

Environmental Advocacy in the Obama Years

Assessing New Strategies for Political Change

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On a cold day in February 2013, on the National Mall in Washington, DC, an estimated thirty thousand people gathered to protest the Keystone XL pipeline, the controversial project intended to link the Alberta oil sands in Canada with Gulf of Mexico refineries and distribution centers in the United States. “All I ever wanted to see was a movement of people to stop climate change,” declared writer turned 350.org activist group leader Bill McKibben, addressing the crowd from a stage. “And now,” he told them, “I’ve seen it.”¹ Minor political players just three years earlier as the major environmental groups failed to pass congressional cap-and-trade legislation, McKibben and 350.org have in the years since redefined the way environmental groups practice politics, generating levels of grassroots activism not seen since the first Earth Day four decades ago. To do so, McKibben has melded his storytelling ability as a popular writer with 350.org’s innovative methods of Internet-enabled political organizing.

These grassroots strategies have been joined by a new approach to electoral politics, bankrolled by California billionaire Tom Steyer. Adopting campaign-financing methods first employed by his billionaire counterparts on the right, Steyer in 2013 launched the super PAC NextGen Climate. Promising to spend upwards of \$100 million in the 2014 Senate and governor’s races, Steyer’s goal is to make denial of climate change by Republican candidates politically unacceptable and action on the issue a priority among Democrats, all the while setting the stage for climate change to be a dominant point of contention during the 2016 presidential election.

These complementary outside-the-Beltway strategies address a long-standing weakness on the part of the national environmental movement and the major DC-based groups that, despite immense budgets, hundreds of highly credentialed staff, and millions of members, have struggled to shape public opinion or to generate grassroots pressure on elected officials. Instead, these national groups have specialized in insider coalition building, think tank-style analysis, and lobbying. Yet, the defeat in 2010 of cap-and-trade legislation, after years of planning and the expenditure of vast financial resources, forced many environmental leaders and their funders to refocus attention on the need for an “outside” game and a new approach to environmental advocacy.

In the latter years of Barack Obama’s presidency, the effort to mobilize public opinion and grassroots activism on climate change has led to a broader

shift in environmental politics, as environmental organizations and their allies devote ever greater resources to shaping the outcome of elections, framing debates in stark moral terms, and melding innovative Internet-based strategies with traditional face-to-face field organizing. Yet as I review in this chapter, on the road to meaningfully dealing with climate change and other environmental problems, this new brand of pressure politics as practiced by 350.org, NextGen Climate, and their allies among national environmental groups is not without its potential trade-offs, flaws, and weaknesses.

Most notably, critics charge that although blocking the Keystone XL pipeline and divesting from fossil fuel companies make for potent symbolic goals, they detract from more important goals such as the passage of new federal rules limiting emissions from coal-fired power plants, and promoting government investment in a broad range of cleaner, more efficient energy technologies. Evidence also suggests that the strategies that environmental groups and climate advocates have used to mobilize a progressive base of voters and donors may in fact be only strengthening political polarization, turning off core constituencies, dividing moderate and liberal Democrats, and promoting broader public disgust with “Washington” and government.

Lessons Learned from the Cap-and-Trade Fight

Scholars, journalists, and commentators have focused on a range of factors that contributed in 2010 to the demise in the Senate of a cap-and-trade bill (for review, see Chapter 5). To be sure, no single factor can be considered primarily responsible. 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.²

Most notably, several analysts have emphasized the intense lobbying against the bill by the fossil fuel industry and the political spending by an aligned network of industry associations, conservative groups, and think tanks. In this regard, the billionaire brothers Charles and David Koch, along with a handful of other ultrawealthy donors, have funded conservative groups opposed to most forms of environmental regulation,³ with these groups efficiently folding opposition to the cap-and-trade bill into a broader narrative about the need to protect free markets and personal freedom from Obama-style “socialism,” whether in relation to health care or the environment.⁴

In all, the precise role of political spending in the defeat of the climate bill—as political scientists have shown is the case across issues⁵—is extremely difficult to determine. Despite the belief that environmental groups and their allies were massively outspent in the debate, a more accurate assessment is that environmentalists, industry, and conservatives each brought considerable resources and key advantages to the fight.⁶

Relevant to understanding the nature of environmental advocacy today, following their defeat, environmentalists and their funders debated how to move forward and more effectively apply their considerable financial and organizational resources to future political debates. In this regard, several analysts focused on the need to invest more significantly in building a grassroots movement in support of comprehensive policy action, an emphasis that has guided the strategies of many environmental groups and climate advocates in the years since.

