Currents of Change: Tracing the History of the U.S. Climate Movement

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Executive Summary

Climate science is not new, nor is the understanding of the human causes and consequences of a warming world. Yet large-scale mobilization around climate change in the United States has emerged only recently. This thesis aims to trace today’s activism to its roots by identifying and examining three distinct, but connected, currents of U.S. climate activism: (1) late 20th century mainstream environmentalism; (2) the emergence of a climate justice movement and amplification of the voices of communities of color and Indigenous communities in the 2000s, and (3) the origins of the highly motivated youth climate movement through today.

The first coordinated responses to climate science came from mainstream U.S. environmental organizations. Climate change was an issue distinct from previous campaigns in that it was abstract and future-focused, not tangible and immediate. Mainstream environmentalists struggled to build a grassroots movement around the issue, and ultimately focused on a scientific, technical policy approach that favored insider maneuvering over public policy. Climate solutions proffered by mainstream environmentalists in the late 20th century included campaigns to inform individual behaviors, increasing vehicle fuel economy standards at the national level, and pushing for a binding emissions reduction agreement at the international level. On the latter, the mainstream environmental current placed hope in the 1997 Kyoto Protocol negotiations, which ultimately was not ratified by the U.S. Senate. After that setback, the mainstream environmental movement reached a breaking point, especially regarding its narrow approach to climate up until that point, which opened the movement to new ideas for and leadership on climate solutions.

During the 1990s, some leaders and researchers, particularly those from communities of color, observed that the climate conversation at both the global and domestic levels was leaving historically marginalized communities out. To counter this trend, at the start of the 21st century, organizations outside of the mainstream began organizing around the concept of climate justice. The climate justice movement framing of climate change diverged from that of the mainstream. Rather than focusing on technical policy and approaching the issue as a future-facing one, climate justice organizers rooted the climate crisis in immediate local struggles, uneven historical responsibility for causing climate change, and a demand for solution-making processes that included the voices and expertise of frontline communities. Climate justice organizations used strategies distinct from the mainstream organizations as well, including a focus on coalitional organizing and mass mobilizations. While the climate justice movement lost a measure of its cohesion in the years following the Copenhagen Conference in 2009, this period solidified climate justice principles as central to future climate organizing and climate solutions.

Youth activism emerged from the mainstream environmental and climate justice currents of the movement. In the early 2000s, youth involvement in the climate movement was limited to participation in mainstream environmental or climate justice organizations. The Energy Action Coalition, formed in 2004, was the first coordinated attempt to bring youth representatives from these organizations together to develop a youth climate activist infrastructure at a national scale. In 2008, 350.org was established by a group of young college alumni, making it the first major organization to be predominantly directed by young people. After Copenhagen, when many leaders in the U.S. climate movement believed the window for domestic climate policy was also
closing, 350.org helped organize a national youth movement for fossil fuel divestment at institutions of higher education. Though the divestment movement had mixed results, the campaign helped create a model for distributed action on a national campaign, a model which the Sunrise Movement built upon when it launched in 2017. Youth activists, in building the youth current of the climate movement, were extremely concerned with centering principles of climate justice, but they also pulled from the mainstream environmental playbook by rooting their campaigns in specific policy demands backed by scientific and technological research. The youth climate movement therefore drew upon the movement’s past, funneling together elements from each distinct current, as it emerged at the forefront of the U.S. climate movement.

Understanding these three foundational currents of the U.S. climate movement contextualizes the form the movement has taken today. The Sunrise Movement shocked politicians and the public alike when young protestors occupied Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s office following the 2018 midterms. For many, the Sunrise Movement was the first introduction to a highly energetic youth activist movement. Yet tracing the longer history of the climate movement reveals that although Sunrise diverged from previous iterations of the youth climate movement, it also emerged directly from it. Rooted in the work of climate justice protest politics and building on 350.org’s hub-based organizing strategy, the Sunrise Movement reoriented the climate movement to federal level policy, mass protest, and winning political power. After the 2018 midterms, the Sunrise Movement pivoted to championing the Green New Deal which, drawing on climate justice ideas and mainstream technical policy solutions, reimagined climate solutions as ones that address both climate change and social injustices together.

Based on this understanding of the movement’s past, its moments of greatest strength, and its synergies and contradictions, I conclude by offering four lessons to inform the movement’s future: (1) The climate movement should gather behind a common, transformative framing of the climate crisis; (2) The climate movement should focus on the federal level; (3) The climate movement should work both from the inside and on the outside; and (4) The climate movement should build deep, long-term coalitions.
Introduction

It was November 13th, 2018, Democrats had just regained control of the House, and hundreds of young people lined the halls of the Capitol leading to Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s office. The sounds of singing, speeches, and chants resounded, but this was no celebration. It was a protest, a sit-in staged by fed-up young people—climate activists with the Sunrise Movement. Gathered in the Capitol’s hallowed halls, the place of lobbyists and insider meetings, young activists raised their voices, calling on politicians to say “which side they [were] on” concerning the climate crisis.¹ Wearing shirts and holding posters demanding “good jobs and a livable future”, the soon-to-be slogan of the Green New Deal, and boldly stating “12 years”, referencing the 2018 IPCC report, the activists asked Democratic politicians: “what is your plan?”²

For their part, Sunrisers believed that they had found a plan and its champion. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who Sunrise had backed during the contentious New York primary, had just announced her proposal for a Green New Deal—a proposal to address climate change as a social justice issue through the transformation of the economy.³ Fanning the flames of Sunrise protestors, Ocasio-Cortez joined young activists on Capitol Hill even before she officially took office. The November 2018 protest and a follow up sit-in in December 2018 resulted in the arrest of 51 and 150 young people respectively.

The Capitol Hill protests rapidly launched the Sunrise Movement into prominence in both the U.S. climate movement and the left-wing of Democratic politics. After the series of sit-ins, the fervent fight for a Green New Deal and campaigning for supportive politicians became Sunrise’s primary federal goal. The Green New Deal quickly turned into a uniting force for climate activists, drawing early support from environmental groups across mainstream, justice, and youth oriented currents of the U.S. climate movement. Leading climate justice organizations like Climate Justice Alliance and the Indigenous Environmental Network backed the proposal,

but were concerned that the idea would not live up to its promises of justice for and leadership by frontline communities. Mainstream environmental groups, too, were publicly outspoken in favor of a Green New Deal, with the Natural Resources Defense Council describing the proposal as one “with social and economic justice at the core.” By the end of February 2019, hundreds of environmental organizations, including labor unions and the Sierra Club, had endorsed the proposal.

Due in part to this outpouring of public and organizational support, the Sunrise Movement and the banner of the Green New Deal became a driving issue in the 2020 Democratic presidential primaries. Remarkably, by October 2019, the Democratic candidates had spent nearly 43 minutes discussing the environment over the course of the primary debates, with a particular focus on climate. Comparatively, during the 2016 general election, climate change was discussed for a total of only six minutes, and in 2012 the topic was avoided entirely. Not only did young activists successfully make climate a key campaign issue, they also made the Green New Deal something of a litmus test for Democrats. In order to distinguish themselves, candidates scrambled over each other to endorse their version of the Green New Deal, contributing to a significant push to the left on climate issues.

Today the Sunrise Movement is considered synonymous with the fight for a Green New Deal, but Sunrise’s story did not begin there. Nearly two years before Sunrise posted the Green New Deal on its website, in the wake of Trump’s election in 2016, its founding members came together to identify why climate activists seemed to have so many near victories that only resulted in disappointment. In their analysis, the problem was a failure to pair people power with political power. With that framing in mind, over the course of a year they crafted a plan, unprecedented in the history of U.S. climate activism, to simultaneously build people and political power through direct action and traditional electoral organizing ahead of the 2018

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midterms. By the end of its first year, Sunrise had trained 500 new organizers, launched 20 hubs in six states, publicly confronted oil executives and fossil fuel funded politicians, and engaged over 4,700 young people over the course of two national tours. During the 2018 election cycle, Sunrise stated that across the nation, over 800 political candidates running for office at all levels of government had signed a pledge not to accept fossil fuel money, and 19 of the 34 new House Democrats won “without a dime of money from fossil fuel CEOs and lobbyists. Before the Green New Deal became Sunrise’s focal policy, they had already built a powerful youth climate apparatus capable of pushing climate into the political limelight.

The Sunrise Movement appeared to be an entirely new phenomenon in the U.S. climate movement. Yet many of its founders were not new to climate activism. A number of Sunrisers were deeply involved in the work of mainstream environmental organizations, and had engaged in the pipeline opposition protests of the climate justice movement. The first web archive capture of the Sunrise Movement’s website even identified Sunrisers as “the young people who united by the thousands to stop [Keystone XL]” and “joined with many nations to protect the water at Standing Rock.” Ocasio-Cortez, when addressing the 2018 Capitol protesters, revealed that she too shared those experiences, and that her “journey … started at Standing Rock, … with every day people doing exactly what [Sunrisers were] doing.” Sunrise and Ocasio-Cortez saw themselves and the Green New Deal as extensions of the fight for climate justice that drew national attention at the pipeline protests.

Looking back, Standing Rock can, for that reason, be understood as a major inflection point in the power and direction of the climate movement. The brutally violent standoff between Indigenous water protectors and allies against the federal government over the Dakota Access Pipeline began at Standing Rock in 2016. Sparked by an unexpected change in the route of the pipeline that would bring it across a sacred burial ground of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and

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Standing Rock was, even at the time, understood as a critical moment for environmental justice and Indigenous rights, but it was also a moment when the connections between fossil fuel extraction projects, justice, Indigenous rights and climate change came into public focus. The Climate Justice Alliance in particular dedicated resources to drawing the connections between a just transition, Indigenous sovereignty, and the uneven consequences of climate change that would result from projects like the one contested at Standing Rock.\footnote{“CIA Letter to AFL-CIO on Dakota Access.” \textit{Climate Justice Alliance}, Sep. 23, 2016. \url{https://climatejusticealliance.org/cja-letter-to-afl-cio-on-dakota-access/}.} But Standing Rock was also a pivotal moment where the different currents of the climate movement, from mainstream environmentalism to climate justice and an emerging youth current, intersected in a critical way. Indigenous youth activists led the charge, but were soon joined by thousands of activists, young and old alike, from the Climate Justice Alliance, Indigenous Environmental Network, Sierra Club, Natural Resources Defense Council, 350.org, and others. Standing Rock effectively brought ideas of climate justice and protest politics into the center of environmental and climate politics, and became a moment in which the balance of power within the movement shifted
dramatically. The big traditional organizations like the Sierra Club and Natural Resources Defense Council were not leading U.S. environmental activism, they were following. Standing Rock crystallized the organizational and conceptual power of the climate justice movement, pushing ideas of justice, equity, and human rights to the center of climate discourse and laying the foundation for the powerful youth climate movement to come.

To make sense of how these two synergistic and related moments emerged at the forefront of the U.S. climate activism—pushing aside the technical policy approach of mainstream environmentalism and crystallizing the justice principles of the climate justice movement—requires an understanding of the longer tradition and history of climate activism. This thesis traces these explosive moments in the recent past to their roots by examining what I have identified as three distinct but intertwined currents of U.S. climate activism: the mainstream environmental movement, climate justice movement, and youth climate movement. I use the terminology of “currents” to capture the ways each thread of climate activism has ebbed and flowed over time, at times converging and others diverging. By telling and examining this history, it is possible to make sense of how this disruptive burst of youth climate activism has both emerged and diverged from each of these currents within the U.S. climate movement.

This thesis is organized into three chapters, each of which follows a different current of the movement. The chapters are generally organized chronologically, and follow the organizations, leaders, and solutions characteristic of each current. Importantly, though, the story of climate activism in the U.S. is not an episodic one—instead, these currents continue to overlap and intersect with each other in meaningful ways over time.

To describe these currents as part of a single movement is reasonable to a certain extent. Each current worked toward similar goals, and shared similar concerns. Finding a viable solution to the climate crisis was their central unified aim—though they did not always agree on what that solution should be. In pursuit of their goals, actors within each current, to different extents and employing different strategies, endeavored to build a grassroots social movement in support of climate action. At several key moments in the history of climate activism, organizations and leaders across these currents even worked together, ad hoc or on longer term projects, towards

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common objectives. In this thesis, I will at times refer to a singular “climate movement”, but I do so mindful of the fact that it is a movement full of tensions and contradictions, and that each current had aligned but distinct goals, principles, and tactics. So, while each current should be considered as separate from the others, to consider them in isolation would be to consider them out of context, and hinder a full understanding of the history of U.S. climate activism.

The first chapter investigates the mainstream environmental current of the U.S. climate movement, tracing the origins of mainstream climate activism from roughly 1989 to the start of the 21st century. Focusing on the Sierra Club and Natural Resources Defense Council, I examine the way traditional mainstream environmental organizations responded to early alarm over global warming. Struggling to frame the issue in a way that could inspire public mobilization, these organizations took a narrow policy approach, pinning their climate strategy to national fuel efficiency standards for vehicles. At this time, the global community was also beginning to react to the severity of the problem, and mainstream environmental activists originally hoped to exert influence over and inform international negotiations. Though these organizations remain important players in climate politics, after the Kyoto Protocol’s disappointing fate in the U.S., the mainstream environmental movement ceased to be a clear leader in the push for climate action.

The second chapter covers the climate justice current from 1999 through the mid-2010s. Climate justice activists—at first primarily from Indigenous and frontline communities—were active in climate politics prior to 1999, but at that time the climate conversation was primarily directed by mainstream organizations. At the start of the 21st century, the climate justice current pushed to the forefront of climate activism through the use of large scale demonstrations, climate justice summits held parallel to “official” international climate proceedings, and the creation of principles to guide just climate policy. The rise of the climate justice movement aligned with a growing understanding of the ways climate change would affect Indigenous and other historically marginalized communities first—indeed, many communities in the Arctic and the Pacific Islands had already begun to feel the consequences of a warming world. Recognizing the potential for collective power, coalition-based organizing and network-based organizations took center stage. Unlike the mainstream movement, there was no specific policy or solution driving

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20 The term “global warming” has been contested in U.S. climate politics. Over time, scientists, advocates, and politicians alike moved away from the use of “global warming” to the term of “climate change,” in part due to the fact that global warming will not cause warming everywhere. I at times use the term “global warming” in this thesis to refer to how scientists, advocates, and politicians described the phenomenon at the time.
climate justice organizing, instead activists focused on building a people-centered movement, growing a grassroots organizing strategy, and advocating for justice-based climate solutions.

The third chapter explores the emerging youth climate movement from the early 2000s through the late-2010s. Over the course of the 2000s, the youth movement itself went through several iterations. Early on, it was not clear that youth activism would be a key facet of climate organizing. For the most part, young people participated in the movement only as members of established organizations, such as the Sierra Club or Indigenous Environmental Network. The Energy Action Coalition and Power Shift Convergences were early attempts to bring young people together as stakeholders in their own right, though still primarily in their capacity as representatives of mainstream and climate justice organizations. It was not until the formation of 350.org on a college campus in 2008 that young people began to steer the direction of climate organizing. Importantly, the youth movement adopted strategies from both the mainstream and climate justice currents—from the former, policy-focused activism; from the latter, a recognition of the need for community organizing and a focus on justice issues.

To understand future possibilities for climate organizing requires a complete understanding of the movement’s past. Only through tracing the way these three distinct but related currents weave in and out of each other, build together, and develop from each other, is it possible to find opportunities for future collaboration and success. The reality is that the U.S. has not yet started down a viable path towards addressing the climate crisis. Exploring the efforts of activists and leaders within these three currents provides insight into the major ideas, moments, and setbacks that continue to shape the present landscape of climate politics. Though we may not have found a workable climate solution yet, there are critical lessons to be learned from the past.
Chapter One: Mainstream Environmentalism

1.1 Defining the Problem

The historic heat waves and public advocacy of top scientists in 1988 were pivotal in thrusting climate change onto the U.S. environmental agenda. Climate science was already decades old, but it had yet to enter the public and political arenas in a major way. That changed in the summer of 1988, when the convergence of extreme heat and droughts across the country set the stage for scientists’ first urgent calls to act on the science.21 Most notably, in June 1988, National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) scientist Dr. James Hansen testified before a Senate committee that climate change was already happening. On a scorchingly hot day in D.C., in the midst of what TIME magazine would call the “Big Dry”, Hansen told the committee that summers like 1988 would become more frequent if global warming continued unimpeded.22 In a significant break from the usual cautiousness of scientific testimony, Dr. Hansen declared with “99% confidence” that global warming was a real phenomenon.23 Hansen’s confidence sparked a dramatic change in public attention to the threat of climate change. Public opinion polling indicated that at the start of the decade, only 38% of the U.S. public had heard of the greenhouse effect; in 1989, a year after Hansen’s testimony, that number jumped to 79%.24 Against the backdrop of the hottest summer on record, Hansen’s testimony launched climate change into the national consciousness.

1988 was an election year, and with climate change on the national environmental agenda, there was real hope that policy action would be taken by the next administration. Climate change was a significant talking point on the campaign trail. Senator Al Gore (D-TN), a passionate environmentalist in the legislature, ran in the Democratic presidential primary on a platform that included objectives to combat global warming.25 Though he lost the primary to

23 Greenhouse Effect and Global Climate Change, Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, 100th Congress, page 39 (1988) (Hansen, Dr. James, Director, NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies).
Michael Dukakis, then Governor of Massachusetts, climate was an important campaign issue during the general election too. Most famously, in a September 1988 environmental policy speech, then Republican presidential nominee George H.W. Bush declared that “those who think we’re powerless to do anything about the greenhouse effect are forgetting about the White House effect” and that as President he intended to “do something about it.” After his election, though, it became uncertain whether or not Bush would pursue domestic climate action. International U.S. climate leadership was also weak. Though Bush attended the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, and signed the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), he did so against the advice of other Republicans. While the agreement set up the possibility for future cooperation, world leaders did not commit to, nor did Bush advocate for, an early agreement to reduce emissions. Navigating climate action at two very different scales—the domestic and international—would challenge politicians, presidents, and activists alike both during and far beyond Bush’s single term.

As activists and politicians alike turned climate change into a key political issue during the 1988 election, journalists and authors increasingly covered the issue for the broader public. In January 1989, *TIME* magazine declared Earth the “Planet of the Year” for 1988, a clever play on its annual “Person of the Year” tradition. The “Endangered Earth” was not merely the centerpiece of the magazine’s striking cover, but also the subject of the entire special edition, which included a range of articles on climate-related issues. The spotlighted article, authored by *TIME* journalist Thomas Sancton, was titled “What on EARTH are we doing.” Solving climate change, wrote Sancton, would require massive political mobilization, international cooperation and individual sacrifices “unknown except in wartime.”

Climate change was more than an eye-catching cover for the magazine, it was the focus of the entire issue. Published alongside Sancton’s call to action were pieces by politicians, poet

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laureates, and scientists alike, tackling a range of topics that included barrier to political action,\textsuperscript{33} the science of the greenhouse effect, nuclear power, overpopulation, and immediate mitigation and adaptation measures.\textsuperscript{34} While the magazine’s approach to telling the climate story was expansive, in retrospect, the topics that weren’t included are notable. Aspects of climate change that have come to define the climate crisis today, including tipping points, local effects, climate refugees, climate justice, and a just economic transition are all noticeably absent.

Not only did the magazine intend to inform a wide audience about the emerging climate problem, it also put forth recommendations for action. The concluding piece of the magazine outlined “What the U.S. Should Do.”\textsuperscript{35} In a call that would become the foundation of climate justice efforts years later, the piece implored the U.S.—the largest single consumer of energy in the world, and home to the drivers of one-third of the world’s cars—to be at the forefront of the “effort to solve the earth’s environmental crisis.” Demonstrating an awareness of the multi-leveled nature of solving a global problem, the eight recommendations were split between domestic and international actions. Domestic solutions included raising the gas tax, strengthening vehicle fuel-efficiency requirements, encouraging recycling, and promoting the use of natural gas; international solutions included encouraging debt-for-nature swaps, supporting family planning measures, ratifying other environmental treaties to create goodwill for a climate treaty, and making the environment a summit issue at the next international economic summit.

Looking back, it is clear that some important solutions had not yet been considered. The eight recommendations offered do not mention, for instance, a need to dramatically transform the economy, transition to renewable energy sources, or address climate justice issues. By advocating for U.S. action on climate as early as 1988, though, \textit{TIME} magazine’s “Endangered Earth” shows a clear, early effort to heighten climate awareness and catalyze the massive collective action needed to address the problem.

That same year, 1989, author Bill McKibben published \textit{The End of Nature}, which is widely regarded as the first book about climate change targeted at a public audience. McKibben is not a scientist and at the time he was not really an activist either. He was a concerned citizen.

\textsuperscript{33} Gore, Albert. “‘What Is Wrong With Us?’ A Senator’s Impassioned Call for Action.” \textit{TIME} 133, no. 1 (January 1989): 66.
\textsuperscript{34} “Planet of the Year: Endangered Earth.” \textit{TIME} 133, no.1 (January 1989). \url{http://content.time.com/time/magazine/0,9263,7601890102,00.html}
\textsuperscript{35} “Planet of the Year: What the U.S. Should Do.” \textit{TIME} 133, no.1 (January 1989).
and journalist.\textsuperscript{36} Inspired in part by the summer of 1988 heatwaves and Dr. Hansen’s testimony in the Senate,\textsuperscript{37} The End of Nature had an extensive reach, and was reviewed countless times in publications around the world, as well as translated into over 20 languages.\textsuperscript{38} In The End of Nature, McKibben argues that the idea of “nature” as a realm separate from humans had ended in both a literal and a metaphorical sense.\textsuperscript{39} Global warming would change the patterns of weather and ecosystems, rendering no natural systems beyond human influence.\textsuperscript{40} While the book is centrally about climate change, it meanders through personal narrative, interpretations of Environmental Protection Agency reports and scientific research from a lay perspective, and concern about the human relationship to wilderness. Part of the book’s success—despite receiving some criticism of some of its assumptions, especially the separation of humans from nature—was that it sought to inform people through personal stories and emotional reactions, rather than data.\textsuperscript{41} For that reason, The End of Nature also represented a belief that in raising awareness, readers might come to share McKibben’s same sense of concern, and that public action would bubble-up to answer the book’s “plea for radical and life-renewing change.”\textsuperscript{42}

Although McKibben’s book did not galvanize public protest, environmentalists at the leading non-profits certainly took notice of its message. In January 1991, then President of the Sierra Club Susan Merrow spoke to the Sierra Club’s Board of Directors, urging them to center a sense of mission in their work. That winter, Merrow had read a reprint of McKibben’s “End of Nature” essay in The New Yorker magazine. Merrow described the piece as a “call to action” to read whenever you felt your “sense of urgency slipping, if the skeptics [had] gotten to you.”\textsuperscript{43} For Merrow, the Sierra Club’s “mission [had] to be to save the planet from the intertwined issue of global climate change and the horrendous lack of leadership from Washington on a rational energy policy.” She spoke of the need to “get mad, to get involved, and to make a difference,” so

\textsuperscript{37} McKibben, “The Emotional Core of ‘The End of Nature,’” p. 182.
\textsuperscript{43} President’s Report. Item 20. Sierra Club Board of Directors January 1991 meeting minutes. Online Archive of California.
that she would be able to tell her granddaughter that in “the moral equivalent of war” she did more than balance the Sierra Club’s budget.\textsuperscript{44} While Merrow’s report is stirring, the fact that in 1991, three years after the Sierra Club’s global warming program was established, the Sierra Club’s president was still trying to figure out how to act on climate, how to inspire a sense of urgency in the Sierra Club’s staff and even herself, highlights how difficult it was to transform climate awareness into meaningful action. Scientists, politicians, and journalists had, over the course of the late 1980s, moved climate from the domain of science into the public sphere, but still had not offered a clear roadmap for how to solve the problem or engage the public. Instead, it fell on environmentalists, especially those active in the big mainstream organizations, to capture the political and public energy that had been generated and shape it into real action.

How to do that is the question Dan Becker was tasked with answering when, in 1989, he was hired to direct the Sierra Club’s global warming program and craft its climate campaign.\textsuperscript{45} To understand the challenge Becker faced, it is helpful to think about what made climate change different from other issues the Sierra Club worked on. The Sierra Club’s influence on other campaigns had come from its ability to mobilize grassroots members on specific problems, often with clear legislative solutions.\textsuperscript{46} In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Sierra Club’s major national campaigns included the Clean Air Act Amendment of 1990 (which they lead the grassroots effort on), a decade-long campaign to expand public land protections (especially in Alaska), and fierce opposition to drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR).\textsuperscript{47} Lobbying and insider maneuvering were central strategies of those campaigns, but the Sierra Club’s real strength came from mobilizing its grassroots network.\textsuperscript{48} Some tactics were specific to individual campaigns, for example activist lobby days on Capitol Hill were particularly effective.

\textsuperscript{44} President’s Report. Item 20. Sierra Club Board of Directors January 1991 meeting minutes. Online Archive of California.
\textsuperscript{45} Executive Director’s Report. Item 31. Sierra Club Board of Directors March 1989 meeting minutes. Online Archive of California.
\textsuperscript{46} The Sierra Club had a specific Volunteer Development Office, held scheduled Sierra Club volunteer training and workshops, and worked to build a Training Resources Information Bank. During this time, the Sierra Club also created a Grassroots Sierra newsletter to further develop and empower its grassroots network. Item 34. Sierra Club Board of Directors March 1989 meeting minutes. Online Archive of California. page 5.
in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge campaign, while volunteer workshops were important to equip volunteers with information to advocate for the Clean Air Act. Generally, though, campaigns followed something akin to a conservation campaign playbook that included: (1) lobbying Congress, (2) asking constituents contacting members of Congress, and (3) empowering grassroots activists/chapters to take the lead on state and local level actions.

It was not clear how that same playbook could be employed to mobilize people around an issue as seemingly abstract as global warming. Up until this point, the Sierra Club was primarily a place-based organization working on issues of national relevance that had clear and obvious local effects like deforestation, toxics, and acid rain. Climate change, as a global and future-facing issue, was fundamentally different. When the Sierra Club’s global warming campaign was established in late 1988, its first task was therefore to figure out how to communicate climate change to its members and the broader public. Since the consequences seemed remote, and since there was a dearth of broad public knowledge on the issue, the starting point for action was much different from that of other Sierra Club conservation campaigns. To better understand public perception of the issue, donations by several large benefactors to the Sierra Club funded eight focus groups. The sessions revealed that Americans did not have a strong understanding of the causes and consequences of global warming, but after learning about the consequences, they were willing to find solutions to stop it for the good of future generations.

The Sierra Club focus groups revealed that unlike air pollution and wilderness protection, climate change was still a relatively novel issue for most Americans. Thus, before even considering mass mobilizations, the Sierra Club needed to engage the public through awareness-raising. During the November 1989 Sierra Club board meeting, Steven Fenton, a Sierra Club member who worked in advertising, proposed an ad campaign to address reasons why people did not see climate as a problem, and highlight the Sierra Club as a “source of

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49 Item 120. Sierra Club Board of Directors May 1991 meeting minutes. Online Archive of California; Item 35-36. Sierra Club Board of Directors March 1989 meeting minutes. Online Archive of California.


53 Even by 1991, awareness-raising was a central focus of Sierra Club leadership. In 1991, Sierra Club President Susan Merrow embarked on a national public outreach and education tour to engage people on environmental issues, especially climate change. President’s Report. Item 20. Sierra Club Board of Directors January 1991 meeting minutes. Online Archive of California.
education, trust, problem solver and giver of hope.” A year later, by the March 1990 board meeting, the project had been completed. The PSAs were accepted by over 583 television stations, and included an 800 number (800-TOO-WARM) people could call to receive a pamphlet with ways to help stop global warming, a membership application, and a Sierra Club brochure. Featuring recognizable celebrities, including William Shatner, the PSAs described the consequences of climate change and implored viewers to find out how to help because “[their] children and [their] grandchildren [were] counting on [them].” After the video was shown at the Board of Directors meeting, it received a standing ovation by those in attendance. The excitement the PSAs created about finding a message that might finally resonate with people reflects how serious of a challenge it was for the Sierra Club to communicate the issue. It also foreshadows the difficulty Sierra Club activists would face trying to forge a movement focused on such an abstract problem.

Reaching a domestic audience was one challenge, but early on Sierra Club leaders realized that creating a strategy that addressed action at different scales, from the local to the international, was another. When Dan Becker took over the program in 1989, he pitched a plan with four distinct components to the Board: (1) A traditional legislative-grassroots campaign, including lobby weeks on Capitol Hill, that would focus on the various energy efficiency related bills that had been introduced in Congress. The Sierra Club expected to be especially useful on this front because unlike other organizations involved at that point, the Sierra Club had a grassroots structure that could take the lead. (2) An effort to influence international work by promoting rapid global emissions reductions in areas where emissions were rising. (3) An “aggressive state legislative and political action program aimed at governors, legislators and public utilities,” since many energy decisions are made at the state-level. And (4) a local organizing effort to “provide sample initiatives for local groups to take to city councils, county commissions, and others, stating the case and tailoring the needs to the locality.” Recognizing the ways that climate change was distinct from other conservation campaigns, Sierra Club leaders endeavored to craft a campaign strategy suited to its unique features. Though the plan

54 Item 12. Sierra Club Board of Directors January 1989 meeting minutes. Online Archive of California.
55 Item 30. Sierra Club Board of Directors March 1990 meeting minutes. Online Archive of California.
56 Item 30. Sierra Club Board of Directors March 1990 meeting minutes. Online Archive of California.
58 Item 31. Sierra Club Board of Directors March 1990 meeting minutes. Online Archive of California.
still reflected an attempt to apply the standard campaign playbook, the breadth of pathways the Sierra Club was prepared to pursue indicates the simultaneous uncertainty and urgency they felt about climate change, with scale posing a unique obstacle.

Despite early and ambitious goals for grassroots engagement on climate, the Sierra Club struggled to realize those objectives in practice. It wasn’t until late in 1989 that a staffer, Gene Coan, began devoting half of his time to state and local campaigns on global warming. Six months later, in March 1990, local action was still in its infancy, and efforts to engage local activists were framed as opportunities for education. One of the most concrete steps taken to bring local level activists into the fold was an activist kit that included “a sample resolution that [could] be used at any level.” The kit was meant to be used as a “powerful educational tool,” and as a way to catalyze the adoption of energy efficiency-related policies locally. Grassroots activists were also encouraged to keep their Congressional representatives informed, especially in support of the federal Bryan bill which, if passed, would increase car fuel efficiency standards. Though there is some evidence that plans were made to push for widespread grassroots climate activism before the 1990s, the Sierra Club’s efforts remained primarily focused on education.

