



Climate Change Activism in the Age of Donald Trump

Luis E. Hestres, University of Texas at San Antonio

November 8, 2016 was a shocking day for millions of progressive Americans. Donald Trump's victory dashed the hopes of many climate change activists. Although many were skeptical about Hillary Clinton, they also expected that, if elected, she would be an ally when it counted. With Trump's victory instead, climate activists must now deal with an administration almost uniformly hostile to their goals.

Climate and environmental advocacy groups have responded to the Trump administration by playing to their contrasting unique strengths. Grassroots-oriented groups such as 350.org and Power Shift have stepped up outreach and mobilization activities; and they are working to enlarge support to include traditionally underrepresented groups such as racial minorities. Meanwhile, elite-oriented groups such as the Environmental Defense Fund and Earthjustice, have modified their advocacy efforts to suit the changing times. Here I provide an overview of the contrasting approaches these two sets of environmentalists are taking.

Taking to the Streets

Since Trump's election, climate change and environmental activists have helped build grassroots support for two mass mobilizations – The Women's March on Washington and the March for Science – and have also helped to organize a third effort, the People's Climate March.

- The Women's March in late January 2017 became a rallying point for a wide range of grievances against the new president, including his treatment of women, people with disabilities, and minorities, especially Hispanics and Muslims. Another important issue was Trump's denial of climate change. In fact, "environmental justice" was one of the "unity principles" of the Women's March. Many participating environmental advocacy groups – including the Sierra Club, Natural Resource Defense Council, and 350.org – emphasized that joint efforts by groups working on behalf of many causes can intersect to create a whole exceeds the constituent parts. It's estimated that between 470,000 to 680,000 people marched in Washington, D.C., while another 3.3 million and 4.6 million marched throughout the country.
- The **March for Science** held in late April 2017 was conceived after the success of the Women's March. Commenters on Reddit suggested a 'Scientists' March' to protest the new president's policies and attitude toward scientific research. Environmental organizations like the Nature Conservancy, NextGen Climate, Friends of the Earth, Green for All, and 350.org, applauded the idea and eventually became partners in the march. Again, an emphasis was placed on bringing together protestors on behalf of various issue causes and groups under the banner of "Diversity Principles" released by organizers. According to estimates, about 40,000 people marched in both Washington, D.C. and Chicago, 20,000 marched in New York City, and 10,000 in both Philadelphia and London.

November 15, 2017

<https://scholars.org>

- The People’s Climate March in late April 2017 was also a direct result of the success of the Women’s March. The steering committee consisted of more than 50 organizations, ranging from well-established groups like the League of Conservation Voters, the Natural Resources Defense Council, Oceana, and Sierra Club, as well as newer, climate-focused groups like 350.org, Power Shift, Green for All, and others. As with the other two marches, the statement of principles stressed diversity and included a call 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 “[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.”

Taking Trump to Court

While grassroots organizations worked to organize and involve new constituencies, other organizations have focused on elite-level advocacy. Taking the Trump administration to court has been one approach used by elite environmental advocacy organizations, with a major emphasis on defending President Obama’s Clean Power Plan. Immediately after President Trump issued an executive order directing the Environmental Protection Agency to review the Clean Power Plan, environmental activists, including the Environmental Defense Fund and Sierra Club, rushed to court to defend it. The general counsel of the Environmental Defense Fund said that the Environmental Protection Agency has “a duty to protect Americans from dangerous climate pollution under our nation’s clean air laws...” The quote refers the *Massachusetts v. Environmental Protection Agency* Supreme Court decision that holds the Environmental Protection Agency accountable for reducing carbon pollution.

Environmental groups have also taken legal action against the Trump administration to head off coal sales in federal lands, to halt the revival of the Keystone XL pipeline project, and even to require the administration to prepare an environmental impact statement before proceeding with plans for the controversial new wall on the U.S.-Mexico border.

What It All Adds Up To

The Trump era intensification of environmental and climate activism follows well established avenues of grassroots versus elite-level strategies, but with some additional new twists.

The near-universal embrace of inclusive principle and efforts to involve new social constituencies indicates a desire to broaden activist environmental and climate coalitions beyond the traditional demographics that leaned toward prosperous and well-educated whites. Meanwhile, confronted with a lack of allies within the new administration, elite-oriented advocacy groups have been forced to modify inside lobbying approaches to place more emphasis on challenging the administration in the courts.

Climate and environmental activists appear determined to place their issues at the heart of broad anti-Trump coalition, using every tool at their disposal to show disapproval and slow down the Trump-Republican agenda as much as possible.

Read more in Luis Hestres and Matthew Nisbet, "Environmental Advocacy at the Dawn of the Trump Era," in *Environmental Policy: New Directions for the 21st Century*, edited by Norman Vig and Michael Kraft (CQ Press, 2018).