The 2020 Democratic Presidential Candidates’ Positions on Climate Change, Environmental Justice, and Related Housing Issues

By Lily Milwit, Megan Haberle, and Ndidi Anekwe
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In October 2018, the United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released a report on the impact of global warming, suggesting that we have twelve years to make necessary changes to global energy infrastructure if we hope to limit global warming to moderate levels.1 The same report recognizes that the disastrous effects of climate change fall disproportionately on low-income communities.2

The U.N.’s findings echo concerns raised by advocates here within the United States - especially those within the communities most directly affected by climate change and its impending impacts on housing stability and public health. Many of the Americans who are most vulnerable to climate-related problems, such as forced displacement, property loss, rising energy costs, and air- and water-related health issues (such as asthma), are already disproportionately impacted by other environmental and housing concerns. This is in part because current legal and policy frameworks fail to provide adequate protections and rights, and because there are currently few affirmative measures in place to ensure that resources are directed where they are needed most. In addition, our country’s persevering legacy of racial segregation continues to shape the distribution of infrastructure resources, health burdens such as industrial and highway siting, and even access to basic human needs such as clean water and air. It is our hope that the continuing public conversations around climate change will yield policies that make environmental justice a central concern, and that bridge climate change and related spheres such as fair and affordable housing. This policy brief examines the Democratic candidates’ positions on these issues thus far.

Overview of Climate Change Proposals

Most major Democratic candidates tend to agree not only that climate change is a pressing concern, but also that the burdens of living with and mitigating its effects primarily rest with low-income communities. Democratic voters are also beginning to prioritize climate change as they prepare to head to the ballots next November: a CBS News poll conducted in July found that 78 percent of Democratic voters in 18 early

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1 M.R. Allen, et al., Global Warming of 1.5°C: An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty, IPCC (2018), https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/

2 Id.
primary caucus states view climate change as “very important” in the 2020 election. As a policy issue voters indicate matters to them, climate change ranks second only to health care.

Despite this priority among voters, climate change received only fifteen minutes of discussion in the first round of Democratic debates at the end of June, and only one question directly addressing climate change was posed to candidates in the third round of debates in mid-September. Additionally, the DNC voted down a resolution calling for a single-issue debate among 2020 Democratic candidates devoted solely to climate change. Still, candidates have continued to release, revise, and promote plans addressing climate change, and in early September ten candidates participated in a seven-hour climate change town hall hosted by CNN.

The Green New Deal

Commonly cited as the catalyst for recent conversation about progressive climate change solutions, the Green New Deal (GND) resolution was introduced by U.S. House Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Ed Markey in February of this year. Because of the national attention that the GND has garnered, the Democratic candidates’ positions on climate change have largely been measured by the degree to which candidates support the resolution. Senators Bernie Sanders, Cory Booker, Kamala Harris, Elizabeth Warren, and Amy Klobuchar are all co-sponsors of the GND, and author Marianne Williamson, former HUD secretary Julián Castro, and entrepreneur Andrew Yang have been vocal in their support of the GND. Conversely, former U.S. House Representative John Delaney has been critical of the resolution.

The GND contains a number of goals, including the shifting of national power generation to renewable sources; updating buildings to become energy efficient; decarbonization of infrastructure and manufacturing; clean job creation and infrastructure investments, prioritizing frontline communities; and community leadership and decision-making.

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4 Id.
9 The View, *John Delaney Doesn’t Think Green New Deal is “Right Way Forward”*, YOUTUBE (June 13, 2019), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=60zRDYB32I_M
Systemic inequality is an animating principle of the GND, which also acknowledges the disproportionate impact climate change has on low-income communities of color. Notably, however, the GND does not currently provide specifics for the implementation of its environmental justice principles; nor does it include details on the connection to housing policy.

Campaign Finance

Many have attributed the lack of governmental intervention in climate change to the billions of dollars spent by fossil fuel interest groups on lobbying. In response, the 2020 candidates and voters have made campaign finance a major talking point in broader discussions about how to meaningfully and comprehensively address climate change.

