



# PHASE OUT FOSSIL FUELS AND FAST TRACK CLEAN ENERGY

*HOW TO TALK ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE, FOSSIL FUEL  
THREATS AND THE NEED FOR A FAIR ENERGY  
TRANSITION IN THE UNITED STATES*

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### **About the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty**

The Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty is a global initiative to phase out fossil fuels and support a just transition. The world is beginning to recognise that unprecedented levels of international cooperation will be required to prevent the proliferation of fossil fuels, to phase out existing stockpiles and infrastructure, and to fast-track a just and peaceful transition to sustainable development and greater wellbeing for all.

[www.fossilfuel treaty.org](http://www.fossilfuel treaty.org)

### **About Climate Access**

Climate Access is a nonprofit organization focused on building political and public support for climate and clean energy solutions by developing and promoting the adoption of effective communication and engagement approaches. Climate Access draws from social science, best practices in the field and its in-depth climate communication and public engagement experience to make complex issues easy to understand and involve stakeholders in decision making and supporting policy and program implementation. Climate Access offers strategic framing, narrative, activation and engagement services and runs a resource and training center for more than 3,700 members from nonprofit, government, academic and community organizations.

[www.climateaccess.org](http://www.climateaccess.org)



*“Phase out Fossil Fuels and Fast Track Clean Energy” was produced by Climate Access on behalf of the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty Initiative.*

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## **playbook contents**

1. Introduction
2. Top Level Framing Tips
3. The Message Triangle
4. The Message Triangle in Action
5. Unpacking the Triangle
6. Resources
7. Appendix of Key Research Trends

# introduction

## BACKGROUND

Fossil fuels are responsible for more than 85 percent of the emissions causing climate change to date. Climate policies and programs focus on reducing emissions from the burning of fossil fuels but largely ignore the source of the problem – the production of oil, gas and coal – which governments and fossil fuel companies are expanding unchecked. Their plans, if allowed to continue, would generate more than twice the amount of emissions allowable to avoid catastrophic climate change.

This is not surprising given the influence of the fossil fuel industry and its government proponents in shaping the narrative around oil, gas and coal, undermining support for impactful supply side policies. They amplify arguments about the necessity and inevitability of oil, gas and coal (despite their threat to humanity), the economic benefits they deliver and their role as innovators. Most recently, they claim the industry is part of the solution to climate change with hollow net zero commitments that rely on unproven, expensive technologies and timelines that undermine our efforts to preserve a livable planet.

The movement in the United States and around the world to shift from fossil fuels to clean energy and low-carbon technologies is growing and successfully blocking some of the expansion of new oil, gas and coal projects despite being David in a fight with the ultimate Goliath. Yet fossil fuel expansion plans and existing production levels remain inconsistent with survival. Those advocating for a fossil fuel phase out and fair energy transition must scale up efforts to tell a new story about the imperative and benefits of a fossil fuel free world and how we get there.

## PURPOSE OF THE PLAYBOOK

The Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty Initiative aims to change the narrative around fossil fuels and climate change as one of its core goals. This means elevating the risks associated with existing and planned fossil fuel production, connecting the need for a phase down of fossil fuels with the imperative of a global, fair transition to clean energy and outlining a pathway to achieve it.

In 2021, on behalf of the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty Initiative, Climate Access in partnership with Drive Agency conducted media, social media and polling analyses and message testing in five countries – the United States, India, Brazil, Philippines and Kenya. This was done to inform the Initiative’s communication efforts and share with organizations addressing supply side issues including the network of groups advocating for a Fossil Fuel Treaty. In addition, Climate Access and the Climate Narratives Initiative conducted similar research in Canada and developed [framing guidance](#).

The Fossil Fuel Treaty U.S. Framing Playbook offers guidance on how to talk about fossil fuel supply side issues, a fair transition and the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty. A summary of key trends from the research sources listed below are included in an appendix.