At the same time, opponents to climate action—industry interests and big utilities—were consolidating around a sophisticated way of framing opposition to climate action. Their argument hinged on (1) emphasizing the economic costs of action to the U.S., to industry, and to consumers if greenhouse gas emitting activities were strictly regulated and (2) engaging in an effort to politicize the science by highlighting uncertainty. Strategies used by opponents included building industry organization coalitions, like the American Petroleum Institute, Global Climate Coalition, and Edison Electric Institute; lobbying members of Congress (especially effective due to Congressional energy interests and eventually campaign funding); and forming and mobilizing citizen groups. Jane Mayer, in her 2016 book Dark Money, delves deeply into the nefarious, coordinated efforts of top fossil fuel industry executives and wealthy conservatives to finance deceptive research and fund friendly politicians in order to turn back the rising tide of support for climate action. While oppositional forces are not the focus of this thesis, it is important to acknowledge the structure and strength of the opposition that activists had to contend with.

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60 Item 217. Sierra Club Board of Directors September 1989 meeting minutes. Online Archive of California.
61 Item 30. Sierra Club Board of Directors March 1989 meeting minutes. Online Archive of California.
62 Item 30. Sierra Club Board of Directors March 1989 meeting minutes. Online Archive of California.
In this very early stage of the climate movement, environmentalists made a good faith effort to catalyze collective action. Even so, mainstream environmentalists soon ran into the brick wall that getting the science right, showing it to people, and hoping everything will fall into place is not an effective approach to mobilizing people. Naomi Oreskes, a historian of science, finds that despite the clear consensus of the scientific community that climate change is both a pressing and human-caused issue, by the early 2000s many Americans remained skeptical, believing that scientists were still divided. In her seminal book *Merchants of Doubt*, Oreskes draws connections between climate crisis discourse in the U.S. and past scientific debates, and argues that opponents to change create confusion and highlight uncertainty to undermine action. In other words, what mainstream environmental activists did not fully comprehend in the 1990s was that being on the side with conclusive science is not enough. Though increasingly rigorous scientific study was critical to climate activism as it ramped up in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the challenging reality was that interpretations of the science, and contrasting assessments of its urgency, were colored by the differing values and priorities between opponents and proponents of change. Mainstream environmentalists had not found a framing of the issue that resonated with enough people to spark large-scale mobilization. Though at the time these phenomena were not as well-known, it is possible now to see the ways they posed significant problems for mainstream environmentalists who saw the climate crisis as first and foremost a scientific one. As a consequence, early efforts to mobilize the public did not find purchase.

At the start of the 1990s, with the 1992 Rio Earth Summit approaching and a battle over vehicle fuel economy brewing in the Senate, a new window for early climate victory had opened. During this period, two critical obstacles had become clear, and foreshadowed the challenges still to come: (1) the difficulty of engaging grassroots activists on an abstract, future-focused issue with unclear solutions, and (2) the need to organize around climate policy and solutions at very different scales, most critically the domestic and the international. Yet it was unclear whether groups like the Sierra Club had positioned themselves well to meet these challenges, or whether they were stalled on figuring out how to communicate the problem to people in a way that would encourage them to act.

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1.2 Narrowing in on Energy Efficiency

In the early 1990s, mainstream environmental organizations searched intently for viable solutions to rally grassroots advocacy efforts around. Sierra Club President Susan Merrow, in her January 1991 report to the Sierra Club’s Board, shared her passionate belief that the Sierra Club needed to focus on the twin issues of global warming and energy policy. Addressing climate change was a “daunting goal” but, Merrow said, “we know how goals work. You break them down into pieces, into something quantifiable.” Merrow’s vision functionally describes how leading environmental organizations, particularly the Sierra Club and the Natural Resources Defense Council, conceived of the climate problem: it was a scientific one that could and should be addressed through pieces of technical policy. Climate change wouldn’t be solved by one nation acting alone, but domestic level policy would be integral to international success.

Influenced by this framing, mainstream environmental organizations in the 1990s narrowed in on strengthening vehicle fuel economy standards at the national level as a key climate solution.

Focusing on vehicle emissions as a crucial element of the domestic climate agenda was not inevitable. There were three primary reasons that increasing Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) standards emerged as the leading policy strategy for environmentalists. First, it was pragmatic. It was a quantifiable piece of the larger goal to address global warming. Car and light truck emissions made up nearly one-third of total carbon emissions at the time. For that reason, environmentalists at the big non-profits maintained that strengthening fuel economy standards was the biggest single immediate step the U.S. could take to curb emissions.

Second, the strategy was opportunistic. Traditional environmental advocacy work commonly followed the pattern of pressing for legislative action on existing policy proposals, especially those already in Congress. As Mark Dowie, in his book Losing Ground, remarks, the wealthy environmental non-profits with national agendas and influence increasingly “pursued a

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strategy based on the civil authority and good faith of the federal government.”\textsuperscript{70} That formula is evident in many campaigns contemporary to the time, including the pushes for passing the 1990 Clean Air Act Amendment, preventing drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and reducing toxics contamination under the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA).\textsuperscript{71} So following that pattern, it made sense for the Sierra Club’s global warming program to seize the opportunity to influence Senator Richard Bryan’s (D-NV) Motor Vehicle Fuel Efficiency Act in 1989.\textsuperscript{72} In early 1990, Becker reported to the Sierra Club Board that Senator Bryan’s bill contained the “single biggest step toward curbing global warming, the 45 mpg fuel efficiency standard” which would cut emissions in half.\textsuperscript{73} Senator Bryan himself made an appearance at the March 1991 Sierra Club Board meeting and praised Becker’s and the Sierra Club’s involvement on the bill, while also emphasizing the overwhelming challenges that remained.\textsuperscript{74}

A third reason mainstream groups concentrated on vehicle fuel economy was that targeting other sectors, like power plants and factories, was a non-starter. After a decade-long struggle, the Clean Air Act Amendment passed in 1990, which established regulations on sulfur emissions using a market-based system. There wasn’t political will at the time to go down that same path again.\textsuperscript{75} Indeed, even after the Clean Air Act Amendment passed, the debate over its costs, benefits, implementation, and potential expansion to regulate greenhouse gases continued to be a contentious political battle itself.\textsuperscript{76} For those three overarching reasons, CAFE standards were a strategic policy for groups like the Sierra Club and Natural Resources Defense Council to pursue as a first step towards tackling the climate problem.

Mainstream organizations also championed stronger CAFE standards as good policy in its own right. Fuel economy standards were framed by both politicians and big environmental non-profits as a way to achieve the separate, publicly popular goal of reducing U.S. dependence...


\textsuperscript{72} Item 217. Sierra Club Board of Directors September 1989 meeting minutes. Online Archive of California.

\textsuperscript{73} Item 30. Sierra Club Board of Directors March 1990 meeting minutes. Online Archive of California.

\textsuperscript{74} Item 97. Sierra Club Board of Directors March 1991 meeting minutes. Online Archive of California.


\textsuperscript{76} Turner et al., “The Cost of Clean Air and Water.”
on foreign oil.\textsuperscript{77} CAFE standards were first established in 1975 in response to the 1974 oil crisis, and were justified as a way to reduce U.S. energy consumption and increase domestic energy security.\textsuperscript{78} After the U.S. initiated the Gulf War in 1990, foreign oil dependence again became a hot-button issue. When Senator Byan introduced his bill to increase CAFE standards, he capitalized on the fears of the moment,\textsuperscript{79} asserting that there was “no better argument for reducing our dependence on foreign oil than news reports from the Persian Gulf.”\textsuperscript{80}

Stronger CAFE standards were also seen as another way to protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge from drilling. Higher fuel economy standards, if implemented, would save more oil than could ever be extracted from the Arctic Refuge, weakening the argument for using the refuge as an oil production site.\textsuperscript{81} Sierra Club leaders attempted to explicitly link the issues of fossil fuel use, drilling in the Arctic, and global warming in a 1991 energy campaign called “Never Again!” Notably, despite the recognition that a “visible campaign to mobilize the public” was desperately needed, it was difficult to know how to create one. As a result, the campaign focused on raising public awareness around a cohesive campaign calling out the dangers of “excessive fossil fuel use”, not mobilizing action.\textsuperscript{82}

CAFE standards were publicly popular, which made them an easier sell for proponents. A 1991 poll conducted for the Union of Concerned Scientists demonstrated overwhelming public support, with 80% of those surveyed in favor of requiring fuel economy standards of 40 to 45 miles per gallon.\textsuperscript{83} Polling from 1992, the year Senator Bill Clinton was elected President, indicated public support remained high at 82%, even if new fuel efficient cars cost an extra $500.\textsuperscript{84} In one notable presidential debate, CAFE standards, oil dependence, and the environment


\textsuperscript{82} Item 8. Sierra Club Board of Directors January 1991 meeting minutes. Online Archive of California.


were brought together in response to the issue of energy policy, which signaled advocates’
effective linkage of the issues. Clinton, citing the opportunity for environmental protection,
argued in favor of increasing vehicle fuel economy standards to 40 miles per gallon, though he
wavered on whether or not CAFE standards should be implemented through law or simply
incentivized through other funding mechanisms. Bush, on the other hand, opposed increasing
fuel efficiency, asserting such action would “break the auto industry” and lead to massive job
loss. CAFE standards were therefore a key point of distinction on the campaign trail, though
neither major candidate vocally championed the cause to the extent the Sierra Club did.

In an attempt to broaden support, Sierra Club advocates also marketed the measure as a
pro-consumer policy. A 1994 joint study by the Sierra Club and the Public Interest Research
Group provided data indicating higher fuel economy standards would achieve enormous gas
savings for U.S. families and carbon savings for the planet. Winning the public relations battle
was difficult, though, since even though polling data suggested that public support remained high
through the early 1990s, consumer polls by the National Highway and Traffic Safety
Administration showed that the role fuel economy played in decision-making had decreased
significantly over time.

Finally, and most straightforwardly, many climate activists maintained that fuel economy
standards were a strong, clear, scientifically-backed solution to the otherwise abstract climate
problem. Environmentalists like the Sierra Club’s Dan Becker really believed that tackling
automotive emissions was the correct policy pathway to pursue at the moment; the science said
emissions needed to be reduced, cars were the number one emitter, and the technology existed to
make it happen if only regulators would require it. After two decades passed without progress
on CAFE standards, Becker abandoned D.C. for California, where he found greater success
making progress on vehicle emissions with the Safe Climate Campaign at the state-level.

Though CAFE standards were fertile ground for pursuing climate-related policy, the big

Presidential Debates.
87 Consumer polling data in 1995 revealed that fuel economy went from being, on average, ranked second to ranked
15th among reasons to purchase a vehicle over the course of a decade.; Knickerbocker, Brad. “As Drivers Shift to
88 O’Donnell, Jayne. “With Warm Regards; Sierra Club carries the torch against global warming by turning up the
heat for more fuel-efficient cars.” AutoWeek, Apr. 23, 1990.
89 Becker, Dan and James Gerstenzang. “3 Lessons to Winning the War on Global Warming.” Inside Climate News,
environmental organizations struggled to push more stringent regulations through Congress. It was good policy but bad politics. Environmental organizations paid lobbyists, or spent time lobbying themselves, to make sure their issues were at the top of the agenda. Yet even using insider tactics, leading non-profits found it difficult to gain traction. As part of its climate campaign, the Sierra Club in particular dedicated significant resources to strengthening the Bryan bill. Attempting to increase member involvement, Sierra Club leaders also organized lobby weeks around the issue that brought professional and citizen lobbyists to meet with the offices of members of Congress. It is unclear that either of these tactics had any measurable influence on political support for the policy.

Leaning into insider strategies, mainstream environmentalists also prioritized testifying at Congressional committee hearings on climate-related issues and policy. In May 1994, Natural Resources Defense Council senior scientist Daniel A. Lashof testified before a Senate committee that stronger fuel economy standards were the key to emissions reduction. By the end of the decade, mainstream environmentalists still towed the same line: in 2000, Sierra Club representative Ann Mesnikoff similarly testified before a Senate committee that the “key to curbing global warming is improving energy efficiency.” Environmentalists from these large national groups recognized their joint interests, and frequently wrote letters in partnership with each other advocating for stronger CAFE standards and climate action. In one notable example from November 1995, the Sierra Club, Natural Resources Defense Council, Public Citizen, Center for Auto Safety, American Council for an Energy Efficient Economy, U.S. Public Interest Research Group, Friends of the Earth, and Environmental Action all signed a letter opposing a bill to weaken the implementation of CAFE standards, and hand delivered it to members of the House. The problem with the inside game, though, is that you risk the possibility that your opponents will play it better. Intensive, sustained lobbying efforts by the auto-industry have been credited with preventing any meaningful progress on fuel economy standards by the end of the twentieth century.

90 Items 35-38. Sierra Club Board of Directors March 1989 meeting minutes. Online Archive of California.
94 Bradsher, Keith. “License to Pollute: A special report; Light Trucks Increase Profits But Foul Air More Than
Unlike with other national issue campaigns, the big environmental organizations did not have a clear roadmap for how to mobilize activist involvement in the climate campaign. Despite mainstream environmentalists’ argument that CAFE standards were good for consumers, and despite the consistently high level of public support, there is no evidence that a strong grassroots campaign emerged to champion the cause. That is not for a lack of trying, though.

When the public was engaged, efforts focused primarily on what each individual could do, rather than how communities could organize for political action. For the CAFE standards campaign, cars became the target of this type of individual messaging. Cars are personal, so it was possible to craft a campaign around the idea that if you were an environmentalist, there was a right and wrong car to buy. If you clicked onto the Sierra Club website in 1997, the first thing you would have seen would have been calls to participate in a contest to “Name that Gas Guzzler!”, referring to Ford’s new highly inefficient SUV. Cars like the 1994 Honda Civic VX, on the other hand, were upheld as models for well-known vehicles that had increased fuel efficiency. When the Toyota Prius, a hybrid electric- and gas-powered vehicle, was introduced to the U.S. market in 2000, Becker went so far as to invent a Sierra Club award for it: the Sierra Club Award for Excellence in Environmental design. That same year he took the Prius, along with a few assistants, on a 50-city promotional tour to encourage people to test drive and buy the Prius. In a 2007 interview with The New York Times, Becker said that “The Prius allowed you to make a green statement with a car for the first time,” which confirmed the way cars were used as, and perhaps encouraged to be, expressions of personal environmental beliefs.

Efforts to change individual consumption were characteristic of environmental...
organizations’ climate messaging overall in the 1990s. Many of these organizations prominently featured on their websites lists outlining simple steps every individual could take to help fight climate change. All of these lists, including those of the Natural Resources Defense Council, Sierra Club, and Environmental Defense Fund called on the people to buy energy-efficient appliances, switch to fluorescent light bulbs, and stop driving fuel-intensive SUVs. Though many of these lists were passive attempts to raise awareness about individual impact, in 1998, the Environmental Defense Fund and Natural Resources Defense Council ran a concentrated joint campaign to urge their 100,000 California members to buy California’s new clean electricity options. As Soneryd and Uggla argue in a review of the literature on “green consumption” and individualization, this kind of individual approach draws attention away from the bigger project of reimagining the role of government and other social structures in causing and solving issues like climate change. In the context of mainstream environmental climate strategy in the 1990s, this manifested in the way mainstream organizations engaged the public on climate, which was not to show them how to engage in advocacy, but how to spend their money.

Linkages between mainstream environmentalism, consumerism, and individual action, which were evident in the messaging around CAFE standards and climate in the 1990s, are well documented in the literature. Szasz, in his book *Shopping our Way to Safety* introduces the idea of “fatalistic environmentalism”, a phenomenon in which individuals, recognizing environmental danger, engage in “individualized acts of self-protection” rather than coordinated action and social movements. That kind of thought process contributes to a widespread “consumeristic response” to environmental problems, which are especially problematic in the context of climate change, since buying a more efficient car or lightbulb will not actually protect individuals from the consequences of climate change that will be felt collectively. Maniates, an

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environmental scholar studying consumerist environmentalism, writes in a 2001 article that “an increasingly dominant, largely American response to the contemporary environmental crisis understands environmental degradation as the product of individual shortcomings and finds solutions in enlightened, uncoordinated consumer choice.”107 Specifically calling out the listicle style “10 easy steps to save the planet” published by mainstream environmental organizations, Maniates attributes the rise of consumerist framings of environmentalism in the 1990s to the simultaneous unfettered ascendancy of liberalism and fears about the assault on environmental regulations by opponents to action.108 The continuous reinforcement of the need for individual action, though, likely contributed to the challenges mainstream environmentalists faced in building a climate movement, since the “public increasingly [understood] environmentalism as an individual, rational, cleanly apolitical process that [could] deliver a future that works without raising voices or mobilizing constituencies.”109

When mainstream environmental organizations did encourage political engagement, it was most often through the engagement of people as individuals rather than as collective actors. Dowie argues that the federal level strategy of the mainstream groups focused on “the three Ls—legislation, litigation, and lobbying” rather than effectively working with grassroots environmentalists.110 Recent research on social movements indicates that engaging the public through individualized action, even in the collective, is distinct from expanding public will for action or building a social movement that can transform action into power and change.111 The mainstream environmentalists’ view of political influence in the 1990s, in which insider, bureaucratic tactics were prioritized over building collective power, contributed to an individualized view of political action. Rather than engage in long-term community organizing or public protest and mass action, mainstream environmental organizations asked individuals to contact elected officials and raise awareness. Groups like the Natural Resources Defense Council and Sierra Club used their websites and email alerts to notify activists about opportunities to call


Asking activists to raise awareness in their communities was a more active attempt by environmental organizations to cultivate a grassroots climate action base. The Environmental Defense Fund, for instance, encouraged individuals to work within their communities to “implement waste reduction and energy-efficiency measures.”\footnote{114}{“20 Simple Steps to Reduce Global Warming.” IAWM.} Similarly, the very mission of the Sierra Club’s Global Warming and Energy Campaign in 1996 was to “educate, motivate and empower citizen activists to participate in the public policy debate, and to provide education materials and information to policy makers, the media and the general public.”\footnote{115}{“Sierra Club Global Warming and Energy Campaign.” \textit{Sierra Club}. IAWM: Nov. 21, 1996. \url{https://web.archive.org/web/19961121082235/http://www.sierraclub.org/global-warming/}; “Sierra Club Global Warming and Energy Campaign.” \textit{Sierra Club}. IAWM: Nov. 21, 1996. \url{https://web.archive.org/web/19961121082235/http://www.sierraclub.org/global-warming/}.} Though many organizations did not provide resources for how to raise awareness or initiate implementation efforts in their communities, the Sierra Club was a notable exception. For instance, the Sierra Club provided individuals with a template letter to the editor in support of stronger CAFE standards.\footnote{116}{“SC Action #202 Shell and Exxon Feel the Heat.” \textit{Sierra Club}. May 9, 1996. IAWM: Dec. 1, 1996. \url{https://web.archive.org/web/19961201140338/http://www.sierraclub.org/news/sc-action/1996/0049.html}.} In another particularly creative effort, in 1996 the Sierra Club put together a “Climate Report” video series of “six 2-3 minute segments … [explaining] the problem of global warming through interviews with top scientists, weather footage and graphics.” Weathercasters from a number of cities ran the series over the summer, and the Sierra Club encouraged individual activists to help educate the community by calling their local TV stations and urging
them to run the series.\textsuperscript{117} While efforts that were made to highlight individual level actions, consumer behaviors, and civic engagement were an important strategy at the time, environmental organizations had not tapped into a transformative, energetic theory of change, nor were they able to create large-scale coordinated grassroots climate action.

Despite all of the initiatives to raise climate awareness, environmentalists, at this point, were still missing a consistent, inspiring way to communicate to the public why action was important. The need to act on climate was first and foremost presented as a matter of fact. Global warming fact sheets, IPCC report summaries, and expert interviews inundated non-profit messaging, websites, and materials, without an overarching framing or story to contextualize it. Instead, the need to act was asserted in clear, succinct phrases imploring that “we must act now,” “CAFE standards are the biggest single step to curb global warming,” and that the U.S. “must lead.”\textsuperscript{118} Lost in the science and the calls to action were the reasons why individual people should care about the problem.

When mainstream environmentalists did get at a “why” the reasons were multitudinous rather than cohesive. In part due to a limited understanding of when the impacts of climate change would worsen, environmentalists tended to appeal to the need to protect the planet for the next generation.\textsuperscript{119} Other framings included positioning CAFE standards as a pathway to address separate problems like air pollution and wilderness destruction.\textsuperscript{120} Eventually, as scientific research became more robust, mainstream environmentalists also emphasized the potential for dramatic local consequences like flooding, drought, and disease.\textsuperscript{121} The language these organizations weren’t using is just as revealing. Organizations and environmentalists rarely used

\textsuperscript{119} Jennifer Johnson. “Global Warming PSA Sierra Club 1990.” YouTube Video, 1:00, Dec. 17, 2019.
the language of a “climate crisis” or “emergency”, and rarely mentioned the devastating potential for massive numbers of climate refugees and loss of land to sea-level rise. Generally, mainstream environmentalists focused on climate action as a way to avoid negative consequences, rather than framing CAFE standards and other policies as part of a set of overarching values or vision for the future. Today, language about the urgency and moral imperative to act on climate is nearly ubiquitous among climate activists, even among the big environmental organizations, but in the 1990s that messaging was almost entirely absent.

By focusing on CAFE standards, mainstream environmentalists took a narrow, focused strategy to climate action, but were not able to achieve the rapid change they had hoped for. Instead, the fight over fuel economy standards turned into a multi-decade campaign that never succeeded in inspiring a grassroots effort and achieved only uneven success at the national level. The 1991 Bryan bill, environmentalists’ best shot at early action, never even went up for a vote. Environmentalists, who refused to use the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge as a bargaining chip, were unable to overcome the industry lobby and the citizen group mobilization it assembled. In a 2002 PBS Frontline episode, Becker reflected that “The auto industry reacted to the Bryan bill as if Godzilla had come down to eat Detroit… They sent armies of lobbyists to the hill.” Even if mainstream environmentalists had succeeded in pushing the bill through Congress, the Bush administration promised to veto any legislation that strengthened fuel economy standards. Though Clinton’s election in 1992 sparked new hope, the auto-industry continued to fiercely block any possibility for passing the stricter standards he endorsed.

Notably, the fight for higher fuel economy standards at the national level stayed alive in the executive branch long after it faded away in Congress. When the Clinton administration tried to move forward with raising fuel economy standards through executive pathways, Congress passed an appropriations rider (vehemently opposed by environmentalists) removing the administration’s authority to do so, which remained in place from 1995 to 2000. It was not until 2012 that environmentalists tasted anything close to victory after the Obama administration

122 Nivola, *The Long and Winding Road*.
finalized standards mandating a fuel economy of 54.5 mpg for cars and light-trucks by 2025. Still, executive action is more tenuous than legislation, and in 2020 the Trump administration rolled back Obama’s standards to only 40 miles per gallon.

As mainstream environmental groups struggled to pass fuel economy legislation in Congress, they also endeavored to enact change at the international level. Part of what made the legislative battle so difficult was that mainstream environmentalists were also fighting on another front: pushing the White House and executive agencies to take a strong stance on climate in the arena of the United Nations. In the early 1990s, the Bryan bill initiated a long, fraught road to stronger CAFE standards. Around the same time, the Bush administration had begun the process of entering a global climate treaty, which marked the start of an equally fraught path towards the Kyoto climate negotiations in 1997. Therefore, mainstream environmental groups, in their hope of building a robust climate movement, faced the challenge of not only mobilizing the public around climate change at the domestic level, but at the international level as well.

1.3 Laying the Groundwork for Global Climate Action

In the 1990s, domestic action was halting, but there was still hope that international action could be a way forward. In 1987, President Ronald Reagan, known more for budget slashing than environmentalism, signed a groundbreaking international emissions treaty: the Montreal Protocol. Ratified by the Senate with little fanfare in 1988, the Protocol committed industrial nations to reducing and eventually eliminating ozone-depleting substances like the CFCs found in refrigerants and hairsprays. Environmentalists in the leading non-profits understood that global warming was similarly an intrinsically global problem, and that any real solutions would require international cooperation. U.S. leadership on the Montreal Protocol was a reason to believe that might be possible. Despite their early optimism, the big environmental non-profits continued to struggle to create a two-level strategy to mobilize the

129 Turner et al., The Republican Reversal, pp. 146-147.
130 Items 35-39. Sierra Club Board of Directors March 1989 meeting minutes. Online Archive of California; Organizations like the NRDC, Friends of the Earth, and Greenpeace all had international branches or staff working on environmental issues.
public around domestic policy on one level, and international policy on another.

President George H.W. Bush was not the first choice of mainstream environmentalists, but they were still optimistic that international climate action would be possible when he assumed office in 1989. On the campaign trail in 1988, then Vice President Bush had broken with the Reagan administration in branding himself as the environmental president.\textsuperscript{132} His environmental agenda was promising, including goals to address acid rain, conserve public lands, and take action on climate.\textsuperscript{133} In his famous 1988 environmental policy speech, Bush carefully described the dangers of the greenhouse effect, stating that the “critical answer [was] energy conservation,” that the problem was “international in scope,” and that tackling climate change was the “common agenda of the future.” Any doubt of “the possibility of an international agreement forged by U.S. leadership” he proclaimed, could be assuaged by the recent success of the Montreal Protocol.\textsuperscript{134}

In his 1988 environmental campaign speech, Bush focused heavily on acid rain,\textsuperscript{135} which he discussed in a way remarkably similar to how environmentalists discussed climate change. Bush described the Montreal Protocol as an example of U.S. leadership, but he also pointed to another upcoming international agreement to limit nitrous oxides emissions, a major contributor to acid rain. The Protocol, he said, should be signed by the U.S. and be implemented around the world, “[since it] will require both national and international action.” Expanding further, Bush argued that “to take steps to limit the future damage,” immediate action would be “an insurance policy against future disaster,” and clear commitments to reduce emissions on a set time table were necessary.\textsuperscript{136} The nitrous oxides protocol was swiftly signed by President Reagan in 1988 and ratified by the Senate in January 1989.\textsuperscript{137} Then, after a decades-long battle, President Bush delivered a significant win to environmentalists by signing the 1990 Clean Air Act Amendment.

\textsuperscript{134} Bush, “Road to the White House 1988: Bush Environmental Policy Campaign Speech.”
\textsuperscript{135} Bush, “Road to the White House 1988: Bush Environmental Policy Campaign Speech.”
\textsuperscript{136} Bush, “Road to the White House 1988: Bush Environmental Policy Campaign Speech.”
into law, effectively regulating nitrous and sulfur oxides. Bush’s position on acid rain, and his follow through on the issue once elected, showed that the President at the very least understood the structure of, and importance of addressing, future facing issues. Yet, while the progress on acid rain proved that both international and bipartisan action on an emissions-related issue was possible, those lessons proved non-transferrable to the climate issue.

Any hope big environmental groups had that President Bush would take decisive action on climate faded soon after he was inaugurated. Within his first year in office, Bush was already clashing with mainstream environmentalists. In September 1989, the Bush administration submitted a U.S. position paper to an international climate change working group that met that year. International efforts to address global warming, the administration stated, should focus on preventing adverse economic, social, and environmental impacts, not “protecting the climate” by limiting emissions. The official position of the administration, as outlined in the paper, was that any international convention on climate change should focus on data collection and avoid specific emission targets, time tables, or obligations. A month later, in October 1989, it was reported that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator William K. Reilly might not attend an important upcoming global meeting about the threat anthropogenic pollution posed to the climate. When Reilly eventually confirmed that he would lead the U.S. delegation at the meeting, he announced that the U.S. would not make any specific emissions commitments, and that any detailed plan for reduction commitments would be premature. Seemingly innocuous in the moment, Reilly’s statement marked a critical moment in the development of the twin specters of scientific uncertainty and the unclear role of developing nations, both of which emerged as central sticking points in U.S. climate politics at both the domestic and international levels for the next several decades.

Mainstream environmentalists responded forcefully to those two early decisions by the Bush administration, both of which foreshadowed the hesitancy to act that came to characterize

the White House’s climate position. Unsatisfied with the administration’s position, the Natural Resources Defense Council publicly released the position paper, criticizing the administration for its weak stance on emissions reductions. The Natural Resources Defense Council, playing the inside game, also submitted its own comments to the working group advocating for an accelerated negotiations timetable alongside planning for a convention, and calling for a treaty requiring concrete steps to reduce emissions by 1992. The U.S. position, which didn’t prescribe working towards treaty talks until 1992, was far too slow for the Natural Resources Defense Council.

A month later, the big environmental non-profits created an uproar in response to the reports that Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Reilly might sit out the Netherlands meeting. When mainstream environmentalists found out he would attend, they seized the opportunity to loudly criticize the U.S. delegation’s weak position. In a media play meant to focus public attention on the issue, eleven groups, including the Sierra Club, Natural Resources Defense Council, Friends of the Earth, and the Environmental Defense Fund, organized a press conference to exhort the White House for more aggressive leadership. Accusing Bush of “reneging on a campaign promise to tackle the global warming issue early in his presidency,” the groups called on the U.S. to endorse a 20 percent reduction in carbon emissions by 2000, and to achieve it by passing domestic fuel efficiency and other conservation measures.

Noticeably, in both of these early clashes with Bush, the leading environmental organizations lacked people standing behind them in any major way. There is no evidence that these groups called on grassroots activists to mobilize in these early stages of crafting an international agreement. They didn’t organize public protests. High level back and forth became a standard pattern for international-related climate decisions—the administration would do something unsatisfactory, and the big environmental groups would respond with an inside move, a press play, or a joint letter, but never with a massive mobilization of people. It is unclear why, exactly, this element was missing, but it can be connected back to challenges faced by groups like the Sierra Club in creating a clear infrastructure for mobilization around domestic issues as well.

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144 Lobsenz, “Editors: Repeating earlier story U.S. questions emissions limits to fight global warming.”
The Bush administration’s final, and most significant, climate clash with environmentalists occurred over the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. There, despite concerns from his own party, President Bush signed the U.S. into the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and urged other nations to do the same.\(^\text{146}\) Despite that historic moment, mainstream environmentalists were deeply unhappy with President Bush’s approach to Rio. In early 1992, it was unclear if Bush would even attend the Summit; environmentalists spent most of the spring urging Bush to listen to the science, adopt specific emissions commitments, and take the lead in Rio.\(^\text{147}\) Bush eventually announced in May 1992 that he would attend Rio after all. Yet environmentalists remained unsatisfied, since the decision was made only after White House negotiators weakened key provisions of the treaty related to car and industry emissions.\(^\text{148}\) Political fractures continued to grow with Rio on the horizon. Climate activists, including Senator Al Gore and many large environmental groups excoriated the U.S.’s weak position, while Republican domestic policy advisor Clayton Yeutter displayed unease over the signing of a treaty at all because of a belief that the science was uncertain and a concern about the role of developing nations.\(^\text{149}\) Dan Lashof, a Natural Resource Defense Council senior scientist, also made an appearance, pushing for strong action and an investment in technological innovation and fuel efficiency.\(^\text{150}\) The fight over signing a treaty in Rio, and what that treaty should include, pit environmentalists against the Bush administration and its senior advisors.

Neither position won out completely. Bush attended the Summit, and signed the weakened treaty. In the aftermath of the summit, Environmental Action’s Executive Director Ruth Caplan criticized the U.S. delegation for “purging the agreement of any specific targets for emission levels and compliance deadlines,” and posed the question: “Will Rio be all hype with no commitments for fundamental change to save the planet?” For Caplan, the real hope of the...