Eighteen Democratic candidates have signed the No Fossil Fuel Money Pledge, refusing to take any donation over $200 from any fossil fuel executives, lobbyists, or PACs. Some candidates, however, have taken advantage of loopholes in the pledge. Senator Harris, for instance, “has accepted donations from a top attorney at CITGO Petroleum, among others at natural gas corporations,” according to the Washington Post. And former U.S. House Representative Beto O’Rourke has accepted “tens of thousands of dollars” this election cycle from fossil fuel companies.

Town Hall Takeaways

In an unprecedented seven-hour CNN town hall on climate change, ten Democratic candidates took to primetime television to share their climate change proposals. More than half of the ten participants said they support a carbon dioxide pollution tax – a policy proposal that environmental economists have long advocated for but that has historically been the subject of intense opposition from both sides of the aisle. Almost all of the participating candidates have expressed support for rejoining the Paris climate change agreement, and all said that they would ban any new leases permitting fossil fuel drilling

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15 Id.
16 Davenport & Gabriel
on federal land. Many candidates also discussed plans to end fossil fuel subsidies and to provide a safety net and job reentry programs for displaced fossil fuel workers.

Environmental Justice and Equity Considerations

Applying an environmental justice framework to climate change policy proposals and analyses means considering that not every demographic and identity group experiences climate change the same way. Communities of color, low-income communities, individuals with disabilities, the elderly, and immigrants and refugees are already, and will continue to be, disproportionately burdened by the impacts of climate change because of existing patterns of segregation and inequitable distribution of resources. A number of the 2020 Democratic candidates have incorporated this framework into their climate change plans or have introduced relevant legislation, while others have yet to rise to the challenge.

Senator Booker is among the candidates who have addressed environmental justice directly, as illustrated by his reintroduction of the Environmental Justice Act in July of this year. 2020 candidates who have cosponsored the bill in the Senate include Senators Harris, Sanders, and Warren. The bill seeks to:

1. **Codify and expand the 1994 Executive Order on Environmental Justice.**

   **Executive Order No. 12898** was focused on bringing attention to the health impacts of federal climate change actions on minority and low-income communities. The bill would codify this order and improve access to information related to environmental justice.

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20 In the third round of Democratic debates, Senator Booker also brought up Environmental Justice while answering a question about school segregation, saying, “...My kids are not only struggling with racial segregation and housing and the challenges of underfunded schools, but they’re also struggling with environmental injustice.” Senator Booker cited the fact that there are over 3,000 jurisdictions in the country with blood lead levels more than double that of Flint, Michigan; and pledged to incorporate environmental justice as a pillar of combatting poverty and racial segregation. ABC, *Read the full transcript of ABC News’ 3rd Democratic debate*


22 Id.
2. **Codify the existing National Environmental Justice Advisory Council and environmental justice grant programs.** The bill would provide continued support to NEJAC, which gives federal agencies insights into environmental justice issues.

3. **Establish requirements for federal agencies to address environmental justice.** Under the bill, agencies would implement and annually update strategies aimed at addressing the negative environmental and health impacts on populations and communities of color, indigenous communities, and low-income communities. It would also codify existing EPA guidance that provides for federal consultations with Native American tribes in cases where proposed EPA actions may affect tribal treaty rights.

4. **Require consideration of cumulative impacts and persistent violations in federal or state permitting decisions under the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act.** Under current law, the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act permitting decisions do not consider an area’s cumulative pollutant levels when permits for facilities being issued or renewed, which can lead to high concentrations of polluting facilities in particular areas. The bill would require these permit decisions to take into account cumulative pollutant levels as well as individual facilities’ history of violations.

5. **Clarify that communities impacted by the Flint water crisis and similar events may bring statutory claims for damages and common law claims in addition to requesting injunctive relief.** As of now, communities and groups most impacted by climate change lack a legal basis to sue for damages. The bill would provide avenues for legal recourse for those communities.

6. **Reinstate a private right of action for discriminatory practices under the Civil Rights Act.** The Supreme Court ruled in *Alexander v. Sandoval* that individuals were not permitted to bring actions in court under the Civil Rights Act based on discriminatory practices with a disparate impact, forcing citizens affected by discriminatory measures to rely on federal agencies to bring civil actions on their behalf. Senator Booker’s bill would overrule that decision and reinstate a private right of action for citizens.

