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Environmental Advocacy at the Dawn of the Trump Era

Assessing Strategies for the Preservation of Progress

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On November 6, 2015, environmental activists celebrated what they considered a major victory in the fight against fossil fuel extraction and for the mitigation of climate change. On that day, President Barack Obama announced his State Department's decision that the Keystone XL pipeline, a controversial project intended to link the Alberta oil sands in Canada with Gulf of Mexico refineries and distribution centers in the United States, would not be approved. The president agreed with his State Department's determination that building the pipeline "would not serve the national interest of the United States," although he made it clear that he believed the pipeline would "neither be a silver bullet for the economy, as was promised by some, nor the express lane to climate disaster proclaimed by others."¹ For climate and environmental activists, this announcement was the culmination of a multiyear campaign to stop construction of the pipeline, a campaign that generated hundreds of thousands of e-mails to the White House and Congress, mobilized thousands of activists who participated in sit-ins and rallies, and even occasioned more than a thousand civil disobedience arrests.²

Activists had even more reason for celebration six weeks later, when the 21st Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP21 of the UNFCCC) reached a far-reaching agreement in Paris to curtail greenhouse gas emissions around the world.³ These events, along with the Environmental Protection Agency's rules limiting emissions from coal-fired power plants and the potential election to the presidency of former secretary of state Hillary Clinton, who was running on a platform of continuing her predecessor's climate policies,⁴ gave climate and environmental activists reasonable cause for

optimism heading into the 2016 presidential election. That optimism suffered a severe blow on November 8, 2016—just over a year after the Keystone pipeline decision—when real estate magnate Donald Trump, defying the forecasts of nearly all election prognosticators, won the presidential election by capturing 304 electoral votes.⁵ Trump ran on a platform that professed skepticism about climate change as a scientific phenomenon and promised to roll back virtually all of his predecessor’s climate and environmental policies.

After years of pushing and prodding a generally sympathetic president in a policy direction with which he broadly agreed, climate and environmental activists found themselves in a completely different situation after Trump’s inauguration, facing a president and Congress that appear almost uniformly hostile to their goals. Activists have altered their playbook according to this strategic assumption. Grassroots-oriented advocacy groups such as 350.org have adopted a defiant posture toward the new administration, declaring their ongoing opposition to the Keystone pipeline and similar fossil fuel extraction projects. Meanwhile, legacy environmental organizations are taking the Trump administration to court to prevent his proposed rollback of the EPA’s climate pollution regulations. A broad array of climate and environmental groups has also opposed Trump’s proposed rollback of President Obama’s carbon emission rules, cuts to the EPA’s budget, and other proposals.

This chapter briefly chronicles the activities that environmental advocates undertook during the Obama administration and how they became involved in the 2016 presidential election. It lays out the challenges they face under the new Trump administration, and it discusses how they are responding to these challenges so far.

Activism in the Obama Era

The Obama era of environmental activism is bifurcated by Congress’s failure to pass a cap-and-trade bill in 2010. This failure has been blamed on many different factors. The economic recession, the heavy focus on the health care debate, a perceived lack of leadership by the White House, the country’s intense political polarization, the rise of the Tea Party movement, the difficulty in passing legislation that strongly challenged the political status quo, and miscalculations by key leaders in the Senate all contributed to the bill’s demise.⁶ In the cap-and-trade fight, environmental leaders acknowledged that they had lacked the capacity for grassroots mobilization in key House districts and in states where Senate seats were at stake. According to some critiques, the campaign to pass cap-and-trade legislation had focused too much on a “big fix,” communicating about the technical details of the policy rather than

showing the public how climate change action might personally benefit people and their communities.

Environmental groups had conducted a “policy” campaign rather than a “cultural” campaign, and they lacked the ability to punish or reward members of Congress.⁷ In a much debated assessment of the bill’s failure, Harvard University political scientist Theda Skocpol argued that groups such as the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) and the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) had relied too heavily on traditional inside-the-Beltway strategies of coalition building and lobbying and had not done enough to rally grassroots support for cap-and-trade legislation. The design of the policy itself, argued Skocpol, was confusing to the public, focusing too heavily on providing giveaways to corporations rather than on direct benefits to the public. The bill also generated skepticism from more activist-minded environmental groups and progressive leaders who either threw their support behind the bill reluctantly or remained quietly on the sidelines.⁸ After the demise of cap-and-trade legislation, the coordinated alliance among the EDF, the NRDC, and other big-budget environmental groups lobbying on behalf of congressional action split apart. With Republicans winning control of the House in 2010, there was little chance of a major climate bill passing, leaving this coalition without a defining goal to align around. Instead, the NRDC focused on passing a federal clean energy standard, increasing fuel efficiency for cars, and promoting new rules by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to limit greenhouse gas emissions from power plants.

