



HAL
open science

Youth climate activism in the United States

Mélanie Meunier

► **To cite this version:**

Mélanie Meunier. Youth climate activism in the United States. E-rea - Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone, 2021, 1. "Letters to Swift" / 2. " État d'urgence environnemental : comprendre, agir, représenter ", 18.2, 10.4000/erea.12490 . hal-03690148

HAL Id: hal-03690148

<https://hal.science/hal-03690148>

Submitted on 7 Jun 2022

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



E-rea

Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone

18.2 | 2021

1. "Letters to Swift" / 2. « État d'urgence
environnemental : comprendre, agir, représenter »

Youth climate activism in the United States

Melanie MEUNIER



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/erea/12490>

DOI: 10.4000/erea.12490

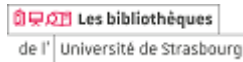
ISBN: ISSN 1638-1718

ISSN: 1638-1718

Publisher

Laboratoire d'Études et de Recherche sur le Monde Anglophone

Brought to you by Université de Strasbourg



Electronic reference

Melanie MEUNIER, "Youth climate activism in the United States", *E-rea* [Online], 18.2 | 2021, Online since 15 June 2021, connection on 21 November 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/erea/12490> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/erea.12490>

This text was automatically generated on 21 November 2021.



E-rea est mis à disposition selon les termes de la licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

Youth climate activism in the United States

Melanie MEUNIER

“The recent attention on climate policy is not because members of the media or political establishment woke up one day. It is a direct result of the active energy and the demand from thousands of young people on the front lines of the crisis.”

Varshini Prakash, Co-founder, Sunrise Movement

- 1 Climate change is often referred to as the defining crisis of the twenty-first century. The international and American scientific communities have published reports that confirm beyond doubt that climate change exists, is accelerating, and will have devastating effects if current rates of greenhouse gas emissions continue. North America being a continent of extreme weather events (Huret & Tourbe), the diverse regions of the United States experience hurricanes, wildfires, droughts, flooding, and peaks of severe heat and cold. Due to climate change, the intensity and frequency of these extreme weather events have increased in recent years (National Centers for Environmental Information). Mounting numbers of Americans have been directly affected (homes and livelihoods lost, communities devastated, etc.), which has raised the salience of the issue. In a 2019 US Conference of Mayors’ survey of 182 cities, 96% of respondents stated that they had experienced the impact of climate change (Durr), and a 2020 Yale Climate Change Communication report found that 51% of respondents think that global warming poses a risk to their community over the next ten years (Leiserowitz et al 17).
- 2 Young Americans take the issue much more seriously than the population as a whole: in a recent nationwide online survey of 1,000 youths aged 18 to 29 years old, 80% of the respondents felt that “global warming is a major threat to human life on earth as we know it” (Barnet et al). Climate change also has a greater impact on young people for many reasons, including physical and mental health. As Judy Wu et al stated in *The*

Lancet, “They are at a crucial point in their physical and psychological development, when enhanced vulnerability to the effects of stress and everyday anxiety elevate their risk of developing depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders” (Wu et al 2015). Climate anxiety, or eco-anxiety, defined as “a chronic fear of environmental doom” (Clayton et al 2017, Huizen) can result from the trauma of experiencing natural disasters firsthand or learning about them through written and video accounts. Vasser Seydel, a young director of the Oxygen Project, remarked that the alternative to eco-anxiety and depression is action and empowerment: “If you can get yourself to start taking action, you can overcome the paralysis and the overwhelming nature of the climate emergency” (Climate Academy).

- 3 Compounding these youths’ anxiety is the observation that the United States government has often been reluctant to address the climate crisis: many anti-environmental policies under the G.W. Bush and Trump administrations, and in Republican-dominated Congresses have been enacted since 1994. Even as the crisis became more apparent, the Trump administration adopted an anti-environmental, climate-denying, anti-scientific stance. Thus, it rolled back the Obama administration’s climate mitigation efforts such as the Clean Power Plan, the refusal of the Keystone XL Pipeline Project and automotive emissions standards, and announced withdrawal from the Paris Agreement (Pitt et al). The urgency of the situation combined with federal inaction has led to the mobilization of scores of young people, many of whom are too young to vote. As Henry Jenkins et al stated in *By Any Media Necessary: the New Youth Activism*, there is a widespread perception that:

On the one hand, the institutions historically associated with American democracy are dysfunctional, public trust in core institutions is eroding, civic organizations no longer bring us together, elected representatives are more beholden to big contributors than to voters... and very little is likely to emerge at the level of institutional politics that is going to shift conditions very much. On the other hand, we have seen an expansion of the communicative and organizational resources available to everyday people (and grassroots organizations). (Jenkins et al 3)

- 4 In this context of contentious politics, the stage is set for an upward scale shift, as concerned youths, who have successfully channeled their fear and frustration into positive action, spread their enthusiasm to their peers. Tilly and Tarrow explain in *Contentious Politics* that an upward scale shift, i.e. the coordination of collective action at a higher level (from local to regional, national, international), is one of the most important processes in the success of a movement (Tilly & Tarrow 1995). The scale shift can be explained by mechanisms such as “diffusion” and “emulation” when activists learn of episodes of contention and derive inspiration from them, or “brokerage” whereby contention leaders bring formerly isolated groups into contact. Social media tools, a mainstay of most youths’ daily lives, enable individuals to meet and mobilize online. The pervasive use of social media is creating a cultural shift to the political arena (Gamber-Thompson 2016). In addition, participating in horizontal, peer-led groups creates a strong sense of collective identity and of belonging to a community (Jenkins et al 3). These processes have spawned and developed numerous youth-led initiatives in the United States in parallel to movements in other countries (Thunberg’s Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion), which have mutually inspired one another.
- 5 In order to better understand youth activism in the United States, a framework categorizing various means of action would be helpful. In a 2018 article titled “Exploring youth activism on climate change,” published in *Ecology and Society*, Karen

O'Brien et al present a typology to account for the various ways in which youths are expressing dissent. Based largely on Western modes of activism, their study distinguishes three types of dissent: disruptive, dutiful, and dangerous. "Disruptive" dissent, according to O'Brien et al, is oppositional, where activists organize protests to contest prevailing policies or norms. "Dutiful" dissent is reformist and works within existing power and economic structures. It challenges the status quo but does not challenge existing decision-making processes. Membership in political and environmental organizations is the most common example of dutiful dissent in climate activism. While disruptive dissent focuses on the underlying causes of climate change, raises awareness and encourages participation of newcomers to fight against the system, dutiful dissent offers direct access to power holders and builds legitimacy within the system. The third type of dissent, "dangerous," is propositional: activists propose new norms and values which communities embrace. The dangerous aspect is not because dissenters' actions are violent, but rather, dangerous in the eyes of existing power holders, because the activists' ideas subvert existing systems and pose a threat to their authority or practice (O'Brien et al).

- 6 Reformist environmentalism, i.e. dutiful dissent, was the mainstay of the environmental movement from the 1970s to 2000, according to sociologist Robert J. Brulle. The "Big Ten" environmental organizations like the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society, the National Wildlife Federation, and Friends of the Earth, opened offices in Washington D.C. and became part of the lobbying establishment (Andrews 238). Since the 1990s, however, environmental organizations have expended most of their energy in defending gains against neoconservatives' attacks rather than achieving new advances (Brulle). Critics have found them to be too technocratic, too top down, and too entrenched in outmoded discourses. Indeed, the failures of the major environmental associations have been much documented (Brulle, Shellenberger & Nordhaus). Today's youths have largely preferred to create their own organizations, "set the agenda and frame the message," rather than to work through the institutionalized environmental associations (Jenkins et al 289).
- 7 Given that many founders of these movements are teenagers – most of whom do not have the right to vote – the multitudes of loosely organized groups of youths that have sprung up in recent years belong principally to the classic model of street marches, sit-ins and protests. Disruptive dissent corresponds to the anger and frustration with lawmakers' lack of action, and is the easiest way for relatively unorganized, little-financed groups of youths to express themselves. As sociologist Dana Fisher remarked to a PBS journalist during the September 2019 Youth Climate March, "In some ways, the school strike for climate change is what the sit-in was for the civil rights movement. It is a tactic that is doable for people in a very local way, where they can get involved in a movement" (Fisher).
- 8 While protests may raise public awareness about climate change, the political elites and establishment generally ignore or discount such efforts (O'Brien et al). Jamie Margolin, who was 15 years old in 2017 when she founded the activist group Zero Hour, admitted that the threat of climate change had been a constant fixture in her life, and that the lack of government action amidst all the disasters that were happening during the summer of 2017 (Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, wildfire smoke from Canada blanketing her city of Seattle, Trump announcing the withdrawal from the Paris Agreement) triggered her activism. Interviewed on CBS News, she expressed her

frustration with the failure of older people to take youths seriously, to view the climate crisis like an emergency and act in consequence:

