Climate Silence: Why Aren't There More Votes?

https://www.climateone.org/audio/climate-silence-why-arent-there-more-votes
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Announcer: This is Climate One – changing the conversation about energy, economy, and the environment.

As the midterms approach, how are the fires and floods of the past year playing with voters?

Trip Gabriel: In my interviews with the folks whose homes, you know, were damaged and a lot of them driven out it was not the kind of issue that is really front and center for them even after two heavy hurricanes.

Announcer: So some voter-registration groups are focused not on changing voters' minds, but on changing non-voters' behavior.

Nathaniel Stinnett: We actually have a lot of people who are already persuaded – they're just not voting. We have a turnout problem, not a persuasion problem.

Announcer: Climate-conscious companies like Lyft are also trying to get out the vote.

Sam Arons: Across all populations transportation is a barrier to voting. So we want to make sure that we're helping folks to overcome those barriers and get out there and exercise their duty and their right.

Announcer: Climate at the ballot box. Up next on Climate One.

Announcer: How are climate and energy issues playing with voters, and non-voters, in the upcoming elections? Welcome to Climate One – changing the conversation about energy, economy, and the environment. Climate One conversations – with oil companies and environmentalists, Republicans and Democrats – are recorded at the Commonwealth Club of California, and hosted by

Greg Dalton.

I'm Devon Strolovitch. Climate-conscious voters don't have a great track record at the ballot box.

Nathaniel Stinnett: When we poll environmentalists who we know aren't voting, the overwhelming majority of them lie their pants off.

Announcer: Nathaniel Stinnett founded the Environmental Voter Project in 2015.

EVP's mission is to increase demand for progressive environmental policy by turning inactive environmentalists and into active voters. Stinnett will tell Greg how the group works to get out the climate vote.

Sam Arons: Regardless of where you live what your political views might be, this is really about helping everyone participate in our democracy. (8')

Announcer: Sam Arons is Director of Sustainability at the ride-hail company Lyft, which is part of a coalition of companies, including Patagonia and Levi's, that are encouraging their employees and customers to vote this year. We'll hear how that civic engagement effort aligns with their own corporate sustainability work.

First, Greg talks to New York Times reporter Trip Gabriel, to find out how the recent fires, floods, and hurricanes have – or haven't – been playing on the campaign trail.

Greg Dalton: Trip Gabriel, welcome to Climate One.

Trip Gabriel: Glad to be with you.

Greg Dalton: So as we approach the midterms with me to me him lots of hot button social issues. How is energy and climate in the environment playing this election cycle?

Trip Gabriel: Well climate change, you know, as an issue so described is hardly playing at all. And, you know, that just is a head scratcher to someone like me who's, you know, following the news or anyone else who might be following the news. You know it's been a year of a record wildfires on the West Coast in California. It's been a season of, you know, century or 500-year floods in the Southeast and of course there have been the widespread attacks on climate policy and energy policy by the administration. But it is an issue that is not much talked about certainly in federal races for congress you hear it more at the state level and maybe not surprisingly, some of the Western states where energy is much more on voters' minds.

Greg Dalton: Right. There's a carbon tax on the ballot in Washington a gas-tax repeal in California, fracking initiative in Colorado, clean energy proposals in Arizona and Nevada, you know, all Western states but it's not really playing along the East Coast or even some of the extraction states in the East.

Trip Gabriel: There are sort of local issues interestingly Florida, algae, sort of toxic algae spread has become a big issue in the gubernatorial races down there. But climate change, you know, which particularly in the wake of the IPCC report noting very dire consequences, you know, speeding up more than scientists have previously expected. It's very hard to find a race for a house seat or United States Senate seat in which it is a front and center issue. And perhaps it's not surprising in the sense that, you know, the big issue here is or the big question here is whether Democrats will take a majority in the house representatives and the districts that are in play mostly Republican held are by definition swing or battleground districts. And climate is an issue that has become

enormously polarized along partisan lines in a way that it didn't used to be, as recently as a decade ago. So it's a bit of a potential -- it is a fraught issue for the Democrats to raise because it's easy to -- could be easy to, you know, use it against those candidates by sort of motivating conservative voters to come out against them.

Greg Dalton: You wrote about Dan McCready, a boyish ex-Marine who is also a solar energy entrepreneur. Tell us about his race and how he's talking about issues in his district.

