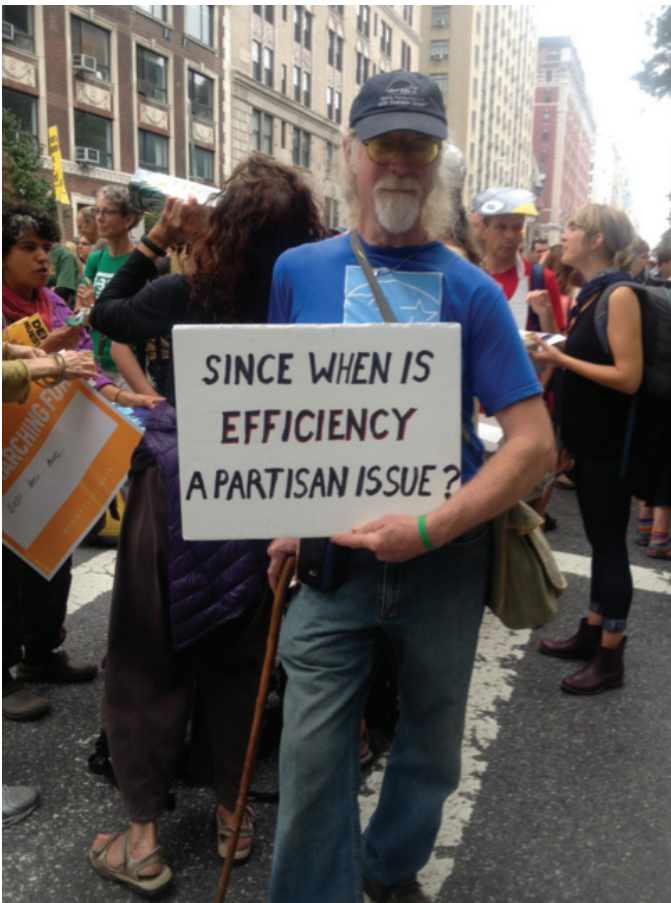
“I’m here with Bikes not Bombs with some of the young people. So we use bikes as a vehicle for social change, and we are pretty concerned, and for the last 30 years have been warning against the impact of fossil fuels.”

“I am marching with an organization called Deep Green Resistance, and we’re here to show our support. Our organization does advocate for a full-spectrum of resistance. We’re trying to actually build a resistance movement, so we do say we need marches such as this to show those in power that we’re serious, and that this is a real movement.”

“And I’m also here as part of Transportation Alternatives, hence the bike, and that’s just really more about envisioning a new way of living, a new way of really being more communal with respect to transportation, but also just learning to live in the cities.”

“I am part of the Climate Reality Project leadership core. Part of what I do is to give presentations on climate change to various groups. So, I spend a lot of time thinking about climate change and how to convince people to take action.”





THIS IS WHAT I DO (27 respondents) An equally high number of respondents said that global warming is a fundamental part of their professional work, or that they are personally passionate about the issue.

In their words:

“Well, I’m almost 70 years old now. I spent my whole career working for energy efficiency programs, low-income weatherization, utility programs, home performance, all kinds of things.”

“I’ve been marching, thinking about this my whole life, because I was brought up on Long Island. And if you love nature and beauty, and you’re brought up on Long Island, you see the environmental destruction firsthand, and feel it really in your heart. So I’ve been doing what I can for years and years and years.”



TO CREATE PUBLIC PRESSURE (24 respondents) Others said they came in hopes that the PCM would pressure powerful individuals and groups to take action on global warming.

In their words:

“And no one is acting; no one is reacting. So we need to take to the streets and show that the people are here and that we are going to make the change happen.”

“Because if we don’t, we may not have a future. I’m even afraid that the tipping point might have passed, which is heartbreaking, but we’ve got to do what we can do to get our political leaders to change the direction we’re going in. If we don’t, it’s curtains for the planet.”

“Well, I’m marching so I can listen and so I can learn, and I can bring all 140 pounds of me to add to this critical mass, because that’s sometimes what it takes.”

FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS (23 respondents) A considerable number referenced younger family members and future generations as the foremost reasons they were marching.