Senator Harris’ climate plan also touches on environmental justice, calling for policies that help enfranchise those families “that have been and continue to be harmed as a result of environmental racism and injustice.” Senator Harris’ Climate Equity Act requires mapping of climate change impact on frontline communities via quantitative and qualitative evaluation models developed by and with experts. The proposed Act would also review climate-related grant-making and investment programs to ensure that

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impacted communities benefit from federal programs. An independent Office of Climate and Environmental Justice Accountability would be established under the bill to conduct research on issues and trends in frontline communities and monitor government compliance. Senator Harris has also proposed a Water Justice Act, which would invest $250 billion over five years to address water infrastructure in rural and low-income areas. 

Former Vice President Biden’s climate plan includes provisions to “stand up to the abuse of power by polluters who disproportionately harm communities of color and low-income communities.” A Biden administration would prioritize community-driven approaches to develop environmental solutions, ramp up EPA oversight of corporate polluters, and ensure access to safe drinking water across the country. Former VP Biden's plan also stipulates that communities of color and low-income communities would receive preference in competitive grant programs to ensure that those most affected by climate change benefit from clean energy job creation.

While Senator Warren’s climate plan does not address “environmental justice” explicitly, she does discuss the urgency of building a farm economy that prioritizes farmers of color, who have historically been discriminated against and stripped of opportunities to own land. Senator Warren plans to fully fund the relending program, enacted as part of the 2018 Farm Bill, which aims to provide legal and technical assistance to farmers of color. Additionally, a Warren administration would expand funding for the Indian Tribal Land Acquisition Loan Program as well as the Highly Fractioned Indian Land Loan Program to help tribal governments acquire and preserve land. Her plan would further expand access to credit for farmers of color and audit the USDA Office of Civil Rights to ensure protection for farmers of color.

25 Id.
28 Id.
29 Id.
31 Id; Leah Douglas, Psst! The Farm Bill Includes a Rare Provision That Could Help Black Farmers, THE NATION (July 24, 2018), https://www.thenation.com/article/psst-farm.bill.includes.rare.provision.help-black.farmers/
32 Warren, A New Farm Economy
Part of Mayor Buttigieg’s climate plan includes a commitment to “Invest in Resilience.” The plan acknowledges that low-income, Black, and Latinx Americans are “hit first and hardest” when it comes to feeling the impacts of climate change. To rectify this, Mayor Buttigieg would establish “Regional Resilience Hubs” that bring community leaders, the private sector, and academia together to create innovative solutions to climate change. A Buttigieg administration would also prioritize the equitable distribution of disaster relief resources for disaster preparedness and relief to ensure that communities historically left behind by federal emergency relief are provided with critical funding and assistance.

Senator Sanders’s climate plan includes “justice for frontline communities” to recover and prepare for climate change. The plan allocates $40 billion to a Climate Justice Resiliency Fund specifically to provide resources and support for communities of color, Native Americans, people with disabilities, children, and the elderly. Sanders’ WATER Act would also provide up to $34.85 billion to promote and provide access to clean water, while also working to research and publicize information about water affordability and civil rights violations in the area of clean water access.

Former U.S. Representative O’Rourke’s climate plan acknowledges that climate change exacerbates structural inequality, noting on his campaign site that “[r]ace is the number one indicator for where toxic and polluting facilities are today.” But the specifics of Representative O’Rourke’s plans do not delve into further detail on exactly how an O’Rourke administration would address the exacerbation of structural inequalities, other than his notes on expanding access to affordable housing discussed further below.

