Climate of Change: What Does an Inside-Outside Strategy Mean?

By **Mark Engler and Paul Engler** – *Dissent* **Summer 2013**

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For those who believe that the arc of the moral universe is long but bends toward justice, it is comforting to see that bend reflected in the polls. Over time, as public awareness of an outrage increases, tolerance for the status quo should diminish while the percentage of the population demanding change creeps up. With steady persistence, popular support for detrimental views will recede, ignorance will be undermined, and consensus around truth will solidify.

Unfortunately, with one of today's most pressing public issues—climate change—things have not worked out so neatly. From the early 2000s through 2007, the year after Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* was released, public concern about global warming grew. The percentage of people who indicated in Gallup polls that they believed climate change would pose a "serious threat" to them within their lifetimes rose from 25 percent in 1998 to a high of 40 percent by the start of 2008.

Then came a bad turn. By 2010, the "serious threat" number had fallen back to 32 percent, erasing almost a decade of progress. A summary of polling data by two University of Connecticut professors notes that the percentage of Americans who agreed that "most scientists believe that the planet is warming" also took a nosedive, falling "by 13 points between March 2008 and March 2010—reaching the lowest level of support since the question was first asked in 1997." In the aftermath of a sharp economic downturn—amid a furious counterattack by Fox News pundits, think tanks funded by the fossil fuel industry, and Tea Party activists—a widespread wariness about the issue took hold in Washington, D.C. The mood persists to the present day.

Environmental advocates now face a question that has widespread implications for how we think about legislation, lobbying, mass movements, and social change: what do you do when an issue emerges as one of the most urgent matters of our time and, at the same instant, becomes firmly regarded as a political loser?

The inhospitable climate in Washington has touched off a debate among environmentalists about what sort of inside politicking and outside pressure will be required to secure limits on greenhouse gases—and whether regulation of these emissions should be pursued at all. Early in the first Obama administration, the White House responded to the political dilemma of global warming with a curious two-step. First, it indicated that it would use the Environmental Protection Agency to promote green regulation and that it would support cap-and-trade legislation to address climate change as it worked its way through Congress. Second, it told people not to talk about the issue.

Or rather, the president's team preferred that people not call the problem by its name. In November 2012, the British *Guardian* broke the story of an off-the-record meeting that the Obama administration held with green leaders in the spring of 2009. The paper reported that the meeting "marked a strategic decision by the White House to downplay climate change—avoiding the very word." After examining focus groups and polling, the White House decided that "climate change was not a winning message" and that "[r]aising the topic would also leave Obama open to attack from industry and conservative groups opposed to intervention in the economy."

The administration opted to use different language to promote environmental measures, and it pushed the environmentalists present to do the same. One participant, environmental campaign consultant Betsy Taylor, described the message conveyed by the White House's presentation: "I took away an absolutely clear understanding that we should focus on clean energy jobs and the potential of a clean energy economy," she said, "rather than the threat of climate change."

The *Guardian* presented its story as a groundbreaking exposé. However, the shift in messaging it reported had been apparent for several years. In 2009, the drive for a landmark national climate change law took the form of a push to put carbon emissions under a market-based, cap-and-trade system. In typically euphemistic fashion, the

legislation, which passed the House of Representatives in July 2009 and was killed in the Senate the following year, was dubbed the "American Clean Energy and Security Act." Leading advocates rallied support for it using the slogan, "Better Jobs, Less Pollution, and More Security." It was also obvious that President Obama scrupulously avoided mention of climate change in his 2011 and 2012 State of the Union addresses and in his reelection campaign—at least until Hurricane Sandy struck the Eastern seaboard.

Moreover, this approach to climate change was consistent with what outfits such as the Breakthrough Institute have long endorsed. The institute was founded by Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, authors of the much-discussed 2004 essay, "The Death of Environmentalism." With regard to the climate, Breakthrough has focused primarily on promoting public investment in clean energy technology. By itself, this is not very controversial, but Shellenberger and Nordhaus strive to cultivate post-partisan bona fides and an image as the "bad boys of environmentalism" by attacking progressive environmentalists. They blame figures such as Al Gore for alienating the public with unduly "partisan" stances and deride activist "climate warriors" for opposing natural-gas fracking and projects such as the Keystone XL pipeline. Advocating "climate pragmatism" that will "swim with, rather than against, the process of human development and modernization," they aim to appeal to the center by tacking to the right and bashing the bogeyman of traditional liberalism. In other words, they propose to do for environmentalism what Bill Clinton's "triangulation" strategy did for the Democratic Party.

