

Steve Schmidt and Varshini Prakash on Disrupting Climate Politics

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Recorded on October 23, 2020

Greg Dalton: This is Climate One. I'm Greg Dalton.

On today's program - breaking the political logjam on climate.

Steve Schmidt: The brokenness of our politics is that we have 90% agreement on a dozen different solutions that we cannot get through the state or federal legislative processes because of the systemic brokenness of politics. [:15]

Greg Dalton: In today's ultra-partisan era, when even wearing a face mask is seen as a political statement, can both parties ever get on the same page?

Steve Schmidt: I do think that one of the aspects if we want to move climate change forward as an issue is that the two sides, they're gonna have to learn to speak American to each other. [:12]

Greg Dalton: And what happens when youth take action - and take over - to demand change.

Varshini Prakash: So during this time we had over 200 Sunrisers who marched to Nancy Pelosi's office and held envelopes that said, "Dear Democrats, what is your plan?" [:11]

Greg Dalton: Disrupting climate politics with Steve Schmidt and Varshini Prakash. Up next on Climate One.

Greg Dalton: How does the climate crisis figure in our national political conversation?

Climate One features energy companies and environmentalists, Republicans and Democrats, the exciting and the scary aspects of the climate challenge. I'm Greg Dalton.

Fiery young people and historic wildfires have propelled climate disruption onto the agenda during this presidential election.

Later in the show we'll hear from Varshini Prakash, leader of the Sunrise Movement that has effectively moved Joe Biden and other Democrats toward bolder climate action in line with the science. Republicans, for their part, are still denying or downplaying the threat, as evidenced by Amy Coney Barrett's comment, during her confirmation hearing, that climate change is controversial.

Not long ago, Democrats and Republicans basically agreed on climate change. Republican Governor

Arnold Schwarzenegger put California at the head of the charge to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Senator John McCain crossed the proverbial aisle to co-sponsor three versions of the Climate Stewardship Act -- none of which made it through the senate.

Since then, climate change has become a partisan issue, despite the fact that its effects touch the lives, jobs and communities of every American. Political strategist Steve Schmidt believes that agreeing on a solution means first meeting people where they are.

Steve Schmidt: I think the climate advocates really need to think very hard about how do you communicate to working-class people in this country, people who work with their hands, who build things, work in manufacturing sectors that are under strain and stress, about what a picture of a future looks like that they can be full participants in, an economy that's in transition both from a technological perspective and from an environmental perspective. [:32]

Schmidt worked on the presidential campaigns of George W. Bush and John McCain and Arnold Schwarzenegger's surprise run for governor. He is one of the founders of The Lincoln Project, a group of lifelong Republican strategists working to defeat Donald Trump and Trumpism.

Schwarzenegger's belief that what's good for the environment is good for the economy, led him to sign the Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006. Schmidt explains how that bipartisan climate deal came about.

PROGRAM PART 1

Steve Schmidt: Well, it remains I think the singularly most significant climate change legislation that's been passed in the country. Arnold Schwarzenegger had a view he had a conviction. It was really a time and example and there's not been a lot of them in this century of elected officials working together. You had a Republican governor who had a very close working relationship with the Democratic speaker of the house, Fabian Núñez. And Fabian Núñez had a point of view, which is my job is to move the state of California forward. My job is to craft legislation. My job is to get the best deal possible not to obstruct wholly a Republican governor.

So, he went in there and he said no to the governor on a number of different issues, but he also had a point of view, hey, I'll work with you on this. And the two of them found their way to working with each other and passed that historic legislation which you know is not a perfect piece of legislation. But certainly, the apocalyptic predictions about what it would do to the California economy have not come to pass. But the reality is, is that it's a global problem, and California can be a leader but California, as big as it is and as powerful as it is, still can't be the solution to a planetary problem.

