

**ASSESSING A TRANSITION IN ENVIRONMENTALISM:  
A COMPARISON OF CAMPAIGN AND NGO RHETORIC AND THE EFFECT OF  
CRISES ON BIDEN'S PROPOSED ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY**

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### **Abstract**

In this study, we examined if the Biden campaign's environmental rhetoric and proposed environmental policies shifted as a result of two major social crises that occurred during the 2020 election year-- COVID-19 and the murder of George Floyd. We also analysed the Sierra Club, an environmentally focused NGO, to see if their discussion of environmentalism shifted as a result of these external events. **This research is essential to understand how external events influence environmentalism and whether environmentalism can be adapted to include and harmonize with emerging concerns, ultimately becoming a more effective and inclusive social movement as a result.** We evaluated 74 statements released between January 1st, 2020 and November 3rd, 2020. We found Biden's campaign rhetoric about environmentalism, as well as his policy proposals, changed as the events of 2020 developed. The Sierra Club also adjusted their rhetoric following these events. The rhetoric surrounding COVID-19 and racial injustice differed in key ways between the Biden campaign and the Sierra Club, but in uncovering their rhetorical responses to racial and public health crises, we offer compelling evidence that environmentalism has changed and is changing in the face of these social movements. By including more conversations about public health and racialized environmental injustice, Biden and the Sierra Club represent an emerging transition in environmentalism.

### **Introduction**

For most of 2020, headlines captured and fueled public awareness of mask mandates and COVID-19 transmission rates, Black Lives Matter protests and police brutality, wildfires and climate refugees, and of course, the 2020 Presidential Election. The COVID-19 pandemic, racial injustice, and climate change all fundamentally challenged and disrupted American society. Since early March of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has posed major public health concerns and sociocultural changes in the U.S. throughout the year. The murder of George Floyd, which occurred in late May of 2020, caused renewed anger and protest which served as a reminder of police brutality and racial disparities in America. These protests continued well into the summer and throughout the remainder of the year. These two crises, while different in their underlying

causes, all share an intersection with environmentalism, specifically through the lens of Environmental Justice.

Our research seeks to understand the varying impacts of these overlapping crises of 2020 on Joe Biden's Presidential campaign strategy. The nature of this research will build upon and contribute to the literature of many fields, including political science and environmental studies. We have one main research question and two subsidiary research questions, which are as follows:

1. How did the two major external events of COVID-19 and George Floyd's murder affect Biden's environmental campaign rhetoric?
  - a. How does Biden campaign rhetoric on these issues compare to rhetoric released by environmentally focused non-governmental organizations?
  - b. Does this rhetoric adjustment appear in Biden's environmental policy?

These questions are designed to engage with scholarly conversation about campaign strategy, social movement theory, and environmentalism. As a whole, we would like to understand how (or if) presidential campaigns manage their environmental stance in light of current events and external crises. Presidential campaigns have a wide base of constituents to appeal to, so it is in their best interest to respond to crises in ways that are favorable to the broadest base possible.

In contrast, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have much smaller and focused constituencies, and often do not respond to unrelated crises. However, in 2020 many of these smaller groups began to address external issues. For example, the Sierra Club, an environmentally focused NGO based in the USA, released statements about both George Floyd and the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to their usual environmental statements.<sup>1</sup> Because of this shift, we are curious to see how an NGO's rhetoric and Biden's campaign rhetoric regarding these issues differ, and will use materials from the Sierra Club as a representation of this contrast.

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<sup>1</sup> Sierra Club, *Sierra Club Statement on the Murder of George Floyd*; Sierra Club, *Sierra Club's Statement on the United States Surpassing 100,000 Deaths from COVID-19*.

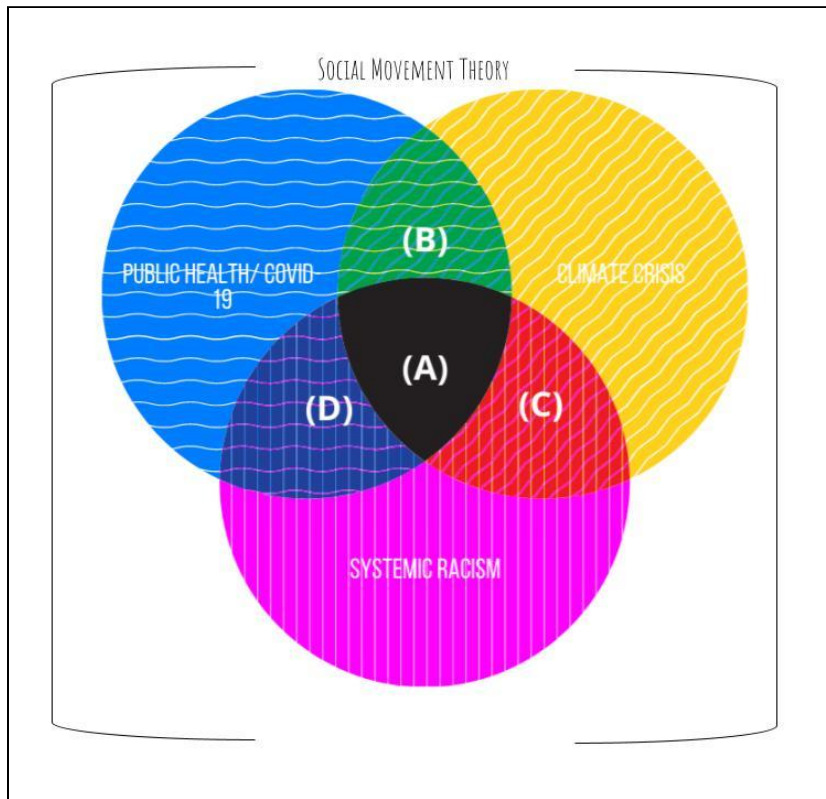
We seek to understand how/if Biden's statements on environmentalism shifted as a result of public health and racial justice issues. We assessed this through a textual analysis of the Biden campaign's statements, campaign materials, and policy proposals directly responding to COVID-19, George Floyd, and environmentalism. To assess how the issue framing of the Biden campaign compares to the rhetoric of environmentally focused NGOs, we conducted a textual analysis of statements released by the Sierra Club responding to the same events. In this study, we investigated how crises reshape environmental rhetoric and policy positions. We evaluated this reshaping through issue-framing theory, a framework that focuses on how individuals portray facts to appeal to their desired audience. Additional information about issue-framing theory will be provided in our literature review. Based on the crises faced in the 2020 election season, we want to determine if Biden and/or the Sierra Club changed how they framed environmental issues.

