

Bernie and AOC Are Right: Joe Biden Should Declare Climate Change a National Emergency

BY

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For decades, presidents have used their power to declare emergencies to sideline badly needed regulations and entrench the national security state. Now a group of Congress members led by AOC is proposing that those powers be used for good: to force action to avoid a climate catastrophe.

In late spring of 2019, the Trump White House issued a [fear-mongering statement](#) about the “sustained influx of illegal aliens” on America’s Southern border. Its contents, needless to say, were xenophobic nonsense from start to finish. Noteworthy, however, was the way it invoked the language of emergency to justify the cruel and brutal measures the administration was hell-bent on pursuing. In this case, such language also carried the force of law: Trump invoking emergency legislation, and [not for the first time](#), to broaden his powers of action.

The president’s abuse of emergency legislation, however, got progressive lawmakers wondering how it might be used constructively. In that spirit, Representative Earl Blumenauer of Oregon partnered with Senator Bernie Sanders and Representative

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to introduce the [Climate Emergency Resolution](#): a simple declaration recognizing the scope and urgency of the climate crisis. As a resolution facing a Republican-controlled Senate and White House, the declaration was more of a symbolic effort than a legislative one.

But with both now flipped to the Democrats, Sanders, AOC, Blumenauer, and Senator Jeff Merkley of Oregon have decided to give the initiative some teeth in the form of [a bill](#) calling for President Biden to declare a national emergency under the National Emergencies Act. Under the act, a sitting president has discretionary authority to deem something a national emergency — a decision that enables them to draw on nearly [140 statutes](#) and dramatically expand the potential scope of federal government action across a wide range of areas. The administration's room to maneuver and (if it saw fit) take aggressive action would, in effect, be massively increased. **As the Center for Biological Diversity [pointed out](#) in a statement endorsing the bill, declaring a national emergency would allow the president to, among other things, “redirect military funds to build clean energy systems, marshal private industry for clean technology manufacturing, generate millions of high-quality jobs and finally put an end to dangerous crude oil exports.”**

In both a rhetorical and legislative sense, the case for declaring climate change a national emergency couldn't be stronger. As the bill's own text notes, [quoting](#) from former NASA climatologist Dr James Hansen, atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide must be reduced to no more than 350 parts per million “if humanity wishes to preserve a planet similar to that on which civilization developed and to which life on Earth is adapted.” And as it further notes, the crisis is already an imminent one, with droughts, wildfires, acidification, and deadly storms attributable to human-caused changes in the earth's climate. Addressing or even mitigating any of these issues will require nothing short of an economic transformation: necessitating among other things a total phaseout of gas, oil, and coal and an unprecedented modernization of basic public infrastructure.

As the bill's proponents clearly recognize, however, its passage would only be a first step. Expanding the potential scope for action is obviously not the same as taking it, and some countries have declared climate emergencies only to remain [decidedly vague](#) about their actual plans (some, like Canada, have even [done so](#) while [continuing](#) to develop fossil fuel infrastructure). Nevertheless, legislation of the kind represented by the National Climate Emergency Act is a necessary precursor to any worthy or meaningful action on a growing crisis that threatens to destabilize societies and ultimately make the planet uninhabitable. Certain to face opposition from lawmakers cynical enough to [try and spin](#) it as heavy-handed political overreach, the bill undoubtedly faces a very real fight in Congress despite potentially having a few [unlikely allies](#).

On [more than one](#) occasion, the Trump administration invoked the National Emergencies Act to abuse presidential authority and carry out its reactionary ambitions. What if, just for once, it was used for good?