## METHODOLOGY

Recommendations in the Phase Out Fossil Fuels and Fast Track Solutions Playbook are informed by the following research:

**[U.S. public opinion analysis:](#)** The Climate Access team reviewed available public opinion research conducted in 2020 and 2021 on climate change, the phase out of fossil fuels, climate and clean energy solutions. A total of nine studies were analyzed from sources including Climate Nexus, Yale/George Mason University, ecoAmerica, Data for Progress, Gallup, Pew Research Center, Resources for the Future and others. This report is an updated version of the [2020 Climate and Energy Public Opinion Summary](#) released in July 2021.

**[U.S. media analysis:](#)** Climate Access used the United Nations Environment Programme Web Intelligence Portal to analyze climate and fossil fuel narratives in more than 2,000 articles from 72 regional and national outlets.

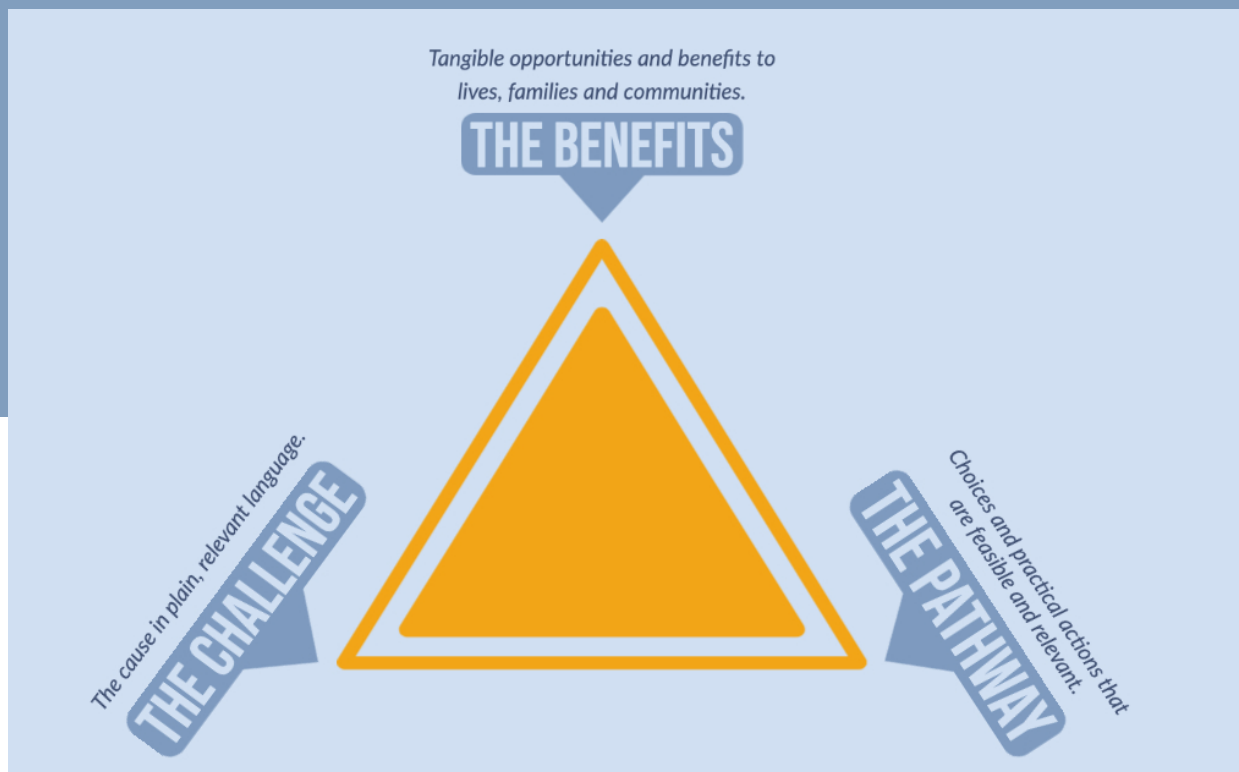
**[U.S. message testing:](#)** Climate Access worked with Drive Agency on message testing via social media. Drive Agency also conducted a social media analysis.

