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PROJECT**

Photo: Partnership for Southern Equity



# **RENEWABLE ENERGY NARRATIVE TRENDS**

**January - December 2020**

**Commissioned by The Solutions Project**

**Developed by Conspire for Good**



**Conspire for Good** is a strategy and communications collaborative committed to helping progressive organizations, entrepreneurs, and social ventures achieve their goals and scale their impact. Through research, strategic planning, and messaging and branding, we help clients build and refine the foundation they need to succeed.

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**The Solutions Project** is a national nonprofit organization that promotes climate justice through grantmaking and amplifying the stories of frontline community leaders in the media. The organization seeks to accelerate the transition to 100% renewable energy and equitable access to healthy air, water and land by supporting climate justice organizations, especially those led by women of color.

[TheSolutionsProject.org](https://TheSolutionsProject.org)

#### **AUTHORS**

**EUNA BONOVICH**

Conspire for Good ▶

**BENJAMIN GASS**

Conspire for Good ▶

**MEREDITH WHITFIELD**

Conspire for Good ▶

#### **EDITED BY**

**SARAH SHANLEY HOPE**

The Solutions Project ▶

**NATALIE PAWELSKI**

Story & Reach Communications ▶

**GLORIA WALTON**

The Solutions Project ▶

#### **DESIGN**

**NALLELY CHOW**

Conspire for Good ▶

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# **SUMMARY & KEY TAKEAWAYS**



# SUMMARY & KEY TAKEAWAYS

In the extraordinary year that was 2020, the one-two-three punch of the COVID-19 pandemic, the national reckoning on race, and the bitter and divisive presidential election sparked unprecedented soul-searching that was reflected in the media. Long-standing problems – racial and economic inequity, poor health outcomes caused by pollution and climate change, and a lack of commitment to healthcare infrastructure – converged and took on catastrophic immediacy as the U.S. was gripped by the pandemic, and as millions of people rose up in protest of the police killings of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and so many others. Consequently, racial inequity became a central theme in news coverage and social media discussion of issues from police violence to public health. This included a massive increase in the number of energy stories focused on equity and communities of color.

Whether this focus on equity is permanent remains to be seen. But as the climate crisis continues to wreak havoc, those communities already impacted, especially people of color at the frontlines of crisis for years, will be joined by more and more communities facing life-or-death decisions about their futures. Journalists can play a critical role not only by pursuing truth, but also by elevating solutions. In any case, the problems frontline communities face and the solutions they create will remain worthy of coverage and discussion.

Here's what's new in our review of renewable energy\* media coverage in 2020:

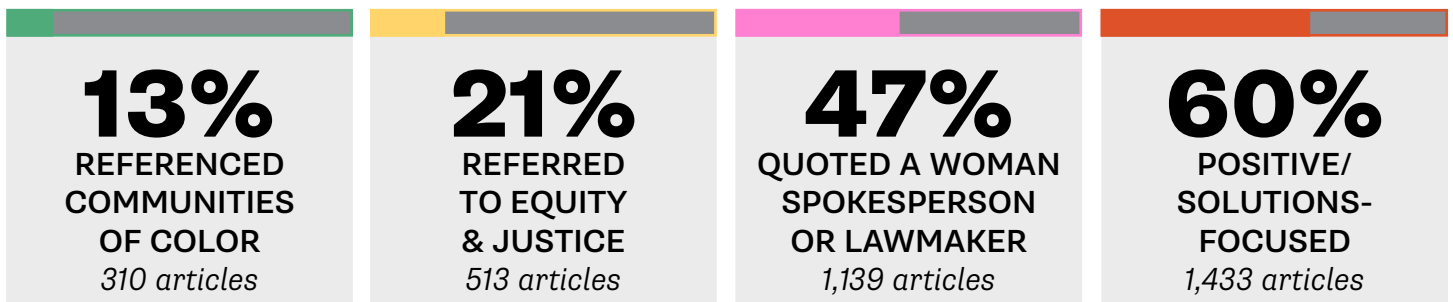
- The Movement for Black Lives helped drive discussion of equity issues, which more than doubled compared to 2019
- Mentions of communities of color increased by more than 500%
- Among articles quoting a spokesperson or lawmaker about energy issues, more than half quoted a woman, a clear tipping point in our analysis since 2017
- Messaging around renewable energy became more partisan, in part due to virulent messaging against the Green New Deal
- COVID-19 helped drive an increase of more than 600% in messages about renewable energy's health benefits



Photo: Black Voters Matter

**TOTAL ARTICLES REVIEWED:**

**2,400**  
(750 opinion or editorial)



*Note: Of the 310 articles that referenced communities of color, 194 (63%) also focused on solutions, while 116 (37%) did not.*

Tracing the history of these analyses reveals that the media narrative around renewable energy has steadily progressed to more equitably represent people and communities working in the sector or impacted by energy policies.

- **In 2017**, coverage discussed renewable energy's viability
- **In 2018**, coverage revealed renewable energy's widespread growth
- **In 2019**, coverage turned toward practical policy and implementation

**In 2020**, coverage highlighted two key changes in the renewable energy narrative:



**1. Fresh Focus on Equity and Justice:** COVID-19 and movement-led uprisings for social and racial justice pushed the renewable energy conversation to focus on equity and justice at a never-before-seen scale. In previous years, our analyses found equity and justice messaging in fewer than 10% of articles; in 2020, that figure doubled. Twenty-one percent of articles included messaging around social justice and its intersection with climate and energy policies.



**2. Renewable Energy Support Grows More Partisan:** An extremely contentious election season caused a partisan-fueled regression in views of who renewable energy is for and who supports its growth. In past years, we observed flickers of bipartisan support for renewable energy, especially in state and local leadership, but our 2019 report noted that the Democratic primaries and the Green New Deal rollout “cast the renewable energy movement firmly within the realm of Democratic politics.” In 2020, due in part to virulent anti-Democratic messaging around the Green New Deal, renewable energy narratives were again firmly partisan.