In their words:

“I care about the planet and I care about the future of the planet. In part because I have a child and one day she will have a child maybe, and I want a safe, healthy, diverse environment to still exist. We were given that mostly from our parents and it is our obligation, our responsibility to make sure that is there for our descendants.”

“I just think climate change is extremely important, and I’m thinking more for the future generations. That’s my main concern.”

“I think the main reason is somewhat selfish. It is for my grandchildren. I mean, you know selfish in a family way. Because I shudder to think what my eight-month old grandson who I adore was going to be facing when he is my age. Sixty-five years from now, what’s that, 2070, 80? What is he going to be facing? So that is the main reason I’m here.”



Additionally, many people said that global warming is **the most pressing issue** (16 respondents), or conveyed that it is **time for action** (15 respondents).

2. “Would you say you’re hopeful about this issue, or not?”

When asked if they are hopeful about the issue, or not, participants’ responses varied, with three major themes emerging from the answers:

Doubtful – the situation is grave.

Hopeful – because of today, and because I have to be.

Very hopeful – change is happening all around us.

When needed, we prompted interviewees to elaborate by asking, “What gives you hope?” (If they answered “yes”) and, “Why aren’t you hopeful?” (If “no”).

The following answers demonstrate each theme, in the participants’ own words:

DOUBTFUL – THE SITUATION IS GRAVE

“You are talking to a confirmed pessimist. I am almost completely lacking hope.”

“The ocean liner hasn’t even started to turn around yet. With countries like China still firing up the coal fired plants, I know we have to do something. Hopeful is not the word.”

“On a governmental level, I’m not that hopeful. But on a personal level I think people really can begin to make, bring the change they want. I mean, that’s to me, sometimes that’s the only way you can go.”

HOPEFUL – BECAUSE OF TODAY, AND BECAUSE I HAVE TO BE

“...[T]his march is a real shot in the arm. I come from California; we’ve done a lot already. We have regional carbon caps, and that works very well, and I think that’s the solution.”

“I’m always hopeful, but then again, I’m a Mets fan, so that says I’m weird.”

“...[W]e are starting to reach a bit of a tipping point... it is not going to be very long... until it is going to be way more damaging for politicians to ignore it than it will be for them to take action on it and ... go against their benefactors in the fossil fuel industry. Between marches like this, all the disasters that have been in the news, the weather disasters, and also like the burst pipelines and oil train derailments that are in the news as well, it is just kind of reaching the tipping point in the public eye, I think.”



VERY HOPEFUL – CHANGE IS HAPPENING

“Sure. I can already see a future in which we are done with using coal in the United States by 2024. Done with using natural gas by 2026 and done with using oil by 2030.”

“Yes, I’m very hopeful. California just passed a bill to completely ban plastic bags statewide, so if that’s passed it will be the first state in the United States to make such a huge environmental shift.”

“The incredible ingenuity of humanity. We have an ability to reinvent ourselves and reinvent the way that we produce energy and use energy...”

“Oh, I am very hopeful. I mean, 1,253 of us got arrested in Washington three years ago, and nobody had ever heard of the Tar Sands, and now the Tar Sands, everybody knows what that means.”



3. “I see you have a sign. Why this particular message?”

An array of media communicated a great variety of messages at the march. We identified some prominent themes in the signs and props that people carried, the clothing and costumes they wore, and the other types of visual communications they brought.

If the person who we interviewed was carrying a sign, or otherwise displaying any sort of message through their clothing, a costume, prop, float, or vocal chant or song, we then asked them about that message. We typically said, “I see you have a sign [OR OTHER OBJECT] that says [INSERT MESSAGE]. Why this particular message?”

The most prominent visual messages we observed among interviewees were:

REPLACING FOSSIL FUELS WITH CLEAN ENERGY (19 messages) Visible throughout the crowd were signs that opposed fossil fuels and supported clean energy. People carried messages asking for a ban on fracking, divestment from fossil fuels, and an end to the Keystone XL Pipeline. Not surprisingly, many displayed signs in support of energy efficiency and clean energy.

These visuals included, for example:



A woman held a sign, “End Fossil Fuel Dependence,” and on the other side, “Clean Renewable Energy Now: Planet Before Profit.”