Enough is enough. They'll just pat us on the head and say...maybe one day you should run for office and you can take action on climate change. By the time I grow up, it'll be too late! Right now, the people who are holding power – whether we like it or not – they're the ones in this tiny, tiny window. The door is closing and we have this tiny window to take action before it's too late. (CBS News 19 Sept. 2019)

- 9 Her words speak for many young activists who have become involved in one of the many groups that have sprung up in the last few years, such as the Sunrise Movement (2017), the Youth Climate Strike (2018), the Down Ballot Disruption Project (2020), Zero Hour (2017), American Conservation Coalition (2017), Earth Uprising (2019), and many more. Not only are these youths fearful for their future because of climate change and frustrated with the inertia of the political class, they, for the most part, have solely experienced a society divided by inequality, endless wars, a financial collapse, and a student debt crisis. Faced with a combination of so many disruptive factors and inspired by politician Bernie Sanders and activists like Naomi Klein who criticize unbridled capitalism that put “profits over people” (Evelyn), many youths have concluded that old models are not working. Youths are forging new visions of their future. Spurred by a feeling of urgency and necessity, they are willing to fight for a “livable planet” (sunrisemovement.org). Observing the 2019 Youth Climate Marches in March and September, Fisher remarked, “Something different is happening here. We have a new wave of contention in society that’s being led by women...and the youth climate movement is leading this generational shift” (Kaplan).
- 10 The following pages will examine the diverse strategies the young generations are utilizing to fight for climate action. Analysis will primarily be based on the mainstream press coverage to assess the impact of youths’ actions. For the purposes of this paper, youths will be loosely defined as people under thirty years old. The majority of their tactics could be considered “disruptive”: mobilizing an “army of climate activists,” engaging in classic street rallies and sit-ins. Other strategies could be categorized as “dutiful” dissent because they work within existing power structures, like the electoral process and the courts. Third, a discussion of the “dangerous” aspects of youth activism that threaten power holders will conclude this analysis.

1. “Disruptive” Dissent: working from outside the system

- 11 These youth movements rely on their energy, enthusiasm and the sheer number of peers they are able to mobilize and who take part in street marches and peaceful protests, targeting particular officials or institutions. In this section, we will present some of the movements and profile a few of their leaders, both from the progressive and the conservative sides of the political spectrum: specifically, on the left, the Divestment movement, and U.S. Youth Climate Strikes, and on the right, the American Conservation Coalition, and Young Evangelicals for Climate Change.

1.1 Fossil Fuel Divestment

- 12 The Fossil Fuel Divestment campaign began in 2011 on several university campuses and has maintained a significant presence on campuses ever since. Students demonstrate to put pressure on their university boards to divest from any holdings in coal and other fossil fuels. Amplified by climate advocacy group 350.org's efforts internationally, the movement grew rapidly, encompassing 181 universities and other institutions by September 2014, adding hundreds more each year. Today, after ten years, the divestment movement has spread from American college campuses to many other countries and many other institutions. As of April 2021, the latest divestment figures comprise ten categories of institutions, out of which faith-based, philanthropic and educational ones constitute 64% of 1,319 institutions and a total of \$14.56 trillion, according to the website gofossilfree.org.
- 13 University campuses are prime sites where the "diffusion" mechanism of contentious politics works particularly well to spread ideas from one campus to another. They have long been sites of contention, from the 1960s antiwar and other protests to the shanties against the South African apartheid movement in the 1980s (Tilly & Tarrow 38-41). The fossil fuel divestment movement carried the idea forward to 2011 as a means to raise awareness about climate change, with the potential of impacting the fossil fuel industry.
- 14 To mention a few examples, at Harvard University, student protesters have staged protests over several years, so far without success. The youth-led movement has inspired adult support, thereby expanding its influence. After it became public in 2015 that Harvard had considerably increased its investments in fossil fuel companies, support for divestment flourished amongst alumni, as well as faculty members whose numbers jumped from 100 to 250 professors. In 2019, led by Divest Harvard and Fossil Free Yale, a crowd of protesters took over the football field at the halftime of a Harvard-Yale game to raise awareness about the issue (O'Daly). Harvard Forward, a campaign created by concerned alumni, supported three pro-divestment candidates for the Harvard Board of Overseers in 2020. The website of the Harvard Forward platform states:
- In the 1980s, alumni successfully ran petition candidates for the Harvard Board of Overseers to push Harvard to divest from apartheid-era South Africa and become more socially responsible. Over three decades later, alumni still want the same things from Harvard: leadership & accountability in facing the biggest challenges of our time. (harvardforward.org/)
- 15 All three candidates were elected on a platform of climate action and social justice, with fossil fuel divestment at the center of their campaign, which indicates broad support for divestment. On the West coast, Stanford University divested its \$18.7-billion endowment in 2014, which was a major victory for the youth movement. More recently, the University of California announced in May 2020 that it had fully divested from fossil fuels (Watanabe). The University of California is the largest American university with 285,000 students and a portfolio of \$2.6 billion.
- 16 As important as these divestments may be for the movement, observers assert that a tarnished image of fossil fuel companies could have even more damaging consequences to them (Atif et al). The exposure of ExxonMobil's knowledge of the impact of fossil fuel emissions on human health and the company's efforts to manufacture doubt about

global warming in direct contradiction to the results of its studies, is a case in point (Banerjee et al). As Bill McKibben stated in 2015, after years of domination of the energy sector, the fossil fuel industry is starting to receive some serious setbacks: Keystone XL pipeline, multiple lawsuits, and with the Biden administration, the probable loss of fossil fuel subsidies. The current administration's \$2.3 trillion infrastructure plan includes a proposal to turn those subsidies into incentives for renewable energy (McKibben 6 Nov 2015, Gardner).

- 17 The movement's ability to sustain itself despite the high turnover (as graduating students leave) has made the divestment movement a model for youths aspiring to start their own movements.

1.2 U.S. Youth Climate Strike

- 18 Secondly, inspired by Swedish youth activist Greta Thunberg's Fridays-for-Future student strikes initiated in 2018, three American teenagers who had been striking on their own in their respective cities joined forces to organize the first countrywide youth climate strike in March 2019. The executive director of the U.S. Youth Climate Strike is a sixteen-year-old (in 2018) named Isra Hirsi from Minneapolis, Minnesota. She became an activist due to the drinking water crisis in Flint, Michigan, which primarily affected poor communities of color. Her identity as a Black Muslim woman drove her to seek environmental justice. Twelve-year-old (in 2018) co-founder Haven Coleman from Denver, Colorado was inspired by a schoolteacher who taught about deforestation which, she realized, was putting her favorite animal, the sloth, in danger. She started striking alone but sought contact with other strikers, which deepened her commitment to climate action. The third co-founder is Alexandria Villaseñor, a thirteen-year-old (in 2018) who had been striking alone in front of the United Nations since December 2018. A native of California, her activism was triggered by the simultaneous events in November 2018 of the Camp Fire, a wildfire which completely razed the town of Paradise, California, and of Greta Thunberg's speech at COP 24, the United Nations' annual meeting on climate change, which took place in Poland. In order to motivate more young people, she founded a new group, Earth Uprising, which focuses on educating youths in schools, peer-to-peer (The Climate Group).
- 19 All three noted that staying connected through social media with likeminded activists was crucial in sustaining their motivation. The communication and joining of these three youths to found the U.S. Youth Climate Strike is a classic example of coordinated action according to the framework proposed by Tilly and Tarrow (Tilly & Tarrow 31). As momentum built, eight U.S.-based youth-led climate groups formed an alliance, the U.S. Youth Climate Strike Coalition. The groups worked together to plan the American marches organizing more than 1,000 events in all fifty states, Puerto Rico, and Washington, D.C. The third global Youth Climate Strike, with multiple events planned on the week of 20-27 September 2019, was timed to coincide with the U.N. Youth Climate Summit and the U.N. Climate Action Summit in New York City. The latter was to be attended by most major world leaders and Greta Thunberg, the "poster girl" of the youth climate movement, who would address them (Sky News). Turnout across the United States and the world for the global youth climate strike on 15 March 2019 was much higher than at previous marches and skyrocketed on 20 September 2019. It is estimated that nearly two million attended in March and between 6 and 7.6 million on

20 September (Climate Academy). Impressed by the numbers of young people at these marches, Fisher conducted a survey and found that half of the people who attended the 20 September protest were of college age or younger, and fully 25% was under eighteen years of age (Kaplan).

