

Harris climate engagement director Camila Thorndike

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The Harris campaign’s climate engagement director said the destruction across the Southeast from two powerful hurricanes in recent weeks has driven a “real uptick” in voter interest in the issue of climate change as the presidential race enters its final stretch.

Camila Thorndike, who joined Vice President Kamala Harris’ campaign just last month, has sought to draw a sharp contrast between the Democratic nominee’s long support for action to combat climate change with that of Republican nominee Donald Trump, who

has dismissed climate science and pledged to slash the Biden administration's signature climate legislation, the [Inflation Reduction Act](#).

Hurricanes Helene and Milton, which [scientists say were made worse by record-high global temperatures from the burning of fossil fuels](#), have driven home for voters that climate change is “an emergency people are dealing with right now in their lives, and so many people have lost their lives over it,” Thorndike said. Hurricane Helene killed more than 300 people, while Milton is blamed for at least 24 fatalities.

“Voters are seeing that we have two very different rooted visions on the table,” Thorndike said. “One, a leader who recognizes the issue and the urgency to act. And on the other side, we have a candidate in Donald Trump who is politicizing these tragedies [and] calls climate change a hoax. This is not a conversation we would be having if he was president. He does not care.”

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

How have the two major hurricanes affected your engagement with climate voters, especially as we see Republicans [dismissing the role of climate change](#) and [spreading misinformation](#)?

We're seeing a real uptick in engagement with our “[Climate Voters \[for Harris-Walz\]](#)” push to win this election given the extreme devastation in the Southeast and the obvious reality that climate change is not a problem for the distant future, it's an emergency people are dealing with right now in their lives, and so many people have lost their lives over it.

A lot of Vice President Harris' campaigning on climate has been about drawing this contrast with former President Trump and Republicans. Do these hurricanes enable you to really push that message given their reaction to it?

Voters are seeing this extreme weather is made so much worse by climate change, and that we have two very different rooted visions on the table. One, a leader who recognizes

the issue and the urgency to act. [Harris] was the tie-breaking vote on the largest ever investment in climate action, and she's hard at work meeting with families on the ground to recover and rebuild.

This administration she's a part of is doing a phenomenal job through FEMA and all disaster response to really meet people on the ground and help them recover and rebuild. And that's what we've seen from Republican governors across the board, who were so grateful for the prompt and generous assistance from the federal government.

And on the other side, we have a candidate in Donald Trump who is politicizing these tragedies, calls climate change a hoax. And this is not a conversation we would be having if he was president. He does not care. The very opposite is true. He is eager to continue expanding tax breaks and rolling back regulations so that fossil fuel companies can make an even more record-breaking profit than they already are as the climate situation worsens day by day.

How challenging has it been to persuade young climate voters to come out and support Harris after some activists were disengaged by President Joe Biden and some of his moves to support some fossil fuel production and high-profile infrastructure projects?

We were met with such an enthusiastic wave of endorsements from leading climate and environmental groups that, to be honest, I have not encountered apathy or really protest, because young voters that I'm working with really deeply feel the stakes in this election, and they're working overtime to defeat Donald Trump through any and all avenues they can.

And the launch of "Climate Voters [for Harris-Walz]" a couple weeks ago featured back-to-back posts from her with that message that she understands the severity, that her track record dating back from when she was district attorney to attorney general, senator, it is an incredible array of accomplishments for environmental justice, for holding polluters accountable, for expanding our conservation, for taking on the corporate interests who should not be able to run roughshod over our lives, and take advantage of folks.

And so she's been a champion from the start. And climate voters see that and are excited to have not only one climate champion as president, which Kamala Harris will be, but also Governor [Tim] Walz, who has an incredible record as governor of Minnesota with those same shared values.

Harris has publicly moved to the middle on certain energy issues, such as reversing her fracking ban pledge from the 2019-20 primary campaign and touting record oil and gas production in the Biden-Harris administration, along with measures in the IRA to require more fossil fuel lease sales. How are you reassuring young voters that Harris will look to push policies commensurate with global climate goals when she's been promoting fossil fuels these last few months?

Just to be clear, Vice President Harris hasn't said anything that the administration hasn't already said. She is not promoting expansion. She's just said that they wouldn't ban fracking and the fact that anyone could look up is that the IRA required leases, and that was not something that she promoted.

And so voters who care about climate change understand that she is someone that not only movements can work with, but she has championed these causes, and that we know who she is. Her record is so clear, and that more and more voters are getting the opportunity to meet her in these final weeks of the campaign, which has been really a wild sprint.

When the top of the ticket switched, we had a historically abridged amount of time to build. And if we look at what we and she are proudly standing behind, it's not just that tie-breaking vote on the Inflation Reduction Act, it's rolling out new policy proposals to innovate in clean manufacturing, to take on the housing shortage crisis with climate in mind, to also expand access to clean drinking water.