Her response: “Well, I think that a lot of the problems we’re seeing in our country, and a lot of the obstacles people have to converting and transitioning to clean renewable energy, is the economic argument. And on my sign here I have lots of little scenarios depicting all the different ways that fossil fuel costs us money in terms of healthcare, disease, flooding, of course the horrible pollution in our waters, the train explosions, the oil fields, the fracking, groundwater...”



An enormous globe spun on its axis, powered by a large solar panel on the front, as several people wheeled it down the street. A sign on the front of this float read, “100% Renewable Energy.” We interviewed a man who guided one side of the float and wore a shirt with “Renewable Energy, I’m a Fan” printed on the front.

His response: “Basically the solar panel is operating on the power of a battery back behind here. The power then goes through the inverter, which it is then plugged in and actually powers the globe. There is an energy thing there in the globe and it is designed to turn the globe.”

A man held a sign, “When There’s a Huge Solar Energy Spill, It’s Just Called a Nice Day.”

His response: “I just saw it earlier this week on a girl’s computer, and I thought it was awesome, so I stole it and used it for a sign,” he told us.

ENVIRONMENT AND NATURE (14 messages) Many visuals referenced nature, wildlife, and the Earth. Protecting the environment was a clear theme at the march. The following are some example visual messages:

Two people held a sign with blue/green lettering that said, “Ilha Formosa Says Defend our Mother.” With some pictures of lightning rods, a heart, and the Earth.

When asked why this particular message, the interviewee responded:

“Because me and my friend here, we are originally from Ilha Formosa and it is a very beautiful island. The climate there, the fruits there are amazing. It is a subtropical climate, and it is changing too. The waters are rising, and soon Taipei will be immersed under water if we don’t do, if we don’t try to help out, you know, stopping all this pollution...”

A woman held a large, handmade purple flower with a green stem. She wore a shirt that says, “Kids for Saving Earth; The Pollution Solution,” with a picture of the globe, and patterned pants.

Her response: “Well, all the clothes I am wearing are not new. They are recycled, actually from when I was president of ‘The Kids for Saving Earth’ in the sixth grade, and I wanted to evoke the feeling for myself the excitement and the hope that I had when I was so young and started to get involved with activism,” she said. “And the flower is just to celebrate the colors and the beauty in the natural world. It is hard to replicate that, or make anything even close to the beauty that nature creates effortlessly. And that is something that I want to preserve.”



A woman with a child carries a sign, “There is no planet to B.” Two people, presumably a couple marched together in identical t-shirts that said, “Save the Songs.”

One of them offers in response to our question about why this message:

“I actually work at Audubon...The point with birds is that the climate change is projected to eat into their habitat, so there’s a pretty big risk of mass die-off if not extinction of a lot of species. So that’s the thinking behind Save the Songs, is consider the birds basically.”



FOOD AND FARMING (10 messages) Many marchers brought messages related to food and agriculture, from signs opposing GMO crops, to signs promoting a vegan diet, food was clearly a major theme. Here are a few examples to illustrate the theme:



Woman carried the standard orange People’s Climate March sign: “I’m marching for...,” on which she had written in permanent marker, “my boys and my bees.” She explains:

“Because my husband died of lymphoma, and I have celiac disease, and I feel like we are the poster couple for Monsanto. They’re destroying lives with their pesticides. And I just love my bees. I got my bees because I was so worried about the destruction of bees, and the destruction of farming that will happen if all bees die. And I have two sons, and they’re, you know, hopefully I’ll get a grandkid out of it somewhere along the line, and then you know, that’s the future.”

Woman holds sign, “Cook Organic, not the Planet” and “Boycott Factory Farming” on the back.

Her response: “Factory farming and industrial agriculture is a huge contributor to global warming and climate change...”

Two people, a man and a woman, each held a sign. One sign says, “Go Vegan, Change the World.” On the back it has a cross-out sign through “meat.” and under that it says “Go Green.” The other sign reads, “Vegan is the new Black.”



Other themes in the visual messages, included: **Corporate accountability** – calling out corporations on their responsibility for climate change (8 messages), **act now** – voicing the urgency of acting on climate (7 messages), **anthropocentric messages** – conveying that human communities will be affected, or that global warming affects everybody (7 messages), and **the effects of climate change**, such as extinction, rising temperatures, and climate-related crises (7 messages).