1.3 American Conservative Coalition

- 20 On the conservative side of the political spectrum, a Pew Research survey conducted in the spring of 2020 showed that 79% of millennial and younger Republicans believed the U.S. should invest in clean energy sources. It also showed that nearly twice as many millennial and younger Republicans as older Republicans believe human activity contributes a great deal to climate change (Fry).
- 21 Republican-leaning conservatives like Benji Backer, (aged 19 in 2017), from Appleton, Wisconsin founded the American Conservation Coalition in 2017. Backer declared that the health of the environment affects everyone, regardless of where they live, their background or political affiliation (60 Minutes). Along with Greta Thunberg and Jamie Margolin and other youths, Benji Backer testified on Capitol Hill in September 2019, pressing elected officials to take serious action on climate change. The coalition's website states that it is "dedicated to mobilizing young people around environmental action through common-sense, market-based, and limited-government ideals." It seeks to overcome partisan inaction by "promoting a mix of free-market, pro-business, and limited-government environmentalism in legislatures, college campuses, the political arena, and beyond." As of May 2021, the coalition counts 58 branches throughout the United States (American Conservation Coalition).
- 22 The American Conservative Coalition produced an alternative to the Green New Deal in 2020, called the American Climate Contract. Its FAQ page states that the conservative plan focuses on action now, using "carrots, not sticks" and that the Green New Deal is "a wish list of progressive policies." The website announces "an unprecedented coalition of experts and activists, liberals and conservatives, environmental organizations and energy groups," auguring a nonpartisan approach (American Conservation Coalition, acc.eco).

1.4 Young Evangelicals for Climate Action

- 23 The American Conservation Coalition is silent on religious matters, but studies find a positive correlation between conservatism and religiosity. Indeed, Pew Research surveys consistently find that evangelicals are some of the staunchest skeptics of climate change science. Young evangelicals, however, support action to mitigate climate change (Meyaard-Schaap). According to a November 2019 poll on Americans' views about climate and energy, 52% of young Republicans responded that the government is doing too little to address climate change (Funk & Hefferon). Reverend Kyle Meyaard-Schaap, a spokesperson for Young Evangelicals for Climate Change who crisscrosses the country talking to members, believes that a "tectonic shift" is taking place in American churches. He no longer hears debates about the science of climate change amongst the young generations. Rather, like the vast majority of climate activists, they are mobilizing on college campuses, marching in the streets, meeting

elected officials and "speaking up for the people's right to clean air and water and a stable climate" (Meygaard-Schaap).

- 24 These movements are examples of an upward scale shift as youths turn their energy into action, emulating earlier actors and inspiring later ones. They demonstrate the depth and breadth of youth climate activism which, judging by the numbers cited above of participation at the youth climate strikes in March and September 2019 (Climate Interactive), have increased significantly in the last few years. Mass mobilization and widespread protests are key in raising awareness and influencing public opinion and have been quite successful in the divestment movement. Yet, pragmatists question the effectiveness of mass protests: all this action and passion is exciting and seems promising to many, but have these actions resulted in real change? In a 2017 *New Yorker* article, Nathan Heller wonders, "Is there any point to protesting?" (Heller). In his review of recent protests – against the war in Iraq in 2003, Occupy Wall Street in 2011, Black Lives Matter in 2014, Women's March in 2017 – he finds that none of them had concrete success.
- 25 So what have the climate protests accomplished? Has the United States taken steps to reduce its emissions? The Obama administration took significant steps near the end of its term: the Clean Power Plan, signing the Paris Agreement, refusal of the Keystone XL Pipeline and of the Dakota Access pipeline (PBS 2017). However, initiatives of the executive branch not enshrined in law by Congress can easily be overturned by the president's successor, which is exactly what President Trump did upon arriving in office (Pitt et al). Furthermore, the Trump administration proved to be particularly inattentive to voices of opposition. Clearly, taking to the streets, even *en masse*, is insufficient to effect lasting change. It will take more to move an entire country like the United States away from fossil fuels, especially in the current contentious political and social climate. Some young activists have concluded that, rather than simply expressing opposition to the current state of affairs, working within the system could produce more results.

2. "Dutiful" Dissent: Working from within, through the electoral system

- 26 Voting is a primary tool in a democracy: if enough elected officials in Congress vote for a climate action plan, a comprehensive program will finally be passed after years of gridlock. Those who are too young to vote can still influence the results of votes by putting pressure on elected officials in other ways than classic rallies. In this section, we will examine two other types of initiatives that youth groups are implementing to force a change in climate policy. One focuses on the electoral process while the other targets the courts.

2.1 The Sunrise Movement

- 27 One group in particular amongst the youth activists realized that peaceful protests were insufficient and, from the outset, has had a strategy to both mobilize large numbers of energetic activists and elect committed individuals to Congress and state legislatures. Co-founder of the Sunrise Movement, Varshini Prakash started out in the divestment movement at her university, so was familiar with demonstrations, sit-ins,

rallies. She and a group of friends spent a full year studying previous successes of protest movements, like the civil rights movement of the 1960s, and previous failures, like the Occupy Wall Street movement and Bernie Sanders' 2016 presidential campaign, in order to develop a comprehensive strategy before launching the Sunrise Movement in 2017. Not only would these youths protest *against* inaction, they would also propose a solution *for* the future. What distinguishes this group from the majority of youth climate action groups then, is its multi-pronged strategy and wide-ranging program to adapt the American economy to the twenty-first century. By framing the fight for the planet as “a battle between underdogs and moneyed special interests,” Sunrise “taps into reservoirs of youthful passion and energy, turning students into student activists” (Turrentine).

- 28 Sunrise is structured to encourage the creation of “hubs,” which are active at the local level throughout the country. According to their website, there are more than 400 hubs and although no official figure is available, it is believed that a million volunteers have joined the movement (Higgins & Chávez). Social media presence – informing, educating, motivating followers – is an integral part of the Sunrise Movement’s communication strategy, both to enhance cohesion amongst those who are members and to attract new activists. Innovative young volunteers have devised a new style of digital campaigning, creating “stan” accounts to publicize campaign messages through memes when door-to-door canvassing became tricky, if not impossible, during the Coronavirus pandemic (Higgins and Chávez).
- 29 In addition to demonstrating, organizing sit-ins, handing out flyers door-to-door and the like, Sunrise developed many tools to galvanize and train an “army” of youth activists. Their website offers training programs so that newcomers can quickly learn the basics of becoming an activist. Getting few mentions in the press, these training retreats of a day up to a week are fundamental in helping young, motivated people gain confidence and skills in order to become key actors in their respective local areas. Now under the heading of “Sunrise School,” the website proposes both online support and in-person training programs for newcomers and trainers. The level of support offered to volunteers appears to be well above that on other websites and contributes to the movement’s success. According to a Sunrise volunteer, Ben Bristol, teenagers strongly desire to be part of the solution to the climate crisis:

Kids are already suspicious of the establishment. They have strong opinions and rebellious streaks. When you’re a high schooler, environmentalism too often just means recycling programs and classroom lessons on sustainability. The chance to think about that problem – and themselves – in political terms is new for them. Even for students who study politics or history or government, activism isn’t really a dimension of their curriculum. (Turrentine)

- 30 Thus, many youth movements, especially Sunrise, have provided means for those who desire to take action. Public opinion is a powerful tool as well: the practice of “naming and shaming” is an effective way to force climate change onto the agenda (Lakhani). During the 2020 presidential primaries, Sunrise called upon candidates to sign the “No fossil fuel money” pledge. Twenty-four Democratic presidential candidates (all but one) signed the pledge in 2020, and as of 9 May 2021, the website lists over 3,293 elected officials at all levels of government who have signed the pledge. Sunrise has also adopted and extensively used a technique that early environmentalists pioneered in 1970: identifying elected officials with poor environmental voting records. In 1972, environmentalists contributed to the defeat of seven out of twelve anti-environmental

incumbents, the “dirty dozen”. Today, with the help of the League of Conservation Voters, which tracks the voting records of all congressional members, Sunrise targets those elected officials who have poor voting records on environmental issues, publicizes the records in their home districts, and if the officials are up for re-election, strongly supports challengers whose platforms coincide with Sunrise’s objectives. To summarize, picket signs read: “Dear Democrats: Step Up or Step Aside” (Sunrise website).