At the state and local levels, other groups led by the Sierra Club and the League of Conservation Voters took legal action against coal-fired power plants, marshaled grassroots pressure to shut them down, and funded electoral campaigns to elect Democrats supportive of action on climate change. “The national environmental groups said, ‘We need to do more in-your-face activism,’” Gene Karpinski, president of the League of Conservation Voters, told the *New York Times*. “You can’t just lobby members of Congress with a poll that says people support you.”⁹ Most significantly, the period 2011–2014 is notable for the rise to prominence of a new form of environmental advocacy group, much smaller in size and budget and focused specifically on climate change. These groups specialize in a sophisticated form of Internet-enabled grassroots activism designed to pressure political leaders, institutions, and industry members by rallying a liberal base of activists around issues such as the Keystone XL pipeline and divestment from fossil fuel industries. It took the failure of the national environmental organizations to pass cap and trade, the search among funders and advocates

for new grassroots strategies and leaders, and the cultural, media, and economic factors that converged in the wake of the 2010 elections to help push environmental activists and writer Bill McKibben and the activist group he cofounded, 350.org, into national prominence.¹⁰ In February 2005, as a scholar in residence at Middlebury College, McKibben began meeting informally with students to discuss strategies for mobilizing political action on climate change, which led in 2006 to a thousand-person, five-day hike to call attention to climate change. The perceived success of the event prompted McKibben and his collaborators in 2007 to organize national “Step It Up” days of action, which they coordinated by way of the Step It Up website.¹¹

To share insight about their new model for organizing, McKibben and his five co-organizers published in 2007 *Fight Global Warming Now: The Handbook for Taking Action in Your Community*.¹² In 2008, McKibben and his collaborators from Middlebury College launched 350.org. The name of the organization was derived from climate scientist James Hansen’s declaration that 350 parts per million was the “safe” level for the stabilization of atmospheric carbon dioxide levels, a goal required to avoid the worst effects of climate change. In comparison to the EDF or NRDC, each of which boasts a budget greater than \$100 million and hundreds of highly credentialed staff,¹³ as of 2015, 350.org employed 120 staff in the United States and abroad—but spent only \$7.6 million on campaign work and grassroots field organizing.¹⁴

The main goal of 350.org was to use Internet-enabled organizing strategies to increase the intensity of political activity among those members of the public already alarmed about climate change. In targeting this segment, McKibben was appealing directly to the base of readers and fans he had built up over the past twenty years as a best-selling author. Yet despite an avid interest in climate change and a shared worldview, these people had a historically low level of activism, as was evident in the cap-and-trade debate. As May Boeve, executive director of 350.org, said in a 2011 interview, “Our most consistent audience is the community of people who care about climate change and see it as a problem and are committed to do something about it. The metaphor we like to use is, yes, there’s an issue of preaching to the choir, but imagine if you could have the choir all singing from the same song sheet.”¹⁵

Sparking a National Pipeline Controversy

Following the demise of cap-and-trade legislation and with international negotiations stalled, McKibben and 350.org began the search for a new political target to mobilize a movement around. In early 2011, McKibben learned of the proposed Keystone XL pipeline and the pending approval by the U.S. State Department. Most experts had predicted that the Obama administration would approve the Keystone XL pipeline. Yet McKibben and 350.org have played a central role in delaying its approval by morally dramatizing the stakes involved and rallying a small, yet intense, base of opposition.

To be approved, the pipeline had to be judged in the “national interest” by the Obama administration and U.S. State Department. McKibben realized not only that the pipeline was a potent symbol to rally activists against but also that rejecting the pipeline was an action by which Obama could demonstrate his commitment to climate change, bypassing a gridlocked Congress. Turning again to James Hansen to muster rhetorical authority, McKibben cited Hansen’s (contested) conclusion that by speeding up the development of the oil sands, approval of the pipeline would mean “Essentially, it’s game over for the planet.”¹⁶

Using Hansen’s dramatic assessment as a rallying cry, in August 2011, 350.org and its allies mobilized thousands to protest in front of the White House, with more than twelve hundred participants arrested. They followed in November by turning out an estimated fifteen thousand activists who encircled the White House in a last push to convince President Obama to reject the pipeline. Later, in February 2012, after Obama had delayed the decision on the pipeline until 2013, the Senate took up legislation revisiting the pipeline. In response, McKibben and 350.org joined with other environmental groups to generate more than eight hundred thousand messages to senators, an effort that aided the defeat of the bill. In February 2013, an estimated thirty thousand gathered on the National Mall to once again pressure the president as they waited on a decision.¹⁷