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. Among 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 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 like 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 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

General public apathy about the bill was deemed reflective of a fatal communication mistake on the part of major environmental groups and their allies, a mistake that they have sought to correct in the years since. The issue could have been identified in stark moral terms, which might have led to greater public backing. But environmentalists instead focused on trying to generate public support for cap-and-trade legislation, which tended to push the public to see the issue through the technical lens of science and economics. If the public did perceive a moral dimension to climate change, it was as a duty to care for the environment, a moral intuition that is easily overlooked in the context of economic concerns, and that engages only a small segment of Americans.⁹

In making their case, appeals to the public offered the promise of economic benefits, but did not build a case for why Americans should become involved politically and why elected officials had a moral obligation to vote for the cap-and-trade bill. The emphasis on economic benefits in the context of the recession also turned the debate into “some economic benefits” as claimed by backers of the bill versus “dramatic economic costs” as claimed by conservatives and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, a balance that given the economic context favored the opposition.¹⁰

For many Republican-leaning Americans, skepticism of climate science became a stand-in for opposition to a climate bill that was framed for them as deeply damaging to the economy, as violating strongly held moral beliefs relative to free markets and personal freedom, and as favoring President Obama's political goals.¹¹ Conservative media—led by Fox News—likely helped drive strong opposition among the Republican base, an influence that continues today. According to one study, at Fox News, close to two-thirds of all network segments mentioning climate change rejected the need to take action. Predictably, Republicans who were heavier viewers of Fox News were more dismissive in their views of climate change than their lighter-viewing counterparts.¹²

New Movements and Strategies

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, waged 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.”¹³

The campaign effort against coal-fired power plants was greatly aided by the expansion in shale gas drilling or “fracking,” which dramatically lowered the cost of natural gas energy production, and made older coal power plants increasingly costly for companies to keep in operation. Although the NRDC, the Sierra Club, and other groups also led opposition efforts against natural gas drilling, the EDF, recognizing the potential of the energy source as a bridge fuel away from coal reliance, worked with industry to assess risks and methane leakages, and to promote stronger regulation.¹⁴

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. Groups like 350.org 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 symbolic issues like the Keystone XL pipeline and divestment from fossil fuel industries.

Of similar importance, in the wake of the 2010 *Citizens United* ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court, which eliminated major restrictions on election spending by corporations, individuals, and labor unions, the influx of funding from the billionaire Koch brothers and other ultrawealthy conservative donors triggered intense alarm among environmentalists and their liberal donor base. Yet by 2013, environmental groups had their own free-spending super PAC billionaire in Tom Steyer, who was pouring tens of millions of dollars into campaigns to morally stigmatize Republican elected officials and candidates who denied climate change and opposed policy action.

Mobilizing the Progressive Choir on Climate Change

The Republican victory in the 2010 midterm elections and the rise of the Tea Party not only led to a rethink of strategy on the part of environmentalists, but also helped catalyze a reinvigorated U.S. progressive movement. At the center of this movement was an emerging new paradigm for thinking about the economy and social justice, a paradigm that not only resonated strongly with the long-standing vision of prominent environmental leaders arguing for action on climate change, but also was reflected in the consumer choices and behaviors of younger (mostly white) Americans and wealthy urban liberals.

These trends included strong interest in localized economies and “buy local” efforts; a preference for organic farming, urban gardens, and farmers’ markets over industrial agriculture; and intense opposition to natural gas drilling and genetically modified food, sentiments that reflected an idealized preference for “natural” food and energy sources like solar or wind. These trends were popularized not only by advocates and social entrepreneurs, but also by way of the dramatic growth online in liberal media outlets such as *Mother Jones*, *Grist.org*, *The Nation*, and documentary film campaigns such as *Food, Inc.* and *GasLand*, with articles or video excerpts widely spread and shared by way of social media.