As we consider these processes within the Biden Campaign and Sierra Club to be windows into the larger American Environmental Movement, we illuminate some ways in which environmentalism engages with, and is reshaped by, other emerging social movements and fundamental changes to American life. Not only was 2020 the first year that environmental justice was a main talking point for a presidential campaign, it was potentially the year that issues of public health and racism became more widely embraced by and incorporated into mainstream environmentalism.

### **Literature Review**

This research is contributing to and drawing on scholarship in overlapping fields of study that frame the social dimensions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the movement for racial justice,

and the dynamic role of environmentalism in politics. We can visualize these intersections and group our relevant literature according to the diagram below.



Social movement theory encompasses all fields of work in the diagram, so we will first expand on the broad concept of social movements in our discussion of relevant existing literature. Following that discussion, existing work will be reviewed in terms of the intersections shown, where A is the mutual overlap of all three crises-- their shared environmental concern. B is the intersection of public health and the climate crisis, C is where racism and climate concerns meet, and D is the overlap of public health and race. After addressing the scholarship of the social movements included in the diagram, we will then address the relevance of issue framing theory as a shared strategy that all social movements (and presidential campaigns) rely on in order to resonate with their desired audiences.

## **Social Movement Theory, Public Policy, and Environmentalism**

Social movement theory is an interdisciplinary field of study that seeks to understand how social mobilization occurs and its experienced or potential social, cultural, and political consequences. In our research we investigated if and how environmental rhetoric and policy are influenced by various social movements. The most relevant work in social movement theory focuses on the politics of social movements, so it is reasonable to use the Biden presidential campaign as an indicator of mainstream environmentalism and the political sphere.

One work that discusses the significance of politics on social movements is Victoria Carty's *Wired and Mobilizing: Social Movements, New Technology, and Electoral Politics* (2010).<sup>2</sup> This book sets out to develop and apply theories of collective behavior within the sphere of electoral politics. It also synthesizes the existing political science, which focuses on the relations between social movements and political parties, and existing social science, which seeks to explain the timing and emergence of social movements. Critically, the author asserts that among social movements, the key to forging collective identity and shared meaning is the organizers' framing of key issues. Organizers do this by linking the concerns of the movement to mainstream beliefs and values. This mobilizes and maintains solidarity, and could be a driving force in our study, as under Carty's framework, all crises and their associated social movements are striving to align their movements with broadly held beliefs.

*Environmental Networks and Social Movement Theory* by Clare Saunders builds upon the social movement theory outlined and summarized in Carty's work by exploring the extent to which social movement theory illuminates the nature of interactions between various environmental organizations<sup>3</sup>. The author adopts the term "environmental network" instead of

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<sup>2</sup> Victoria Carty, *Wired and Mobilizing Social Movements, New Technology, and Electoral Politics*.

<sup>3</sup> Clare Saunders, *Environmental Networks and Social Movement Theory*.

“environmental movement” because while social movement theory can be applied to environmentalism, the author feels that the concept as a whole does not sit comfortably with the various organizations included within the entire environmental movement. Dividing the movement into networks which interact, she found that “While well-financed moderate conservationist and reformist environmental groups will seek to maintain their office space, staff and reputations, radicals will want to maintain their strong sense of collective identity. This can set radicals and moderates apart from one another.”<sup>4</sup> Despite these differences, radical and established groups collaborate to great advantage regularly. Because Biden and the Sierra Club are appealing to different environmental bases, we can consider their responses to crises as components of an “environmental network” as proposed by Saunders.

In “Environmentalism, Pre-Environmentalism, and Public Policy”, Sylvia Tesh engages with the environmental epidemiology movement and its interplay with the politics of public policy<sup>5</sup>. The author addresses the challenge of advocating for environmental protections against pollutants in a system which considers pollutants harmless until proven harmful. With this burden of proof tilted decidedly in favor of chemical producers, the U.S. government has largely failed to regulate them and has skillfully manipulated scientific uncertainty to delay regulation, even as chemicals permeate many aspects of our bodies and ecosystems. From this stance, Tesh argues that environmental epidemiology could change the way scientists collect and interpret data, as well as how politicians think about regulation. We contribute to this line of inquiry by assessing a more recent case of environmental movements advancing new ideas, and by investigating whether these changes can influence the way politicians approach issues.

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<sup>4</sup> Saunders, *Environmental Networks and Social Movement Theory*.

<sup>5</sup> Sylvia Tesh, *Environmentalism, Pre-Environmentalism, and Public Policy*.

Charlotte Burns' 2020 article titled "EU environmental policy in times of crisis" serves as an anchoring paper with respect to how environmental policy responds to times of general upheaval.<sup>6</sup> The author considers how environmental policy ambition has been impacted by the economic malaise experienced by the European Union (EU). Burns *et al.* observed a clear reduction in environmental policy proposal and adoption in response to the economic crisis. Through interviews with policy stakeholders, the authors found that this response was driven by 3 factors: 1) pre-existing preferences for deregulation; 2) increased diversity of EU members; and 3) the maturity of the *acquis*. From this, additional theories for the observed decline in policy appear that are more directly relevant to our research in the US-- (1) decline occurs when major environmental challenges are already addressed and therefore no longer a policy priority (2) shift to country responsibility instead of the larger EU governing body (3) redefinition of what "environmental" policies include. Given our research interest's shared overarching inquiry, Burns *et al.*'s work on this topic is a major part of the foundation on which our research is built. We suggest that what Burns saw in the EU might be an underlying dynamic in the US as well. However, our scope of inquiry differs from this existing work and compliments it by considering rhetoric in addition to policy.

