

# A ‘jaw-dropping’ 15 million super-environmentalists don’t vote in the midterms

The Environmental Voter Project aims to mobilize "the silent green majority."

[JOE ROMM](https://thinkprogress.org/15-million-super-environmentalists-dont-vote-in-the-midterms/) ThinkProgress SEP 4, 2018 <https://thinkprogress.org/15-million-super-environmentalists-dont-vote-in-the-midterms/>

The most important environmental effort you’ve probably never heard of — the Environmental Voter Project (EVP) — doesn’t talk about the environment much, if ever.

But that’s because talking about the environment isn’t the solution to perhaps the biggest solvable problem the environmental movement has: a lack of voters. There are 10 to 15 million so-called “super-environmentalists” who are registered to vote in this country, but generally don’t.

If they voted more consistently, it could change U.S. politics, as candidates from both parties would need to work to win their vote.

Yet as EVP’s own randomized-control studies show, the way to get such non-voters to vote is not through messaging about the environment, since they already take enough care in their personal life to reduce their footprint.

So what is the winning message? To get the answer, ThinkProgress spoke to Nathaniel Stinnett, EVP’s founder and executive director.

He explained that EVP is a nonpartisan nonprofit that is “laser-focused on finding environmentalists who don’t vote and turning them into better voters.” That’s all they do.

“We don’t endorse candidates. We don’t talk about particular policies. We don’t even try to persuade people to care more about climate and the environment.

We think it is increasingly hard to change people’s minds about these issues, and we are going to focus on changing people’s behavior, rather than changing people’s minds.

They target the “already-persuaded super-environmentalists” who are registered to vote but generally don’t, as Stinnett describes, and “we try to turn them into more consistent voters.”

Super-environmentalists are defined as people who identify the environment as one of their top priorities in surveys conducted by EVP. Whether or not you voted is a matter of public record. So, in the modern digital era, using “[cutting-edge data analytics and predictive modeling tools](#),” as EVP does, it’s fairly straightforward to find non-voters and poll or survey them.

It turns out that some 15.8 million super-environmentalists were registered to vote in the 2014 midterm elections, but didn’t. Even in the 2016 presidential election, some 10.1 million didn’t vote — and remember, that election was decided by 77,000 votes in just three states.

These are “jaw-dropping” numbers says Stinnett. But that means they are also a jaw-dropping opportunity.

Stinnett argues that persuading a voter who doesn’t rank the environment or climate change as a top priority that it should be is considerably more difficult than merely persuading a registered voter that they should vote.

Certainly, modern social and behavioral science support Stinnett’s view that changing someone’s mind on a major issue is much harder than merely changing a specific action they take — particularly when it is an action that they’ve already signed up for.

The message the EVP uses is straight out of the behavioral science playbook created by people like Dan Kahneman, who won the 2002 Nobel Prize in economics for his pioneering work on the psychology of decision-making.

One of Kahneman’s key points, as explained in his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, is that over the course of human evolution, we developed a great many decision-making shortcuts so we could make faster decisions.

After all, tens of thousands of years ago, if you heard strange sounds in the forest, and saw members of your tribe running away from the noise, what is the safest thing for you to do? Should you take the time to listen carefully to see if the sounds are getting closer or if you can determine whether they are coming from something dangerous or not?

No, the safest thing to do is what everyone else is doing. We are social animals and are definitely influenced by peer pressure and group norms.

So the core message is simple, nonpartisan, and apolitical.

All it involves is informing these super-environmentalist non-voters by phone, in person, or online (via email or text) that there is an upcoming election and whether they vote or not is a matter of public record.

Non-voters may also be informed of how many people living on their street voted in the last election, with questions such as: [“Did you know that last time there was a City Council election, 87 percent of your block voted and you didn’t?”](#)

These “behavioral nudges” situate a person in their peer group and that motivates people to act.

Similarly, non-voters are encouraged to sign an [“environmental voter pledge”](#) that they will vote. [Recent behavioral research shows “young people who pledge to vote”](#) are more likely to turn out than those who are contacted using standard get-out-the-vote materials.”

The EVP makes repeated contacts during a given election and then follows up in subsequent elections. They don’t just focus on national elections, but also state and local elections “that seemingly have nothing to do with the environment — such as district attorney races — because voting is a sticky habit,” says Stinnett. “Someone who votes for the first time is then significantly more likely to vote in the next election.”

The EVP has tested this approach on a large group and compared the results to a randomly chosen control group of such non-voters who were never contacted by them.

Stinnett tells Think Progress that over the course of four elections during their first year in Massachusetts, they measured a 12.1% rise in voting in their test group compared to the control group. If reproduced nationwide, that could mean nearly 2 million more environmental voters in the midterms.

One reason the effect is so big is that voter data is public, so after one or two elections, other groups and politicians start targeting this new voter.

As the website sums up, the EVP “is acting as a pipeline, pushing environmentalists into the electoral process, and we won’t stop until we’ve built an army of environmental super voters.”