While Breakthrough leaders opposed cap-and-trade altogether—seeing it as too punitive and objecting that it would raise energy prices—they praised Obama's instinct that, in their words, "the best way to move forward on climate policy is to not focus on climate at all." Moreover, they argued, "Obama's explicit embrace of nuclear and natural gas broadens the political appeal of his energy policies."

Breakthrough proponents share much in common with conservatives who acknowledge the reality of warming but reject any critique of the high-consumption lifestyles of people in advanced industrial countries and believe that solutions to future climate problems should be left to market-based innovation. While Shellenberger and Nordhaus promote a more active government role in funding research and development, they, too, believe that technology will save us.

The Breakthough position, and to a lesser extent the strategy of the Obama administration, represents a most profound capitulation to existing political conditions. It is based on a simple logic: since we cannot pass ambitious climate legislation, we should focus on the measures that can pass. Breakthrough puts forth the premise that "deadlocked international negotiations and failed domestic policy proposals bring no climate benefit at all." Instead, it embraces "politically feasible forms of action."

Most of the "big green" groups pursued a different approach after the 2008 election of Barack Obama—one also rooted in insider pragmatism, but less politically fatalistic than Breakthrough's. The center of the environmental movement in Washington, D.C., deployed considerable lobbying resources, attempted to build a coalition with business, and brokered a series of policy compromises in an effort to cobble together a cap-and-trade deal that could make it through Congress. Led by the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), these groups also accepted the decision to avoid talking about climate change as an impending ecological catastrophe, but they did so for more narrowly strategic reasons.

Under the leadership of Fred Krupp, the EDF has rebuilt itself over the past two decades as a home for business-friendly environmentalism. In 2007, in preparation for a major legislative effort, the organization helped create the U.S. Climate Action Partnership (USCAP). This coalition brought together several dozen CEOs (including executives from BP and Jim Rogers, CEO of utility giant Duke Energy) and major environmental groups such as the EDF, the Nature Conservancy, and the National Resources Defense Council. Since cap-and-trade policy was a "market-based" alternative to straightforward regulation of carbon emissions and had drawn some support from Republicans in the past, Krupp and his allies reasoned that adequate lobbying and sufficient pre-compromise with corporate interests could propel it through Congress. The USCAP campaign culminated in the climate bill that died in the Senate in 2010.

In January 2013, Harvard professor of sociology and government Theda Skocpol released a 142-page report detailing the history of this failed drive. The report elicited a strong response from the environmentalist community and has fueled ongoing debate about future strategy. Its assessment of cap-and-trade leaders is often damning. Skocpol concludes that the "USCAP campaign was designed and conducted in an insider-grand-bargaining political style that, unbeknownst to its sponsors, was unlikely to succeed given fast-changing realities in U.S. partisan politics and governing institutions."

In 2009 and 2010, conservative funders such as David and Charles Koch and activists in the Tea Party outmaneuvered the business-friendly insiders, not merely by changing general public attitudes but by polarizing right-wing opinion. Making opposition to cap-and-trade an important litmus test for Republican officials, they eliminated any possible support for the deal from moderate crossovers.

In light of this emerging opposition, Skocpol slams USCAP and its allies for embracing "nonpartisan messaging strategies that, in general and gauzy terms, mentioned unspecified 'green jobs' and 'American energy independence' as the reasons for ordinary citizens to acquiesce to sweeping climate change legislation, whose specifics those citizens were supposedly not to worry about too much." Skocpol takes a firm stand against the stealth approach of pushing climate change legislation without discussing the crisis of global warming.

She also points out that although "big green" groups purported to invest tens of millions of dollars to organize the public around climate legislation, the money was in fact mostly spent on television advertising that "maintained a lofty nonpartisan stance well above the level of any policy specifics." In contrast, the Tea Party-fueled Right garnered far more success with a vivid scare campaign emphasizing the direct economic costs of cap and trade.