Though relatively new in their broader popularity and visibility, each of these arguments and trends had long been fused together and articulated by way of the writing, advocacy, and warnings of Bill McKibben. Yet 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 McKibben and the activist group he cofounded into national prominence.¹⁵

In 1989, McKibben published *The End of Nature*, recognized as the first popular book about climate change. In this book and in many subsequent works, he warned that humans had become the “most powerful source for change on the planet,” a potentially catastrophic achievement that marked an end to our traditional understanding of nature. Deeply skeptical of technological approaches to climate change such as genetic engineering or nuclear energy, McKibben controversially argued that the only possible path to survival was through a fundamental reconsideration of our worldviews, aspirations, and life goals.

The creation of this new consciousness, he argued, would dramatically reorganize society, ending our addiction to fossil fuels, economic growth, and consumerism. As he wrote at the time and elaborated on in more recent books, in this pastoral, idealized future free of consumerism or material ambition, Americans would rarely travel, experiencing the world instead via the Internet; grow much of their own food; power their communities through solar and wind; and divert their wealth to developing countries. Only under these transformational conditions, argued McKibben, would we be able to set a moral example for countries like China to change course, all in the hope that these countries will accept a “grand bargain” toward a cleaner energy path.¹⁶

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. 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*.¹⁷

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,¹⁸ as of 2012, 350.org employed just twenty-six staff in the United States and eleven abroad, and that year, 350.org spent \$2.5 million on campaign work and grassroots field organizing.¹⁹

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, activism among this segment of the public historically has been relatively low, 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.”²⁰

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 that the pipeline was not only a potent symbol to rally activists against, but also an action that 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.”²¹

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.²²

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 have not only occurred in Washington, DC, but have been coordinated across other cities and states. In Nebraska, environmentalists have 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 and 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 power plants, and natural gas development.²³

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.²⁴

In delaying a decision on the Keystone pipeline, 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, giving Republicans a ready-made issue to intensify support and turnout among their own grass-roots base. Alternatively, if Obama were to approve the pipeline, the decision would risk provoking a rebellion among a network of major liberal donors and/or depress electoral support among progressive activists and voters.²⁵

At his influential Dot Earth blog at the *New York Times*, environmental writer Andrew Revkin has been critical of McKibben's effort at 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."²⁶ The Editorial Board at the *Washington Post*²⁷ and the editors of the journal *Nature* have offered similar lines of criticism. 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."²⁸

Not only does the Keystone pipeline divide commentators and analysts, but the issue also reactivates long-standing fault lines between environmentalists and labor groups. In this regard, during the cap-and-trade battle, environmentalists had forged important alliances with organized labor to lobby for the bill. But in the case of the Keystone XL pipeline debate, several labor groups representing construction workers have broken ranks, criticizing environmentalists for distorting the significance of the pipeline to the livelihoods of their members. These groups have formally withdrawn from the BlueGreen Alliance, a long-standing coalition of labor and environmental groups.²⁹

In terms of broader public opinion, even after three years of campaigning against the pipeline, by 2014, nationally representative surveys showed that although the efforts had predictably helped trigger opposition among liberal Democrats, majorities of moderate Democrats and Independents favored construction of the project. In other words, instead of forging a coalition of moderates and liberals opposed to the project, the anti-pipeline campaign had instead served to divide the opinions of liberal and centrist Democrats.³⁰

This division is even more strongly reflected in Congress, where moderate Democrats from fossil fuel-producing states have openly distanced themselves from President Obama's delay in approving the project, been outspoken in their support for the pipeline, and been harshly critical of environmentalists.³¹ Following the 2014 elections, as Democratic senator Mary Landrieu of Louisiana faced a runoff election against her Republican candidate, she pushed her caucus leadership to hold a vote to approve the pipeline. Fourteen Democrats joined Republicans in supporting the bill, which failed by one vote to pass.³²

Morally Stigmatizing the Fossil Fuel Industry

Along with opposition to the Keystone XL pipeline, McKibben and 350.org in 2012 also turned their focus to pressuring universities and other institutions to divest their financial holdings from fossil fuel companies, a campaign that draws direct parallels to the 1980s antiapartheid movement. In this case again, McKibben used his influence as a writer and storyteller to catalyze a new campaign aimed directly at recruiting college students, contributing a six-thousand-word article to the August 2012 issue of *Rolling Stone* magazine that warned of “Global Warming’s Terrifying New Math.”³³