\(^{150}\) MacNeil, “Road to Rio; That Fateful Day.”
summit lay not in “the formal delegations and their bracketed language,” but in the international mobilization of non-governmental constituencies, including coalitions of women, Indigenous people, and grassroots environmental groups, around environmental issues broadly defined, not necessarily climate specifically.\textsuperscript{151} Even if the negotiations did not go the way mainstream environmentalists had hoped, connections made between organizations at Rio set up the emergence of an even more powerful international grassroots coalition during climate talks in Copenhagen (2009) nearly fifteen years later. Rio may have planted the seeds for future international climate justice coalitions, but notably, mainstream environmental organizations mostly stayed out of Rio—some, like Dan Becker, refused to attend.\textsuperscript{152}

When Bush first entered office, mainstream environmentalists were remarkably optimistic about the prospects for both domestic and international climate action. Ultimately, though, Bush punt ed on his campaign promises to “meet the greenhouse effect with the White House effect.”\textsuperscript{153} Mainstream environmentalists worked on the inside to make climate a priority despite the resistance of Republicans in Congress and the executive branch and with limited results. Though remembered as a lackluster end to a series of climate disappointments,\textsuperscript{154} Bush’s attendance at Rio was still a landmark moment in the international fight against climate change, and kept open the door for U.S. leadership at the international level,\textsuperscript{155} whether future iterations of the U.S. government would use it or not.

1.4 Getting to Kyoto

By signing the UNFCCC in Rio, Bush helped set the U.S. on the course to an international emissions agreement. But 1992 also marked the end of President Bush’s tenure in office, after environmental organizations fought hard to elect his opponent, then Democratic Governor of Arkansas Bill Clinton. The flagging economy was Clinton’s number one campaign

\textsuperscript{152} In an interview with me in October 2020, Dan Becker told me he did not attend Rio, even though he originally planned to, because the prospects for reaching a significant agreement seemed bleak. Bronstein, Scott. “Earth Summit’s global warming treaty receives mixed reviews. U.S. position wins as no targets set.” \textit{The Atlanta Journal and Constitution}, May 9, 1992.
\textsuperscript{155} Waldman, et al., “This is when the GOP turned away from climate policy.”
issue, but the environment was also a key part of his platform. Working to distinguish himself from President Bush, Clinton pronounced in one notable campaign speech that the “days of photo-op environmentalism [were] over.”

Clinton’s campaign, and later his administration, made a significant effort to cater to the environmental constituency, considered at the time to be a growing bulwark of the Democratic Party. Much of Clinton’s environmental agenda revolved around reinstating policies the Bush administration had rolled back or threatened, including drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, weakening the Endangered Species Act, and loosening timber regulation in the Pacific Northwest. Citing Senator Al Gore’s record on environmental issues, Clinton picked Gore to join him on the ticket in his bid for the presidency. Clinton, by choosing Gore as his running mate, solidified climate goals as a key part of his platform. Even before Gore joined the ticket, though, in April 1992, Clinton laid out an environmental agenda ahead of the Rio Summit that supported a U.S. commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2000 and endorsed environmental groups’ number one climate policy: increasing fuel economy standards. Mainstream environmental organizations rallied behind Clinton, who collected several key endorsements from the League of Conservation Voters and the Sierra Club (only the second presidential endorsement by the organization in its 100 year history). The Sierra Club also worked to get out the vote for Clinton, including by running its first political national TV ad campaign in May 1992, which aimed to hold “President Bush’s feet to the fire for his broken environmental promises and expose his poor record as the ‘Environmental President.’” Clinton’s platform, buoyed in part by the support of the big environmental organizations, ultimately won him the presidency.

156 Turner et al., *The Republican Reversal*, p. 158.
158 Nie, “‘It's the Environment, Stupid!' Clinton and the Environment,” p. 46.
161 Nie, “‘It's the Environment, Stupid!' Clinton and the Environment,” pp. 45-46.
Clinton wasted no time in the early days of his administration to pursue action on climate change through energy policy. In February 1993, the Clinton administration introduced the centerpiece of its domestic policy agenda, an economic plan containing an energy tax, to a joint session of Congress. But the attempt to marry energy and environmental policy was easily defeated, in part because it was viewed as a guise for environmental action, and in part due to a coordinated mobilization of public opposition. While opponents pulled together manufacturing lobbies, the agricultural lobby, and concerned citizens in a $2 million public relations campaign, including ads, radio segments, and rallies, environmentalists didn’t successfully pull together an enthusiastic campaign for the tax. Clinton didn’t wait around for support to build, and was instead quick to compromise in the face of opposition. By the time Earth Day 1993 arrived, the administration had abandoned the energy tax proposal, achieving only a small gasoline tax hike, which not only was nowhere near high enough to stabilize greenhouse gas emissions, but also was something Clinton explicitly said on the campaign trail that he wouldn’t pursue.

After the administration’s failed attempt to tackle energy policy via economic policy, they soon released the much weaker Climate Change Action Plan. Publicized in October 1993, the plan amounted to a piecemeal strategy to reduce U.S. emissions. The plan sought to cut emissions from the government, transportation, building, and industrial sectors, but it was unclear how the plan could actually achieve its stated goals. Even when the plan was first formulated in February 1993, the Clinton administration already knew environmental non-profits would be disgruntled by it’s moderatism. While disappointing, in retrospect, scholars have emphasized the political realities that constrained the Clinton administration, since a more forceful plan likely would have failed in Congress, thereby hurting further action in the future.

Despite these constraints, the Clinton administration sought to lead where the Bush administration had not. Clinton’s original climate action plan outlined a position on global negotiations that, although moderate, went farther than its predecessors. The original plan outlined a U.S. position that focused narrowly on carbon emissions rather than on all greenhouse gases.

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166 Turner et al., “American Exceptionalism in a Warming World.”
gases, and supported voluntary non-binding commitments to return greenhouse gases to 1990 levels by 2000. Though the administration was attuned to environmentalists’ concerns, they chose a weaker strategy in order to appease industry interests, Congressional members with energy interests, and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) partners.  

Clinton was correct to be worried about the environmental response. When the final plan was released in October 1993, on the tails of the collapse of the energy tax, environmentalists criticized the plan for its lack of teeth and capitulation to business interests. Indeed, after the plan was publicized, industry leaders and groups were largely favorable, while environmental groups such as the Union of Concerned Scientists, the Environmental Defense Fund, and the Sierra Club were opposed to the plan’s voluntary approach to emissions reduction. Though there was not a clear coordinated response from environmental organizations (as was common under the Bush administration), nor a mobilization of grassroots members, mainstream environmentalists vocally criticized the Clinton plan in the press. The Sierra Club in particular disparaged Clinton for reneging on his campaign promise to raise fuel economy standards.

Even as the prospects for strong action and U.S. leadership were waning domestically, international processes trudged on. In July 1996, the Parties to the UNFCCC met for the second time in Geneva. Some of the major issues left unresolved were those that haunted the treaty from the beginning, especially the undefined role of developing countries. One of the Convention’s most important events was the United States’ introduction of a Ministerial Declaration that recommended future negotiations focus on creating an agreement that set “realistic, verifiable and binding medium-term targets” with maximum national flexibility. The final text of the Declaration centered on national flexibility, without any mention of legally binding policies, targets, or measures—a far cry from the emissions commitments Clinton endorsed in his 1992 campaign.

172 Lande, Laurie. “Global climate change plan received warmly by industry; environmentalist response cooler.” The Oil Daily 43, issue 202.
International negotiations are by nature closed door affairs, but mainstream environmental NGOs and industry interests were well represented at the meeting. Mainstream environmental interests were represented by, among others, the Climate Action Network, the Environmental Defense Fund, and the World Resources Institute. Environmentalists were especially concerned with urging leaders to start negotiations as soon as possible. Industry interests, represented by groups like the Global Climate Coalition (GCC) and the Edison Electric Institute (EEI), focused on lobbying against an accelerated negotiating timeline and strict emissions commitments. Though tensions were high, by the end of the meeting environmental groups appeared to pull ahead. Representatives of the environmental organizations in attendance came away pleased with the Ministerial Declaration, and a representative of the alliance of small island nations even remarked “Now I know we can come to an agreement.”

So, eighteen months ahead of the third meeting of the Parties, which was set for December 1997 in Kyoto, mainstream environmentalists were optimistic about U.S. engagement at the international level. As with the Bush administration and Rio, though, it seemed that an agreement with the teeth needed to start tackling global emissions hinged on a few difficult topics: binding emissions commitments, national flexibility and the potential for a credit/joint implementation program, and the role of developing countries. These sticking points proved to be a bigger obstacle than proponents had hoped, and as Kyoto drew near, it seemed that the possibility for an agreement was falling apart. Reactions to early U.S. proposals ahead of Kyoto suggested that there would be significant controversies. Domestic politics in the U.S. were unravelling as the debate grew increasingly contentious. While industry lobbyists, particularly the Global Climate Coalition, actively sought to delay and derail negotiations, Clinton advisors believed that the environmental community had not put forward a “clear and cogent case” for action. Mainstream environmentalists acknowledged that, though they had increased the

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intensity of environmental pressure at the end of the Clinton administration’s tenure, they had not done enough to build a grassroots coalition in support of their environmental agenda early on.\textsuperscript{181}

Though mainstream environmental organizations struggled to rile up grassroots action or generate public political cover for strong climate policy, they spent a considerable amount of time on inside advocacy. In July 1997, a House committee convened to hear testimony regarding global climate negotiations and the obligations of developed and developing countries. Peter DeBrine, the World Wildlife Fund’s program officer for Climate and Energy, testified about the importance of listening to science, the dangers climate change would have on national parks worldwide, and the need for strong U.S. leadership in Kyoto.\textsuperscript{182} The most impassioned plea for U.S. leadership during the committee hearing was made by Becker, by then nearly a decade into his work as director of the Sierra Club’s Global Warming and Energy Program. For most of his time, Becker implored the U.S. to take a leadership role by acting domestically, urging Congress to adopt the stronger CAFE standards Becker and the Sierra Club had fought for years for. Commenting on the Kyoto negotiations, Becker’s position was characteristically clear, focused, and rooted in science. The U.S. needed to take the lead on binding commitments and, on the issue of developing nations, he opposed the proposal of a trading system or joint implementation scheme. Becker, and the Sierra Club, were concerned that trading or credit schemes would “provide polluters with the right to pollute” and be challenging to enforce. Taking a public health angle, one that climate justice activists expanded on in the 2000s, Becker emphasized that “steps to reduce greenhouse emissions also reduce smog and acid rain.”\textsuperscript{183} It is unclear what, if any, influence the testimony of environmentalists on the issue had on Congressional decision-making, especially since ratifying any international treaty would ultimately be the responsibility of the Senate, not the House.

Despite top environmentalists’ calls for global and domestic action, the Clinton administration had correctly diagnosed that their case for action was not enough to sway members of Congress. In July 1997, the Senate unequivocally “denounced any climate treaty that did not impose limits on both developed and developing countries” in a resolution known as the

\textsuperscript{181} Layzer, \textit{Open for Business: Conservatives’ Opposition to Environmental Regulation}, p. 255-256.
\textsuperscript{182} Hearing on Global Climate Change, Before the House Committee on International Relations, 105th Congress, pp. 83-85 (1997) (DeBrine, Peter, Climate and Energy Program Officer, World Wildlife Fund).
\textsuperscript{183} Hearing on Global Climate Change, Before the House Committee on International Relations, 105th Congress, pp. 77-78, 82-89.
Byrd-Hagel resolution, which passed with bipartisan support in a 95-0 vote.\textsuperscript{184} Supporters of global climate action such as Senator John Kerry (D-MA) framed the vote as an endorsement of strong emissions commitments by all countries, in other words arguing that the vote supported the known need for global collective action to eventually include both developed \textit{and} developing nations.\textsuperscript{185} What it really signalled, though, was the success of climate skeptics and industry lobbyists in swaying Congress towards inaction.\textsuperscript{186} The Byrd-Hagel resolution would, in a sense, doom the Kyoto Protocol’s prospects in the U.S. before it had even been adopted. In the absence of a compelling campaign by mainstream environmentalists to get Senators on board (and, in fact, the problem that environmentalists themselves were not entirely on board), “there was no chance of reconciling the Senate demands with the expectations of the global community.”\textsuperscript{187}

Representatives of the mainstream environmental organizations attended the Kyoto negotiations at the end of 1997 with the shadow of the Byrd-Hagel Resolution looming over them. There, they lobbied U.S. negotiators, connected with environmental organizations,\textsuperscript{188} and kept the U.S. public informed about proceedings. The Natural Resources Defense Council, for instance, ran a blog titled “Dateline Kyoto” where they offered an “inside glimpse” into the negotiations. Though it is unclear how large the blog’s readership was, the Natural Resource Defense Council’s goal was to use the blog to “continue to stimulate public action and political will to confront what is perhaps the most difficult and dangerous environmental challenge the world has ever faced.” In the blog, Natural Resource Defense Council representatives described the efforts of environmentalists to push the U.S. delegation to take stronger action, make binding commitments, and close loopholes in the agreement. Notably, the blog was aimed at reaching a broader audience, but used language that centered technical, legal, and scientific terms, with only rare references to the need to “protect the climate for future generations.” In their final post, the Natural Resources Defense Council bloggers called the negotiations a “fabulous experience,” then pivoted to the “huge battles” at home that would ensue over ratifying the Kyoto Protocol. There was still work to be done to show “industry and its allies in the Senate… that the American people will reject their flat-earth viewpoint.”\textsuperscript{189} Despite its shortcomings, the Natural

\textsuperscript{184} Turner et al., \textit{The Republican Reversal}, p. 164.
\textsuperscript{185} Turner et al., \textit{The Republican Reversal}, p. 164-165.
\textsuperscript{186} Turner et al., \textit{The Republican Reversal}, p. 164-165.
\textsuperscript{187} Turner et al., \textit{The Republican Reversal}, p. 167.
\textsuperscript{188} “Kyoto Climate Agreement is a Critical First Step.” \textit{EDF Letter} XXIX, no. 2 (April 1998). \url{https://www.edf.org/sites/default/files/24_Apr98.pdf}.
Resources Defense Council called Kyoto a “historic success.”

Environmental leaders clearly understood the need to mobilize people in order to pressure the Senate to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. Kalee Kreider, director of Greenpeace’s U.S. climate change campaign, said that leading up to Kyoto, environmental organizations had focused on influencing senior government leadership. Kreider admitted that “[they hadn’t] done as much public education as [they] should have”, but that after Kyoto concluded, a priority was to create an “extensive grassroots campaign to increase public support” in order to “push the pact through the Senate.” Yet they struggled to do so. Before Kyoto, there were many efforts to inform, but not mobilize, the public. The Natural Resources Defense Council, for instance, ran a six-month intensive public outreach campaign, the largest the organization had ever undertaken, that included internet ads, telephone campaigns, and ads in the New York Times. Environmental Defense Fund leaders similarly focused on awareness-raising by vocally criticizing the Clinton administration for its timidity, releasing reports—including one about the potential local effects of climate change on Washington, D.C.—and hosting a series of “Town Meetings” to educate local groups on the effects of climate change. None of these efforts compare to the kind of massive mobilization of people in protests, marches, and on the internet that climate change negotiations would draw in Copenhagen in 2009 and Paris in 2016.

When President Clinton signed the Kyoto Protocol in November 1998, he was met with praise from mainstream environmentalists invested in its success. The Environmental Defense Fund was especially encouraged, since it was a critical step forward in the push for Senate ratification. But, as expected, Senate opponents proclaimed that ratification was off the table,
and Clinton never submitted the treaty for Senate approval. Though groups like the Sierra Club continued to make efforts to drum up popular support through global warming action alerts (imploring individuals to call their Senator demanding strong action to curb global warming), the campaign never picked up steam.

Unsurprisingly, when President George W. Bush took office in 2000, he sided with opponents and rejected the Protocol. Importantly, the Kyoto Protocol was a significant success of international environmental law, and demonstrated that global engagement on the climate problem was possible. But despite the good faith follow through of other nations, without the U.S., which represented one-third of 1990 emissions, the Protocol was considered to be largely meaningless.

The long road to Kyoto, ending in a dead end at the domestic level, highlights the obstacles mainstream environmental organizations faced while trying to advocate for climate action at vastly different scales. Part of the problem that plagued the big environmental organizations on their Kyoto strategy was the lack of a domestic plan to meet its goals, despite the concurrent efforts to pass stronger CAFE standards. The piecemeal approach to climate action, breaking it down into smaller chunks like an energy tax or stronger fuel efficiency standards, was in itself an obstacle. Neither mainstream environmentalists, the Clinton administration, nor Congressional proponents articulated a clear, ambitious climate plan. Climate solutions were instead assessed based on scientific support and economic cost, rather than framed in terms of economic and social possibilities like climate justice activists proposed years later in the Bali Principles of Climate Justice. Relatedly, during the Kyoto negotiations, just as in the CAFE fight, environmental organizations focused on insider politics and technical policy rather than inspiring people to mass action. With the collapse of the Kyoto Protocol in the

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201 “United States Rejects Kyoto Protocol, March 30, 2001.”
U.S., mainstream environmentalists entered the 21st century with many lessons under their belt, but had made very little progress in terms of large-scale political solutions.

1.5 The Death of Environmentalism

With the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol out of the question, the U.S. environmental movement reached a breaking point. Looking back on this early period of climate advocacy, something is glaringly missing: public mobilization. Despite early recognition that federal climate action would require a strong grassroots organizing effort, most attempts to create one amounted to merely engaging people through letter writing campaigns, individual consumer choices, and window-dressing encouragement of community engagement. Mainstream environmental organizations made meaningful efforts to educate the public but by navigating advocacy at both the domestic and international levels, environmental organizations struggled to discern how to communicate the issue, much less inspire people to action. Perhaps unfairly, the mainstream groups were ultimately blamed by the Clinton administration for their failure to create a movement that could provide enough political cover for the administration to take action.

Seven years after Kyoto, in 2004, authors Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger shook the mainstream environmentalist community with an essay (and eventually book) titled *The Death of Environmentalism: Global warming politics in a post-environmental world*. Drawing on history, political philosophy, and interviews with leaders of mainstream environmental organizations, the authors diagnosed that the failure to reduce emissions over the preceding decade was in part due to the “unwillingness of environmental leaders to expand their conception of ‘the environment’ to include humans and economic development.” Instead of galvanizing a public campaign that articulated a forward-looking vision of the future to match the scale of the crisis, the authors argued that environmentalists promoted technical policy to address the narrow framing of global warming as a scientific problem. Further, environmental

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204 Turner et al., *The Republican Reversal*, p. 166.

leaders put “all of their global warming eggs in the Kyoto basket” without a strategy to mobilize the public or mount a coordinated campaign to pressure the Senate to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. It was time, Nordhaus and Shellenberger insisted, that the environmental movement collectively “[rethought] everything” and created new proposals around a core set of values. Otherwise, they warned, environmentalists would never be able to build a sustained movement to combat climate change.\footnote{Nordhaus et al., The Death of Environmentalism.}

In \textit{The Death of Environmentalism}, the authors pointed towards the Apollo Alliance and the New Apollo Project, both formed in the early 2000s, as an inspired attempt to advance the changes they prescribed.\footnote{Nordhaus et al., The Death of Environmentalism.} Launched in 2003, the Apollo Alliance focused not on technical solutions to climate change, nor on crafting legislation at all. Instead it framed itself as a “growing coalition [of labor unions, civil rights groups, and businesses] dedicated to a just and sustainable economy.”\footnote{“Apollo Alliance: Ready for Lift Off,” \textit{Apollo Alliance}. IAWM: June 21, 2003. \url{https://web.archive.org/web/20030621170017/http://www.apolloalliance.org/}.} In many ways, the actions the Apollo Alliance pushed for were not dissimilar to those mainstream environmentalists had already advocated for—the Ten-Point Plan for Good Jobs and Energy Independence that was released in 2003 highlighted increased energy efficiency, fuel efficiency, and renewable energy as key solutions.\footnote{“The Ten-Point Plan for Good Jobs and Energy Independence.” \textit{Apollo Alliance}. IAWM: Aug 1, 2003. \url{https://web.archive.org/web/20030801204555/http://www.apolloalliance.org/about_the_alliance/tenpointplan.cfm}.} The critical distinction was that the Alliance \textit{framed} the issue differently: climate was not just a scientific problem but an economic and industry problem too. By broadening the framing, the Alliance was able to bring together the organizing and advocacy power of both labor unions and environmentalists.\footnote{Greenhouse, Steven. “Unions Back Research Plan for Energy.” \textit{New York Times}, June 6, 2003. \url{https://www.nytimes.com/2003/06/06/us/unions-back-research-plan-for-energy.html}.}

Taking this new approach a step farther, in 2005, Representative Jay Inslee (D-WA) called on Congress to address climate change by simultaneously strengthening the U.S. economy. Drawing on the framing of the Apollo Alliance, Inslee urged Congress to take on the “New Apollo Project” to build the U.S. economy and technological power, in pursuit of an independent, clean energy future.\footnote{Inslee, Jay. “New Apollo Project can help us unplug our need for oil.” \textit{Seattle PI}, Mar. 13, 2011. \url{https://www.seattlepi.com/news/article/New-Apollo-Project-can-help-us-unplug-our-need-1103459.php}.} Importantly, the New Apollo Project was not a single piece of legislation; it was a vision to address global warming through economic transformation.\footnote{Inslee, Jay and Bracken Hendricks. \textit{Apollo’s Fire: Igniting America’s Clean-Energy Economy}. Washington, DC:}
Death of Environmentalism and the Apollo Alliance (which in 2011 merged with the Blue Green Alliance, founded in 2002), marked a tremendous shift in the way climate solutions were conceived by activists. This shift laid the foundations for organizing the public around a new platform that went beyond immediate environmental concerns, and represents a remarkable antecedent to later organizations, including Power Shift and the Sunrise Movement, that attempted to build robust social movements around visions for a just climate future.

Though the 1990s mainstream environmental movement had few tangible climate successes to its name, its efforts had consequential impacts on the future of the climate movement. Climate change only emerged as an environmental concern in 1989, and by the end of the decade the large mainstream non-profits had made significant efforts to raise public awareness, search for a viable framing of the problem, and advance climate-related policy at the domestic and international levels. Only in hindsight does it become clear that the mainstream approach to the problem as a narrowly scientific one, and a limited imagination of solutions in terms of fuel efficiency and green consumerism, hindered mainstream environmental organizations’ ability to build a grassroots social movement. Still, the work of mainstream organizations was integral to elevating climate change as a leading political issue around which the climate justice and youth movements would rally grassroots action in the next two decades.
Chapter Two: Movement for Climate Justice

2.1 An Inconvenient Truth

When *The Death of Environmentalism* was published, its critique of mainstream environmentalism’s approach to climate change called for a reckoning within the movement. But even in their departure from the framing and strategies of early mainstream climate activism, its authors made what today seems like a glaring omission: they do not include any discussion of climate justice. In the imagination of Nordhaus and Schellenberger, a dramatic transformation of the approach to climate action meant finding the intersection of climate and labor. Yet not once do they discuss the unequal responsibility for and consequences of climate change, mention the word “justice”, or allude to the potential for major migrations of climate refugees.

*The Death of Environmentalism* was not an outlier, though. Justice was rarely discussed in the broader mainstream environmental discourse of the time. In the early 2000s, the Sierra Club still described climate solutions in terms of energy efficiency and fuel economy standards.213 Grassroots members were told to call their Senators in support of Corporate Average Fuel Economy standards and Arctic National Wildlife Refuge protections because “the human race [was] engaged in the largest experiment in history” and “gambling our children’s future on the results.”214 An “Earthrise” postcard campaign was the Sierra Club’s largest national global warming grassroots campaign in 2002; activists were sent postcards featuring the iconic Apollo 8 “Earthrise” photo and encouraged to send them to their Senators to support higher fuel economy standards, greater energy efficiency, and clean wind and solar power.215 By 2007, the Sierra Club’s website still featured echoes of those same types of actions: “Please keep asking your Senators to fight to raise fuel economy standards and to pass a renewable electric standard.”216 Though the Natural Resources Defense Council, in 2002, began to talk about weather changes and sea level rise, they too focused on asking members to press law makers and industry interests to change the law and update technology, not consider impacts on

215 “Join the Sierra Club’s postcard campaign to the US Senate” IAWM.
Early in the new millennium mainstream environmental organizations had done little to significantly change their approach to climate solutions or grassroots engagement.

Al Gore’s release of the film *An Inconvenient Truth* in 2006 was a landmark moment that propelled public interest in global warming, drawing millions of people into movie theaters to learn about climate change. The film garnered significant critical acclaim, receiving two Academy Awards and contributing to Gore’s receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007. Those accolades and accomplishments further cemented Gore as an authoritative voice on climate change, bolstered his reputation as a voice for the environment from his time in the Clinton administration, and led scholars to seriously analyze the content of the film. Narratively, the film tells two intertwined stories—one of climate change, and one of Gore himself. Climate change, in the film, is framed through a mainstream environmentalist lens. Though the film mentioned issues like global sea-level rise and the potential for a climate refugee crisis, those topics remained peripheral to the central narrative.

Critiques of the film focused not on the way climate change was framed, but on how Gore aimed to motivate climate action. The clear goal of the documentary was to present the problem as a solvable one, namely through technology and individual action. Since the government (as Gore emphasized he knew all too well) had not taken the necessary steps to address the problem, Gore impressed upon the individual viewer the moral imperative to take action in the government’s place because “it [was their] time to seize the issue” and “rise again to secure our future.”

The documentary ended with a series of climate actions woven into the credits. These actions enforced the ideas of “green citizenship” and the primacy of collective but individual actions. While some solutions encouraged political activities like voting or lobbying, the


219 Johnson. “(Environmental) Rhetorics of Tempered Apocalypticism in An Inconvenient Truth.”


222 Gore, Albert. *An Inconvenient Truth*.


overwhelming bulk of recommendations endorsed individual behavior changes such as lowering the thermostat, using public transportation, and planting trees.\textsuperscript{225} Even where more structural changes were addressed, such as increasing fuel efficiency standards, the framing remained in the realm of mainstream environmentalism, without raising questions about, as one author put it, the “origins of and solution to climate change that might incorporate questions of equity, justice, and power.”\textsuperscript{226} For that reason, some climate justice writers have used the film to represent the technical framing characteristic of the mainstream approach to climate change.\textsuperscript{227} An Inconvenient Truth reflects that in the mid-2000s technical framings of climate solutions still dominated the climate narrative.

\subsection*{2.2 Development of Climate Justice Principles}

In order to understand the origins of the climate justice current of the movement, then, it is necessary to seek out different voices, outside of the big mainstream environmental groups and their leaders. The climate justice current of the movement made three crucial divergences from the mainstream environmental movement of the 1990s that will be explored here: (1) it developed a set of guiding principles and documents to reorient the movement towards equity and justice; (2) it localized the consequences of climate change and elevated the struggles of frontline communities through domestic and international coalition-building; and (3) it embraced protest politics and engaged the public in massive mobilizations for climate action. While the climate justice current at times converged with the mainstream one, the two distinct approaches to the climate contributed to the continued peripheralization of climate justice ideas and organizations, even as the latter slowly entered the center of U.S. climate politics over the course of the 2000s.

There is no single, clear moment that represents the origin of the climate justice current, but one place to start takes us back to 1991. At that time, actors within the mainstream environmental movement were focused on fighting Congress over the Bryan bill, and gearing up to take on the Bush administration over the U.S. position at the Rio Summit. Mainstream organizations, however, were not the only ones working on the environment and climate.\textsuperscript{228} In

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{221} Rutherford. “Science and Storytelling: Al Gore and the Climate Debate.” pp. 163-164.
\item \textsuperscript{226} Rutherford. “Science and Storytelling: Al Gore and the Climate Debate.” pp. 164-165.
\item \textsuperscript{228} Legal scholar Jedediah Purdy outlines the longer history of the environmental justice movement and its critique
\end{itemize}
1991, two important documents for the budding climate justice movement were put forth by two different groups on distinct but related topics: one on global warming inequities and the other on environmental justice.

While U.S. mainstream non-profits worried over the Bush administration’s lukewarm climate position ahead of the Rio climate negotiations, other international organizations were troubled by emerging Global North-South divisions in conversations about international climate solutions. In January 1991, the India-based Centre for Science and the Environment published a report titled “Global Warming in an Unequal World: A case of environmental colonialism,” authored by Anil Agarwal and Sunita Narain. The report was a scathing response to a report published by the U.S.-based World Resources Institute in collaboration with the United Nations, which argued that countries like China and India were responsible for climate change to a comparable magnitude as Western industrialized nations. Agarwal lamented the lack of U.S. leadership in stabilizing emissions, but went further to say that even stabilizing energy consumption would maintain “the manifold inequity in resource consumption between developing and developed worlds.” This problematic conceptualization unduly villainized more recently industrialized nations and absolved Western nations from their historically disproportionate emissions production and exploitative political presence.

The crux of Agarwal’s argument was that the World Resources Institute’s findings were representative of larger structural injustices between the Global North and the Global South regarding responsibility for climate change. First, the World Resources Institute’s findings were based on misleading data manipulation which Agarwal called “bad data, politically motivated mathematics, [and] unjust politics” that “[made] a mockery of human values.” Only by emphasizing emissions associated with deforestation and livestock and de-emphasizing those

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229 I adopt the terms “Global North and South” in accordance with the literature, but I want to clarify my critical engagement with the terms because of the embedded geographical inaccuracies. I, therefore, use the distinction between the Global North and South to differentiate historical oppression and inequitable international power structures rather than geography.


associated with oil and coal was the World Resources Institute able to construe China and India’s shares of emissions as equal to industrialized nations.\textsuperscript{233} That pointed to a second concern: how to \textit{fairly} calculate responsibility for global warming.\textsuperscript{234} If the world truly aspired to “the lofty ideals \textit{of} global justice, equity, and sustainability,” then, argued Agarwal, the share of emissions should be split per capita.\textsuperscript{235} There was also the trouble of historic inequity that needed to be accounted for—countries in the Global North shared a much greater share of historic emissions.\textsuperscript{236} Finally, Agarwal concluded the report by calling on leaders in the Global South to demonstrate that “global environmental concerns cannot be chosen on an adhoc basis by the rich and powerful actors in the world.”\textsuperscript{237} If Western industrialized nations could place climate change on the global agenda, countered Agarwal, then other “equally important” environmental problems like desertification, land and water degradation, and unfair terms of trade for biomass should also be elevated.\textsuperscript{238} This third point would come to be a central tenet of climate justice organizing: there was a need to challenge the very structures that enforce global inequities and exclude less powerful voices from decision-making, not just the unjust allocation of climate responsibility.