The staged protests, arrests, and related strategies were the first in an ongoing series that, for a second time, pressured the Obama administration into delaying a decision on the Keystone pipeline until at least 2015. Protests occurred not only in Washington, DC, but were coordinated across other cities and states. In Nebraska, environmentalists joined with ranchers, farmers, and Native Americans to oppose the pipeline. This self-described “Cowboy Indian Alliance” has cited risks from pipeline spills to local groundwater contamination and threats to public safety. Activists have also challenged the Nebraska governor’s authority to approve the construction of the pipeline within the state, taking the case to the state supreme court. Local spin-offs of the national 350.org effort, such as 350

Maine and 350 Massachusetts, have applied similar protest strategies in opposing regional oil pipeline projects, coal-fired power plants, and natural gas development.¹⁸ Major environmental groups joining with 350.org in opposing the Keystone pipeline include the NRDC, the League of Conservation Voters, Friends of the Earth, and the Sierra Club. Along with supporting protest actions, the Sierra Club and Friends of the Earth have also used freedom of information requests to call attention to what they allege are corrupting ties between the State Department, the consulting firm hired to assess environmental impacts, and related industry members.¹⁹

Delaying a decision on the Keystone pipeline seemed prudent. Obama and his advisers feared that a decision to reject the pipeline might hurt the 2014 electoral chances of Democrats in swing states and districts by giving Republicans a ready-made issue to intensify support and turnout among their own grassroots base. Alternatively, if Obama were to approve the pipeline, the decision would risk provoking a rebellion among a network of major liberal donors and depress electoral support among progressive activists and voters.²⁰ At his influential Dot Earth blog at the *New York Times*, environmental writer Andrew Revkin was critical of McKibben's effort to block the Keystone XL pipeline, arguing that the controversy was a "distraction from core issues and opportunities on energy and largely insignificant if your concern is averting a disruptive buildup of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere."²¹ The Editorial Board at the *Washington Post* and the editors of the journal *Nature* offered similar lines of criticism.²² As the *Nature* editors wrote, "The pipeline is not going to determine whether the Canadian tar sands are developed or not. Only a broader—and much more important—shift in energy policy will do that." A more comprehensive action, according to the *Nature* editors, would be the implementation of pending EPA regulations for power plants that would "send a message to the coal industry: clean up or fade away."²³

The 2016 Democratic Primary

Environmental activists could justifiably look back on the Obama years with a sense that some progress had been achieved, especially on the climate change front: The Keystone pipeline had been rejected, new EPA regulations on the biggest climate polluters had been enacted, millions had been spent on energy efficiency and clean energy technology research, and a sweeping agreement to curb carbon emissions had been adopted in Paris. At the same time, they could point to several disappointments, such as Obama's stance on offshore

drilling. Looking beyond the Obama presidency, activist groups wanted to consolidate the gains made over the previous years while ensuring prospects for more progress. Grassroots climate groups in particular wanted the next administration to be even more aggressive on climate change than the Obama administration had been; in their estimation, Obama-era policy had fallen short on the issue in several ways.

With these goals in mind, environmental and climate groups of all stripes threw themselves into the struggle within the Democratic Party to find a successor to Obama. In the leading Democratic presidential contenders, former secretary of state Hillary Clinton and Vermont senator Bernie Sanders, activists had candidates they could support, as both pledged to at least continue, or even improve upon, many of President Obama's environmental policies. Climate and environmental advocacy groups split their support between Clinton and Sanders, with larger, well-established environmental groups usually endorsing Clinton and smaller, climate-focused groups endorsing Sanders.²⁴

The NRDC issued its first-ever endorsement of a candidate during a presidential primary by endorsing Hillary Clinton, extolling her as “an environmental champion with the passion, experience and savvy to build on President Obama's environmental legacy.”²⁵ In its endorsement of Clinton, the League of Conservation Voters (LCV) called her “without a doubt the most effective leader to stand up to Big Polluters and push forward an aggressive plan to tackle climate change and get it done.”²⁶ Meanwhile, Friends of the Earth, widely considered more left leaning than most major environmental groups, endorsed Senator Sanders, citing his “bold ideas and real solutions to addressing climate change, inequality and promoting a transformative economy that prioritizes public health and the environment over corporate profits.”²⁷ Environmental writer and 350.org cofounder Bill McKibben became deeply involved in the Sanders campaign, going so far as to serve as a party platform delegate for the Vermont senator.²⁸

Despite some victories, McKibben mostly expressed disappointment at the party's platform committee and accused the Clinton campaign of being “unwilling to commit to delivering specifics about fundamental change in America.”²⁹ McKibben was particularly disappointed at the Clinton campaign's decision to block several climate change-related planks sponsored by the Sanders campaign, such as a carbon tax, a ban on fracking, an effort to keep fossil fuels in the ground on federal land, and mandating that federal agencies weigh the climate impacts of their decisions.³⁰ Fracking—the process of extracting oil or gas from the ground by injecting pressurized liquid into rock—was one of the most prominent

environmental issues during the Democratic presidential primary. Climate change activism and anti-fracking campaigns have been increasingly coinciding in recent years, with activists drawing connections between the local impacts of fracking and its global impact on climate change.³¹ This pattern continued throughout the Democratic primaries. For example, Josh Fox, the director of *Gasland*, a documentary about fracking, rallied around Senator Sanders, who proposed a national ban on the practice and also advocated an ambitious plan to curb climate change.³² Secretary Clinton, meanwhile, supported fracking as a way to fight climate change, encourage American energy independence, and undercut petro-states such as Russia, but she also supported “smart regulations” on fracking.³³