## WHAT WILL MEDIA COVER NEXT?

**Federal Climate Policy:** With a new administration in the White House and Democratic control of Congress, we’re likely to see climate policy advance. This may or may not translate into increased focus on equity and racial justice in media coverage in 2021. While the climate justice movement is expected to turn up the volume as it calls for practical and equitable solutions, elected officials have much louder bullhorns, and our analysis has demonstrated that they are the people most often quoted on clean energy issues. However, coverage centering solutions created by frontline communities remains worthy of coverage. For example, frontline leaders in New York won a hard-fought victory for the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act, which set state targets of 100% clean energy and 35-40% of the law’s benefits flowing to environmental justice communities. This inspired President Biden’s executive order directing 40% of benefits from federal climate investments to flow to disadvantaged communities.

**State and Local Solutions:** As the extreme weather crises affecting Texas, Mississippi, and many other Southern states in February 2021 lays bare, we can also expect to see more local and state policies aimed at addressing 2020’s compounding crises and the failure of status-quo energy, water, and health infrastructure.

## WHAT ARE THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR MORE EQUITABLE COVERAGE?

Our research shows that equity and justice are themes that journalists tend to cover more when the U.S. is facing a crisis, from 2019’s spate of natural disasters (sparking a then-record high in equity coverage) to 2020’s COVID-19 pandemic (breaking that record). But as the largest social uprising in U.S. history in support of the Movement for Black Lives made clear during 2020, equity and justice need more media attention. Journalists can orient themselves to covering renewable energy issues through this more intersectional lens by referring to the [Covering Climate Equitably](#) guide for journalists released last year. To quote Professor Sue Robinson, journalists educated about bias and equity have “more pragmatic skill sets [and] more flexible mind-sets.”

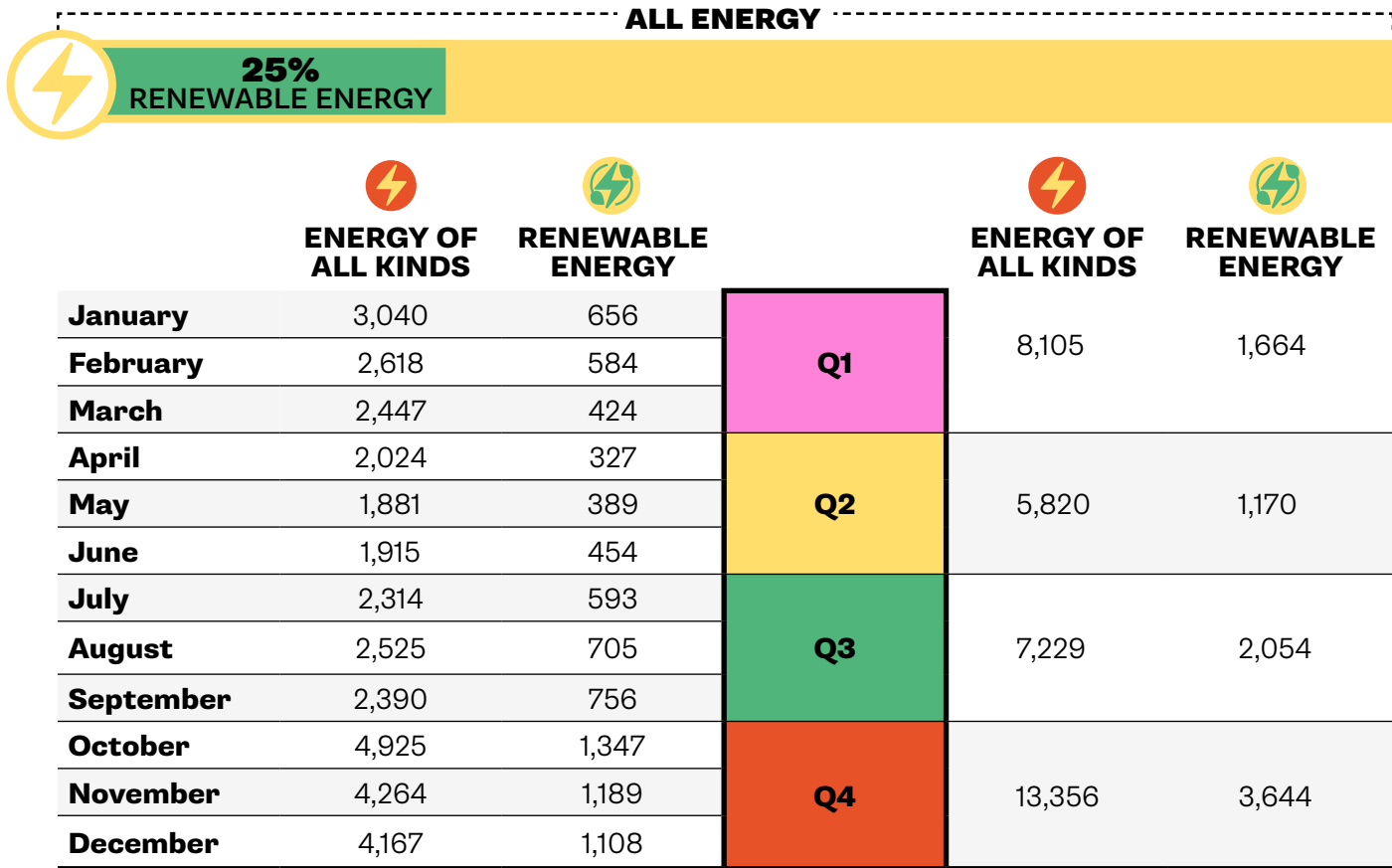
**MESSAGING**

**BY THE NUMBERS**



# MESSAGING BY THE NUMBERS

## What Received the Most Coverage in 2020?



## Sectors With Most Coverage in Support of Renewable Energy

1. The government	1,273 messages · 47%
2. Businesses	814 · 30%
3. Advocates & communities	643 · 24%

## Pro-Renewable Energy Messages

1. It's growing	1,077 messages · 30%
2. It's good for the economy	771 · 21%
3. It's healthy	446 · 13%
4. It's cheap	466 · 12%
5. It improves safety/disaster readiness/geopolitical safety	396 · 11%
6. It's reliable and resilient	290 · 8%
7. Its projects are a good use of land, not a threat to environment, etc.	162 · 4%

## Anti-Renewable Energy Messages

1. It's too expensive	456 messages · 32%
2. It's not growing	391 · 27%
3. It's not reliable	181 · 13%
4. It's a job-killer	161 · 11%
5. It's bad for the immediate environment	142 · 10%
6. It's bad for the economy	75 · 5%
7. It's unhealthy	31 · 2%

## Equity Concerns About Renewable Energy

1. It doesn't do enough to mitigate inequalities	66 messages*
--------------------------------------------------	--------------

\*Note: Message variants here usually referred to objections about renewable energy implementation. For example, a new wind farm driven by business, without policies or considerations for how it would impact a vulnerable community nearby.