That same year, another transformative environmental document was crafted in the U.S. From October 24-27, 1991, the first National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit was held in Washington, D.C.\textsuperscript{239} In an article published in \textit{Race, Poverty \& the Environment}, Dana Alston, a member of the planning committee, wrote that the meeting “set in motion a process of redefining environmental issues… not in reaction to the environmental movement, but rather to reaffirm \textit{people of color’s} traditional connection to and respect for the natural world.”\textsuperscript{240} Vastly different from the conservation-oriented, often technical framing espoused by the mainstream environmental movement, Alston clarified that “for people of color, the environment \textit{was} woven into an overall framework and understanding of social, racial and

\textsuperscript{233} Agarwal. “Global Warming in an Unequal World: A case of environmental colonialism.” p. 3.
\textsuperscript{236} Agarwal. “Global Warming in an Unequal World: A case of environmental colonialism.” p. 20.
economic justice.”

Key issues at the conference included oppressive agricultural labor systems and unequal distribution of hazardous waste and industrial sites. To begin to address those inequities, summit delegates collectively formulated the Principles of Environmental Justice, a defining document of the U.S. environmental justice movement. The principles span a range of issues from labor to demilitarization, making clear the need to center the interdependence of people and the environment when discussing environmental problems and solutions.

Both of these documents offer fundamentally different ways of thinking about climate and environmental problems compared to those proffered by the major U.S. environmental non-profits. Conceptualizing the climate crisis as one inherently linked to questions of equity and justice—rather than based primarily on atmospheric emission concentrations or vehicle efficiency—slowly gathered large-scale grassroots support, parallel to mainstream climate advocacy, in the 1990s before becoming a central force in the 2000s. Notably missing from both of these documents, though, is a discussion of the tangible impacts of climate change, at least in an immediate sense. It was clear that the United Nations was misrepresenting responsibility and that the U.S. had an environmental justice problem, but the effects of climate change on local communities still seemed far off. Though neither document succeeded in shaping the discussion of climate change solutions in their time, they laid the groundwork for what was to come, and opened up space in the climate discourse to discuss responsibility, transnational processes, and ecological equity.

Conversations about climate justice gained momentum in the early 2000s, in response and in relation to several major changes in the climate politics landscape. First, the Kyoto negotiations had completed, which was a step towards differentiating responsibility between the Global North and South based on historic responsibility and capacity for action. Second, the local impacts of climate change were by then becoming much more clear. Reports by the IPCC became increasingly specific in terms of local impacts of climate change, especially the vulnerability of small island nations and communities in the Arctic. Released in 1998, the

creation of the IPCC’s Third Assessment Report (TAR) was in part justified by a proliferation of new science that built on the Second Assessment Report. Some sections of the report made explicit connections to issues of justice and responsibility; for instance, it stated that though small island states accounted for less than 1% of emissions, they were most susceptible to sea-level rise, with the potential for dramatic changes to local culture and migration away from low islands and atolls. Similarly, in examining the evidence related to the Arctic, the report stated that based on scientific studies and testimony by Indigenous people, changes in sea ice patterns, and wildlife migration patterns, some Indigenous communities may disappear or be forced to adapt at the “expense of traditional lifestyles.”

Third, the popularization of the term “climate justice” emerged following its first acknowledged use in a 1999 report by San Francisco-based organization CorpWatch titled *Greenhouse Gangsters vs. Climate Justice*. The report reflected a stark shift in the framing of the climate problem and its solutions. Rather than melting glaciers or endangered species, the authors identified climate change as “the largest environmental justice issue of all time”, centering marginalized human communities around the world as the bearers of the injustices of climate change along the entire “global chain of production” of fossil fuels. Instead of focusing on the individual consumer or on technological solutions, the authors called out “Big Oil” as the primary “culprits” who needed to be held accountable for climate injustices.

The authors of *Greenhouse Gangsters vs. Climate Justice* advocated for solutions that addressed both the social and environmental dimensions of climate change. The “best solutions” are described as those that “will not only reverse global warming” but also promote the wellbeing of people through improved human rights and reduced inequality “between and within

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“Assessing vulnerability to climate change: The link between objectives and assessment.”: 376-383.
The report also made a first attempt at outlining a set of climate justice principles including: (1) remove the causes of global warming—build democratic control over corporations; (2) oppose the destructive impacts of oil locally and globally; (3) forge just solutions to the challenge of climate change, including a “Just Transition” for fossil fuel workers; and (4) reverse the dynamics of corporate-led, fossil fuel based globalization. The report provides a useful touchstone for understanding the emergence of core ideas of climate justice, and was referenced in the early 2000s by environmental justice activists such as Robert Bullard and Indigenous Environmental Network Executive Director Tom Goldtooth.

With a heightened sense of urgency about and understanding of the unequal and immediate impacts of climate change on those least responsible for it, a coalition of justice-oriented environmental groups convened in Bali in 2002. The meeting was held at the final preparatory negotiations for an international Earth Summit that same year. Though the main body of the summit received considerable media attention, the climate justice coalition was overlooked. A number of U.S.-based organizations attended as part of the coalition, including CorpWatch, Friends of the Earth International, and the Indigenous Environmental Network, along with organizations from around the world including OilWatch Africa and Third World Network. Unsatisfied with the way international negotiations focused on technical solutions and were derailed by special interest groups and historic polluters like the U.S., the coalition aimed to create a document that “[redefined] climate change from a human rights and environmental justice perspective.” In the preamble of the Bali Principles of Climate Justice, the authors immediately reoriented the climate as a problem with immediate relevance that already had local consequences like sea level rise, changes in agricultural patterns, and increased frequency of natural disasters. Signatories of the document called for an “international

257 Bali Principles of Climate Justice.
258 The aim of the document was to “redefine climate change from a human rights and environmental justice perspective.” Bali Principles of Climate Justice.
movement of all peoples for Climate Justice” based on the climate justice principles they had crafted. These 27 principles called for, among others demands, “the recognition of a principle of ecological debt,” and exhorted that “communities play a leading role in national and international processes to address climate change.” Though the principles received little mainstream attention, both the concepts contained within them and the diverse coalition responsible for drafting them further solidified the emerging movement.

At the U.S. domestic level, 2002 marked another dramatic moment in the U.S. climate justice movement. A decade after its first meeting, the second National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit was held in Washington, D.C. in October 2002. During the Summit, Ansje Miller and Cody Sisco of the Environmental Justice and Climate Change Initiative presented a document titled the Ten Actions of Climate Justice Policies, otherwise referred to as the Ten Principles for Just Climate Change Policies in the U.S. Like the Bali Principles, the document was rooted in the knowledge that “people of color, Indigenous Peoples, workers, and poor communities are the first to experience climate change’s negative impacts” and would have fewer resources to adapt and respond to them. These ten principles aimed to recenter climate solutions on the protection of the most immediately impacted communities, and called for solutions that would address the economic, health-related, and cultural consequences of climatic change. Further, the principles demanded that policy solutions include the voices of impacted communities. Built upon the framework of the environmental justice movement, the Ten Principles for Just Climate Policies in the U.S. addressed both procedural and distributive justice concerns, and expressed an intimate understanding of the ways climate change impacts were linked to historic global and domestic inequities.

Taken together, these early climate justice documents—all published in the relatively short period between 1999 and 2002—revealed the emergence of a quickly coalescing movement. The ideas first publicized in CorpWatch’s Green Gangsters vs. Climate Justice were fleshed out in the Bali Principles, which CorpWatch had a hand in writing), and applied to the

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259 Bali Principles of Climate Justice.
261 Miller. Ten Actions of Climate Justice Policies.
263 Miller. Ten Actions of Climate Justice Policies.
264 Miller. Ten Actions of Climate Justice Policies.
265 Miller. Ten Actions of Climate Justice Policies.
U.S. context in the Ten Principles for Just Climate Change Policies in the U.S. Each of these three documents sought to fundamentally change the climate conversation by highlighting the material inequities in the causes and consequences of climate change, which would be disproportionately felt by marginalized communities. Climate justice principles also emphasized the need for impacted communities to be involved at all steps of the solution-finding process.

Thus, below the surface of the focus on mainstream environmental organizations’ climate advocacy, these documents highlight the ways early climate justice advocates worked to elevate the justice implications of climate change. Further, the emergence of climate justice principles, crafted by coalitions of justice-oriented organizations and frontline communities, acted as models for bottom-up organizing across scales—something that mainstream environmental organizations had struggled to do. Understanding these foundations is necessary for contextualizing the work of climate justice activists leading up to the Copenhagen Conference in 2009, and frames the efforts organizers made to turn these principles into practice.

2.3 Making the Global Local

At the core of the climate justice movement was, and still is, the need to center the communities most impacted by climate change when considering the solutions to it. Climate justice communities include Indigenous peoples and other frontline communities that are impacted by climate change, from the environmental issues caused at the point of fossil fuel extraction to the local consequences of a warming world. For climate justice communities, the causes and consequences of climate change have not been abstract, and by the 2000s the effects of climate change had already been felt by them locally in very material ways. Since the local effects of climate change have and will continue to vary locally from region to region, it is difficult to pinpoint moments of convergence within the early climate justice movement apart from major international meetings. Instead, climate justice campaigns are better characterized by local efforts around specific campaigns for specific communities. While in the global context the issue of sea-level rise for small island nations became a focal point, in the U.S. climate justice concepts and organizing first gained attention in the context of melting ice in the Arctic.


Taken together, these geographically diverse local campaigns successfully illustrated that the global problem of climate change was also a local issue. The certainty of climate justice activists about how to frame climate change and how to focus efforts to address it stand in stark contrast to past moments in the movement. In the early 1990s, the Sierra Club’s foremost challenge was how to frame an issue that seemed abstract, with victims that would not materialize until future generations. Frontline communities, in contrast, possessed a clarity and certainty about the problem because the material impacts of climate change were no longer abstract for them.

Indigenous scholars and journalists were at the forefront of efforts in the U.S. to investigate the way climate change would soon affect local communities, specifically Indigenous communities. One of the first publications to highlight the impending local consequences of climate change was the Fall/Winter 1999 edition of the *Native Americas* journal—an award-winning publication by Akwes:ken Press of the American Indian Program at Cornell University. Titled “Global Warming, Climate Change and Native Lands,” the special double edition highlighted the disproportionate effect climate change would have on Indigenous peoples.268 Evocative of the “Endangered Earth” special edition of *TIME* in 1998, the special edition of *Native Americas* signaled a proliferation of knowledge about local consequences of climate change. Articles covered a variety of topics, including Native prophecy and traditional knowledge about climate catastrophe, perspectives on climate adaptation and extreme weather, implications for agricultural and urban communities alike, and poetry.269 Some authors also focused on immediate issues facing Indigenous peoples, from an analysis of the Kyoto Protocol negotiations, to a spotlight on Arctic communities. On the latter was a piece titled “In the Arctic, Ice is Life—And it’s Disappearing.” In the piece was an interview with a member of the Yupik Native community from Nome, Alaska, who emphasized the harm his community faced due to shorter freeze periods and longer melt periods.270

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270 Moreno, Fidel. “In the Arctic, Ice is Life—And it’s Disappearing.” From *Native Americas* (Fall/Winter 1999): *Global Warming, Climate Change and Native Land*. Published on *Indigenous Environmental Network*. IAWM: Feb.
While impacted communities began ringing the alarm bells on local climate issues as early as 2000, they were not heard by U.S. mainstream media for years. In 2005, Elizabeth Kolbert published a three-part series in the *New Yorker* titled “The Climate of Man.” The series became the first major piece of U.S. reporting to call attention to the existential threat faced by climate justice communities. A year later, in 2006, Kolbert’s book *Field Notes from a Catastrophe: Man, Nature, and Climate Change*—based on the *New Yorker* series—launched the issue even deeper into the public consciousness. *Field Notes* opened with a narrative drastically different from the one the Sierra Club had been telling, or the story that McKibben had told in *The End of Nature* in 1989. The opening story of *Field Notes* brought climate change into frightening focus in the small Inupiat village of Shishmaref. Though the community had lived in the area for centuries, in 2002, two-thirds of the village voted to move to mainland Alaska due to the unpredictable, shrinking ice patterns caused by local warming. Some community members celebrated the move, but many others were concerned that “by leaving the tiny island, they would give up their connection to the sea and become lost.” After telling this story, Kolbert posits that “in the same way that global warming [had] gradually ceased to be merely a theory, so, too, its impacts [were] no longer just hypothetical.” In a nod to the basis of climate justice concerns, Kolbert closed this opening narrative by stating that these impacts were occurring disproportionately in certain areas of the world, especially the Arctic.

Kolbert’s reporting was consequential in bringing to light for the American public what had been apparent to impacted communities for a long time. The delay between the *Native Americas* special-edition and the release of *Field Notes* indicates the degree to which mainstream environmental conceptions of climate change remained at the center of climate conversations at the start of the 2000s. Kolbert’s opening narrative in *Field Notes* marks a stark shift from 1990s public-focused writing, but still missed the mark in centering climate justice communities. Most of Kolbert’s book reads as apolitical, rooted in research on and observations about the development of climate science, models, and tipping points, not local climate consequences, uneven responsibility for climate change, equity, or the problem of climate refugees.

Where the global warming edition of *Native Americas* covered consequences for agriculture, culture, and science as they related to Indigenous communities, Kolbert used Indigenous communities as relatively narrow, singular examples of local consequences. Even ten years later, in a second edition of *Field Notes* with three additional chapters, she mentioned Indigenous justice issues and the potential climate refugee crisis only briefly. Though her reason for writing a second edition was in part due to “the signs of global warming [becoming] much more obvious,” she still focused on the science of wildfires, tar sands, beetle-diseased pine trees, and Arctic ice, rather than the human communities already being affected. Kolbert’s book is remarkable in the way it addressed climate science and local impacts, but it still did not capture the depth of the problem felt by frontline communities, especially compared to similar work of Indigenous authors and climate justice organizers.

Indeed, despite the beginnings of a climate justice movement and some media coverage of impacts in Alaska, the focal point of environmental debates was not the future of Alaskan communities, but rather the future of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Mainstream environmental organizations were concerned with preservation of the refuge, based primarily on the ideals of conservation and the need to protect the “pristine unspoiled” wilderness of the refuge. To engage their grassroots networks, the big national groups such as the Sierra Club and Natural Resources Defense Council called on citizens to write to their Senators using a template letter that emphasized oil independence and a moral responsibility to save wilderness for future generations; there was no mention of the potential consequences of longer melt seasons on the traditions and livelihoods of Indigenous communities in the Arctic. This framing of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge was indicative of mainstream environmental organizations’ broader climate framing too; by 2007, the Sierra Club’s global warming website still asked activists to pressure their Senators to fight for higher fuel economy standards to limit emissions, rather than as a matter of justice.

Indigenous activist groups, such as the Indigenous Environmental Network, on the other hand, framed the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge issue as one of Indigenous rights and the harm

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caused by extractive industries. In 2002, at the same time that the mainstream groups were calling on their supporters to call Congress to protect the wilderness, the Indigenous Environmental Network was amplifying the calls of the Gwich’in Nation, asking people to call Congress on behalf of the Gwich’in, for whom the Refuge was, and still is, sacred.\footnote{Goldtooth, Tom B.K. “Native Leaders Standing in Solidarity with the Gwich’in Against Oil Drilling in the Arctic Refuge.” Indigenous Environmental Network, Feb. 2002. IAWM: June 1, 2004. https://web.archive.org/web/20040601013353/http://www.ienearth.org/mining_campaign2.html#feb2002.} That same year, Indigenous leaders held a press conference in D.C., where Indigenous Environmental Network Executive Director Tom Goldtooth spoke about standing in solidarity with the Gwich’in against drilling in the Arctic Refuge.\footnote{Goldtooth, Tom B.K. “Native Leaders Standing in Solidarity with the Gwich’in Against Oil Drilling in the Arctic Refuge.” Indigenous Environmental Network, Feb. 2002. IAWM: June 1, 2004. https://web.archive.org/web/20040601013353/http://www.ienearth.org/mining_campaign2.html#feb2002.} He detailed the way extraction in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge would desecrate Gwich’in culture, and also emphasized the need to shine a light on the “human face” of environmental issues.\footnote{Goldtooth. “Native Leaders Standing in Solidarity with the Gwich’in.” IAWM.} Unlike mainstream environmental groups up to that point, Goldtooth also explicitly made the connection between the Arctic Refuge debate and climate change, imploring the American public to “stop the axis of evil oil industries and governments… a major factor in causing climate change and global warming.”\footnote{Goldtooth. “Native Leaders Standing in Solidarity with the Gwich’in.” IAWM.} Goldtooth’s speech, representative of the Indigenous Environmental Network and other climate justice organizations’ perspective on the issue, highlights the difference between the approaches of the Climate Justice movement and the mainstream movement—the former was the human face of climate issues, while the latter needed to listen.

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge battle illustrated an emerging divergence from past framings of the climate problem. Focusing on previously sidelined voices, including those of the authors of the global warming edition of Native Americas, Indigenous Environmental Network leaders, and the Gwich’in Nation, reveals a long history of frontline communities fighting to shift the conversation away from conservation to climate justice. From the 1980s through the 2000s, mainstream organizations framed the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge almost entirely as an issue of oil extraction versus wilderness protection. By privileging those voices and those framings of the issue, the human face of climate change was obscured. The ongoing debate over the refuge into the 2000s captured the increasingly pivotal role of climate justice within the larger climate movement. The Sierra Club and other mainstream groups, by the late 2010s, transformed their approach to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Where they had once focused on action to
protect wilderness, it is now impossible to read about their Arctic campaigns without reading about Indigenous rights, the Gwich’in, and climate change.284

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is a critical element of the climate justice story in the Arctic, but not the only piece. Though the media and the public may not have been paying attention, there is a much richer story to be uncovered by turning to different organizations and centering the voices of impacted communities. Immediate climate-related issues facing Indigenous populations in the Arctic included the thinning of the ice sheet, shorter freeze periods and faster melt periods, and a decrease in overall ice cover. Those pressing problems became the basis of local and coalition-based advocacy efforts within the Arctic.

An early advocacy effort began in 2005 to hold the U.S. legally culpable for harming Arctic populations. In 2005, Inuk woman and Chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC) Sheila Watt-Cloutier presented a petition, on behalf of the ICC and over sixty individual petitioners representing many communities, to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR).285 Titled “Violations Resulting from Global Warming Caused by the United States,” the petition declared that the IACHR had an obligation to force the U.S. to take climate action to repair its disruption to culture and human rights.286 Hinging on the immediacy of the harm felt by Arctic communities, the petition invoked the climate justice principles of ecological debt and the need for responsible nations to be held accountable and remediate the harm caused.287 The petitioners enumerated the international laws they believed had been violated, and demanded a formal investigation of the harms caused. They further exhorted that the U.S. take immediate and mandatory action to limit emissions and assist Inuit communities with adaptation measures.288 Though the IACHR chose not to proceed with the petition, climate justice advocates’ act of linking climate change to human rights and culture in a formal institutional


setting was a bold shift from prior climate action.

Climate justice organizers also engaged with local grassroots networks in the Arctic to bolster local resistance and advocacy. Compared to mainstream national campaigns run by the Sierra Club or Natural Resources Defense Council, organizations within the climate justice movement relied heavily on direct actions and movement building. For instance, a campaign called REDOIL, an Indigenous grassroots network in the Arctic that stood for “Resisting Environmental Destruction on Indigenous Lands”, was started at the local level. REDOIL was an Indigenous Environmental Network program, which made it a local activist campaign under the broader umbrella of the Indigenous Environmental Network. Formed in 2002, the group first met in Alaska to “share knowledge, experiences, and strategies” and to draft a set of guiding principles for oil and gas development resistance. The document echoed the climate justice principles that had emerged in the global climate justice movement at the time, but also detailed localized principles.

REDOIL members engaged in a number of tactics to support their advocacy work. In order to raise the profile of Alaskan Natives in climate circles, REDOIL made statements as a “movement of Alaska Natives,” advocated in educational spaces, and participated in international Indigenous meetings on climate change to build a global coalition. REDOIL, and other local climate justice campaigns, were not opposed to working with the mainstream environmental current of the movement either. In 2013, for instance, REDOIL was joined and supported by mainstream groups like the Sierra Club, Natural Resources Defense Council, and Wilderness Society in an unsuccessful lawsuit under the Clean Air Act, filed against the EPA for granting permits to Shell to operate an oil drillship off the North Slope. This cooperation signaled the value that climate justice organizers placed on building coalitions


290 “REDOIL.” IAWM.

291 “REDOIL.” IAWM.

292 “REDOIL.” IAWM.


and working across differences between the climate justice and mainstream currents of the movement. Working in coalition allowed both currents to achieve more than they could on their own; in this case, the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Sierra Club had the funding, resources, and institutional infrastructure to provide legal assistance for the realization of climate justice ideals that REDOIL may not have been able to pursue alone.

Since many climate justice campaigns were first and foremost organized around local issues, umbrella organizations and networks like the Indigenous Environmental Network were critical in shaping a broader, cohesive movement. For instance, the Indigenous Environmental Network did not always run its own climate and energy justice campaigns, but it supported, amplified, and stood in solidarity with various Alaskan Native communities, the fight against nuclear waste placement in Yucca Mountain in Nevada, and energy development projects across the U.S. 297 While this looser network could be attributed to a lack of funding that prevented the network from operating nationally-focused campaigns the way large, long-standing mainstream groups like the Sierra Club or Natural Resources Defense Council did, the network approach also aligned with the principles of climate justice.298 The distributed approach allowed for ideas, campaigns, and actions to percolate up from local communities, meaning that those most impacted directed the message and arc of campaigns, rather than the Indigenous Environmental Network dictating a top-down campaign structure for local groups to take on.

Climate justice advocates made huge strides in the 2000s to force climate justice issues into the center from the margins, but the mainstream climate conversation had not yet shifted in that direction. Looking past the dominant climate conversation led by mainstream organizations, which was preoccupied by the Bush administration’s disregard for the Kyoto Protocol and opposition to stronger fuel efficiency standards, there is a wealth of work to uncover by climate justice organizers starting to build a movement. Climate justice advocacy was not only growing around U.S. domestic issues. At the international level, coalition and network-based organizing, especially under the leadership of the Indigenous Environmental Network, would bridge the local activism of North American frontline communities to the larger global movement.

2.4 Making the Local Global

Driving the climate justice movement was the conviction that while each frontline community faced very different climate impacts, those problems came from the same source. Climate change was primarily caused by—both in the present and historically—industrialized nations in the Global North. Structural power inequities in global policy arenas, notably in the crafting of international policy through the United Nations, further compounded the injustices of climate change. Organizing at the international level was, therefore, a critical component of the movement, which meant that climate justice organizers had to face the same challenges as mainstream environmental organizers in operating across vastly different scales. Though climate justice organizers had the advantage of a unified message, predicated on shared principles, they still faced a significant challenge in building a unified front—out of hundreds of local campaigns—that could wield real influence. In contrast to the lobbying-based strategy adopted by mainstream environmentalists, climate justice organizers focused on (1) building coalitions through global networks and forums and (2) creating pressure and gaining public attention by executing mass actions and embracing protest politics. Though at the time climate justice efforts were perceived to be at the margins of official negotiations, in retrospect, what was happening on the outside is what would come to eventually occupy the center of climate politics.

The collective, outside approach was both strategic and necessary. Though Indigenous activists were often excluded from formal proceedings, they had been speaking out outside international climate meetings since they began in Rio in 1992. Procedural injustice within the international processes fundamentally inhibited the work of the climate justice movement. Accordingly, the movement vocally advocated for the UNFCCC to remedy its failure to include Indigenous perspectives, representatives, and knowledge within the forum. In 2000, the Rising Tide Network organized the first Climate Justice Summit, marking a pivotal shift by engaging

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grassroots activists under the specific banner of “climate justice.” Working in partnership with groups like the U.S.-based CorpWatch, the summit was positioned as an “alternative vision” to the UNFCCC, which was simultaneously meeting for the sixth Conference of the Parties. Summit organizers aimed to show that those inside the UNFCCC negotiations, including mainstream environmental organizations, were the wrong people talking about the wrong issues when it came to climate. Instead of negotiating market-based solutions and entertaining industry interests, the Climate Justice Summit provided a platform from which impacted communities could voice their fears and hopes in a way that hadn’t been done before. Some of the specific injustices vocalized at the summit included the vulnerability of the Ogoni people in Nigeria as a result of oil operations and the threat of rising sea levels, in addition to the plight of the Gwich’in People in Alaska due to changing melt seasons and the threat of oil drilling. By bringing together activists from communities historically excluded from international negotiations to share stories and connect their struggles, the summit initiated the imagination of transnational resistance at the international scale.

The way climate justice organizers communicated with and engaged supporters differed significantly from the way mainstream environmentalists did. After the conclusion of the summit in 2000, the Rising Tide Network published a zine titled “Dissenting Voices.” The zine included a detailed lineup of the speakers and events at the summit, Rising Tide’s political statement on the official talks, and informational articles about climate politics and science—all of which was endorsed by more than 300 signatory organizations. Where the Natural Resources Defense Council used its blog “Dateline Kyoto” to communicate insider happenings at COP3 to their supporters, Rising Tide used a zine section titled “Direct Action Diary” to

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308 Kevin. “Movement history: COP6 climate justice mobilization & the birth of Rising Tide.”
describe outsider actions at COP6. Direct actions included processions, art pieces, blockades, occupations of the perimeter of the U.S. embassy, banner drops, and even a storming of the conference center. Together, the two dimensions of the summit—conventional programming and nonviolent actions—presented a symbolically powerful image. It made clear that the concerns of frontline communities were literally being left outside of the negotiations. For the rest of the decade, though, they would remain on the outside, engaging in regional forums, events, and coalitions, though rarely with so much spectacle.

Bringing those marginalized voices into the official proceedings, into the center of the conversation, was a key demand of the movement from the very start. In the Bali Principles of Climate Justice—the first articulated by a global coalition—three of the 27 principles specifically demanded procedural justice. By affirming the right of affected communities to “represent and speak for themselves,” the right of Indigenous peoples and local communities to “participate effectively at every level of decision-making,” and the need for affected communities to “play a leading role” in climate solutions, the Bali Principles signaled inclusive participation as a focal point for the climate justice movement.

Obtaining procedural justice was accordingly the aim of many early climate justice organizing efforts. Even before Bali, Indigenous peoples of North America exhorted the UNFCCC to grant Indigenous and local communities a seat at the table. In November 1998, ahead of a UNFCCC meeting in Argentina, over 180 Indigenous representatives met in Albuquerque, New Mexico to craft the Albuquerque Declaration, which was read at the COP4 meeting. The Declaration highlighted the essential need to listen to local communities when negotiating solutions to the global threat posed by climate change. The document framed the global issue as a local one, emphasizing the disproportionate impacts of climate change on certain communities, and demanded formal opportunities for Indigenous communities to participate in UNFCCC processes.
Demands like those in the Albuquerque Declaration, renewed in the climate justice documents of the 2000s, illuminate a fundamental difference in the organizing of climate justice groups compared to mainstream ones. Where mainstream environmentalists could use the influence of long-standing non-profits and lobbyists to affect policy and arrange meetings with government officials, climate justice organizers didn’t even have a foot in the door. This persistent exclusion can partially be attributed to the way that climate justice organizers, unlike mainstream environmentalists, sought to fundamentally reshape power distribution within the UNFCCC and reorient the framing of what good policy solutions should look like. The climate justice movement cultivated a structure that made space for bottom-up policy creation by taking local concerns seriously, and advocated for a shift away from market-based, technological solutions. Scholars studying climate justice in the U.S. today trace current activism to the early global climate justice movement, through which “climate justice narratives emerged from forged solidarities and actions and created opportunities for strategic and translocal solidarities among social justice and climate change organizations across scales and continents.”

Despite these efforts to “mobilize intersectional climate justice narratives,” especially through interventions at the mainstream-dominated international meetings, it was not until 2019, nearly two decades after the Albuquerque Declaration, that the UNFCCC (COP23) began intentional collaboration with Indigenous communities to adopt and implement the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples’ Platform. Established at the 2015 Paris Conference, the platform would (1) increase capacity for the engagement of Indigenous communities in the UNFCCC process, (2) expand the use of “diverse knowledge systems” in crafting policy, and (3) bridge the historic gap between indigenous and local communities and the UNFCCC.

Procedural justice was necessary to achieve all other goals of the climate justice movement, since those who held the power in climate proceedings, primarily industrialized
nations, were also those most responsible for causing the problem. In 2001, a coalition of climate justice organizations, including CorpWatch and the Indigenous Environmental Network, delivered a letter to the Bush administration stating that the decision to abandon the Kyoto Protocol would profoundly harm “poor people and people of color in the U.S. and around the world.”

Echoing Argawal’s 1991 paper on warming in an unequal world, the letter’s signatories urged U.S. leaders to recognize the country’s climate debt and lead in “reversing its role as the main contributor” to the crisis. For climate justice ideals to be achieved, the U.S. had to be involved at the international level. Mainstream environmentalists shared in the disappointment over the U.S.’s failure to adopt the Kyoto Protocol, which offered a passing moment of synergy between the mainstream and climate justice currents of the movement, reflecting that despite divergent framings of the climate crisis, they shared the same overarching conviction that the U.S. had to take responsibility internationally.

The Climate Crisis Coalition, founded in 2004, organized the most notable campaign that encapsulated this moment of overlap between the mainstream and climate justice currents. Most active in 2005 ahead of an international meeting in Montreal, the Climate Crisis Coalition’s campaign utilized three tactics that merged the work of both the mainstream and climate justice currents of the movement. First, the centerpiece of the campaign was the “People’s Ratification of the Kyoto Protocol,” a petition demanding that U.S. officials ratify the Protocol. Grounded in the democratic ideals of a people-powered government responsible to its citizens, the petition was aligned with the bottom-up politics of climate justice. It was a truly grassroots effort. Organizers urged supporters to bring the petition to their own communities, and suggested they bring it to viewings of An Inconvenient Truth to collect signatures. Second, the petition and the campaign were endorsed by mainstream environmental leaders and prominent climate justice organizations alike. Before its publication, the petition was signed by the likes of mainstream environmentalists Bill McKibben and Michael Shellenberger and, once it was released, the

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320 Beer, Christopher Todd. “Climate Justice, the Global South, and Policy Preferences of Kenyan Environmental NGOs.” The Global South 8, no. 2 (2014): 84-100; Goodman. “From Global Justice to Climate Justice?”


322 “International Coalition Delivers Scathing Earth Day Letter to President Bush on Climate Change and Environmental Justice.” CorpWatch.