Responding to the Skocpol report, many environmentalists questioned whether the professor lets Obama off too easily for what they believe was his failure to lead aggressively on climate change. (Skocpol defends the White House's penchant for staying above the congressional fray and only intervening at moments when the vote is very close. In the case of cap and trade, she argues, "Presidential arm-twisting and sweet-talking were not the issue.") Despite these disagreements, Skocpol's concluding recommendation—that environmental donors must make a more significant investment in movement-building outside of the beltway—should be a welcome one on the environmental Left, which has long pointed out that resources within the movement are overwhelmingly directed toward inside efforts.

"To counter fierce political opposition, reformers will have to build organizational networks across the country," Skocpol writes, "and they will need to orchestrate sustained political efforts that stretch far beyond friendly Congressional offices, comfy board rooms, and posh retreats."

More broadly, she contends "Big, society-shifting reforms are not achieved in the United States principally through insider bargains. They depend on the inspiration and extra oomph that comes from widely ramified organization and broad democratic mobilization."

This sentiment is sound. At the same time, the idea of "oomph" is vague enough to allow a variety of competing, and even contradictory, interpretations. In discussions about strategy, this causes problems.

Skocpol and her many interlocutors broadly agree that environmentalists need to pursue an inside-outside approach to addressing climate change. The question is, what does this really mean? As it turns out, understandings of this strategic notion can vary widely, and even some of those who claim to accept the need for more "outside" pressure take stances that are distrustful or even contemptuous of actual social movements. Indeed, Skocpol's report, shrewd and useful in many respects, breaks down on this point.

In a particularly insightful passage, Skocpol notes that inside reformers, despite giving lip service to the need for outside pressure, see citizen activists as playing a secondary and ultimately inferior role:

[The] division of labor in the cap and trade effort—insiders work out legislation, pollsters and ad-writers try to encourage generalized public support—reflects the way most advocates and legislators in the DC world proceed

nowadays. "The public" is seen as a kind of background chorus that, hopefully, will sing on key. Insiders bring in million-dollar pollsters and focus-group operators to tell them what "the public" thinks and to try to divine which words and phrases they should use in television ads, radio messages, and internet ads to move the percentages in answers to very general questions in national polls. It all has a very distanced, antiseptic quality to it . . .

Eric Pooley, an EDF senior vice president, took issue with Skocpol's characterization of its effort as merely an insider drive. He acknowledged that "successful legislative effort must be built upon a combination of inside strategy and outside push (see *Lincoln*)," and he insisted that USCAP was intended as just one part of a wider effort. The business-environmentalist alliance "wasn't designed to be the only horse pulling the climate cart." Pooley contends that a grassroots, outsider coalition simply did not come together quickly enough in 2008 and 2009 to back the cap-and-trade drive: "Yes, we needed more horses. But Skocpol's response is, in effect, to shoot the horse that pulled hardest."

Yet, in maintaining that "the real problem was execution, not strategy," Pooley essentially makes the argument for his more progressive-minded critics: he views outsider organizing as an appendage to the central work of cultivating a legislative compromise. Grassroots pressure is not the foundation of a campaign, something that must be built over the long term, but rather something extra, a force to be brought in when the reformers need backup. Pooley implicitly conveys the notion that many who should-have-been supporters at the grassroots did not appreciate the difficult, expert work being done on their behalf, and that social movement reticence to embrace cap-and-trade deal making can be chalked up to ingratitude and political naïveté.

Skocpol effectively indicts this position, but she too evinces mistrust of the instincts of grassroots environmentalists. This suspicion takes several forms.

First, she barely mentions the fact that, by the time the Senate version of the cap-and-trade legislation materialized, a very sizeable portion of the environmental movement opposed the deal. Groups such as Greenpeace, Public Citizen, Friends of the Earth, and 350.org pointed out that USCAP, in trying to make the cap-and-trade bill more palatable to reluctant senators, had granted some startling concessions. The insiders agreed to the expansion of offshore drilling, promotion of nuclear power, and the elimination of EPA authority to regulate greenhouse gasses under the Clean Air Act. "It's not accurate to call this a climate bill," Public Citizen's Tyson Slocum told reporter Joshua Frank. "This is nuclear energy-promoting, oil drilling-championing, coal mining-boosting legislation with a weak carbon pricing mechanism thrown in."

