



POLICY CHANGE

# 2021 RESEARCH PRIORITIES



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*This work is preliminary, and subject to change. Questions and comments are welcome at [givinggreen@idinsight.org](mailto:givinggreen@idinsight.org).*

[Giving Green](#) identified United States climate policy change as a key focus for our 2020 and 2021 recommendations. We believe that public policy will be a key driver of the technological and human behavior changes that are necessary to fight the climate crises. We focused on US policy because the US is the world's second-largest emitter; it has outsized global influence; and because Giving Green's staff is most familiar with the US policy systems, which therefore leverages our comparative advantage.

## Main Takeaway:

Giving Green determined that (1) Activism and (2) Policy Advocacy are the two methods that are highest priority and we are focusing our research on these topics.

To narrow down our research priorities, we tried to answer the question "what methods to achieve policy change are most impactful, solvable, and in need of additional support?" Accordingly, we ranked methods by their potential impact, their likelihood of happening (i.e. how solvable?), and the need for more funding in that method. Table 1 below shows the rankings of the five methods for policy change we identified.

The world is complicated, and organizations and activities will not generally neatly fit into one of these categories. However, this framework is designed to help us narrow down the field and focus further research on areas we think have the most promise. The findings of this exercise will help guide Giving Green's research priorities and recommendations, but will not be binding.

We explain these rankings in more detail in the rest of this document. This table presents the rankings in order of priority (lower weighted scores mean a higher priority).

**Table 1.** Current rankings

| Method                                                                      | What are the proximate victories?                                                                                      | Impact if victory is achieved (importance) | Solvable problem? (tractability) | Need for more funding? (neglectedness) | Weighted score <sup>1</sup> |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <b>1. Activism</b><br>(Grassroots mobilization focused on political change) | Pressure on people in power and increased issue visibility. This could influence elections and the legislative agenda. | 2                                          | 2                                | 1                                      | 1.8                         |

<sup>1</sup> Weights: Impact if victory achieved = .4, Solvable problem? = .4, Need for more funding? = .2

|                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                   |   |   |   |     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|---|---|-----|
| <b>2. Legislative Advocacy</b><br>(Lobbying and other forms of influence)                            | Getting specific pieces of legislation passed, influencing design of legislation                                                                                  | 3 | 1 | 2 | 2   |
| <b>3. Influencing elections</b><br>(Direct involvement in campaigns and election efforts)            | Election of environmentalist supporters and champions. This also impacts legislation.                                                                             | 1 | 4 | 5 | 3   |
| <b>4. Litigation</b><br>(Bringing cases to court with potential for positive environmental outcomes) | Changes in interpretation of laws, upholding environmental laws, setting pro-environment legal precedent                                                          | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3.6 |
| <b>5. Communications</b><br>(Educating the public and advertising climate issues)                    | People believe in climate change, understand it, and think something should be done about it. This could influence elections, legislation, and consumer behavior. | 5 | 5 | 3 | 4.6 |

The remainder of this article details the methods used to create these rankings.

## The ITN Framework

To rank methods of policy change for our prioritization, our team leveraged the [Importance, Tractability, and Neglectedness \(ITN\) framework](#). This framework is a commonly used approach to evaluate which issue areas to work on across a variety of domains, particularly among those using [Effective Altruist](#) methods. It is used by other organizations that share Giving Green's commitment to rigorous evaluation and ranking methods such as GiveWell and Founders Pledge.

Broadly, the elements of the ITN framework are defined as follows:

1. **Importance:** Impact if victory is achieved (amount of goal accomplished per amount of problem solved)
2. **Tractability:** Solvable problem? (amount of problem solved per amount of increased resources)
3. **Neglectedness:** Need for more funding? (amount of increased resources per extra person or money allocated)

Neglectedness and tractability are really two sides of the same coin - we look at neglectedness because we think that methods that are more neglected are likely to have a higher marginal impact of additional donations. Also, the fact that an organization is neglected also means it is less likely that someone else will fill important funding gaps. We downweigh neglectedness relative to tractability to reflect the fact that these two elements are, to a certain extent, trying to measure the same thing.

We create a final score for each method by taking a weighted average of the ITN scores. The formula for the final score is: Importance x Tractability x Neglectedness = Amount of goal accomplished per extra person or money allocated.

This general framework needs to be adapted to individual project needs, and below we detail the specific way we leveraged the framework to rank our policy change research priorities in 2020; we used the same top two priorities in 2021 as well.