Trip Gabriel: McCready is running for a Republican held seat in Southern North Carolina. It's a district that's kind of east of Charlotte. And this is one of the seats that Democrats nationally feel they can flip. It's been in Republican hands for decades. It's an open seat there's not an incumbent running and McCready is one of those candidates that, you know, has the right profile for this kind of seat. He's an ex-Marine he's a businessman in the solar energy field. He started an investment, company invest in solar power, but he doesn't talk a lot about the climate change. On his website there are 13 top issues that he list and none of them are climate change. One of his most recent ads extols his record investing in solar power, but doesn't really talk about it as an environmental issue. He talks about it as a jobs issue and he talks about his business experience as often he would take the congress. So that is a very careful kind of walking around, you know, the main issue here, which is climate. And I was down in this district shortly after Hurricane Florence devastated that part of the state and you think that that would be a pretty top of my front and center issue, but it is not

Greg Dalton: Yeah, well scientists tell us that those extreme events have a strong but short-lived impact people tend to -- those things tend to fade. Also, you to write about Lumberton one of the poorest counties in the state. We know that climate change is gonna affect poor people who are least equipped to deal with it to respond to it. So is that connecting it all issue, you know, climate and poverty or is it just too far away?

Trip Gabriel: Well, Lumberton is actually the name of the city and it's in the poorest or one of the poorest counties in North Carolina. And you're right, the Lumber River flooded in Hurricane Florence who's just drop 24 to 36 inches of rain just devastating rain less than two years after a previous hurricane had also done a lot of damage there. And, you know, the most vulnerable areas in a place like that are right along the river and there was not a great levee system around the city and these are where poor people tend to live and so they've been hit twice back to back. In my interviews with the folks whose homes, you know, were damaged and a lot of them driven out it was not the kind of issue that is really front and center for them even after two heavy hurricanes.

Greg Dalton: Be interesting to see what happens after Hurricane Michael ripping through the Florida Panhandle where there's couple of Republicans down there. Carlos Curbelo representing the southern tip of Florida, Francis Rooney in Florida also Brian Fitzpatrick, are there moderate Republicans that are touching this issue as they affect their districts?

Trip Gabriel: Well you named two of them, Curbelo's district is actually in the southernmost tip of Florida Keys and he's probably the most aggressive Republican in either the house or the Senate in Washington right now on this issue. He introduced a bill to tax carbon which is an anathema really to most mainstream Republicans these days. And you mentioned, Brian Fitzpatrick who represents a Pennsylvania district I believe he's one of the cosponsors of that bill, Bucks County district outside in the suburbs of Philadelphia. And he's in a tough race, you know, with a lot of well-educated voters who are the, you know, the swing voters in this Republican held seats. I mean it's actually a race between two candidates, Democrat and Republican who are both, you know, talking a little bit about climate change and we want to see some action on it. So there are, you know, a smattering of Republicans at least in the federal races. Ironically, in this very polarized election climate the folks that are likely to be defeated are the more moderate Republicans. So we can see a House without

any of the Republican congressmen who are willing to address climate as an issue.

Greg Dalton: And as we're talking about the midterm elections earlier in the cycle Don Blankenship was CEO of a coal company when the Upper Big Branch Coal Mine killed 29 people in 2010. He campaigned as a victim for the U.S. Senate. Tell us that story.

Trip Gabriel: The worst coal mine disaster in recent times was in 2010 in West Virginia and as you mentioned there were 29 miners who are killed. It's a mine owned by a company run by Don Blankenship, who was a legendary still is, I suppose, figure in West Virginia. And he was sent to federal prison for a year in a trial connected with his connection to that disaster. He got out and promptly announced that he was going to run for United States Senate from West Virginia and try to defeat Joe Manchin who's up for reelection this year. And Don Blankenship, who I don't think anyone would take seriously but I did go down and write a story about it, you know, early in the spring. And he found a fair amount of traction in the Republican primary, you know, and it was from -- he claimed to be a victim of the federal government he called himself a political prisoner. He said he'd been unfairly prosecuted by the Obama Justice Department. He had a very, and he put on a very, I think a $10 million defense trial in his case before he's convicted. And he continues to maintain that, you know, that he was a victim. And there was a fair amount of support, a surprising amount of support for Blankenship in the Republican primary in a coal country the southern part of West Virginia. It wasn't so much that, you know, rank-and-file folks felt that Don had been persecuted, you know, for his role in this mine disaster. But they felt that, you know, he was someone that once represented the height of the coal industry in West Virginia. And what I heard a lot was when Don Blankenship was running the Massey Energy we all had jobs and so there has been, you know, a great loss of jobs in Southern West Virginia in coal mines and the reason is mostly because of the, you know, cheaper natural gas so many power plants in the central part of the country have converted from coal to natural gas and so the demand is much lower for coal. That's not what people see because it's not what they hear I mean what they hear is that the EPA and the Federal government have regulated coal out of the marketplace. And so that's why they lost their jobs and that's of course a message that Donald Trump also repeated when he campaigned in that part of the country.

Greg Dalton: So what are you gonna be looking at as key indicators for which way the house is going to go in November of 18?

