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Moving Clean Energy to the Center: Insights from Swing Voters in the Midwest and South

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FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS:

- #1** Even swing voters in traditional energy states want to get America running on clean energy.
- #2** To get traction for clean energy, we need a new public approach.
 - Focusing on long-term economic growth potential and the consequences of inaction works. Selling near-term job creation doesn't.
 - Tapping into concerns about pollution and the strong desire to eliminate coal works. Focusing simply on climate change doesn't.
 - Describing a vision of government as a facilitator for the private sector works. Direct spending by government doesn't.

With the collapse of the 15-year effort on cap-and-trade, the politicization of climate change, and, most recently, the controversy around the bankruptcy of Solyndra, conventional wisdom in Washington is that there's no viable public path to move the United States to clean energy. On Capitol Hill, no energy reform or climate legislation is moving and the Obama Administration is being forced to shutter some of the programs it designed to help deploy clean energy. This is all happening despite the emergence of a \$2.3 trillion global clean energy market that China is trying to corner, rapidly dropping solar prices, instability in the oil markets, and a massive amount of evidence that climate change is already having an impact. The view in political circles is that none of that matters—the public has tuned out, and serious energy reform is dead.

The conventional wisdom in Washington, however, is wrong. New focus groups conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research for Third Way in Ohio and North Carolina* found that even swing voters in traditional energy states want to get America running on clean energy.

* The groups comprised of swing voters who were either registered independents or "weak" partisans who had split their tickets over the past two election cycles. In Columbus, OH, one

Our findings could provide an outline of a new political path to get this done. They include focusing on long-term economic growth and the consequences of inaction, emphasizing government's role as a "facilitator" for America's businesses to move to clean energy, and tapping into voters' concerns about pollution—especially coal (which is viewed as antiquated and dirty). As important, we found that selling clean energy as a way to jump start near-term job creation was not an effective way to build support, nor was advocating direct government spending on clean energy. Climate change alone is an even tougher sell—it was not on the radar screen of our participants.

The goal of these focus groups was to take a deep dive into Midwestern and Southern swing voters' relationships with energy, as well as their views on how energy impacts the economy and the role of innovation in clean energy. Rather than testing slogans or specific messaging, we were seeking to find out how they think and talk about energy.

Based on previous research, Third Way believes the idea of "getting America running on clean energy" resonates deeply, and the findings in these groups underscored that belief—in fact, they demonstrated a demand for such a reform agenda. By contrast, we found that it is unavailing to try to sell clean energy by emphasizing alleged benefits that voters simply did not find credible or even desirable.

group was 50–65 year old non-college educated men and the other 35–50 year old, college-educated women. In Charlotte, NC, it was 50–65 year old college-educated women and other 35–50 year old, college-educated men.

FINDING #1

Even swing voters in traditional energy states want to get America running on clean energy.

Over the past decade, policymakers from the coasts and a handful of other tech-friendly states have been the main forces behind national clean energy policies. Many of these policies died because of the perception that there is no public support for clean energy in conventional energy-reliant Midwestern and Southern states. That may well have been the case with massive, economy-wide policy changes like cap-and-trade. Our focus groups, however, found strong support for clean energy among swing voters in the industrial Midwest (Ohio) and the South (North Carolina).

These voters want to get America running on clean energy because they see it as a necessary step for a successful, modern country. To accomplish this, these reactions point to a focus on how clean energy will:

- **Drive long-term economic growth.** The voters' time frame here is critical. They believed clean energy would reduce energy prices and the country's reliance on expensive, foreign oil, and create jobs—but that it would take 10 to 15 years.
- **Help the U.S. win the economic competition with China.** Voters believed clean energy was one of the key sectors in this competition, and they thought the Chinese government was helping its companies win this race. They wanted the U.S. government to act with the same national interest, but they said that is not happening now because of ineptitude and corrupt special interests.
- **Reduce air and water pollution that threatens their health and the health of their children.** Voters equated a successful country with modern energy and a healthy environment. To them, coal plants—and the pollution they produced—was emblematic of a country that was stuck in the past or failing to compete in the 21st century.

In addition to the gains they thought would come from clean energy, participants were motivated by their fears of what America would lose—the economic competition with China—if we fail to act. They see a country today where their interests are being held back by a broken system. They want the private sector to act, with government serving as the catalyst.