- 31 Once convinced of a candidate’s platform and commitment to the group’s core objectives, Sunrise deploys an “army” of activists to call potential voters and canvas neighborhoods door-to-door. In 2018 for example, they were instrumental in Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s upset win of the U.S. House of Representatives seat for the Queens and Bronx areas of New York City. Joseph Crowley, the incumbent Democrat, had held the seat for twenty years and did not take his challenger, Ocasio-Cortez, a 28-year-old female bartender at the time, seriously. AOC, as she is known, won the primary by 15 points and went on to win the election. Since then, she has become an influential progressive leader in the House of Representatives. Ten of the twenty candidates Sunrise endorsed for Congress in 2018 were elected and six more won seats in the state legislatures of Pennsylvania, New York and Florida (Influence Watch).
- 32 In 2020, Sunrise endorsed seventeen candidates: Bernie Sanders for president and the others for congressional seats. Once convinced of candidates’ merits, the volunteers put great energy into promoting them. Notable successes include the elections of Senator Ed Markey and Representative Cori Bush. Markey, a longtime incumbent senator of Massachusetts, was challenged by Joe Kennedy, 39, in the Democratic primary of the 2020 election (Higgins & Chávez). Aged 74, Markey is a veteran politician and co-sponsor of the Green New Deal in the Senate, but the Kennedy name and the allure of a young, new voice had Markey trailing by a significant margin a year before the primary. Sunrise volunteers engaged in intensive voter turnout efforts (mostly digital and telephone contacts due to Covid restrictions) to bolster Markey’s image: “In a clever twist, Sunrise was able to cast the veteran lawmaker not as a stale incumbent, but rather as a longtime ally in developing and fighting for the Green New Deal” (Higgins and Chávez). Markey eventually won the primary handily, despite influential House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s endorsement of Joe Kennedy. Commentators remarked that the turnabout would have been impossible without Sunrise’s help (Tierstein, Ward & Wilson, White, Holden, Manchester).
- 33 Cori Bush ran for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives in Missouri in 2020. Sunrise threw its support behind Democratic challenger Bush, who was running for the second time against Lacy Clay, the ten-term incumbent, for a seat that had been held by a member of the Clay family for 52 years. Sunrise volunteers called up 150,000 voters in the final weeks of the primary campaign, contributing significantly to Bush’s upset win. While in 2018 Bush lost to Clay by twenty points, in 2020 Bush won by three points, which the Sunrise volunteers considered proof of the efficacy of their endeavors.
- 34 Overall, the majority of Sunrise’s endorsed candidates won their primaries in 2020, consolidating the Sunrise Movement’s position as a force to be reckoned with in the electoral field. “Dutiful” may not be the best word to characterize Sunrise’s tactics in the electoral process. At least from the standpoint of targeted incumbents, Sunrise constitutes a danger to the status quo. In hopes of furthering their influence, Sunrise activists posted on their website panels of people that they would like to see in the 2021

Biden cabinet. Sunrise's support for the Green New Deal, another important aspect of the group's activism, will be discussed in the "dangerous" dissent section.

2.2 Working through the courts

- 35 Another strategy employed by youth climate activists – and perhaps the most effective one – is litigation, a widespread tool of contestation in the United States. The knowledge that human activity (primarily the burning of fossil fuels) is impacting the climate was known by the late 1950s and significant enough for policymakers to take note by the 1960s. In 1965 President Johnson said in a speech to the nation: "this generation has altered the composition of the atmosphere on a global scale through ... a steady increase in carbon dioxide from the burning of fossil fuels" (Lavelle).
- 36 A watershed moment occurred when in 1988, James Hansen, a physicist at NASA testified to the U.S. Senate committee: "The greenhouse effect has been detected and is changing our climate now" (Yale Climate Connections). Thus, the federal government, if not the general public, has been aware of the phenomenon for decades. Hansen's 1988 testimony was instrumental in convincing the George H.W. Bush administration to sign the first treaty on climate change in 1992 – before it became a partisan issue. This treaty, called the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) remains the basis for a coordinated international effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and reduce the threat.
- 37 On the domestic scene, the country has a solid basis from which to combat rising emissions through wide reaching environmental protection legislation that was passed during the late 1960s and early 1970s. A crucial new provision that was written into the 1970s' environmental legislation states that citizens "have a right to know" and can have access to documents pertaining to a particular issue. In addition, developers using federal funds are required to produce an Environmental Impact Statement before proceeding with their project (Andrews 241-2). Environmental associations understood the potential of this principle and have used it extensively to block projects through litigation. Thus, the courts have played a major part in environmental protection since the 1970s.
- 38 Currently, several cities, counties and a state are suing major fossil fuel companies for selling harmful products and misleading the public about their dangers (Banerjee et al). *InsideClimate News* has conducted in-depth research which has proven that Exxon Mobil knew of the negative impact of fossil fuels on human health and the environment decades ago (Banerjee et al). Rather than inform the public and find ways to make their products less polluting, they launched misinformation campaigns and cast doubt on the science. As Rhode Island Attorney General Peter F. Kilmartin said in 2018, announcing his state's suit against companies like Exxon Mobil, Chevron, BP, and Royal Dutch Shell,
- Instead of working to reduce that harm, these companies chose to conceal the dangers, undermine public support for greenhouse gas regulation, and engage in massive campaigns to promote the ever-increasing use of their products and ever-increasing revenues in their pockets. (Kusnetz 2 July 2018)
- 39 The fossil fuel industry's misinformation campaign has been quite successful: judging by the surveys of public opinion in various countries, the American public shows significantly greater doubt about the human responsibility for climate change. According to Pew Research, in 2019, only 59% of Americans compared to 83% of the

French or 90% of Greeks believe that human activity is the driver of global warming (Fagan & Huang). And this figure is considerably higher than a few years ago (Saad). The prevalence of climate skepticism and denialism in the United States points strongly to the success of the misinformation campaign and has been a major factor in the federal government's lack of climate action. With gridlock in Congress and President Obama's "all-of-the-above" energy strategy followed by the Trump administration's support for the coal industry and systematic repeal of as many environmental protections as possible, (Fox News, Pitt et al) the federal government has been unable or unwilling to take serious action on climate change for decades.

- 40 In an attempt to force the federal government to act on climate change, twenty-one young plaintiffs, accompanied by Dr. James Hansen and lawyer Julia Olson, filed a lawsuit against the United States government in 2015. The lawsuit, *Juliana vs. the United States*, based on the Public Trust Doctrine¹, charges that the government is guilty of allowing and encouraging greenhouse gas emissions over the past fifty years despite knowing about global climate change, thus violating the plaintiffs' due process rights under the Fifth Amendment of the Constitution. The litigants were chosen from diverse locations in the United States (Oregon, Florida, Colorado, etc.), all of which had been damaged due to climate change (60 Minutes). The plaintiffs contend that federal support for fossil fuel extraction is causing climate change, endangering their future and violating their constitutional rights to life, liberty and property.
- 41 In an interview on *60 Minutes*, Julia Olson stated,
- The lawsuit claims the executive and legislative branches of government have proven incapable of dealing with climate change. It argues that the government has failed in its obligation to protect the nation's air, water, forests and coastlines. And it petitions the federal courts to intervene and force the government to come up with a plan that would wean the country off fossil fuels by the middle of this century." (60 Minutes)
- 42 After multiple stays, the case was heard in court in June 2019 and a decision was published in January 2020 (Schwartz). Two of the three judges stated that they recognized the gravity of the evidence provided by the plaintiffs, the government's role in causing injury from climate change, and that the government was violating the plaintiff's constitutional rights. However, the two judges concluded that the plaintiffs did not have standing and that the executive and legislative branches – not the courts – should address the requests, while the third judge dissented, strongly affirming the youths' constitutional rights. The decision was a disappointment for the plaintiffs, who responded by filing a petition to request a review of the decision by the full panel of eleven circuit court judges. Groups including twenty-four members of the U.S. Congress, experts in constitutional law, climate change and public health filed ten *amicus curiae* briefs in support of their petition (Schwartz).
- 43 Our Children's Trust is the non-profit organization that underwrites and provides the legal representation for *Juliana* and many similar actions. Its website declares that it is "the world's only non-profit public interest law firm dedicated exclusively to securing the legal rights of youth to a healthy atmosphere and safe climate, based on the best available science." The website offers information on seven pending cases in the states of Alaska, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, New Mexico, North Carolina and Oregon as well as details concerning legal actions in all fifty states.