Trip Gabriel: Well, there's a lot of house seats that are, you know, that the Democrats at least think are in play and a lot of Republicans do too. I mean, you know, the Democrats need to win I guess it's 23 seats to win a majority. And early on they thought, they looked around the country and they realize hey, there are like 23 house districts that Hillary Clinton won and we'll win those ones and now we are done. It's a lot more complicated than that but, you know, there are kind of various categories of seats that are more or less vulnerable that a Republican held and there are many open seats and those are gonna be the easiest ones to flip. And they tend to be in suburban areas, Northern Virginia, the Philadelphia suburbs also throughout Southern California in Orange County there's half of these four or five seats down there that, you know, is traditionally very conservative part of the country. But the number of Republicans retired, Darrell Issa being one, those are pickup opportunities and that's interesting race too just in terms of the climate issue. I mean Darrell Issa is the 49th District of California and the Democratic nominee Mike Levin launched his campaign by going to a Darrell Issa town hall and, you know, and then trying to impress, give him a book about climate change for dummies. So he's one of the very outspoken, he's an environmental lawyer he's one of the very outspoken Democrats on this issue sort of breaking the rule that we're talking about earlier. Some of the seats that the Democrats, you know, are hopeful of picking up become a lot harder and a lot of them are in Texas and California and have a high proportion of Latino voters who Democrats think they're gonna win or would like to win, but are having a much harder time

convincing. I mean I can't predict what's gonna happen. I don't think anybody can, you know, some of the best folks I've talked to have said whoever comes out of this, you know, whichever party comes out the majority party in the house, you know, will have a very slim majority of just a handful of seats. And of course the Senate is a very difficult picture for Democrats just because they're defending so many seats in red states.

Greg Dalton: Trip Gabriel from The New York Times. Thanks for joining us.

Trip Gabriel: My pleasure. It’s a lot of fun. Thank you.

Announcer: You’re listening to a Climate One election special. Coming up, Greg Dalton talks to the founder of the Environmental Voter Project about getting out the climate vote.

Nathaniel Stinnett: If we can just get more of these people who say that they care about the environment to vote, politicians will follow because nothing motivates a politician more than the prospect of winning or losing an election. (13’’)

Nathaniel Stinnett: We talk to them before library trustee races and city council races and elections for dog-catcher. Any election is an opportunity to turn a non-voter into a voter. (11’’)

Announcer: That’s up next, when Climate One continues.

Announcer: We continue now with Climate One’s election special. Nathaniel Stinnett is executive director of the Environmental Voter Project, which he founded in 2015, after more than a decade as a senior advisor, consultant, and trainer for political campaigns and nonprofit advocacy groups. EVP has discovered a shocking number of Americans - more than 10 million - who cite environmental protection as a core value, but who don't vote regularly. Let’s listen as Stinnett tells host Greg Dalton how the group work works to turn those non-voters into voters.

Greg Dalton: Nathaniel Stinnett welcome to Climate One.

Nathaniel Stinnett: Thank you Greg. Thank you for having me.

Greg Dalton: Why are environmentalist such awful voters?

Nathaniel Stinnett: Gosh, you asked the right question and the honest answer is we don't know. We've tried to research this and no matter how we ask the question we always get back a really interesting and frustrating response. And that is when we poll environmentalists who we know aren't voting. The overwhelming majority of them Greg, lie their pants off and square up and down that they vote all the time. And we know they're lying because whether you vote or not, is public record. And so the really interesting thing is we actually don't know why environmentalists aren't voting. We know the excuses that they give but it's hard to believe them because we know that people over report how often they vote.

Greg Dalton: That raise an interesting point about how people don't tell the truth to posters. How do you find and define these environmentalists?

Nathaniel Stinnett: So we at the Environmental Voter Project because we’re a voter mobilization organization don’t just want to mobilize casual environmentalists. We want to target and then

mobilize people who care so deeply about climate and the environment that they list it as their number one priority or their number two priority over all others. So that's how we define environmentalists. And then as far as how we find them we conduct enormous polls. We'll poll something close to 10,000 people per state and all we'll ask them is we'll say what's your number one most important political priority and what's your number two most important political priority. And then we'll isolate the people who deeply care about climate and the environment and then our data scientists will look for a lot of hidden patterns and correlations that reveal who those people are and we'll use that information to build these models that help us identify every environmentalist in a state. And I know it sounds like a very complicated and convoluted process but this approach is actually how every sophisticated political campaign is now targeting voters.

Greg Dalton: When they don't tell the truth about how often they vote, how do you know that they're telling you the truth that the environment is a top one or two issue? They may be just telling you what they think you want to hear. How do you know they're telling you the truth in this case?