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## Our Team's Process

Our team adopted a systematic approach to the ITN framework through using the following steps:

1. First, we created precise definitions for what importance, tractability, and neglectedness mean in our specific application: methods for changing climate policy in the US.
2. Next, we conducted desk research to identify each of the main levers to enact policy change and bundled them into five categories.
3. After defining the categories, we (Giving Green's staff) each individually ranked them by ourselves, without observing each other's rankings. After ranking by ourselves, we un-blinded ourselves and observed others' rankings.
4. Together, we discussed the reasons for our rankings, and tried to come to a consensus.
5. After hearing others' reasoning behind their rankings, each of us was able to re-rank the methods.
6. We averaged across each of these rankings to determine final overall rankings.

After this process, we ended up with a full set of rankings that each of us agreed upon, reflecting our team's final prioritization of issue areas to focus on in our research for 2020-2021.

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## Adapting the ITN Framework to Climate Change Policy

We adapted the ITN framework to rank different methods to achieve similar final goals (policy change leading to reduced atmospheric greenhouse gases, or GHGs). Climate policy change in a democracy requires a complex array of preconditions, but we found the ITN framework to still be a useful tool. In order to meet the requirements of our exercise, we defined importance, tractability, and neglectedness for our purposes as follows:

1. **Importance:** What would be the impact if victory is achieved? Impact is defined as reduced atmospheric GHGs.
  - In this category, we define the proximate “victory” of each approach and assess what the impact of achieving the “victory” in this category would be. This is independent of considerations of how solvable the approach is and whether the approach as a whole requires more funding.
2. **Tractability:** How practical is this approach and how many structural impediments are there to its success?
  - Independent of funding constraints, this category looks at things like institutional arrangements and difficulty of achieving victory even if funding is received.
3. **Neglectedness:** How much need is there for more funding to go towards this method?
  - This is meant to assess how much need there is for additional funding for the approach and is a function of existing funding. It asks: how useful would additional funds be to achieving victory as defined for this method?

Many applications of the ITN framework begin by defining logarithmic scales to create a score system for each of the three categories, importance, tractability, and neglectedness. This allows for the scores to be simply added together. We decided to make use of an approach that involved ranking each option relative to other options. Our choice was driven by the difficulty in determining the outcome of policy change methods with the kind of certainty often available in other applications of the ITN framework, as well as our goal of determining the most promising from a set of existing options. Ranking in this way allowed us to compare methods to each other rather than to a set of external criteria and to avoid making any nebulous claims about the magnitude in the difference of our importance, tractability, and neglectedness scores for each method.

To create final rankings, we took a weighted average of our individual rankings. Since neglectedness and tractability are measuring similar concepts (the impact of a marginal dollar toward victory), we felt that weighting them both equal to importance would have an element of double-counting. Therefore, we weighted neglectedness and tractability lower than importance. Despite this, our rankings are the same if we use a simple rather than weighted average.

## The Methods We Ranked

Our final ranking considered the following methods for achieving policy change. For each method, we defined what proximate “victory” would look like if the method were to achieve complete success:

| Method                       | Components                                          | Victory                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Example Organizations                                |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Activism</b>              | Citizen lobbying, protests, marches, phone banking  | Pressure on people in power and increased issue visibility. This could influence elections and the legislative agenda.                                                                                  | Sunrise Movement, Greenpeace                         |
| <b>Communications</b>        | Advertising, social media campaigns                 | People believe in climate change, understand it, and think something should be done about it. This could eventually influence elections and legislation and may also directly affect consumer behavior. | Covering Climate Now, Alliance for Climate Education |
| <b>Influencing Elections</b> | Volunteering with or donating to election campaigns | Election of environmentalist supporters and champions. This also impacts legislation.                                                                                                                   | GiveGreen, NextGen America                           |
| <b>Legislative Advocacy</b>  | Writing legislation, lobbying                       | Getting specific pieces of legislation passed, influencing design of legislation.                                                                                                                       | Clean Air Task Force                                 |
| <b>Litigation</b>            | Climate-change impact litigation                    | Changes in interpretation of laws, upholding environmental laws, setting                                                                                                                                | Earthjustice                                         |



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pro-environment legal  
precedent.

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Several of these methods seek to achieve the same intermediate outcomes. Activism and communications could both impact people's voting patterns, which would have a similar effect as directly influencing elections if that leads to the election of more pro-climate politicians. Because of this, we made sure to define victory at the level which immediately follows from the activities associated with each method. For example, we define victory for directly influencing elections as the election of environmental policy supporters and champions, while victory for communications is defined as increasing the share of the public who believe in and understand climate change and support action that influences climate change.