**[U.S. focus groups:](#)** Potential Energy Coalition Research conducted two sets of focus groups on supply side issues (Make Polluters Pay) including testing response to a Fossil Fuel Treaty.

# recommendations

## TOP LEVEL FRAMING RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ Lead with or incorporate a positive vision of a world without fossil fuels.
- ▶ Emphasize the need for equity so workers and communities are not left behind.
- ▶ Highlight why fossil fuel companies cannot be trusted and why government accountability is needed.
- ▶ Provide tangible examples of how fossil fuels harm public health with health professionals as messengers.
- ▶ Amplify that it's not an energy transition if fossil fuel producing countries keep growing the problem - oil, gas and coal production. The first step is to end expansion.
- ▶ Emphasize the need for a plan to move away from fossil fuels via a Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty where every country does their fair share and that increases energy security and affordability.
- ▶ Elevate the availability, affordability and reliability of clean energy and low-carbon technologies.



## THE MESSAGE TRIANGLE

A message triangle can help guide you to create a story that sticks. This helps to keep things simple amidst the noise and connect the dots between what people care about and what can be done. It highlights key themes to integrate and amplify in communications while allowing room for specific messages to be tailored for different stakeholders and audiences.

When you hit each of the points, you remove barriers to engagement and create a complete narrative for your audience with a clear challenge, pathway forward and benefits of taking action.

**The challenge** – the cause in plain, relevant language.

**The pathway** – choices and practical actions that are feasible.

**The benefits** – tangible opportunities and benefits to lives, families and communities.

You can start at any point, depending on where your audience is on the issue and cares about, then link to the other two points. The benefits – the vision of what a fair shift away from fossil fuels will be like – is often left out or downplayed yet is needed to generate a sense of hope and momentum. Consider leading with it. All three components are needed. Individuals must feel a challenge to want to engage yet it must be balanced. If you dial up the threats, also dial up the pathway and the opportunity.

# THE MESSAGE TRIANGLE IN ACTION

## Fossil Fuel Treaty Meta-Narrative

Here is an example of how to bring the three points of the message triangle together into a cohesive narrative. This is a high-level framework offering key themes to integrate and amplify in fossil fuel supply side campaigns.

### ► Vision/Benefits

Everyone in America and the world should have access to affordable clean, renewable energy from sun, wind and water. There's enough clean energy potential in the United States and every region of the globe to power our homes, businesses, communities and lives. Moving away from polluting, oil, gas and coal is the way to a healthy, thriving future for all including those most impacted by fossil fuels and climate change. The solutions are here now. America can lead and generate good jobs and lasting economic opportunities in clean energy and low-carbon technologies today and for generations to come.

### ► Challenge

Shell, Exxon and other fossil fuel companies are holding us back. They're making windfall profits while Americans struggle to make ends meet as energy and other costs rise. All the while, the oil, gas and coal lobby blocks progress on addressing air and water pollution and efforts to cut the carbon emissions driving extreme flooding, wildfires and heat waves that are harming communities across the country. Taxpayers are footing the bill. \$11 billion of subsidies goes to the global fossil fuel industry each minute. An industry that doesn't need help and continues to ignore its responsibility for climate change and conflicts. Meanwhile, the fossil fuel industry is making windfall profits while many Americans struggle to make ends meet as energy and other costs rise due in large part to the fossil fuel funded war in Ukraine. Fossil fuel companies have plans to expand production, locking in climate, security and economic risks. Some face these more than others, including Black, Brown and Indigenous Americans, women and people in the Global South.