Nathaniel Stinnett: That's a great question. That's a great question. So the first thing that we do is after we build these models and once we think that we've identified all these super environmentalists in a state. We then ship out our work to an outside polling company and we say can you test the accuracy of these models and call these people up and ask them off the top of their heads what their top two political priorities are. The worst score we've ever got in one of those tests, the worst score is that 88% of the respondents off the top of their head have offered climate or the environment as one of their top two priorities. However, you might ask maybe they're lying again. Maybe these people just feel the urge to say that they care about climate and the environment when really deep down that they don't. And that might be happening, but it actually doesn't really matter because the way that policy is made in this country is that politicians poll likely voters to figure out what issues they care about. They don't poll nonvoters they only poll voters. And when they find out what issues voters prioritize that's what politicians lead on. Politicians go where the votes are. And so whether these voters are telling the truth or not if we can just get more of these people who say that they care about the environment to vote, politicians will follow because nothing motivates a politician more than the prospect of winning or losing an election.

Greg Dalton: And what percentage of Americans have environment or climate as a top one or two issue?

Nathaniel Stinnett: So we don't know how many Americans because we actually don't measure Americans. We only measure registered voters. Of the roughly 200 million registered voters we've found 20 million who list climate change or some other environmental issue as one of their top priorities. So that's about 10%. The problem is those 20 million people are not very good at voting. Only 4.2 million of them voted in the 2014 midterm elections and only half of them only 10 million voted in the 2016 presidential election. So that's why at the Environmental Voter Project we don't concentrate on trying to change people's minds. We don't try to make new environmentalists. We just try to find the people who already deeply care about this issue yet aren't voting and we try to tweak their habits and turn them into better voters.

Greg Dalton: And how do you tweak their habits you use psychology, peer pressure, what tools do you get people to vote more frequently?

Nathaniel Stinnett: Well the punchline is the Environmental Voter Project never talks about the environment. And there's a very good reason for that. It doesn't work. Talking about climate change and talking about environmental issues might be a good way to persuade people to care about those issues, but if you're already preaching to the choir and you just want to get them out the door on election day talking about those issues doesn't work. What we've realized is that peer

pressure and other forms of social pressure work the best. So I'll give you some examples. We might send someone a letter saying, "Greg, did you know last time there was an election, 93 people in your building on Main Street turned out to vote?" And I know that sounds juvenile and it is but it works. Peer pressure works. Another thing that we do is we will send people copies of their personal voting histories and we'll say, "Greg, I just wanted to remind you who you vote for is secret, but whether you vote or not is public record. And here's a copy of your voting history." And some people are a little put off by that but at the end of the day it increases turnout dramatically because we've realized that even people who don't vote still buy into the societal norm that voting is a good thing they want to be known as good voters.

Greg Dalton: It doesn't sound strange at all. Earlier this year I did an interview with evolutionary biologist Paul Ehrlich who talked about how humans evolved in small social groups and your status in that group meant survival. Whether you had a mate whether you had food and so your status and respect and the standing in small social groups whether it's your building or your block or your peer group. It totally makes sense when you think about that. You also asked them to make a public pledge and follow up with them after the election. Tell us about that.

Nathaniel Stinnett: That's exactly right. And this is something that a lot of campaigns use and asking for a voter to pledge to vote sounds very simple and it is but there's a lot of sophisticated behavioral science underneath that. Unless you're a sociopath, most Americans want to be known as an honest and trustworthy person. So if I get you Greg to promise to vote and then I mail back a reminder of that pledge that you made, it dramatically increases your likelihood of voting. Not because you needed a reminder of when the election is but rather because you want to keep your promises just like most people want to keep their promises. And if our reminder says, hey Greg back in October, you promise that you were going to vote. Well, the election is on Tuesday and we know it's important to you to be an honest and trustworthy person and so this is your opportunity to keep your promise. Again, it feels like we're in middle school when you say that and it is very juvenile but it works. We're social animals and we want to adhere to a certain societal norms and if we can take advantage of that we can really change people's behavior in pretty dramatic ways.

Greg Dalton: If you're just joining us, we're talking to Nathaniel Stinnett, executive director of the Environmental Voter Project. This is Climate One, I'm Greg Dalton. I've had some conversations about boomers and some people say that boomers created a lot of the climate problem. They're not so interested in paying to fix it because they won't see the benefits of the costs they incur. What kind of age breakdown do you see are younger people more concerned about climate because they know they're gonna be living in a disrupted climate longer?

Nathaniel Stinnett: Yes, younger people are more concerned about climate change, but it's not as clear a distinction as young versus old as you might believe. A lot of the stereotypes that most people have in their heads about the typical environmentalist no longer hold true. For instance, I would suggest to you that a Latina grandmother living in Phoenix is now just as likely to care about climate change as some hipster in Portland or San Francisco or Brooklyn. We have found that Latinos and African-Americans are significantly more likely to care about climate change than Caucasians. We have found that people who make under $50,000 a year are significantly more likely to care about it than people who make more than 50,000. And yes young people do care about this issue more than older people, but we're also seeing some interesting deviations from that. In particular, we're seeing something we call the grandmother effect. We're seeing that women, particularly in their late 50s through their early 70s are much more likely to care about climate change than their male counterparts in that age group, but also they care more about it than people in their 30s, 40s and 50s do. And so it's not as simple as it's just teenagers or people in their 20s who care about climate it's a more complex and evolving constituency.