## Who Benefits From Renewable Energy?

1. Workers	707 messages (economy/jobs) · 41%
2. Former fossil fuel workers	593 (just transition) · 35%
3. Frontline communities	414 (equity and justice) · 24%

## Do People Like Renewable Energy?

1. Yes	771 messages · 52%
2. No	722 · 48%

## Is Renewable Energy Seen as Partisan?

1. Yes	496 messages · 75%
2. No	169 · 25%

## What About the Green New Deal?

1. It's good	142 messages · 56%
2. It's bad	84 · 37%

## Is Nuclear Energy a "Clean" Power Source?

1. Yes	127 messages · 67%
2. No	62 · 33%

### DO PEOPLE LIKE RENEWABLE ENERGY?

We attribute this rise in messages about renewable energy's low popularity to a few factors: (1) the growing partisanship of the issue due to the presidential campaign and factional response to the Green New Deal, (2) unfavorable coverage of wind and solar projects due to widespread energy blackouts, and (3) a hard push from the natural gas lobby toward selling natural gas as a "bridge fuel".

# **COVERAGE TRENDS**

# COVERAGE TRENDS

## TOP OUTLETS

*Outlets with highest number of renewable energy articles (based on our sample)*

### National Media, including Lifestyle, Magazine, and Online

1. Bloomberg | **157**
2. Reuters | **95**
3. The New York Times | **85**
4. Houston Chronicle | **85**
5. The Columbus Dispatch | **71**
6. San Jose Mercury News | **57**
7. CNN | **54**
8. Salon | **53**
9. The Associated Press | **50**
10. The Boston Globe | **47**

### Trade/Industry Publications

1. Utility DIVE | **149**
2. E&E News | **111**
3. The Hill | **110**
4. Grist | **83**
5. Green Biz | **67**
6. EcoWatch | **48**
7. Inside Climate News | **23**
8. Inside Cal/EPA | **10**
9. The Daily Climate | **10**
10. Environment & Energy Leader | **10**

## COVERAGE BY REGION

*Of state and local coverage, states with the highest number of renewable energy articles*

1. California | **156**
2. Virginia | **114**
3. Texas | **108**
4. Ohio | **97**
5. New York | **92**
6. Florida | **64**
7. Colorado | **52**
8. New York & Massachusetts | **47**
9. Illinois & Minnesota | **45**
10. Washington | **39**

## EQUITY MESSAGING

*Top outlets with articles containing equity and justice-focused messaging*

1. Grist | **30**
2. Green Biz | **27**
3. The Hill | **26**
4. The New York Times | **23**
5. Utility DIVE | **19**
6. E&E News | **17**
7. The Boston Globe | **17**
8. Bloomberg | **17**
9. EcoWatch | **16**
10. Salon | **16**



Photo: Black Voters Matter

## WOMEN

Total # of References to Women Spokespeople

**2,148**

*Note: This analysis identifies 'women' as those with feminine pronouns in articles or otherwise evident online. In some cases, researchers made their best determination given the information available.*

As Percent of Total:

Total articles reviewed:

**2,400**

**47%**

Quoted a woman spokesperson or lawmaker

As Percent of Articles With Quotations:

Not all articles include references to people, so we calculated an additional data point based on articles that included a quotation.

Articles that included a quotation

**1,990**

**57%**

Of those, articles that quoted a woman

FOR THE FIRST TIME: Of articles that included a quote from any spokesperson, women were more likely to be quoted than men.

## Top 10 Most-Quoted Women in Clean Energy Coverage

1. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, U.S. House of Representatives	87
2. Kamala Harris, U.S. Senator (Current Vice President)	67
3. Nancy Pelosi, Speaker, U.S. House of Representatives	44
4. Elizabeth Warren, U.S. Senator (D) MA	43
5. Gina McCarthy, President and CEO, Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC)	33
6. Lisa Murkowski, U.S. Senator (R) AK	32
7. Hillary Clinton, former U.S. Secretary of State and Senator	29
8. Abigail Ross Hopper, President and CEO, Solar Energy Industries Association	25
9. Jennifer Granholm, former Michigan Governor	21
10. Varshini Prakash, Founder, Sunrise Movement	20



## INSTITUTIONS IN CLEAN ENERGY COVERAGE

### Most mentions

1. Environmental Protection Agency | **135**
2. The Sierra Club | **115**
3. Natural Resources Defense Council | **85**
4. U.S. Department of Energy | **72**
5. Solar Energy Industries Association | **71**
6. Federal Energy Regulatory Commission | **67**
7. Sunrise Movement | **59**
8. U.S. Energy Information Administration | **56**
9. BloombergNEF | **53**
10. Wood Mackenzie Power & Renewables | **51**

### Most mentions of organizations by geographic location

1. National | **1783**
2. California | **535**
3. Washington, D.C. | **346**
4. New York | **215**
5. Regional | **208**
6. Colorado | **166**
7. Texas | **117**
8. Florida | **95**
9. Ohio | **79**
10. Virginia | **70**



Photo: Native Renewables

# **SOCIAL LISTENING**

# SOCIAL LISTENING

1,275 total posts recorded · January - December 2020

Channels: Twitter, Tumblr, RSS, Instagram, Reddit, YouTube



Photo: UPROSE



\*BIPOC: Black, Indigenous and People of Color

NOTE: Our methodology records any mention of equity, communities of color, positive or solutions-focused attitudes, and BIPOC or woman leaders, regardless of post sentiment. As an example, about 20% of posts that reference women leaders were also tagged with metrics like 'conservative viewpoint,' 'anti-Green New Deal,' or 'anti-renewable,' meaning the post likely expressed negative sentiment toward that woman leader.