As he explained, fossil fuel companies and many countries were committed to extracting as much of their oil, gas, and coal holdings as possible, a morally irresponsible commitment that would exceed what scientists had determined was the world’s safe level of carbon extraction. “Given this hard math, we need to view the fossil-fuel industry in a new light,” McKibben argued. “It has become a rogue industry, reckless like no other force on Earth. It is Public Enemy Number One to the survival of our planetary civilization.” Drawing comparisons to the antiapartheid effort, McKibben urged a mass movement pressuring universities, colleges, churches, and local governments to divest their holdings in fossil fuel companies.

The divestment movement’s controversial goal—as McKibben outlined at *Rolling Stone*—is to morally stigmatize the fossil fuel industry, much like the antiapartheid movement helped frame in stark moral terms the policies of the white supremacist South African government. The call is for universities and other institutions to “immediately freeze any new investment in fossil fuel companies, and divest from direct ownership and any commingled funds that include fossil fuel public equities and corporate bonds within 5 years.” The pressuring of university boards of trustees—many of whom are affiliated with major corporations and investment banks—is also intended to force these individuals to “to choose which side of the issue they are on.”³⁴

Yet paired with this moral call to action is a secondary frame focused on financial prudence. In this regard, divestment advocates argue the risk of a “carbon bubble,” specifically the overvaluation by way of the stock market of the estimated \$670 billion invested in fossil fuel industries. Once society shifts to regulate and sufficiently price carbon energy sources, the value of these companies is likely to “crash,” according to the carbon bubble thesis. Therefore, universities and other institutions would be wise to eliminate these industries from their investment portfolio while their value remains high, advocates argue.³⁵

As of 2014, according to 350.org, students at more than two hundred campuses across the country had pressured their institutions to divest from fossil fuel industries, with the most intense efforts occurring at smaller northeastern colleges. In response, ten small liberal arts colleges took action to divest all or part of their endowments. Most notably, Stanford University announced it would divest its financial holdings from approximately one hundred coal companies, and Yale University directed its money managers to

consider how its investments could affect climate change. Several cities and college towns with a strong base of liberal voters also took divestment actions including Seattle, San Francisco, Cambridge, Berkeley, Ithaca, Ann Arbor, and Boulder.³⁶

At Harvard University—a lead target of the divestment campaign given the size of its endowment and national profile—the administration initially strongly resisted calls for divestment, arguing that the university's most effective response to climate change would be to maximize investments in research, teaching, and students. In December 2012, the university announced that it was setting up a “social choice fund,” separate from its endowment, where donations to the fund would be invested “in one or more external mutual funds that take special account of social responsibility considerations.” Facing additional pressure from students, faculty, alumni, and liberal bloggers, the university in 2014 announced that it would raise \$20 million to invest in clean energy research, refocus its goals to decrease campus-related greenhouse gas emissions, and participate in two voluntary initiatives to invest in social responsibly funds and pressure companies to disclose their greenhouse gas emissions.³⁷

The divestment movement has provided students and their allies a personally relevant focus on their local institutions, and the hope that their actions can make at least a limited political difference. The campaign has also created important opportunities for students to learn about coalition building, negotiation, and compromise, with campus forums and events sparking critical self-reflection on what climate change means for society and institutions and how everyday citizens, especially young people, can become involved.

Yet critics of the divestment movement argue correctly that there are only a few socially responsible mutual funds fully divested from fossil fuel companies. Moreover, these fossil fuel-free funds offer lower returns on investment than traditional investment options. Such funds might become more competitive if governments start to take action to regulate emissions from fossil fuel sources, but until then, universities and municipalities will have to accept greater risks and lower returns. Critics also argue that the focus on campus divestment might have little impact on the behavior of oil companies—much less oil-producing countries—since most of the stock in companies is controlled by pension and hedge funds and individuals with large net worth. Previous research evaluating the impact of the antiapartheid movement, for example, concludes that divestment strategies had no discernible financial effect on the South African economy, or its companies, currency, or major industries.³⁸