FINDING #2

To get traction for clean energy, we need a new Public approach.

While there is a strong desire to get America running on clean energy, there is a gap between what participants want and how they think the country can achieve it. Much of the public focus for clean energy advocates in recent years simply did not resonate with these participants. While *voters did believe clean energy will spur economic growth—eventually*—they did not see it creating a significant number of jobs today, particularly in manufacturing. In addition, climate change was simply not on voters' minds—virtually none of the participants connected a focus on clean energy with addressing global warming. Finally, there was no faith that direct government spending would spur innovation or adoption of clean energy.

This may stem from the fact that our participants' vision of transitioning to clean energy may be different than that of the policy community. Voters in our groups did not associate clean energy with innovations—like the Internet—that have had a huge economic impact. Instead, they classified clean energy as infrastructure, like roads and railroads. These voters saw clean energy as important for a modern, successful nation and something that provides an eventual payoff, but not a stimulus to drive our economy out of the downturn.

Focusing on long-term growth potential and the consequences of inaction works. Selling near-term job creation doesn't.

Voters saw clean energy as necessary for long-term economic growth. And they were willing to pay for it—to a point.

Placing the economic benefits of clean energy in the proper timeframe is important to building support for clean energy among moderates. Many participants saw a link between clean energy and long-term economic growth in the U.S. They anticipated the country would be "prosperous," "booming," and have "more jobs" if it widely adopted clean energy. This was because, as some of the voters in our groups said, U.S. companies would invent and own new clean energy technologies even if they were not domestically manufactured. Others anticipated the price of energy would drop, making it less expensive to do business in the U.S. One North Carolina man said that adopting clean energy would mean "jobs are abundant" and "we (the U.S.) are at the top." Another said it would lead to an "economically strong" America. An Ohio man wrote that, if the U.S. adopts more clean energy, "Hopefully technologies will be invented that will bring down energy costs." The challenge, as we discuss below, is that these

voters did not see much immediate economic benefit from clean energy. Rather, they anticipate some short-term cost increases as fossil fuels are replaced by clean energy.

All of the groups had strong, positive connotations for solar and wind energy. When shown pictures of solar arrays and wind turbines and asked to describe them, the unprompted reactions of our participants revolved around “clean.” Given how often this word came up in this exercise and throughout the groups, it is language that is clearly sticky. Other terms for wind and solar included “future” of the country, “smart,” “creative,” and “innovative.” Both sources were popular because of a sense that they offer an “endless supply” of energy that, while more expensive in the short-term, could be cheaper in the long-run. As a North Carolina woman explained, wind “seems like the concept is so simple, it’s using what God gave us on Earth and putting it to use.”

“... the concept is so simple, it’s using what God gave us...”

Participants also voiced frustration that they did not have a choice of where their electricity came from or which utility they use. They viewed clean energy as a way to get this strongly-desired choice in fuel sources and, potentially, utilities. The key will be to balance access to clean energy with cost. As one North Carolina woman put it, “I’d like to have a choice, but it would also be based on cost too. I’d pick something cleaner and more sustainable [if the cost was right].” The desire for choice also was indicative of participants’ broader frustration with big institutions. They saw both government and large businesses as unresponsive to their concerns and viewed choice, in this case through clean energy, as a way to give them more power.

The cost of moving to clean energy was a concern for these groups, but was not necessarily fatal. Significantly, *our focus groups expected energy prices to go even higher if the United States remained on fossil fuels*. Many felt that, initially, solar and wind would cost more because of the upfront costs of building new facilities. There was a general tolerance for increasing electricity bills by as much as \$5 per month to pay for clean energy. Support quickly eroded beyond \$5 and disappeared entirely by \$10 more per month. This in large part was due to participant’s continued pessimism about the state of the economy, which they felt was still years away from recovery.