## Top Posters on Clean Energy

► Conservative/  
Anti-renewable  
energy

1. Ryan Knight: @ProudSocialist · 65
2. Sen. Bernie Sanders: @BernieSanders · 52
3. Sen. Ed Markey: @EdMarkey · 34
4. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez: @AOC · 32
5. Daniel Turner: @DanielTurnerPTF · 26 ►
6. Sen. Bernie Sanders: @SenSanders · 24
7. Robert Reich: @RBReich · 19
8. Ronna McDaniel: @GOPChairwoman · 18 ►
9. Briahna Joy Gray: @briebriejoy · 14
10. Trump War Room: @TrumpWarRoom · 13 ►

## Top Equity & Justice Posters on Clean Energy

► 4 Women  
► 4 POC

1. Sen. Bernie Sanders: @BernieSanders · 52
2. Sen. Ed Markey: @EdMarkey · 34
3. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez: @AOC · 32 ►►
4. Ryan Knight: @ProudSocialist · 29
5. Sen. Bernie Sanders: @SenSanders · 19
6. Briahna Joy Gray: @briebriejoy · 14 ►►
7. Robert Reich: @RBReich · 10
8. Greta Thunberg: @GretaThunberg · 10 ►
9. Charles Booker @Booker4KY · 9 ►
10. Rep. Ilhan Omar: @IlhanMN · 9 ►►



## In-depth trend analysis of highest-engagement posts

 **10** were written by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

4 were written by Donald Trump

4 were written by Bernie Sanders

2 were written by Greta Thunberg

■ **2** were written by Joe Biden

18 were by or mentioned women

■■■■■■■■■■ **16** were by or mentioned a Black, Indigenous, or other Person of Color (BIPOC)

 **25** were about the Green New Deal

7 were about natural disasters

4 were about COVID-19

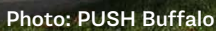
6 were from the week of September 6th, the peak of the west coast wildfires

Of the **top 10** highest engagement posts:

■■■■■■■■ All 10 were from Twitter

4 explicitly mentioned equity

3 were by or mentioned Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

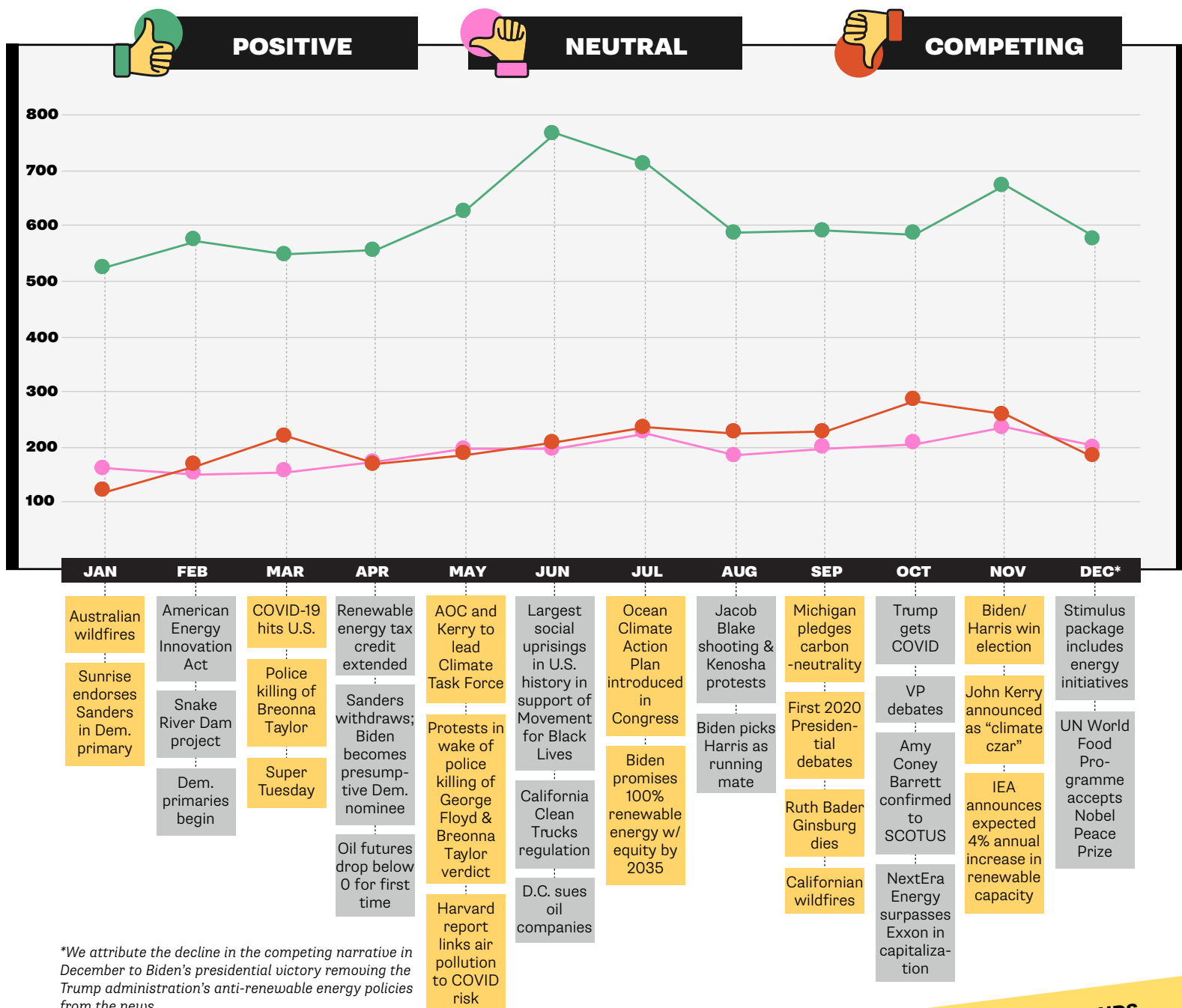


# **DOMINANT NARRATIVE TRENDS**



# DOMINANT NARRATIVE TRENDS

The key messaging shown above is just part of the story. The narrative trends identified below measure the overall tone of the conversation and the performance of specific messages. They also offer nuance. For example, an article may mention a community of color but fail to use an equity lens, or vice versa. Or an article may quote a woman spokesperson who is not positive or solutions-focused.