### **A) Public health and Climate**

Jochen Markard's 2020 paper titled "A tale of two crises: COVID-19 and climate sustainability" is written from the vantage point of someone concerned about the difficulty of harmonizing efforts to improve public and environmental health<sup>7</sup>. Received in April and published in May of 2020, relatively early in the course of the pandemic, this paper points to the

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<sup>6</sup> Charlotte Burns, Peter Eckersley and Paul Tobin, *EU environmental policy in times of crisis*.

<sup>7</sup> Jochen Markard and Daniel Rosenbloom, *A tale of two crises: COVID-19 and climate, Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*.



fact that COVID-19 response programs run the risk of distracting from climate change and other sustainability crises being faced. The author states that “given that we have scarce resources at our disposal, it is essential that we synergize such efforts. We propose that this can be accomplished in two primary ways: (1) harnessing the disruptive forces of the COVID-19 pandemic to accelerate the decline of carbon-intensive industries, technologies, and practices, and (2) leveraging responses to drive low-carbon innovation.”<sup>8</sup> In their view, and engaging with Carty’s observations, “appealing to the common concern of health offers a promising way to realize rapid change.”<sup>9</sup> Markard’s research was released prospectively at the beginning of the pandemic, while our research will respond in a retrospective manner.

### **B) Race and Environmentalism**

Our research aligns well with a series of forward looking assessments of the relationship between race and environmentalism published recently as evaluations and addendums to Environmental Justice (EJ). Environmental Justice was a framework that emerged in the 1980’s as a beneficial coupling of environmentalism and social justice, aimed at addressing racial inequalities and unfair distributions of hazards in environments where people live and work. Recent research has divided EJ into phases: (1) the “first-generation,” which was focused on documenting environmental inequality through the lens of race and class; and (2) “second-generation” studies that complete a deeper evaluation into the ways that gender, sexuality, and other categories of difference shape EJ struggles. The studies we connect with fall into this second-generation of EJ scholarship.

David Pellow’s “Toward a Critical Environmental Justice studies” (2016) draw links between the most important insights and questions that emerged from the Black Lives Matter

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<sup>8</sup> Markard and Rosenbloom, *A tale of two crises*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

movement and the struggle against environmental racism.<sup>10</sup> Pellow argues that these issues are closely intertwined and that we must explore their connections in order to identify the cause of racist violence no matter the form it takes. The broadly held framework connected here is the concept of indispensability, countering the ideology of White supremacy and human dominionism, and articulating the perspective that excluded, marginalized, and othered populations, beings, and things must be viewed as indispensable to our collective futures. Further, the author unites EJ and race as both state sanctioned violence against people of color and marginalized communities. While this work is Critical EJ theorized, our research develops on this by looking at Critical EJ in practice.

On the other hand, *The Promise and Peril of Environmental Justice*, by Christopher Foreman, critiques EJ's coupling of social justice and environmentalism<sup>11</sup>. The author asserts that in matters of health and risk, EJ poses a danger to the minority and low-income communities it is designed to help. There is a danger of EJ worsening the problem of environmental policy's missing priorities. In their view, the concerns of EJ would be better met if approached through the public health and economic justice lenses separately. As our research considers overlapping crises and the potentially synergizing movements, the criticism and concern for joining forces is an instructive and valuable perspective.

Leilani Nishime's *Racial Ecologies* (2018), on the other hand, affirms EJ's concerns and goals, but moves into a new framework that privileges neither environment nor race but sees them as inextricably linked, much like Pellow proposes in his concept of shared indispensability.<sup>12</sup> While environmentalism is understood as universal and post-racial,

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<sup>10</sup> David N. Pellow, *Toward a Critical Environmental Justice Studies: Black Lives Matter as an Environmental Justice Challenge*.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher H. Foreman, *The Promise and Peril of Environmental Justice*.

<sup>12</sup> LeiLani Nishime and Kim D. Hester Williams, *Racial Ecologies*.

environmental justice is seen as uniquely concerned with racial equity. The authors extend beyond this by arguing that race is intertwined with our understanding of ecology. The authors also explore nature and environment as sites for navigating both embodied racial identities and ecological places. Nishime's proposed framework is one potential approach Biden and the Sierra Club could implement if they chose to integrate racial and environmental concerns through a more ecological perspective.

### **C) Public Health and Race**

Maxwell Smith's paper "Public Health as Social Justice?" engages with the idea of social justice's described role as the foundation of public health<sup>13</sup>. Beyond theory, the authors feel that the relationship between social justice and public health is rarely acknowledged. They investigate public policy makers' views on the role of social justice in public health practice. Finding that views vary strongly depending on the programmatic area, the authors suggest that more should be done to reveal how the field of public health can better promote social justice. Another article, "What Does Social Justice Require For The Public's Health? Public Health Ethics And Policy Imperatives", echoes the last thoughts of Smith but also explores how social justice sheds light on controversies in the field of public health.<sup>14</sup> Like Smith, the authors provide examples of potential policies that could be adopted to overcome these challenges. If Biden and the Sierra Club acknowledge the overlap between the environment, public health, and social justice, do they address the connection between health and race so often missed by public health experts?

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<sup>13</sup> Maxwell J Smith, Alison Thompson, and Ross E. G Upshur, *Public Health as Social Justice? A Qualitative Study of Public Health Policy-Makers' Perspectives*, 384–402.

<sup>14</sup> Lawrence O Gostin and Madison Powers, *What Does Social Justice Require For The Public's Health? Public Health Ethics And Policy Imperatives*, 1053–1060.

Catherine Campbell engages with public health initiatives that have been operationalized as social movements.<sup>15</sup> Specifically, she introduces social movements that have been targeted towards power-holders, motivating them to increase access to resources. She also discusses the importance of social capital in public health. This theme of social capital and marginalization in public health, introduced by Campbell, is applied to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic by Diego Silva in “Social Distancing, Social Justice, and Risk During the COVID-19 Pandemic.”<sup>16</sup> In this, the authors problematize social distancing, a practice of limiting interactions in order to slow the spread of SARS-CoV-2 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social distancing, in the author’s view, places people who are socially or politically marginalized at risk of further harms. They argue that marginalized or disadvantaged people are at risk of developing COVID-19 and additional harm that may occur with social distancing measures. This complicated risk of harm is antithetical to the notion of social justice that is the basis of public health. The same dynamics of social movement theory, social capital, and marginalization are at play in all of the concerns that Biden and the Sierra Club responded to in 2020, not just in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic which Silva writes about.