In the responses to our question about why people had brought these particular messages, a slightly different set of themes emerged. Unsurprisingly, Energy and Fossil Fuels remained a top theme in the responses, with 19 responses hitting on this subject. In addition, many people spoke about Politics and Government (16 responses), Corporate Accountability (15 responses), and Public Health (14 responses).

The following are some additional examples of people’s responses, illustrating each of these top themes:

ENERGY AND FOSSIL FUELS (19 responses):

Wearing an elaborate green costume and traveling with a group of other costumed people, a woman explained, “...As you can see I am plugged into the community micro-grid over there. We also have solar power, the spirit of solar, and we’ve also got tidal power...more than renewables, it is kind of the democratization of energy. You no longer are going to have to plug into a giant utility that gets all of its energy from fossil fuels...An individual can have solar panels on their roof, or wind power on their roof. So it is more about the democratization of energy instead of a central utility is controlling all of it.”

A woman described the sign she was holding, which contained imagery of a clock and gas nozzle, “... the more fossil fuels you use, we have sort of a ticking clock and we have a limited time on the planet. And so, to say gas is time reminds us of the kind of continuance of our life on the planet...”



A woman with a sign, “Fuel change, DivestInvest.org,” said, “I am a strong advocate of divesting from fossil fuels and investing in climate solutions. I think it’s unethical and financially problematic to continue investing in the industries that are driving this problem. And I would say to Yale, you’ve taken some important steps, but it is crucial that you come out publicly and say that you’re divesting from fossil fuels, and you’re committed to investing in your students’ future.”

CORPORATE ACCOUNTABILITY (15 responses):

A woman representing a business described her sign, “ ‘Save our luscious planet: ’ we believe that a planet that is lush and beautiful is something that we want for all things...That is what we stand for – producing packaging, having good ingredients in our products and healthy things that benefit communities, your skin, your health, your hair, your families. So the bigger message of why we are here marching for the planet is that we are trying to do as business globally.”

Another man, describing his sign said, “ ‘Do you have the courage to do what’s right? #PCM’ for



People's Climate March. Well, I'm here for the Divest Team at my school... we are urging our president, President Hurley, to divest from (the) fossil fuel industry, and reinvest in more social and environmentally friendly companies."

PUBLIC HEALTH (14 responses):

A man who held a sign, "Climate Change is a Health Crisis," told us, "...when you look at where climate change is happening, you can look around the world, but even in our own country, when disasters happen, the poor, which equals more unhealthy people, are disproportionately affected. So when you have disasters happening, if you're rich, or you're not socioeconomically depressed, you can just pick up your stuff and leave. You can get on a plane and fly away. But if you don't have the resources, you're stuck. You're stuck where you are."



A woman holding a sign "Californians for Climate Justice" said, "to me as a public health person, it's people. It is an environment issue, but it never should have been just in the environmental sphere. It's about human rights; it's about our sustainable economy. It's about taking care of people. And people need to be at the forefront of the climate change messaging, so that it relates to them."

POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

A man who wore a shirt that said, "Environmental Advocates of New York," told us, "I am a board member, I am proud to say, and I have served this organization for the last six years and we are the watch dogs for the environment in Albany, New York, and we do our best to hold our legislators accountable for their actions, and making sure that they put the needs of people and public health and preservation at the top of their priorities."



Carrying a sign that read, "I'm marching for evidence-based policy," one man said in response to our question, "Because I believe in science, and I think that science needs

to be part of the policy process... the scientists have to figure out how engage with policymakers, and the policy-makers have to figure out how to engage the engineers.”

A man held a sign, “Ashamed Republican,” with three arrows pointing down towards him. He said, “it is what I am and sort of what I feel, for a party that I agree with a lot of basic premises, but I see very little rationalism in at the moment.”

Other prominent themes included **economy** (12 responses), **the effects of climate change** (11 responses) and **food and farming** (10 responses).

4. “When you think of ‘global warming,’ what is the first word, phrase, or image that comes to your mind?”

