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NEWS & ANALYSIS

Who Are Climate Change Activists in America?

by Dana R. Fisher

During the climate change meetings at the Group of Eight (G-8) Summit in July 2008, President George W. Bush summarized the results of the meeting:

The G-8 expressed our desire to have a—a significant reduction in greenhouse gases by 2050. We [the United States] made it clear and the other nations agreed that they must also participate in an ambitious goal, with interim goals and interim plans to enable the world to successfully address climate change. And we made progress, significant progress, toward a comprehensive approach.¹

Even with public statements of support for emission reductions at an international event, President Bush's actions continue to be consistent with his position on the Kyoto Protocol, which he made clear in a letter to U.S. Senate leaders in March 2001. In the letter, he stated: "As you know, I oppose the Kyoto Protocol."²

The president is not only inconsistent with regard to the international aspect of the issue, contradictory statements and actions can be seen in his national policies as well. During his 2008 State of the Union Address, President Bush claimed that "[t]he United States is committed to strengthening our energy security and confronting global climate change. And the best way to meet these goals is for America to continue leading the way toward the development of cleaner and more energy-efficient technology."³ Although he made this public statement on January 28, 2008, only a few days later, he sent a proposed budget to Congress that included significant cuts in all government programs that focus on renewable energy and energy efficiency. In the words of a staff member of the Senate Appropriations Committee: "If you look at the President's energy efficiency and renewable energy account [for fiscal year 2009] they propose a cut of \$300 some million."⁴ A press release from the

Natural Resources Defense Council, Inc. (NRDC) summarizes the proposed budget by saying that the president had "slashed investments in energy efficiency and renewables by 28%."⁵ In other words, although President Bush has made a number of public statements in support of addressing the climate change issue, both in the international arena and on the national political stage, his actions make it abundantly clear that his words are merely symbolic politics.⁶

In the face of inaction by the federal government, citizens around the United States have mobilized in support of the regulation of greenhouse gases (GHGs),⁷ as well as the country's re-engagement in the international climate change regime. But who are these climate change activists and how do they compare to other Americans? This Article presents data collected during one of the largest mobilizations against climate change in the United States: the Step It Up National Day of Climate Action in November 2007.⁸ I begin by describing the day of action and how data were collected around the country. Then, I discuss the findings of this study, providing a general description of climate change activists and comparing them to the general American population. Finally, I discuss what these findings can teach us about the climate change movement in the United States.

I. Studying the Step It Up National Day of Climate Action

This analysis of the people who participate in collective action against climate change in the United States focuses on data collected on participants in a centrally coordinated day of action in the United States. Although some scholars have studied days of action, the research to date is very limited.⁹

those people who spoke with me with the understanding that they would not be directly attributed, I reference those conversations by only citing the person's general affiliation.

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1. President George Bush, Remarks Following G8 Summit and MEM Leaders Meeting (July 9, 2008), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/07/20080709-4.html> (last visited Oct. 22, 2008).
2. Letter from President Bush to Senators Hagel, Helms, Craig, and Roberts (Mar. 13, 2001), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/03/20010314.html> (last visited Oct. 22, 2008).
3. President Bush, State of the Union Address (Jan. 28, 2008), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/01/20080128-13.html> (last visited Oct. 22, 2008).
4. Interview with staff member of Senate Appropriations Comm. (June 6, 2008). All data for this project were collected in accordance with Columbia University policies on the research on Human Subjects (IRB Protocols Nos. IRB-AAAD2840 and IRB-AAAA8063). For

5. Press Release, NRDC, Bush Budget Guts Proven Energy Savers, Gives More Handouts to Coal, Oil, and Nukes (Feb. 4, 2008), <http://www.nrdc.org/media/2008/080204.asp> (last visited Oct. 22, 2008); see also Center for American Progress, *Bush's Energy Budget: Proposals Not Consistent With Claims*, http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/02/energy_budget.html (last visited Oct. 22, 2008).
6. MURRAY J. EDELMAN, *THE SYMBOLIC USE OF POLITICS* (1964).
7. GHGs refer to carbon dioxide (CO₂), methane (CH₄), nitrous oxide (N₂O), hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs), perfluorocarbons (PFCs), and sulfur hexafluoride (SF₆).
8. See Step It Up 2007, *National Days of Climate Action*, <http://www.stepitup2007.org> (last visited Oct. 22, 2008).
9. See, e.g., Mario Pianta, *Parallel Summits of Global Civil Society: An Update*, in *GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY: 2003* (Maria Kaldor et al. eds., 2001); MARIO PIANITA ET AL., *GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY EVENTS:*

To understand this form of collective action, this Article presents data from a new organization, Step It Up, which was founded in 2007 to try to “push things a little further” by mobilizing a day of climate action in April 2007.¹⁰ On the organization’s website, it identifies itself as a “web-based day of action dedicated to stopping climate change.”¹¹

Founded by the well-known environmental writer Bill McKibben, the organizers of Step It Up included a handful of college students working with him to make it happen. Although the team was based out of an office in Manchester, New Hampshire, they organized the day of action almost exclusively through their website. The Step It Up website included materials to help people organize events in their own communities. It also tracked all of the local actions that were being coordinated around the country. These events were searchable on the website by city and state. Potential participants could find events taking place near them and sign up to participate in an action.