### **Issue Framing**

In this study, we look at the Biden campaign and the Sierra Club to assess their rhetorical shifts in response to COVID-19, the murder of George Floyd, and environmentalism. We craft this examination through the lens of issue-framing theory. Issue framing is a theoretical framework that focuses on how facts are presented. This is a strategy to establish credibility between speaker and audience. To rationalize a particular policy position, the policy maker or

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<sup>15</sup> Catherine Campbell, *Social Capital, Social Movements and Global Public Health: Fighting for Health-Enabling Contexts in Marginalised Settings*.

<sup>16</sup> Diego S Silva and Maxwell J Smith, *Social Distancing, Social Justice, and Risk During the COVID-19 Pandemic*, 459–461.

public figure must frame the issue in a way that is acceptable and understandable to their target audience.

Issue framing is frequently used in social movement theory. While one organization such as Sierra Club may discuss “environmentalism” in regard to the natural environment and pristine areas of “wilderness”, another organization such as Black Lives Matter may frame “environmentalism” as a social justice issue. Issue framing is also often used during presidential campaigns, in which candidates may use framing to make their opponent seem incompetent, selfish, wrong, and/or less qualified. As a result, we expect Biden to frame himself as a better candidate than Trump regardless of the issue at hand. However, we are curious to see if the way Biden frames issues like public health, systemic racism and environmentalism are impacted directly by outside crises.

We are also following the rhetorical shift of the Sierra Club along with the Biden campaign. We expect to see more environmentally-focused framing by an environmental NGO compared to framing by the Biden campaign. Compared to the Sierra Club, the Biden campaign rhetoric is designed for a much larger and more diverse audience, which could result in more general or ambiguous framing techniques. A more general framing technique for environmental issues could gain wider support from Biden’s diverse constituents, but may have less concrete policy demands or rhetoric as a result.

### **Sources & Methodology**

COVID-19 was first announced by the World Health Organization on January 9, 2020. The first case of COVID-19 in the US was confirmed on January 21, but was not considered a national emergency or priority. On February 3, the Trump administration declared a public health emergency, but COVID was not declared a pandemic or national emergency until March

11 and March 13, respectively.<sup>17</sup> A few months later, George Floyd was lynched in police custody on May 25, 2020. Protests over racial injustice and police brutality began the day after the murder and continued in force well into June 2020.<sup>18</sup> This timeline of events is relevant to our collection of sources and our methodology of interpretation.

We collected all Biden and Sierra Club statements related to our issues of interest from January 1, 2020 to November 2, 2020. We chose sources from this time frame because the events we assessed took place within 2020, and since we were evaluating campaign rhetoric, it is practical to stop our analysis after election day, the formal end of the campaign. Since COVID-19 did not take center stage of American discussions until the end of February 2020, sources from January to February represent a relative “control” group, which allows us to assess both Biden’s and the Sierra Club’s rhetoric before COVID-19 took place. Since Floyd’s murder occurred in May, sources from between March and May allow us to examine how COVID-19 alone impacted Biden’s and Sierra Club’s environmental rhetoric. The remaining months combined COVID-19 and Floyd, and from these sources we saw how/if the environmental rhetoric of Biden and Sierra Club were shifted, and how/if these two issues of public health and social injustice were impactful together.

We collected 74 different sources that addressed 7 different categorical areas of interest (Appendix A). These areas were as follows: Biden-COVID, Biden-Floyd, Biden-Environmentalism Statements, Biden-Environmental Policy, Sierra Club-COVID, Sierra Club-Floyd, and Sierra Club-Environmentalism statements. With regard to many of the Biden statements, these issues of interest were mentioned briefly in various debates and interviews, but were not the primary focus of the entire text. For these scenarios, we focused on the excerpts

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<sup>17</sup> AJMC Staff, *A Timeline of COVID-19 Developments in 2020*.

<sup>18</sup> Reuters Staff, *Timeline: Key Events in the Month since George Floyd's Death*. 2020.

specific to our topic. The varying format and intended audience of the texts was another element to keep in mind throughout our analysis. Additional information about the breakdown of sources assessed can be seen in Appendix B.

We also did a close reading of the Green New Deal in order to examine if Biden's environmental policy differed substantially from previous environmental policies in regard to public health and social inequity. The Green New Deal (GND) is a 14-page non binding resolution that was introduced on March 26, 2019. Among other initiatives, the GND proposed that the US should reduce greenhouse gas emissions down to net zero and meet 10% of energy demand through renewable, zero emission sources by 2030.<sup>19</sup> Since the GND was proposed prior to both COVID-19 and the Floyd murder, we found it a useful policy to compare with the "Biden Deal." The Biden Plan cites the Green New Deal as an important framework, but elaborates beyond it with the freedom to reshape the framing surrounding its policy. If COVID-19 and Floyd impacted Biden's environmental rhetoric, we would expect the Biden plan to address more EJ and social justice issues, and include more public health considerations than are found in the GND.

After we had collected the sources, we proceeded to do a close textual analysis of each source. Our method of analysis was the same for each source type. Each team member read all of the sources independently. We then compared and synthesized our conclusions as a group to remain consistent across our analysis. In analysing the texts, we paid close attention to the sources at every level. This included observation of word choice and the number of keywords and phrases, text structure, ideas expressed, and overall tone of the article. We looked for these key components of the text to determine the central meaning of the text and see what changed as time went on. While reading the sources, we entered all relevant information into a form to keep

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<sup>19</sup> Deborah DSouza, *The Green New Deal Explained*.

track of information and trends. Using this form, we found which ideological words and phrases were used most frequently, as well as which words were frequently repeated for rhetorical emphasis. This close reading, when assembled into a chronology, showed us if the way Biden discussed environmental ideas shifted as a result of COVID-19 and/or Floyd. It also allowed for a contrast between Biden's response, aimed at a large constituency of the American public, and the Sierra Club's response, aimed at a more specific subset of the American public. Overall, these methods created a chronology of rhetoric that served as an indication of how the ideas about environmentalism in America have changed and are changing in response to these building social movements and crises.