Indigenous Environmental Network prominently promoted it on its website. Third, the campaign engaged in the protest politics characteristic of the climate justice movement. At the height of the campaign, in December 2005, the Climate Crisis Coalition organized nationwide “Stop Global Warming” and “USA Join the World!” actions in over 20 states.\footnote{“Climate Crisis Coalition Organizing Nationwide: ‘Stop Global Warming’ Actions on December 3.” Indigenous Environmental Network, Nov. 10, 2005. IAWM: Nov. 22, 2005. \url{https://web.archive.org/web/20051122072021/http://www.ienearth.org:80/climate_campaign.html}.} Focused on pressuring the U.S. government to engage in meaningful international and domestic climate policy, grassroots activists participated in local actions across the country. Some of the more attention-grabbing actions included encircling the White House driving hybrid vehicles and large rallies in New York City.\footnote{Revkin, Andrew C. “Youths Make Spirited Case at Climate Meeting.” \textit{New York Times}, Dec. 9, 2005; “Climate Crisis Coalition: Actions.” \textit{Climate Crisis Coalition}, IAWM: Jan. 28, 2006. \url{https://web.archive.org/web/20060128084229/http://www.climatecrisiscoalition.org:80/}.} In its advocacy, the Climate Crisis Coalition frequently adopted the rhetoric of the climate justice movement, demanding that the U.S. address its historic responsibility for climate change. The Coalition also sought to raise awareness about the immediate local realities of frontline communities through a series of actions (many carried out by young people), including a massive mobilization of marchers in Montreal that concluded with participants holding their breath to symbolize the threat of sea level rise in the Pacific islands that would eventually make breathing impossible.\footnote{Tokar. “Movements for Climate Justice in the US and Worldwide.” p. 133.}

The Climate Crisis Coalition’s 2005 campaign exhibited the shift towards an embrace of climate justice ideas and leadership that was underway in the U.S. climate movement, but the energy behind the campaign was short lived. Similar to the Climate Justice Summit organized by Rising Tide, the Climate Crisis Coalition’s campaign ahead of Montreal was representative of the reactivity of large-scale climate justice actions and the fragility of the connections being built between climate justice and mainstream organizers. In contrast, Climate Justice Now! (CJN!) is one of the most consistent, long-running climate justice efforts to emerge from the early 2000s. Before it was CJN!, the group was known as the “Durban Group for Climate Justice,” named for its first meeting in 2004 in a forum outside of the official international proceedings happening in Durban. There, representatives of social movements, Indigenous groups, and allied organizations from around the world wrote the Durban Declaration on Carbon Trading.\footnote{The document, written in coalition and endorsed by over 300 groups, reaffirmed climate justice concepts,}
centered impacted local populations, and specifically critiqued carbon trading and market-based solutions.\(^ {329}\) In 2007, at the UNFCCC conference in Bali, members of the Durban Group advocated for the Durban Declaration as a basis for climate solutions both inside official proceedings and in outside events, actions and protests.\(^ {330}\) After the conference, the group consolidated under the name CJN!, released its own climate justice principles in 2008 reminiscent of the Bali Principles, and consisted of over 750 organizations by 2009.\(^ {331}\)

Over the course of the 2000s, climate justice organizers brought together local movements and struggles from around the U.S. and the globe to form a unified grassroots movement aimed at reshaping climate politics and policy. International meetings were used as focal points by climate justice organizations and organizers to energize grassroots engagement and were guided by the 2002 Bali Principles and subsequent principles statements. By engaging with and connecting frontline communities, organizers succeeded in creating a new degree of bottom-up climate organizing to ensure that the realities of local communities, forewarned by Agarwal in the 1990s, were heard, even if they were still largely ignored by those in power. Advancements in the development of climate justice principles, localization of the climate problem by frontline communities, and embrace of protest politics at the international level enabled the climate justice movement to successfully build international coalitions that simultaneously centered local struggles and advanced climate justice ideals around the world.

2.5 Copenhagen Conference (COP 6, 2009)

Climate justice organizers dedicated most of the early 2000s to building a movement infrastructure that could be mobilized in support of climate justice ideals. Developing principles, supporting local campaigns, and building coalitions at international meetings all contributed to the creation of a robust, unified, and energetic global movement. Understanding these strategies and how they elevated the influence of both climate justice organizations and ideas is necessary


for accounting for the unprecedented outpouring of climate activism that happened at the Copenhagen Conference in 2009. Further, an acknowledgement of the grassroots, bottom-up strategy of the climate justice current of the movement helps to explain how despite the absence of tangible successes, the climate justice movement came to occupy the center of U.S. climate politics by the early 2010s.

Climate justice organizers routinely planned large-scale actions around UNFCCC meetings, but Copenhagen was a distinctly significant organizing opportunity for four reasons. First, Copenhagen was considered the deadline to resolve questions about what would happen after 2012, when the initial commitment period determined in Kyoto would end. For that reason, Copenhagen marked a major turning point for the global climate regime—would the UNFCCC extend Kyoto for a second commitment period? Or create an entirely new agreement under the Framework Convention, working towards bringing non-Kyoto parties and developing nations into the fold? Second, there were extremely high expectations for the outcome of the conference; over 100 heads of state committed to attend and forty thousand people registered to participate, making Copenhagen one of the largest environmental meetings in history. A United Nations backed marketing campaign bolstered public interest under the slogan “Hopenhagen” which aimed to frame Copenhagen as a chance to move from “‘coping’ with climate change to ‘hope’ that action [could] be taken to tackle the issue.” Third, the meeting was the first to take place since the transfer of U.S. leadership from President Bush to Obama. After eight years of stagnation and the abandonment of the Kyoto Protocol, there was genuine hope that the U.S. would actually come on board (and maybe bring China with it). On the campaign trail, and in his first few months in office, Obama promised that climate would be an administration priority, which contributed to high expectations for U.S. leadership in Copenhagen. Though doubts about the potential for success arose before Copenhagen,

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Obama meaningfully shifted the role of the U.S. in international climate politics by promising ahead of the conference to personally attend the meeting and commit to an emissions reduction of 17% by 2020. Finally, for Indigenous and climate justice organizers, Copenhagen was particularly important because the primary axis of the negotiations shifted from European Union-U.S. to developed-developing nations. More specifically, the solutions being considered by the Parties to the UNFCCC were increasingly focused on the role of developing nations.

In preparation for the conference, over 500 Indigenous peoples from 80 nations convened in Anchorage, Alaska for the first Indigenous Peoples’ Global Summit on Climate Change in April 2009. The summit, like its predecessors, aimed to create a unified statement of demands calling for global action on climate change and the inclusion of Indigenous voices and knowledge in both international proceedings and policy. At the end of the four day conference, the group adopted the Anchorage Declaration. The declaration captured the worries Indigenous and other climate justice communities had ahead of Copenhagen since it, unlike analogous documents, included specific policy recommendations for the United Nations alongside the by then conventional affirmations of Indigenous rights.

The policy recommendations included in the Anchorage Declaration were primarily concerned with ensuring that developing nations would be treated fairly under the new climate agreement. One recommendation outlined requiring aggressive, binding emissions targets on industrialized nations to address uneven responsibility for the problem. A second policy recommendation responded to a policy that industrialized countries saw as a win-win solution, but that climate justice organizers vehemently opposed: REDD, which stands for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation. The Indigenous Environmental Network was


These reduction commitments were in line with the Waxman-Markey bill that had just passed the U.S. House, though it was unlikely to pass the Senate (and ultimately did not). Woodruff, Judy. “Obama to Offer 17% US Emissions Cut at Copenhagen Summit.” PBS, Nov. 25, 2009.


REDD: Protecting climate, forests and livelihoods.” International Institute for Environment and Development. Accessed March 2021; The U.S. had been strongly supportive of REDD+ policies in Copenhagen and after it. “The
particularly focused on the latter. In a REDOIL and Indigenous Environmental Network joint statement introducing the Anchorage Declaration, Indigenous Environmental Network Executive Director Tom Goldtooth criticized REDD as a market-based mechanism that benefited polluters without addressing underlying drivers of deforestation.\(^{344}\) To communicate their position with supporters and other members of the public, Indigenous Environmental Network created a zine, published on their website, outlining REDD as an anti-Indigenous policy.\(^{345}\)

Despite the efforts of climate justice organizers and the collaborations that had budded under the Climate Crisis Coalition, the concerns of the Indigenous Environmental Network and its allies did not fully resonate with mainstream environmental organizations. Going into Copenhagen, groups such as the Sierra Club and Natural Resources Defense Council shared some of the same priorities as the climate justice movement, especially for aggressive, binding emissions targets and for wealthier nations to fund adaptation plans for the most vulnerable localities and nations.\(^{346}\) Yet, though mainstream groups started to use the vernacular of equity and responsibility, they also continued to promote market-based emissions mechanisms and were not at the forefront of advocacy for greater inclusion of Indigenous voices, frontline communities, or traditional knowledge.\(^{347}\) For instance, before Copenhagen, Sierra Club Executive Director Carl Pope published a piece in SIERRA magazine debunking fallacies about climate solutions. Although his arguments had elements of ideas rooted in justice—like the fact that many carbon sinks were in developing nations, and that prior agreements didn’t address the issue of historic emissions—the solutions he actually advocated for were efficient energy markets and technological advancement.\(^{348}\)

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Beyond working towards a set of unified policy recommendations and demands for the conference, climate justice organizers in the U.S. also continued intensive efforts to galvanize grassroots engagement leading up to Copenhagen. Mobilization for Climate Justice, a U.S.-based network to build a more cohesive climate justice movement through nonviolent direct action and awareness campaigns, gained significant momentum in 2009.\(^{349}\) Over the summer, the network organized a large-scale mobilization campaign for November 30, 2009, referred to as the N30 actions.\(^{350}\) The date was symbolically meaningful as it immediately preceded Copenhagen and coincided with the tenth anniversary of the World Trade Organization protests in Seattle.\(^{351}\) Protests swept across the U.S., leading to dozens of arrests.\(^{352}\) On December 7th, the day proceedings opened in Copenhagen, the group rallied outside of Chevron headquarters and demanded that industry leaders stop blocking climate change solutions; the action made visible the connection between extractive industries and climate change.\(^{353}\) Grassroots engagement in the climate justice movement, unlike in the past mainstream climate campaigns, was not confined to individual letters to the editor or calls to Senators, but instead focused on taking action in the streets together.

When the conference began in Copenhagen, climate activists turned out in force, engaging in the largest scale demonstration of climate protest politics in the movement’s history. Previous protest campaigns at global climate meetings, from the 50,000 marchers for Indigenous rights and ecological stability in Rio (1992),\(^{354}\) to the Greenpeace Carbonosaurus and melting ice penguins in Kyoto (1997),\(^{355}\) and the Climate Justice Summit at The Hague (2000), paled in comparison to the numerical scale of 2009.\(^{356}\) Over the course of the conference, climate


\(^{350}\) “Mobilization for Climate Justice Open Letter to the Grassroot Help Organize for Urgent Action on Climate Change.” IAWM.

\(^{351}\) “Mobilization for Climate Justice Open Letter to the Grassroot Help Organize for Urgent Action on Climate Change.” IAWM.

\(^{352}\) Mobilization for Climate Justice. “Compilation of reports from n30 day of climate justice action!” *Carbon Trade Watch.* Nov. 30, 2009.


\(^{354}\) “‘Oppressed by Life’ march brings 50,000 demonstrators together.” *Jornal do Brasil.*


organizers led over 100,000 protesters in nonviolent mass mobilizations. Leaders in the movement, including the Indigenous Environmental Network, Grassroots Global Justice Alliance, and Climate Justice Now! held huge events nearly every day. Highlighting the multi-faceted nature of the climate crisis, each day focused on different issues, including anti-corporation day, farmers action day, and protests against the Canadian Tar Sands. Other actions sought to visibilize the way climate justice communities were left out of positions of power and decision-making, such as the occupation of the entrance to the U.S. Embassy by members of the Indigenous Environmental Network and the U.S.-based Indigenous Peoples Power Project (IP3). Clashes with the police resulted in hundreds of arrests, though most actions remained peaceful. These actions served to persistently raise climate justice issues as key concerns in the climate conversation, and solidified the role of protest politics as a climate organizing strategy.

Images of climate protesters crowded in the streets of Copenhagen are relatively common. What is undercovered about the conference is that climate justice organizers used the international meeting to create an alternative venue where climate justice communities, activists, and allies could gather. The “people’s summit,” known as Klimaforum09, was hosted by Climate Justice Now! and allied organizations in parallel to the official proceedings, in the tradition of the 2000 Hague Climate Justice Summit. At the forum, speakers like Gwich’in Elder Sarah James addressed over 15,000 delegates, activists, and journalists, and spoke about the pressing issues faced by vulnerable communities left on the margins of global climate discussions. The work of climate justice activists, rooted in coalitional organizing, contributed to the amplification of their message to a larger audience than ever before in Copenhagen. Indeed, as in other social

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359 “Copenhagen Chronology of Actions.” Carbon Trade Watch.
movements, Copenhagen was a pivotal moment where the grievances of climate justice communities and allies, built up over a decade, were “translated into collective action… channeled through movement organizations and networks.” Yet the imagery of crowds of climate justice organizers chanting, protesting, and demanding action from leaders deliberating behind closed doors was a stark reminder that climate justice ideas were still primarily on the outside of the solution-making process.

While as a whole the climate justice movement was positioned outside of official proceedings, a few organizations had made inroads into the Copenhagen negotiations. The NAACP, a leading civil rights organization in the U.S., operated more similarly to mainstream environmental non-profits than the looser networks and alliances characteristic of the climate justice movement, and had the funding for a dedicated Environmental and Climate Justice Program. Though the NAACP was active on domestic climate justice issues, including their role in the creation of the Ten Principles for Just Climate Change Policies in the U.S. in 2002, the group had not been active on the international level until Copenhagen, when it sent its first NAACP delegation to the UNFCCC. As participants inside the official proceedings, NAACP delegates advocated for U.S. communities of color and pushed for stronger U.S. commitments.

Reminiscent of groups like the Natural Resources Defense Council, NAACP delegates engaged their supporters and communities back home throughout the conference by using a blog that reportedly received thousands of views. Blog posts documented the proceedings both inside and outside the conference from the perspective of NAACP delegates and aimed to bring the voices of those historically marginalized to the negotiations. The NAACP blogger described official proceedings, climate justice actions, and critiqued the policy positions of U.S. officials. In contrast to the Natural Resource Defense Council’s Kyoto blog, the NAACP blog also went beyond the negotiations by including features that highlighted the climate realities of different communities of color in the U.S., and by documenting the policy brutality faced by Copenhagen protestors, from arrests to police dogs and tear gas. The NAACP blog clarifies that the climate

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justice movement was not just an asterisk to the official proceedings in Copenhagen, but rather a robust meeting of marginalized groups in solidarity with each other and in opposition to the hierarchical, inside-outside format of the UNFCCC negotiations.

Mainstream U.S. environmental organizations were not actively involved in these protests or actions. Notably, though, the mainstream non-profit bloc in Copenhagen looked different than in Kyoto. The Blue Green Alliance—a partnership formed in 2002 between labor organizations, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and the Sierra Club—attended alongside the usual cohort of U.S. environmental organizations. Groups like the Sierra Club and the Natural Resources Defense Council generally stuck to the tactics they had used in Kyoto. Just as in Kyoto, the Natural Resources Defense Council ran a blog for its supporters that communicated information and reactions meant to keep U.S. activists attuned to the proceedings, but otherwise did not directly involve supporters. In a departure from Kyoto, though, the Sierra Club invited a large contingent of its grassroots members to attend, not just their climate lobbyists.

While the mainstream organizations made forays into broadening their delegation by including labor interests and grassroots members, the way they framed the proceedings revealed how tangential the protestors and climate justice movement seemed to the mainstream environmentalists at the time. Together, at the end of the conference, the mainstream organizations held a press conference that emphasized the link between good jobs and a sustainable future, but omitted even a gesture to the demands of climate justice advocates over the past decade. Further, where the NAACP blog highlighted the violent police responses to protesters, the only Natural Resources Defense Council post to mention the protests focused entirely on capturing pictures of art installations and protesters dressed in spectacular costumes of polar bears and aliens.

In retrospect, as climate justice principles have solidified within the climate movement

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372 Young. “Copenhagen Pictures—Everything but the Proceedings.” IAWM.
over the past decade, Copenhagen is a clear turning point where the center of the climate movement was shifting away from mainstream environmentalism towards climate justice. Yet at the time, mainstream environmentalists continued to view the protestors as a sideshow to the real work of the proceedings: the author of the Natural Resources Defense Council blog went so far as to write that 95% of their focus, their real work, was on getting out the organization’s message during the proceedings, while the other 5% was spent “taking in some of the ancillary events, stunts, and exhibitions.” Much of the attention paid to protestors underscored the theater of the protests rather than the substance. Although this may, in part, have been a strategic miscalculation of the climate justice movement, it also reveals that the mainstream attitude towards anything outside of the official proceedings was one of amusement rather than concern.

For the U.S. climate movement, Copenhagen was ultimately a moment of progress and of disappointment. In terms of building a movement, the mobilizations at Copenhagen bolstered public engagement and solidified protest politics as a key strategy for climate advocacy; but the conference also revealed the ongoing tensions between the mainstream current’s technical and economic framing of the climate problem compared to the climate justice current’s justice framing. On the matter of an international agreement, the outcome was more clear: after the excitement and expectations that had been projected onto the conference, it was ultimately considered a let down on par with that of Kyoto. Two weeks of intensive negotiations, hundreds of thousands of protestors, and willingly involved U.S. government officials resulted in a weak accord that was rendered meaningless at the U.S. level when the Senate failed to adopt legislation to reduce domestic emissions. The disappointing outcome left mainstream and climate justice organizers and organizations alike in disarray.

373 Young. “Copenhagen Pictures—Everything but the Proceedings.” IAWM.
For some groups, Copenhagen was the end of the road; Mobilization for Climate Justice for instance—central to galvanizing the public before Copenhagen—crumbled under the pressure of internal concerns over representation, inclusion and leadership, and struggles to keep up public visibility and broad mobilization.\(^{376}\) In retrospect, Copenhagen is a clear turning point towards a powerful climate movement centered on justice principles, but at the time, the overwhelming disappointment that shrouded the negotiations sparked a moment of re-evaluation and retrenchment for climate activists.\(^{377}\) But the foundations activists had laid for future work far from faded. Their efforts elevated the principles of the climate justice movement, tested new tactics to engage the public, and endeavored to center impacted communities all while localizing a very global issue. By doing so, the early climate justice movement dramatically shifted the climate conversation, making it clear that however the pieces of the climate puzzle would be put together after Copenhagen, climate justice ideas would be at the center of the picture.

### 2.6 Beyond Copenhagen: The People’s Climate March

Where *The Death of Environmentalism* sparked a reckoning in the mainstream environmental movement in the wake of Kyoto, Copenhagen marked a moment of evolution for the climate justice movement. Some organizations and campaigns that were pivotal ahead of Copenhagen fell away, but the motivating principles that propelled the movement did not fade. The Indigenous Environmental Network, Grassroots Global Justice Alliance, and Movement Generation remained, and continued to gain strength after Copenhagen, emerging as central figures in climate organizing. Those organizations, among others, came together in 2012 to form an organizing network called Climate Justice Alliance (CJA), which primarily consisted of frontline communities and supportive networks, alliances, and movement groups.\(^{378}\) The Climate Justice Alliance was born out of a three-year “alignment process” pursued by leaders of the climate justice movement that began immediately after Copenhagen.\(^{379}\) Since then, the alliance has been instrumental in connecting frontline groups and organizers at “Climate Justice Alliance gatherings” and summits, pressuring powerful labor groups like the AFL-CIO to begin a just transition away from fossil fuels, building leadership capacity in frontline organizers and youth,

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\(^{377}\) Posner. *Climate Change Justice*; Tokar. “What was decided in Copenhagen?”


\(^{379}\) “History of the Climate Justice Alliance.” *Climate Justice Alliance*. 
and organizing mass direct actions like the People’s Climate March.\textsuperscript{380}

The People’s Climate March of 2014 was a pivotal moment in the climate justice movement, and in the climate movement as a whole, that shifted the movement slowly away from reactionary mobilizations, and garnered serious media and political attention. Organized by a coalition of more than a dozen climate and environmental groups, including those in the Climate Justice Alliance, the People’s Climate March mobilized people around the climate crisis at an unprecedented scale. Two days ahead of a United Nations climate summit, the march drew an estimated 400,000 people from across the country to the streets of New York City in late September.\textsuperscript{381} With U.S. organizations taking the lead, over 2,600 allied events in 162 countries swept the globe on the same day, adding hundreds of thousands more protesters to those gathered in the U.S.\textsuperscript{382} While the march was meant to align with the United Nations climate summit attended by world leaders, the march was different from past mobilizations in that it was not held in direct reaction to an official UNFCCC or other international meeting. Instead, though the upcoming Paris Conference loomed, the march was primarily a venue for concerned people to unite and raise their voices about the growing public anxiety felt towards the issue.\textsuperscript{383}

Unlike previous actions, even those in Copenhagen, the People’s Climate March received significant media and political attention.\textsuperscript{384} The event was treated seriously as a call for action, not like a sideshow—though the costumes and floats were no less theatrical.\textsuperscript{385} Active politicians, including Secretary of State John Kerry and Senator Bernie Sanders (D-VT), and celebrities and scholars like former Vice President Al Gore, Leonardo Di Caprio, and Naomi Klein all attended.\textsuperscript{386} At the United Nations summit, it became clear that, at the very least, protesters had been heard this time. President Obama, acknowledging the march in his remarks to the summit,
proclaimed: “Our people are marching. We cannot pretend we do not hear them. We have to answer the call.”

More remarkable, though, was the way the march ignited an unprecedented degree of interaction and collaboration between the mainstream and climate justice currents of the climate movement. During the planning process, there was a concerted effort to bring together these distinct, at times divergent, currents through a year-long strategizing coalition that involved over 1,400 organizations. Involved in the planning were large climate justice networks, most prominently the Climate Justice Alliance, as well as relatively new groups like 350.org and local organizations like the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance (NYC-EJA). During the march itself, Indigenous and frontline communities were given a symbolically powerful and substantively meaningful role: they both “led” the march at the front of the procession and, after a minute of silence, were the first to “ring” the alarm about the climate crisis that traveled all the way through the congregated protestors. The march has been called one for climate justice, and many banners featured in photographs reflected climate justice issues, including: “Defend our Mother,” “Grow Local for Food Sovereignty,” “Water is a Human Right,” and “Keep the Oil in the Ground.”

Older, larger non-profits like the Sierra Club relinquished their position at the head of the movement, instead contributing enormous support by sending over 25,000 of its members to participate and funding transportation for supporters. The march reconstructed the image of climate activism as one with real, sustained energy behind it, led by those most affected, and made up of all different kinds of groups, from frontline communities and mainstream environmentalists to labor unions, youth activists, and human rights organizations.
Even as the march signalled the progress that had been made towards the creation of a more unified, just movement, the union was far from perfect. News coverage of the march was impressive, but many accounts of the event gave most of the credit to 350.org, rarely mentioning other highly involved groups like the local NYC-EJA or national Climate Justice Alliance.\footnote{An online article in \textit{TIME}, for instance, had to be corrected after the original described Bill McKibben and 350.org as the only organizers of the event. Feeney. “New York City Climate Change March.”; Thorson. “Seeking Visibility in a Big Tent: Digital Communication and the People's Climate March.” p. 4784.} There was certainly symbolic power in having climate justice communities lead the march, yet some believed that the theatrics and celebratory tone of the march were incongruous with the severity of the issue as felt by those very communities.\footnote{Coplan, Karl. “Prologue: Climate March at the Crossroads.” In \textit{Live Sustainably Now: A Low-Carbon Vision of the Good Life}, 1-4. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. p. 2.} Similarly, while on the one hand the image of hundreds of thousands of supporters following the lead of frontline communities is a meaningful one, some voiced concern that these marchers were only a small minority of the participants.\footnote{Coplan. “Prologue: Climate March at the Crossroads.” p. 3.} Leaders within the environmental justice movement were less concerned with that imagery, though; in one interview Robert Bullard called the march “fantastic” and “probably the most diverse environmental event” he’d seen in a long time because “it was planned that way.”\footnote{Bullard. “Conversation: Robert Bullard.” p. 53.}

As closer relationships were formed between the mainstream and climate justice currents of the movement, and as these two strands became progressively more unified behind the ideas of climate justice, the roles of each current were still contested.

While the People’s Climate March was noteworthy for the reasons already described, the attention it was paid overshadowed other actions organized by climate justice activists that more clearly centered climate justice. Instead, the events most focused on climate justice were still on the margins. A day after the march, the Climate Justice Alliance organized an event called Flood Wall Street “that explicitly connected the climate crisis to capitalist and corporate abuses”,\footnote{Clarke. “People's Climate March.”p. 60.} but received only a fraction of the media attention and none of the political attention of the People’s Climate March. Protestors—wearing blue to symbolize sea-level rise—called for financial institutions that benefited from climate change to be shut down. Then, they were pepper-sprayed by police and over 100 people were arrested.\footnote{Restuccia, Andrew. “Over 100 arrested at Wall St. protest.” \textit{Politico}, Sep. 22, 2014; Clarke. “People's Climate March.” p. 60.} The day after Flood Wall Street, climate justice
organizations—led by the Climate Justice Alliance—held the People’s Climate Justice Summit concurrent to and across the street from the “official” proceedings of the United Nations climate summit.\(^{401}\) The entire summit, including a tribunal of the perpetrators of climate injustice, was live-streamed, but was reportedly viewed by fewer than 150 people at a time,\(^{402}\) a stunning difference from the march, which was attended by 400,000 people and reported on by countless major media outlets. Speakers and community representatives at the summit and tribunal did not celebrate the march, they repeated again the issues they faced due to climate change, including false promises, false solutions, uneven responsibility, and regional perspectives on the crisis.\(^{403}\) While the People’s Climate March was a considerable step towards popularizing climate justice principles, the Flood Wall Street and People’s Climate Justice Summit show how broadening the climate justice current’s base meant that the most justice-based advocacy remained on the sidelines.

The first People’s Climate March was not organized to directly align with a UNFCCC negotiating meeting, but it did come at a significant moment in climate politics. After the disappointment in Copenhagen,\(^{404}\) the massive mobilization in New York City captured an escalating sense of public urgency for climate action ahead of the Paris Conference in late 2015. The outpouring of public support in New York City signaled a broader embrace of climate justice ideals and an embrace of protest politics previously utilized primarily by climate justice organizations alone. Within the climate justice current more narrowly, the march was also a pivotal moment in building connections and power ahead of Paris, where the Climate Justice Alliance would send its first “It Takes Roots” delegation—a product of collaborations that started during the planning for the People’s Climate March.\(^{405}\) Thus, the march crystallized the role of climate justice ideas in the climate movement, and solidified that even if it was messy, collaborative and coalitional work with climate justice organizations in the lead were critical to the movement’s power moving forward.

\(^{402}\) “People’s Climate Justice Summit & Tribunal.” *Climate Justice Alliance*, Mar. 8, 2019.
3.1 Youth Activism in the 21st Century

In June 2009, mainstream environmentalists found themselves, yet again, faced with a series of setbacks on federal climate action. The Waxman-Markey bill, one of the most promising opportunities for climate legislation in the 2000s, had just passed the House, but only with significant concessions from Democrats, and its prospects in the Senate were uncertain. Responding to this sense of concern, Thomas Friedman, a New York Times opinion writer, published a piece titled “Just Do It.” Friedman argued that passing the bill was imperative, and specifically called on young Americans to do their part in turning the tide in favor of environmentalists. Young people’s climate future, said Friedman, was “being decided … in the cloakrooms of the Capitol, where the coal lobby holds huge sway.” If they really wanted to make a difference, then young people needed to “get out of Facebook and into somebody’s face… Play hardball or don’t play at all.”

Friedman’s consternation captured popular and scholarly criticism of youth organizing at the time. Critiques of youth organizing, often referring to “youth” as those under the age of 24, commonly relied on two assumptions that Friedman himself displayed. First, that the real work of policy-making is done on the inside via lobbyists, so young people need to be insiders too. If they were not engaging in insider tactics, like the opposition’s lobbyists, then they could not be playing “hard ball.” Second, that social media was at best a shallow form of organizing and at worst a disastrous distraction to the necessary real work. Today, it is clear that these apparent failures are actually advantages of youth organizing, but at the time, Friedman was part of a much larger conversation voicing uncertainty over the future of youth organizing.

Youth activism and civic engagement was widely believed to be in worrisome decline in the 2000s. Researchers, observing a disconnected, even apathetic, youth, raised questions about

the future of organizing, especially electoral organizing. This uncertainty about the future stemmed primarily from concerns about the implications of new communications technology such as texting, MySpace, and eventually Twitter and Facebook. Academics and advocacy organizations alike were worried that the online landscape and the types of connection between peers it encouraged was contributing to a decline in “real world” civic engagement. Persisting through the 2010s, some scholars described these worries as “haunting” the literature and research on youth activism. Even after Tunisia’s “Twitter Revolution” in 2011, doubts remained about the role social media played, and the extent to which it could be credited with igniting the massive mobilizations that overturned the government. In 2012, Malcolm Gladwell famously published a piece titled “Small Change” in the New Yorker, which differentiated between the strong-tie activism of movements like the Civil Rights Movement and the “weak-tie” activism of emerging digital organizing. The latter, warned Gladwell, which encouraged low-stakes actions (retweeting versus joining a sit-in), portended the death of sustained, high-commitment social movements in the future.

Within the climate movement, one group of people that was decidedly not concerned about youth organizing was young Americans themselves. Even as journalists like Thomas Friedman sought to charge young climate activists with the future of the movement, young people were demonstrating that they had already been answering that call, using new tools and tactics. Three days after Friedman’s “Just Do It” op-ed, Jamie Henn, an organizer for the two-year-old 350.org, responded in the New York Times. Young people, said Henn, were playing hardball—“Our challenge isn’t action: we’ve protested, lobbied, gotten arrested and more.” Neither was the budding youth movement lacking in numbers, since “Energy Action Coalition, leading the youth climate movement, [had] over 350,000 active members.” Instead, the problem was a lack of funding: “Youth organizing could change the political dynamic (hint: we

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410 Harris et al., “Beyond apathetic or activist youth,” 9-32.
411 Harris et al., “Beyond apathetic or activist youth,” 9-32.
415 Gladwell, Malcolm. “Small Change.”
know what Twitter is), but not until foundations look beyond the traditional environmental
groups and support our work.”

Friedman and Henn’s exchange is representative of how concerns about apathetic youth
and online organizing tactics dogged the climate movement. At the start of the 21st century,
scholars and older observers considered youth organizing to be very much in doubt, even as an
energetic and far-reaching youth climate movement began to bubble up to the surface. To
appreciate that would require reimagining what activism could look like.

3.2 Scholarly Work on Youth Activism

Concerns about youth activism proliferated in the scholarship, but at the same time
another strand of academic work emerged evaluating the potential of new technologies to
strengthen youth activism. In one study of U.S. youth organizing for immigrant rights in the
early 2000s, digital technologies were identified as critical to the character of youth “organizing
methods, mobilization, leadership, and ideology.” Technologies like texting and social media
were observed to have altered the treatment of time, “producing a new phenomenon of fast
organizing.”

Text messaging facilitated a growing “infrastructural possibility” for
activist-minded youth, since it allowed for the coordination of mass mobilizations outside of the
authority of government, adults, and corporate media. Social media provided a new way for
young people to engage with each other and do so creatively—mobilizing large groups of people
at a relatively low-cost and without the need for direction by a power-holding authority. Early
on, traditional activists and researchers ignored young peoples’ use of online tools like digital
petitions because they were frequently used for “non-political” issues. It is possible that this
youth culture blindspot also prevented traditional activists from seeing the potential for such
tactics to grow into a real youth organizing infrastructure.