### ► Pathway

It's time to make a plan to move away from fossil fuels and fast-track clean, low-carbon solutions. A plan that takes into account the needs of workers and communities that produce oil, gas and coal so they are supported to shift into the growing clean energy economy. The United States has the ingenuity, innovation and commitment to hard work to make this happen. Yet, we can't go it alone. Other fossil fuel-producing nations need to be part of accelerating the move to clean energy so we can tackle the security, economic and environmental threats we all face. That's why a Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty is needed so countries work together to end the expansion of fossil fuels and start to wind down production to keep extreme weather from getting worse. International cooperation is also needed to accelerate the adoption of clean energy so we can tap into the immense potential that exists and do it in a fair way so one is left behind and everyone benefits.



## Unpacking the Triangle

Choose which points to highlight based on the stakeholders you aim to reach (i.e. health, economic, climate, equity). Be sure to link to oil, gas and coal as the main driver of the challenge and the risk of fossil fuel expansion.

### The Vision/Benefits

- ▶ Make the benefits clear and tangible.
  - *All Americans can have access to clean, reliable and affordable energy from the sun, wind and water if we work together and with other countries to move away from fossil fuels.*
  - *Shifting away from fossil fuels is good for our health in so many ways. Expanding access to public transportation and electric vehicles means clean air and quieter streets. Retrofitting buildings helps everyone heat and cool their homes more efficiently and cost-effectively. Those living on the frontlines of fossil fuel production facilities will have options for better lives and livelihoods.*
  - *The world is moving away from fossil fuels to clean energy. This is generating new jobs and economic opportunities. There's already more than 230,000 Americans working in the solar energy sector and it keeps growing. These are good, stable jobs people can feel proud of doing and we can create more like them.*
  - *The fossil fuel industry causes conflict everywhere it goes. The war in Ukraine is the latest example. The way to achieve global security is to move away from the source of the problem.*
- ▶ Recognize that it won't be easy to make the transition happen at the pace needed but remind people that Americans rise up to take on great challenges and can do so again. Also, make the case that the benefits of action outweigh the costs of inaction. We have more options and it will take fewer resources to make a shift now, rather than spending more each year to respond to and recover from extreme weather events.
- ▶ Provide examples of how the transition is already underway and gaining momentum in the United States and around the world. Include local examples as much as possible. For example, feature O'Brien, Iowa as one of the leading jurisdictions with wind power and the types of opportunities now available as a result.

## The Challenge

- ▶ Emphasize that oil, gas and coal are driving the climate crisis and the extreme heat, flooding, fires and storms we are experiencing as a result. Mention these extreme weather events harm people, communities and cost more each year to respond to.
- ▶ Talk about the health, climate, economic and societal risks associated with fossil fuels and the impact on BIPOC Americans, youth, women and other populations most impacted.
  - *1 in 5 deaths globally each year is due to pollution from fossil fuels. In the United States, it is responsible for more than 230,000 deaths annually and \$600 million in economic losses.*
  - *Oil, gas and coal are responsible for more than 85 percent of the climate pollution driving extreme weather events.*
  - *Investors and increasingly countries are moving away from fossil fuels. In little more than a decade, more than half of the financial assets sunk into oil, gas and coal in the US are at risk of being worthless.*
- ▶ Make the point that scientists (IPCC) and energy experts (IEA) agree there can be no new fossil fuel projects and we need to accelerate the adoption of clean energy and other low-carbon solutions or we will lock in catastrophic climate impacts. Yet the evidence is being ignored as countries pledge climate action while building out more of the problem. Cite the United States, Canada, U.K. and other wealthy fossil fuel producing countries as [examples](#).
- ▶ Highlight that countries have plans for expansion that would lock in [two times](#) the amount of climate pollution than the levels needed to have a safe climate. The United States is responsible for more than 80 percent of all planned oil and gas expansion in the world. It is not an energy transition if we keep growing the problem. The first step is to end expansion to ensure humanity has a viable future.
- ▶ Pivot to who is responsible for the problem - the fossil fuel industry.
  - *Fossil fuel companies and their executives are making record profits as Americans face higher prices at the pumps and rising costs across the board.*
  - *The fossil fuel industry has deceived the public for decades, burying evidence that their products cause climate change just as tobacco companies lied about cigarettes causing cancer. Now oil, gas and coal companies are saying they can continue to expand, misleading the public with empty promises based on false solutions. Take net zero pledges where the emphasis is capturing emissions through technologies that don't work, are expensive and not at scale.*