Unlike apartheid, considering fossil fuel divestment from a moral standpoint makes it far more difficult to choose which side you stand on, given what is for all of us a heavy dependence on fossil fuels. Reliable energy alternatives like hydropower and nuclear energy each also have their own moral trade-offs and risks. Critics argue that a more effective strategy might be for universities to buy up, rather than divest, their shares in energy companies, thereby gaining more influence on industry practices. A similar strategy

would be to maximize university finances to leverage research and deployment of cleaner energy technologies.³⁹

Beyond the focus of the divestment movement, there are signs that McKibben and 350.org's efforts to build a broader social justice movement in support of action on climate change is gaining momentum. In October 2014, legions of demonstrators totaling more than three hundred thousand marched in New York City to pressure world leaders gathered at the United Nations to discuss an international climate accord.⁴⁰ The same month, writer and 350.org board member Naomi Klein published her best-selling book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism Versus the Climate*,⁴¹ which appeared for several weeks on the best-seller list, generating considerable media attention. "Only mass movements can save us now," Klein says. She argues that "profound and radical economic transformation" is needed to avoid certain catastrophe.⁴²

Super PACs and Election Campaigns

As McKibben and 350.org have focused on building a new progressive grassroots movement pressuring President Obama and universities, California billionaire Tom Steyer and his political advisers have sought to spend his vast wealth to influence key U.S. Senate and governor's races. This strategy is intended to lay the groundwork for climate change to be a dominant issue during the 2016 presidential election, while positioning Steyer as a candidate for future electoral office.

The San Francisco-based billionaire first began to gain political attention by bankrolling a series of California ballot initiative campaigns that boosted state energy efficiency actions, promoted land conservation, and defended the state's cap-and-trade law against industry rollback. In recent years, he has devoted much of his wealth and time into supporting climate and energy initiatives at Yale University, Stanford University (where as a trustee he played a key role in pushing through coal divestment), managing clean energy investment funds, and cofounding a climate risk assessment initiative with former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg and U.S. Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson. Along the way, he has hosted major political fund-raisers for Democratic congressional leaders and President Obama, lobbying for stronger action on climate change, including rejecting the Keystone XL pipeline.⁴³

Most notably, however, in 2013 he launched NextGen Climate, a super PAC that has run a national ad campaign opposing the Keystone XL pipeline while investing heavily in several key electoral races. In Democratic-leaning Massachusetts, Steyer's NextGen super PAC joined with activists in spring 2013 to elect Rep. Edward Markey to the U.S. Senate, campaigning against fellow Congressman Stephen Lynch in the primary race. At issue was Lynch's support for the Keystone XL pipeline. The Steyer-backed attack on Lynch demanded the candidate "act like a real Democrat and oppose Keystone's dirty energy," framing him otherwise as working for Big Oil.⁴⁴ In all, Steyer spent \$1.8 million on the Senate race. "Once politicians start to become aware

that this issue can either help them or hurt them, you begin to change the conduct and behavior of those who are in elected office,” chief campaign adviser Chris Lehane said of their electoral strategy.⁴⁵

In fall 2013, Steyer’s super PAC played an influential role in electing Democrat Terry McAuliffe as Virginia governor, spending an estimated \$8 million to frame his Republican opponent Ken Cuccinelli as an elected official who “denies basic science” and who as state attorney general “wasted taxpayer money” by investigating the research activities of climate scientists. The main goal was to mobilize Virginians who had voted in the 2012 presidential election but who were otherwise unlikely to vote in the 2013 governor’s race.⁴⁶

NextGen commissioned pollsters who recommended that successful messaging would link climate change to daily concerns such as asthma rates or the price of food. Instead of referring to Cuccinelli as a “climate denier,” a term favored by activists, the recommendation was to say he “denies basic science.” Their strategy also explicitly recognized latent ambivalence about climate change among voters: “I’m no environmentalist . . .,” began one digital ad, “but droughts are ruining my farm.”⁴⁷

Their primary objective was to portray Cuccinelli as a “wild man.” Direct mail fliers told voters that not only did Cuccinelli dismiss climate science, but he also wanted “to eliminate all forms of birth control” and “let criminals, even those convicted of sexually abusing children, buy guns at gun shows.” By the end of the campaign, Steyer’s super PAC had spent an estimated \$4.3 million on TV and digital ads, \$1.3 million on phone calls and canvassers, and \$1.1 million on direct mail.⁴⁸