Greg Dalton: One thought is that people who live in cities are disconnected from the environment therefore, they may not value it want to pay to protect it to vote on it. Do you see an urban, rural split along in this environmentalism?

Nathaniel Stinnett: We do see an urban and rural split, but not in the way that you just suggested. We actually see people who live within 5 miles of an urban core tend to care more about climate change and other environmental issues and there are a few reasons why. The first is that just generally mirrors a conservative versus liberal trend in the United States the more urban population is the more likely it is to care about typically progressive issues. But even beyond that we're realizing that the people who are feeling the impacts of climate change most, tend to be the urban poor who live on the coasts or the urban poor who live in sort of drought stricken areas. Yes, there is much more complexity to it than that. There are plenty of suburbanites who care about climate change there are plenty of people who live in rural America who care about climate change, but certainly the majority of this constituency are urban Americans.

Greg Dalton: And how are people affected by extreme weather events. We've seen Hurricane Michael ripped through the Florida Panhandle, strongest hurricane in 50 years. There's sort of a coming together at some point and then people fade and go back to their lives. Does that affect people and does it stick?

Nathaniel Stinnett: It absolutely changes opinions. Extreme weather and climate change fueled natural disasters definitely change people's opinions about climate change, but it is not sticky. There are a lot of people who will care very deeply about the present impacts of climate change and the future impacts of climate change when they are experiencing that but then their passion for the issue and their worry about the issue fades over time. And that's why I think we need to resist the urge to not talk about climate change and to not talk about politics when a disaster is happening. That's the best time to talk about these issues because that is when this really big but kind of amorphous tragedy actually becomes real to people that is the best time to talk about the politics behind climate change because that's when people deeply care about it.

Greg Dalton: And where have you tested this mobilization what track record do you have so far in certain elections?

Nathaniel Stinnett: So we launched three years ago at the end of 2015 in Massachusetts and we ran a year-long proof of concept here. And then off the strength of those initial results we then last year in 2017 expanded into Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Nevada and Pennsylvania. And our results vary from year to year, because obviously presidential elections are very different from municipal elections that we had last year in 2017 and this year's midterm elections will be different yet again. But every time we have run these mobilizations when we've been able to contact people in at least two ways. So by texting and mail or by calls and canvassing or something like that. We have been able to increase turnout 2.8% to 4.5%. And I know those numbers might not sound like much to certain people. But in politics 2% or 3% is everything. Remember, our goal is to change the electorate over time, and when we go into a state and we find these nonvoting environmentalists. We don't just talk to them before the big elections. We talk to them before library trustee races and city council races and elections for dogcatcher. Any election is an opportunity to turn a non-voter into a voter. And the results we're most excited about is over the course of one year when we're able to contact people three, four, sometimes even five times, we have increased their turnout rates as much as 12.1%, which is truly extraordinary. And that's the type of sea-change that we need in the electorate for the environmental movement to really start flexing our muscles.

Greg Dalton: So let's talk about some specific swing states, Pennsylvania, Florida, Georgia, Colorado, Nevada, states where you're active. In Florida about half a million registered

environmentalists stayed home in 2016. Donald Trump won there by a 100,000 votes. What are you doing in Florida?

Nathaniel Stinnett: So this year in Florida we are targeting 960,000 already registered voters who deeply care about climate and the environment. Yet, they are unlikely to vote this fall. And we know that by looking at their previous voting histories. So 960,000 people and not to get creepy here, but we literally know them all by name and street address we've identified them on the voter file and we're contacting them in five different ways. We have volunteers who are going door-to-door to talk to them. We also have volunteers who are texting them and calling them and then we as an organization are sending them direct mail and digital advertisements. And as a reminder, all of our messaging whether you're a canvasser or a texter or a digital advertisement it's almost politically agnostic we're not talking about climate change, we're not talking about the environment. We know that our audience already deeply cares about these issues we're just using those behavioral psychology techniques to turn them from bad voters into good voters.

Greg Dalton: And you mentioned something creepy, you know, you admit that some of this data work is creepy. What something creepy that you could mine data and find out about any of our listeners?

Nathaniel Stinnett: Well, you know, we adhere to the best sort of ethical standards and we only use publicly available data. So all of the data that's available is something that people freely give up. And then beyond that I --

Greg Dalton: Does that include something like Facebook like tracking on Facebook because people, you could say they freely give up information on Facebook, although they may not really know what they're given up.