\*We attribute the decline in the competing narrative in December to Biden's presidential victory removing the Trump administration's anti-renewable energy policies from the news.

## NARRATIVE TRENDS

We have broken down the larger renewable energy narrative into three major sub-narratives:



The positive narrative is shaped by stories and messages that endorse one or more aspects of the renewable energy movement's vision for the future: *100% is possible, 100% is happening, 100% is equitable*. The positive narrative dominated in 2020, bolstered by ballooning awareness of renewable energy and mainstream conversations focused on renewable energy policies. We saw this in our 2019 analysis and noted continued coverage in 2020 related to the Green New Deal and Democratic political efforts to address climate change.

### Qualifying Messages

- Renewable energy growth is spurred by government policy
- Renewable energy is growing
- Renewable energy is popular
- Renewable energy change is led by movement leaders and communities
- Renewable energy could provide a just transition from fossil fuels
- Renewable energy is healthy
- Renewable energy is affordable for consumers
- Renewable energy promotes equity and justice
- Renewable energy improves safety
- Renewable energy is resilient/reliable
- Renewable energy is affordable to produce
- Renewable energy is bipartisan
- Renewable energy is good for the immediate environment
- Green New Deal is good
- We need more equitable energy policies

### COVID, Movement for Black Lives spurred conversations around equity and social justice

In 2019, we observed that natural disasters increased coverage of renewable energy, specifically advancing narratives of equity and justice. We observed a similar trend in 2020: **The COVID-19 pandemic and national conversations around racial justice advanced by the Movement for Black Lives profoundly influenced renewable energy coverage.** These compounding crises adversely affect BIPOC communities due to a legacy of racist policies that concentrate harm and disinvest in healthcare, water, and energy infrastructure in especially Black and Indigenous communities. We saw a seismic shift toward issues of equity and justice in the renewable energy narrative. Last year's analysis found that 6% of articles referenced issues of equity and justice, while **this year's metric jumped to 21%.**

This narrative found footing even before advocates spurred national conversations around social justice. In April, an op-ed in *The Nation* referenced the UN's term for climate change: a "threat multiplier," suggesting the Black and Brown communities that disproportionately suffer the ill health effects caused by climate change will only suffer more intensely because of COVID.

In May, the Movement for Black Lives led a national reckoning around race in the wake of George Floyd's death and the verdict in Breonna Taylor's killing at the hands of police, thereby supercharging equity-framed discussions around renewable energy and climate change. In fact, the National Black Environmental Justice Network (NBEJN), a national coalition of Black-led environmental justice groups and grassroots activists, which had been on hiatus since 2006, re-activated its work in June of 2020. As Grist observed, this culminated in an election season that featured environmental justice more than ever before.

Accordingly, in the third quarter of 2020, articles containing equity and justice messages spiked, as did articles that referenced communities of color. This demonstrates that **the Movement for Black Lives significantly pushed the needle on equity and justice messaging and discussion of race in renewable energy media coverage.**

### COVID-19 highlighted renewable energy's health benefits

#### ► Messages: Renewable energy is healthy

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a clear and timely alarm bell for the adverse respiratory health effects caused by fossil fuels and their disproportionate impacts in BIPOC communities. A study from Harvard, illustrating that long-term exposure to air pollution increases the risk of dying from COVID, received significant coverage. **In fact, messaging around renewable energy's health benefits was up significantly: almost 500 messages compared with just 71 in 2019.** Concerns around fossil fuel pollutants were also frequently connected with which communities were most affected by the virus: in May, Seth Mullendore wrote in US News and World Report, "The link between pollution and coronavirus mortality rates...lays bare the environmental injustices facing urban communities."

### Renewable energy remains a key policy issue

#### ► Messages: Renewable energy growth is spurred by government policy; renewable energy is growing; renewable energy is popular

In the context of the Democratic primary and presidential election, 2020's media landscape was highly political, and renewable energy policy was widely covered. Following early coverage of all Democratic primary candidates' climate change policies in 2019, after Biden secured the Democratic nomination, focus turned in Q2 of 2020 to the nuts and bolts of his climate plan. Green New Deal sponsor Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), the most-mentioned woman in our sampled renewable energy media coverage in 2019 and 2020, was named to Biden's Climate Unity Task Force in May, but coverage that quoted the Congresswoman did not spike until Q3, when pre-election policy debates intensified.



The neutral narrative contains messages that may support an aspect of the positive narrative but detract or could detract from another, e.g. corporate renewable energy commitments prove 100% is possible and happening, but may ignore or undermine equity. Starting in 2019 and continuing in 2020, coverage of economic issues related to renewable energy declined, turning instead toward the political implications of renewable energy policies – 1,273 instances of government-led messaging, versus 814 instances of business-led messaging. As a result, we saw less overall coverage of a once-dominant trend: businesses’ renewable energy commitments.

### Qualifying Messages

- Renewable energy is led by business
- Renewable energy is a sound business investment/creates jobs without mention of job quality or access
- Only Democrats and environmentalists like renewable energy
- Nuclear energy is renewable/beneficial/good
- Nuclear energy is not renewable/bad/dangerous

### Business’s role in a renewable energy future shifts

#### ► Messages: Renewable Energy is led by business

While in previous years businesses have led renewable energy adoption with large public commitments to clean power, in 2020, COVID-related market instability and increasing stakeholder pressure led to increased corporate divestment from fossil fuels – particularly oil and coal. Bill Thomas of EOG Resources, an oil and gas company, said in May, “U.S. oil production is in severe decline and it could take years for domestic production to turn around.” A high-profile story in the *New York Times* even highlighted the uncertain futures of early-career oil professionals.



## COMPETING

Competing message trends either oppose the positive, solutions-focused narrative, or actively compete for attention and therefore dilute the positive and neutral narratives. The turn toward partisanship in renewable energy messaging meant a boost in outright anti-renewable energy rhetoric from politicians and operatives. Where once we saw disagreements on implementation strategies, we're seeing a regression to 2017-era narratives about renewable energy's viability.