With the Virginia race serving as a model to build on, in May 2014, Steyer’s super PAC announced plans to spend at least \$50 million of his own money, plus another \$50 million in matching funds from other donors, to support Democratic candidates in seven competitive Senate and governor’s races. These included the Senate races in New Hampshire, Michigan, Iowa, and Colorado and the governor’s races in Florida, Pennsylvania, and Maine. The goal was to demonstrate that climate change could be used as a wedge issue to elect Democratic candidates, testing the premise in advance of the 2016 presidential and congressional elections.⁴⁹

The strategy is to drive a “wedge” between conservative candidates and moderate voters, framing conservatives as standing on the morally wrong side of the climate change issue, as they have been portrayed in the same-sex marriage and civil rights debates.⁵⁰ In this regard, the NextGen campaign applies a master narrative that is adapted to each state emphasizing that climate change poses a serious threat to the economy, public health, and children and that if candidates don’t believe in climate change, they can’t be trusted. Among those targeted are young, female, and minority voters who are otherwise less likely to turn out in midterm elections.⁵¹

Yet by the end of the 2014 elections, specific to fund-raising and targeted races, Steyer and NextGen had fallen well short of their goals. NextGen raised \$67.7 million with \$57.6 million contributed by Steyer himself,

a total considerably less than the \$100 million target.⁵² Of the seven Senate and gubernatorial races that NextGen targeted, the Democratic candidates backed by NextGen won in just three.⁵³ Overall, Republicans won control of the Senate holding fifty-four out of one hundred seats, strengthened their majority in the House, and increased the number of state legislatures and governorships that they control.

Steyer, however, claimed many positives from NextGen's efforts. With an eye toward the 2016 election, positives included raising the overall profile of climate change as an election issue, building up a relevant network of voters and volunteers in key battleground states, and pressuring candidates to shift their position. "In every state we were active, Democrats and Republicans had to deal with this issue," said Steyer. "Not only do Democrats have to be good on it to turn out votes, but the Republicans really had to move away from denial."⁵⁴

Escalating Polarization and a Spiral of Disengagement

Looking ahead to the next several years and beyond, by framing climate change in stark moral terms and by emphasizing Republicans' "denial" of the problem, environmentalists and Democratic strategists believe that they have identified a successful strategy that will result in policy victories and electoral advantage. Polling suggests that a carefully tailored "wedge strategy" as pursued by Steyer's super PAC might be able to isolate Tea Party-identifying Republicans from their more moderate-leaning GOP counterparts. This latter group, though supporting the Keystone XL pipeline, also accepts the reality of climate change and supports specific actions such as EPA limits on coal power plants.⁵⁵ According to the *New York Times*, Democratic strategists believe that Republicans who oppose the EPA rules or deny climate change are likely to be viewed by most voters as "ideologically rigid and unwilling to accept scientists' conclusions," a perception that will damage Republicans' efforts to expand their support among young people and women.⁵⁶

In response to this strategy, Republicans joined by political reform advocates criticize Democratic leaders for opposing super PAC spending by conservative billionaires like the Koch brothers yet readily endorsing Steyer's efforts.⁵⁷ In this case, conservatives argue that Democratic leaders are catering to the interests of their liberal activist and donor base rather than looking out for the interests of working-class Americans.⁵⁸ Front-page stories at the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* have also highlighted Steyer's past investments in the fossil fuel industry and the profits accrued by the hedge fund he founded, noting the apparent inconsistency with his political advocacy.⁵⁹ McKibben, who helped inspire Steyer's opposition to the Keystone pipeline and who consults with the billionaire activist, offers an opposing perspective: "After years of watching rich people manipulate and wreck our political system for selfish personal interests, it's great to watch a rich person use his money and his talents in the public interest."⁶⁰ Yet to be sure, Steyer's advisers have been open about his own personal ambitions, as he promotes his national

profile and climate advocacy work leading up to a possible future electoral candidacy as governor of California.⁶¹

