



## Democrats' plan to boost 'tree equity' is actually a good idea

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Trees have become a contentious piece of Democrats' Build Back Better Act, the budget reconciliation bill that encompasses sweeping social and environmental programs. Congressional Republicans have seized on the \$3 billion in the proposed nearly \$2 trillion bill earmarked for planting trees, with a focus on boosting 'tree equity' — despite the fact that this is a strategy that experts say could reduce health disparities in cities.

While opponents have called the tree equity provisions an indicator of Democrats' "reckless spending spree" and a "waste [of] even more taxpayer dollars," in reality, disparities in tree coverage across American cities are a huge problem that affects heat exposure, air quality and more, with serious consequences on people's health. This inequity actually builds on a legacy of segregating, polluting, and disinvesting in communities of color. Planting trees in the right places could be one step towards healing some of those injustices.

"We're depriving communities that need and depend on those trees to help them live a good quality of life," says Charity Nyelele, a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Earth System Science at the University of California, Irvine.

Neighborhoods where a majority of residents are people of color have, on average, 33 percent less tree canopy cover than majority white neighborhoods, according to data from the Tree Equity Score, an initiative backed by the nonprofit American Forests. Americans of color are more likely to live in 'urban heat islands,' places that trap heat because there's a lot more concrete and asphalt than trees and greenery.

That's no accident. Urban heat islands also overlap with maps of redlined neighborhoods, places where Black Americans were pushed to move into since the 1930s because of discriminatory housing policies that denied them home loans and insurance. Now, these neighborhoods reach temperatures up to 7 degrees Celsius hotter than nearby non-redlined neighborhoods, according to research published last year.

One solution to cool down urban heat islands is to plant more trees. Trees not only provide shade, they also dial down temperatures when water evaporates from their leaves (a cooling process called evapotranspiration that's similar to humans sweating). One study in Phoenix found that trees were even more effective at helping neighborhoods chill out during the daytime than other heat mitigation strategies, like painting roofs and streets white to reflect the sun's radiation.

That is a life-saving service. Extreme heat has killed more people than any other weather-related disaster in the US over the past thirty years. The deaths are often concentrated in the most vulnerable communities. In New York City, for example, extreme heat has killed a disproportionately high number of Black residents. Heat waves are only becoming more dangerous because of the climate crisis.

“Most people just think it’s about beautification or aesthetics, just plant trees because they’re pretty and beautiful to look at,” Nyelele says. “But that’s not the case. It’s about the benefits that we can derive.”

There are other benefits to having more trees in neighborhoods. Trees can actually help clean up air pollution, which is another common problem in neighborhoods without a lot of green space. And they can reduce street flooding because their roots and the soil they grow in absorb water, as opposed to impervious surfaces like asphalt.

Funny enough, Republicans have attacked the Build Back Better Act and its tree provisions even though they’ve actually been a fan of tree planting as a strategy to tackle climate change. Last year, former President Trump even committed the US to joining an initiative to plant a trillion trees around the world. Although that initiative has garnered significant criticism from scientists, healthy forests are important carbon sinks, because trees trap and store planet-heating carbon dioxide.

“There are also the benefits that you can’t really that you can’t measure,” says Ariane Middel, assistant professor at Arizona State University who focuses on urban climate science. “Just being in nature has benefits, overall for people’s health. And those are really tough to put into numbers.”

As it now stands, the Build Back Better Act includes \$3 billion in grants to tribes, state agencies, local governments, and NGOs for tree planting. It prioritizes “projects that increase tree equity,” but details on how the money would be spent are otherwise scarce. There’s another \$100 million in the bill for the Forest Service to create new urban forests.

While it would become the single biggest package of climate policies in US history if it ultimately passes into law, the bill still faces a tough vote in the divided Senate after months of political wrangling

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