- Fossil fuels are funding Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and driving conflicts around the globe. Fossil fuel companies are profiting while people struggle with high energy and food costs and lack of availability.
- ▶ Elevate the gaps in government action and international cooperation.
- *Governments around the world including the United States are letting oil, gas and coal companies off the hook. Most climate policies have ignored the production of fossil fuels. Even the global Paris Agreement where nations committed to limit warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius avoids the issue by not even mentioning the words oil, gas and coal.*
  - *With nothing to hold them accountable, most countries are not willing to move away from oil, gas and coal, assuming their products will be among the last in the climate era or arguing if they cut production, others will up theirs. Most can’t go it alone. Particularly countries in the Global South that have paid the social, environmental and economic price for fossil fuels yet haven’t gained the benefits and lack resources and capacity to be part of the energy transition.*

#### METHANE GAS

The term “natural” tends to conjure position connotations, like fresh foods or the great outdoors. When discussing “natural gas,” this association is more insidious. A deceptive marketing advantage of the fossil fuel industry, the language of “natural gas” has led to widespread misunderstanding of its threats to health, safety, and the climate. “Natural gas” garners a far [more favorable impression](#) than “methane.” Despite this disconnect in understanding that “natural gas” and “methane gas” are one and the same, Americans largely support government action to regulate methane pollution, showing that terminology matters and affects how people perceive the energy sources they may use every day in their homes.

- Avoid defaulting to the familiar terminology of “natural gas” that is often conflated with clean sources of energy. Instead, refer to [“methane gas”](#) and emphasize that it is indeed a harmful fossil fuel and not a climate solution.

## The Pathway

- ▶ Identify the present as the crossroads moment to address mounting security, energy climate and health risks. We either expand the source of the problem (fossil fuels) or we move to what we know is needed (clean energy and low-carbon economies).
- *It’s not a clean energy transition if we keep expanding the cause of the climate emergency – oil, gas and coal.*
  - *We can continue to dump money into fossil fuels and risk our climate, health, economy and global security or invest in clean energy from the sun, wind and water.*

- ▶ Amplify that there are enough fossil fuels already in production to support us through a transition and enough [renewable energy capacity](#) in every part of the world to deliver energy security for every American and person around the world.
- ▶ Focus on the fact that the solutions we need to power our businesses, homes, communities and lives from clean energy are available now and affordable.
  - *We can electrify our transportation systems and homes and power them with clean energy and cut climate pollution and energy use at the same time through high energy performance building design and retrofits and community design.*
- ▶ Pinpoint that now what's needed is a plan to phase out fossil fuels and fast track clean energy and other low-carbon solutions.
  - *Action is needed at the local, state and federal levels to wind oil, gas and coal production and scale up clean energy. But there's also a need for a coordinated plan where every country contributes their fair share.*
- ▶ Call for a Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty as the vehicle to create a global plan.
  - *A Fossil Fuel Treaty would bring countries together to agree to end the expansion of fossil fuels, wind down existing production to levels that ensure a safe climate and accelerate a transition to clean energy and low-carbon solutions where no worker, community or country is left behind.*
- ▶ Emphasize the United States has the ability and capacity to lead on the issue and inspire other fossil fuel producers to join.
  - *Just as Americans have stepped up to face great global challenges including the war in Ukraine, it can be done again when it comes to leading a fair transition to clean energy.*
- ▶ Showcase the momentum underway in the U.S. and globally.
  - *Los Angeles was one of the first cities in the world to endorse the need for a Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty and advocate for state and federal action to phase out fossil fuels and fast track clean energy and low carbon solutions. Hawai'i was the first state in the world to call for a Fossil Fuel Treaty and the first Pacific Island. Local and state governments around the country and world including London, Paris, Barcelona and Vancouver, British Columbia have also joined the growing movement by elected leaders to tackle the threat of oil, gas and coal.*