Perhaps the most notable criticism of Steyer's super PAC efforts and the allied strategies of environmentalists and Democrats is that they likely portend further ideological escalation by both sides in the climate debate, with ever more financial and political resources spent on demonizing opponents. Indeed, liberals, environmentalists, and conservatives speculate endlessly as to the fund-raising prowess of the other side, each warning of dramatic disparities as a way to mobilize its respective donors and activists. Across election cycles and legislative battles, as one side gains a perceived advantage, the other side predictably attempts to catch up in terms of spending, ever more advanced campaign strategies, and polarizing rhetoric.⁶² In months leading up to the 2014 midterm elections, liberals led by Steyer gave more to super PACs than conservatives, a reversal from the 2012 election cycle.⁶³ The surge in spending by either side resulted in a record amount of TV advertising focused on energy, climate change, and the environment, with more than 125,000 mostly negative attack ads running specific to Senate races alone.⁶⁴

Yet by defining almost everything about the climate change debate as "us versus the radical fringe," environmentalists and liberals continue to reinforce a bunker mentality that rewards groupthink and substantially reduces opportunities for developing innovative ideas and approaches to climate change that broker support among moderates and conservatives. Those experts, advocates, or political leaders who break with conventional perspectives or attempt to cross the fault lines that polarization over climate change has etched into our political culture are too often "debunked" as contrarians, or dismissed as compromise-seeking centrists.⁶⁵

Extreme polarization on issues like climate change has also led to public disgust with politics, government, and "Washington." The resulting damage to our civic culture disproportionately harms environmentalists and liberals, whose core objectives to combat climate change and seek greater social and economic justice almost always entail government services, investments, and interventions in private markets. Democrats have also increasingly come to depend upon young people, women, and minorities, who make up a growing proportion of eligible voters. But among these potential supporters, intense negativity and extreme polarization on issues like climate risk reinforce feelings of cynicism and inefficacy while likely adding to the propensity to tune out the debate. Indeed, in order to mobilize these voter groups in midterm elections, Steyer's Super Pac, environmental groups and allied Democratic campaigns are forced to spend ever greater resources each election cycle on canvassing, texting, social media, and narrowly targeted appeals.⁶⁶

Conclusion: Balancing Activism and Pragmatism

In the wake of the failure of cap and trade, as reviewed in this chapter, McKibben's 350.org and Steyer's NextGen super PAC have helped address a long-standing weakness among major environmental organizations, providing

a potent grassroots base of activism and a sophisticated, well-financed electoral strategy. Yet, these strategies, as discussed, are not without their unintended negative consequences or potential pitfalls.

Yet, as much attention as these “outside” mobilizing strategies have received, in the final years of the Obama presidency, the most significant progress on climate change has occurred not by way of these advocacy efforts, but through a traditional insider legal strategy with roots dating to the 1970 Clean Air Act. In this case, going to work behind the scenes after Obama’s 2012 reelection, the NRDC through its legal and economic specialization has strongly shaped the EPA’s proposed rules to regulate greenhouse emissions from existing coal-fired power plants. The rules, many experts predict, can have a substantial impact on U.S. greenhouse gas emissions and provide more persuasive leverage in negotiations with other countries to agree to international emissions targets (see Chapter 13).⁶⁷ The landmark agreement between the United States and China in which each pledged to substantially reduce their emissions by 2025 and 2030, respectively, is a leading example.⁶⁸

The proposed EPA rules, however, will undergo a lengthy comment period, with environmental and industry groups mobilizing key constituencies to weigh in. The rules will also face major legal challenges from companies and states that are the most heavily affected. In this regard, the major environmental groups led by the Sierra Club, the League of Conservation Voters, and the NRDC plan well-financed TV advertising campaigns and grassroots mobilization to defend the rules. The EPA rules, along with the U.S.-China climate deal and other international agreements to limit emissions, are also likely to be the focus of heavy campaigning and debate leading up to the 2016 elections.⁶⁹

For several years to come, rather than grassroots activism and electoral campaigning, the EPA rules, along with similar executive actions, may be environmental advocates’ best bet to meaningfully reduce U.S. greenhouse gas emissions and achieve progress on other environmental problems. Looking ahead to after the 2016 election, even assuming that an experienced Democrat like Hillary Clinton is elected president, there are likely to be strong barriers to passing major climate legislation such as a carbon tax, given that Republicans are likely to control at least half of Congress. Moreover, just as was the case with cap-and-trade legislation, other issues, including immigration, gun control, income inequality, banking regulation, and revisions to the health care bill, may take top legislative priority over climate change.