Taking on Donald Trump

Despite their differences during the primary campaign, environmental activists mostly coalesced around Secretary Clinton’s candidacy as a way to prevent a Donald Trump presidency. As a candidate, Trump repeatedly denied the scientific consensus on climate change, calling it a “hoax” that helped China undercut the United States in manufacturing.³⁴ During the presidential campaign, Trump called for more fossil fuel extraction and pledged to rescind environmental regulations promulgated by the Obama administration to curb climate pollution, to pull the United States out of the Paris Agreement, to revive the coal economy, and to restart the Keystone XL pipeline project that the Obama State Department refused to approve in 2015.³⁵ Trump also often spoke derisively of President Obama’s climate and energy policies. During a major energy policy speech in Bismarck, North Dakota, he said, “Regulations that shut down hundreds of coal-fired power plants and block the construction of new ones — how stupid is that?”³⁶

Environmental activists saw a Trump presidency as a dire threat to gains made during the Obama administration, as well as to their ability to address issues like climate change more aggressively in the future. While endorsing Secretary Clinton, NRDC Action Fund president Rhea Suh sharply criticized Trump’s environmental agenda: “His plan for his first 100 days would take us back 100 years, and America cannot afford to indulge his climate conspiracy theories.”³⁷ EDF issued a point-by-point refutation of Trump’s most controversial environmental claims, including that climate change is a hoax and that “there is no drought” in California.³⁸ LCV used the spotlight of the Democratic National Convention to name Donald Trump to its “Dirty Dozen”—a collection of the candidates who, in its judgment, most consistently side against the environment. During the convention, LCV president Gene

Karpinski declared about the so-designated Trump, “I can’t imagine anyone more deserving.”³⁹ After Trump’s Republican presidential nomination became a foregone conclusion, the Sierra Club issued a report stating that, if elected, Trump would be “the only world leader to deny the science and dangers of climate change.”⁴⁰ Large environmental organizations, along with billionaire Tom Steyer’s NextGen Climate organization, backed up their opposition to Trump with large campaign expenditures. Together, these groups spent more than \$100 million during the 2016 election cycle, much of it focused on the presidential election. LCV spent \$40 million in its campaign to defeat Donald Trump, while NextGen Climate reportedly spent \$55 million.⁴¹

Climate advocacy groups such as 350.org also supported Clinton, but they did so in a more subdued tone. Power Shift, a climate advocacy group that focuses on millennials, did not even send a preelection mobilization e-mail to its supporters, focusing instead on the Dakota Access pipeline. In a mass e-mail to supporters, 350.org’s Duncan Meisel wrote, “Hillary Clinton, after much pressure, says she opposes Keystone XL. If she’s President, we have a shot at pressuring her into doing the right thing on fracking, Dakota Access, and more.” It also accused Donald Trump of personally investing “up to \$1 million into the company behind the Dakota Access pipeline” and said he would “doom international efforts to stop climate change, making the world hotter, poorer, and more dangerous.”⁴² One of the tactics 350.org used to influence the election’s outcome was trying to influence the agenda of the presidential debates. The group directed its supporters to vote online for one of three questions related to climate change that might be included in the second debate—the town hall version—if they garnered enough votes.⁴³ Ultimately, none of the questions about climate change were included in the debate, although Clinton mentioned the issue once.⁴⁴

In the end, all the money and manpower that environmental activists invested in electing Secretary Clinton president were for naught. On November 8, 2016, Donald Trump was elected president of the United States after amassing 304 electoral votes, even as he lost the popular vote to Hillary Clinton by more than 2.8 million votes.⁴⁵ Given that nearly all election prognosticators had predicted a Clinton win,⁴⁶ Trump’s victory came as a shock to many election observers—including environmental activists.