## THE PATHWAY TO A TREATY

- **Reference examples of when the world has come together to take on great challenges such as closing the hole in the ozone layer, phasing out asbestos and banning landmines.**
- **Outline how the campaign for a Fossil Fuel Treaty is as important as achieving a binding agreement.**
  - ➔ The campaign for a Fossil Fuel Treaty is generating the pressure and social norms needed to spur a phase out of oil, gas and coal and fair expansion of clean energy. Since its launch in late 2020, the campaign has already prompted local and state governments to call on higher levels of government to act, compelled 101 Nobel Laureates to demand international cooperation to address fossil fuels and activated hundreds of scientists and academics and more than 1,300 civil society organizations to advocate for government leadership.
  - ➔ Not every country needs to sign on. In fact, this was the case with the Mine Ban Treaty where a small group of countries were willing to lead and compel others to join.
- **Lay out the steps to a Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty.**
  - ➔ A critical first step is mobilizing a broad and large cross-section of civil society organizations as well as academics and government, Indigenous, youth, business and other leaders around a common global call for action – Phase out fossil fuels and fast track clean energy in a fair way.
  - ➔ Local, state and national governments endorse the call for a Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty and compel other governments to join.
  - ➔ It is also important to increase transparency and accountability related to emissions from fossil fuels. A new Global Registry of Fossil Fuels is being developed which will be the first publicly accessible database of all current, planned and potential oil, gas and coal production and the climate pollution they would lock in. This can be used by governments as a basis for negotiating countries' fair share of the responsibility for action, by advocates to demand government action and investors assessing the risk of stranded assets.
  - ➔ The Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty Initiative is calling for a Global Commission on Fossil Fuels to create an initial group of first mover countries, enhance transparency and develop a formal process for a legal agreement. This can draw on the World Commission on Dams as one of many examples.

# resources

For more information on the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty Initiative, visit [www.fossilfueltreaty.org](http://www.fossilfueltreaty.org) or reference these [FAQs](#).

Check out communication resources available at [Climate Access](#), [Fossil Free Media](#) and [Potential Energy](#).

## appendix

### RESEARCH TRENDS

- ▶ **Climate Change Acceptance Yet Polarization and Skepticism Persist**
  - Acceptance that climate change is happening is at its highest point since 2008 (76 percent of Americans). Slightly less, but still a majority (60 percent) agree it is human-caused. At the same time, views are more starkly polarized than ever. In 2021, fewer Republicans said climate change is due to human activity than 20 years ago. Globally, the U.S. has the highest level of climate skepticism.
  - Extreme weather events are sparking media reporting and conversations around the impacts of climate change. While an overall positive trend, some of the discourse is polarized with Conservative outlets and influencers pushing misinformation about the connections between extreme weather, climate change and energy. As an example, during the Texas power outage, clean energy was positioned as the cause of electrical grid failures, rather than climate change and the reliance on fossil fuels.
  
- ▶ **Concern is on the Rise but for Many, Climate Change is a Still a Distant Threat**
  - While Americans may be politically divided around the cause of climate change, more Americans are seeing the rise in extreme weather and say they are experiencing it firsthand with significant effects on their daily lives. Most associate this with climate change. Democrats, young adults, college graduates, non-White Americans and women are significantly more likely to say that impacts of climate change have arrived. Fewer Republicans and Republican-leaning independents agree.
  - At the same time, there is still the tendency for people to think that others, and in particular future generations, will be more impacted than themselves.