### **Importance: Impact if victory is achieved**

| Method                       | Victory                                                                                                                                                                               | Importance Ranking |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| <b>Influencing Elections</b> | Election of environmentalist supporters and champions. This also impacts legislation.                                                                                                 | 1                  |
| <b>Activism</b>              | Pressure on people in power and increased issue visibility. This could influence elections and the legislative agenda.                                                                | 2                  |
| <b>Legislative Advocacy</b>  | Getting specific pieces of legislation passed, influencing design of legislation.                                                                                                     | 3                  |
| <b>Litigation</b>            | Changes in interpretation of laws, upholding environmental laws, setting pro-environment legal precedent.                                                                             | 4                  |
| <b>Communications</b>        | People believe in climate change, understand it, and think something should be done about it. This could influence elections and legislation. (* could affect consumer behavior too). | 5                  |

When making our rankings for Importance, one key factor was how far the victory of a given method was from the final outcome of policy change. For instance, communications has many more steps to influencing policy versus directly influencing elections.

Overall, our individual rankings of importance were broadly in agreement.



In our final ranking, we ranked [influencing elections](#) the highest, since the victory of this method is political change in who holds office, and this is an important, immediate step towards changing policies. Given the repeating national elections held every two years, this is a constant priority. We noted that some of the other methods eventually hope to influence elections, but their victories are further up the causal chain, and may not actually lead to political change. For instance, victory for activism could translate into electoral pressure that influences a campaign, but this pressure [may or may not](#) actually result in swinging an election.

We ranked [activism](#) second. This reflected our belief that a mobilized public constantly putting pressure on candidates and politicians is [an important input into the electoral and policy process](#). [This is true both](#) before elections and after them, as activism can be a source of sustained pressure on politicians in power. In addition, it may be a key part of building the groundwork for the success of other policy change methods, and one that has been [consistently underemphasized](#) in climate change policy change efforts. Overall, we widely agreed that [influencing elections](#) and [activism](#) were jointly the two top-ranked on Importance.

We ranked [legislative advocacy](#) third. Legislative advocacy refers to influencing the design and passage of specific pieces of legislation. Legislative advocacy can be a [key input into creating and passing key pieces of legislation](#), but only works if there are sympathetic politicians in office and they believe it is politically advantageous to take the advice of advocates. Therefore, we view legislative advocacy as highly important but secondary to having the right politicians and public pressure allocated towards pushing for effective climate policy (i.e., the victories of [influencing elections](#) and [activism](#) provide fertile ground for effective lobbying to follow and so in some way precede lobbying efforts in importance).

Overall, we were at the end in agreement that the three categories above were of a different class of importance than the two remaining categories:

[Litigation](#) took the fourth ranking. Overall, we see changes in [interpretations of laws and legal precedent as important](#) but secondary to actual legislative and executive action. While the legal realm is of deep importance to pro-climate efforts, legal outcomes in most cases represent “changes around the margins” relative to electoral and legislative change.

Our lowest-ranked area of importance was [communications](#), which involves creating an educated and informed public. In general, we believe that [understanding of the climate crisis](#) by the general population is a key input into policy change. However, there can be large [gaps between knowledge and action](#), and climate concerns may not be the most politically salient or relevant issues even among a very well-informed public.

## Tractability: How practical is this approach?

| Method                       | Victory                                                                                                                                                                             | Tractability Ranking |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| <b>Legislative Advocacy</b>  | Getting specific pieces of legislation passed, influencing design of legislation                                                                                                    | 1                    |
| <b>Activism</b>              | Pressure on people in power and increased issue visibility. This could influence elections and the legislative agenda.                                                              | 2                    |
| <b>Litigation</b>            | Changes in interpretation of laws, upholding environmental laws, setting pro-environment legal precedent                                                                            | 3                    |
| <b>Influencing elections</b> | Election of environmentalist supporters and champions. This also impacts legislation.                                                                                               | 4                    |
| <b>Communications</b>        | People believe in climate change, understand it, and think something should be done about it. This could influence elections and legislation. (*could affect consumer behavior too) | 5                    |

Although we agreed that all listed victories will be difficult, we ranked [legislative advocacy](#) as the most solvable approach. This reflects our belief that the legislative process is the most responsive to additional inputs: for instance, money can purchase lobbying services, which in turn influences legislation. Legislative advocacy efforts seem to have a clear path to effectiveness and provide inputs into the American policy process, though this may be within limits set by partisan institutional structures. In addition, evidence suggests that [lobbying has a significant impact](#) on the shape of climate policy and support for legislative proposals. It may be the case that anti-climate lobbies saturate the lobbying market and any increase in legislative advocacy by pro-climate interests is likely to lead to an increase in anti-climate advocacy. We agree with this, but argued that the same is true for any policy area, i.e. there are strong anti-climate communications and litigation and even perhaps activist efforts. *We may more deeply consider the ease of counter-efforts in our rankings in the future.*

We ranked [activism](#) second, reflecting the fact that organized citizen groups seem to be an important and regular part of the political process. In addition, current communication technology has increased the ease and decreased the costs associated with activism. This has led [both to promise and to concerns](#) over the effectiveness of activism given how easy it is to mobilize large numbers of people, but well-organized and targeted activism may be [quite effective](#).

