

Georgians on Climate, COVID, and Equity: Survey Highlights

Summary

What do Georgians actually believe about climate change, and how did the pandemic shift those views? Over the summer of 2020, the founders of Drawdown Georgia partnered with market research firm Stable Kernel to survey Georgia residents on climate change, the environment, and social equity. In this video, John Lanier of the Ray C. Anderson Foundation shares Drawdown Georgia's three founding goals, and Emily Creek of Stable Kernel walks through key findings from the survey, including how COVID-19 shifted climate awareness and how Georgians see the connection between climate change and social justice.

Key Takeaways

- Drawdown Georgia has three broad goals: achieving drawdown itself, where Georgia sequesters more greenhouse gases each year than it emits, solving collateral problems like public health and equity alongside climate solutions, and uniting Georgians across the state's racial, geographic, and political diversity around a shared framework.
- Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, 43% of Georgians report being more aware of climate change, and 73% say they're very or somewhat worried about climate change negatively impacting Georgia.
- 54% of Georgians say the issue of global warming is very or somewhat important to them personally, and reduced food waste ranked as the climate solution Georgians were most interested in learning more about.
- 56% of Georgia survey respondents said climate change and social justice issues are related, rising to 80% among college students, 74% among urban residents, 70% among 18-to-34-year-olds, and 68% among African Americans.
- John Lanier highlights energy burden as a key equity concern in the electricity sector, noting that disadvantaged communities pay a disproportionately higher share of their income toward utilities, and that scaling solutions like rooftop solar requires making sure the benefits reach people who can't necessarily afford to install panels themselves.

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John Lanier: There are three broad goals we hope to accomplish with Drawdown Georgia, the statewide movement of people engaging around climate action for our state. The first is that we want to achieve drawdown itself. The term was coined by Project Drawdown, a nonprofit that studies the world's most substantive solutions to reverse global warming. They call drawdown the point in time when atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases peak and begin to decline, in other words, the time when the Earth begins to cool. What does that mean for a region, though? For Georgia to achieve drawdown, it means we begin, as a state, to sequester more greenhouse gases each year than we emit.

The second goal of this movement is to solve other collateral problems while we scale these climate solutions, since they don't exist in isolation. Things like a plant-rich diet have tremendous benefits for human health. Planting more trees and scaling the work of our natural forests to pull down carbon also means cleaner air and cleaner water. There are so many co-benefits, especially around equity, can we advance social justice by working on climate? The answer is yes, and we want to make sure that's a fundamental part of this too.

And finally, our third broad goal is that we want Drawdown Georgia to unite Georgians. We have so much diversity in this state, in all its different forms, whether that's racial diversity, urban and rural, or the mountains of north Georgia all the way down to the coast. We believe Drawdown Georgia can become a common framework within which all of us, as Georgians, can collectively work on solving one of the most significant challenges our generations face.

Emily Creek: Since COVID began, more Georgians are aware of climate change. In fact, 43% report they're more aware since COVID hit. When we asked consumers whether their awareness of climate change had shifted since the pandemic began, you can see that nearly half had their perception shift. This is pretty striking to me, and it's one of the things that gives me hope, that Georgians believe climate change and global warming really do matter, and plan to make positive changes in their behavior to reflect that belief. When we asked consumers how worried they are that climate change is negatively impacting Georgia, 73% said they're very or somewhat worried. And when we asked how important the issue of global warming is to them personally, 54% said very or somewhat important. Georgians are really passionate about these issues, and are going to match their behaviors accordingly.

Georgians are also fairly well-versed in climate change already, but they're interested in learning more. When we asked consumers how interested they are in learning more about these solutions, you can see they're really interested in learning about all of them, but by far the top solution was reduced food waste. Georgians are especially interested in learning more about that, because it's something they can control and act on directly.

Georgians also believe climate change and social justice are related issues. When we asked, in your opinion, how related are climate change and social justice issues in general, 56%, over half of all Georgia respondents, said they strongly or somewhat feel they're related. That number is

even higher among specific groups, 80% among college students, 74% among urban residents, 70% among those age 18 to 34, and 68% among African Americans.

John Lanier: We want this to be, as I've called it, a movement, and for it to really be that, it needs to be joinable by stakeholders of all different stripes. When it comes to business engagement, we have tremendous partners at Georgia Tech, in particular the leadership of the Ray C. Anderson Center for Sustainable Business within Georgia Tech's Scheller College of Business, who are taking on the task of organizing engagement from the business community broadly. That includes Fortune 100 companies headquartered here in Atlanta, but also smaller businesses, perhaps with their entire operations right here in our state. By engaging with them, we can help those businesses share best practices and discuss how to collaboratively solve these challenges.

We know business engagement will be critically important to getting significant amounts of carbon out of the atmosphere here in our state. It's going to take all of us, but when you get one business involved, that represents significant potential for carbon reduction, and for those collateral co-benefits I mentioned earlier. So there are going to be many opportunities here, but I'd like to call out the folks at Georgia Tech specifically for the leading role they'll play.

Emily Creek: It's such an important issue, and for this initial survey, we intentionally kept it pretty broad, just to get that global sense of how consumers feel about climate change and social justice as related issues. The fact that 56% do feel they're related, and that there's a real need to work together to get things done, is really important. But another big thing that came up was around gender equality and race equality, and all of that came through in the open-ended comments too, there were so many great responses, we wanted to include them all, there just wasn't enough room. But just the importance people placed on the idea that all people should be treated equally, and that we all need to work together to make sure everyone is treated equally and has the opportunity to make an impact, came through clearly.

John Lanier: Two of our five solution sectors are electricity and transportation. In the electricity space, it's very clear that Georgia's most disadvantaged communities carry a significant energy burden, they pay a disproportionately higher percentage of their income toward utilities. As we imagine scaling a solution like large-scale solar or rooftop solar, we know the sun provides its energy free of charge, but we need to make sure the benefits of reducing energy costs, in the long term, actually flow to the people who might not have the ability to scale those solutions themselves. Rooftop solar, in particular, requires real care around the risk of lower-cost energy only reaching the people who can already afford to put solar panels on their roof.