In some of the interviews, we asked people to tell us what they first thought of when they think of global warming. This mirrors a question we have asked in nationally representative surveys of Americans. At the march, the top three themes in people’s responses were:

ALARMED (26 responses) – A range of responses explicitly stated negative associations of global climate change, for example with catastrophe and devastation. In their words:

“Catastrophe. In a nutshell, that’s basically it. The end of the world as we know it.”

“Oh, just devastation. I mean the effects of it are so widespread, and we can’t even anticipate all the effects. So it is scary.”

“Death. Cancer.”

“Apocalypse.”

“We’re burning our house down.”

SEA LEVEL RISE AND FLOODING (17 responses) – Many interviewees referenced either flooding or sea level rise.

“I picture actual coastal inundation, so I picture a lot of ancient cities suddenly being partially underwater.”



“I actually see us all like drowning. I see ice caps melting and you know, just like the movies, I see the Statue of Liberty under water.”

“The waters rising in certain places, and it’s even New York, some places will be under water soon.”

ICEMELT (13 responses) – A third theme to emerge was related to people’s frequent allusions to melting snow and ice.

“Icebergs melting.”

“The polar bears just seeing one piece of ice.”

“All those ice caps going away. That’s very, very bad. And Antarctica going away. Very, very bad.”

“... You know glaciers, they are melting.”

“I think of the north and south poles melting.”

People often said that they **feel a certain way**, such as sad and worried, when they think of global warming (12 responses). **Nature** and **weather** were also commonly mentioned, including references to extinction, the Earth, and extreme weather.³

5. “When you think of ‘global warming solutions,’ what is the first word or image that comes to your mind?”

We then asked the same people, “And when you think of global warming solutions what is the first word or image that comes to your mind?” Commonly invoked as solutions were:

ENERGY (28 responses) – Most commonly renewable energy but also other energy sources. In their words:

“I think of renewable energy is an important solution. I think of nuclear power as a potential solution.”

“Solar power”

³ These main themes are consistent with the findings from a recent nationally representative survey by YPCCC that asked Americans a similar question, “When you think of global warming, what is the first word or phrase that comes to your mind?” However, unlike in the the national survey, no one we interviewed associated the term with Naysaying (e.g., “hoax”). YPCCC found the term *global warming* elicits significantly more associations to Ice melt (e.g., “melting glaciers”), Alarm (e.g., “world catastrophe”), Flood (e.g., “coastal flooding”), and Ozone (e.g., “the ozone hole”) categories than the term *climate change*. In the national survey, both *global warming* and *climate change* evoked similar numbers of associations with Heat (e.g., “rising temperatures”), Other (e.g., miscellaneous), Politics (e.g., “liberals”) and Changing Climate (e.g., “changing seasons”) categories. (See Leiserowitz, A., Feinberg, G., Rosenthal, S., Smith, N., Anderson A., Roser-Renouf, C. & Maibach, E. (2014). What’s In A Name? Global Warming vs. Climate Change. Yale University and George Mason University. New Haven, CT: Yale Project on Climate Change Communication.)

“Alternative energies. More solar panels, more wind turbines way up high, like on our mountains”

“I think of biogas.”

“Making homes more energy efficient”

“Equitable access to cheap energy”

PEOPLE (18 responses) – Interviewees often said people: people taking action, people coming together, communities, organizing, and other people-related activity.

“Organizing”

“First image is people power. Solidarity.”

“I’d say strength and unity. That’s really what it is. All these people coming together, even though we live different lives, we are all coming together for one thing.”

“It is going to take a lot of cooperation.”



POLITICS (18 responses)– Many referenced policies, politics, regulation or government.

“Thinking about how we vote”

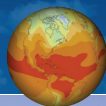
“Regulations, carbon taxes, administration – the government, they just need to impose regulations and enforce, that’s the biggest thing. They may be there, the regulations, but we need somebody to enforce them.”

“Get those politicians to get some policies together. The science is there, it’s been there forever. Enough?”

“We need governments behind it, regulating carbon dioxide emissions, I think that would probably be a big one.”

People frequently talk about **carbon** in various ways, such as carbon caps and carbon emissions. We also hear many references to the **economy**, including transforming the way business is done and transitioning to a new sustainable growth model.





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