Greg Dalton: Couple years later you advise John McCain on his presidential run. President Bush had pulled the U.S. out of the Kyoto protocol but McCain took climate seriously and cosponsored a climate bill with Sen. Joe Lieberman. How did McCain see the climate and how did his understanding of climate evolve over time?

Steve Schmidt: Well, John McCain wasn't a scientist, but he believed in science and believed in scientists. And he would certainly have been and was at the time in disagreement with people that were in denial over a growing consensus around this issue. And John McCain represents a vestigial Republican Party that wasn't an anti-science party, you know, by any stretch of the imagination. And so, you know, I do think that one of the aspects if we want to move climate change forward as an issue is that the two sides, they're gonna have to learn to speak American to each other. And I don't - so for sure the question of the science on this is indisputable. And anecdotally anybody who's over 35, 40 years old wherever you are in the country the weather is materially different. And I've

lived in California for a long time. I live out West now for a long time. I grew up on the East Coast. You look at the severity of storms, hurricanes, everything that scientists have said would happen over the last 40 years is in fact happening. I mean it's just indisputable.

Now there's a question: what do you do about it? And the question is and I think it's a fair one to ask and some Republicans asked this question that believe in the science but say and I think that people who are advocates for climate change policy have to have the capacity to answer this question, which is if you want to impose \$1 trillion worth of regulation on the economy you're gonna have to explain what the efficacy of the policy is. What will it in fact do to lower global carbon emissions? If it is just a virtue signaling exercise, leadership for other countries at the cost of America's working-class families, then I think it becomes a more difficult proposition. I mean there has to be sensitivity around the economic dislocation that has brought us in large measure in part to this moment broadly speaking, that we're in with dangerous ramifications for our democracy and for even the union of states.

Greg Dalton: There's also the cost of inaction, right. People often point to the cost of action. And we've seen with COVID, a trillion-dollar used to be a lot of money and now you know I've lost track of how many trillions that national governments have spent. So, there's the COVID context which shows we can spend big money when we want to and have to and then there's the cost of inaction.

Steve Schmidt: Well, look, you know, I don't know what a limited government party means in an era where the government has the ability to spend \$3 trillion in a month, but we should all understand that you know the debt to GDP ratio's now the highest it's been since World War II, and eventually even this country will run out of money. My point is, is that when you talk about big change and you talk about reconciling sacrifice and action you have to talk candidly and clearly. COVID is a great example of the six months of nonsense talk, all of it foundationally built around the president's lie he delivered to the country 119 times. And as a result, we have 150,000 dead Americans that didn't have to be dead. We had the same mortality rate as the Germans did, right. So, this is a lethal aspect of all of this, as it relates to COVID that's deeply related to climate change. The out of hand rejection of science. I mean, you saw an exchange between Rand Paul and Anthony Fauci where Rand Paul has no idea what he's talking about at all. Just nonsense talk and Dr. Fauci dressed him down. But, you know, we have a political party that is death to the expertise of what everyone else in the world would recognize as the world's leading infectious disease expert who just happens to be an American. And so, on all of these issues I think that people deserve to have and must have an understanding of the result that will be delivered by the policy.

And I think it's an important thing to realize that you know most Americans when they walk into and I don't care what political party they're in. When they walk into a local government, a county government, a state government to the DMV to the federal government for whatever, it is an infinitesimally small number of people who walk out of that experience saying wow, that was terrific, what a great experience. You know, let's give them more money and let's give them more power.

And so, for Democrats, right, a really important figure in this primary election was Andrew Yang. Because Andrew Yang understands something right, which is that government is sclerotic and that would drive cynicism and would obstruct an ability to solve problems is a substantial belief the government is not capable of delivering and executing either the program, the mission or delivering the service. So there's no group in the country, right, who should be more invested in the idea of the efficient delivery of government services that build trust in the eyes of the people in government to do so than progressives who have the point of view that government should be doing more across a wide spectrum of things including climate. And the bigger the aspiration and the ambition to fix big problems, the greater the gap is between the credibility of government claims, you know, to, hey, we got to do something. But people look at it and say do what and how and how is it gonna work?

