

Climate Change and the Green New Deal: Diverse Perspectives Surrounding Climate Justice in Connecticut



Shayla Peterson, Department of Environment, Geography and Marine Sciences, Southern Connecticut State University

INTRODUCTION

Given the current climate crisis, it is imperative to achieve a greater understanding of what exactly motivates individuals to act more sustainably and support/oppose environmental legislation, particularly the Green New Deal. Individual action driven by implementations by policymakers and governance will be a requirement moving forward to maintain a level of sustainability that is befitting in terms of mitigating climate catastrophe. The purpose of this exploratory research is to investigate and disseminate the effects of the climate justice movement on Connecticut State University students' tendencies to understand climate change and climate justice, and to potentially engage in sustainability in their daily lives. This research will also reveal if these exposures and lifestyle shifts lead students to support policy that implements facets of climate justice, such as the Green New Deal. The information gained from this research will provide baseline data which will be applied to future policy and regulations to gently coerce the American public into sustainable modes of living.

- Consequences of worsening climate change are most threatening to vulnerable communities. This is plainly unjust.
- Environmental/climate justice seeks to reduce the inequity present between persons, and the depletion or destruction of natural resources.
- The general focus of most climate justice organizations is not only to reduce emissions and stop global warming, but to address the inequitable consequences resulting from the oil industry and to shift into a renewable, green economy (Schlosberg and Collins, 2014).
- Awareness, discussion and media coverage of climate change have all increased since 2016 (Ballew *et al.*, 2019).
- The Green New Deal proposed by Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in 2019 became the legislative plan of the climate justice movement.

Now, amid multiple societal upheavals, it is crucial to recognize the interconnections between crises: climate change, coronavirus, and systemic racism. The pandemic and widespread equal rights activism are reinforcing the need for a Green New Deal or similar policy, which places public health and equity at the forefront of all political decision making. Studying the effects that this rising movement will have on individuals' perceptions of climate justice, sustainability and the Green New Deal, especially during the era of coronavirus and the Black Lives Matter movement, will prove momentous for future sustainable policy applications.

METHODS

A quantitative methodological approach that gathers quantitative data through surveying and is supported by qualitative data yielded by short answer questioning was employed for this research project. The Likert scale survey consisted of three sections: an Involvement Survey, which determined participants' involvement in 5 categories (Sustainability, Climate Justice, Green New Deal, Climate Change, Politics/Voting); a Green New Deal Priorities Survey, which revealed participants' agreement with the legislative priorities listed in the document; and a Voting Priorities Survey, which yielded a more general look into the legislative priorities of the student population. The short answer section was tailored to inspect individualized views on climate justice, sustainability and the Green New Deal.

97 students ($n=97$) responded to the questionnaire in full. Table 1 describes demographic characteristics of the research population. Survey responses were statistically analyzed individually and categorically. Descriptive and frequency statistics were employed conjunctively to ensure validity and reveal any specific phrase-based perceptions. This analysis provided the broad statistical content and relationships in data that can be applied to a wider population. Short answer questions were deeply analyzed using theoretical thematic analysis. Lists of themes were determined for terms "Climate Justice", "Green New Deal", and "Sustainability", which accurately summarize the views of respondents related to these overarching concepts.

Table 1 Demographic Summary of Population ($n=97$)

Race/Ethnicity	Percent	Level of Education	Percent	Political Affiliation	Percent
White	66	Some high school	0	Democrat	47
Hispanic, Latino or Spanish	15	High school graduate	14	Republican	16
Black/African American	10	Some college	69	Green	2
Asian/Asian Indian	1	Trade/Technical/Vocational training	0	Libertarian	7
Middle Eastern/North African	1	Some postgraduate work	11	Independent	9
Other	6	Postgraduate degree	6	Other	19
Prefer not to answer	1				
TOTAL	100	TOTAL	100	TOTAL	100
Income Level	Percent	Gender	Percent	Registered Voter	Percent
\$25k or less	24	Male	32	Yes	89
\$25k-\$50k	17	Female	62	No	10
\$50k-\$75k	12	Non-binary	6	Not sure	1
\$75k-\$100k	14				
\$100k+	12				
Prefer not to answer	21				
TOTAL	100	TOTAL	100	TOTAL	100