### Qualifying Messages

- Renewable energy is unpopular
- Renewable energy is expensive
- Renewable energy is not growing
- Carbon pricing is good
- Renewable energy is unreliable or unstable
- Renewable energy takes away jobs
- Renewable energy is bad for the immediate environment
- The Green New Deal is bad
- Renewable energy causes economic stagnation
- Renewable energy should compete in the free market
- Renewable energy is unhealthy

### Presidential race surfaces critiques of renewable energy's costs

► **Messages: Renewable energy is expensive; The Green New Deal is bad; Renewable energy causes economic stagnation; Renewable energy should compete in the free market**

A popular argument against renewable energy investment is its price, and another popular punching bag for anti-renewable energy voices was the Green New Deal. The anti-Green New Deal and anti-spending camps converged in Q3 of 2020, when Biden released a proposed policy to spend \$1.3 trillion on infrastructural improvements and climate research: messaging around renewable energy cost concerns peaked in Q3 at 134 messages, as compared to 98 in Q1 and 107 in Q2.



## Carbon Pricing: A Sidebar Battle

Carbon pricing received favorable coverage in 195 articles in 2020. While there was bipartisan support in Congress for carbon pricing as a climate solution, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission announced that they only have the authority to set a carbon price if it's proposed by state and regional operators. The implication is that the commission can't unilaterally pursue a carbon price at the federal level. The group Young Conservatives for Carbon Dividends was an example of expanding Republican participation. Pennsylvania and Virginia recently joined The Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative as well. In previous years, coverage highlighted criticisms of carbon pricing for passing costs onto consumers and deepening wealth inequities. These same concerns continued to be mentioned in 2020.

Carbon tax policy started to transform into an equitable solution with the federal Climate Action Rebate Act, which “funds a dividend for middle and low-income households, transition assistance for fossil fuel workers, and much more”. Movement advocates began arguing that the initial upfront costs of a 100% renewable energy transition can be resolved by investing carbon taxes in helping low-income communities purchase clean energy infrastructure, such as solar panels and electric vehicles. To some extent, renewable energy advocates have succeeded in using carbon pricing as a platform for discussing equity and justice issues. Overall, carbon pricing policy (a) is largely unconcerned with equity and justice issues when proposed even within the dominant environmental movement or by Democratic party officials, and (b) continues to grow as a policy idea from pro-corporate forces without remedying disproportionate costs of a fossil fuel economy born by environmental justice communities. For these reasons, this message continues to be a divisive and hotly debated issue along the lines of equity and justice.



Photo: The Solutions Project

**Special Section:**  
**STATE DEEP DIVE**

# Special Section: STATE DEEP DIVE

Following our baseline analysis in 2018, we conducted our second message and messenger analysis for California and Georgia, sampling 200 renewable-energy-focused articles published in 2020 in state and local newspapers in each state.

Both California and Georgia were highly relevant politically in 2020. California Senator Kamala Harris ran and won as vice president on the Democratic ticket and Georgia proved to be a battleground, ultimately giving its electoral votes to Joe Biden and electing two Democratic senators. Each state's media landscape presents unique narratives around climate solutions that reflect broader nuances and challenges across the country.

## GEORGIA 2020

TOTAL ARTICLES REVIEWED:



# 200



Energy of all kinds

 **2,561** articles

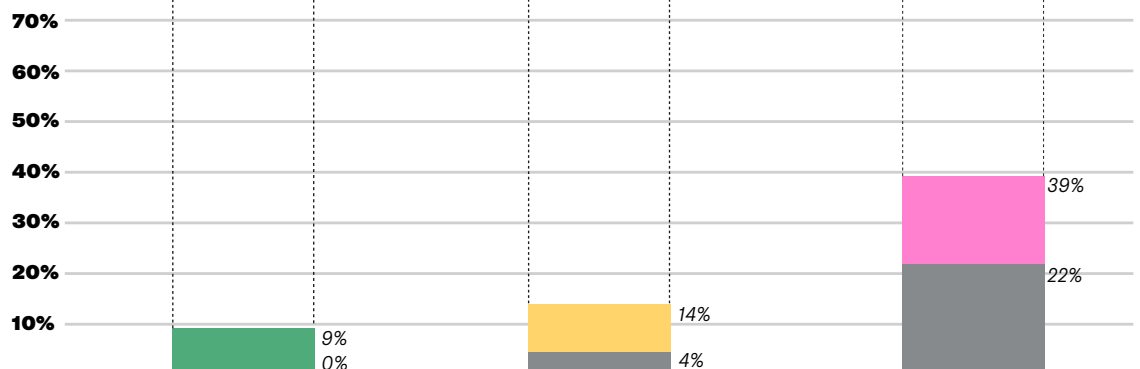
Renewable energy

 **494** articles

**9%**  
REFERENCED  
COMMUNITIES  
OF COLOR

**14%**  
REFERRED  
TO EQUITY  
& JUSTICE

**39%**  
QUOTED A WOMAN  
SPOKESPERSON  
OR LAWMAKER



**2018**

Total articles: **344**  
200 articles reviewed

COMMUNITIES  
OF COLOR

EQUITY  
& JUSTICE

WOMAN  
SPOKESPERSON  
OR LAWMAKER

2018

2020

2020 RENEWABLE ENERGY NARRATIVE TRENDS

While Georgia has yet to commit to 100% renewable energy, some of its biggest cities, including Atlanta, Athens, and Savannah, have made the pledge. These cities led coverage of the state's renewable efforts in 2020, continuing a broader trend we have observed of state and local governments leading the renewable energy transition in the absence of robust federal leadership.

**Focus on growth.** Narratives that prevailed in Georgia in 2020 had to do with growth – both in renewable energy capacity and in green jobs. Seventeen percent of news coverage mentioned renewable energy as a job creator compared to only 9.5% of articles in 2018. And 69% of news articles mentioned the growth of renewable energy capacity.