Participants were divided on whether clean energy (wind and solar) would cost more than traditional sources once it became widely available. Men, in particular, had a nuanced view of its viability. They were not certain solar, and

especially wind, could be reliable in the South and Midwest. A few participants also questioned whether wind and solar could ever be the dominant sources of electricity for the United States. These people doubted whether solar was technologically ready for prime time, or if wind turbines could ever generate sufficient electricity to be useful. One Ohio man explained, “[Wind] just doesn’t seem like it can get the job done.” As a North Carolina man said: “If we do it the wrong way we’ll have really expensive energy and obtrusive solar panels and wind mills everywhere with very little return.” There is a gender divide on how costs will play out. Many of the non-college men described wind as an “expensive” technology, though fewer felt that way about solar. The women in the groups said that since the wind and sun are “free,” these sources could be much cheaper over the long term.

The economic consequences of losing the clean energy race to China drove support.

Our focus group participants believed that, over time, clean energy would help America thrive economically and dramatically reduce pollution. They were extremely receptive to warnings about what the U.S. will face if we cede the clean energy innovation and economic race to China: a reliance on fossil fuels that would lead to more pollution, higher energy prices, and a weak economy. Presented with these outcomes, participants were much more supportive of government actions to accelerate innovation and deployment of clean energy than they were in discussions that focused only on benefits. They understood that the United States cannot control China, but felt strongly we could do a better job competing on our own.

“[Unlike China] our government only cares about their own personal interests...”

Focus group participants in both Ohio and North Carolina view China as a competitor to the U.S. And they are worried that China is “out-Americaing” America, particularly by graduating more science, technology, engineering, and math majors. But we also saw an interesting sentiment that China could have a leg-up on the U.S. because our government was no longer looking out for the national interest. As one Ohio man put it, “China’s government is interested in their own [national] interests and ours is not, our government only cares about their own personal interests.”

This certainly extended to clean energy. Very few of these voters thought the U.S. was leading in that race. Many said China was, but several showed surprising recognition that Germany is a leader in the field. These participants

expressed a deep pessimism—almost a sense of resignation—about our ability to compete. They said that divisive politics and the overriding power of special interests are keeping the U.S. from leading in clean energy. “We’ll still have clean energy,” an Ohio man explained. “But we’ll buy it from elsewhere like everything else.”

Participants believed that the U.S. must dominate the global clean energy competition. They were very open to the line of argument, used by President Obama and Energy Secretary Steven Chu, that we cannot afford to lose the clean energy race and must do whatever it takes, including investing in innovation, to win. “If we are the innovators in this area it will help our economy,” offered one North Carolina woman, “but if we sit back and let others do it first it will hurt us.” These participants did not believe America’s loss is inevitable or unacceptable. They reacted very negatively to a statement made by Rep. Cliff Stearns (R-FL) (which he has since softened), arguing that the U.S. can’t compete with China in clean energy and we should look for other technologies to invest in. “I’d be pissed off [if we did not win this race],” said one Ohio man. An Ohio woman said, “It’s sad that our country is where it’s at and not at the top, where we should be.”

When asked what the United States would look like in 30 years if we remained reliant on fossil fuels, many participants worried that energy prices would be much higher. One North Carolina man said that without clean energy, “individual transportation may become a luxury item.” Failure to adopt clean energy would mean “higher gas prices, higher heating and cooling bills,” wrote an Ohio woman. In describing a “business as usual” future, another man from Ohio said “clean water costs more than gas.” They described a polluted country with a “tanked economy” that is reliant on old technologies or is “owned by China.” Sentiments like “we missed our chance” and “shame on us” were prevalent. One Ohio man described this scenario as a “poor legacy of wastefulness and short-term thinking.”

“Clean energy jobs” and “green jobs” were seen as meaningless terms, and they are skeptical of short-term job-creation from clean energy.

Despite more than three years of use by the Obama Administration and clean energy advocates, the public remains confused by phrases like “clean energy jobs” or “green jobs.” They did not work in our groups because participants did not believe that clean energy was creating a significant number of jobs today, even though they thought it will in the future. They also found clean energy jobs “vague” to the point of meaningless. Some participants guessed it meant jobs related to solar, wind, or hydro; most met it with blank stares. Several asked if a worker at a company that is trying to reduce its carbon footprint

counted as a “clean energy job.” Others argued wind turbine or solar panel manufacturers should not count as a “clean energy job” because the manufacturing process itself is not necessarily clean. Ultimately, most participants did not think “clean energy jobs” was an adequate label, as no single term could capture all of these jobs.