**Validity:**

To validate our approach as an effective way to study environmental issues, we will answer the following questions: how textual discourse analysis has been used to study mass communication, why our study materials can be classified as a discourse, and what a discourse analysis can reveal about environmentalism in our study.

Discourse analysis is a qualitative strategy that has become more popular in recent years. The logic utilized by this strategy is that, by studying how public conversations (such as campaign statements) have discussed environmental issues, scholars can find out public attitudes towards these issues and explain policy tendencies and relevant policy outcomes. Compared to content analysis, discourse analysis puts content into additional context and studies the relationship between language and ideology, revealing not only a direct linguistic assessment, but also the attitude behind the language.

Tonkiss<sup>20</sup> defines "discourse" as "a group of statements which provides a language for talking about-- i.e., a way of interpreting-- a particular kind of knowledge about a topic." The 74

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<sup>20</sup> Fran Tonkiss, *Discourse Analysis*.



speeches and statements we collected from the 2020 Biden campaign and the Sierra Club meet this definition, as they provide a way to interpret Biden and the Sierra Club's knowledge about the crises and framing techniques.

### *Subjectivity in our qualitative approach*

When performing this analysis, it is worthwhile to note subjectively in this approach. Each of us may read the same piece with different implicit or personal assumptions and biases. For example, some may see "climate change" as an ideologically contested word, while others do not. This subjectivity might have caused inaccuracy in the results of our qualitative approach. However, by having each team member read each source and discuss as a group, we attempted to reduce this subjectivity.

## **Discussion**

### **How did Biden Environmental Rhetoric Change Post-COVID-19?**

We found that in Biden's COVID-19 speeches, the COVID-19 pandemic was often portrayed as a sister crisis to the climate crisis. They were both used to spur themes of unity, as well as the fragility of life on this planet. In Biden's statement on Earth day (April 22, 2020) he described the pandemic as "difficult, immediate, and undeniable" and climate change as an "existential threat," both threatening mankind with "equally deadly results."<sup>21</sup> Biden combined these crises to illustrate how they both need to be taken seriously and must be handled with ambitious plans and every tool available. Biden also tied both crises together by highlighting the danger of ignoring scientists' warnings. In his conversation with Al Gore, also on April 22, 2020, he emphasized that Americans "believe in science" and "want a leader to act" on the crisis based on science.<sup>22</sup> In this sense, while COVID-19 wasn't affecting environmental campaign rhetoric

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<sup>21</sup> Joe Biden, *Statement by Vice President Joe Biden on Earth Day*.

<sup>22</sup> Joe Biden, *Joe Biden & Al Gore Earth Day Town Hall Transcript*.

directly, Biden was using tenets of environmental arguments to apply to an emerging issue. This relates to Markard's assertion that due to scarce resources, public health and environmental efforts must be synergized.<sup>23</sup>

Both issues were often connected to economic arguments as well. Biden would often reiterate the only way to solve the economic crises would be to solve the public health and environmental crises at hand first. On May 14, 2020, one month after his speech on Earth day, Biden further defined the current crisis into two parts-- "public health crisis and economic crisis...[while the former] is hitting older Americans hard, [the later] is "hitting younger people."<sup>24</sup> Biden has often linked science with climate change, but in this speech, he included public health and science as well. Here, Biden began to use the word "science" to frame his policy positions and economic strategy. In order to unify America, on March 25th, 2020, Biden claimed the nation would need "a thought out strategy, supported by science and scientists, to get Americans back to work."<sup>25</sup> This statement combines an economic framework with words like public health, science, and pandemic. While Markard initially theorized that health would be an effective means of motivating efforts to respond to COVID and environmental crises in tandem, it appears that for Biden, the portrayed connection between COVID and climate was *economic toll, not health*.<sup>26</sup> Another similarity between Biden's climate discussions and COVID-19 were that both touched on economically compelling arguments *and* human interest-based arguments. We see this emotional appeal grow stronger in the last stage of Biden's campaign.<sup>27</sup> In his COVID-19 vaccine speech on September 16, two months before the election, he emphasized the vaccine as a scientific remedy to the crisis as usual, but throughout his other speeches closer to

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<sup>23</sup> Markard and Rosenbloom, *A tale of two crises*.

<sup>24</sup> Joe Biden, *Joe Biden Town Hall on Protecting Essential Workers*.

<sup>25</sup> Joe Biden, *Joe Biden Coronavirus Online News Conference Transcript*.

<sup>26</sup> Markard and Rosenbloom, *A tale of two crises*, 53-60.

<sup>27</sup> Joe Biden, *Joe Biden Coronavirus Vaccine Speech Transcript September 16*.

election day, he linked the climate crisis with the use of “next generations” and “our future” to invoke a more emotional association from his audience.

### **How did Biden Environmental Rhetoric Change Post-Floyd (May 25)?**

While the emotional approach surrounding environmentalism and COVID-19 often focused on broad depictions of “our future” and similar sentiments, following the murder of George Floyd, Biden included more specific discussions about human rights issues. Prior to Floyd, Biden focused almost entirely on the economic arguments for environmentalism and would only include vague emphases on community well-being. Prior to the Floyd murder, during January and February, Biden often repeated the phrase “accelerate the deployment of clean technology throughout our economy.”<sup>28</sup> After the murder, Biden significantly decreased framing environmental issues as economic, and instead shifted to a much greater emphasis on Environmental Justice. Here, we can see that while social justice and public health relationships were less acknowledged, as predicted by Smith, social justice and environmentalism were merged more directly.<sup>29</sup>

Conversations about Environmental Justice were almost non-existent in Biden’s environmental texts before the murder. Prior to June, in most of the Biden-environmental sources, environmentalism was listed as the single topic of his speech. After June, it was often combined with “justice” and the rhetoric used also became more subjective and emotionally-appealing. Additionally, prior to the murder, Biden often had a global approach to environmental issues. During the first three months of 2020, he often repeated the sentiment that the US makes up “15% of contributions to climate change”<sup>30</sup> and emphasized that other countries would also have to do their part to combat the crisis. During these months, he would also often

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<sup>28</sup> Joe Biden for President, *9 Keys Elements of Joe Biden’s for a Clean Energy Revolution*.