**Movement for Black Lives and 2020 election drove equity coverage.** Thanks to organized communities and movement advocates, 2020's political environment and associated news coverage were more focused on social justice than ever. And because of Georgia's key role in the presidential election and Senate majority, media narratives in 2020 included communities of color and equity and justice issues significantly more than in 2018: leaps of 9% and 10%, respectively. In addition to the U.S. Senate campaigns in Georgia, an election for the District 4 Public Service Commission seat also drove energy coverage. Both candidates were in favor of clean energy – specifically solar – but Democratic candidate Daniel Blackman also included solutions for affordability, equity, and justice, while longtime Republican incumbent Lauren “Bubba” McDonald focused on nuclear energy development. McDonald won the election with 50.4% of votes.

**Equity narratives did not always focus on communities of color.** Momentum around the movement for Black Lives and the Global Climate Strikes led to a significant increase in mentions of equity and justice and communities of color. Usually, these narratives go hand-in-hand. However, when equity and justice issues were

raised, there was a low correlation with explicit mentions of race. Rhetoric focused instead on class and low-income communities. When communities of color were mentioned, it related to diversity in environmental organizations and politics. Fallon McClure of Reform Georgia said, “We have always been a part of this movement; we just weren't necessarily seen in it.” While representation matters and, as indicated in our multi-year research, is a major gap in media coverage, coverage that ignores race in favor of a singular focus on class undermines the [Race Class Narrative](#) research and strategy that guides The Solutions Project and many of its partners.

**Clean energy developing via green jobs and industry expansion.** Schools and local businesses in Georgia are adopting solar panels for electricity needs. Due to the impacts of COVID-19 and the oil industry's decline, clean energy as a path toward job creation was seen as broadly popular in reporting. The Solar Foundation released its Solar Jobs Census in February of 2020, sparking a trend of news articles and op-eds commenting on the growth of solar-industry jobs in Georgia. Additionally, due to the high-profile Public Service Commission race, the Plant Vogtle nuclear power station continued to receive coverage two years after we began our research on Georgia. Detractors of Plant Vogtle cited concerns about high costs, safety, nuclear waste, and delays in expansion. However, the McDonald camp pushed the narrative of nuclear as a renewable energy source and part of clean energy infrastructure development in Georgia.



## CALIFORNIA 2020

TOTAL ARTICLES REVIEWED:



200



Energy of all kinds

 **4,913** articles

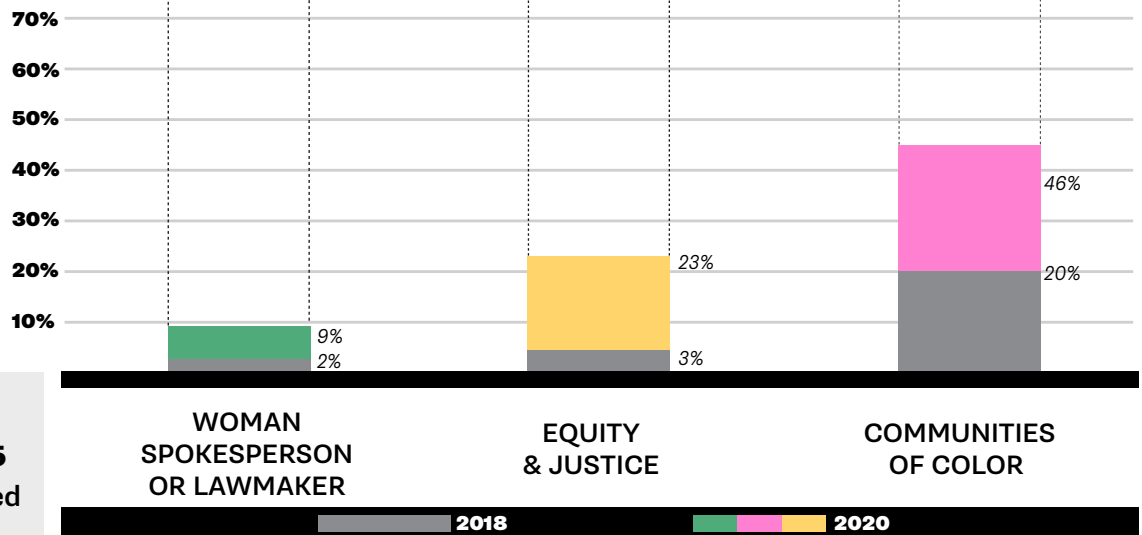
Renewable energy

 **1,240** articles

**9%**  
REFERENCED  
COMMUNITIES  
OF COLOR

**23%**  
REFERRED  
TO EQUITY  
& JUSTICE

**46%**  
QUOTED A WOMAN  
SPOKESPERSON  
OR LAWMAKER



**2018**

Total articles: 1,335  
200 articles reviewed

California has continued to be a national leader in the movement toward net-zero emissions and clean energy development. Renewable energy infrastructure has grown rapidly, with 23% of articles describing California as the leading state for development in policy and industry. Matching a national trend, equity and justice messaging in all news coverage grew dramatically, from 3% to 23%. However, rolling blackouts across the state led to a resurgence of messaging critiquing solar and wind energy as “unreliable”. According to one article, Gov. Gavin Newsom even “suggested that renewable energy might be part of the problem” and that “he embraced the goal of transitioning away from fossil fuels, [but] [...] could not ‘sacrifice reliability’”.

### **Environmental justice driving energy independence and addressing gentrification.**

Equity and justice messaging appeared in 29% of articles we reviewed from the California sample in 2020, while in 2018 these messages appeared in only 3% of articles. This increase reflects the same national narrative trends we observed, as the Movement for Black Lives resurged in the largest social uprisings in U.S. history and the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 drove wider discussion of equity issues and environmental racism. Even though explicit or implicit mentions of communities of color increased in 2020, appearing in 9% of articles, these mentions didn't always appear hand-in-hand with discussion of equity issues. Coverage of equity focused on income level and how that affects transitions to clean energy, while mentions of communities of color connected toxic air quality to majority BIPOC neighborhoods, a consequence of historic racist housing policies like redlining and corporate opposition to public health regulations. Community-owned utilities are becoming popular in California because they offer renewable energy to consumers at more affordable rates, which also makes renewable energy more accessible to marginalized communities.