This goes to a deeper problem. On their own, participants did not link energy or clean energy with job creation. When we prompted, they did agree that the industry was an important creator of jobs. Almost everyone, however, believed that traditional fossil fuel companies create more jobs than clean energy does today. Some participants raised concerns that moving to clean energy would kill jobs in traditional energy industries at the same time it created jobs in clean energy.

Clean energy was not seen as a way to revitalize manufacturing.

There was deep pessimism about the future of manufacturing in America from both the Ohio and North Carolina groups. Participants were resigned to the idea that while clean energy and innovation could boost growth along the East and West coasts, it would not be a savior for industrial states that have seen their manufacturing base decimated. Importantly, participants were not aware, and do not believe, that clean energy could increase manufacturing jobs in their regions. The Ohio groups had a strong disbelief that anyone would locate a new wind turbine or solar panel manufacturing factory in their state to replace some of the lost jobs.

When prompted with a statement noting that wind turbines have over 800 parts, all of which could be manufactured in the U.S. (and even in their own state), they did perk up. However, even that enthusiasm quickly disappeared at the first mention that those manufacturing jobs are much more likely to go to China or Mexico than to be located here. A North Carolina woman said: “That absolutely changes things if they can’t make it 10 cents cheaper in China.” And two men there said: “Yes it could [create manufacturing jobs here in North Carolina]. The question is where would the plant be? ... Yeah, it’s just a matter of time before it goes overseas.”

Tapping into concerns about pollution and the strong desire to eliminate coal works. Focusing on climate change doesn’t.

Pollution reduction drove support for clean energy.

In one exercise, we asked participants to describe what the country would look like in 30 years if we did or did not increase our investments in clean energy. The results were telling. Almost everyone mentioned the impact clean

energy would have on pollution and health. A vision of a more prosperous country, with less reliance on oil and lower energy prices, was also offered by several participants.

When considering a scenario in which the U.S. does increase its investment in clean energy, the overwhelming sentiment of these participants was that it would result in significantly less pollution and better public health for their children. Most described a country with cleaner air and water. As one North Carolina woman wrote, “it must be terrific to wake up and not be bothered with an ‘orange code’ by air pollution! Today we are faced with pollutants across our country. We still depend on oil and gas for our vehicles. How I envy you in the future to come!” A North Carolina man said it would create “a cleaner planet” where “the world is a better place with less disease.”

Voters viewed coal as archaic.

The reaction to coal among participants in both Ohio and North Carolina was intensely negative. When we showed the groups an image of a coal-fired power plant, nearly everyone immediately referred to pollution. There was also a strong sense that coal is an outdated source that is part of the past. A North Carolina woman summed up the sentiments of all the groups when she said of coal, “This should not be happening anymore.” In another group, an Ohio man echoed this, saying, “There are too many options today. There has to be a way to not see this anymore.” Even when participants associated coal plants with jobs, especially in Ohio, the jobs were seen as something out of the 1970s. This took on both bad connotations (outdated, dirty energy), but also a sense of nostalgia for the days when manufacturing towns like Youngstown were booming.

Voters were uncertain about natural gas and nuclear energy.

Unlike wind, solar, and coal power, voters were not able to classify natural gas or nuclear energy as either clean or dirty. Some clean energy supporters have embraced the already expanding role of natural gas in electricity to accelerate the transition away from coal and as a back-up to renewable energy. Our focus group participants knew very little about natural gas. What they did know centered on the controversies about fracking. As we have seen in other research, participants didn’t generally associate natural gas with electricity; rather, they thought about it as a source for heat.

There was also no consensus on where gas fell on the “clean” spectrum. Some thought it was closer to wind and solar because, in their minds, it was cleaner than sources like coal. This was challenged by others who compared it to oil and coal because it was extracted from the ground. Fracking also came up on

several occasions as something that people felt was bad for the environment but did not understand why. Other findings on natural gas:

- Many participants volunteered that the gas they pay for is too expensive and had concerns about what they perceived as fluctuations in natural gas prices.
- No one volunteered that natural gas is a domestic energy source, though there was some awareness that we had access to enormous new gas fields.
- Energy independence did not come up.