417 Henn, “Letter to the editor.”
418 Yang, K. Wayne. “Organizing MySpace: Youth Walkouts, Pleasure, Politics, and New Media.” Educational
94, no. 3 (November 2012): 52-56. p. 54.
422 Earl, Jennifer, and Alan Schussman. “Contesting Cultural Control: Youth Culture and Online Petitioning.” Civic
Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth. Edited by W. Lance Bennett. The John D. and
71–96.
423 Earl et al., “Contesting Cultural Control,” 71-96.
Yet the very elements of youth digital activism that made it effective also presented challenges for sustaining a youth movement. Its diffuse, non-hierarchical nature sometimes created power vacuums that were filled by adult organizers, undermining the agency and goals of youth activists. Additionally, the tools that made fast organizing possible were better equipped for responding to “crises” than for the long-term campaigns necessary for durable political action. Newer technologies, including social media websites like MySpace in the 2000s, were viewed as possible solutions to those challenges, since they created a more permanent “virtual time-space” where “youth [could return] from the walkouts and [regroup] in virtual space.” This use of online space and virtual connection also translated into “real world” engagement. A study in 2012 showed that young people who had engaged in participatory politics, like making a social media post or sending a political video to a friend, were more likely to have voted than those who had not. While digital organizing presents challenges for sustained youth leadership and long-term campaigns, virtual spaces also encourage longer-term relationship building, and may translate into greater engagement in traditional political participation.

Other research challenged the argument that youth were disengaged in the first place. In an effort to respond to the “identification of a crisis in young people’s engagement,” one study of Australian youth found that the sense of youth disengagement was related to a misunderstanding of how youth activism had changed compared to traditional engagement. Rather than being deeply apathetic, youth activism had been reshaped in light of social and technological changes. While youth participation in representative/electoral politics may have declined, youth engagement through Internet politics and protest had not. Younger activists were also significantly more likely to engage in what researchers termed “actualizing citizenship,” characterized by expressive politics and the use of social networks and peer-to-peer relationships to propel information sharing and action, rather than the sense of duty and traditional media that motivated older activists who engaged in “dutiful citizenship.” Within environmental and climate organizing specifically, the concept of young people as “actualizing citizens” is useful in

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428 Harris et al., “Beyond apathetic or activist youth,” p. 9.
429 Harris et al., “Beyond apathetic or activist youth,” p. 9.
430 Harris et al., “Beyond apathetic or activist youth,” pp. 14, 26.
understanding how young activists used political protest as a “struggle to develop their identity, independent of parents and preceding generations” as well as express their agency in the face of the uniquely future-focused threat of climate change.\textsuperscript{433} Thus, expanding the breadth of tactics that are considered meaningful civic engagement challenges the very idea that youth engagement was ever in decline, and reorients both a scholarly and public understanding of the evolving motivations of expression, identity, and threat that motivated the youth climate movement.

More recently, there has been a heightened academic interest in examining the youth climate movement in particular. Any alarm about youth disengagement on climate, as expressed by Friedman in his 2009 \textit{New York Times} column, may actually have been a product of not taking youth dissent seriously or misunderstanding it.\textsuperscript{434} Young people, in reality, dissented in a multitude of ways to business-as-usual social, economic, and environmental policies.\textsuperscript{435} Like in other iterations of the climate movement, this dissent varied within the youth climate current; some chose to participate through small-scale community based-actions, while others engaged in more formal activism through global organizations like 350.org and Power Shift.\textsuperscript{436} Even before young people struck out to form their own current of the climate movement, scholars have uncovered the role that young people played in supporting environmental non-profits like Greenpeace or Friends of the Earth at the Montreal Climate Conference, where generational divides were employed to strengthen NGO positions at the international gathering.\textsuperscript{437} At UNFCCC gatherings like those in Montreal (2005) or Copenhagen (2009), the outsider tactics of young climate activists complemented the insider tactics of older, more established activists—the former providing political cover and pressure to support the latter’s position in negotiations.\textsuperscript{438} Aunio, a sociologist interested in social drivers of environmental issues and mobilization, identifies that phenomenon as the beginning of the “strategic construction of these identities [that] ultimately contributed to the emergence of a global youth climate movement” and a “dramatic shift to extra constitutional convention emphasizing climate justice.”\textsuperscript{439}

\textsuperscript{434} O’Brien, “Exploring youth activism on climate change,” p. 5.
\textsuperscript{435} O’Brien, “Exploring youth activism on climate change,” p. 2.
\textsuperscript{436} O’Brien, “Exploring youth activism on climate change,” p. 2.
\textsuperscript{438} Aunio, “Mobilizing the Generation Gap.”
\textsuperscript{439} Aunio, “Mobilizing the Generation Gap.” p. 94.
The perception of a disengaged youth, and a misunderstanding of digital organizing, was powerful in obscuring the actions American youth had taken to become change-makers in the climate space. Though scholarship from the 2000s indicates just how contested the issue of youth organizing was, the narrative of an apathetic youth was unfounded in the context of the climate movement. It is necessary to look past these concerns to see that young people were and had been engaging on climate issues, just not in the way that traditional activists were used to.

### 3.3 Energy Action Coalition and the Roots of the Youth Movement

When most people think of youth organizing within the climate movement, they think of thousands of young people gathering in D.C. for the Power Shift convergences to hear from leaders at the time like Van Jones, when he was Obama’s Special Advisor for Green Jobs. But Power Shift was not a stand alone event, rather, it was a training and networking program organized by the Energy Action Coalition, an organization with its own longer history. To understand the youth climate movement of today requires a clearer understanding of the movement’s origins leading up to Power Shift, and the role the Energy Action Coalition played in the formation of an independent youth current of the U.S. climate movement that recognized the distinct positionality of young people in the climate crisis.

In the early 2000s, when youth activism became a prominent part of the U.S. climate movement, it was not through youth-led or founded organizations, but rather through youth participation in already established organizations. For instance, the Sierra Student Coalition, a program founded in the 1990s under the national Sierra Club organization, was particularly active in the youth climate space by the early 2000s. The Sierra Student Coalition was directed by an executive committee made up of young people, and at the time was primarily known for its annual training camp called “Sprog” (Summer Program), which aimed to develop the leaders of the next generation of the environmental and climate movements. Over the course of the early 2000s, though, Sierra Student Coalition also worked to distinguish itself from—as well as be a leader within—the national organization by endeavoring to better center climate justice, including through redesigning the Sierra Student Coalition’s logo into a tree with a fingerprint at its center, representing the connection between human well being and environmental well

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Climate justice organizations were also dedicated to training youth activists. From 2003 to at least 2008, the Environmental Justice and Climate Change Initiative (EJCC) coordinated the Climate Justice Corps, a summer program that paired young people with large climate justice organizations like the Indigenous Environmental Network and NAACP. These early youth climate programs and organizations served primarily to build long-term organizing capacity and develop young leaders within the climate movement, not build a youth movement in itself.

It was therefore well established in the mainstream and justice currents of the movement that youth engagement was needed to sustain the climate movement; yet this youth training on an organization-by-organization basis meant youth activism was relatively fractured. Recognizing that this disjointed approach to youth engagement detracted from the potential strength of the movement, in 2002 Billy Parish dropped out of Yale University to help found the Energy Action Coalition. Three years later, in 2005, the organization was officially launched as a coalition space for youth representatives of the major environmental organizations where together they could face the “enormity of the climate change crisis” by working “towards a common vision.”

At the core of the coalition was a team of seven full-time staff, most of whom were at least five years out of college and older than youth fellows and representatives to the coalition. Around this core was “the coalition” of member organizations, working groups, and the steering committee—which was in some ways the heart of the project—made up of around ten youth representatives from the member groups. Between 2007 and 2008, representatives included young people from the Sierra Student Coalition, Southern Energy Network, Indigenous Environmental Network, and an alum of the Climate Justice Corps from the Environmental

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442 The logo change information was shared with me by Dominique Hazzard, a former member of the Sierra Student Coalition steering committee, who I interviewed. The motivating ideals behind the logo change was supported by other Sierra Student Coalition actions, for instance distributing materials at the Paris Climate Conference with “images of trees made out of fingerprints—commentary on the mark that people have left on the environment.” Skylar, Blake. “COP21’s Climate Generations is a magnet for young environmentalists.” People's World, Dec. 2, 2015.


446 “Who We Are.” Energy Action Coalition. IAWM.

Justice and Climate Change Initiative. By 2008, the Energy Action Coalition was made up of 48 organizations including climate justice-oriented groups like the Black Mesa Water Coalition, Ruckus Society, and Indigenous Environmental Network; labor unions and labor rights organizations like PIRGS and SEIUs; and mainstream environmental organizations like the League of Conservation Voters, National Wildlife Federation, and the Sierra Student Coalition. As signaled by the diversity of organizations represented in the coalition, the Energy Action Coalition represented a moment of genuine coalition-building across currents of the movement that was meant to foster long-term collaboration.

In order to fulfill its purpose of uniting organizations in a common fight for climate solutions—and center the unique position of youth within it—Energy Action Coalition created a series of guiding documents for its work. First, in 2004, the sixteen founding members of the coalition signed a vision statement ahead of its official launch. At the heart of the vision laid out by the founders was a desire to build coalitions and strengthen the “youth clean energy movement in North America” in order to “leverage [member organizations’] collective power and create change for a clean, efficient, just and renewable energy future.” Second, in 2007, after the group had officially launched but before the first Power Shift Convergence, youth representatives endorsed a set of three-year goals. Embodying the “hopes and ideas of the young leaders who represent the partners of Energy Action Coalition”, the goals both foregrounded youth leadership and tied youth activism to the work of more established organizations. Drawing on the original vision statement as a guide, Energy Action Coalition’s three-year goals were to (1) build a diverse coalition, (2) support leadership development for a just energy future, (3) organize for sustainability policies on college campuses, (4) bring in members of “traditionally disenfranchised communities in climate work”, (5) make 2008 the “Climate Election” and get federal policy passed, and (6) push corporations to “empower our generation to build the green economy.” While these goals were more specific than the 2004 vision statement, they did not clarify in great detail what it would mean to achieve these things. Rather

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448 “Steering Committee.” Energy Action Coalition. IAWM.
than fighting for centrally identified sustainability policies or federal policy, these goals indicated a continued focus on building a coalition-based infrastructure and the capacity for a national youth movement.

Following in the tradition of the climate justice movement, in 2008 the Energy Action Coalition released the Youth Statement of Principles on Climate and Energy. The statement opened by identifying the authors as “young Americans”, which immediately foregrounded the principles as specific to the experiences and concerns of American youth. As alluded to in the statement’s title, the principles also immediately zeroed in on energy, but also asserted that to achieve a clean energy future would require “concrete principles to guide [that] work.” In doing so, the Energy Action Coalition authors of this youth statement combined the principled fights central to the climate justice movement with the narrowly-focused energy solutions characteristic of mainstream environmentalism. Uncommon in other principles statements, the document was explicitly targeted at government leaders, with young Americans calling “on [their] leaders” to follow the enumerated principles as “they make decisions that will determine our future.” By framing the principles as ones meant for decision-makers to follow, the Energy Action Coalition representatives revealed that they viewed themselves as separate from decision-making power. Rather than writing a set of principles to specifically guide their own work as the Divestment Student Network and Sunrise Movement would in later iterations of youth principle statements, the youth representatives to the Energy Action Coalition instead wrote the document from the position of an interest group or even frontline community making demands of those in power.

The principles themselves were straightforward and concrete compared to the aspirational principles of the climate justice movement. The five principles for climate policy, as identified by youth representatives to the Energy Action Coalition, were that policies: (1) must be based in science; (2) must create an “ambitious plan” to shift energy, agriculture, and transportation systems away from “dirty energy”; (3) must include a just transition away from dirty energy for climate justice communities; (4) must prioritize total energy reduction rather than alternative fuels; and (5) must practice procedural justice. With regards to the fifth principle, the Energy Action Coalition emphasized that “as the generation that will inherit the impact of the decisions [made] today, young people must be given a particularly important seat at the table,” which

positioned young people as stakeholders in the climate crisis in a way they hadn’t been before.\textsuperscript{454}

Incorporating principles rooted in both technical understandings of climate change and in justice, the Youth Statement of Principles on Climate and Energy captured the synergies produced through the collaboration of young people from both climate justice and traditional environmental organizations. When taken alone, the principles foreground scientific objectives in fighting climate change, but the Energy Action Coalition included within the statement an affirmation of key documents from the climate justice movement, including the Jemez Principles for Democratic Organizing, the Bali Climate Justice Principles, and the NAACP’s Ten Principles for Just U.S. Climate Policy.\textsuperscript{455} This not only signaled the lasting resonance of climate justice ideals within the U.S. climate movement, but also showed deference to the voices of climate justice leaders. Rather than rewriting climate justice principles in their own words, youth representatives of the Energy Action Coalition chose to amplify the statements central to the climate justice movement. In doing so, youth activists also made an early effort to link scientific/technological fixes with social justice considerations.

Coordinating climate organizations through their youth representatives was only part of the Energy Action Coalition’s work. The coalition was most known for its Power Shift Convergences. The focal point of these convergences was the mass mobilization of thousands of young people to Washington, D.C. During the convergences, young activists networked with each other, strategized over organizing in their own communities, and engaged in educational programming led by leaders in the climate movement and government agencies. The leadership development aspects of the convergences were paired with opportunities for action, namely large marches in D.C. demanding federal climate action, and lobbying members of Congress on Capitol Hill.\textsuperscript{456} Aligned with Energy Action Coalition’s principles, the agenda of the convergences brought together the strategies characteristic of both the mainstream and climate justice currents by combining traditional tactics like lobbying with the localized organizing training and protests of the climate justice movement. Over 5,000 young people attended Power Shift ’07,\textsuperscript{457} the inaugural convergence. In reflections on the event, attendees and organizers

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{454} Youth Statement of Principles on Climate and Energy. Energy Action Coalition. IAWM.
  \item \textsuperscript{455} Youth Statement of Principles on Climate and Energy. Energy Action Coalition. IAWM.
  \item \textsuperscript{456} Power Shift 2007. Power Shift. IAWM: Apr. 6, 2008.
  \item \textsuperscript{457} Harper, Matt. “Youth Leaders Shift Attention to Environment at Power Shift Summit in D.C.” MTV, Nov. 6, 2007.
\end{itemize}
spoke highly of the events’ optimism and idealism and the importance of the convergences in helping to build a youth climate movement infrastructure.  

Power Shift ‘09, Energy Action Coalition’s second major mobilization, was also its most significant in terms of scale and public attention. Held the year after President Obama was elected, more than 10,000 young people came to the convergence and met with over 360 congressional offices. Power Shift ‘09 mostly stuck to the blueprint of Power Shift ‘07. A notable exception was that young activists sought to distinguish themselves from traditional environmental organizations like the Natural Resources Defense Council by making it clear that they would rather protest and pressure politicians than come to the table for water-downed climate legislation. Like in 2007, thousands of young activists mobilized in the streets of D.C., but this time, their protest garnered significantly more media and public attention. Following the protest, Obama aides “scrambled to invite Power Shift organizers to a meeting in the West Wing.” In that meeting, young Power Shift representatives reportedly challenged Obama to his face on what they viewed as his weak position on climate. Obama, in turn, encouraged the activists to continue to place pressure on both the White House and legislature. Some observers of the event considered the mobilization and the meeting to be a turning point in the movement—shifting the drivers of change from scientists and policy insiders to a “broad-based citizens’ movement” led by young climate justice organizers.

To understand why Power Shift activists were so frustrated, it is helpful to remember the promise and the failure of what became known as the Waxman-Markey bill. Commonly known by the names of the Representatives who sponsored the bill, the American Clean Energy and

459 Young organizers campaigned for Obama through an Energy Action Coalition program called Power Vote 2008, though it is unclear what effect, if any, the initiative had on the outcome. At Brown University, for instance, the pledge goal was to recruit 2,000 voters. Sheppard, Kate. “Power Vote plans to mobilize 1 million young adults to vote on climate change.” Grist, Sep. 12, 2008; Yang, Unikora. “Power Vote works to build membership.” The Brown Daily Herald, Oct. 14, 2008.
Security Act was introduced in the House in May 2009, and passed by the House in June.\textsuperscript{465} The bill included an aggressive renewable electricity standard, emissions cuts, and a cap-and-trade emissions permitting system. Climate activists were originally hopeful about the bill’s potential to fulfill the Obama campaign’s promise to make climate change a key issue of his presidency. While the bill passed the House, the Senate was the greater challenge. In 2009, a surprising coalition formed between Democrats John Kerry and Joe Lieberman, and Republican Lindsey Graham. Together, by April 2010 they had drummed up sixty votes for the climate bill in the Senate, as well as knit together support from both environmentalists and industry—“no previous climate-change legislation had come so far.”\textsuperscript{466} But the political dealmaking substantially weakened the bill. By 2010, the broad support for passing Waxman-Markey had fractured. The Obama administration became wary of the deals that were being cut. Then, several public mishandlings of the legislation by White House and Democratic Senate leadership led Senator Graham to leave the coalition, effectively ending any chance of the bill being successful. Ultimately, the bill was never brought to the floor of the Senate.\textsuperscript{467} Throughout the process, environmentalists criticized the Obama administration for not pushing harder for climate action earlier in his presidency, and for taking a hands-off approach to the Waxman-Markey debate.\textsuperscript{468} While the White House’s approach may have contributed to the legislation’s demise, other environmental leaders like former Vice President Al Gore conceded that despite the initial support of Senator Graham, Republican opposition was strong, the nation’s economy was in a bad position, and special interest groups had muddied the messaging and substance of the bill.\textsuperscript{469}

Notably, some of the strongest opposition to a cap-and-trade system, which Waxman-Markey would have established, came from organizations within the climate justice current of the movement. Ahead of Copenhagen in 2009, the same year Waxman-Markey was introduced, the Indigenous Environmental Network took a strong stance against market-based

and carbon offset solutions at the international level. In 2010, the Rising Tide Network (which had coordinated the first international Climate Justice Summit) created a booklet, called Hoodwinked in the Hothouse, that made the case against “false solutions” like carbon markets.

At the domestic level, the Climate Justice Alliance and Indigenous Environmental Network criticized the reliance on cap-and-trade policies in the early 2010s, including Waxman-Markey and California’s 2014 cap-and-trade bill, which reportedly increased pollution in frontline communities. The battle over Waxman-Markey, and the tensions within the movement it created, would have been at the front of the minds of Power Shift organizers and the leaders of the environmental organizations they were a part of during the 2009 and 2011 Power Shift convergences, contributing to the frustrations demonstrated through their protests and meeting with Obama. Without a unified approach to climate solutions, organizations within the broader climate movement found themselves, at times, in tension with each other.

By Power Shift ’11—Energy Action Coalition’s third and last significant youth mobilization—the group had entered a period of decline. For its third convergence, Energy Action Coalition changed its tactics by intentionally working to recruit 10,000 youth leaders, and branding the convergence as a comprehensive bootcamp-style program. The convergence agenda still featured lectures by top government officials and environmental leaders, a lobby day, and networking in state breakout groups. But it also aimed to prepare attendees to be active in three “critical campaign areas”: (1) catalyzing the clean energy economy; (2) Campus Climate Challenge 2.0 (making campuses clean energy innovators/hubs); and (3) a “Beyond Dirty Energy” campaign. Though Power Shift ’11 drew over 10,000 activists to Washington, D.C.—5,000 of whom protested at the Chamber of Commerce—just as the previous two convergences had, the event did not generate nearly as much media coverage, and did not result in any special meetings with the President.

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476 Pinsky, David. “Power Shift 2011 was full of (direct) action.” Greenpeace, Apr. 21, 2011.
The Energy Action Coalition—now called the Power Shift Network—remains active today, though not nearly to the same degree of scale or influence. Part of this decline may be in part due to the coalition’s decision to retreat from massive gatherings in Washington, D.C. Power Shift 2013 was held in Pittsburgh (where 7,000 attended), and Power Shift 2016—the most recent—was organized in four regional locations. It is possible the absence of a clear motivating goal for the organization, outside of youth networking and training, contributed to its inability to create sustained attention to the group’s work. While Energy Action Coalition attempted to shift towards a campaign-based strategy in Power Shift ‘11, none of its campaigns had the clarity of fossil fuel divestment, which was popularized around the same time by the newly formed 350.org. In retrospect, at the same moment that Power Shift sputtered, 350.org was just getting started, and may have sucked some of the momentum away from Power Shift.

The Energy Action Coalition’s decline was not all of its own making. At the time, another major player in the youth climate movement emerged: 350.org. Sandwiched between Power Shift ’07 and ’09, in 2008 one of the first major steps in the formation of a youth climate current, separate from its attachments to the organizations and leaders of the mainstream and justice currents, was taken by a group of recent Middlebury College graduates. Together with author-turned-activist Bill McKibben, the Middlebury graduates organized Step It Up 2007, a campaign that sparked over 2,000 rallies across every U.S. state. Inspired by the campaign's success, the group created a lasting organization out of it and named it 350.org. Unlike the Energy Action Coalition, 350.org was youth-led and independent from any established organization. The founders of 350.org—many of whom participated in or helped organize the Power Shift convergences and the Campus Climate Challenge—considered themselves to have been born out of the “early wave of the youth climate movement.” Yet while 350.org was founded by young activists, it was not intentionally focused on building a youth climate

movement. Instead it sought to make the number “350”—referring to what scientists determined was the safe concentration of carbon in the atmosphere—unavoidable by the public and politicians. Additionally, though it was not central to its original messaging, 350’s mission reflected a commitment to climate justice, a norm within the youth climate movement. So, right as the Energy Action Coalition began to decline in 2011, 350.org continued to ascend to a position of influence in the U.S. climate movement, in part by becoming deeply involved in the Keystone XL pipeline protests, the 2014 People’s Climate March, and the initiation of a youth fossil fuel divestment movement in 2012.

Though the Energy Action Coalition and 350.org were intentional about the inclusion of, and the building of coalition with, climate justice leaders, they were still implicated in difficult conversations about justice in the movement. Both the Energy Action Coalition and Step It Up (350’s precursor) were founding members of the 2007 1Sky Initiative, “a project that [included] the comprehensive science-based priorities necessary to overcome the crisis we face and realize the immense opportunities of our time.” 1Sky’s three priorities were: (1) Green Jobs Now—creating 5 million green jobs by 2015; (2) cutting carbon emissions by 80% by 2050; and (3) No New Coal—a moratorium on new coal-fired power plants. 1Sky, as a project, was aligned with the vision and youth principles statements of the Energy Action Coalition, and helped make the more nebulous ideals of the Energy Action Coalition into concrete objectives. Additionally, 1Sky can be understood as a bigger picture attempt to answer the questions posed in The Death of Environmentalism, the book that sparked a reckoning in the mainstream climate movement over its narrow, technocratic focus. Though 1Sky never achieved significant momentum in the climate movement, its objectives attempted to resolve concerns about jobs

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482 “Our Mission.” 350.org. IAWM.


and solutions to the climate crisis.

Yet, despite its attempt to answer the call to broaden the scope of the movement, 1Sky provoked a moment of tension between the larger movement and its climate justice current. In 2010, 1Sky wrote an “open letter to all people and organizations working to combat global warming” that essentially called on environmental activists to ask the “tough questions” about why they had not achieved success at the federal level. In asking these tough questions, 1Sky encouraged the movement to “redouble [its] investment in grassroots movement building”; make a stronger public case for change; talk to Americans about a transition to a green economy; build power by negotiating from a position of power; fight corporate power in politics; and be more intentional about addressing the international aspects of the crisis.486 A month later, a coalition of climate justice organizations—including the Indigenous Environmental Network, Grassroots Global Justice, and Movement Generation—responded with an “open letter to 1Sky from the grassroots.” Though the letter expressed appreciation that 1Sky was asking questions of the movement, it also emphatically outlined the ways in which climate justice organizations had already been doing the work that 1Sky demanded in its letter, from leading with the grassroots to international solidarity.487 Though this moment did not receive much attention outside of the internal politics of the climate movement, it revealed the ongoing contradictions and tensions between the mainstream and climate justice currents, and the ongoing need to intentionally recognize the work frontline organizers had been doing all along.

By the end of the early 2010s, it was groups like 350.org that carried the torch for the U.S. climate movement and the still budding youth climate movement. But it was the earlier work of the Energy Action Coalition and its member organizations in the 2000s that carved out a space for youth activists in the broader movement. Utilizing principles, convergences, and organizer training, the Energy Action Coalition brought together and empowered young people, giving shape to the unique position of young people in the climate crisis. 350.org importantly broke out of the coalition’s organization structure, which had constrained youth organizing within the boundaries of existing organizations and limited moments of convergence. In spite of its limitations, Power Shift laid the foundations for the youth climate movement and prepared

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young people to take on new initiatives like 350.org and the divestment movement to come. After Power Shift ’11, and after the optimistic Waxman-Markey bubble popped, climate activists scrambled to figure out what came next. Disenchanted with political action, especially at the federal level, young activists soon turned toward institutional reform closer to home.

3.4 Origins of the Divestment Movement

Despite a surge in mobilization actions from the mainstream, climate justice, and youth currents of the climate movement in the 2000s, by the early 2010s climate activists had faced a string of domestic and international disappointments. When President Obama was elected in 2008, and on the heels of Power Shift 2007 and 2009, it seemed the federal government might finally be on the precipice of passing comprehensive climate policy. Yet it was not to be. Internationally, the 2009 Copenhagen Conference did not result in the level of emissions commitments that had been hoped for. Then, in 2010, the Waxman-Markey climate bill failed in the Senate, and the Obama administration retreated from pushing for climate legislation.\textsuperscript{488} Prospects for federal and international action seemed increasingly grim. Leaders in the youth climate movement—and older supporters like Bill McKibben—were forced to reevaluate the direction of the movement.\textsuperscript{489}

In the mid-2000s, the U.S. youth climate movement pivoted resources away from major mobilizations to a new kind of organizing strategy: fossil fuel divestment. No longer was the central aim of the movement to gather as many thousands of students as possible in Washington, D.C. to pressure Obama on climate. Instead, students were encouraged to stay local and focus on their own communities. Before the divestment movement picked up steam, students often engaged in organizing efforts like Mountain Justice or Beyond Coal. These campaigns often involved college students moving to communities they had little to no ties in, which led to criticism regarding young people organizing in communities they did not know and undermining

\textsuperscript{488} Reilly. “7 years later, failed Waxman-Markey bill still makes waves.”
community organizing and long-term coalition building.\textsuperscript{490} Divestment, compared to those campaigns, was a dramatically different organizing strategy for young activists at the time. Though still united under the banner of a national movement, students were encouraged to engage deeply in their own communities and leverage their own positionality to create change in places they already had power.

Launched by 350.org in 2012, the “Fossil Free” initiative was at the forefront of the divestment movement, supporting student-led campaigns for college and university fossil fuel divestment.\textsuperscript{491} Framing climate change as a “clear and present danger” and positioning the fossil fuel industry as the “clear” culprit, Fossil Free called on students to join in a global movement to “challenge the industry on [their] campus or on the ground in [their] community.”\textsuperscript{492} In the group’s training materials, Fossil Free identified the divestment movement as a “new chapter” of the climate movement, using a “new strategy” that drew upon the lessons of the divest from South Africa apartheid movement in the 1980s.\textsuperscript{493} Turning away from federal politics and focusing primarily on college campuses, organizers believed that they had found a new route to climate action by taking on fossil fuel companies, which were framed as the main climate antagonists.

As Fossil Free’s campaign took off in its first year, the movement partially consolidated under the Divestment Student Network. The network was launched in February 2013 by a set of youth activists who had participated in 350.org’s “Fossil Free Fellowship” summer program.\textsuperscript{494} For its first major event, the Divestment Student Network hosted nearly 200 students from colleges across the country at Swarthmore College for the Power Up! Divest Fossil Fuels convergence.\textsuperscript{495} The student-organized convergence brought together student campaigns to share

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their progress and prepare for upcoming escalations and direct action, which was new for the movement. Beyond providing a centralized hub for student campaigns, the Divestment Student Network also contributed a set of principles to guide the movement, which were first articulated as the Convergence Organizing Principles in 2013. Though organizers acknowledged the support provided by large environmental non-profits, they also explicitly centered student leadership by affirming the convergence as a space created “for students by students.” Organizers also foregrounded ideas of climate justice by emphasizing the need for both anti-oppression and environmental/economic frameworks, recognizing divestment as only one “tool in the toolbox.”

In 2014, the Divestment Student Network published a broader set of movement principles that expanded upon the Convergence Organizing Principles. These principles provide further insight both into how young activists framed climate change and into the evolving role they saw themselves as playing in the movement. Justice is a core theme in the principles. Divestment Student Network activists emphatically acknowledged that (1) those who have contributed the least to climate change are most affected by it; (2) struggles for racial justice and over student debt are linked to the same systemic causes as the climate crisis; and (3) it was important to build alliances with frontline communities. The principles also more clearly articulated the position of students in the climate crisis and movement, including (1) that universities were increasingly under the control of corporate interests, and therefore not fulfilling their mission to act in the interest of students; (2) that as young people, students will “inherit the consequences of a poorly managed environment and economy”; and (3) that students must build relationships with each other, develop leadership, and increase their collective power. Notably missing from these principles are ideas related to scientific and technological climate solutions, which young people who participated in Power Shift had emphasized in their 2008 Youth Statement of Principles on Climate and Energy. Though there is no evidence of institutional or organizational support from climate justice organizations like the Indigenous Environmental Network, divestment

496 “About the Convergence.” Divestment Student Network. IAWM.
497 “About the Convergence.” Divestment Student Network. IAWM.
498 “About the Convergence.” Divestment Student Network. IAWM.
501 “About.” Divestment Student Network.
502 Youth Statement of Principles on Climate and Energy. Energy Action Coalition. IAWM.
organizers clearly saw themselves as aligned with the fight for climate justice, focusing on issues of power and procedural justice rather than technocratic policy fixes like cap-and-trade.

Divestment also became one of the primary collaborative campaigns for other youth-led organizations at that time. While Fossil Free and the Divestment Student Network originated from 350.org, the divestment movement was a collaborative effort that brought together the Energy Action Coalition and the Sierra Student Coalition, among others. Both the Energy Action Coalition and Sierra Student Coalition were also antecedents to Fossil Free, and offer windows into where the energy behind fossil fuel divestment may have originated within the youth movement. During Power Shift ‘09, three years before Fossil Free launched, Energy Action Coalition organizers had already begun to frame the fossil fuel industry as a key target for campus organizing and endowment action. On the conference agenda, panel topics included the “No Coal Movement,” greening the campus, organizing student communities, and endowment action—though the word “divestment” is never used. At the same time, the Sierra Student Coalition had taken on campus organizing as an important strategy as well. In 2009, the Sierra Student Coalition launched the Campuses Beyond Coal Campaign—the youth segment of the Sierra Club’s national Beyond Coal Campaign—which supported students in pushing their colleges to retire coal power on campus. After seeing major victories, most notably the retirement of a coal power plant at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, the Sierra Student Coalition joined the national student effort for full fossil fuel divestment in 2011. Divestment was both an important connector and a powerful organizing strategy to catalyze student activism across the country, bringing together the work of many leading organizations within the youth current of the climate movement on an issue that was framed first and foremost as a climate justice one.