Skocpol does not explore the substance of these arguments. She only mentions disaffected progressives in order to portray them as averse to working with business, insufficiently self-critical, and immature in their fear of the "messy compromises" that passing major legislation necessarily entails. "The left critics," she writes, "never asked themselves whether they might have done more in an overall push to get basic emissions controls through the Senate—and then come back in later months and years to strengthen the legislation. Left-environmentalists focused instead on what more they should have done to demonize business interests."

Nor does Skocpol give attention to the organizing that environmentalists have already been doing. Given some impressive grassroots efforts at the time, this is a significant oversight. As *Nation* environment correspondent Mark Hertsgaard points out, during Obama's first term a vibrant organizing effort successfully blocked construction of more than one hundred new coal-fired power plants, "thereby imposing a de facto moratorium on new coal in the United States." Their actions, he argues, "limited future U.S. greenhouse gas emissions almost as much as the cap-and-trade bill would have done." In the process of scoring key victories in Southern and Midwestern states, the "CoalSwarm" and "Beyond Coal" efforts built coalitions that reached far beyond the "usual suspects" of liberal environmentalism, embodying precisely the type of far-reaching organizing that those interested in building greater outsider pressure should laud.

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Skocpol does not elevate such efforts for a clear reason: she fears a turn toward the local. Given the hardening of

resistance among congressional Republicans that her report details, one might think that it would be prudent for environmentalists to shift to campaigns that do not require national legislation. But Skocpol rejects this impulse. She warns against any focus on states, cities, towns, and universities "that gives up on legislative remedies" in Washington, D.C. Getting a carbon-capping measure through Congress remains her priority; she merely thinks that the next policy proposal environmentalists push should be better explained to the public and that negotiations around it should be more "transparent." Writing in *Foreign Policy*, she argues, "The congressional equation can only change if proponents of carbon limits stop trying to arrange secretive insider bargains and, instead, put forward a transparent proposal such as a carbon tax with revenues returned directly to citizens in annual dividend checks."

A variety of experts have questioned whether Skocpol's solution, a "cap-and-dividend" policy, is politically viable, and there is active debate about whether movement groups could more easily organize around it than cap and trade. Putting aside those concerns, her proposal has a more basic problem: once again, it asks the grassroots to take its cue from technocratic national policymakers. Even as Skocpol calls for "several years of popular organizing . . . to build alliances stretching into most states and congressional districts," she shows little interest in the popular organizing that is already going on or in the demands that have emerged from below.

In a condescending passage in her report, Skocpol lampoons those who believe that "purely grassroots activity [can] carry the day, working its magic entirely outside of Washington, D.C., headquarters to so many confusing maneuvers and imperfect bargains." But the process of creating social movement pressure is not magic. If it is sometimes treated as such, it is because its dynamics are much less studied and much less understood than the arts of electioneering, lobbying, and legislative deal-making. The latter dominate public understanding of U.S. politics, and they are consistent with elite values and practices. In contrast, the "outside" portion of an inside-outside strategy deserves more sustained attention, precisely because its contours are too often regarded as mystical.

A more robust understanding of the process of building outside pressure would paint a different picture of the options and opportunities available for future climate advocacy. And it would draw on key concepts and overlapping vocabularies from the worlds of community organizing, anti-corporate "comprehensive campaigning," social movement theory, and strategic nonviolence.

A first useful idea highlights a distinction between "transactional" campaign approaches and "transformational" ones. In a well-regarded op-ed published after the 2010 midterm elections, Harvard lecturer and former United Farm Workers organizer Marshall Ganz referenced the leadership theories developed several decades ago by political scientist James MacGregor Burns to explain the difference between Obama's method for getting elected in 2008 and his philosophy of wielding power once in the White House. Ganz wrote,

"Transformational" leadership engages followers in the risky and often exhilarating work of changing the world, work that often changes the activists themselves. Its sources are shared values that become wellsprings of the courage, creativity and hope needed to open new pathways to success. "Transactional" leadership, on the other hand, is about horse-trading, operating within the routine, and it is practiced to maintain, rather than change, the status quo.