Nathaniel Stinnett: Right. Right, no and people often, you know, will buy a T-shirt online and not read the five-page disclaimer that says yes the gap can sell my name to 10 other people. So yes, I understand that just because someone signs away their information doesn't mean that they want to. But we're using the same data that the major political parties use, Democrats, Republicans, all major political organizations. They use it to identify people who are likely to support a candidate. We use it to identify people who are likely to deeply care about climate change and the environment. Furthermore, there are security walls in place such that I as the executive director of the Environmental Voter Project can't even access this data, I can't even find it. It's all anonymized and we only use it to build these predictive models so our data scientists at the end can say, hey we used a lot of these data points to help build this model. But I can't actually access any of it. So not only is it publicly available data, but I still don't even have access to it. That being said, it is still a very powerful tool and it does allow us and other political campaigns to now target people on an individual basis. Gone are the days when campaigns target by demographic group. No one looks for soccer moms or NASCAR dads anymore. Every campaign knows which individuals on the voter file they want to target and that's how they do it. And we are not going to apologize one minute for using cutting-edge techniques to try to solve the climate crisis. We need to find these people and make sure that they vote so we embrace this technology.

Greg Dalton: Nathaniel Stinnett, thank you so much for your time coming to Climate One.

Nathaniel Stinnett: Well, thank you so much for having me, Greg.

Announcer: You're listening to a special election episode of Climate One. Coming up, Greg Dalton

talks to the Director of Sustainability at Lyft to find out how the ride-hailing company is getting its employees and customers to the polls.

Sam Arons: Our goal is to improve people's lives with the world's best transportation and that means connecting people and communities to do the things that communities do and one of the most important things that a community does is to vote.

Announcer: That's up next, when Climate One continues.

Announcer: You're listening to Climate One's 2018 midterm election special. After 10 years at Google, where he developed the company's sustainability efforts as Senior Lead for Energy & Infrastructure, Sam Arons now works as Director of Sustainability at Lyft. The ride-hailing company is part of a coalition of companies that are actively encouraging their employees to vote. Lyft is also helping their customers get to the polls by offering free rides on Election Day as part of the "Drive the Vote" program. Greg Dalton asked Arons how that effort aligns with Lyft's other sustainability initiatives.

Greg Dalton: Sam Arons, thanks for coming to Climate One.

Sam Arons: Thanks for having me.

Greg Dalton: So why is Lyft getting involved in Drive the Vote this election season?

Sam Arons: Well, Lyft has always been a company that has focused on its values and we've been a mission driven and values driven company from day one. And, you know, our goal is to improve people's lives with the world's best transportation and that means connecting people and communities to do the things that communities do. And one of those things, one of the most important things that a community does is to vote.

Greg Dalton: And there's other companies that jumped into this to Levi's, Walmart a little bit, Patagonia which closed all their stores in the 2016 election. So how did these particular companies come together, was it in a bar one night, how that happened?

Sam Arons: That's a great question. I can't say that I was there at the time whenever I got to go at the bar whatever it was. But, you know, I think that we're a group of companies that believe strongly that exercising, you know, our civic duty as citizens, as corporate citizens in helping citizens of our democracy do that is fundamentally important. So we came together to help our communities in the ways that we can exercise that right.

Greg Dalton: And I read research on your page showing that among youth, 19% with college experience cited transportation as an obstacle to getting to the polling place and 35% of people youth without college experience cited transportation as a problem. Those numbers were kind of high for me, thinking that a lot of people vote by mail these days but sounds like transportation is a pretty significant obstacle to getting to vote.

Sam Arons: It is, yeah. And, you know, I think across all populations, transportation is a barrier to voting. Vote by mail is not available in every jurisdiction. So we want to make sure that we're helping folks to overcome those barriers and get out there and exercise their duty and their rights.

Greg Dalton: So how are you gonna help on election day. How are you gonna find out who needs a ride to the polls. Are you gonna target urban, rural, you know, inner-city, how is this gonna work?

Sam Arons: So we're actually offering this service to people across the country regardless of where you live, what your political views might be. This is really about helping everyone participate in our democracy. And so what we're gonna do, what we are doing actually consists of three parts. The first is registering to vote, right. You can't vote if you don't register. The next part is making sure that you know what your plan is for voting. So just being aware of what the different ballot initiatives are and making a plan for the day of voting. And, you know, study show that folks who have taken the time to make a plan to figure out when you're voting to know where your polling place is, who you're going to vote with is it before work is it after work, if you have a plan you're much more likely to actually follow through and vote. And then finally, on the day of the election itself getting yourself to the polls of course, is the third and final step to voting as well. So we are actually addressing all three of those things by helping to inform folks through our app and through our partners, voter registration deadlines. We're also working with our partner organizations to now help people make a voting plan. And then on the day of the election itself we're offering discounted rides across the country to folks who may need that to help them get to the polls.

Greg Dalton: And companies like Lyft know a lot about their customers. Did you use any data to try to target people who you think are likely voters, or maybe unlikely voters to try to get them in?

Sam Arons: So that we left to our partners and I have mentioned that a few times, I actually say who they are. We're working with BuzzFeed who actually provides the website where people can go look up their polling locations. And then Vote.org, Nonprofit VOTE, TurboVote, and Voto Latino and various local urban league affiliates as well as the National Federation of the Blind. These are all organizations it's really across functional effort here with all these different folks. And they are the ones who are the experts who know, you know, which are the populations that have transportation barriers and they're gonna help get the word out to those specific populations.