Chart 1 Involvement Index Descriptive Statistics

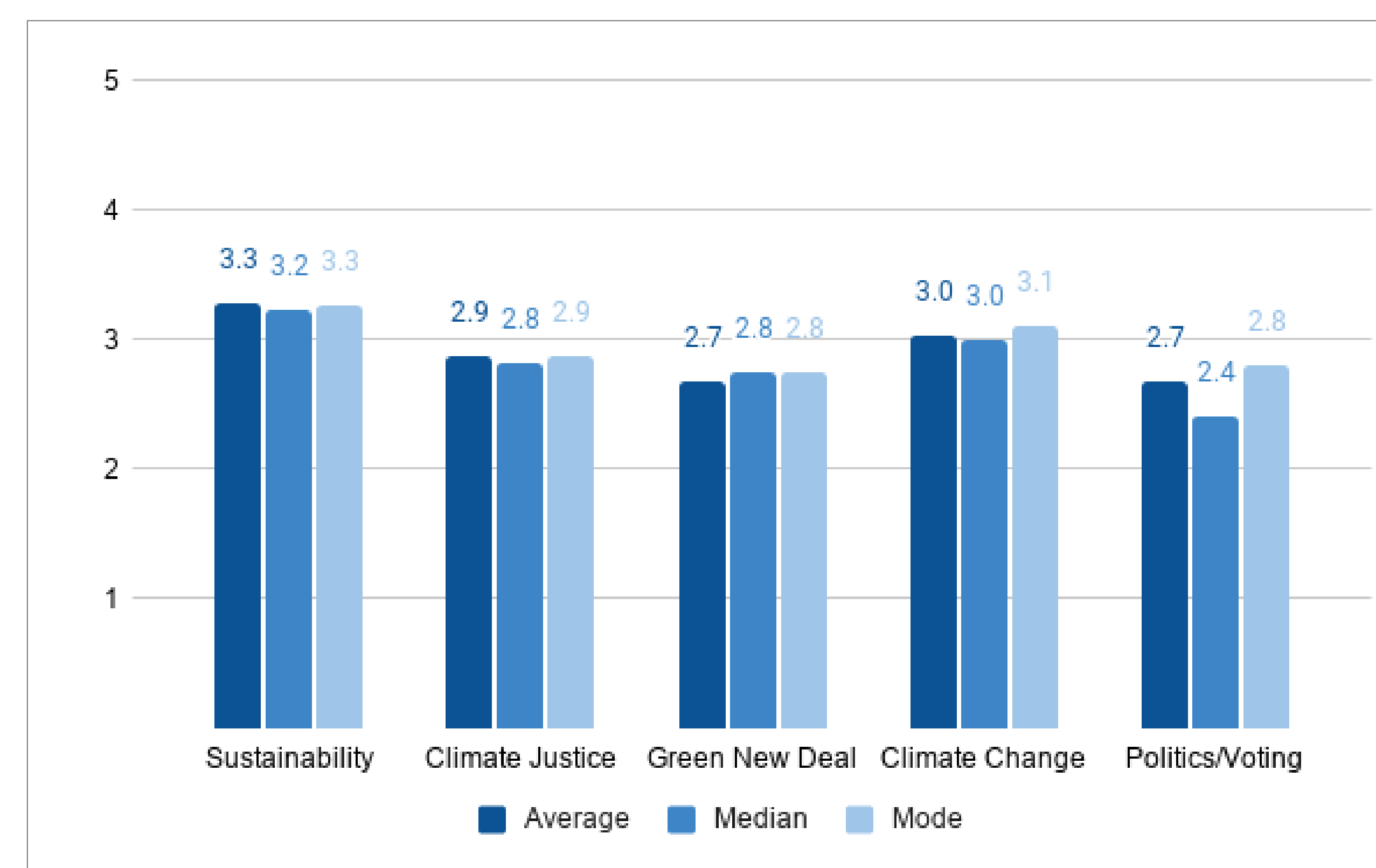