504 “Panel Topics.” Power Shift. IAWM.
3.5 The Divestment Movement

Why, though, did divestment become such a central organizing vehicle in the early 2010s? One answer is that more so than just uniting different parts of the youth movement, divestment was a strategic way to galvanize collective youth action. By encouraging students to focus on the administrations and student communities of their home institutions, divestment provided activists with clear demands for clear targets, rather than mobilization goals opposing the more nebulous entities of the federal government or fossil fuel industry head-on. Additionally, divestment campaigns did not require students to go to other communities to make a difference (where they at times undermined rather than supported ongoing environmental work), but rather equipped them with the tools and objectives to make change at home.

Divestment was also a strategic adaptation to the landscape of climate politics at the time. Indeed, the movement emerged in part out of a growing recognition among young people that climate policy had stalled over the years, and that “more science [had] not led directly to the implementation of effective policy.” The moment, for young people, seemed to require new avenues of organizing. Additionally, the divestment movement was designed to be scalable. Endowment action in the form of divestment provided a model that could be readily transported to campuses across the country, even without direct top-down management (though the materials were distributed from a centralized source), and eventually replicated at universities and non-educational institutions alike around the world. In this way, the campaign was able to create many different points of entry for youth anywhere to get involved, though the campaign was also limited in that it was restricted to youth who were college students at schools with endowments. Where, in the 1990s, groups like the national Sierra Club struggled to identify a roadmap to address the climate problem and energize grassroots action, and where the climate justice movement was centered on addressing the unique circumstances of local communities, Fossil Free and the Divestment Student Network were able to create a set of training and planning materials for campus divestment that could be applied anywhere.

510 Baraka. “Divestment.”
Student organizing for divestment at Wellesley College offers a representative example of the trajectory most college campaigns took at this time. In 2013, a student who had been highly involved in national environmental organizations, including Power Shift, Greenpeace, and Sierra Club’s Beyond Coal campaign, started “Fossil Free Wellesley” (FFW) under the umbrella of the national Fossil Free campaign, and subsequently joined the Divestment Student Network.511

Drawn from the suggested demands of the national campaign,512 and then adapted to Wellesley’s specific context, Fossil Free Wellesley organizers called for (1) the immediate freeze of new investments in fossil fuels, (2) the divestment of all direct holdings in the 200 largest publicly traded fossil fuel companies within two years, and (3) an annual review of the impact of divestment by a committee of campus stakeholders, including students.513

Similarly, many of Fossil Free Wellesley’s tactics and escalations were consistent with the materials provided by the national group.514 After collecting signatures on a petition in early 2013, Fossil Free Wellesley organized a rally in May during which over 30 students marched to the administrative offices with banners bearing the iconography of Fossil Free. There, they delivered their petition and shared their personal stories, asking the college president to grant them a meeting with the Board of Trustees in the fall.515 Over the summer, Fossil Free Wellesley learned that the meeting had been granted, and accordingly they began to escalate the issue ahead of the meeting. In one action, Fossil Free Wellesley organizers and supporters held a “die-in” outside of the campus center, where students laid down on the walkway wearing cardboard signs that declared their “causes of death” as water contamination, food security, asthma, flooding, and other health-related consequences of climate change.516 Reportedly, at the meeting with the

512 In an interview with Fossil Free Wellesley Founder Ace Wang, I was provided with access to a number of archived Fossil Free Wellesley documents that evidenced the ways that Fossil Free Wellesley’s demands drew on national materials and collaborations with other Fossil Free campaigns, including Fossil Free Minnesota. Drew from the national materials but every campus had a different set of demands “Outline for Presentation to the Board of Trustees.” Fossil Free Wellesley, 2013. Accessed March 2021; “Concerns and Rebuttals.” Fossil Free Minnesota, Oct. 22, 2013. Accessed March 2021.
trustees, there was agreement that climate change was a pressing issue, but uncertainty about the effectiveness of divestment; the trustees agreed to create a working group to analyze Fossil Free Wellesley’s proposal before the full board voted on it. As with other campaigns across the country, once members of Fossil Free Wellesley had met with the trustee committee, there was not much left to do besides continue to engage the campus community while waiting for the Board’s decision.

Organizing the campus community, like Fossil Free Wellesley did at Wellesley, was only one component of divestment, though. The other component, convincing decision-makers to adopt the policy, was often more challenging. Convincing administrators and trustees to divest was in part difficult because it was not entirely clear what role divestment had to play in the climate movement. Despite the replicability of fossil fuel divestment campaigns, there was no obvious rationale for why divestment was a critical climate action. Examining the arguments made by a variety of campus campaigns around the world, one scholar narrowed down the multitude of rationales to three broad ideas: (1) divestment as in the financial self-interest of the institution; (2) divestment as avoiding complicity in the harm caused by climate change and extractive industries; and (3) divestment as a symbolic action that cumulatively would exert meaningful influence to help end the fossil fuel industry.

Over the course of their campaign, Fossil Free Wellesley employed all three of these rationales. Before meeting with trustees in fall 2013, organizers submitted A Student Proposal for Fossil Fuel Divestiture to the Board of Trustees Committee and College President Kim Bottomly. In the proposal, organizers made the case for divestment using these three intertwined arguments. First, they argued that divestment was actually fiscally responsible, because fossil fuel companies had not accounted for the true limits of the market, and likely

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520 In an interview with Fossil Free Wellesley Founder Ace Wang, I was provided with a drafted op-ed that displayed these three intertwined arguments. “On the wrong side of history: Wellesley’s myopic decision not to divest from fossil fuels.” Fossil Free Wellesley. Accessed March 2021. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1LJJrmbOFcpnL--z7aG5fKa9rOvO70fyrxWn6w1-BDg/edit.
would not be able to burn all of their reserves. Second, they implored that divestment was the morally correct action, would hold fossil fuel companies accountable in ways other actions could not, and would give Wellesley the opportunity to “align its financial decisions with its stated values” by preventing further climate- and extraction-related injustices. Third, they suggested that divestment was a strategic decision that, when combined with the hundreds of other active divestment campaigns, could have a real political and even economic impact, while also importantly engaging students in the climate justice conversation.

College administrators and scholars alike were not convinced by the mixture of financial and moral rationales. Some institutions observed that divestment may be counterproductive to “real” climate action by weakening the influence universities have on the fossil fuel industry and diminishing the funds available to enact other climate solutions such as renewable energy. An editorial in *Nature* entirely dismissed the movement as an awareness-raising effort that would only serve to polarize the issue, placing blame on the fossil fuel industry without bolstering the scientific justification for climate policy. Responding to the *Nature* editorial, a Divestment Student Network staffer wrote an article arguing that raising awareness was one purpose of the movement, but that there were also other purposes that included “establishing climate change as a popular moral issue, establishing new investment norms, and politically marginalizing business models that are dangerous.” The questions these tensions raised were difficult for student organizers to answer—was divestment a primarily financial or moral action? If it wasn’t meant to materially hurt the fossil fuel industry, then why should colleges engage in an action that would materially harm themselves? Or were other options, like carbon reduction, more beneficial?

Conversations about these complexities happened throughout the country, including on Wellesley’s campus. While waiting for the Board’s decision on divestment, Wellesley’s Sustainability Advisory Committee hosted a panel to bring the many divergent perspectives on divestment into open conversation with each other, and with the college community. Fossil Free

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527 Franta. “Fossil Fuel Divestment is Exposing Confusion on Climate (And That’s a Good Thing).”
Wellesley representative Meredith Wade opened the discussion by placing Fossil Free Wellesley in the context of the broader movement, describing Fossil Free Wellesley as one of nearly 500 divestment campaigns, and explaining how the group collaborated with other New England area campaigns through the Divestment Student Network. Similarly, Wellesley’s Chief Investment Officer, Deborah Kuenstner, placed the Fossil Free Wellesley campaign within the history of past divestment campaigns at Wellesley. In the case of South Africa, she explained that the College eventually divested from selective companies, while in the case of Big Tobacco the Board decided to use shareholder action to pressure for change. Finally, she firmly stated that meeting Fossil Free Wellesley’s demands would be financially costly to the College. Rounding out the conversation were professors of Political Science and Philosophy, who provided perspectives framing the issue in terms of power and ethics; and Roger Pratt, CEO of GreenU Consulting, who gave a birds-eye view of climate options available to colleges, including carbon reduction measures and infrastructure improvements.

Though a remarkably respectful conversation, the tensions between the various perspectives, especially between Fossil Free Wellesley and the investment office, were palpable. At one point, a question from the audience brought the clearest point of tension into the open: if there was no financial hit to the endowment, would there still be administrative resistance to divestment? Chief Investment Officer Kuenstner said it would be a different conversation, one about how fossil fuel divestment might open the door to similar requests on other social issues. Wade responded that even not acting made a political and social statement, eliciting supportive snaps from the audience. On the one hand, the panel revealed just how contentious and complex conversations about endowment action were on college campuses, but on the other, it showed how effective these campaigns were at bringing more people, especially young people, into the climate conversation. By the end of the panel, of the 71 respondents to the pre- and post-panel

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surveys, the percent of attendees that believed environmental concerns should be weighed heavily in endowment management jumped from 18% to 30%.\textsuperscript{532} In their proposal, Fossil Free Wellesley identified engaging the community as a goal of the campaign—this panel supports that, at the very least, they succeeded in doing that.

In March 2014, Wellesley College’s president announced that the College would not divest the endowment from the fossil fuel industry.\textsuperscript{533} Fossil Free Wellesley’s campaign was not unique in this way, either. Reporting by \textit{The Wellesley News} revealed that the announcement did not come as a surprise to Fossil Free Wellesley because they had seen the same negative response at colleges across the country.\textsuperscript{534} According to the president’s statement, the decision was based first and foremost on the financial cost the action would have for the College. Further, the decision was made because the impact on the fossil fuel industry would be negligible—the statement cited the fact that while hundreds of colleges had considered divestment in response to student proposals, only a handful were successful, thus undermining the power of collective action.\textsuperscript{535} Fossil Free Wellesley endeavored to keep attention on the issue, holding a rally immediately after the decision and a bannering event on the anniversary of the Board’s rejection,\textsuperscript{536} but the door for divestment seemed to close. By 2016, the group was inactive.

Fossil Free Wellesley’s demise, like its origin, was replicated in campaigns all over the U.S.\textsuperscript{537} Of the hundreds of campaigns associated with Fossil Free and the Divestment Student Network, few reported successes. Exceptions included Stanford’s commitment to divest from coal in 2014 and the UMass system’s full divestment in 2016.\textsuperscript{538} The national campaign was also successful in generating true grassroots action, with groups outside of the initiative—for instance

\textsuperscript{532} Wellesley College. “Sustainable Choices: Divestment, Reinvestment, Climate.” Min. 39:42, 1:23:00.


\textsuperscript{534} Bary. “College announces it will not divest endowment of fossil fuel stock.”

\textsuperscript{535} Bottomly. “Wellesley’s Board of Trustees has carefully considered proposals of fossil fuel divestment.”


\textsuperscript{537} In 2013 and 2014, the divestment movement gained momentum under the leadership of 350.org and Divestment Student Network. By 2017, these initial campaigns had lost steam, “national support scaled back and many of the original student organizers graduated and moved on, many campus initiatives began to flag.” Since 2017, there have been efforts, like the Better Future Project’s Divest Ed initiative, to revive the movement in a coordinated way. Shemkus, Sarah. “Divest Ed looks to help fill gap in fossil fuel divestment movement.” \textit{Energy News Network}, Feb. 19, 2019.

the Mizzou Energy Action Coalition’s divestment campaign at the University of Missouri in
2016—citing Fossil Free as an inspiration. Divestment also spread outside of the sphere of
higher education; Fossil Free’s efforts reverberated in religious, financial, and philanthropic
institutions around the world. Notably, in 2014, a group of seventeen foundations with nearly $2
billion in assets launched the Divest-Invest Philanthropy initiative, pledging to divest from the
top 200 fossil fuel companies. Still, by the fall of 2018, only 150 institutions of higher
education around the world had made divestment commitments, with fewer than 50 of those
coming from schools in the U.S. Even a large-scale, focused national campaign garnered few
tangible results for the climate movement.

With the slow dissolution of Fossil Free beginning in 2016, another wave of the youth
climate movement came to a close. Youth activism had reached new heights in the 2010s,
creating both a space and an infrastructure for a national youth climate movement. With
divestment stalled, and with the election of President Trump, many of the most promising routes
tangible climate action seemed blocked by the end of 2016. Though divestment is certainly not
where the story of the youth climate movement ends, it is critical to understanding the creation of
a generation of climate leaders and activists, and of a model for coordinated youth organizing.
The divestment movement produced real energy behind climate activism on college campuses,
but it was never meant to be the sole solution. It left open the question of what the fossil free
world really looked like, and how it could be achieved.

Over the course of the 2000s, young climate activists proved beyond a doubt that any
concerns about the future of youth organizing were unfounded, at least in the climate context.
While young activists were not interested in insider maneuvering nor reliant on lobbying tactics
like Friedman believed “real” climate work to be in his 2009 column, they were certainly
“playing hardball” in the streets of Washington, D.C., in the office of President Obama, and in
their own higher education communities. Young activists, in their expansive and inclusive
conception of climate justice and climate action, can be thought of even more broadly as a
decade-long response to the existential crisis faced by the mainstream environmental movement

539 Donica, Adrienne. “Mizzou Energy Action Coalition calls for fossil fuel divestment, one signature at a time.” Vox
outlined by *The Death of Environmentalism*. Indeed, youth activists distinguished themselves from the pasts of the other currents of the movement, evolving from a coalition of youth representatives under the Energy Action Coalition to an independent, youth-led movement that, viewed as a whole, was part of a rising tide of youth climate organizing that would remake the climate movement with ideas of climate and social justice at its core.
Conclusion

The Sunrise Story

Examining the mainstream environmental, climate justice, and youth currents of the U.S. climate movement as a whole reveals the complexities and connections within U.S. climate activism, and sets the stage for understanding where the movement is today. This history contextualizes the rise of the Sunrise Movement, a current leader in the movement. Rather than entirely new, Sunrise’s story is in many ways a product of the past—both in the ways Sunrise draws on that history and in the ways it has chosen to diverge from it.

Although the Sunrise Movement seized national attention when young activists occupied Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s office demanding a Green New Deal, Sunrise should be understood as having emerged from the decline of the earlier iterations of the youth climate movement. Sunrise’s website from its original launch in 2017 clearly positioned the upstart group of young people as an extension of the youth movement beyond the divestment movement of the recent past: “We are young people who united by the thousands to stop KXL. We joined with many nations to protect the water at Standing Rock. We weakened Big Oil by divesting billions of dollars. // Now, we’re getting ready for the fight of our lives: to defeat Donald Trump, and the fossil-fuel politicians from both parties who back his agenda.”

This founding statement both acknowledged the youth movement’s past, and made explicit Sunrise’s intention to return to organizing for federal policy, rejecting the early 2010s youth strategy of focusing on local divestment campaigns. From its very founding, Sunrise made clear its connections to the recent history of the youth climate movement, and sought to distinguish itself from it as the group took a new path forward.

Sunrise’s decision to redirect the movement back to national political advocacy coincided with a major turning point in the political landscape: the election of President Donald Trump. When Sunrise’s antecedents—including Power Shift, 350.org, and the Divestment Student Network—first began organizing in the late 2000s, federal-level political conditions were the best they had been for climate legislation in a long time. President Obama had just started his first term, entering office to a Democrat-controlled legislature, and had promised to make climate a priority. By 2010 those conditions had already soured with the failure of the Waxman-Markey

542 “Who We Are.” Sunrise Movement. IAWM.
bill and the reclamation of Republican control of the House in 2011. Responding to the shift in the national political landscape, the early youth movement, led by 350.org’s Fossil Free initiative, pivoted away from national policy to college campuses. It was not until 2017, right as the Trump administration cut off any clear path to federal climate action, that the youth movement returned to federal politics with a vigor under the leadership of Sunrise. Looking back, the twists and turns of the youth movement carry an air of irony—when activists seemed the most likely to succeed, they turned away from federal politics; when the circumstances seemed the most dire, activists felt compelled to take on federal action again. Relatedly, there is a question to be asked: if the first iterations of the youth climate movement were unable to succeed in shifting the national policy conversation when the window appeared open, what was different about Sunrise—or for Sunrise—that allowed it to dramatically change the conversation under much less favorable conditions in 2018?

Part of the difference has less to do with Sunrise itself, and more to do with the ways the landscape of the climate conversation and understanding of the climate issue had changed over the course of the 2010s. In 2015, President Obama actively helped negotiate the Paris Climate Accord, and entered the U.S. into the agreement via executive order despite a lack of support in the U.S. Senate. The Accord, which Obama lauded as a historic turning point in the fight against climate change, committed signatory nations to reducing carbon emissions and keeping the global temperature below a 2 degree Celsius rise from pre-industrial levels. More than signaling that nations were listening to climate science, the agreement renewed the global community’s faith that diplomacy and international negotiation could work. Less than a year later, newly elected President Trump announced that the U.S. would leave the Accord, sparking outrage among environmentalists and the public alike.

The Paris conference was also sandwiched between two IPCC reports in 2014 and 2018.

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544 Sara Blazvecic, a co-founder of the Sunrise Movement, said in an interview that part of the motivation behind Sunrise was noticing the rise of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump and seeing that as “proof that a change in direction was needed.” Relatedly, even though Blazvecic was “proud of [their] divestment work” she worried that “if [they] didn’t evolve, [they] would never build enough power to actually stop climate change.” Matthews, Mark K. et al. “Inside the Sunrise Movement (it didn’t happen by accident).” *E&E News*, Dec. 3, 2018.
that outlined the increasingly grim science about the consequences of climate change. The 2018 report, which was especially concerning, concluded that to achieve the 1.5 degree goal outlined in the Paris Climate Accord, the world would need to reach carbon neutrality by 2050.\textsuperscript{548} A feeling of public and political urgency towards finding climate solutions was increasingly apparent in the late 2010s, which breathed new life into climate activism. Despite the obstruction Trump’s election posed to federal action, Sunrise’s emergence in the climate space came at a time when the need to solve climate change was more intense and salient than at any other point in the 2000s, which may have created better conditions for grassroots movement building.

While Sunrise had the appearance of a spontaneous, even unpredictable, group of young people, the organization was remarkably and, within the youth movement, unprecedentedly well planned.\textsuperscript{549} Before the organization had formally launched, its founding members spent a year working with and following the program of Momentum, a training institute and “movement incubator,” to compose a set of principles, a four-year plan, and a comprehensive strategy.\textsuperscript{550} Where previous youth-led groups had articulated policy-related goals within their principles, such as the Energy Action Coalition’s Youth Statement of Principles on Climate and Energy and the Divestment Student Network’s divestment movement principles, Sunrise split its strategy into three parts: Sunrise Principles, policy positions, and political engagement. The Sunrise Principles, which have remained the same since 2017, focused primarily on guidelines for organizing rather than ideals for climate action, which were characteristic of climate justice principles statements. In fact, the principles had very little to say about climate at all, other than that Sunrise was a movement “to stop climate change and create millions of good-paying jobs in the process.”

Instead, the Sunrise Movement’s principles centered on how the movement should act,
perhaps partially due to the fact that Sunrisers saw themselves as the decision-makers, or at least the people that should be the decision-makers, on climate. Sunrise’s principles therefore included ideas about building power in communities, being inclusive and nonviolent, sharing stories and burdens, and striving to bring “a spirit of positivity and hope” to everything they did.\footnote{Sunrise Principles. \textit{Sunrise Movement}. IAWM: Nov. 17, 2017. \url{https://web.archive.org/web/20171117230150/https://www.sunrisemovement.org/principles}.} Sunrise’s policy principles, as part of its four-year plan, were much more specific, and rooted in the ideas of climate justice and equity. They included demanding (1) a transition to a 100% renewable energy economy that leaves no one behind; (2) an immediate halt on all new fossil fuel projects; and (3) the dissolution of large energy monopolies and a transition to local, democratic control over our energy system.\footnote{“Policy Priorities.” \textit{Sunrise Movement}. IAWM: Nov. 17, 2017. \url{https://web.archive.org/web/20171117230156/https://www.sunrisemovement.org/policy-priorities}.} Finally, as an environmental group almost uniquely focused on political organizing, Sunrise created a set of guidelines for political engagement and endorsements, namely: (1) supporting candidates that represent a significant break from the status quo for their district, no matter their party; (2) supporting politicians who will represent “us,” not the fossil fuel industry—so no candidates that accept fossil fuel money; and (3) no permanent friends, no permanent enemies, only a permanent allegiance to protecting communities.\footnote{“Political Engagement.” \textit{Sunrise Movement}. IAWM: Nov. 17, 2017. \url{https://web.archive.org/web/20171117230153/https://www.sunrisemovement.org/political-engagement}.} Though Sunrise’s principles and policy goals were aspirational, they were noticeably less idealistic than principles created during the climate justice movement by climate justice leaders, or even those created during the early youth movement. Instead, the architects of Sunrise’s principles and policy goals tried to use climate justice principles to inform the articulation of specific, and theoretically more achievable, climate actions.

In order to achieve those goals, Sunrise detailed a four-year plan before its launch, a roadmap distinct from any that had come before it. Designed to follow the political cycle of American elections, the four-year plan spanned the course of Trump’s presidency, and the 2018 midterms marked a key half-way point. Unlike the past currents of the movement, Sunrise’s strategy aimed to unite what they described as both people power and political power.\footnote{The Sunrise Movement Plan. \textit{Sunrise Movement} (2017).} Based on Sunrise’s analysis of the history of the movement, the disappointments climate activists had faced were attributable to having largely one or the other type of power at a time. During Obama’s presidency, activists had political power, but not enough people power to hold their
elected officials accountable. Then, in 2016, when the climate justice movement was at its strongest in terms of pipeline opposition, they still could not win lasting solutions once Trump entered office—“People power without political power was not enough.”

While those two recent examples are the ones Sunrise cited, the theory is applicable to moments further back in the history of the climate movement as well. During the peak of the mainstream environmental climate movement in the 1990s, traditional organizations like the Sierra Club, Environmental Defense Fund, and Natural Resources Defense Council struggled to build a grassroots movement. Mainstream organizations did not focus on what Sunrise calls people power, but rather on leveraging existing congressional relationships and lobbying influence in an attempt to create political power. Then, during the climate justice current of the early 2000s, frontline organizations and activists reacted by channeling energy into creating people power, building coalitions, and growing protest politics, thereby working to pressure politicians from the outside. Without a concerted effort to build political power on the inside, though, it was difficult for the climate justice movement to make lasting change. By the time the youth movement emerged in the late 2000s and early 2010s, young people had begun to see the merit in pursuing both—Power Shift, for instance, made it possible for young people to march through the streets and meet with members of Congress in the span of the same week. Yet it was not until the Sunrise Movement that climate activists realized the potential necessity of building these two types of power in a coordinated way.

Sunrise’s four-year plan, meant specifically to build these two types of power simultaneously, seemed like it might be the answer. In its first year, from June 2017 to June 2018, Sunrise planned to build people power by raising awareness, exposing corrupt politicians and oil executives, and recruiting people to join Sunrise. Notably, by the end of its first year, Sunrise had trained 500 new organizers, launched twenty hubs in six states, publicly confronted oil executives and fossil-fuel-funded politicians, and talked to over 4,700 young people during two national tours. Next, from May to November 2018, Sunrise planned for its “nonviolent army of thousands of young people” to focus on ten politically significant states, act as volunteer

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558 “It’s our 1st birthday!” *Sunrise Movement*. 
organizers for the 2018 midterm election, and demand that all candidates refuse fossil fuel money.\footnote{559} After the midterms, the organization planned to take time to reflect and reevaluate for the second half of the plan leading up to the 2020 presidential election.

In working to make its goals a reality, Sunrise both followed in the footsteps of past climate organizers and forged its own way. Sunrises’s strategy for building people power was in part predicated on building a national movement. Organizations in the climate justice movement had done so primarily by engaging local frontline community efforts in coalition-based work, whereas groups like 350.org and the Divestment Student Network used a more hub-based model of local chapters that could be replicated anywhere. Sunrise based its strategy on the latter, making it possible for anyone anywhere to start a hub as long as they had a friend to join them and a way to receive Sunrise’s materials.\footnote{560} As with the divestment movement, most of these hubs operated independently and worked on bringing the climate conversation to their communities. Where Sunrise differed from the divestment movement was in its “waves of creative moral protest” that brought hubs together in coordinated actions every few months.\footnote{561}

For instance, in fall 2017, the “Climate Legacy Time Capsule Project” created national excitement when Sunrisers held rallies all over the country and asked people to bring items or letters for the future about things they loved that were threatened by climate change.\footnote{562} Beyond bringing together local hubs in national actions, these protests were also opportunities to call out politicians— in the time capsules, for example, organizers included evidence of the harmful legacies politicians like Governors Andrew Cuomo (D-NY) and Charlie Baker (R-MA) were leaving behind.\footnote{563}

While it was clear that Sunrise adapted the models of past organizations to its own goals, early on in Sunrise’s history it was unclear what relationship the group would have with organizations from the other currents of the movement. Early on, collaboration with other groups...
was relatively high. In early 2017, for instance, Sunrisers joined 350.org, Power Shift, Sierra Club, Honor the Earth, and other organizations in Minnesota for a pipeline project protest rally.\textsuperscript{564} That same year, at the international level, Sunrise also helped collect signatures on petitions to protect the Paris Climate Accord, and attended COP23 in Germany as part of the U.S. People’s Delegation alongside 350.org and Indigenous Environmental Network “It Takes Roots” representatives.\textsuperscript{565} While these kinds of collaborations continued over the years, especially at the local hub-level, Sunrise often stands alone on the national stage in its national-level campaigns and portrayal by the media.\textsuperscript{566}

This apparent disconnect is at least in part due to the fact that Sunrise engaged in strategies that set it apart from other groups in the history of the movement, namely: a dedicated, coordinated effort to build political power through electoral organizing. Environmental organizations had not historically made political organizing or elections central to their work beyond endorsing candidates, and even endorsements were only common for a select few groups like the Sierra Club and League of Conservation Voters. Partially, this lack of political activity was related to the political restrictions placed on 501(c)3 non-profits—for instance, even when Energy Action Coalition coordinated Power Vote 2008 and 2010 with the goals of mobilizing hundreds of thousands of young climate voters, the project was explicitly “non-partisan.”\textsuperscript{567} The Sunrise Movement, on the other hand, chose to establish both 501(c)3 and 501(c)4 arms, which provided the organization with much more flexibility to endorse and actively campaign for the candidates it supported. By directing its resources to political organizing, the Sunrise Movement was also able to capitalize on the new audience of Americans receptive to new ideas and messaging due to the alarm caused by the Trump administration.\textsuperscript{568}

So, even though other organizations had dipped into electoral politics before, what

\textsuperscript{564} “Minnesotans Rally and March to ‘Hold the Line’ against proposed Enbridge Tar Sands Pipeline Expansion.” \textit{State News Service}, Sep. 29, 2017.
\textsuperscript{566} “Our Campaigns” \textit{Sunrise Movement}. Accessed May 2021. \url{https://www.sunrisemovement.org/?ms=SunriseMovement-WeAreTheClimateRevolution}.
distinguished Sunrise’s strategy was an embrace of electoral organizing, not just endorsing candidates or turning out the vote. In 2018, ahead of U.S. primary elections, the Sunrise Movement released its inaugural slate of political endorsements. Notably the eleven Congressional endorsements Sunrise made included Ilhan Omar (D-MN), Rashida Tlaib (D-MI), Debb Haaland (D-NM), Ayanna Pressley (D-MA), and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), all of whom were elected to Congress in the 2018 midterms, representing massive gains for the progressive wing of the Democratic Party. As outlined in Sunrise’s four-year plan, the group poured all of its resources and momentum into the 2018 midterms, and the strategy proved to be an effective one.

Sunrise’s midterm strategy, like its organizing strategy, combined traditional electoral organizing with protest politics. Beginning with a week-long bootcamp in early June 2018, 70 Sunrise Semester fellows and 10 trainers started six-months of intensive organizing. Fellows were split up and sent to five “politically significant” states to begin community political organizing using voter registration, canvassing, and direct actions. Full-time organizers and community-based hubs targeted direct actions at politicians and candidates, pressuring them to make commitments like the #NoFossilFuelMoney pledge. In August 2018, the national Sunrise Movement held a “Heat Week” action to turn up the pressure on politicians to sign the #NoFossilFuelMoney pledge and respond to climate action petitions from young activists. Heat Week actions included attempting to sneak into Philadelphia city hall, repeatedly demanding a face-to-face meeting with Rhode Island Governor Gina Raimondo, and protesting in front of New York Governor Cuomo’s Manhattan office (which led to eight arrests). “Bird-dogging”

570 “Sunrise Movement Announces First Round of Endorsed Candidates.” Sunrise Movement; “2018 Endorsements.” IAWM.
571 Matthews. “Inside the Sunrise Movement (it didn’t happen by accident).”
573 The #NoFossilFuelMoney pledged meant that “a candidate’s campaign [would] adopt a policy to not knowingly accept any contributions over $200 from the PACs, executives, or front groups of fossil fuel companies—companies whose primary business is the extraction, processing, distribution, or sale of oil, gas, or coal.” “Tell Our Leaders: Take the No Fossil Fuel Money Pledge.” Sunrise Movement. IAWM: Nov. 29, 2018. https://web.archive.org/web/20181221164203/https://www.sunrisemovement.org/nofossilfuelmoney.
politicians—asking them questions in situations that forced an answer on video—was a particularly useful tactic that had not been used in much climate organizing in the past. Bird-dogging was especially effective at generating media attention. For instance, when a Swarthmore student questioned Marco Rubio on the ethics of accepting hundreds of thousands of dollars from the fossil fuel industry for his campaigns, Rubio responded angrily, which caused a number of Florida papers and even national media companies to pick up the story. Where mainstream environmental organizations favored coordinated press conferences to criticize politicians, and where organizations in the climate justice current focused on large-scale alternative events to juxtapose the positionality of climate justice communities with that of negotiators in official international climate events, the Sunrise Movement preferred to get directly in the thick of politics and media.

By the end of the 2018 midterms, Sunrise had already successfully broken into local and national electoral discussions. In a rapid rise to influence, Sunrisers were able to pressure over 800 political candidates nationwide—at the local, state, and federal levels—to sign the #NoFossilFuelMoney pledge over the course of the election cycle. In November, Sunrisers achieved a sweeping number of electoral victories. Nationally, the movement celebrated that 19 out of the 34 new House Democrats won “without a dime of money from fossil fuel CEOs and lobbyists.” At the local level, Sunrise NYC claimed a “political revolution” in the New York state legislature. Even with those wins, Sunrisers were not yet satisfied—Sunrise Movement Founder Varshini Prakash, looking ahead in the wake of the election, called on Democratic leaders like Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) to “take up [the climate] fight alongside [them], or step aside and make way for new leadership who will.” Whether the Sunrise Movement was satisfied or not, the political victories it achieved in the 2018 midterms were significant in the context of the history of the climate movement that came before it, and showed that the electoral route to climate action had the potential to change the national debate about climate.