- 44 *Juliana vs. the United States* has received significant coverage in the media, both mainstream (*New York Times*, *Washington Post*, CBS, ABC, NBC) and specialized (*InsideClimate News*, *Grist*) and shone a moral spotlight on the country's government and on powerful corporations. If *Juliana* were to prevail, it could have a far-reaching impact on climate action. Indeed, if the tobacco industry's experience is any indication, the case could lead to multibillion-dollar payouts, and force the federal government to make greenhouse gas emission reductions a central priority (Oreskes and Conway). Although few legal observers expect the case to prevail, some believe that it has opened the door to more favorable rulings because the court clearly acknowledged that there has been injury to the youths and that the federal government has promoted fossil fuel use despite the harm fossil fuels are known to cause (Banerjee et al).
- 45 In sum, working through the electoral system and through the courts are two avenues that youth climate activists are exploring. Battles in these institutions require determination and patience but offer more likelihood of long-term success. Indeed, electing enough climate action proponents to Congress to enact laws may take years. A case like *Juliana vs. the United States* has already been in the works for six years and may not result in a victory. Analysts are even more skeptical since President Trump appointed three conservative justices to the Supreme Court, bringing the count to six conservative and three progressive justices. But as mentioned above, the number of lawsuits against fossil fuel corporations and governments for failing to protect public health and common resources has multiplied, and a victory would set a precedent for future litigation.

3. "Dangerous" Dissent

- 46 The majority of the youth actions examined so far could be considered "disruptive:" mobilizing an "army of climate activists," engaging in classic street rallies and sit-ins. Some could be categorized as "dutiful" dissent because they work within existing power structures, like the electoral process or the courts. Unconventional techniques, however, are employed to produce successes: "naming and shaming" for example. And in the courts, youths are using an innovative approach by suing their federal, state and local governments for violating their right to a livable planet. Reparations are unlikely, but the courts could judge that the state and federal governments must devise and implement climate action plans, which is what the *Juliana* plaintiffs are demanding (60 Minutes). In fact, states and cities have been far more active than the federal government in this domain. As of 2020, thirty-two states have climate action plans with targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by implementing various policies that favor clean energy sources, clean transportation and buildings, as well as strategies to cope with climate disasters and support economic and social goals (Ricketts et al). And the Biden administration appears to be committed to action on climate change, which may result in more accountability for corporations and utilities (Gardner).

3.1 A threat to the fossil fuel industry

- 47 One indication that the fossil fuel industry feels threatened is its draconian use of force against groups of oil pipeline protesters, comprising significant numbers of youths (Cagle). The Keystone XL and Dakota Access pipeline projects to transport Canadian tar

sands to Texas refineries are a case in point. Many powerful interests are at stake: the federal government, to ensure energy supplies in the interest of the nation; the states that the pipeline passes through, for the jobs and wealth that the project brings; the corporations, to maximize profits from such projects. The perceived threat of the protests, regarded as “dangerous” dissent, could then become the object of repression, even criminalization. According to an article published by *InsideClimate News* and the *Washington Post*, since January 2017 elected officials in at least thirty-one states have proposed measures to limit the right to protest (Sadasivam).

- 48 For example, the Standing Rock Indian Reservation groups protested against the construction of an oil pipeline that would despoil sacred burial sites and endanger their drinking water (Kusnetz 22 August 2018). Despite legal action that was pending, the Dakota Access Pipeline Company, Energy Transfer Partners, proceeded with construction and brought in a private security firm which deployed dogs and pepper spray against protesters. According to *Democracy Now’s* journalist Amy Goodman, who filmed the conflict, the project had already faced months of resistance from the Standing Rock Sioux tribe as well as members of nearly 100 more tribes from across the U.S. and Canada (Democracy Now). Numerous protesters and Goodman were targeted for arrest under new laws in North Dakota that criminalize protesting within a few feet of a contested site. Since these confrontations in 2016, activists have increasingly been treated as terrorists and arrests have become frequent (Cagle). “They’re basically trying to silence and minimize the impact of environmental organizations,” said Pamela Spees, a senior staff attorney at the Center for Constitutional Rights, which represents activists in Louisiana (Kusnetz 22 August 2018).

3.2 A threat to the capitalist establishment

- 49 Furthermore, progressive climate activists integrate social justice and equity into their calls for climate action, deeming that one is unattainable without the other. Climate activists have values that come into conflict with society’s mainstream tenets – the set of political values and ideals that constitute the bedrock of American identity. Sociologist Dennis C. Pirages defined the dominant social paradigm as comprising four elements: a commitment to individualism, property rights and laissez-faire government; faith in material abundance, progress and economic growth; faith in science and technology; and a view of nature as something to be subdued (Pirages 37). The vast majority of environmentalists and climate activists contest at least two of these beliefs: that of the eternal growth model and that of humans being superior to nature (Dunlap et al). As these ideas run counter to the dominant social paradigm, they put into question the extractive model on which the American economy is based. Surveys show that young generations believe less in humans’ ability to dominate nature or in the limitless growth model.
- 50 This melding of the environmental with the social brings to mind the words of an early environmentalist, Barry Commoner. In *The Closing Circle*, he spoke of the environmental crisis in terms that are entirely applicable to the current situation:

Human beings have broken out of the circle of life, driven not by biological need, but by the social organization which they have devised to “conquer” nature: means of gaining wealth that are governed by requirements conflicting with those which govern nature. The end result is the environmental crisis, a crisis of survival... the world is being carried to the brink of ecological disaster... by the phalanx of

powerful economic, political, and social forces that constitute the march of history. ...sweeping social change can be designed only in the workshop of rational, informed, collective social action. That we must act is now clear. (Commoner 222-23)

- 51 It is worth noting that, fifty years later, the conversation seems to be stuck in a time warp: this statement could as easily have been written today, with “climate” in place of “environmental.” What happened between 1971 and 2020? According to Naomi Klein, Bernie Sanders, and many others, the neoconservative revolution flourished, sweeping away as many environmental and trade regulations as possible, leaving in its wake a hyper-consumerist society and a badly degraded planet. As Klein remarks,

We have not done the things that are necessary to lower emissions because those things fundamentally conflict with deregulated capitalism, the reigning ideology for the entire period that we have been struggling to find a way out of this crisis. We are stuck because the actions that would give us the best chance of averting catastrophe, and that would benefit the vast majority, are extremely threatening to an elite minority that has a stranglehold over our economy, our political process, and most of our media outlets. (Klein 2019 249)

3.3 A threat to the political establishment: the Green New Deal

- 52 An alternative model that puts equity and respect for the natural environment over growth and profits is a threat to those with an interest in perpetuating the current model. The sheer number of people turning out to demonstrate their support for climate action and the Green New Deal gives cause for worry to all the stakeholders in the status quo of a fossil-fuel, hyper-consumptive growth model of society. This is perhaps why the proposition of the Green New Deal by the progressive wing of the Democratic Party has been soundly rejected, not only by Republicans, but also by the Democratic Party establishment (Roberts 2018). The Sunrise Movement does not only contest the status quo; these youths propose an alternative vision of society. Their vision is detailed in the clean energy and job creation plan called the Green New Deal, of which the Sunrise political director Evan Weber was one of the main architects (Matthews et al). Inspired by Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal, the Green New Deal is a program to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions, secure clean air and water, invest in the country’s infrastructure and industry, and create millions of good, high-wage jobs in the process. According to Green New Dealers’ reckoning, this overhauling of the nation’s economic and energy systems would also promote justice and equity (Roberts 2019).
- 53 To these youth activists, most members of Congress seem either out of touch with reality or fail to appreciate the urgency of the climate crisis. When youths approached Senator Dianne Feinstein, a well-known Democratic senator from California, to obtain her support for the Green New Deal, her dismissal made them realize that they could not count on elected officials in Washington, D.C. to address the climate emergency (Guardian 23 Feb 2019). The Republican and Democratic opposition charge that it would cost trillions of dollars to accomplish. Seasoned Democratic politicians like Senators Feinstein and Joe Manchin, a ranking member of the Senate Energy Committee, and Representatives Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and the four co-chairs of the House’s Climate Change Task Force all oppose the Green New Deal (Roberts 2019). The House’s Climate Change Task Force published its alternative plan in June 2020, which is more incremental and less disruptive of the status quo than the Green New Deal (House

Select Committee). Thus, the progressive wing of the Democratic Party faces opposition in both houses of Congress – and not only with Republicans.