Chart 2 Green New Deal Priorities

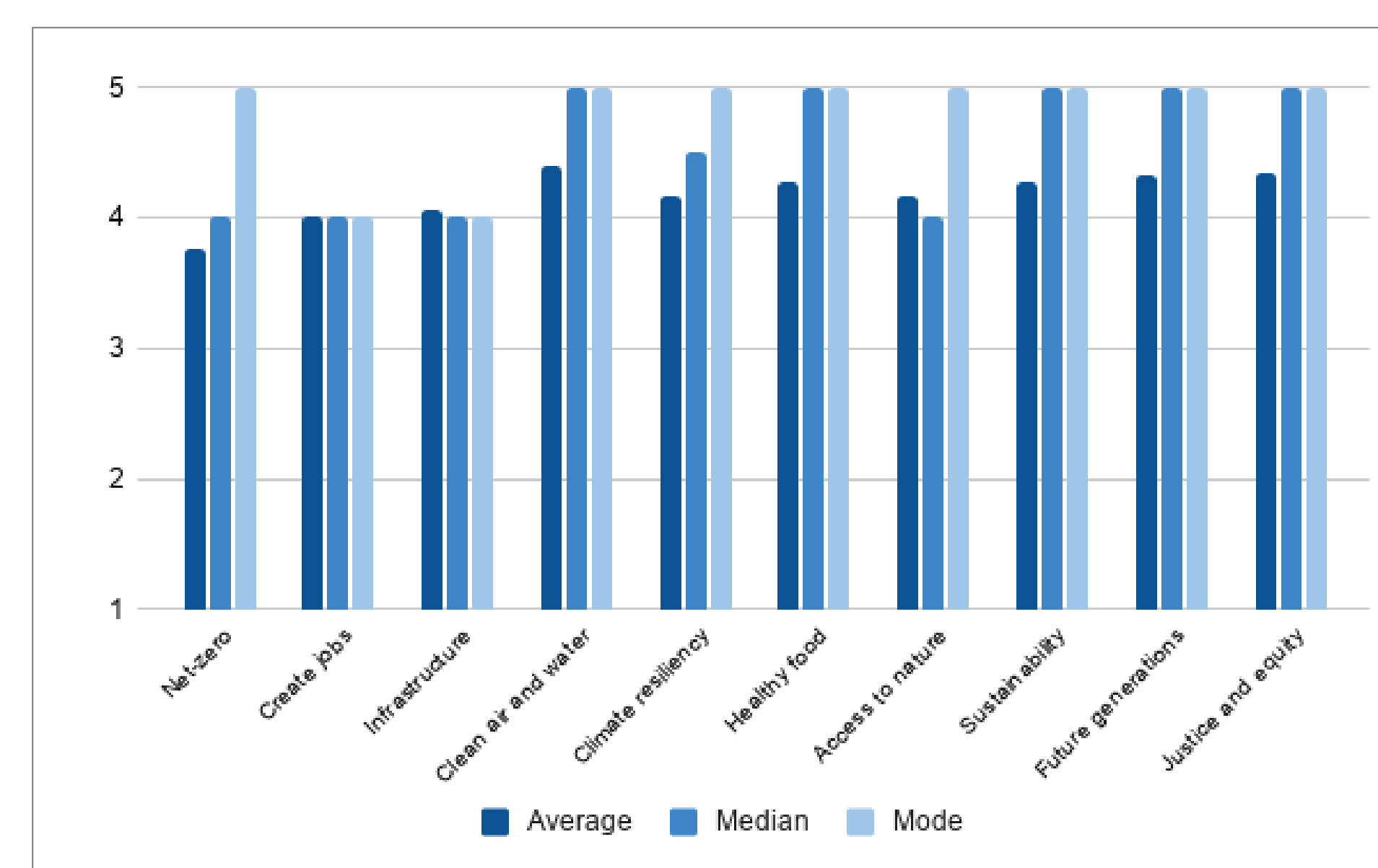
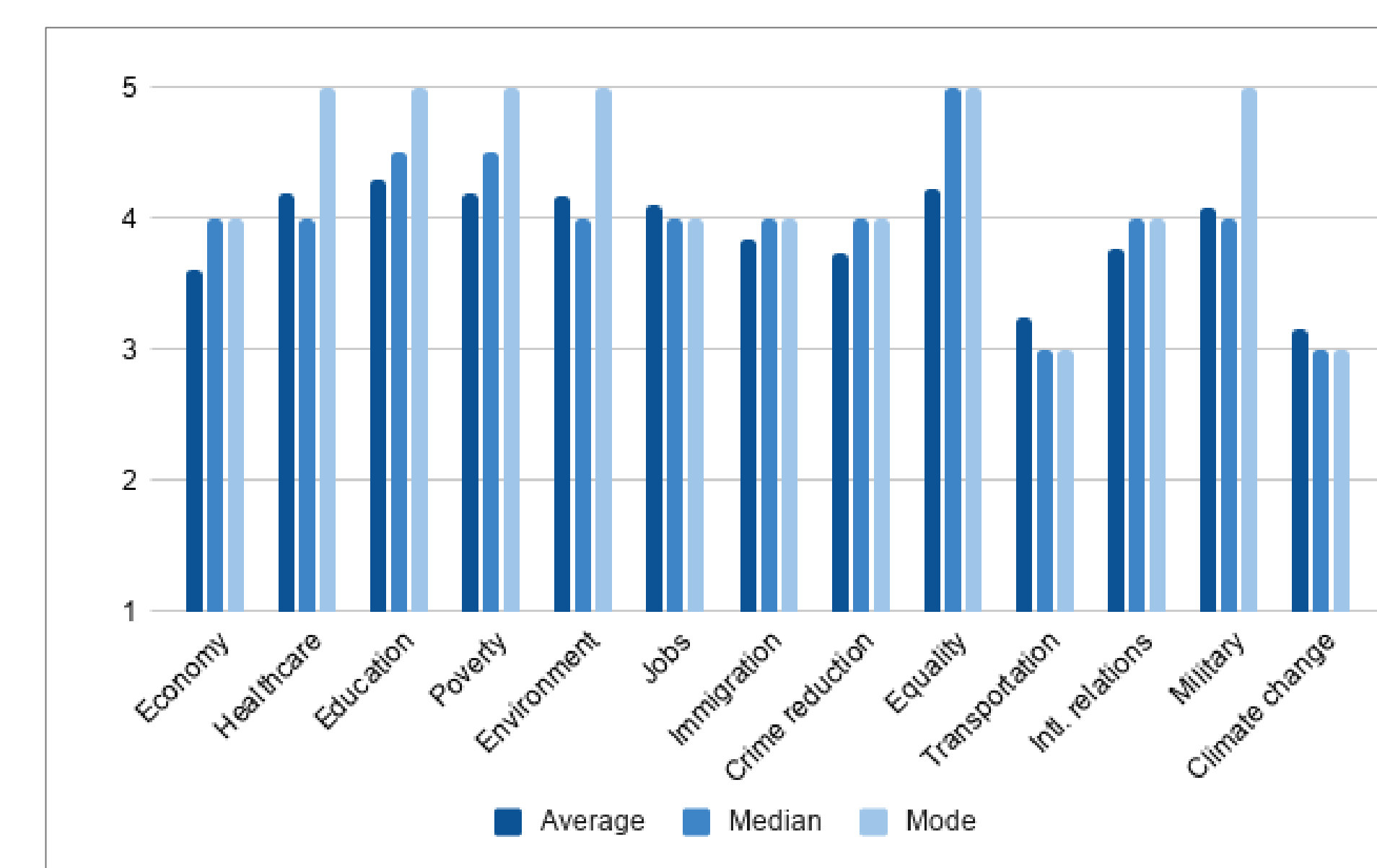


