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To: Middlebury Research Students

From: VT AFL CIO

RE: **Research Proposal: Amending Vermont's Constitution: Analysis and Strategy**

Objective: Proposal 3 (<https://legislature.vermont.gov/bill/status/2024/PR.3>) will enshrine the right to collective bargaining into the Vermont constitution. As part of the constitutional amendment process, Proposal 3, once finalized by the legislature, will go before Vermont voters in the 2026 general election. This research project aims to examine the three most recent Vermont constitutional amendment votes to gain insights into voter behavior and outreach effectiveness. Students will analyze voter turnout by town and county, spending associated with each amendment campaign, overall trends, and provide recommendations for improving outreach efforts for the upcoming 2026 statewide vote. We are also looking for an analysis of the opposition efforts in Illinois on the vote there to enshrine the right to bargain in the state constitution.

Research Tasks:

1. **Review of Amendment Votes:**

- Identify the three most recent Vermont constitutional amendments.
- Summarize the content and context of each amendment.
- Examine the outcomes, including statewide approval rates.

2. **Voter Turnout Analysis:**

- Collect and analyze data on voter turnout by town and county for each amendment vote.
- Compare turnout rates across amendments and identify any geographic patterns or discrepancies.

3. **Campaign Spending Assessment:**

- Research spending data for each amendment campaign
- Compare spending levels to outcomes to identify any potential correlations.

4. **Trend Identification:**

- Synthesize findings to identify overall trends in voter engagement, campaign effectiveness, and geographic participation.
- Highlight any shifts in turnout or spending over time.

5. **Outreach Recommendations:**

- Develop evidence-based suggestions for enhancing voter outreach and participation in the 2026 statewide vote.
- Address potential barriers to voter engagement and propose innovative strategies tailored to Vermont's demographic and geographic characteristics.

6. **Research Illinois collective bargaining amendment opposition**

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- What groups were involved in opposing the votes
- What arguments did they make
- How much and who spent on the opposition of the amendment.

Deliverables: Students will produce a comprehensive report that includes:

- A summary of the three amendment votes.
- Detailed analyses of voter turnout, campaign spending, and identified trends.
- A set of actionable outreach recommendations for the 2026 vote.

Resources: The Vermont Secretary of State has extensive records available online.

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Growing Vermont for a Resilient Future

Project Partner: *Kevin Chu, Executive Director of the Vermont Futures Project*

Potential Resource Partners

Vermont Professionals of Color Network, Vermont Council on Rural Development, Vermont Land Trust, Vermont Housing Finance Agency, Vermont Afghan Alliance, Southwestern Vermont Chamber of Commerce, Vermont Declaration of Inclusion, Vermont Community Foundation, Vermont Council on World Affairs, Energy Action Network, UVM Health Network.

Background Context

Vermont is the third oldest and third whitest state in the country. This has major implications for its labor force now and in the coming decades. A declining workforce and tax base will continue to exacerbate existing affordability challenges and socioeconomic inequities. In response to these projected trends, [Vermont Futures](#), a non-partisan, non-profit organization initiated by the [Vermont Chamber of Commerce](#), has launched a statewide economic action plan to answer this mission question: *How can we use data to support the evolution of Vermont's economy towards a thriving future full of opportunity for all?* The action plan considers economic, environmental, and equity perspectives to answer this leading question.

The framework of the plan is simple: Vermont's future depends on people and places. By *People and Places*, they believe Vermont needs more people, especially younger individuals, families, a more diverse workforce, and more housing to support this growth. Based on data analysis, Vermont Futures Project have set a goal to grow Vermont's population to 802,000 people and the non-seasonal housing stock to 350,000 units by 2035. Vermont's current population is estimated at approximately 648,000 with non-seasonal housing stock at approximately 273,000 units. The action plan weighs population growth, infrastructure development, and decreasing per capita greenhouse gas emissions as connected components of a sound economic plan.

While it is easy to find Vermont statistics reflecting the challenges outlined above, the proposal for growth, in a rural identifying state, is a contentious one. Without understanding what this could look like or understanding the benefits to current residents, some are dubious. The success and buy-in of proposed strategies must be backed by qualitative and quantitative research and data, and reflect a deep understanding of Vermont's unique economic, cultural, and environmental values, assets, and present and projected challenges.

