HART RESEARCH ASSOCIATES

TO: **Center for American Progress Action Fund and League of Conservation Voters**

FROM: **Hart Research Associates**

DATE: **January 2, 2020**

RE: **Talking about Climate Change with Rural Voters**

On November 20 and 21, 2019, Hart Research Associates convened four focus groups with rural voters in Iowa – including three with swing voters and one with farmers. The discussions centered on these voters' views regarding climate change and policies to move to a clean energy future.

These sessions left us feeling encouraged about the potential to successfully engage rural voters on climate change. Indeed, these discussions were strikingly at odds with the myth that rural voters oppose government action to address climate change. Participants in these groups are enthusiastic about a number of progressive policies we presented and believe these policies would result in important benefits for their communities, such as flood control, economic development via wind energy, and shoring up farms' finances.

In our discussions about climate and broad weather patterns, rural voters feel that, in their words, "something has changed." They recognize that there is more rain, there are colder winters, and there are hotter summers than there used to be. Farmers told us that these changes have complicated their livelihoods significantly by making their harvests more difficult and less profitable, and they are open to solutions that address them. This sentiment also provides an opportunity to show how out of step Republicans are for denying that any change is happening and for using language like "hoax" to describe climate change—language that these rural swing voters found to be utterly ridiculous.

With that context in mind, several key findings suggest compelling ways to talk about climate and climate policy solutions with rural residents.

- **Adopt the language of "something has changed."** Variations of this phrase were uttered time and again throughout the discussions. Rural voters say summers are hotter, winters are colder, and it is raining more than at any time in memory. While some respondents are unwilling to attribute these weather phenomena 100% to man-made climate change, the reality of changing weather and its consequences has opened the window for making a compelling case to rural voters about the need for action and new policies.

- **At the same time, point out the hyperbolic and disingenuous language those on the right use.** These rural swing voters find the idea that climate change is a "myth" or "hoax" to be patently absurd. They believe that this kind of language ignores very real issues their communities are facing, and is, in fact, designed to be an excuse for inaction on those problems. Our position that something has clearly changed, coupled with commonsense solutions for dealing with the change (see below) look all the more reasonable and relevant when paired against the statements of a climate denier that strike swing voters as ridiculous.
- **Policy solutions should be characterized as win-win, because they both tackle key rural concerns *and* help address climate change.** A range of policies—from incentives for farmers to improve water quality and soil health, to efforts to strengthen communities against floods—engender substantial support. In each case these policies are approved first and foremost because of what they do for farmers and rural areas. Emphasizing the rural advantages first, with climate effects as an extra benefit (a "win-win" scenario), will yield the widest agreement.
- **Clean water is an especially important focal point.** While clean water routinely emerges as voters' top environmental concern in polling, it has special relevance to Iowa's rural voters. These voters—farmers and non-farmers alike—know the potentially damaging effect that poor farming practices can have on water quality, and thus solidly endorse incentivizing farmers to adopt water-safe steps.
- **Additionally, rural voters endorse broad-based policy solutions that seem commonsense and workable to them.** There is just as much support for large-scale policies such as reducing pollution from power plants, industrial facilities, and vehicles as there is for rural- and farm-centric policies. These large-scale policies may not have the same day-to-day impact on their communities as flood or soil policies, but rural voters nonetheless see them as reasonable and commonsense. In fact, reducing power plant and factory pollution was the most popular policy tested overall, in part because rural residents believe big polluters should (and can afford to) be held to account.
- **Avoid language that strikes rural residents as hyperbolic.** Other research has found that Democratic primary voters consider climate change to be a true crisis. However, just as they ding Republicans for "myth" and "hoax", these rural swing voters push back against language on our side that strikes them as over the top, even if that same language helps mobilize base voters. For example, rural swing voters doubt the credibility of statements about a "climate crisis" or "climate catastrophe" and this language can cause some of them to tune out the substance of what is being said. More measured language about climate change being a "growing problem" or "continuing problem"—and, of course, the basic notion that "something has changed"—draws attention back to where it is needed: on the solutions that most of these swing voters endorse.