Because of the success of the first day of action, which was held on April 14, 2007, the organizers decided to mobilize another event to “bring together more people to ensure

that those in power would understand the meaning of *real* leadership on climate change.”¹² The second day of action—“Step It Up 2: Who’s a Leader?”—was held on November 3, 2007. This date was selected for the day of action for a variety of reasons. In the words of one of the organizers: “A bunch of factors went into our choice of November 3rd: congressional recesses, school schedules, other ‘green’ or ‘protest’ events, and the fact that it’s nearly exactly one year from next year’s elections, etc.”¹³ Although Step It Up targeted relatively conventional forms of institutional politics by aiming to pressure members of Congress and presidential candidates, in some ways, this day of action was innovative in its reliance on the Internet as the central coordinating mechanism. In addition to participating in the “day of action,” the organization urged event coordinators to invite their members of Congress to attend their events. Overall, all 540 members of Congress were invited to participate in at least 1 of the 481 actions that took place throughout the United States. Step It Up actions were held in every state in the country. Figure 1 presents a map of all of the events throughout the United States.

Figure 1: Map of Step It Up Events



○ General Events

☆ Events where a member of Congress (or a representative of the office) attended.

Source: Step It Up 2007, *Events*, <http://events.stepitup2007.org> (last visited Nov. 5, 2008).

PARALLEL SUMMITS, SOCIAL FORA, GLOBAL DAYS OF ACTION (2004), available at <http://www.lse.ac.uk/Depts/global/Yearbook/outline2004.htm>; Dieter Rucht, *Appeal, Threat, and Press Resonance: Comparing Mayday Protests in London and Berlin*, 10 *MOBILIZATION* 163-82 (2005).

10. For information about the first day of action, see Step It Up 2007, *supra* note 8.

11. Step It Up 2007, *Our Story*, <http://stepitup2007.org/article.php?list=type&type=48> (last visited Oct. 22, 2008).

12. *Id.*

13. Personal e-mail correspondence with author (Aug. 12, 2007).

Events during the second day of action ran the gamut—from traditional demonstrations and marches to performance art. In New York City, for example, the Step It Up website listed 13 separate events taking place. These events ranged from a rally at Washington Square Park, to a “global warming burlesque” (a “performance and art” event in “a gritty bar on the Williamsburg waterfront”), to a “polar bear ferry ride” (leaf-letting on the Staten Island ferry, dressed as polar bears). For this study, we excluded the musical and art events and focused our inquiry on the more traditional forms of protest, such as marches and demonstrations.

II. Data Collection

Data were collected at 10 different events in 5 different cities: (1) New York City, New York; (2) Washington, D.C.; (3) Chicago, Illinois; (4) Bloomington, Indiana; and (5) Long Beach, California. Overall, 454 demonstrators were sampled. In total, 19 people refused to take the survey, representing an overall refusal rate of 4.4%. Refusal rates were very low for all events, although slightly higher for “the Big One” in New York City.

In events with less than 100 participants, researchers surveyed every protester who was over the age of 18 and willing to participate. For those events that had more than 100 participants, researchers selected survey participants using a field approximation of random selection at the events.¹⁴ Starting from different points, field surveyors counted off protesters standing in a formal or informal line, selecting every third protester to participate. Because field situations

varied, random selection was achieved at some events by choosing every third person standing in a line to enter a rally area and, at others, by choosing every third person in a line or row as determined by the researcher working in a particular area.

The survey was designed to be short and non-invasive to facilitate data collection in the field and encourage the widest possible participation among the demonstrators. It included six short questions that were designed to elicit responses that can easily be coded into categories regarding how the respondent came to participate in the protest. In addition, participants were asked if they would provide an e-mail address to participate in a follow-up survey. The follow-up Internet-based survey included questions about the protesters’ involvement in multiple social movements, the types of organizations in which they were involved, which large-scale protest events and days of protest that they had attended, and what particular issues motivated them to participate in social protest. Overall, 43.3% of the protesters who were initially surveyed at the day of action and agreed to provide an e-mail address to be contacted about the follow-up component of the study participated.¹⁵ Table 1 presents the reported attendance, the number of survey participants, and the refusal rates for each action. Although the events were quite different from one another in terms of their attendance and structure, they were all part of the same day of action and had the same general goals. Since the aim of this Article is to understand who climate change activists are, the data from the events are aggregated for the remainder of the Article.