- 54 This longstanding congressional reticence to tackle the climate emergency has undermined trust in the political system and galvanized youth activism. Youths like Solei Yoder Salim, aged 15, said that, leading up to the November election, he was spending five hours a day on phonebanking: “The Green New Deal is worth fighting for, it’s important for the world and our country. I like coming together with my community and other high schools, it’s important but also fun” (Lakhani). Even if Biden was not their ideal candidate, 60% of 18-29-year-olds responded that they would vote for him vs. 27% for Trump in the Fall 2020 Harvard Youth Poll (Ranalli). Many youths saw the choice between Biden and Trump as an existential emergency, the former representing the potential for a livable planet whereas the latter represented “the apocalypse” (Lakhani). While youth climate activists were relieved to see Biden elected and feel that their work had contributed to this victory, they remain skeptical: will the current administration take the drastic measures necessary to avert the worst effects of climate change? (Ebbs et al).

4. Biden’s response to climate activism and young voters

- 55 As noted earlier, since Joe Biden’s election, the federal administration has signaled its commitment to climate action. Appointments of highly qualified climate actors to key positions like the heads of the Department of the Interior, Energy, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Council on Environmental Quality, as well as the creation of two new positions, Special Presidential Envoy for Climate and National Climate Advisor, demonstrate a willingness to tackle the climate emergency. Second, Biden announced that the United States would rejoin the Paris Agreement and commit to emissions reductions goals and take on a leading role in the international fight against climate change (Davenport & Friedman). Third, in March 2021, the President unveiled a \$2.3-trillion green infrastructure plan which focuses on rebuilding the country’s infrastructure and shifts to greener energy and transportation, two prime polluting sectors. While the bill may undergo necessary compromises in order to pass the Senate, the Biden administration’s plan is far more comprehensive than many climate activists imagined possible (Gardner). Fourth, President Biden hosted a Global Climate Change Summit on 22 April 2021 and announced that the United States would reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 50%-52% below its 2005 emissions levels by 2030 (Mahtani et al).
- 56 From the perspective of climate campaigners and in particular of youth climate activists, this flurry of executive branch climate action is a long-awaited turn of events. The calls for action coming from youths on both sides of the political spectrum are being answered, and the nonpartisan nature of these demands signals the potential for American politics to move toward a less polarized approach. The youths’ calls in unison for action against climate change confirm the “generationally shared values of truth, empathy, and patriotism,” according to Nikayla Jefferson, of the Sunrise Movement (Kahn).
- 57 From the perspective of elected officials, the young generations represent a significant number of potential voters. Demographic forecasts predict that as early as 2028, Gen Z

(born since 1997) and millennials (born 1981-1996) will dominate the electorate: 49% vs. 46% comprised of baby boomers (born 1946-1964) and Gen X (born 1965-1980) (Brownstein). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, voter turnout for the 2020 elections was higher across all age groups, but the increase was greatest amongst young voters, aged 18 to 34, rising from 49% to 57% of eligible citizens (Fabina). Higher turnout indicates greater engagement and may prove to be a formative “stage in the process of acquiring the skills necessary for political participation” (Jenkins et al 7). As Ruy Teixeira writes in the *Atlantic*, the Democratic Party has a golden opportunity to bring the young voters into its fold, on condition that it opens up to their ideas and shares leadership (Griffin et al). In an interview in August 2020, young conservative Benji Backer warned that unless the Republican Party started dealing with the climate crisis, it would lose scores of young members for whom the issue is primordial and nonpartisan.

- 58 In sum, large numbers of American youths have joined the ranks of climate activists in the last few years, particularly since the election of President Donald Trump. Their actions have taken various forms, from street marches and school strikes to phone banking and canvassing communities to get out the vote, to suing their governments, both state and federal, for violating the public trust doctrine, to supporting the Green New Deal. Characterized as “disruptive, dutiful or dangerous” dissent, their actions helped elect progressive candidates in 2018 and 2020. These youth movements span the political spectrum from progressive to conservative and, as a generation, are putting substantial pressure on older elected officials to pass legislation to limit emissions and ensure an equitable society on a livable planet. The victory of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris in the 2020 presidential election – to which the uncharacteristically high number of young voters contributed – has vastly increased the chances of the United States meeting its emissions reductions goals and playing a positive role in the fight against climate change.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Youth climate activism

Climate Academy. “How youth activism is moving the needle on climate change.” *Guardian*, 23 Sept 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/climate-academy/2020/sep/23/youth-activism-climate-crisis-action>. Accessed 8 May 2021.

Ebbs, Stephanie, Ginger Zee, Lindsey Griswold and Jon Schlosberg. “Why youth climate change activists are pushing Biden to do more.” *ABC News*, 21 Apr 2021; <https://abcnews.go.com/US/youth-climate-change-activists-pushing-biden/story?id=77167042>. Accessed 22 May 2021.

“Explained: The rise of Greta Thunberg.” *Sky News*, 20 Sept 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=itAu7Uw0sn8>. Accessed 25 Sept. 2019.

Fisher, Dana R. “The broader importance of #FridaysForFuture.” *Nature*, 6 May 2019, <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41558-019-0484-y>. Accessed 30 Oct 2020.

“Influence Watch: Sunrise Movement.” <https://www.influencewatch.org/non-profit/sunrise-movement/>. Accessed 1 Nov 2020.

Kaplan, Sarah. “Teen girls are leading the climate strikes and helping change the face of environmentalism.” *Washington Post*, 24 Sept 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/science/2019/09/24/teen-girls-are-leading-climate-strikes-helping-change-face-environmentalism/>. Accessed 31 May 2021.

Klein, Naomi. *On Fire, The Burning Case for a Green New Deal*. Allen Lane, 2019.

Lakhani, Nina. “‘We don’t have any choice’: The young climate activists naming and shaming politicians’.” *Guardian*, 16 Oct 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/oct/16/sunrise-movement-wide-awakes-us_. Accessed 30 Oct 2020.

Matthews, Mark, Nick Bowlin and Benjamin Hulak. “Inside the Sunrise Movement.”, *E&E News*, 3 Dec 2018, <https://www.eenews.net/stories/1060108439>. Accessed 2 Nov 2020.

Meyaard-Schaap, Kyle. “Young evangelicals used to be skeptical of climate change. Not anymore. And we’re voting.” *Grist*, 23 Sept 2020, <https://grist.org/fix/young-evangelicals-climate-change-voting/>. Accessed 30 Oct 2020.

O'Brien, Karen, Elin Selboe and Bronwyn M. Hayward. “Exploring Youth Activism on climate change: dutiful, disruptive, and dangerous dissent.” *Ecology and Society* 23(3):42, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-10287-230342>. Accessed 2 Nov 2020.

The Climate Group. “Youth activism in climate in USA.” 23 Sep 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5NJ-p0vMEEU>. Accessed 31 Oct 2020.

Turrentine, Jeff. “Will the Kids Save us from Climate Change?” NRDC, 23 March 2019, <https://www.nrdc.org/onearth/will-kids-save-us-climate-change>. Accessed 2 Apr 2019.

“Young climate activists testify on Capitol Hill ahead of U.N. Climate Action Summit.” *CBS News*, 19 Sept 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ecuiQXSv5pc>. Accessed 31 May 2021.

Lawsuits

60 Minutes. “Juliana vs. the United States: the climate change lawsuit that could stop the US government from supporting fossil fuels.” *CBS News*, 3 March 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/juliana-versus-united-states-the-climate-change-lawsuit-that-could-stop-the-u-s-government-from-supporting-fossil-fuels-60-minutes/>. Accessed 29 Sept 2019.

Kusnetz, Nicholas. “Faced with the costs of climate change, R.I. sues fossil-fuel companies.” *InsideClimate News*, 2 July 2018, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2018/07/02/faced-with-costs-climate-change-sues-fossil-fuel-companies/mGflVecLITfLHCmBHYZAM/story.html>. Accessed 31 May 2021.

Schwartz, John. “Court Quashes Youth Climate Change Case Against Government,” *New York Times*, 17 Jan 2020 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/17/climate/juliana-climate-case.html>. Accessed 4 Nov 2020.

