

The Future Of The Planet Is In Our Hands—Effective Activism Is Essential



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Building long-term progressive power is key to bringing into force a comprehensive climate change policy

The United States is a global outlier on multiple fronts. It is the only country in the developed world without a universal healthcare system. It ranks number one in firearms per capita and has the second highest firearm homicide rate in the world. The U.S. is also a childcare outlier (developed countries contribute an average of \$14000 on childcare for 2 and under, compared with \$400 in the U.S.) and now a global outlier on abortion rights.

The U.S. is also doing a horrendous job when it comes to climate and the environment. In the 2022 [Environmental Performance Index](#) (EPI), which uses 40 performance indicators and ranks 180 countries “on their national efforts to protect environmental health, enhance ecosystem vitality, and mitigate climate change,” the U.S. is ranked 43rd, behind shining democracies like Bulgaria, Hungary, North Macedonia, and the United Arab Emirates.

Indeed, speaking of the U.S. as a global outlier, the country is also the only major economy in the world without a national climate policy. So, what if it is the biggest carbon emitter in history and the climate crisis represents one of the biggest existential threats facing humanity? In a political system where the interests of the rich and powerful take precedence over the common good, it should not be surprising that the planetary environment is treated as an afterthought. The forces of reaction have no interest in protecting the planet for future generations. West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin may be the villain of the day, the monster of the week, but the perpetual problem in the U.S. is the dark

forces that shape the nation's economic, political, and cultural landscape and have the ability, through support of the likes such as Manchin, to stifle reform even when humanity is close to the edge and the future of this planet is at stake.

So, what can be done to turn the situation around? Surely, climate organizers have been thinking long and hard about how to create and maintain strong momentum on climate change action. Periodic climate protests and acts of civil disobedience may raise public support for climate action, but surely much more is needed in a country like the United States where change comes very slowly, and the views of average citizens have little or no impact on public policy.

Building long-term progressive power is key to bringing into force a comprehensive climate change policy. The Sunrise Movement, probably the primary organizer of climate activism in the U.S., came to the realization of the importance of political power and changed its strategy accordingly. In a recent phone conversation, Sunrise national spokesperson John Paul Mejia told me that the organization now focuses on three pillars of change: (1) People Power, which is essentially engaging and training young people to become organizers and using the collective voice of people to demand climate action; (2) Political Power, which is basically influencing policymaking by endorsing progressive candidates running for office and helping them get elected; and (3) People's Alignment, which is the task of creating a "New Common Sense" in the fight against global warming by promoting the Green New Deal project through the development of strong relationships with labor, climate, and indigenous organizations.

This is an ambitious undertaking on the part of a grassroots youth organization that was created just six years ago. Of course, it's hard to judge how influential the organization has been so far in radically changing public opinion in the U.S. about the need for climate action, and, more specifically, from steering the debate about climate change away from "pathetic incrementalism," in the words of its co-founder Varshini Prakash, to a growing demand for a radical transformation of the existing economic system.

The truth of the matter is that the public in the U.S. continues, amazingly enough, to treat the climate crisis as a rather trivial issue. For instance, in the recently released study of public opinion on major issues by the [Yale University Program on Climate Change Communication](#), out of 29 major issues posed to subjects, "registered voters overall indicated that global warming is the 24th most highly

ranked voting issue.”

One would be hard pressed to identify more depressing news coming out of mainstream America than what is captured in the above-mentioned study. “It is only the most important issue that has ever arisen in human history alongside nuclear weapons,” [Noam Chomsky](#) quipped in a recent interview.

Moreover, ditching incrementalism in favor of an all-or-nothing attitude is hardly common sense, and surely bad politics. When Sunrise Movement labelled last fall’s bipartisanship infrastructure bill the “Exxon Plan,” it may have scored points with some activists, but it is highly doubtful that it made inroads with average voters. Moreover, in a capitalist environment, securing concessions from those that hold the reins of political and economic power is no small matter.

In addition, one has to wonder to what extent engagement with political and ideological issues beyond the climate crisis, such as the Palestinian cause and defunding the police, is helping the cause of making the transition to a post-fossil fuel economy.

Be that as it may, the Sunrise Movement’s new strategic orientation is a major step in the struggle to create a mass movement and alter the balance of political power. Working closely with local hubs and facilitating community-led climate action while offering support at the same time to candidates willing to fight for the Green New Deal in the corridors of power is the mark of an activist organization coming of age.

Climate action has suffered a huge setback after coal baron Joe Manchin’s decision to oppose legislation that could have been a turning point for tackling global warming. As such, the U.S. remains a country without a federal climate policy, but all is not yet lost. To paraphrase Noam Chomsky, human agency is not finished.

The struggle against the forces of reaction continues, and our only hope for a sustainable future lies with organized and effective activism.

Source:

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