The challenges for nuclear energy ran deeper than natural gas. Almost nine months after the disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi plant in Japan, our focus groups found persistent concerns about nuclear energy in the United States. This is exacerbated by the loss of faith in the federal government, which has made it harder to differentiate between the Japanese and American safety and regulatory systems. The gender gap on nuclear energy has also narrowed significantly in the wake of Fukushima with, in these focus groups at least, negative feelings intensifying among both women and men. The women had an overwhelmingly negative reaction to nuclear power. The men, while remaining open to increased use of nuclear energy, said the disaster in Japan had increased their worries over safety.

Climate change did not resonate.

Only one participant across four focus groups mentioned climate change. This was virtually the only time throughout the groups that climate or global warming was raised. *This was a stark reminder of how far the issue has dropped out of every day concerns of most voters, even when clean energy is the topic of conversation.*

Given the voters' concerns about pollution, it is possible that climate change can be addressed most effectively with such voters by putting it in the context of "carbon pollution." That phrase did not come up, however, and it will require further testing to prove this hypothesis.

Describing a vision of government as a facilitator for the private sector works. Direct spending by government doesn't.

There is support for government to incentivize clean energy.

Despite participants' clear skepticism about government's ability to boost innovation (and their belief that government often impedes it), they overwhelmingly believed that government has a role to play in promoting and developing the clean energy sector in the U.S. However, they did not fully understand what that role was. Many differentiated between direct government spending on

clean energy projects, which group members largely opposed, and basic research and tax incentives, which they supported. There was also a clear tension in our groups between people's exhaustion with government regulations and their recognition that sometimes government standards were necessary to force businesses to act. In fact, several participants cited fuel efficiency standards as an example of a successful government standard that they might support replicating to accelerate a shift to clean energy.

We know from surveys that voters have a macro-level view that government is broken and, due to over-regulation, often harms businesses. But at a micro-level, these voters wanted the government to support things they like (such as renewable energy or clean air) that they don't think business will do on its own. One North Carolina man summed up the general sentiment of all four groups: "I think it's absolutely essential [that government play a role]. We talked about the government being a facilitator; they will have to incentivize it."

Moreover, despite complaints about government over-regulation, our groups expressed general support for a renewable energy standard (requiring that a certain amount of our electricity come from clean energy sources). Several participants compared it positively to automobile mileage standards. Importantly, they thought that such actions were sometimes required to overcome the big entrenched special interests that were desperate to block needed change. As one Ohio woman put it, "without the push, companies aren't going to do it."

The Solyndra situation has not had a major impact on perceptions of clean energy or even support for a limited government role encouraging its use. Only a small number of people in our focus groups raised Solyndra without prompting. More important, when we described the Solyndra story (the firm went bankrupt after receiving a \$500 million loan from the federal government), very few participants said it changed their opinion that the government should support clean energy. Rather, it reinforced the need to make government and business more accountable. An Ohio woman said: "No [it doesn't change my view], it just says they need to manage money better."

Clean energy is seen as "infrastructure," not innovation.

Third Way has been very involved in trying to reframe the clean energy conversation around "innovation." It is a word that clearly resonated with our focus groups. Participants viewed innovation across all sectors of the economy as a key American value and central to the nation's success. They had clear ideas of

"Without the push, companies aren't going to do it."

what “innovation” meant: creativity, risk-taking, and finding new and fresh ways to solve old problems. “We have always been the innovators of the world,” as one Ohio man put it. Many volunteered that innovation is even more important to our national economic success now because of the increasingly competitive global marketplace. One Ohio woman summed up the views of several participants: “If we don’t come up with new ideas, someone else will.” A North Carolina man said, “[Innovation] is absolutely essential. That’s still our strength.”

Participants overwhelmingly believed that businesses—not governments—were the largest drivers of innovation, because they are the ones that have an incentive to do so. Some also mentioned universities, though NOT because of the research being done there, but because they educated the future innovators of the business world. *Not one person in our focus groups thought government was the biggest driver of innovation*, and only a small handful thought government could play a major, positive role. The message, driven by Energy Secretary Chu, Bill Gates, and others, that government has had a major role in the great technological breakthroughs of the 20th century has not gotten through. The only major innovation participants said government had a significant role in was the space program. In fact, the general sentiment was that government had a negative impact.