“The ‘climate kids’ suing the government.” 60 Minutes, 3 March 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Qyo6T5xd4A_. Accessed 31 May 2021.

US Energy and Climate Policies

Andrews, Richard L. *Managing the Environment, Managing Ourselves*, Yale University Press, 2006.

Banerjee, Neela, Lisa Song and David Hasemyer. "Exxon: The Road Not Taken." *InsideClimate News*, 16 Sept 2015, <https://insideclimatenews.org/content/Exxon-The-Road-Not-Taken>. Accessed 10 Nov 2020.

Davenport, Coral and Lisa Friedman. "Biden Cancels XL Pipeline and Rejoins Paris Climate Agreement." *New York Times*, 21 Jan 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/20/climate/biden-paris-climate-agreement.html>. Accessed 22 May 2021.

Gardner, Timothy. "Biden tax plan replaces U.S. fossil fuel subsidies with clean energy incentives." *Reuters*, 7 Apr 2021 <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/biden-tax-plan-replaces-u-s-fossil-fuel-subsidies-with-clean-energy-incentives/ar-BB1foARo>. Accessed 8 May 2021.

House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis. www.climatecrisis.house.gov/report. Accessed 5 Nov 2020.

Mahtani, Melissa, Meg Wagner and Melissa Macaya. "Biden hosts global climate change summit on Earth Day." *CNN*, 23 Apr 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/politics/live-news/biden-climate-change-summit-04-22-22/index.html>. Accessed 22 May 2021.

McKibben, Bill. "What Exxon Knew About Climate Change." *New Yorker*, 18 Sept 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/what-exxon-knew-about-climate-change>. Accessed 31 May 2021.

McKibben, Bill. "Exxon, Keystone, and the Turn Against Fossil Fuels," *New Yorker*, 6 Nov 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/exxon-keystone-and-the-turning-tide-on-fossil-fuels>. Accessed 31 May 2021.

Pitt, Hannah, Kate Larsen, and Maggie Young. "The Undoing of US Climate Policy: The Emissions Impact of Trump-Era Rollbacks." *Rhodium Group*, 17 Sep 2020, <https://rhg.com/research/the-rollback-of-us-climate-policy/>. Accessed 15 Oct 2020.

Roberts, David. "Utilities have a problem: the public wants 100% renewable energy, and quick." *Vox*, 11 Oct 2018, <https://www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/2018/9/14/17853884/utilities-renewable-energy-100-percent-public-opinion#:~:text=100%25%20renewable%20energy%3A%20the%20public%20wants%20it%2C%20and,%40drvox%20david%40vox.com%20Updated%20Oct%2011%2C%202018%2C%209%3A19am%20EDT>. Accessed 31 May 2021.

"Trump: We've ended the war on coal." *Fox News*, 23 Feb 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmvW25iKd9M>. Accessed 31 May 2021.

Yale Climate Connections. "James Hansen's 1988 Testimony after 30 years. How did he do?" 20 June 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UVz67cwmXTM>. Accessed 31 May 2021.

US Politics

"Dianne Feinstein rebuffs young climate activists' calls for Green New Deal." *Guardian News*, 23 Feb 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEPo34LCss8>. Accessed 10 Nov 2020.

Evelyn, Kenya. "Warren and Sanders: Amazon must end culture that puts profit over people." *Guardian*, 11 Feb 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/feb/11/warren-sanders-amazon-end-culture-profit-over-people-worker-safety-bezos>. Accessed 1 Nov 2020.

Fabina, Jacob. "Despite Pandemic Challenges, 2020 Election Had Largest Increase in Voting Between Presidential Elections on Record." *US Census Bureau*, 29 Apr 2021, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/04/record-high-turnout-in-2020-general-election.html>. Accessed 9 May 2021.

Higgins, Eoin and Aída Chávez. “The Sunrise Movement, a Growing Electoral Force, Faces ‘Painful Moment’.” *The Intercept*, 9 Sept 2020 <https://theintercept.com/2020/09/08/sunrise-movement-ed-markey-election/>. Accessed 10 Nov 2020.

Holden, Emily. “Bold action is a winning message!: climate advocates hail Ed Markey win.” *Guardian*, 3 Sept 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/sep/03/ed-markey-primary-victory-climate-crisis>. Accessed 23 May 2021.

Lavelle, Marianne. “A Fiftieth Anniversary Few Remember: LBJ’s Warning on Carbon Dioxide.” *Jackson Free Press*, 2 Feb 2015, <https://www.jacksonfreepress.com/news/2015/feb/02/50th-anniversary-few-remember-lbjs-warning-carbon-/>. Accessed 2 Nov 2020.

Manchester, Julia. “How Markey took down a Kennedy.” *The Hill*, 1 Sept 2021, <https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/514702-how-markey-took-down-a-kennedy>. Accessed 23 May 2021.

Ricketts, Sam, Rita Clifton, Lola Oduyeru and Bill Holland. “States Are Laying a Road Map for Climate Leadership.” *Center for American Progress*, 30 Apr 2020, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/green/reports/2020/04/30/484163/states-laying-road-map-climate-leadership/>. Accessed 20 March 2021.

Roberts, David. “The Green New Deal, Explained,” *Vox*, 7 Jan 2019, <https://www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/2018/12/21/18144138/green-new-deal-alexandria-ocasio-cortez>. Accessed 31 May 2021.

Tierstein, Zoya. “This 74-year-old senator has a secret weapon: Climate activists.” *Grist*, 2 Sept 2020, <https://grist.org/politics/ed-markey-wins-massachusetts-primary-over-joseph-kennedy/>. Accessed 23 May 2021.

Ward, Jon and Christopher Wilson. “Markey defeats Kennedy in Massachusetts Senate race.” *MSN*, 2 Sept 2020, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/politics/markey-defeats-kennedy-in-massachusetts-senate-race/ar-BB18BZXw>. Accessed 23 May 2021.

White, Chris. “Ocasio-Cortez, Green New Deal Activists Score Another Big Win After Sen Markey Beats A Kennedy.” *Daily Caller*, 2 Sept 2020, <https://dailycaller.com/2020/09/02/ed-markey-joe-kennedy-primary-green-new-deal-ocasio-cortez/>. Accessed 31 May 2021.

Polls, opinions, age

Brownstein, Robert. “The GOP’s Demographic Doom.” *The Atlantic*, 23 Oct 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/10/millennials-and-gen-z-will-soon-dominate-us-elections/616818/>. Accessed 2 Nov 2020.

Clayton, Susan, Christie Manning, Kirra Krygsman and Meighen Speiser. *Mental Health and Our Changing Climate: Impacts, Implications, and Guidance*. American Psychological Association, Climate for Health and ecoAmerica, March 2017, <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2017/03/mental-health-climate.pdf>. Accessed 31 May 2021.

Dunlap, Riley E., Aaron M. McCright and Jerrod H. Yarosh. “The Political Divide on Climate Change: Partisan Polarization Widens in the U.S.” *Environment* 58, no.5, 2016: 4–22.

Fagan, Moira and Christine Huang. “A look at how people around the world view climate change.” *Pew Research*, 18 April 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/18/a-look-at-how-people-around-the-world-view-climate-change>. Accessed 5 Nov 2020.

Funk, Cary and Meg Hefferon. “U.S. Public Views on Climate and Energy.” *Pew Research*, 25 November 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2019/11/25/u-s-public-views-on-climate-and-energy/>. Accessed 31 May 2021.

Fry, Richard. "Millennials Overtake Baby Boomers as America's Largest Generation." *Pew Research*, 28 Apr 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/28/millennials-overtake-baby-boomers-as-americas-largest-generation>. Accessed 2 Nov 2020.

Griffin, Rob, William H. Frey and Ruy Teixeira. "America's Electoral Future: The Coming Generational Transformation." *Center for American Progress*, 19 Oct 2020, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/politics-and-elections/reports/2020/10/19/491870/americas-electoral-future-3>. Accessed 2 Nov 2020.

Huizen, Jennifer. "What to know about eco-anxiety." *Medical News Today*, 19 Dec 2019, <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/327354>. Accessed 8 May 2021.

Ranalli, Ralph. "Young voters are highly motivated, flocking to Biden, and worried about the economy." Harvard Kennedy School, 23 Sept 2020 <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/faculty-research/policy-topics/politics/young-voters-are-highly-motivated-flocking-biden-and>. Accessed 2 Nov 2020.