Transformational action favors "moral argument and public education" over cutting narrow deals or "[trying] to mediate in a fractious, divided Washington." Applying the concept to social movements, rather than individual leaders, transformational campaigns are those designed to dramatize a moral crisis and broadly shift public opinion, rather than to score narrow wins. Put another way: with its focus on changing political realities, the transformational approach is the exact opposite of the Breakthrough Institute's strategy of accepting the impositions of those political conditions currently in place.

When many Washington-based groups call for the support of outsiders, they are still thinking in a highly transactional mode. This vantage limits their understanding of the scope of organizing required to force change, the forms such activity might take, and the potential impact it might have.

Certainly, it is sometimes warranted to approach a social movement campaign with transactional precision, to exploit points of leverage that grassroots advocates have over a corporation or politician in order to extract an incremental gain. And it is not entirely wrong to argue that 2009 was the right time to rally around a cap-and-trade grand compromise, given that the Senate had a filibuster-proof Democratic majority, unlikely to be seen again soon. But conditions in the Senate were never as hospitable as insiders had hoped—something made clear by the huge concessions they had to make to push their bill forward, as well as the fact that they faced resistance not only from Republicans but also from Democrats hailing from coal- and oil-rich states.

A model such as the Movement Action Plan (MAP), developed by the late organizer and theorist Bill Moyer and advocated by others, including sociologist Mary Lou Finley, would have predicted this failure. MAP recognizes different roles necessary in social movement campaigns, including the "rebel," who "advocat[es] protest against existing conditions," and the "reformer," who works with "official institutions and power holders to formalize the alternatives." Yet, according to MAP, the reformer becomes important in the endgame of movements, while the rebel is of utmost importance in the rising action—exactly the inverse of the cap-and-trade division of labor, which sought to employ grassroots muscle mostly to make a final push.

Among prominent voices in the climate debate, Bill McKibben, the author and founder of 350.org, most often articulates the transformational perspective. Reflecting on how, in the face of rising public support for gay marriage, droves of once-timid politicians are claiming to have "evolved" in their thinking and are changing their previously entrenched positions, McKibben recently came to the following conclusion:

[W]e probably need to think, most of the time, about how to change the country, not the Democrats. If we build a movement strong enough to transform the national mood, then perhaps the trembling leaders of the Democrats will eventually follow. I mean, "evolve." At which point we'll get an end to things like the Keystone pipeline, and maybe even a price on carbon. That seems to be the lesson of Stonewall and of Selma. The movement is what matters; the Democrats are, at best, the eventual vehicle for closing the deal.

Moving beyond a purely transactional framework affects the way in which movement organizations choose their targets and demands, as well as how they relate local wins to larger, national goals. Skocpol suggests that left environmental groups are increasingly mobilizing around state and municipal issues out of distaste for Washington compromise. She is critical of the idea that social justice groups would receive funding for campaigns "regardless of their relevance to any realistic policy agenda"—preferably, a national policy agenda—"about climate change or the limitation of dangerous emissions."

But in most cases, left environmentalists are not crafting locally targeted campaigns out of desire to address parochial issues or to maintain ideological purity. In order to build mass movements, organizers must choose fights that allow them to generate momentum among participants and draw in ever-wider support. They are not local for local's sake. The campaigns are strategically and symbolically chosen. Martin Luther King captured this dynamic in 1967 when he wrote, "Sound effort in a single city such as Birmingham or Selma produced situations that symbolized the evil everywhere and inflamed public opinion against it. Where the spotlight illuminated the evil, a legislative remedy was soon obtained that applied everywhere."

Within social movements, organizers and theorists employ diverse terminology to capture different facets of how this works. In various ways, they affirm the principle that, if they are to spark mass movement, campaigns must be built with symbolic as well as instrumental considerations in mind; they must achieve outcomes that perpetuate further movement-building, even if they do not immediately advance a given policy goal.