Project Need

The Vermont Futures Project is motivated by good questions. The question they would like your team to answer is this: *Who is Vermont for?* This team will explore answers to this question through environmental, social, and economic perspectives. The Vermont Futures Project believes that a thriving future for the state exists at the intersection of these perspectives. This work will be carried out by conducting interviews, analyzing public sentiment in online forums, and creating podcasts/videos/op-eds to reflect on the findings which will be featured on the Vermont Futures Project website at the conclusion of the semester.

The final product should contextualize the findings by leveraging data and describing key moments in Vermont's history that have led to present day conditions to help inform conversations about where Vermont might go in the future.

Project Objectives:

- Improve your understanding and familiarity of Vermont's contemporary challenges and opportunities.
- Determine and implement an outreach and engagement plan to connect with stakeholders and key audiences to gain insight into the desires and fears of population and housing growth in Vermont.
- Synthesize research findings into public-facing formats.
- Provide the Vermont Futures Project with your insights based on personal reflection through this process.

Catalytic questions your team will consider while answering the primary question of this project:

- What does it mean to be a Vermonter and what are Vermont values? Who gets to decide?
- How did we get here? What are the key parts of Vermont's history that have created present day conditions? How will these elements help or hinder progress?
- Where do we want to go? What are the hopes, dreams, and ambitions that you have for the future? What about other young people? Does Vermont seem like a viable option for you to pursue those goals? How will we get there?
- Conservation of what and for whom?
- How is sustainability defined and measured? What about resilience?
- How do we reconcile the tension between the desire for systems change and resilience?

Some starting points for research:

- Vermont Futures Project Economic Action Plan
- [Joint Fiscal Office – Vermont Population Estimates for 2023](#)
- [Energy Action Network 2024 Annual Report](#)
- [US Climate Vulnerability Index](#)
- [Saturday Night Live](#)
- [VT Council on Rural Development report: Imagining Vermont](#)
- [VT Dept. of Labor: Economic Profiles 2024](#)
- [Natural Resources Board Report on Suggested Updates to Act 250](#)
- [Vermont Housing Needs Assessment](#)
- <https://thinkvermont.com/sectors/>



Vermont Businesses
for Social Responsibility

Assessing collective impact across Vermont's mission-driven business community

Community Partner

Jeremy Gerber, Membership & Development Manager with Vermont Businesses for Social Responsibility (VBSR)

Resource Partner

Roxanne Vought, Executive Director, Vermont Businesses for Social Responsibility (VBSR)

Background

[Vermont Businesses for Social Responsibility \(VBSR\)](#) is a statewide, nonprofit business association with a mission to leverage the power of business for positive social and environmental impact. It's the oldest state-level, socially responsible business association in the nation.

VBSR's diverse membership represents all sectors and geographic regions of Vermont - from sole proprietors to the largest employers in the state – and is united by a single vision: *a just, thriving, and transformative economy that works for all people and the planet*. Individually and collectively, [their growing network of member businesses and organizations](#) advances this vision through shared learning, community building, and collective action.

VBSR members are endeavoring to make a positive difference through purpose-driven approaches to their businesses: they are implementing people-centered workplace practices, they are reducing their environmental impact, they are giving back to their communities. Collectively, these businesses and individuals are working to make Vermont a better place to live, work and play in very tangible ways. We want to measure this impact!

Understanding the real, quantifiable collective impact of all VBSR members can inject further inspiration (and aspiration to nonmembers) into the community. It gives each member, no matter how big or small, something to point to and be proud of (and use for storytelling to strengthen their branding and marketing).

This understanding also provides a benchmark to collectively and individually build upon. As a mission driven community, it is vital to know where our impact is strong, and where we could improve. This knowledge drives program design to ensure VBSR is supporting businesses in areas where they need the most help. Additionally, understanding their own social and environmental impact empowers individual businesses to continuously assess and focus their strategies to align with their current goals.

The international gold standard of assessing and measuring a business's social and environmental impact is through the [B Corporation](#) certification process. To receive B Corp status, a business goes through a rigorous and often resource-intensive process. While VBSR members are dedicated to their mission, most don't have the resources to become B Corp certified. We believe they should still have the opportunity to showcase their impact in Vermont.

Project Context

In order to obtain data that will help us understand the collective impact of VBSR's network, we are currently designing a survey dubbed the "Vision Survey," which is intended for our members. This survey will collect data on how each member is progressing toward VBSR's shared vision.