The Trump Victory: Shock, Grief, and Defiance

Reactions from environmental activist groups ranged from shock and grief to defiance and resolve. Fred Krupp, the president of EDF, which is considered a moderate environmental

organization, emphasized in his postelection statement the group's ability for "finding opportunity where others see impasse . . . while always sticking to our core principles."⁴⁷ NRDC's Rhea Suh expressed "shock and disappointment" and said that "[f]eeling shell-shocked is an appropriate response," but she also declared that the "NRDC will fight for our environment, for our climate, and for our shared clean energy future—harder than we ever have fought before."⁴⁸ Michael Brune, executive director of the Sierra Club, said the following during remarks at the National Press Club: "For people all over the country, the pain, anger, and fear at the prospect of a Trump presidency are very real." But he also declared, "We aren't defeated. We are determined."⁴⁹ Greenpeace USA's Annie Leonard wrote that the "election of Donald Trump as President of the United States has been devastating" but also pledged that "Greenpeace is not going anywhere, and we are committed to continue building a movement that fights for environmental, social, racial, and economic justice. We are going to get through this—together."⁵⁰ Friends of the Earth U.S. Climate and Energy Director Benjamin Schreiber claimed the entire American climate movement was "stunned" by Trump's victory, declared the United States would now likely be a "rogue state on climate change," and gave up any notions of progress during a Trump administration, even calling on the world to "use economic and diplomatic pressure to compel U.S. leaders to act" on climate change.⁵¹

Climate change advocacy groups were equally grief stricken but also defiant. The Climate Reality Project, led by former vice president Al Gore, struck a moderate tone, cautioning against giving in to despair and telling its supporters that "this challenge is too important and too pressing to ignore, so we must face the truth in front of us and commit to fighting harder than ever before to protect our precious home."⁵² In a mass e-mail, Power Shift executive director Lydia Avila told supporters that the country's "darkest, ugliest impulses celebrated an enormous victory last night" but also made "a commitment to you, and to everyone I love, that we will not let this kill our spirit." She called on fellow activists to "fight and organize harder than many of us ever have."⁵³ As May Boeve, executive director of 350.org, wrote, "The hardest thing to do right now is to hold on to hope, but it's what we must do . . . we are in this together, and when we mobilize, we are capable of the unimaginable. No one man—no matter how cruel or powerful—can take that away."⁵⁴ Her e-mail, which was available as a blog post, also included an invitation to supporters to participate in a national organizing call taking place two days later.

With these and other statements, environmental groups across the spectrum declared their virtually unanimous opposition to the Trump administration. In the months following the election, this opposition would take various forms, including Internet-mediated offline events such as marches and rallies, as well as insider-type tactics such as lawsuits.

Activism at the Dawn of the Trump Era

The months between the election and the presidential inauguration seemed to confirm all the fears that activists had about a Trump administration. As president elect, Trump signaled that he was looking for the quickest possible way to withdraw the United States from the Paris Agreement.⁵⁵ He also appointed Myron Ebell to head the EPA's transition team. Ebell, a leading contrarian of the scientific consensus on global warming, is head of environmental and energy policy at the Competitive Enterprise Institute, a libertarian advocacy group financed in part by the fossil fuel industry.⁵⁶ Ebell's appointment was widely believed to be a preamble for the undoing of many of President Obama's environmental policies, including his Clean Power Plan, which aimed to reduce carbon emissions from coal-fired power plants, emissions that fuel climate change.

President-elect Trump's appointments to his cabinet did not inspire confidence among environmental activists, either. Trump appointed ExxonMobil chairman and CEO Rex Tillerson as secretary of state, former Texas governor Rick Perry as secretary of energy, and Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt as EPA administrator. Activists objected to the incoming cabinet's ties to the fossil fuel industry, and they especially condemned Pruitt's appointment, given that as attorney general of Oklahoma he had sued the EPA fourteen times.⁵⁷ Several environmental groups, including the Sierra Club and the League of Conservation Voters, ran online petitions urging the Senate to reject Pruitt's nomination.⁵⁸ Although these petitions failed to keep Pruitt from becoming EPA administrator, they likely served to grow the supporter lists of various environmental advocacy groups and to keep these groups engaged in preparation for battles to come.

Women's March on Washington

Environmental activism's first major effort to register opposition to the Trump administration came during the Women's March on Washington that took place on January 21, 2017—the day after President Trump's inauguration. The stated purpose of the Women's March, according to its organizers, was to “stand together in solidarity with our partners and children for the protection of our rights, our safety, our health, and our families—recognizing

that our vibrant and diverse communities are the strength of our country.”⁵⁹ The march became a focal point for a wide range of grievances against the incoming president, including his treatment of women, minorities, the disabled, and other underprivileged groups, as well as his climate change denialism and other environmental stances. In fact, “environmental justice” was one of the “unity principles” of the march.⁶⁰

Many environmental advocacy groups, including the Sierra Club, NRDC, and 350.org, declared solidarity with the march. Their participation often emphasized the concept of *intersectionality*—the notion that multiple identities intersect to create a whole that is different from its constituent parts. As sociologist Patricia Hill Collins defines the term, “race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena.”⁶¹ The Sierra Club’s characterization of its participation in the march is a good example of this phenomenon. In *Sierra*, the organization’s magazine, Wendy Bechtold opens an article about the Women’s March this way:

Cindy Wiesner is queer, Latina, and the daughter of an immigrant. She also lives in Miami, which she points out will eventually be under water because of rising sea levels. Like many people participating in the Women’s March on Washington this Saturday, she won’t be marching just for women’s rights, racial equality, or environmental justice. She’ll be marching for all three, because she lives the struggle for each.⁶²

In a similar vein, 350.org’s May Boeve wrote in a mass e-mail to the group’s supporters on Inauguration Day about the Women’s March, emphasizing the intersectionality between the different communities that were scheduled to meet in Washington, DC, the following day:

Every one of the problems posed by the next President has, at its core, the same solution: people speaking the truth, without apology, in every way available to them. The Women’s March is open to all people who recognize the violence of the next Administration, and wish to speak out about it. It will be a history-making day—here’s where to go to be a part of it.⁶³

The Women’s March on Washington spawned a global movement, with 161 sister marches occurring in 61 countries and all seven continents, including Antarctica.⁶⁴ It is estimated that between 470,000 to 680,000 people marched in Washington, DC, while between 3.3 million and 4.6 million marched throughout the United States.⁶⁵

The success of the Women’s March suggested renewed interest in progressive activism, including environmental activism, centered on opposition to President Trump and his conservative agenda. Other signs, such as monthly donations, also pointed to a surge of interest in anti-Trump environmental activism. Several environmental organizations, including the Sierra Club, Greenpeace, and Friends of the Earth, saw surges in their numbers of monthly donors. The Sierra Club’s chief advancement officer said, “We’ve never seen the volume like this and we’ve never seen it around monthly donors . . . that people are joining monthly, so being committed to the cause over time, is something that is truly unprecedented.”⁶⁶ Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth also reported major increases in their monthly donors. Another sign of renewed interest in environmentally centered political participation was a spike in individuals (especially women) interested in running for public office on explicitly environmental platforms. In another example of intersectionality, a collection of women’s and environmental groups, including EMILY’s List, NextGen Climate, ROSA PAC, EDF, Rachel’s Network, the Sierra Club, and others, cosponsored training for women interested in running for office called “Running to Win 101.” More than 300 women applied for the training, but only 150 were allowed to participate due to space constraints. The training emphasized the political benefits of touting clean energy jobs.⁶⁷

March for Science

Environmentalists had a second opportunity to participate in a high-profile march against the Trump administration during the March for Science, which took place in Washington, DC, and satellite locations on Earth Day, April 22, 2017. The original idea for the march sprang from the success of the Women’s March, when a Reddit commenter, during a discussion of President Trump’s science policies, suggested a “Scientists’ March on Washington.” Shortly thereafter, the march had a Facebook page, a Twitter handle, a website, two cochairs, and a Google form through which interested scientists could sign up to help.⁶⁸

By the time the march took place, major scientific organizations such as the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the Paleontological Society, the Genetics Society of America, and others, as well as environmental organizations, such as the Nature Conservancy, NextGen Climate, Friends of the Earth, Green for All, and 350.org, had become partners of the march.⁶⁹ As with the March for Women, intersectionality was at the core of the March for Science. Through their “Diversity Principles,” march organizers fully embraced the language of intersectionality:

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*Inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility are central to the mission and principles of the March for Science [emphasis in original]. Scientists and people who care about science are an intersectional group, embodying a diverse range of races, sexual orientations, gender identities, abilities, religions, ages, socioeconomic and immigration statuses. We, the march organizers, represent and stand in solidarity with historically underrepresented scientists and science advocates. We are united by our passion to pursue and share knowledge.*⁷⁰

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Also, like the Women’s March, the March for Science spawned satellite marches around the United States and other countries. It is estimated that 40,000 people attended marches in both Washington, DC, and Chicago; 20,000 attended in New York City; and 10,000 attended marches in both Philadelphia and London.⁷¹ Despite its relatively broad support among the scientific community, the march was not without detractors. For example, University of Maryland physics professor Sylvester James Gates worried that “such a politically charged event might send a message to the public that scientists are driven by ideology more than by evidence.”⁷² Representing science as a political faction or interest group, Gates told reporters at a gathering of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, is “extraordinarily dangerous.”