Chart 3 Voting Priorities



REFERENCES

Ballew, M. T., Leiserowitz, A., Roser-Renouf, C., Rosenthal, S. A., Kotcher, J. E., Marlon, J. R., & Maibach, E. W. (2019) Climate change in the American mind: Data, tools, and trends. *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*, 61: 4-18.

Martiskainen, M., Axon, S., Sovakool, B. J., Sareen, S., Furszyfer Del Rio, D., & Axon, K. (2020) Contextualizing climate justice activism: knowledge, emotions, motivations, and actions among climate strikers in six cities. *Global Environmental Change*, 65.

Schlosberg, D., and Collins, L.B. (2014) From environmental to climate justice: climate change and the discourse of environmental justice. *Review for WIREs Climate Change*.

RESULTS

- Involvement Index results indicate a lack of undergraduate student understanding and participation in climate justice, the Green New Deal, and politics/voting.
- Students agree with the ideologies that the Green New Deal sets forth. Most readily identify the climate justice movement as a vessel to "promote the Green New Deal" and "address climate change".
- Informational neutrality pervades notions of sustainability. The most chosen answer in response to Sustainability category phrases was "Neutral".
- Connections made to sustainability remained surface-level, with an emphasis on "resources" and the responsibility of the individual as opposed to corporate/legislative responsibility.
- Responses to the Voting Priorities Index go well in conjunction with Green New Deal priorities; an emphasis is placed on people-centered concepts such as healthcare, education, poverty, and equality.
- The Green New Deal is coupled mainly with the Democratic platform
- Mainstream news and social media are the most common platforms for coverage of the Green New Deal and the climate justice movement.
- These results are based on a population that is adequately representative of the Connecticut state population as according to the US Census Bureau.
- Most students identified as registered voters, but their participation in politics is lacking.

CONCLUSIONS

Looking back to 2019, conversations about climate change and justice were happening much more readily with the increasing popularity of the Green New Deal (Martiskainen *et al.*, 2020). It appears that there has been a general decline in climate justice discourse since the Green New Deal was first revealed, which may have been brought about by several national-level and international-level influences including the coronavirus pandemic.

Climate change, justice and equity should be reintroduced into general discourse and prioritized in response to the worsening climate crisis. It is blatantly clear that large corporations and powerful politicians have succeeded in convincing the general population that the climate crisis, and its ubiquitous consequences, are to be handled by means of individual sustainability, such as driving electric cars and eating less red meat.

Along with the above topics, sustainability should be reintroduced to the general public in a new light: one that frames environmental solutions around compassion for people and a holistic view of nature. Students responded in a manner that shows a background of compassion for people and the environment. Emotional connections are formed with the environment, not with a crisis. A new framework is required to realize climate justice: a framework not based upon impending doom, but one based upon basic rights, holding powerful figures accountable, and equity for vulnerable groups. Legislators are encouraged to take notice of these indicative findings and apply them to the creation of future sustainable policy that speaks to the cornerstone priorities of young adult voters.

Suggestions for further research include similar studies but at a larger scale, gathering participants from multiple states across the United States. It may also be worthwhile to gather perspectives of state legislators and compare to the priorities of young adults, revealing potential misalignments between the wills of people and their representatives.

Corresponding Author Email:
petersons13@southernct.edu