The primary focus of the survey is to assess how well VBSR members are aligning with and advancing the following components of our vision:

- **People-Centered Workplaces:** All people deserve work with dignity, purpose, and a pathway to advance their wellbeing. Centering people in work culture, practices, and policies creates economic mobility, employee empowerment, and thriving families and communities.
- **Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI):** Businesses have a responsibility to build an inclusive economy and dismantle systems of oppression. By redistributing power, wealth, and access to those who have been historically marginalized, businesses can address systemic inequities in the workplace, marketplace, supply chain and beyond.
- **Environmental Sustainability:** A healthy planet and a healthy economy are inherently intertwined. Environmental resilience, regeneration, and justice are the responsibility of all businesses.
- **Prosperity for All:** Sustainable economic progress is only possible if all people are able to meet their basic needs. Through advocacy and collective action, businesses can reduce the opportunity gap and create a healthy economic system that unlocks individual potential and prosperity.
- **Community Vitality & Strong Local Economies:** Strong communities and regional economies are the foundation of business growth and sustainability. Through interdependence and reciprocity with the communities that support them, businesses invest in a shared future: creating places where all belong, supporting local economic development, and giving back through local purchasing, partnership, and philanthropy.

The data gathered will be used to:

- Provide insights into the collective impact of all VBSR members.
- Provide comparative data based on industry, size, stage of business, geography, etc.
- Illuminate where individuals and the collective are each doing well and need support.
- Provide quantitative data to inform VBSR policy and programming.
- Provide longitudinal data in order to evaluate long term trends.

Project Objectives

With the goal of launching in spring 2026, we are aiming for the Vision Survey to provide each VBSR member an easy way to report their social and environmental impact. Simultaneously, we want to ensure the 40 Vermont B Corp certified businesses, who are also VBSR members, don't have a heavy lift because they have already been assessed.

Your objectives are:

- Familiarize yourself with the B Corp community and movement, particularly in Vermont. Learn how B Corps create impact, what benefits their certification provides, and what challenges they face.
 - Optional: connect with a Vermont B Corp business to learn more about their experience as a B Corp and the certification process.
- Analyze the [B Impact Assessment](#) tools provided by [B Lab](#) (the organization that certifies businesses as B Corps) and consider ways of adapting them to the context of VBSR and its members. Identify key questions from the B Impact Assessment and in turn generate VBSR-specific Vision Survey questions that collect quantifiable impacts from VBSR members. Make sure these questions are applicable to a range of industry types, business sizes, and business missions (see [VBSR directory](#) for examples).

- Organize and align your survey questions to the five VBSR vision areas. While you don't have to replicate questions from the B Impact Assessment, try to find inspiration from them to ensure VBSR Members who are already B Corp certified find ease in the questions.
- Test your survey with several Vermont businesses (VBSR member or not) and collect feedback on how to improve.
- Synthesize key findings and recommendations arising from your research and analysis to support the ongoing development of the VBSR vision survey.



New Systems for Community Engagement

Project Partners: Land Access & Opportunity Board and Liberation Ecosystem

Jean Hamilton, Director of Program Development, LAOB

Ornella Matta-Figueroa, Director of Advocacy & Community Engagement, LAOB

Samantha Langevin, Director of Partnerships & Community, Liberation Ecosystem

Project Background

The stronger our local democracies, the more capacity we can unleash to address our toughest challenges, and the more capable we are of surviving and thriving through economic, ecological, and social crises. It is going to take all of us to adequately address the complex challenges our cities and regions are facing. It is time for a new wave of community-driven civic leadership. - Rosa González, Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership

Community engagement remains a stumbling block for creating public policies informed by what the majority of people want, even though many of Vermont's governance practices are "built" for public input, examples include Town Meeting, Open Meeting Law, and Regional Planning. Many of Vermont's more recent laws explicitly require community engagement¹, but many of these processes continue to lack adequate resources and tend to happen too late, without a viable execution plan. Under-resourced communities are especially disconnected from institutional efforts at 'community engagement'. Most of our governance systems rely on a small number of representative decision makers, and these roles are disproportionately made up of wealthy, well-resourced individuals.

Overwhelmingly, it is people with discretionary time and money that are the most able to participate in our democracy. There is also an inherent privilege that allows some to speak up as an "expert," while others have been denied that voice or perspective. Elitism or "ivory towerism"

¹ [Act 154 § 6004. Implementation of State policy](#) (c) Each of the covered agencies shall create and adopt on or before July 1, 2027 a community engagement plan that describes how the agency will engage with environmental justice focus populations as it evaluates new and existing activities and programs. Community engagement plans shall align with the core principles developed by the Interagency Environmental Justice Committee pursuant to subdivision 6006(c)(2)(B) of this title and take into consideration the recommendations of the Environmental Justice Advisory Council pursuant to subdivision 6006(c)(1)(B) of this title. Each plan shall describe how the agency plans to provide meaningful participation in compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

is rampant throughout our policy making system, which includes both State entities and the non-profit and NGO networks that help shape public policy.