She's been such a champion on removing lead pipes, on making sure that kids breathe clean air when they're going to school on electric buses instead of diesel, on cleaning up pollution from power plants and transportation across the board, on building resilience.

So do you think there's an understanding when you talk to climate voters that maybe Harris is not promoting expansion, but she is talking about how fossil fuels are going to be a part of the economy and we are producing at record levels, and that voters recognize that message as an electoral reality given her need to win Pennsylvania, a key fossil fuel-producing swing state?

If we look at the transition that's underway because of her leadership, there are over 330,000 clean energy jobs because of the Inflation Reduction Act. Her economic agenda, with climate woven throughout, is a massive accelerant, also into new sectors that will be decarbonized. And we are full steam ahead in that transition where clean energy and clean energy jobs are growing. That's our new way forward. And her full-throated support for that vision is abundantly clear to everyone who looks at where Donald Trump will take us back to fossil fuels, and fossil fuels only, forever.

A lot has been written about how Biden and Harris have gone about messaging the Inflation Reduction Act, and how polling has shown a lack of awareness among the public on what the legislation did. We recently have heard Harris play up the manufacturing investments. Do you feel like you've closed the information gap with voters?

We're working hard to make sure that voters are aware of what's at stake given that Trump would roll back as much as he possibly can about the Inflation Reduction Act progress.

And this is where I want to lift up the incredible movement that's behind "Climate Voters [for Harris-Walz]." We have a whole team of experts on the Inflation Reduction Act, venture capitalists who are behind it, clean energy workers, community members, students, activists, across the board, who are spreading this message that ... we have these factories opening that are revitalizing communities in Pennsylvania and elsewhere who haven't seen economic growth, and in fact, the opposite, under Trump's administration.

And now they get to go to work proudly every day rolling out battery storage solutions for the clean energy economy. And those are the stories that the vice president and our partners are proudly standing behind.

We know that there's work to be done because there's a lot of misinformation that's out there. There's also so little time in this campaign, and that's why we have literally hundreds of volunteers who are spreading the word through op-eds, letters to the editor, LinkedIn posts, their Instagrams.

They're organizing house parties, we have webinars, we have zoom organizing calls, phone banks, relational organizing. We're leaving it all out in the field.

What is the message you are getting from climate voters on what they want Harris to do next to build off the IRA and the Biden-Harris administration's ambitious climate actions? We've seen a couple ideas in her economic plan. She's talked about permitting reform and setting up a critical mineral reserve, which are wonky things and don't necessarily seem like the kind of actions designed to excite climate voters.

Everyone wants their energy bills to go down. Everyone wants the electric grid to keep the lights on. Everyone wants to make sure the next generation has a livable planet. And our job is showing people who care about those things exactly how Vice President Harris and Governor Walz will make that happen, and how Trump and Vance's plans will do the exact opposite.

And that message is breaking through. If you look at how climate objectives are met through the recent economic plan and lowering costs, saving working families money, clean energy is such an important part of that. And then it's our collective movements' job to continue connecting the dots on how these upstream policy interventions improve your life on a day-to-day basis.

Have you heard demands from climate voters for more aggressive actions like declaring a climate emergency or permanently stopping natural gas

exports when [the administration's review](#) is finished, and how are you responding?

So we are spending all of our time and energy and focus on what it takes to win. Without getting ahead of the vice president, doing what it takes to communicate to voters that the only person fighting for them is this candidate and Donald Trump is trying to take us back.

Clearly, climate emergencies are all around us, driving a sense of urgency to do what it takes to win and build on the accomplishments of the last four years and make possible any kind of policy landscape where these conversations can continue, which will all end under Trump.

How concerned are you about the possibility that younger people who like Harris' climate record are being turned off by other issues, like the U.S.' approach to [the Israel-Hamas conflict and actions in Gaza](#)?

What I see is that young people are fighting for their lives and want a champion who understands the stakes. And what we know is that climate is the most motivational issue for student turnout. There's some recent polling showing that 82 percent of students are more likely to turn out for a candidate will make a difference on climate change. So it remains an incredibly salient issue, and my job is to make sure that we are communicating how seriously Harris-Walz take this imperative and that they are fighting for young people who care about a whole swath of issues.

Are there specific key states you're targeting to spark turnout of climate voters who may be decisive?

We're focused on all the battlegrounds right now. They're all in play.

So in Arizona, the conversation might be around extreme heat. In the Southeast, we know the devastation that Hurricanes Helene and Milton have left in battlegrounds like North Carolina. In Michigan, the conversation around the clean energy economy is very much alive. We have also a strong partnership across the coalitions given that climate is everything. So we're working closely with the Native engagement team, with the youth

engagement team, with Latino voters, with black voters, with women voters, with small business.

There's so many different ways in on this campaign, and we're making sure that anyone who cares about the future knows that they are welcome and needed, because we're in the sprint for our lives and every hour of volunteer time makes a difference.