**State-wide fossil fuel phaseout begins, opposing Trump agenda.** The gas-powered vehicle phaseout in California was one of the most widely-covered initiatives last year related to the state's commitment to be 100% fossil-fuel free by 2045. Major cities including Berkeley, San Francisco, and San Jose also received coverage of their citywide efforts to phase out the use of natural gas. California took a stance against the Trump administration's agenda to increase oil production in 2020, refusing to comply with environmental and energy deregulation policies by announcing a transition away from new fossil-fuel-powered houses and vehicles.

### **Clean energy development growing, but concerns rising for environmental impact.**

Fifty-eight percent of renewable energy coverage in 2020 was positive and highlighted new land developments for solar or wind farms. The star power of Bill Gates and Elon Musk drove coverage of the Salton Sea – both have discussed the area's lithium resources as ripe for production of electric vehicles. Negative coverage about renewable energy growth was due in part to development of solar or wind farms on Bureau of Land Management desert lands, destroying wildlife habitats and Indigenous cultural sites. Environmentalists such as Alfredo Figueroa, who is also a former miner, said “[solar panels] should be installed on rooftops, landfills and other disturbed lands in urban areas – not hundreds of miles away on fragile desert landscapes.”

### **PG&E blamed for mishandling rolling blackouts as wildfires impact millions.**

Pacific Gas & Electric remained unpopular in renewable energy coverage in California in 2020, after being found to have caused wildfires and being faulted for unreliable power distribution. Gov. Newsom told *Politico* that he opposes the utility, and recommends that the state take over its management. Community advocates are also proposing local control of electric utilities through options like community choice aggregation policies. In our sample, the rolling blackouts prompted attitudes to sour on solar and wind energy as reliable sources of power, despite studies that confirmed the blackouts were not caused by lack of solar and wind capacity, but by unreliable infrastructure. This shift in attitudes may also have been driven by fossil fuel companies which capitalized on blackouts by claiming that natural gas is needed to help bridge the transition to 100% clean energy.



# CONCLUSION

Year over year, our analyses have shown that key metrics related to coverage of renewable energy and equity are increasing. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and national conversations around racial justice advanced by the Movement for Black Lives profoundly influenced renewable energy coverage. Mentions of communities of color increased by more than 500% between 2019 and 2020. And for the first time in the history of our analyses, women were more frequently quoted than men in renewable energy articles.

While it remains to be seen to what extent or in what direction these metrics will change, in 2021, with historic energy equity commitments from the Biden White House, we are likely to see continued media focus on communities of color and equity and justice messages.



Photo: Philly Thrive



Photo: KFTC



# **METHODOLOGY**

## **NOTES**

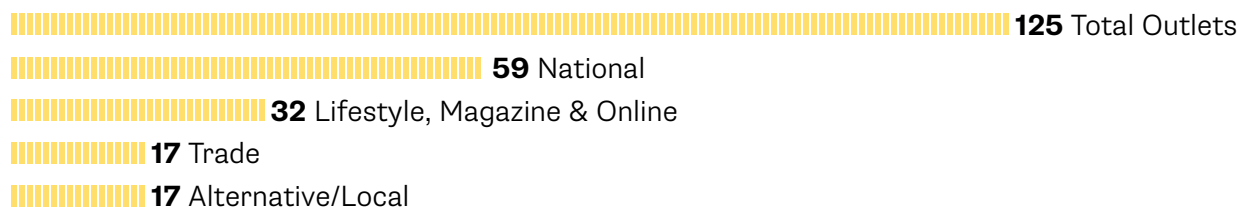
# METHODOLOGY NOTES

## KEY METRICS

	2018	2019	2020
Total articles reviewed	<b>2,121</b>	<b>2,309</b>	<b>2,400</b>
Positive/Solutions focused articles	<b>59%</b>	<b>53%</b>	<b>60%</b>
Articles that refer to equity & justice	<b>11%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>21%</b>
Articles that refer to communities of color	<b>8%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>13%</b>
Articles containing a quote from a woman spokesperson or lawmaker	<b>16%</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>47%</b>

## MEDIA ANALYSIS

We source articles from LexisNexis, dividing our article pool into four categories: National, Lifestyle/ Magazine, Trade, and Alternative.



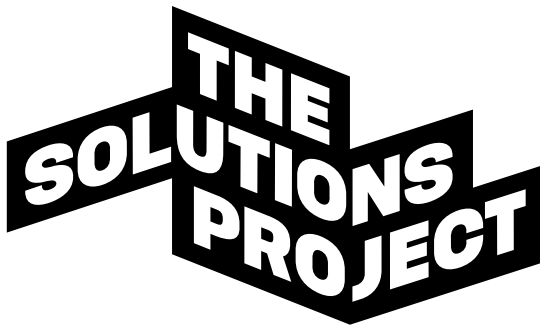
Our pool of articles does not represent an exhaustive list of all available articles, but a representative sample of high-circulation, high-value coverage. We took direction from The Solutions Project for local outlets and trade publications to follow for relevant topics.

For all except Trade, we use the indexed search term “Renewable Energy.” Within our list of Trade organizations, we use the following Boolean search terms: “solar energy” OR “solar power” OR “hydroelectric” OR “hydropower” OR “wind energy” OR “wind power” OR “geothermal energy” OR “geothermal power” OR “tidal energy” OR “tidal power” OR “renewable energy” OR “clean energy” OR “green energy” OR “energy democracy”.

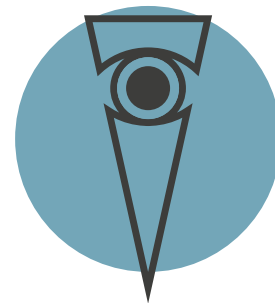
## SOCIAL LISTENING

We source social media posts related to renewable energy using the social listening functionality available in Sprout Social. For each calendar week, we recorded and ranked the top 25 renewable energy posts by engagement. We aggregated, in our database, the post text, username, date, outlet, and URL of each post. We evaluated each post for key data points: whether it referred to a woman or BIPOC leader, whether it explicitly referenced a community of color, whether it referred to issues of equity and justice, and whether it was positive or solutions-focused.

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