All of this suggests that in combination with new approaches to grassroots advocacy and election campaigns, a complementary paradigm for climate advocacy may be needed with a shift in focus from national legislation to a broader portfolio of smaller-scale policy actions and to the promotion of a more diverse array of technological options. Indeed, to the extent that the Obama administration has been able to make substantive progress on climate change, it has been through a combination of smaller-scale, less politically visible approaches like fuel efficiency standards or EPA rules rather than pushing for society transforming solutions like an economy-wide price on carbon (see Chapter 4).⁷⁰

In the post-2016 political world, Obama's policy strategy may be the new blueprint for achieving progress on climate change. Success, however, will ultimately depend on environmental advocates joining with moderates and right-of-center interest groups in pushing for a range of smaller-scale policy actions across levels of government. But in the process, for a number of reasons, they will also need to keep a diversity of technological solutions—including nuclear power, carbon capture and storage, and natural gas fracking—on the table as part of the discussion.

In his 2010 book *The Climate Fix*, political scientist Roger Pielke Jr. notes that polls show the public for several years has favored action on climate change but at low levels of intensity, suggesting that it is not a lack of public support limiting policy action. "The challenge facing climate policy is to design policies that are consonant with public opinion, and are effective, rather than try to shape public opinion around particular policies," he argues. In this regard, "A broad portfolio of technologies and practices should be supported . . . despite the fact that no one energy technology will be universally popular." Examples include combining a focus on wind, solar, and energy efficiency with a similar focus on developing nuclear energy and carbon capture and storage technology. Drawing on case studies of past environmental policy debates such as those over acid rain and ozone depletion, Pielke argues that once next-generation technologies are available that make meaningful action on climate change lower in cost, then much of the argument politically over scientific uncertainty is likely to diminish.⁷¹

In their research on cultural identity and risk perceptions, the findings of Yale University's Dan M. Kahan and colleagues similarly suggest that risk perceptions of climate change are policy and technology dependent and that political agreement is more likely to occur under conditions of a diverse rather than narrow set of proposed solutions. In these studies, when conservative-leaning Americans read that the solution to climate change is investment in nuclear power or geoengineering, their skepticism of expert statements relative to climate change decreased, and their support for policy responses increased. The reason, argue Kahan and colleagues, is that these technologies affirm rather than challenge their worldviews relative to the need to maintain economic growth and the ability of human ingenuity to solve environmental problems. In contrast, when the solution to climate change was framed as stricter pollution controls, conservative-leaning Americans' acceptance of expert statements on climate change decreased, since these measures conflict with their belief in free markets and individual freedom.⁷²

If we apply Pielke and Kahan's reasoning to the climate debate, it follows that building political consensus on climate change will depend heavily on advocates for action calling attention to a broad portfolio of policy actions and technological solutions, with some actions such as tax incentives for nuclear energy, government support for clean energy research, or proposals to invest in resilience and adaptation (thereby protecting local communities against climate change impacts) more likely to gain support from both Democrats

and Republicans. Under these conditions, in regions, states, and cities, not only will it be easier to gain public support from across the political and cultural spectrum, but it will also give members of Congress and future presidents, when they are ready to return to the business of governing, more options by which to reach agreement and compromise.⁷³

In the post-Obama era of environmental advocacy, grassroots mobilization and electoral pressure can provide added incentive for members of Congress and future presidents to cooperate on actions to address climate change and other environmental problems. But the opportunities for such cooperation along with the effectiveness of any implemented actions will depend heavily on environmentalists, experts, and other political entrepreneurs promoting a broader range of policy options and technological solutions that can be adopted across levels of government.

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 video.

Ensia (www.ensia.com) Web magazine *Ensia* 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.

The Climate Shift Project (www.climateshiftproject.org) The Climate Shift Project provides discussion, commentary, and analysis by Northeastern University professor Matthew C. Nisbet 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 he writes at *The Conversation* (<https://theconversation.com/columns/matthew-nisbet-114648>).

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

The New York Times’ Dot Earth 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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