There are three recent reports written on how the Vermont government can conduct effective community engagement (see initial resources for links). The findings of these reports have not been enacted; in fact, they appear to be gathering dust. We continue to see public policy making, especially important processes that decide how public resources are invested, fail to provide opportunities for its citizens to be heard, and heeded.

We need new systems for community engagement that equalize whose voices shape our laws; we need innovations in how we govern. We want to help answer these questions, “How do we create governance systems that better serve all people?” What happens when we “bridge the divide between community and governance”?²

Partner Organizations

[The Land Access and Opportunity Board](#) (LAOB) was formed in 2022 “to engage with Vermont organizations working on housing equity and land access “to recommend new opportunities and improve access to woodlands, farmland, and land and home ownership for Vermonters from historically marginalized or disadvantaged communities who continue to face barriers to land and home ownership.”

[Liberation Ecosystem](#) (LE): Liberation Ecosystem is a BIPOC-led climate and social justice organizing hub seeking to bridge skillbuilding, access to opportunity, solidarity, and healing for marginalized communities across the state of Vermont. Deeply rooted in the pursuit of our four focus areas - Land, Environment, Agriculture, and Foodways - our ultimate vision is the creation of a robust and thriving ecosystem that empowers Black, Indigenous, and Vermonters of Color to uplift meaningful, reciprocal relationships with ourselves, one another, and the Land we call Home.

Steps:

- Students will review recent reports commissioned by public bodies in Vermont to improve ‘community engagement’ in their policymaking (see examples below). What are the goals of these reports? Is the public body making progress towards those goals? Based on their analysis, how do students recommend improving community engagement based on these reports? Extra credit: How much money do these reports cost and who receives those investments?
- In addition to reviewing reports, students will themselves participate in live community engagement. Students will have the opportunity to interview members of the LAOB and Liberation Ecosystem (LE) to explore the best practices within their own communities for engagement, and hear about their experiences with state led processes.

² Called *community ownership* in the [Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership](#)

- Students will explore several case studies as real-time opportunities for analyzing how current approaches align (or don't) with effective engagement of impacted communities. Current policy or processes for case study:
 - Regional Planning Commission's Land Use Plans (Act 250 reform)
 - Climate Resilience Plan
 - Act 59 (Conservation Strategy Initiative)/Land Access Strategy
- Create a final best practices document comparing the actual lived experiences of LE and the LAOB in their community engagement efforts with "identified" best practice standards within state reports. This document will be used as an external facing learning, advocacy, and activation tool. It should include:
 - Recommendations on how the LAOB can help other state agencies operationalize effective community engagement.
 - An analysis of how state approaches align (or don't) with best practices identified from impacted communities.
 - An exploration of how effective, liberatory community engagement can be an effective tool for systems change

Initial Resources

Model Community Engagement Tools

[Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership](#)

Environmental Justice for New England Project (forthcoming from partner)

Vermont Community Engagement Reports

[Vermont Department of Health State Health Assessment and Improvement Plan](#)

[Vermont Environmental Justice Law Core Principles of Community Engagement](#)

[Community Engagement Pilot for Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation](#)

[LAOB presentation](#)

[LAOB statute](#)



Re-envisioning Climate and Clean Energy Communications

Community partners: Johanna Miller, Vermont Natural Resources Council (VNRC) Energy and Climate Program Director and Maggie Richardson, VNRC Communications Director

Additional Resource Partners: Dan Fingas, Executive Director, Vermont Conservation Voters; Lauren Hierl, Executive Director, Vermont Natural Resources Council; and Vermont Town Energy Committee Leaders

Background and Context

The [Vermont Natural Resources Council](#), in a strategic partnership with [Vermont Conservation Voters](#), has worked from the local level to the Legislature for over 100 years. VNRC's mission is to strengthen and restore the very foundation upon which Vermont's economy rests – a clean, healthy environment and thriving communities that serve and support all Vermonters. One of VNRC's top priorities is to help ensure Vermont does its part to cut planet-warming pollution and help all Vermonters access, afford, and benefit from cleaner energy technologies.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of Vermont establishing goals in law that commit the state to helping tackle the climate crisis. While Vermont has taken significant steps to reduce electric bills by millions of dollars and build a cleaner, more resilient power grid, the state has fallen far short on efforts that enable Vermonters to access less costly, cleaner heat and transportation – Vermont's [two most polluting sectors](#) by far.