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Ruckus Society organizer Joshua Kahn Russell writes about how actions combine communicative elements "designed to sway opinion, express an idea, or contribute to public discourse" and concrete objectives "designed to have a tangible impact on a target." Gene Sharp, the author and theorist known as the "Machiavelli of

nonviolence," counsels dissidents to design actions partly as "symbolic challenges," which set out "to test and influence the mood of the population, and to prepare [the public] for continuing struggle through noncooperation and political defiance." Likewise, the trainers at the Center for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies (CANVAS) instruct grassroots activists to judge actions according to criteria such as whether they "build the number of movement supporters and increase their participation" and "build the capacity of civilians to resist." All of these considerations function outside of a strictly transactional calculus. In fact, in the short term they may make the work of reformers more difficult by polarizing opposition.

Grist magazine commentator David Roberts has done an excellent job of examining some of these dynamics in the climate battle. Defending the often-maligned campaign against the Keystone XL pipeline, Roberts writes,

[C]limate analysis and climate activism involve different logics. The biggest sources of carbon are not necessarily the best targets for activism, because the goal of activism is not merely carbon reduction, it is organization and empowerment. The goal of activism is to create a vibrant, impassioned constituency that can throw enough weight around to shift the balance of power in politics.

To create such a movement you need symbolism. You need dramatic confrontations that help define a moral contrast. It's not like integrating Montgomery's bus system was going to eliminate structural racism, but the Montgomery bus boycott was a defining moment in demonstrating what was at stake and the possibility of change. . . .

There aren't many easy or obvious ways to make viscerally affecting stories out of the models and statistics of climate science….In Keystone XL, they found one….It's an entrée to the climate fight that is immediate enough, vivid enough, to spark the popular imagination.

These days, it is common to see environmental "moderates" ridicule protests against the Keystone XL pipeline as misguided and ineffectual—just as civil rights "moderates" lambasted the campaign in Birmingham as being of "doubtful utility" (*Washington Post*), possessing "a poorly chosen target" (Justice Department official Burke Marshall), and being "poorly timed" (*Time*). Such critics may say they want broad citizen engagement to supplement legislative haggling. But when presented with actual social movement activity, they undermine it.

Roberts responds with a simple maxim: "If you want to move the center, you have to pull from one end."

Ultimately, climate change may not be as hopeless a cause as conventional Washington opinion deemed it during Obama's first term. In the wake of Hurricane Sandy, the president and other elected officials have begun to talk about global warming again. The portion of Americans who agree in polls that there is solid evidence of warming has climbed back up to 69 percent, a rise of 12 points since October 2009. What is more, environmentalism—which has traditionally enjoyed broad but shallow support—can take heart from other movements that have recently demonstrated how a mobilized core constituency can sometimes provoke surprisingly swift transformation.

Former George W. Bush speechwriter Michael Gerson wrote in the *Washington Post* in 2011 that "the role of carbon dioxide in climate patterns has joined abortion and gay marriage as a culture war controversy." Thinkers at places like the Breakthrough Institute take such comparisons as a sign that drives for greenhouse gas regulation are unwinnable, and that we must therefore acquiesce to post-partisan realism.

Yet, just in the past year, two "culture war" causes that were treated until recently as untouchable have flipped. Immigration reform—thanks to a movement led by outspoken DREAM Act youths—and gay marriage—propelled by persistent advocates who refused to settle for either discrimination or mere civil unions—are now seen as political inevitabilities. In each case, activists did not hang their hopes on euphemisms. They took a polarizing issue, translated vague discontent in their communities into organized political action, and ultimately changed the climate of national debate.

Do the economic costs of addressing global warming make it more difficult to win than gains around cultural issues? Perhaps. But disasters such as Hurricane Sandy are increasingly making clear the price of inaction. And

the fact that damage from climate change is concentrated in Republican states may help create new paths for clearing ideological blockades in Congress, particularly if emboldened popular movements can use "trigger events" such as devastating storms to propel new waves of action.

In the end, the idea that global warming is considered a political loser does not make it unique among progressive causes. After all, issues that are already embraced as winners by elected officials hardly need outside campaigns to push them forward. If there ever was such a time, the moment in which one could plausibly believe that we could solve the climate crisis without uttering its name has passed. We have entered a time that demands a different type of mobilization: the type that will cause discomfort among believers in pre-compromise and will inspire all those who have not yet found an outlet for their concern about the changing climate; the type that is equally plainspoken and rebellious.