Litigation was ranked third, reflecting the fact that litigation is a mixed-success endeavor, in that it may often not achieve its goals, and is subject to existing precedent and legal institutions.

We ranked influencing elections fourth, reflecting our belief that influencing elections is difficult as well as the fact that much research suggests that campaign spending is only of limited effectiveness. The path from effort to reward in influencing elections is highly unclear.

Finally, the lowest ranking was allocated to communications. Influencing mass public opinion through communications campaigns seems like a very difficult task, compounded by the fact that much of the public pays little attention to climate issues overall and many individuals engage in partisan motivated reasoning with respect to climate change. We found no convincing argument that massive changes in public understanding of the climate crisis through advertising and social media campaigns were highly tractable, especially in today's polarized information ecosystem.

Overall, while the exercise was a ranking exercise, we see overall solvability in each of these approaches to be quite low, reflecting the general difficulty in climate action.

### **Neglectedness: Need for more funding**

| Method                       | Victory                                                                                                                                                           | Neglectedness Ranking |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>Activism</b>              | Pressure on people in power and increased issue visibility. This could influence elections and the legislative agenda.                                            | 1                     |
| <b>Legislative Advocacy</b>  | Getting specific pieces of legislation passed, influencing design of legislation.                                                                                 | 2                     |
| <b>Communications</b>        | People believe in climate change, understand it, and think something should be done about it. This could influence elections, legislation, and consumer behavior. | 3                     |
| <b>Litigation</b>            | Changes in interpretation of laws, upholding environmental laws, setting pro-environment legal precedent.                                                         | 4                     |
| <b>Influencing Elections</b> | Election of environmentalist supporters and champions. This also impacts legislation.                                                                             | 5                     |

Our sense was that the highest room for funding exists for activism, which we believe can absorb a significant amount of money given that activism's power grows in relation to its number of engaged participants. Notably, philanthropic funding for grassroots activism has grown significantly within the past few years.

ClimateWorks, for example, found that between 2016 and 2020, [funding from foundations for public engagement—which includes grassroots mobilization, business engagement, and other public engagement efforts—reached a total of about \\$110 million](#); this was over a quarter of overall donations from foundations. The Sunrise Movement, arguably the most well-known climate activist group, also experienced a sharp increase in funding over this time period; [its budget increased from \\$850,000 in 2018 to \\$4.7 million in 2019 to \\$14.7 million in 2020](#). Although activism has received more funding as of late, we believe that these increased budgets may be a poor proxy for neglectedness because it seems likely that there is little effective climate activism happening at the moment and there is room for effective growth.

We ranked [legislative advocacy](#) as the next most neglected. Overall, it seemed less neglected than [activism](#), however pro-climate legislative advocacy appears to have significant room for additional funding to expand. For instance, despite the overall large amounts of money spent on environment-related lobbying, [environmental groups are outspent 10:1](#) by industry interests. In addition, the relationship between legislative advocacy efforts and increases in funding is fairly straightforward.

The third place was allocated to [communications](#). Communications strikes our team as a moderately well-funded area. In total, communications (broadly defined) accounted for [about 18% of all climate and energy philanthropic funding](#) by the largest environment-focused philanthropies between 2011 and 2015.

The fourth place was allocated to [litigation](#). Our sense is that legal efforts tend to be well-funded and that climate litigation is a [growing practice](#). In 2017, the US had the [world's largest number of climate litigation cases](#) (654) vastly outstripping the next highest country (Australia, with 80 cases) as well as all of Europe, an area with a larger population than the US.

The fifth place was allocated to [influencing elections](#), since electoral donations and campaign finance command large amounts of money each year. Due to the large amount of money already allocated towards political campaigns in the US, the impact of a marginal dollar is likely very low. In addition, evidence suggests climate donations already may play a significant role in campaign funding. For instance, Joe Biden's 2020 presidential campaign [received \\$15 million](#) in climate-aligned donations.

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## Conclusion

Based on the results of our ITN exercise, the Giving Green team prioritized research into organizations focusing on activism and legislative advocacy in both 2020 and 2021. Many climate-focused organizations engage in a variety of methods (for example, the Sierra Club – one of the most well-known environmental organizations – is involved in activism, litigation, and legislative advocacy). We used our rankings to prioritize

the organizations we reviewed and to understand the effectiveness of each organization's approach to influencing climate policy.