Saad, Lydia. "Global Warming Concern at Three-Decade High in US." *Gallup*, 14 March 2017, www.gallup.com/poll/206030/global-warming-concern-three-decade-high.aspx. Accessed 31 May 2021.

Durr, Sarah. "New Poll: Climate Change, Gun Violence the Defining Issues for Young Voters." 24 Jan 2020, <https://www.usmayors.org/2020/01/24/new-poll-climate-change-gun-violence-the-defining-issues-for-young-voters/>. Accessed 10 Nov 2020.

Wu, Judy, Gaelen Snell and Hasina Samji. "Climate anxiety in young people: a call to action," *The Lancet*, Vol 4, Issue 10, 1 Oct 2020 [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196\(20\)30223-0/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(20)30223-0/fulltext). Accessed 8 May 2021.

Climate

Banerjee, Neela, Lisa Song and David Hasemyer. *Exxon: The Road Not Taken*, InsideClimate News, 2015.

Climate Interactive, Climate Scoreboard. <https://www.climateinteractive.org/ci-topics/climate-energy/scoreboard/frequently-asked-questions/>. Accessed 17 Nov 2020.

National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI) formerly National Climatic Data Center (NCDC) of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). *Extreme Events* <https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/climate-information/extreme-events>. Accessed 17 Nov 2020.

Divestment

Atif Ansar, Ben Caldecott and James Tilbury. "Stranded assets and the fossil fuel divestment campaign: what does divestment mean for the valuation of fossil fuel assets?" University of Oxford, 11 March 2015, <https://www.smithschool.ox.ac.uk/publications/reports/SAP-divestment-report-final.pdf>. Accessed 5 May 2021.

O'Daly, Britton. "Climate Change Protesters Disrupt Yale-Harvard Football Game." *The New York Times*, 23 Nov 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/23/us/harvard-yale-game-protest.html>. Accessed 5 Nov 2020.

Watanabe, Teresa. "UC becomes nation's largest university to divest fully from fossil fuels." *Los Angeles Times*, 19 May 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-05-19/uc-fossil-fuel-divest-climate-change>. Accessed 31 May 2021.

Pipeline debate

“Dakota Access Pipeline Company Attacks Native American Protesters with Dogs & Pepper Spray.” *Democracy Now*, Sep 4 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kuZcx2zEo4k>, 4. Accessed 14 Nov 2020.

Cagle, Susie. “Protesters as terrorists!: growing number of states turn anti-pipeline activism into a crime.” *Guardian*, 8 July 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jul/08/wave-of-new-laws-aim-to-stifle-anti-pipeline-protests-activists-say>. Accessed 31 May 2021.

Kusnetz, Nicolas. “How Energy Companies and Allies Are Turning the Law Against Protesters.” *InsideClimate News*, 22 Aug 2018, <https://insideclimatenews.org/news/22082018/pipeline-protest-laws-felony-free-speech-arrests-first-amendment-oklahoma-iowa-louisiana>. Accessed 14 Nov 2020.

Sadasivam, Naveena. “After Standing Rock, protesting pipelines can get you a decade in prison and \$100K in fines.” *Grist*, 14 May 2019, <https://grist.org/article/after-standing-rock-protesting-pipelines-can-get-you-a-decade-in-prison-and-100k-in-fines/>. Accessed 31 May 2021.

Other References

Brulle, Robert J. “The U.S. Environmental Movement”, *Twenty Lessons in Environmental Sociology*, New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 2013.

Commoner, Barry. *The Closing Circle*, New York, Mineola, Dover Publications, 1971.

Earth Day Network. www.earthday.net/education.

Gamber-Thompson, Liana. “Bypassing the Ballot Box,” *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism*, New York University Press, 2016, 219-252.

Heller, Nathan. “Is There any Point to Protesting?” *New Yorker*, 14 Aug 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/08/21/is-there-any-point-to-protesting>. Accessed 31 May 2021.

Huret, Romain and Cédric Tourbe. “Climat, une guerre américaine : quand la ‘wilderness’ tourne au drame.” Documentary film, 2020.

Jenkins, Henry, Sangita Shresthova, Liana Gamber-Thompson, Neta Kligler-Vilenchik and Arely Zimmerman. *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism*. New York University Press, 2016.

Oreskes, Naomi and Erik M. Conway. *Merchants of Doubt*. Bloomsbury Press, 2010.

Pirages, Dennis C. *Sustainable Society: Implications for Limited Growth*. Praeger Publishers, 1977.

Shellenberger, Michael and Ted Nordhaus. *The Death of Environmentalism*. 2004, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56a45d683b0be33df885def6/t/5c75569d104c7bbf4b4ef48e/1551194797246/Death_of_Environmentalism.pdf. Accessed 31 May 2021.

Tilly, Charles and Sidney Tarrow. *Contentious Politics*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2007.

Youth climate associations

American Conservation Coalition. acc.eco, climatesolution.eco

Divest from Fossil Fuels. gofossilfree.org

Earth Uprising. earthuprising.org

No Fossil Fuel Money Pledge. nofossilfuelmoney.org

One Mind Youth Movement. omym.org

Sunrise Movement. sunrisemovement.org, sunrisemovement.org/green-new-deal

U.S. Youth Climate Strike. strikewithus.org

Young Evangelicals for Climate Action. yecaction.org

Zero Hour. thisiszerohour.org

NOTES

1. The principle that certain natural and cultural resources are preserved for public use, and that the government owns and must protect and maintain these resources for the public's use (Legal Information Institute). https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/public_trust_doctrine. Accessed 31 May 2021.

ABSTRACTS

Youths are on the front line when considering their future on a planet that is becoming less and less livable. As the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events devastate regions and impact millions, the unapologetic anti-environmentalism of the Trump administration may have been the ultimate spark that ignited mass action from the young generations. Realizing, too, that many Congress members lack the political will to effect change, an increasing number of passionate youth leaders have initiated movements to raise awareness about the urgency of acting to mitigate the worst effects of climate change. Ranging from classic street protests to electoral canvassing to litigation, their actions may be characterized in terms of “disruptive, dutiful or dangerous dissent” (O’Brien et al). They have already played a key role in electing climate-conscious, progressive candidates, put pressure on governments through lawsuits and proposed an overhaul of the American economy on greener, more equitable terms by supporting the Green New Deal. In 2019 millennials (37% of US voters) surpassed baby boomers as the largest voting demographic group and could have a significant impact on climate policy.

Très préoccupés par le changement climatique, les jeunes sont en première ligne sur une planète qui devient de moins en moins vivable. Alors que la fréquence et l'intensité des catastrophes naturelles ont un impact dévastateur sur des régions et des millions d'habitants, l'anti-environnementalisme avéré de l'administration Trump a sans doute été l'étincelle ultime déclenchant une mobilisation de masse des jeunes Américains. Ayant fait le constat que le Congrès manque de volonté politique pour initier le changement, un nombre croissant de leaders, jeunes et passionnés, ont créé des mouvements pour informer le public de l'urgence de la situation. Ils agissent dans l'optique de réduire les conséquences les plus graves du réchauffement de la terre. Leurs actions contestataires peuvent se ranger dans trois catégories : « disruptive, dutiful, dangerous » (O'Brien et al). Ces jeunes ont déjà joué un rôle clef dans les victoires électorales de candidats progressistes et pro-climat ; ils ont poursuivi des gouvernements en justice ; et ils ont proposé une refonte de l'économie américaine en termes verts et équitables, le « Green New Deal. » En 2019, la génération née entre 1981 et 1996 a dépassé celle des *baby-boomers* pour devenir le groupe démographique dominant, ce qui pourrait avoir un impact important sur la politique climatique.

INDEX

Keywords: youth, climate, dissent, disruption, activism, fossil fuels, environment, Green New Deal, Sunrise Movement, protest, divestment, justice

Mots-clés: Mots-clés: jeunesse, climat, activisme, énergies fossiles, environnement, Green New Deal, Sunrise Movement, justice, contestation, désinvestissement

AUTHOR

MELANIE MEUNIER

University of Strasbourg

mmeunier@unistra.fr

Melanie Meunier is an American language and civilization teacher and researcher at Sciences Po Strasbourg where she teaches courses on environmental politics, climate change and the evolution of the media. She received degrees from Dartmouth College (USA), Sciences Po Paris and the University of Strasbourg, and wrote a doctoral dissertation on American environmental politics.