People’s Climate March

To date, the People’s Climate March has been the environmental movement’s most direct contribution to the proliferation of marches and demonstrations following Donald Trump’s election. Its history goes back to first People’s Climate March, which took place in New York City on September 21, 2014, two days before the UN Climate Summit. That first march attracted approximately 300,000 people, making it at the time the biggest climate change march in history.⁷³

The 2017 People’s Climate March was announced soon after the Women’s March, by the same organizing coalition behind the 2014 march. Organizers declared that the April 29, 2017 march

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. . . comes in response to widespread outrage against President Trump’s disastrous anti-climate agenda—including his executive orders yesterday advancing the Keystone and Dakota Access pipelines—as well as his attacks on healthcare, immigrants, and programs and policies that improve the lives of all Americans.⁷⁴

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The march’s steering committee consisted of more than 50 organizations. They ranged from well-established environmental organizations, such as the League of Conservation Voters, the Natural Resources Defense Council, Oceana, and the Sierra Club, to newer, climate-focused groups, such as 350.org, Power Shift, and Green for All. Also included were nonenvironmental groups such as Public Citizen, the American Postal Workers Union, the Center for Community Change, and others.⁷⁵ As with the preceding marches, the People’s Climate March echoed in its organizing principles the language of intersectionality. Its organizers aimed to “[p]rioritize leadership of front-line communities, communities of color, low-income communities, workers and others impacted by climate, economic and racial inequity” and to “[d]evelop opportunities for a range of organizations and social movements to work together, and to use our joint efforts to give greater visibility to our common struggle.”⁷⁶ The main march in Washington, DC, and its sister marches in the United States and around the world were heavily promoted via social media, using hashtags such as #climatemarch. The main march was also broadcast live online via the website peoplesclimate.org/live. Attendance at the march in Washington, DC, has been estimated at around 200,000.⁷⁷

Despite its success in rallying hundreds of thousands under the banner of climate action and justice, the march has had some detractors. For example, journalism professor Jill Hopke argues that the march’s messaging was too narrow and would not help grow the climate movement beyond its natural constituencies.⁷⁸ Relying on research from the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication,⁷⁹ Hopke notes that only 18 percent of the U.S. population can be classified as being “alarmed” about climate change while a plurality is only concerned about it. She then argues that the messages that march organizers spread through social media would appeal only to the “alarmed” public, thus limiting the march’s appeal and ability to grow the climate movement as a whole. “As a first step,” says Hopke, “it will be critical for climate activists to reach beyond core supporters after the march. It is time to disassociate

climate action in the United States from the political left and climate denialism from conservatives.⁸⁰

Taking Trump to Court

Although marches and similar grassroots efforts featured prominently among the tactics used by environmentalists during the first 100 days of the Trump administration, they were far from the only ones. Taking the administration to court over various energy and environmental policies has been another prominent insider tactic used by several environmental groups. A major focus of environmental activists at the dawn of the Trump presidency has been defending President Obama's Clean Power Plan. This initiative, which was finalized by the Obama administration in August 2015, would cut carbon emissions 32 percent below 2005 levels by 2030 by having states achieve specific levels or rates of reduction. States would choose the mix of natural gas, renewable energy, and energy savings they would deploy to achieve their reduction targets. The plan immediately came under attack in the courts, where nearly 150 opponents, including 27 states, filed more than 50 lawsuits against it.⁸¹ The plan was put on hold by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2016 pending litigation by states and business groups.⁸²

President Trump issued an executive order on March 28, 2017, ordering the EPA to review the Clean Power Plan. The order directed all executive departments and agencies to

[begin block quote]

immediately review existing regulations that potentially burden the development or use of domestically produced energy resources and appropriately suspend, revise, or rescind those that unduly burden the development of domestic energy resources beyond the degree necessary to protect the public interest or otherwise comply with the law.⁸³

[end block quote]

Environmental activists and advocacy groups, including EDF and the Sierra Club, immediately took the Trump administration to court in an attempt to save the Clean Power Plan. As of this writing, however, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia had issued a stay on litigation against the Environmental Protection Agency rule for 60 days. Although opponents of the Clean Power Plan hailed the decision as a "death knell" for the plan, EDF's general counsel said that the EPA has "a duty to protect Americans from

dangerous climate pollution under our nation's clean air laws, and Environmental Defense Fund will take swift action to ensure that EPA carries out its responsibilities under the law."⁸⁴ The quotation refers to the *Massachusetts v. EPA* Supreme Court decision that holds the EPA accountable for reducing carbon pollution.⁸⁵

The legal wrangling over the Clean Power Act is just one of several legal battles that environmentalists are waging against the Trump administration. For example, the Sierra Club, the Center for Biological Diversity, and Earthjustice have joined forces with the Northern Cheyenne Tribe to block President Trump's March 28th order because it lifts restrictions on coal sales from federal lands. An attorney for Earthjustice characterized the lifting of the moratorium as "a hail Mary to a dying industry."⁸⁶ Another prominent legal battle being waged by environmentalists against the Trump administration revolves around the Keystone XL project. Groups that include the Center for Biological Diversity, the Sierra Club, and the Northern Plains Resource Council argued that the Trump administration used an "outdated and incomplete environmental impact statement" when making its decision to revive the project that the Obama administration had rejected, and that by approving the pipeline without public input and an up-to-date environmental assessment, the administration violated the National Environmental Policy Act (the case was still under litigation as of this writing).⁸⁷ Environmental activists have even used the courts to take on some of President Trump's most controversial nonenvironmental policies. For example, the Center for Biological Diversity and Representative Raúl M. Grijalva (D-Arizona) sued the Trump administration over construction of the border wall between Mexico and the United States that candidate Trump promised during the campaign. The center and Grijalva alleged in court that the Trump administration had failed to study the wall's environmental impact before gearing up for its construction.⁸⁸ If this pattern holds, the rest of President Trump's four-year term promises to be one of never-ending environmental litigation.