<sup>29</sup> Smith, Thompson, and Upshur, *Public Health as Social Justice?*, 384–402.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

discuss providing economic forgiveness to Brazil in exchange for stricter environmental enforcement. After the murder, Biden's environmental discussions became much more American-centric. He almost entirely stopped mentioning other countries' responsibilities, and focused almost entirely on issues of environmental justice. In his response to Sierra Club's endorsement announcement on August 10, 2020, Biden stated that he felt honoured to fight with members who will ensure that "climate action leaders are elected across *the country*" and how the crisis was an opportunity for "the nation to come together,"<sup>31</sup> narrowing down his proposed action scale from a global one to a national one. This relates directly to Burns's hypothesis that environmental responsibilities shift from large-scale to a smaller scale. However, Burns was suggesting that this results in a policy decline. As a result, while Biden shifted his framing to include a more American-centric approach, Burns' suggests this framing may result in environmental policy decline.<sup>32</sup>

While we see the frequent mentioning of creating "jobs for workers" in the clean energy industries during February and March, the focus on justice after the George Floyd murder was often used to condemn the opposite party, and the Trump administration directly.<sup>33</sup> This shift was reflected by the words used by Biden after each crisis. Following Floyd, Biden used words like "clean energy" and "economy" less, and used words like "justice" and "unity" more. This shift is reminiscent of Nishime *et al's* theorization in *Racial Ecologies* about the inextricable connection between environmentalism and race.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, it touches on Pellow's argument for a critical environmental justice, where both marginalized people and ecology are seen as indispensable.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Sierra Club, *Sierra Club Endorses Joe Biden for President*.

<sup>32</sup> Burns, Eckersley and Tobin, *EU environmental policy in times of crisis*, 1-19.

<sup>33</sup> Joe Biden for President, *The Biden Plan for Investing in Our Communities through Housing*.

<sup>34</sup> Nishime and Williams, *Racial Ecologies*.

<sup>35</sup> Pellow, *Toward a Critical Environmental Justice Studies*.

### **How did Sierra Club Rhetoric Change Post-COVID-19?**

Prior to COVID-19, many of the Sierra Club Statements were about solely environmental issues. Following the introduction of COVID-19 to the US, the Sierra Club shifted their rhetoric to push for economic and public health incentives. Perhaps, at this point, by separating environmental, economic, race, and health issues, the Sierra Club subscribed to the framework proposed by Foreman, whereby the concerns of each crisis are believed to be best addressed independently rather than merged under the umbrella of environmental justice.<sup>36</sup> In a statement from March 13, 2020, the Sierra Club stated that the government should respond to COVID-19 by “ramping up efforts to safeguard public health, particularly for the most vulnerable communities, workers and families first.”<sup>37</sup> In this statement, environmentalism took a backseat to public health. In other statements, the Sierra Club placed more emphasis on economic consequences of COVID-19 and called for additional support for “communities, workers, and families”<sup>38</sup> without specifying which communities, or workers are most affected. Similar to Biden’s rhetoric early on in the year, the Sierra club is seen to promote a “clean economy” initiative, while Environmental Justice is largely ignored.<sup>39</sup>

This was deliberately stated in a statement from March 22, in which the Sierra Club wrote “we cannot afford this stimulus proposal that defaults to helping corporate polluters..[instead it] must provide direct relief to people, prioritize public health, support workers, and set us up for a clean energy economy.”<sup>40</sup> Again, clean economy and public health had much more significance than it did prior to the pandemic, but the dimension of

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<sup>36</sup> Foreman, *The Promise and Peril of Environmental Justice*.

<sup>37</sup> Sierra Club, *COVID-19 National Emergency Declaration: Put People First*.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*; Sierra Club, *Sierra Club COVID 19 Stimulus*.

<sup>40</sup> Sierra Club, *Sierra Club COVID 19 Relief*.

Environmental Justice dimension was ignored. When environmental justice was mentioned, it was usually through the general phrasing of “vulnerable communities.”<sup>41</sup> By failing to acknowledge Environmental Justice beyond vague surface level inclusion, the Sierra Club may be following Saunder’s conception of social movements, in which well established and financed groups seek to maintain their reputation.<sup>42</sup> It is clear that the Sierra Club was trying to maintain their reputation as a group dedicated to fighting polluters, but in doing so, they failed to address groups that have been marginalized and historically excluded from these discussions.

### **How did Sierra Club Environmental Rhetoric Change Post-Floyd? (May 25)**

After the George Floyd murder, the Sierra Club drastically changed their rhetorical approach. Instead of referring to environmental initiatives as an avenue to promote the economy, the Sierra Club instead began addressing environmental justice and emphasizing the collective human experience.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, in a COVID-19 oriented statement on May 27, they explicitly went more in depth about “vulnerable communities” by specifying that additional resources needed to be granted to “communities of color, tribal nations, and rural regions.”<sup>44</sup>

The wording used in Floyd-related statements was also more aggressive than their COVID-19 focused statements. In a statement from May 27, the Sierra Club used phrases such as “inhumane daily assaults on Black on Brown people....the cruel public lynching.....terrorism against Black and Brown people”<sup>45</sup> as direct calls to action. While public health and economic concerns were emphasized before Floyd, after Floyd, the Sierra Club placed a much more significant emphasis on environmental justice similar to Biden. The Sierra Club merged the issues of systemic racism and environmentalism directly in August of 2020, when they stated

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<sup>41</sup> Sierra Club, *Sierra Club Statement about Trump Executive Order*.

<sup>42</sup> Saunders, *Environmental Networks and Social Movement Theory*.