This was compounded by the groups’ limited willingness to view clean energy as innovation. For example, reaction was tepid when comparing clean energy to the computer industry. Some did note the exponential growth of computers and hoped we would see the same growth with energy technologies. Most, however, rejected the analogy because of the vast difference between the cost of developing software or a new computer and clean energy technologies.

A few participants saw parallels between the emerging clean energy industry and other innovative industries of the past. But even these people made connections to industries of the early and mid-20th century, such as the railroads and commercial aviation, which we would more likely classify as “infrastructure.” They may have been modern (at the time) and driven growth, but they were more Interstate than Apple. Still, as one Ohio woman noted, even infrastructure can be motivating: “I think [it is like the railroads]. I think we’re ready for something like that—get people excited about where America is going again.”

■ CONCLUSION

It may run counter to assumptions inside the Beltway, but voters in the Midwest and South want America running on clean energy. To get their active support, we need a new path that focuses on the benefits voters believe clean energy will yield rather than continuing to sell them on benefits they did not see

or fears they did not share. Highlighting the long-term economic and pollution reduction benefits that clean energy will yield accomplishes this. So does talking about the consequences if we do not embrace clean energy: that our economic competitors (particularly China) will dominate the sector while Americans suffer ever-greater effects from coal and oil pollution.

If we stick with current frames, we run the risk of losing support. Voters in our groups were not receptive to the claim that government can jump-start our economy with a clean energy jobs or innovation revolution. Their deep skepticism about direct government involvement in the sector, or the promise of job creation from cleaner energy, combined with their view that energy is more like roads (infrastructure) than the Internet (innovation), strongly suggests advocates refine their course. The more powerful frame is a focus on the consequences of a government that does not commit to winning the clean energy race and allows America to miss out on all of the benefits that would come with such a victory. This uses the values our voters believed made America great and could do so again—in a timeframe they, not politicians, believe is realistic.

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ABOUT THIRD WAY

Third Way is a think tank that answers America's challenges with modern ideas aimed at the center. We advocate for private-sector economic growth, a tough and smart centrist security strategy, a clean energy revolution, and progress on divisive social issues, all through a moderate-led U.S. politics.

For more information about Third Way please visit www.thirdway.org.



November 2011

Dear Grandchildren,

I'm sorry we left you such a poor legacy of wastefulness and short-term thinking. I'm sad you lived to see this.

[Redacted]

(Ohio man)