Conclusion

This chapter has chronicled some of the most important instances of environmental activism during the last years of the Obama administration and the beginning of the Trump presidency. There are important similarities and differences to note. Although some of the tactics deployed by activists during both periods may be similar, such as marches and rallies, the intensity of vitriol directed towards the targets make for a stark contrast. President Obama was treated by activists as essentially a reluctant ally who had to be pushed and prodded into

doing the right thing from the activists' point of view. President Trump, on the other hand, has been treated so far as an implacable enemy of the environment and climate action who must be opposed vociferously at every turn. But the Trump administration's positions on climate and the environment are not as uniformly opposed to the preferences of activists as they might appear at first sight. There appears to be some support within the administration for keeping the United States within the Paris Agreement, and there is even support in some quarters for a carbon tax.⁸⁹ These climate-friendly positions are deeply embedded in struggles within the administration among top aides seeking to influence the president, and it is too early as of this writing to predict which faction will win. Despite these divisions, activists show no obvious signs of seeking to exploit them.

Another theme that emerges throughout the most recent instances of activism against the incipient Trump administration is the widespread embrace of the concept of intersectionality. Activists have not only embraced the idea that individuals can have distinct yet intersecting identities and also be the victims of distinct yet intersecting systems of oppression, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and others,⁹⁰ but also incorporated this idea into their organizing. Although there may be strong moral reasons for this embrace, from a strategic angle, intersectionality can be a double-edged sword for environmental activists. Intersectionality has the potential to expand environmental activism's public by appealing to individuals who have traditionally not been part of it, such as minorities. Yet intersectionality also holds the potential to consume environmental actions in internecine battles over the proper representation of various identities. Activists will have to balance carefully their wish to be more inclusive with the environmental movement's strategic priorities.

A third theme that emerges from this chapter is the communication strategies that environmental advocates have deployed so far vis-à-vis the Trump administration. Environmental activists (and progressives, more broadly) have been remarkably successful at repeatedly mobilizing hundreds of thousands of people into the streets to protest the new president. Yet Jill Hopke's critique poses a question: can environmental and climate activists move public opinion significantly with their current communication strategies? Using these strategies, argues Hopke, climate and environmental activists only appeal to the "alarmed" segment of the public (which comprises 18 percent of the public, at least on climate change). To expand their base of support and heighten the urgency of climate and related issues, activists would have to appeal more effectively to the "concerned" segment of the public, which comprises 34 percent, and move them into the alarmed category. It remains to be seen

whether highly partisan and polarizing attacks on the Trump administration can help accomplish this. Given the escalating polarization of the country after the election of Donald Trump,⁹¹ however, it is difficult to see how this communication strategy will help change public opinion in the direction that activists would like to see it move.

Suggested Websites

350.org (www.350.org) An advocacy group specializing in grassroots mobilization and industry pressure campaigns, 350.org was cofounded by environmental writer Bill McKibben. The site features multimedia campaign updates, backgrounders, blogs, and videos.

Ensia (www.ensia.com) Web magazine *Ensi*a features news and commentary about environmental science and policy with a focus on identifying new ideas, voices, and opportunities for collaboration in support of policy solutions and actions.

The Breakthrough Institute (www.thebreakthrough.org) The Breakthrough Institute is a San Francisco–based progressive think tank focused on an “eco-modernist,” pragmatic approach to environmental problems and advocacy. The website features commentary, articles, analysis, and reports from experts and journalists analyzing trends and directions related to climate change and energy policy.

Climate Shift (www.climateshiftproject.org) The Climate Shift Project website, authored by Northeastern University professor Matthew C. Nisbet, provides discussion, commentary, and analysis of new studies, reports, books, and public opinion survey trends related to environmental politics and climate change. The site includes access to related courses, workshops, podcasts, and other resources including “The Age of Us: Communication, Culture & Politics in the Anthropocene,” a column Nisbet writes at *The Conversation* (<https://theconversation.com/columns/matthew-nisbet-114648>).

Inside Climate News (insideclimatenews.org) This Pulitzer Prize–winning advocacy news site features coverage and analysis of the debate over the Keystone XL pipeline, the fossil fuel divestment movement, and climate change–related electoral politics.

Dot Earth: New York Times Blog (www.nytimes.com/dotearth) Dot Earth features commentary and analysis of trends in climate science, politics, and policy ideas by veteran environmental writer Andrew Revkin.

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