Greg Dalton: And is it 16 million voters that are potentially, you know, people who can be help by transportation help, that's one number I saw, I'm not sure if it's on your website, that's quite a significant number.

Sam Arons: That's right, yeah, yeah, 15 or 16 million folks who are already registered voters but who have cited transportation barriers as a reason why they are not able to vote or haven't been able to vote in the past.

Greg Dalton: And how many people do you think you can reach this year and is this gonna be something that's continued in 2020 or is this a kind of a midterm one-off?

Sam Arons: Well, let's see. Actually this isn't the first time we've done this. So back in 2016 we offered rides to the polls, discounted ride to the polls in a handful of cities across the U.S. And so I think this year this is sort of a logical next step to expand that, you know, as Lyft's service offering has expanded across the country since that time, we're now available to 95% of the U.S. population. It just makes sense now to be increasing the reach of this program as well.

Greg Dalton: And the profile of Lyft riders, I have an image of them, is perhaps being younger tech savvy is that true?

Sam Arons: You know Lyft is again provides transportation to everybody. We want to be, you know, the world's best transportation service out there and that means we want to be the service for everybody. So we're offering this to, you know, everybody regardless of age, regardless of race, regardless of gender, right, this is to help every citizen exercise that.

Greg Dalton: Right. But you need a smartphone and likely I mean, was is it 20% of American

something like that use the service. So it doesn't -- are you saying that Lyft users don't skew young and kind of tech savvy?

Sam Arons: Well, we actually have a service called Concierge which is a way that people who may not actually have smart phones can still use Lyft. And it's a way that's a ride can be ordered on their behalf basically to come pick someone up, you know, wherever they might be. And we partnered with folks like United Way with their 2-1-1 program to offer, Relief Rides is a whole different program. We can actually help to bring in populations that may not otherwise kind of be at the cutting edge of the Internet world.

Greg Dalton: Let's talk about sustainability which is really the core of what you do, it's the core of Climate One. Lyft has its climate goals 100% renewable energy, you know, how committed are you to Lyft cars being electric versus gasoline, how are you gonna reach that 100% renewable?

Sam Arons: Well, you know, one of the main reasons that Lyft was founded in the first place was to address the environmental impacts of our current system of transportation. And the idea is if we can better utilize the car assets that we have out on the roads today and get more people into shared rides we can actually reduce emissions in that way. So in some ways just by Lyft existing, you know, there's some potential environmental benefits to that. Now, of course as your listeners are very well aware climate change is a very serious and very urgent problem and we can't wait for some sort of perfect future where every car just becomes an electric vehicle. So what we did is back in April of 2018 we announced that from that point forward, all Lyft rides are going to be carbon neutral. And this is not just a commitment to make the rides carbon neutral at some unspecified time this is actually saying, no, the rides are already carbon neutral as of that date.

Greg Dalton: So you're buying offsets, planting trees somewhere, funding project somewhere to offset the carbon emitted by the Lyft cars driving around.

Sam Arons: That's exactly right, yes. And now we acknowledge of course that, you know, buying carbon offsets is a great first step. It's not the ultimate goal, right. Ultimately we have to actually eliminate those emissions in the first place, rather than having emissions and having then to offset them. So the long-term goal of course is one of electrification as you mentioned. So, you know, my vision is that we will have ultimately one day, every car will be electric and it will be charging from renewable energy. Of course there are many barriers to electrification of transportation and we're gonna, we are now laying the groundwork to address those barriers but it probably will be a multiyear project.

Greg Dalton: One of Lyft's sustainability goals is to cut CO_2 emissions for the U.S. by 5 million tons per year by 2025. How are you gonna achieve that?

Sam Arons: Well, I think that that will kind of go along with our ultimate electrification goals. We announced that goal back in mid-2017 and that was before we started doing our carbon offset program on our renewable energy purchasing. So, you know, as our goals continue to evolve I think that's gonna get rolled into that, right. So if we are successful ultimately in electrifying one day all vehicles driving for Lyft, achieving that goal of a certain number of tons of CO_2 being reduced will go along with that electrification.

Greg Dalton: There's been a couple of reports saying that ride hailing services actually increase congestion. One at UC Davis looked at Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York and San Francisco. They found that it reduces the miles that users drive themselves but it increases the total miles driven in cities. And one more recent from the County of San Francisco, said that ride hailing services reduced speed by 26% from 2010 to 2016 and increase total miles by 630,000. So Uber and

Lyft are causing congestion in American cities.