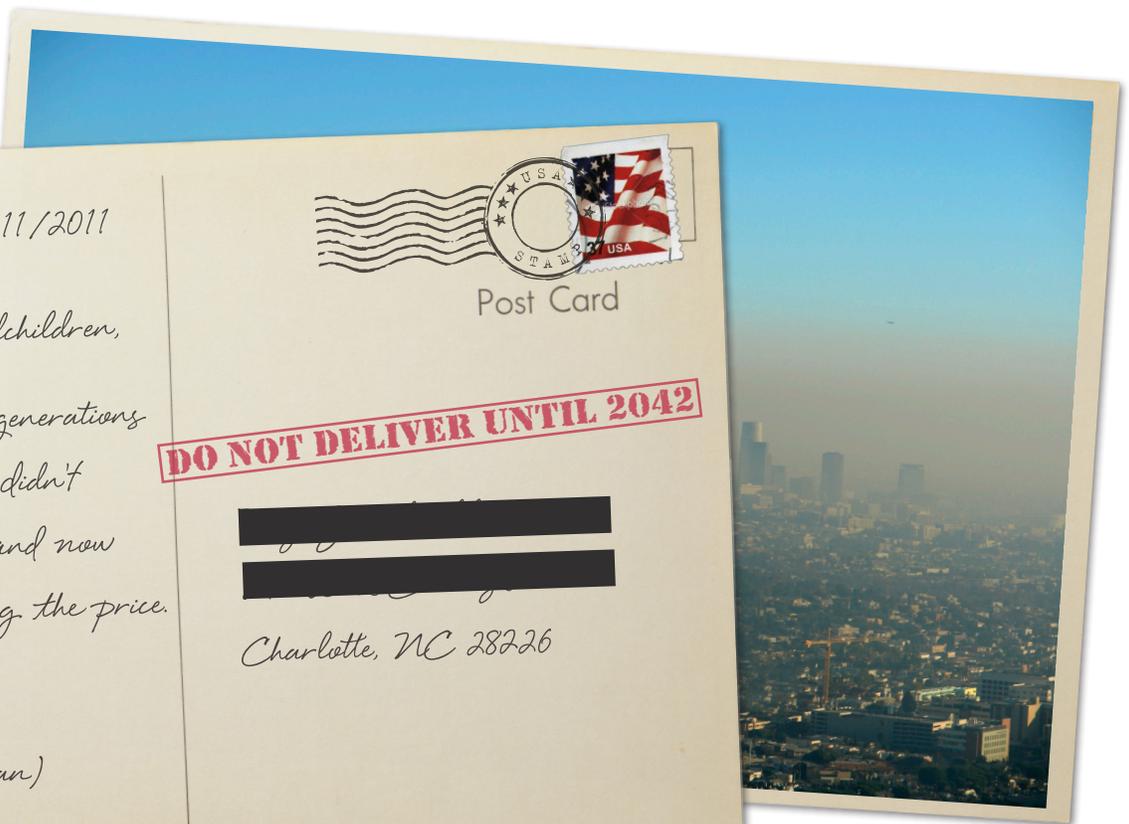


Post Card

DO NOT DELIVER UNTIL 2042

[Redacted]
[Redacted]

Columbus, OH 43210



11/2011

My Children & Grandchildren,

I'm sorry we let your generations down. Our government didn't care about the earth and now you are the one paying the price.

[Redacted]

(North Carolina woman)



Post Card

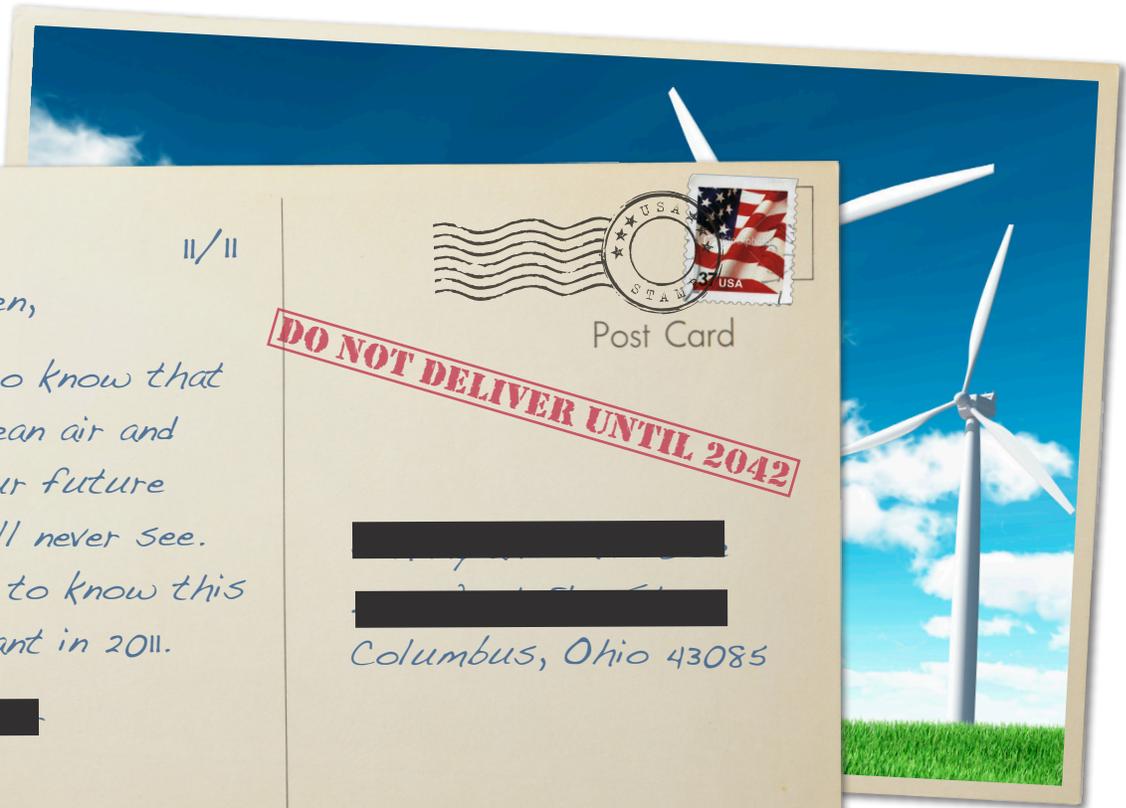
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Charlotte, NC 28226