### ▶ **Broad Yet Shallow Support for Climate Action**

- Americans largely believe there's still time to tackle climate change (67 percent) and that governments, businesses and average people should be doing more (70 percent). This includes prioritizing clean energy development, regulating emissions to reduce pollution and providing federal funding to green jobs and infrastructure.
- Unfortunately, while high, support for climate action has been stagnant over the past 20 years and does not necessarily translate to buy-in for specific policies or behavior change.
- Clean energy is popular but there are still questions regarding the availability and reliability of the solutions. These questions are amplified in the media.
- Americans are lukewarm at best when it comes to prioritizing solutions that address inequalities with the exception of providing energy transition job training, which is supported by the majority of Americans.
- A sense of efficacy that climate change will be tackled is missing due to a lack of political and public will, resulting in fatalism. It is an unpleasant emotion that most turn away from unless the solutions are clear and there is a sense that leaders and others are taking action.

### ▶ **Between a Rock and a Hard Place with Fossil Fuels**

- Almost three-quarters of the public want renewable energy production prioritized over increasing production from oil, gas and coal. By a 2:1 margin, American voters believe that [minimizing reliance on fossil fuels will create millions of new jobs](#) in clean energy rather than kill jobs or reduce energy security.
- There is confusion about whether natural gas is a fossil fuel or renewable energy source. Arguments that "natural gas" is a bridge fuel are prevalent as well.
- Concern over how to transition workers out of fossil fuel jobs are common in media coverage and social media discourse. Also, fossil fuel proponents are quick to use events such as the Texas power outage, to falsely blame renewable energy and climate activists for the problem.
- A slim majority of Americans believe permits should be denied for infrastructure projects that would significantly contribute to climate change and oppose more offshore oil and gas drilling. Compared with older generations, Gen Zers and Millennials are more supportive of shifting U.S. energy reliance away from oil, coal and gas and the idea of eliminating them altogether.
- At the same time, there is still hesitancy with only 33 percent of Americans supporting phasing out fossil fuels. Most people are unsure of the ability to move away from fossil fuels, particularly on a timeline fast enough to avoid climate change and believe maintaining a mix of fossil fuels and renewable energy is important. Americans are uncertain about what a major energy transition would mean for their lives and are worried about unexpected problems, costs, and disruptions with moving away from fossil fuels completely.

- Americans have a negative view of the fossil fuel industry and support ending subsidies, taxing companies on carbon pollution and banning oil and gas wells from operating near residential areas and schools. Some Americans who identify as Republican support regulating the fossil fuel industry and transparency around banks' fossil fuel investments. Regardless, fossil fuel companies are seen as having enough political and economic power to do what they like, which generates a sense of fatalism that an energy transition is impossible.
- The narrative that fossil fuel companies are part of the solution and driving innovation for the future is dominant in media coverage. Unfortunately, this frame that fossil fuels are necessary for the economy, jobs and our lives and that they can be produced in a clean way, resonates well with Americans.

▶ **Pinpointing the Problem and the Need for a Fair, Global Plan Resonates**

- Calling out that planned fossil production will generate 120 percent more emissions than what is needed to keep warming to 1.5C generated alarm and a sense that action is needed in message testing.
- Highlighting the small number of actors responsible for the problem helped overcome the sense that the fossil fuel industry cannot be constrained such as the top companies and short list of countries.
- Messages around the lack of fairness resonated. For example, asserting that billion-dollar corporate polluters should pay rather than everyday Americans worked well, as did amplifying that its unfair CEOs are making millions while regular people struggle with rising gas prices. Also, it's unfair that the fossil fuel industry buys off politicians with lobbying dollars so they can keep polluting and block progress on climate change, deceive the people, get government handouts, yet are laying people off and pouring pollutants into our backyards, including America's poorest neighborhoods.
- The idea that big polluters need to be exposed and that government action is necessary to constrain them resonated. People are eager to hear about a plan to deal with climate change that brings people together. Merely criticizing the industry isn't enough. There needs to be a positive path forward.
- The proposal for a Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty was seen as a realistic plan to transition to cleaner forms of energy because it starts with limiting expansion versus an immediate halt, it helps us "fast track progress" and protects the environment. It also is a way to ensure all countries will act.





[www.fossilfuel treaty.org](http://www.fossilfuel treaty.org)