<sup>43</sup> Sierra Club, *Sierra Club Statement United States Surpassing 100,000 Deaths COVID-19*.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Sierra Club, *Sierra Club Statement Murder of George Floyd*.

that “we cannot fulfill our mission to “enlist humanity” to protect the planet while racism continues to divide us, there can be no climate justice without an end to the anti-blackness and white supremacy that empowers polluters to create environmental sacrifice zones.”<sup>46</sup> In this rhetoric, the Sierra Club engaged in Carty’s proposed tactics for social movement building by aligning concerns over racial inequality with an already shared ideology of environmental protection to their existing followers.<sup>47</sup>

However, this shift was far from perfect. In many statements the Sierra Club addressed their “Black and Brown neighbors and friends.”<sup>48</sup> This rhetoric depicts the Sierra Club as being separate from minority groups and treats “Black and Brown neighbors and friends” as somehow separate from environmentalism and Sierra Club membership, even as the Sierra Club promotes Environmental Justice. It is also unclear if these changes in emphasis (public health, economy, and racism) will persist in the Sierra Club’s long-term rhetoric. For example, in late August and September, when the Sierra Club addressed environmental issues (wildfires in California), they resorted back to their prior rhetorical strategies of solely referring to the environment for its intrinsic worth and did not address Environmental Justice, economic concerns, or public health.<sup>49</sup>

### **How does Biden Campaign Rhetoric Compare to Sierra Club’s Rhetoric?**

We found that Biden’s statements were more emotionally charged while Sierra Club remained more neutral. This difference in tones could be a result of how they intended to frame the same issue to different audiences. While Biden spoke to a wide audience with different backgrounds, Sierra Club was focused on its members. Additionally, rhetoric in speeches

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<sup>46</sup> Sierra Club, *Sierra Club Statement Shooting of Jacob Blake*.

<sup>47</sup> Carty, *Wired and Mobilizing Social Movements*.

<sup>48</sup> Sierra Club, *Sierra Club’s Statement on Trump’s State-Sanctioned Violence Against Protesters*. 2020

<sup>49</sup> Sierra Club, *Sierra Club statement on Zogg and Glass Fires in California*, 2020; Sierra Club, *Sierra Club Response to Trump’s Visit to California*.

delivered in public often contain stronger and more polarized expressions to excite the audience. By using formal expressions, Sierra Club stabilized its image as a leading environmental NGO.

In both Biden and Sierra Club's statements, overlapping crises and the concept of justice were common points of discussion, although Biden merged these issues more frequently. On many occasions, Biden briefly mentioned climate or racial injustice in a speech primarily about COVID-19. For example, in his campaign in Georgia on May 4th, 2020, he mentioned how "stunning" racial disparity was among the COVID-19 patients.<sup>50</sup> Five months later, in his October 23rd, 2020 remark on pandemic response, he once again invited the audience to "imagine if you are a member of a community that has been hit extremely hard, black, etc."<sup>51</sup> This overlap was seen consistently across all issues Biden presented. Conversely, the Sierra Club often only addressed one issue at a time. In the remarks of both Biden and the Sierra Club, many of the same ideological words were used, and many of the same phrases were repeated for emphasis. Throughout the texts we analyzed, we found 6 words/phrases used most abundantly. These words/phrases were as follows: Justice, Trump, Clean Energy, Climate, and Racism. While many of our sources revolved around COVID-19, or discussed it in some capacity, no COVID-19 specific words made the list. The fact that these players in the environmental movement are mounting distinct approaches to address common issues offers some evidence in support of Saunders' theory that the "environmental movement" is more aptly described as an "environmental network."<sup>52</sup>

When compared to how Biden framed the crises, the Sierra Club often avoided pinning all failures on the Trump administration, and instead focused their critiques on larger institutional issues. Sierra Club proposals were often more aggressive rhetorically, but still maintained more

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<sup>50</sup> Greg Bluestein, *Biden's campaign assails 'stunning' racial disparity in Georgia coronavirus patients*.

<sup>51</sup> CSPAN, *Joe Biden Unveils-Coronavirus Pandemic Recovery Plan*.

<sup>52</sup> Saunders, *Environmental Networks and Social Movement Theory*.



formal word choice compared to statements and speeches by Biden. We interpreted this difference as a way to show authority. Unlike Biden who needed to address a larger audience from different backgrounds, the Sierra Club was talking to a more educated audience who performed more formal expressions and evidence. After the consecutive crises, while Biden shifted from a more party-sided strategy to a more universal approach, Sierra Club remained aggressive in its environmental proposals and frequently mentioned “vulnerable communities,” “environmental justice,” and “climate action” in its statements and policy proposals published throughout the presidential campaign.

### **Was Biden’s environmental Policy Affected by COVID-19 and Floyd?**

In comparing two closely tied plans for environmental policy-- the Biden Plan from July 2020 and the Green New Deal from February 2019-- we can extend beyond discussions of rhetoric to see just how the events of 2020 prompted adjustments to environmental policy proposals favored by Biden. In this level of analysis, we cannot be sure if his actual policy has changed, but we can definitively say that the tone and framing of his policy has shifted from 2019 to 2020, ostensibly because of the crises faced.

Traces of the themes Biden evoked in his rhetorical responses to racial injustice were evident in his formal environmental policy unveiled in July of 2020. While the original Green New Deal does not mention environmental justice or associated issues in any of its introductory topics, the Biden Plan immediately centralizes environmental justice by including it in the formal title of the plan: “The Biden Plan For a Clean Energy Revolution and Environmental Justice.”<sup>53</sup> In the bodies of the text, the Green New Deal tended to briefly mention systemic concerns related

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<sup>53</sup> Joe Biden for President, *The Biden Plan to Build a Modern, Sustainable Infrastructure and an Equitable Clean Energy Future*.

to environmental and racial justice, but only in generic terms by referencing a “large racial wealth divide” or pointing out that

“Climate change, pollution, and environmental destruction have exacerbated systemic racial, regional, social, environmental, and economic injustices...by disproportionately affecting indigenous peoples, communities of color, migrant communities, deindustrialized communities, depopulated rural communities, the poor, low income workers, women, the elderly, the unhoused, people with disabilities, and youth.”<sup>54</sup>

The Biden Plan, in comparison, has a more specific discussion of environmental and racial justice. The plan includes a specific policy category dedicated to those who “Stand up to the Abuse of Power by Polluters who Disproportionately Harm Communities of Color and Low Income Communities”. The plan also explicitly references communities impacted by environmental justice issues by stating:

“The Biden plan will ensure that communities across the country from Flint, Michigan to Harlan, Kentucky to the New Hampshire Seacoast have access to clean, safe drinking water. And he’ll make sure the development of solutions is an inclusive, community-driven process.”<sup>55</sup>

In this way, the Biden Plan has been updated from the Green New Deal, on which it was based, to appeal to the lessons learned from the Floyd crisis.