In 2020 the Vermont Legislature passed the [Global Warming Solutions Act](#) (GWSA). This law is the state's legal mechanism for ratcheting down Vermont's emissions, enhancing resiliency, and building more equity and energy affordability into state programs and policies. The GWSA set up a 23-member Climate Council and tasked it and the Agency of Natural Resources (ANR) with the responsibility for implementing the law by identifying policies, regulations, and rules necessary to attain the GWSA's targets. Fundamentally, the GWSA provides the essential framework to identify and develop strategic and cost-effective policies and programs for heating and transportation.

In the last election, the top recommendation of the Climate Council – a [Clean Heat Standard](#) – became a political lightning rod, dogged by a coordinated mis- and disinformation effort playing (if not preying) on peoples vulnerabilities in organized and highly strategic ways. It is hard to overstate the extent to which these emerging dynamics appear to have impacted Vermont politics and energy policy in such a short period of time. In this project, as we continue to assess the causes and ramifications of recent election outcomes, we are interested in better understanding the emergent challenges, opportunities, and changing socio-cultural dynamics surrounding our communications strategies around climate and clean energy policy.

Here are some broad opening questions to help begin and orient your work: How are Vermonters learning about climate action and energy policy and where and how are they getting their information about such matters? What messages are sticking with which people and why? Who do Vermonters “believe” and trust as messengers? And how can false narratives downplaying the urgency, importance, and benefits of climate action and a clean energy transition be interrupted and/or countered?

Project Objectives:

As a nonprofit environmental organization, working in close partnership with many coalition partners, policy makers, and members of the public, we are continuously re-assessing our messages and modes of communication in order to make a compelling case for clean energy, climate action, and a just transition from fossil fuels. This project team can contribute to this effort by digging into the following questions.

- **Messaging on affordability:** Why, how, in what ways, and for whom has our own messaging around *affordability* come up short and failed to gain traction? Relatedly, how have those working to oppose clean energy policy leveraged such affordability framings to undermine support for clean energy policy? Based on our observations of polling and patterns of public engagement, we suspect that Vermonters still care about climate change, but we also recognize how it can be overshadowed by daily economic struggles and needs. We find ourselves asking, with growing urgency and concern, how we can better address these realities in our framing, messaging, and communications.
- **(P)reaching beyond the choir:** How can we adapt our political strategies and communications to *reach different constituencies* across VT? In addition to the immediate on-the-ground work that needs doing, what long term strategies do we need to start developing and employing? For instance, our network has identified many voters in Vermont registered as Democrats but who vote for Republican Governor Phil Scott: an important puzzle and a fruitful potential starting point for this work. Are we reaching this group now, how are we talking to them, what messages are landing, and what/where are the gaps in our messages and in our modes of communication and how can we address these? Are there correlations between information sources (in VT and nationally) and shifting perceptions?
- **Vermont 2024 election post-mortem:** One key way of grounding the broad research questions introduced above could be to develop a retrospective "post-mortem" *analysis of how climate and energy issues played out in the last election*—specifically, in Vermont. This task might involve systematically studying, through various means (including key informant interviews and different kinds of desk-based analysis), 1) the messaging, campaign materials, framing, etc. of opposing actors (and then seeing how their candidates performed); 2) the actual misinformation in circulation along with their associated funders, networks, and strategies, and 3) the sentiments and opinions of Vermonters as represented in reporting, comments, editorials, etc. through qualitative and/or quantitative discourse analysis.

Starting Resources:

Good starting points for materials to evaluate and analyze include:

- Editorials from a range of media sources over a date range you deem as most salient
- Town selectboard meeting minutes and recordings over a similar time period
- Press events

- [Washington's success on cap and invest - a comms success](#)
- Tom Hughes & Mathew Vigneau – Vermont Conservation Voters board members. Matthew in particular can help you access data on electoral politics
- Newport Daily Express [Article](#)
- Opposition
 - Rob Roper Substack Blog on VT Politics -<https://robertroper.substack.com/>
 - [Vermont Daily Chronicle](#)
- Energy Action Network – <https://eanvt.org/2024-annual-report/>