One candidate who has put environmental justice at the forefront of his climate plan is former HUD Secretary Julián Castro, who has promised to focus on “frontline communities” and “families who have borne the unequal burden of pollution.” Secretary Castro plans to provide emergency funding to Flint, Michigan and historically underserved communities facing climate-related disasters. His plan also includes expanding HUD’s competitive National Disaster Resilience Grant Program, passing new civil rights legislation to prevent environmental discrimination, reforming the EPA’s Office of External Civil Rights Compliance, instituting a private right of action for Title VI civil rights actions, establishing a “carbon equity scoring” system to measure the impacts of federal spending on climate justice, and creating a new

34 Id.
35 Id.
36 Bernie Sanders, The Green New Deal
37 Id.
38 Id.
41 Id.
refugee category for climate refugees who have been displaced by the impacts of climate change.42

Though Senator Klobuchar is a co-sponsor of the GND, her campaign website makes no mention of environmental justice or climate change’s disproportionate impact on low-income communities, communities of color, or other historically disenfranchised groups.43 Similarly, entrepreneur Andrew Yang’s campaign website does not mention environmental justice explicitly, although his climate plan touches on aspects of environmental justice. For instance, Yang’s carbon fee and dividend "could be used to subsidize fuel costs for low-income Americans."44

Connections to Housing

Only a small handful of the leading 2020 Democratic candidates mention access to housing as part of their climate plans. One such candidate is Senator Booker, who plans to use federal funds to replace residential drinking water service lines and remediate all housing units that contain lead-based paint and high levels of lead-contaminated dust.45 He also includes plans to ensure that every American household has adequate plumbing and functional wastewater disposal systems and to invest $16 million in funding “denser and more efficient housing.”46

Senator Sanders’ climate plan also includes housing reform. A Sanders administration would expand the National Housing Trust Fund to build 7.4 million more affordable housing units in an effort to close the country’s housing gap.47 He would also “repair and modernize” existing public housing units by conducting deep energy retrofits of all public housing, providing access to high-speed broadband, and ensuring that “every public housing complex has the capacity to serve as a community resiliency center.”48

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Secretary Castro, who served as HUD Secretary under the Obama administration, has made expanded access to affordable housing a key tenet in his climate plan. His plan acknowledges that the disproportionately-felt impacts of climate change on low-income communities have been, and will continue to be, particularly devastating when it comes to housing displacement and exacerbation of disadvantage for individuals and families experiencing homelessness.49 Accordingly, his campaign website promises to ensure access to affordable housing; end veteran, child, family, youth, and chronic homelessness; and “better prepare communities to recover from climate-related

42 Id.
45 Cory Booker, Cory’s Plan to Address the Threat of Climate Change
46 Id.
47 Bernie Sanders, The Green New Deal
48 Id.
49 Julián Castro, People and Planet First
displacement.” Additionally, a Castro administration would establish **flood protection standards for all federally-assisted housing projects and provide $500 billion in HUD housing grants for areas most impacted by natural disasters**.

While Representative O’Rourke’s specific plans related to environmental justice are few, he does plan to invest in housing grants that help close the affordable housing gap “in a way that promotes improvements in both sustainability and quality of life.” Vice President Biden also plans to direct HUD to “make housing for low-income communities more efficient” and direct the Department of Energy to accelerate new efficiency standards for household appliances. His climate plan also includes a proposal to concentrate more affordable housing units near public transit to cut commutes, decrease workers’ carbon footprints, and save consumers money, but doesn’t touch on expanding access to housing.

Other leading candidates do have plans related to affordable housing, but do not include access to housing as part of their climate or environmental justice plans. For a fuller discussion of the **candidates’ positions on fair and affordable housing**, please see our related brief.

**Related resources from PRRAC**

- **The Call for Environmental Justice Legislation: An Annotated Bibliography** (Jennifer Bisgaier & Jennifer Pollan, July 2018)
- **Fair Housing and Environmental Justice: New Strategies and Challenges** (Megan Haberle, January 2018)
- **Equity Considerations in Climate Adaptation Plans: A Call for Advocacy** (Peter Kye, October 2017)
- **The 2020 Democratic Candidates’ Positions on Fair and Affordable Housing** (Megan Haberle & LeGrand Northcutt, July 2019)

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50 Id.
51 Id.
52 Beto O’Rourke, *Taking on our Greatest Threat: Climate Change*
53 Joe Biden, *Joe’s Plan for a Clean Energy Revolution and Environmental Justice*
54 Id.
The 2020 Democratic Candidates’ Positions on School Diversity & Related Educational Equity Issues (Philip Tegeler & Abi Hollinger, June 2019)\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{60} Available at https://prrac.org/the-democratic-candidates-positions-on-school-diversity-related-educational-equity-issues/.