575 Levin. “A Politician Called Her ‘Young and Naive.’ Now She’s Striking Back.”
577 “It’s our 1st birthday!” Sunrise Movement.
579 Catania, Nicole and Aracely Jimenez-Hudis, Sunrise NYC. “We were part of a political revolution in New York State.” Sunrise Movement (Medium Blog), Sep. 14, 2018.
The Fight for a Green New Deal

Sunrise founders and organizers had already dedicated years of work to the movement before their Capitol Hill protest a week after the 2018 midterms launched the organization into the public eye to a new degree. Though the Capitol Hill protest may have looked perfectly coordinated, the alliance for a Green New Deal that formed between Sunrise and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) was almost uncharacteristically spontaneous. Sunrise had endorsed and helped campaign for Ocasio-Cortez, who had run on a Green New Deal (though the language did not appear on her website until June 2018), yet Sunrise did not mention the Green New Deal on its website or in its protests prior to the election.

In the days leading up to the Capitol Hill protest, these pieces came together very quickly. Sunrise and Justice Democrats had been planning a Capitol Hill protest even before the election, but not around a Green New Deal. Reportedly, when Ocasio-Cortez learned of the protest, she wanted to give the young activists “something concrete to rally around,” something with specific demands. While it was no surprise for Ocasio-Cortez, who had campaigned heavily on a Green New Deal and climate action, to make climate change the subject of her first actions in the House, the Sunrise protest seems to have accelerated that timeline. Indeed, it was only the day of the protest, November 13th, that her proposal for a Select Committee on a Green New Deal appeared on her campaign website. Though many details about the early crafting of the policy are unknown, reporting by The Atlantic suggests that Ocasio-Cortez had already been in conversations with think tank New Consensus about the legislation, and after a well-timed

584 Schlanger, Zoe. “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s climate plan is the only one that matches scientific consensus on the environment.” Quartz, June 27, 2018; Kaufman, Alexander C. “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Will Be The Leading Democrat on Climate Change.” Huffington Post, June 27, 2018; Aronoff, Kate. “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez on Why She Wants to Abolish ICE and Upend the Democratic Party.” In These Times, June 25, 2018.
585 In Ocasio-Cortez’s midterm victory speech, she said she would fight for 100% renewable energy, medicare for all, and other components that would be in the Green New Deal resolution. But even then she did not use the phrase “Green New Deal.” Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. “General Election Victory Speech.” Nov. 6, 2018. Iowa State University Archives of Women’s Political Communication.
conversation between the Director of New Consensus and Sunrise senior leadership, Sunrise officially signed on to the Green New Deal just days before the protest.\textsuperscript{587} The proposal, hastily finalized in the days after the election with input from Sunrise and Justice Democrats,\textsuperscript{588} included language that would dedicate resources to drafting climate legislation and help the U.S. reach the objectives of the 2018 IPCC report, while simultaneously addressing related social and environmental justice issues.\textsuperscript{589} Soon after the protest, Sunrise’s first mention of the Green New Deal appeared on Sunrise’s own website, along with a call to join “The Green New Deal Day of Action” in late November,\textsuperscript{590} which became the first action in a years-long battle to make the Green New Deal a reality.

Today, the Sunrise Movement and Representative Ocasio-Cortez are the primary names associated with the Green New Deal, but the idea of it—a plan for widespread, infrastructural, New Deal-scale environmental action—was circulating among environmentalists and economists since nearly a decade prior to Ocasio-Cortez’s election. The first significant use of the term is often credited to \textit{New York Times} journalist Thomas Friedman who, in 2007, wrote a column in support of a Green New Deal that would primarily address two things: (1) government regulations on energy use, like increasing fuel efficiency standards and (2) pricing, through the implementation of a carbon tax or cap-and-trade system.\textsuperscript{591} In 2019, Friedman praised the Sunrise Movement and Ocasio-Cortez for their sense of urgency and ambition, but doubled down on the need for a Green New Deal that would bolster innovation and free-market principles, not one that would promote sweeping economic and social changes.\textsuperscript{592} Friedman’s 2007 proposal was a bold one for its time, though, and over the course of the following few years gained a remarkable amount of traction. In 2008, Obama added a “Green New Deal” to his campaign platform, and in 2009 the United Nations drafted a report titled the “Global Green New Deal”—both of which Ocasio-Cortez criticized during her campaign as half-measures.\textsuperscript{593} Other

\textsuperscript{590} “Green New Deal Day of Action.” \textit{Sunrise Movement}. IAWM.
conceptions of a “Green New Deal” were also considered in the 2010s by think tanks like Data for Progress, and still others made their way into the political platforms of various Green Parties in the United Kingdom, Europe, and eventually the U.S. in 2016. Each of these myriad proposals were flavors of the same idea. When the Green New Deal broke into the climate conversation within the U.S. climate movement and Democratic Party in 2018, though, it was the version championed by Sunrise and Ocasio-Cortez that took hold—a proposal that was grounded in the IPCC science, but also in the combined calls for technological innovation and for social justice.

Occupying Speaker Pelosi’s office brought unprecedented public attention to Sunrise, Ocasio-Cortez, and their version of the Green New Deal, but it was only the beginning of Sunrise’s Green New Deal campaign. Sunrise had always planned to wait until the 2018 midterms to re-evaluate the trajectory of its four-year plan, yet it is unlikely that they expected to shift direction so dramatically. By 2019, the primary goal of the movement was to pass a Green New Deal, and its strategy of building both people and political power was re-oriented towards that goal. Whether by design or serendipity, the push for a Green New Deal fit almost seamlessly into Sunrise’s original organizing strategy. In launching its Green New Deal Strategy, Sunrise was able to use language familiar to those already involved in the organization: “In 2019, we’ll build support for the Green New Deal in every corner of the country, and cement it as a litmus test for every politician seeking the Presidency. Then, in 2020, we will unite by the millions to defeat corrupt politicians and the fossil fuel billionaires who aid them, and we’ll elect a President and Congress who will make the Green New Deal law in 2021.” First, they would build people power, then secure political power, but this time for the purpose of passing a specific political vision for climate action.

By choosing to champion the Green New Deal, Sunrise both built upon a framework that climate justice and youth organizers had started to put together in the prior two decades, and also

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took on a solutions-oriented strategy reminiscent of early mainstream environmentalists. Climate justice organizers and youth climate activists had used their principles statements to put forward a vision of climate solutions that acknowledged the scientific reality of the climate crisis, while also advocating for justice-oriented solutions that uplifted and included frontline voices and livelihoods. The Green New Deal as advocated for by Sunrise and Ocasio-Cortez made an enormous leap in connecting the dots that climate justice and youth organizers had been lining up through years of activism through the creation of language for policies that would address climate change by addressing social issues like jobs, infrastructure, and health care at the same time. By working towards this unified and cohesive, if not broad and still undefined, vision that wrapped together all of these different issues into one phrase—the Green New Deal—Sunrisers were also taking a page out of the book of mainstream environmental organizers. Both climate justice and earlier youth organizing had shown that listing demands, no matter how loud you shouted them, did not translate into the creation of policy. Though the Green New Deal was still much closer to a vision than a piece of legislation, it took a step closer in that direction. In some ways, it is possible to see Sunrises’s whole-hearted embrace of the Green New Deal in the same light as the Sierra Club’s embrace of raising car fuel efficiency standards, or even the endowment action campaigns of Fossil Free. Having a clear target, and a clear ask, appeared much more conducive to sustained organizing than having neither.

Yet there is also a large, and critical, difference between the Green New Deal and fuel efficiency standards, the Waxman-Markey bill, or divestment, that has contributed to the policy’s far-flung implications on U.S. climate politics. Pushing for a Green New Deal presented a fundamentally new vision for environmentalism and climate activism than those offered by the mainstream environmental movement, or even the climate justice movement. Ocasio-Cortez, when campaigning on the proposal, discussed the Green New Deal as providing a vision for ambitious environmental and social policy that the Democratic establishment had not had in the past several decades.\[^{599}\] Rather than just talking about carbon-reducing measures, the Green New Deal blew open the climate conversation to make space for an intersectional approach—making the case for a social agenda to fight climate change through healthcare and a jobs guarantee, as well as clean energy.\[^{600}\] Young people (and arguably the public in general) didn’t just want to

\[^{599}\] Aronoff. “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez on Why She Wants to Abolish ICE and Upend the Democratic Party.”
\[^{600}\] Kaufman. “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Will Be The Leading Democrat on Climate Change.”
fight against what they opposed, but fight for a future that they believed in. Not only did this align well with Sunrise’s optimistic messaging, but it also made the group meaningfully different from any campaign or organization that came before it.

At the same time that Sunrise developed its two-year strategy to pass a Green New Deal, by early 2019 the proposal faced early and legislatively devastating setbacks. Representative Ocasio-Cortez’s 2018 proposal for a Select Committee was quickly sidelined by Democratic leadership. Still, in early 2019, Ocasio-Cortez introduced her “Green New Deal Resolution” in the House, which was co-sponsored by Senator Ed Markey (D-MA) in the Senate. In an interview about that original resolution, Ocasio-Cortez detailed the process of writing the resolution, emphasizing that it was an “extremely complicated” one because they were “committed to drafting legislation that was truly bottom up.”

Much of this drafting occurred under the leadership of Rhiana Gunn-Wright, director of New Consensus (the think tank Ocasio-Cortez tasked with the details of a Green New Deal), who has been referred to as the “architect of the Green New Deal.” In part, the expansive legislative agenda imagined by Gunn-Wright and others in the fight for a Green New Deal was also meant to expand the frame of what seemed possible in the U.S., even if it never passed. Gunn-Wright has, in interviews, discussed just how personal crafting the policy has been for her as a Black woman; her view of climate change as a justice and equity problem, and of policy as a way to redistribute power, informed her approach to putting the “meat on the bones” of the Green New Deal.

While the traditional environmental non-profits were consulted, Ocasio-Cortez also explained how outreach work was done to connect with “experts in front-line communities.” Through a relationship with the Climate Justice Alliance, crafters of the Green New Deal were able to bring together “Indigenous perspectives, Black perspectives, [and] Appalachian perspectives.” Just as the substance of the resolution was meant to move away from the more...
mainstream idea that technical, scientific-based policy was the key solution to climate change, so too did the drafting process move away from the belief that policy makers and career environmentalists were the only ones with a valid say. Notably, the Climate Justice Alliance and the Indigenous Environmental Network showed early support for the Green New Deal idea, though they emphasized the need to intentionally and continuously foreground justice for frontline communities and frontline leadership. Mainstream environmental groups like the Natural Resources Defense Council also showed strong initial support for the Green New Deal soon after it was introduced, lauding it as a solution “with social and economic justice at the core.” In the summer of 2019, the Sierra Club even created a program called “Growing the Green New Deal Mobilization” that included lobbying days in Congress and an online training series. Throughout the drafting process, writers of the Green New Deal endeavored to follow the basic principles of climate justice by actively seeking out the voices of the most impacted communities and opportunities for the creation of a broad coalition of support.

Though the climate movement seemed relatively united around the proposal, Sunrise recognized the need for inside political allies as well. Leading up to both the introduction of the Green New Deal Resolution and the vote on it, Sunrisers worked hard through traditional outreach campaigns and bird-dogging tactics to get Representatives and Senators on board. When introduced in the House, the Green New Deal Resolution had 67 original co-sponsors and had 91 by the end of March; in the Senate there were 11 original co-sponsors and 12 by the end of March. Growing Congressional support can in part be credited to the Sunrise Movement. In 2018, organizers held a series of sit-ins in the offices of Democratic leadership—leading to the public support of the movement and a Select Committee on the Green New Deal by Representative Jim McGovern. Once Representative Ocasio-Cortez and Senator

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608 “A Green New Deal Must Be Rooted in a Just Transition for Workers and Communities Most Impacted by Climate Change.” Indigenous Environmental Network.
https://www.sierrachub.org/resist/growing-green-new-deal-mobilization
614 “1000+ youth sit-in, 143 arrested demanding Dem leadership back Green New Deal.” Sunrise Movement
Markey announced the Green New Deal resolution, and especially after Senator Mitch McConnell announced his plan to rush a vote on the resolution, Sunrisers worked to increase the number of cosponsors through a tweeting, letter-writing, and lobbying campaign.\textsuperscript{615} Perhaps in light of this growing support, Senate Republicans, led by Mitch McConnell, pushed for a fast vote on the resolution at the end of March 2019 in an attempt to force Senators to take a public stand and divide Democrats, who at the time remained split on the policy.\textsuperscript{616} Instead of fracturing, though, Democrats decided to collectively vote “present,” leading to a dramatic 0-57 failure of the resolution.\textsuperscript{617}

Still, the idea of the Green New Deal has remained resilient. Throughout spring 2019, Ocasio-Cortez introduced smaller pieces of legislation in Congress to implement the Green New Deal in a piecemeal fashion, but Sunrise organizers had a plan to pass the Green New Deal agenda in 2021. In January 2019 (before the resolution had been voted down), the Sunrise Movement had posted a four-component “Green New Deal Strategy” that outlined how the organization would build people and political power during the 2020 election.\textsuperscript{618} The 2020 presidential election, particularly the Democratic primaries, were an especially important organizing moment for the Sunrise Movement. Sunrise activists worked hard to push the climate conversation to the left, leading twenty out of twenty-five Democratic presidential candidates to support the Green New Deal proposal.\textsuperscript{619} Few other campaigns have gained such political traction so quickly and so publicly.\textsuperscript{620} In early January 2020, the group endorsed Senator Bernie Marantz. “Are We Entering a New Political Era?” (Medium Blog), Dec. 10, 2018.


\textsuperscript{617} Though many Senate Democrats were not comfortable with the resolution, the Democratic Party had a larger political interest in avoiding a high-profile, Republican-forced split over a progressive policy proposal. Zhou, Li and Ella Nilsen. “Senate Democrats broadly shut down Republican trolling on the Green New Deal.” \textit{Vox}, Mar. 26, 2019; Davis. “Senate Blocks Green New Deal, But Climate Change Emerges As Key 2020 Issue.”; Kramer, Ronald C. “The ‘Climate Swerve’: Hope, Resistance, and Climate Justice.” In \textit{Carbon Criminals, Climate Crimes}. Rutgers University Press, 2020.


\textsuperscript{619} Marantz. “Are We Entering a New Political Era?”

\textsuperscript{620} Marantz. “Are We Entering a New Political Era?”
Sanders for the presidency, who eventually lost the primary to Vice President Joe Biden in April. Despite the loss, Sunrise had cemented the position of its movement, of young people, and of the Green New Deal at the climate table—perhaps most clearly and optimistically represented by Biden’s invitation to Representative Ocasio-Cortez and Sunrise Founder Varshini Prakash to join his Climate Change Unity Task Force. After meeting with the committee, Prakash reflected in a statement to supporters that though they were not getting everything they wanted into Biden’s platform, her presence on the Task Force allowed her to push it even farther than it had been before.

Over the course of a decade, climate change became a litmus test for Democratic presidential candidates. Not only that, but the most discussed solution was the Green New Deal—a social justice-based approach to climate change—rather than the predominantly technological or market-based solutions championed in the past. In understanding this history it is possible to see how Sunrise trod on familiar ground—from the deeper roots of the Green New Deal to the use of electoral organizing and lobbying, in combination with the protest politics and hub-based organizing of the climate justice movement and early youth efforts. Nordhaus and Shellenberger, in *The Death of Environmentalism*, reflected on the mainstream environmental movement of the 1990s and exhorted the movement to completely transform its approach to climate change by creating a coalition that included labor and social concerns. Though the authors have continued to diverge from the central beliefs of most climate leaders, it does seem as though they have finally received an answer to their 2005 call for a transformation of environmentalism—it just required a new generation of activists. Embracing the need to think of climate as an issue interconnected with many other social and economic issues, and pushing even farther to include justice issues in the solution as well, the Sunrise Movement has fundamentally reshaped the climate conversation.

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Lessons for the Future

A close examination of the currents of the U.S. climate movement makes it possible to contextualize the Sunrise Movement in the longer history of U.S. climate activism. From the beginning, Sunrise’s strategy reflected a search for the answer to the question: what will it take to win, and what can we do to get there? There is still not a clear answer to that question, despite the tireless efforts and slow progress of climate activists since the 1990s. Even now, as the urgency to solve the problem continues to mount, the U.S. is still not on a clear path to addressing the climate crisis. After studying the past three decades of the U.S. climate movement, I find myself staring bleakly down the long road ahead. Yet engaging with this history has also equipped me with a better understanding of what has worked and what has not. These are the lessons I have for the movement today, based on where it’s already been:

1. The climate movement should gather behind a common, transformative framing of the climate crisis.

   It was clear from the beginning that any hope for building a grassroots movement required an effective way of framing the issue to the public. A primary tension within the U.S. climate movement, particularly between its mainstream and climate justice currents, has been what exactly that framing should be. Believing that the severity of the science was enough of an argument to act in itself, in the 1990s, mainstream groups framed climate change as an issue of science and technology. Climate justice organizers, on the other hand, framed climate change as first and foremost an issue of justice, and went to great lengths to show how climate change could not be reduced to science, carbon emissions, and free market economics. For the climate justice movement, it was imperative that the climate conversation not leave out the reality that those who contributed the least to the problem bore the brunt of its consequences. While the early mainstream climate movement struggled to inspire grassroots support, the climate justice framing of the issue facilitated greater coalition-building and solidarity across communities and stakeholder groups in the U.S. and around the world, and contributed to the galvanization of the movement’s largest mobilizations.

   These two distinct framings of the problem also shaped the divergent solutions each current advocated for. In the 1990s, mainstream environmental organizations framed the problem as a scientific one, which led them to seek out a scientific or technological solution. Groups like the Sierra Club and Natural Resources Defense Council therefore focused much of their
advocacy on passing higher federal fuel economy standards, or market-based solutions like cap-and-trade. Since the scientific framing was relatively narrow, the solutions they championed were similarly narrow. In response, the climate justice movement took an opposite approach—coalitions of frontline communities and justice-orientated organizations wrote statements of principles that imagined what just climate policy entailed, painting a broad picture of what climate solutions should look like, but never coalescing around a specific proposal. Problematically, climate justice organizers also had to devote significant resources to both getting a seat at the table, and preventing actively harmful policies, like the REDD programs the Indigenous Environmental Network opposed at the international level. Framing is important, then, not only to build grassroots momentum, but also for determining what solutions to put that momentum behind.

Within the youth movement, the framing of the climate crisis was less clear. The most consistent point of framing emerged from the Power Shift convergences and the divestment movement that followed: young people were positioned as unique stakeholders in the crisis, since it was young people that would have to live through the problems climate change will create. Otherwise, youth climate organizations like Energy Action Coalition took the climate justice approach of making principles statements and advocating for broad ideals, without making specific policy goals the focal point of their work. The divestment movement, on the other hand, did the opposite and focused narrowly on endowment action. Neither of these approaches succeeded in dramatically shifting the climate conversation, or bringing the movement drastically closer to significant climate action.

The Sunrise Movement diverged from earlier iterations of the youth climate movement by foregrounding framing. Sunrise established justice as the basis for solving climate change, and summed up its objectives in a snappy slogan that made clear the connections between climate and economic issues: “we have a right to good jobs and a livable future.”625 In its first few years, Sunrise fought for this idea but lacked a clear policy goal. This approach, in itself, was effective in shifting climate advocacy towards fighting for a positive vision of the future rather than framing action in terms of what activists were against. By the time Representative Ocasio-Cortez announced the Green New Deal, the proposal already fit well into Sunrise’s

strategy and vision. Using the Green New Deal as the focal point of its organizing, Sunrise was able to turn the climate conversation away from technocratic policy, and solidify climate justice principles at the heart of climate policy. The Green New Deal offered a tangible, if not perfectly defined, way to bring together all of the various iterations of climate framing into one, transformative idea that sought to address climate issues while ensuring a just economic transition—a jobs guarantee, universal healthcare, and enormous investments in green energy and infrastructure.

Going forward, both in strengthening the climate movement and coalescing around climate solutions, intentional consideration of how to frame the issue will be necessary for the movement. As evidenced by the climate justice movement’s ability to galvanize large-scale mobilization, and Sunrise’s success in shifting the political discussion, framing the climate crisis as one that is intimately related with other social crises provides the strongest opportunity for coalition-building and bringing more people and organizations into the climate fight. In the past, organizations within each current of the movement have taken a siloed approach to issue framing and solution finding. Uniting behind a common vision, one that frames climate action in terms of what activists are for rather than against, would create an opportunity to coordinate and expand the climate movement with potential to create change that no current has yet achieved alone.

2. The climate movement should focus on the federal level.

While the climate crisis has international implications, and will require collective global action to address, the U.S. movement’s resources are best placed at the federal level, at least for now. Throughout the movement’s history, mainstream environmental and climate justice organizations alike were plagued by the challenges of organizing across different levels. In the 1990s, mainstream organizers saw the international space as one full of promise for swift, consequential action. Yet each time the international community reached an agreement, however flawed, the U.S. evaded being bound by it. The climate justice movement similarly focused on climate change as an international injustice, but faced difficulties in sustaining a consistent international movement based on local and transnational coalitions. None of these efforts created change to the extent these organizations hoped for.

Youth activists, on the other hand, focused not on the international level, but rather on local action. The Energy Action Coalition, like climate justice organizations, worked to bring
together young activists from organizations and communities around the country to better equip them to create change at home. Fossil Free and the Divestment Student Network encouraged young activists to work more deeply at their own institutions and in their own communities. Sunrise, though, was discouraged by the way local advocacy had stalled by the mid-2010, and turned almost solely to national level policy. Unlike other groups that worked on local, national, and international policy simultaneously, Sunrise focused almost entirely on national level politics and policy. By focusing on national politics, and in part due to the ways Trump’s election changed American political engagement, the Sunrise Movement was able to change the climate conversation at not only the national level, but the local as well.626

Throughout its history, the U.S. climate movement has struggled with the issue of scale presented by the nature of the climate crisis. Organizing at the local, national, and international levels each posed unique challenges and opportunities—when the work at one scale stalled, activists often turned to others that seemed more open. Today, as in the past several decades, faith in Congress to pass meaningful legislation is low, and it may be tempting for activists and organizations to focus on the local or state level. Ultimately, though, if we are going to have any chance at addressing the climate crisis as a country and a global community, there will need to be transformative national policy-making at the national level in the U.S. We are not going to solve the problem without changing the national policy landscape—for that reason, it is necessary for the climate movement to focus on sustaining a coordinated campaign at the national level.

3. The climate movement should work both from the inside and on the outside.
For every current of the movement, it has been difficult to figure out how to work from both the inside and the outside at the same time. Whether activists are a part of the mainstream, climate justice, or youth currents, at the end of the day they are not the decision makers—so the question has always been how to get people on the inside to adopt the solutions activists were fighting for. As the mainstream environmental movement worked early on to build a grassroots movement from the outside, it relied significantly on relationships and lobbying to maneuver towards change from the inside. Rather than protesting in the streets, it was primarily the paid staff of the major organizations in Washington, D.C. attending UN conferences, organizing lobbying days, and testifying before Congress. Climate justice organizers did not have those

same kinds of relationships to work with, and instead chose to use a more outside strategy. Protest politics were therefore embraced by the climate justice current, through actions including coalition summits, rallies and petitions, and large-scale protest events that coincided with large international climate gatherings and conferences. Much of the climate justice movement’s power was derived from working with other marginalized communities and groups in solidarity against oppressive governments and international structures, rather than from insider work. Neither current, though, chose to or was able to use both inside and outside tactics in coordination.

The early youth movement fluctuated between the two extremes of inside tactics and outside pressure. Power Shift, for instance, included both mass protests and mass lobbying days. Divestment, too, often required student activists to work with, or at least come to the table with, administrators, while also engaging peers through demonstrations and rallies. In both of these iterations, young activists did not see themselves as the decision-makers and instead sought out ways to convince or pressure those who were.

Sunrise, on the other hand, moved to explicitly put these two pieces together—people power on the outside, and political power on the inside. What Sunrise did radically differently from other major organizations was engage specifically in electoral politics, and in Democratic primaries in particular, to get their own people on the inside. It is possible to see how the motivation behind this strategy came from a recognition that if over the past three decades the movement had been unsuccessful in getting decision-makers to do the right thing, then maybe it was time to become the decision-makers themselves. Another significant choice Sunrise made was to participate in the Biden Unity Taskforce in order to try to push the conversation closer towards the Green New Deal from the inside, rather than use outsider protest politics after their endorsed candidate lost—though direct action is still a central strategy of the organization.627

For Sunrise to realize its goals, the organization leaned into electoral politics to an extent that previous iterations of the movement had not. Sunrise recognized that in order to pass policy, it would take more than massive public pressure; it would take getting the right people into the

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627 It is also worth noting that, though outside the timeframe studied in this thesis, Sunrise has since received criticism from its own organizers about the pursuit of a strategy that favors “proximity to Biden” rather than solidarity with historically marginalized communities. Relatedly, in September 2020, the founders of the Sunrise Movement published a letter to the organization outlining a plan to step back from their leadership roles in favor of elevating the voices of People of Color and a younger, new generation of leaders from within the Sunrise Movement. O’Keefe, Alex. Twitter post. June 8, 2021. https://twitter.com/_dotgov/status/1402249288818769920?fbclid=IwAR08OMytC8PO4Si4avAUFrIvZkx1gyOM5f WEnuFAlsalPzdN443yXd6EV0g; “Letter from Sunrise Founders, September 2020.” Sept. 2020. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1bt0iRmmChtWu1JKeECyP7eW-gVhr-mOW-5PqBmcB2a/edit.
right places. The story of the Green New Deal makes clear that having allies in power can make all of the difference. In the end, for Sunrise, and for the climate movement, to win, it will take not just clever issue framing or good strategies, but also raw, political power. Before Sunrise, the climate justice movement had known that the climate issue was not just about the climate, but about power and who gets to wield it. That is why many of the principles and demands of the climate justice movement were not limited to climate policy and solutions, but also to Indigenous rights and procedural justice—the ability to be at the table and have a say in the process. What Sunrise’s work has shed light on is the complicated reality that to win on climate will also require an understanding of, and in an ideal world a reshaping of, power in the U.S. Building what Sunrise calls political power may also require the rewriting of the institutions and laws that influence who gets elected, including campaign finance, gerrymandering and redistricting, and voter protection.

4. The climate movement should build deep, long-term coalitions.

Coalition-building is a phrase that is thrown around a lot in organizing circles, often without clear evidence that coalitions are actually being formed. That said, in order to realize the vision articulated in solutions as transformative and far-reaching as the Green New Deal, deep, lasting connections between climate organizations and non-environmental groups alike will be needed. Indeed, the very purpose of framing the climate as a social issue is to broaden the community of people that feel they have a direct stake in making climate solutions possible.

Though various groups have collaborated with each other over the course of the climate movement, particularly within each of the currents, coalition-building was largely missing from the movement until the climate justice current came to the fore of the movement. Since the climate justice movement was motivated by a desire to create collective power between frontline communities and organizations around the world, almost all of its work was based in coalitions. Despite the high degree of coalition work within the climate justice current, as evidenced by the nature of the international summits, principles statements, conferences, and groups like the Climate Justice Alliance, most of the climate justice movement’s coalitions were within the current of the movement rather than across different currents.

Youth organizations also valued coalition building—at least as an aspirational practice—especially with climate justice organizations and frontline communities. In practice,
though, each group engaged in coalition-building to varying extents. The Energy Action Coalition, by bringing together youth representatives of organizations across the mainstream and climate justice currents, did the most coalitional work of any youth organization. The very idea of the group was to try to unite the many different organizations active in the space through youth leadership development and training. While coalition-based organizing was not central to 350.org and the organizations that led the youth divestment movement, groups like 350.org were deeply involved in collaborative efforts with climate justice groups and mainstream groups, including the 2014 People’s Climate March, pipeline protests, and the 1Sky Initiative. All of these collaborative efforts are missing in the rise of the Sunrise Movement, though. Despite the way Sunrise and Justice Democrats worked together to elect Ocasio-Cortez, and the hundreds of organizations that endorsed the Green New Deal, deep coalition-building efforts were missing in Sunrise’s organizing and campaign for the Green New Deal.

Though not the fault of Sunrise activists, a failure of coalitional thinking led to a rocky moment in the drafting of the Green New Deal in the spring of 2019. New Consensus, the think tank that had been charged with working out policy details and briefings for Ocasio-Cortez and other Green New Deal allies, planned to hold an initial meeting on the idea in March 2019. Leaders at the think tank invited over 80 representatives of various stakeholder groups from the legal to environmental fields to participate. Yet due to either an imperfect understanding of the environmental justice organizing ecosystem, or simply a blatant oversight, there were no representatives from key climate justice organizations like the Climate Justice Alliance, nor were there representatives of labor interests like union officials. After the meeting, efforts were made to reach out to those who had originally been left out, but the incident highlights the need for intentional, coalitional work for a policy like the Green New Deal to be successful in its vision of transformation and justice.

In the future, the U.S. climate movement must work towards greater, longer-term coalition-building. Some of the movement’s most effective moments have come in times of convergence. The 2014 People’s Climate March, for instance, was an example of strong coalition work between all three currents of the movement, and helped to create the largest climate mobilization in U.S. history, with a particular eye towards keeping frontline communities and organizations in the spotlight. Perhaps the most consequential example of coalition-building,

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628 Meyer, Robinson. “The Think Tank Struggling to Write the Green New Deal.”
though, is Standing Rock, where groups from the mainstream and youth movements stood behind the leadership of Indigenous leaders and climate justice organizations. In both of these instances, the high-level of coalition-based organizing produced the conditions needed for unprecedented mobilizations and sustained public and political attention on the environmental and climate solutions conversation. Though neither represent significant policy success, they do represent moments where the climate movement had both the most cohesion, energy, and sheer public turnout towards a common, justice-based message on climate. To win on climate, there is a need to return to these strong coalitions, and create a better, sustained coalition infrastructure moving forward. With the initial support for the Green New Deal given by groups from every current of the climate movement, and the opportunity it provides to bring more people and more connections into its framework, there is strong potential for the creation of a broad-based coalition for a Green New Deal.

There are no easy answers to the collective action problems that face the United States, and the world, in responding to the climate crisis. None of the lessons I have drawn from an in-depth study of the three currents in the U.S. movement’s past are radically new. These are issues every organization has struggled with. Each organization and activist, through decades of work, has helped move the movement as a whole closer to success, and through every trial and error, every near success, allowed for present and future activists to better understand what is needed to win. Looking at the history of the movement as a whole, the climate justice movement in the 2000s stands out as the significant turning point in the trajectory of climate activism. Young climate activists, in particular, have continued to elevate the demands for climate justice that emerged from the climate justice current. Social justice has become the undeniable, dominant force behind climate organizing, and must be at the center of the coalition-building and far-reaching policy needed to address the ever-increasing urgency of the climate crisis.
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