Sam Arons: So I think when we think about the congestion topic which is a very important topic, right. I mean because, you know, part of the promise of improving transportation is reducing congestion. And so we owe that to our partners in cities and our customers to help with that problem. We want to be part of that solution. Now if we take a step back and think about you know what causes congestion broadly, where does congestion come from there are a lot of things that cause congestion. The biggest thing that causes congestion is people driving to work alone in their own car. And then we have to think about what causes that. Well that has to do with land-use policy largely, right. So we're in a situation where we have built our cities at such low density that people have to live, you know, let's say an hour away from work and they have no choice but to commute into the city center for their job. So because we don't have high density housing and a very efficient rapid transit systems that are, you know, connected to that high-density housing we force people to live so far away at such low density that they are driving and causing the majority of this congestion. So, you know, I think we obviously need to think about how does ride hailing fit into this. And we see that ride hailing as part of the ecosystem of transportation but we need to think about the fundamental issues as well and try to think about whether we can change land-use policy for example, to help improve this problem.

Greg Dalton: And there's been efforts to do that in California, other states to facilitate development around transit that sort of thing to make it faster, easier to build housing near transit so people can hop on a rail rather than to drive. But this is quite a stunning report from San Francisco saying that, you know, basically half of the speed reduction and half of the increase in congestion is by the what 30,000 or so cars who come often from 6000, 8000 miles away into San Francisco any given day to circle around. And we all know that that's to get those response time in that what 1 to 3 minute window that people want, including myself when I hop in a Lyft to -- so, you know, land-use is an important tool, it's a slow moving tool, right it takes a long time to get at land-use. There's a lot of NIMBY-ism and although there's YIMBY-ism, Yes In My Backyard, spurring as a political force in California, elsewhere. What's the near-term solution to the congestion that ride hailing services with good intentions are contributing to?

Sam Arons: Well I think the good news is that there's a number of things that we're doing to address this already. So to give you a few examples. We have transit partnerships with over 25 transit agencies across the country and what that means is that we are helping those transit agencies supplement the service that they offer. So we're not trying to replace folks who are riding on a bus line let's say but if they live out in some outer part of town where the bus doesn't go or doesn't go very frequently, then we're helping to provide a link from where they live or where they work to the transit system itself. And so in that way we actually see in many cases an increased usage of transit by Lyft customers rather than a decrease.

Greg Dalton: Although there's some studies say that Lyft and other rides displace walking transit or maybe make it easier to take a trip that you've taken the friction out which is great but that's also a problem take the friction out of hopping in a car.

Sam Arons: Right. And so to address that we have these transit partnerships. We also now have transit integrated directly into the app so that way when you open the app you can see actually I just noticed this just the other day it just got added recently. It shows you what transit is nearby so you can say, well wait a minute I can take a Lyft ride, you know, and it'll get me there at this certain time or hey actually there's a bus coming right down the street it might get me there, you know, in about the same time and it might be a dollar cheaper so hey, why don't I use that. We also have of course our bikes and scooters program that's now launching. And we want to help people get out of cars and get on to other modes of transportation like bikes like scooters like transit to avoid contributing

to that congestion as well.

Greg Dalton: And one question there I think is does Lyft make, what are the profit margins compared on a scooter ride versus a car ride. You may not know that particular number but for me is knowing how businesses work they're gonna go with the profit margins are, right. So whether that if the scooter ride makes Lyft less money it might be it's not gonna get as much emphasis as the higher-margin service, which is what Lyft's investors wanted to do.

Sam Arons: Well remember, this is a whole new industry and it's a very competitive industry. Not only, you know, we're not the only transportation company out there and there are many scooter companies that are just getting started right now.

Greg Dalton: They're like mushrooms all over, sprouting all over.

Sam Arons: Yes, exactly. So, you know, in some ways we have to sort of think about it as bikes and scooters, you know, are coming and they're gonna change the way that we get around our cities for the better I would argue. And we want to be part of that because it will disrupt us, you know, if we don't do it. So we need to disrupt ourselves first and we need to do it ourselves too.

Greg Dalton: Great. Well Sam Arons, thanks for coming on Climate One.

Sam Arons: Thank you so much for having me.

Announcer: You've been listening to a special midterm election episode of Climate One.. Greg Dalton has been talking to Sam Arouns, Director of Sustainability at Lyft; we heard earlier from Nathaniel Stinnett, founder of the Environmental Voter Project; and New York Times political reporter Trip Gabriel.

To hear all our Climate One conversations, subscribe to our podcast at our website: climateone.org, where you'll also find photos, video clips and more. If you like the program, please let us know by writing a review on iTunes, or wherever you get your podcasts. And join us next time for another conversation about energy, economy, and the environment.

Greg Dalton: Climate One is a special project of The Commonwealth Club of California. Kelli Pennington directs our audience engagement. Tyler Reed is our producer. The audio engineers are Mark Kirschner and Justin Norton. Anny Celsi and Devon Strolovitch edit the show. The Commonwealth Club CEO is Dr. Gloria Duffy.

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