Table 1: Summary of Protests Surveyed

Protest	DC Big One	DC Town-hall	DC Bikes	Chicago	LA	Bloomington	NYC Big One	NYC Brooklyn	NYC Queens	NYC Cloisters	Total
Estimated attendance	200	50	13	150	75	55	250	12	25	12	842
Sample size	94	12	13	59	45	49	135	10	10	8	435
Refusals	4	0	0	0	0	1	13	0	1	0	19

14. The three events that had more than 100 participants were the “Big One” in Washington, D.C., the “Big One” in New York City, and the “Big One” in Chicago.

15. For more details on the methodology of this study, see Dana R. Fisher & Marije Boekkoi, *Mobilizing Friends and Strangers: Understanding the Role of the Internet in Days of Action*, Presentation at the ASA Annual Meeting in Boston, Mass. (Aug. 2008).

III. Findings

A. Who Are Climate Change Activists in America?

Climate change activists in America are highly educated. In fact, more than three-quarters of the participants in the Step It Up Day of Action had completed college and 36% of them had completed a graduate or professional degree. Although this group of people is highly educated, they are no more educated than those participants in other left-leaning demonstrations in the United States. In fact, participants in the main demonstration against the Republican National Convention (RNC) in New York City in August 2004 were even more highly educated: 81% had a college degree and about 42% had completed graduate or professional school. As one might expect, almost all of the climate change activists, 95%, identified their politics as being left-of-center. Although climate activists are politically left-of-center, their political affiliations are consistent with those of participants in demonstrations against the RNC in August 2004, 93% of whom identified themselves as being politically left-of-center. Climate change activists are not all young people. In fact, the average age of participants in the day of action was 38 years old. Again, these activists were similar to the participants in the demonstrations against the RNC, where the protesting population was slightly older with the mean age at 40 years old.¹⁶ In many ways, these findings suggest that the people who are participating in climate change activism are similar to participants in other more general left-leaning movements, such as the movement to protest the Bush Administration and the RNC.

A high percentage of the climate change activists who participated in this study reported being mobilized through the Internet. In fact, 37.7% of them said that the main way they had heard about the day of action was through the Internet. This rate of Internet usage is significantly higher than participants in activism around other issue areas. Less than 5% of the participants in the demonstration against the RNC in 2004, for example, reported being mobilized through the Internet. Activists involved in both movements agreed that the Internet is a critical tool for organizing social protests and demonstrations, and stated that they received most of their information about the events from e-mails and websites.

Climate change activists in America are a relatively engaged portion of American society. They tend to participate in actions in their own communities and they do not tend to travel internationally to protest. Most climate change activists have participated in collective action around climate change between two and five times in the past five years. In addition to their participation in the climate movement, many of these activists have been involved in the peace movement in the United States. More than two-thirds of them reported also participating in demonstrations about peace. Consistent with the work of scholars in the United States who have seen a decline in the role of labor unions, most climate change activists are not involved in labor unions or labor groups.¹⁷

B. How Do Climate Change Activists Compare to Average Americans?

Climate change activists were asked to respond to questions about their personal levels of civic engagement. Overall, these activists were much more engaged than the general American population. In the past year, 99% of them had signed a petition; 89% had contacted an elected government official; 65% had attended a public, town, or school meeting; and 65% voted in an election (during the non-midterm and non-presidential election year). These results are particularly interesting because of how they compare to the general population. In contrast to these high levels of civic engagement, data from the General Social Survey show that about one-third of all Americans have engaged in these forms of civic and political activity.¹⁸ Table 2 presents a comparison of climate change activists to the general American population.

Table 2: Comparison of Climate Change Activists to the General American Population

In the past year...	Climate Change Activists	U.S. Population
Signed a petition	99%	35.2%
Contacted an elected government official	89%	32.7%
Voted in a local election	65%	34%

IV. Conclusion

Overall, these findings show that climate change activists in America are very civically and politically engaged members of the population who lean to the political left. In other words, these people represent some of the most engaged members of the progressive movement. Based on these findings, we can expect that these climate change activists will continue to participate in this form of activism. Given the findings of this study of climate change activists, it is not surprising that the Democratic nominee for president—now President-Elect Barack Obama—ran on a platform that included progressive positions on climate change politics, including a plan to reduce carbon emissions by 80% by 2050.¹⁹ Given the positions of most climate change activists, it would have made sense for the Obama campaign to target them to participate in such efforts as Camp Obama, which mobilized friends and neighbors to participate in campaign efforts around the country. Because climate change activists are already very civically engaged and interested in progressive politics, they represent an underutilized resource in institutional progressive politics in America.

16. For details on the RNC protest, see Dana R. Fisher, *On Social Networks and Social Protest: Understanding the Organizational Embeddedness of Protest* (ISERP Working Paper No. 08-01, 2008).

17. See, e.g., KIM VOSS, *THE MAKING OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM* (1993) and SEYMOUR MARTIN LIPSET, *AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD* (1996).

18. For more information, go to General Social Survey, *Homepage*, <http://www.norc.umd.edu/GSS+Website/> (last visited Oct. 22, 2008).

19. For details, see Obama for America, *New Energy for America*, <http://www.barackobama.com/issues/energy/> (last visited Oct. 22, 2008).