third way
fresh thinking



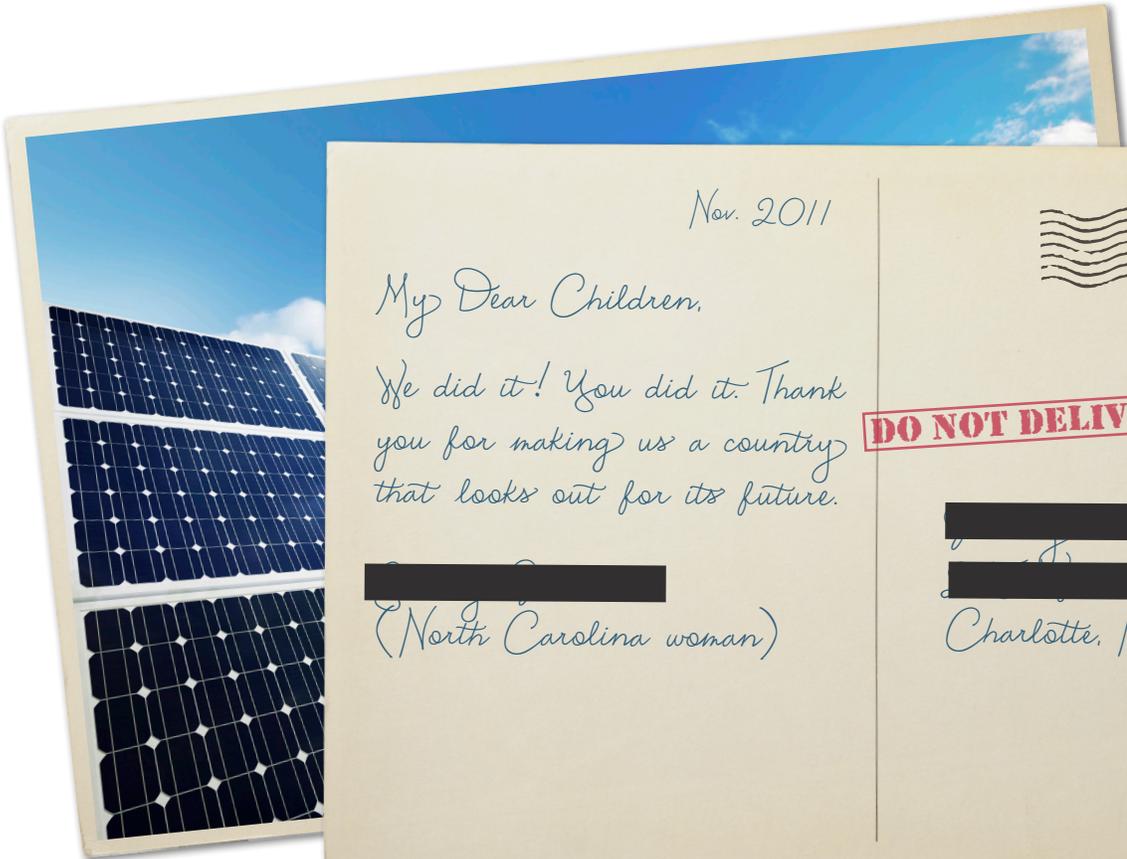
11/11

Grandchildren,

I'm happy to know that you have clean air and water in your future which I will never see. I want you to know this was important in 2011.

██████████
(Ohio man)


 Post Card
DO NOT DELIVER UNTIL 2042
 ██████████
 ██████████
 Columbus, Ohio 43085



Nov. 2011

My Dear Children,

We did it! You did it. Thank you for making us a country that looks out for its future.

██████████
(North Carolina woman)


 Post Card
DO NOT DELIVER UNTIL 2042
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 Charlotte, NC 28278