With respect to COVID-19, the incorporation of rhetorical themes into the policy is much less apparent, but then again, the connection between COVID-19 and the environment was much more tenuous in Biden’s framing than the relationship between racial justice and the environment. In fact, it was the Green New Deal, which predates COVID-19 by almost a year, that used language strongly associated with COVID-19 when it referenced “Ensuring that frontline and vulnerable communities shall not be adversely affected.” In Biden’s campaign rhetoric, the connection between COVID-19 and the environment was most often made by way of economic toll. The Biden Plan’s extensive use of rebuilding, recovering, and creating a

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<sup>54</sup> *Recognizing the Duty of the Federal Government to Create a Green New Deal.*

<sup>55</sup> Joe Biden for President, *The Biden Plan to Build a Modern, Sustainable Infrastructure.*

resilient economy may well be a reflection of this relationship. In fact, rhetoric such as “building back better” was proposed by Markard as a tactic to build the momentum of the COVID-19 crisis response into the climate crisis response.<sup>56</sup>

### **Limitations:**

#### *Limited Database*

Of the 74 sources included in our analysis, 58 are sources from the Biden campaign and 16 are sources from the Sierra Club. The issue-framing theory emphasizes a bidirectional process between policy makers and grassroots organizations, and expects both groups to be affected and to affect each other with their framed issues at the same time. Both Biden and the Sierra Club referred to the Sierra Club as a grassroots movement. However, considering that the Sierra Club is the largest environmental NGO in the United States and has professional management and abundant funding, it certainly operates on a much larger scale than a typical grassroots movement. Thus, its voice cannot be regarded as representative for the broader environmental grassroots movements. This affects the application of our theory because the relationships we found between the Sierra Club and the Biden campaign cannot be categorized as a direct bottom-up or top-down influence.

### **Conclusion**

After assessing over 70 different texts from Biden and the Sierra Club, our analysis provided several key insights into the impact of external events on environmental rhetoric. We found that the COVID-19 pandemic did not have a large effect on Biden’s environmental texts. Instead, often methods of addressing environmentalism were applied to the COVID-19 crises. This was a striking finding, and illustrated that emerging crises may rely on existing issue-framing ideas instead of creating a new framework for each emerging issue. Conversely,

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<sup>56</sup> Markard and Rosenbloom, *A tale of two crises*.

the George Floyd murder had a drastic effect on Biden's environmental stances. Following the murder, Biden shifted his approach from global and economically focused to American-centric and Environmental Justice focused. This reveals that tragic events can compel real rhetorical shifts in the way politicians (and thus the media and the public) discuss and engage with issues that otherwise may not have been addressed or realized. While the Sierra Club used a stronger ideological approach in general, both the Sierra Club and Biden intertwined the crises to craft a multifaceted reaction and approach. While both parties rely on a bidirectional process, it is clear that many of the same techniques were used by Biden and the Sierra Club. Our research provides compelling evidence that 2020 was a major realignment of the mainstream environmental movement. The Sierra Club is a fixture of American environmentalism, and Biden has long been both supported by and is a supporter of environmentalists in a political setting. Both of these entities changed their rhetoric and policy to integrate environmentalism and racial justice in previously unseen ways, departing from the old compartmentalization of Environmental Justice within environmentalism.

**Future Research:**

These findings raise important questions that should be addressed through future research. First, we draw conclusions about the response of the environmental movement based on only two representatives. Though Biden and the Sierra Club have reason to appeal to the broadest swath of American environmentalists through issue framing strategies, in the interest of gaining support, how do other environmental organizations compare? The Sierra Club has been working on EJ to some extent since the 1990's. Given this long standing awareness of EJ, was the Sierra Club better prepared to respond to and incorporate the social challenges of 2020 than other major environmental organizations? Future research could compare the response of the

Sierra Club to that of the other “Big Ten” environmental organizations: Defenders of Wildlife, Environmental Defense Fund, Greenpeace, the National Audubon Society, the National Wildlife Federation, Natural Resources Defense Council, The Nature Conservancy, The Wilderness Society, and World Wildlife Fund.

Though the Sierra Club did address the challenges of race and public health in their statements throughout 2020, their response was imperfect. By othering the BIPOC community by referring to them as their “Black and Brown neighbors and friends”, and abandoning intersectional rhetoric as time distanced them from the outset of the crises, the Sierra Club did not clearly demonstrate a comprehensive or lasting adjustment to the upheaval of 2020. Further research might investigate if smaller environmental organizations were better positioned to embrace the lessons of the crises of racial injustice and public health made acute in 2020.

Research could also consider whether Biden will maintain his evolved environmental stance in rhetoric and policy during his presidential administration. He pivoted with remarkable rapidity. Over the span of a few months Biden created a policy proposal that diverged from the GND to incorporate tenants of EJ and reframed his interviews and speeches to shift from economic arguments for environmental protection to ones based in human rights concerns.

Generally, future research aimed at understanding the extent or legacy of the changes to environmentalism witnessed in 2020 would be valuable. In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic and the murder of George Floyd have challenged American society in fundamental ways, and in our assessment, American environmentalism has been fundamentally changed in response.

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## Appendices

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### Appendix B: Distribution of Sources and Topics Analysed in Our Study

<b>Biden Source Focus</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Sierra Club Source Type</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
<b>COVID</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>COVID</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Fires</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>Fires</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>BLM</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>BLM</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Environmental Policy</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>Biden</b>	<b>1</b>