Greg Dalton: There's been and I think you touched on something that's been a narrative since Reagan said, you know, government is not the solution government is the problem. Bill Clinton said the era of big governments is over. Grover Norquist wants to drown it in a bathtub. The narrative that government is ineffective and stupid has been quite dominant in the last since Reagan, but you know there's the U.S. military, which is a government agency and there's been, I guess I push back on that. That government also gets a lot of the hardest problems that markets don't solve very well. We ask government to solve homelessness, we ask government to solve a lot of things where markets don't work so well. So, I just want to say that push back against that narrative that government is always bad. You know, yes, to DMV -

Steve Schmidt: I'm not saying it's bad. You have a reflexive defensiveness to this, right, which I think is an important. I say this respectfully which is this. So, Reagan and that expression which was a political expression, right. It had resonance at a time where there was a majority of the country that believed that the great society programs that they had been ineffective, that government was too much, that smaller government, more controlled government and the pendulum always swings back and forth in American life on this question. I would argue that Trumpism is an entirely different matter altogether. But I do think that's unfortunate because I do think that there are problems, right that only government can solve, that only government has the scale to solve. But it is true -

Greg Dalton: Like a pandemic, right?

Steve Schmidt: But government hasn't solved the problem of the pandemic our government has had the least effective response of any industrialized country in the world. And so, what I'm saying is that when you look at government -

Steve Schmidt: I have no argument with that whatsoever that he's the most incompetent administration, but up and down. You can look at Flint. You can look at the L.A. school system, we can look at lots of places in America where Republicans have no influence at all. And by no influence I mean 0.0 and you see chaos in the schools you see chaos across the board. Look at the local administration of the city of San Francisco right now on quality-of-life issues or in Los Angeles. So, what I'm saying is that people regardless, right, regardless of where they are, right, on the political spectrum, 85 to 90% of people in this country agree with each other on the question of basically what do we do to solve the immigration problem. What do we do to pass the first steps of common-sense gun control? The brokenness of our politics is that we have 90% agreement on a dozen different solutions that we cannot get through the state or federal legislative processes because of the systemic brokenness of politics. And all I'm saying is that in order to get to the big type of solutions that you need on the biggest problems there has to be some level of restoration of trust between the citizenry and the government and it's not just distrust of the Trump administration, though it's spectacularly incompetent. It's brought distrust across the board over many years about the capacity of government to deliver services.

And so, the updating the modernization -- I don't think that there's bad people in the DMV. I don't think they have the technology for example, that a private sector company does that's operating on a Salesforce Platform. There needs to be top to bottom modernization you know of all of this. There needs to be a strategy. And what I'm saying is the articulation of a strategy that can answer the question about how does this make life better for the people 10 years from now, 15 years from now, 20 years from now -- that should be something if you care about climate change that is a first-order strategic priority with regard to communicating to the country about what the crisis is how much time we have and what must be done to solve it in a way that grows the coalition, that doesn't keep it static. That doesn't keep the problem intractable because it's not a good thing that there's been no forward progress on this legislatively since 2006 anywhere else in the country, not to mention the

country's withdrawal from the Paris climate accords.

Greg Dalton: Right. I think one of the questions is that we don't want to pay for the DMV, we don't want to pay the taxes that could allow the DMV to buy a Salesforce Platform to invest in the infrastructure because we want to see what's the return for me? What am I gonna get out of this? What's gonna be direct personal return. And in climate that's really hard to calculate. What is the cost of reducing greenhouse gas emissions so Florida doesn't get hammered with hurricane after hurricanes? So the American West doesn't burn like a fireball several months a year. So, if we're only thinking about that direct payback, I don't think we get there.

Steve Schmidt: Well, I mean I do think again right like on the efficiency in the state of California, you know, if you have someone, right, who's in the top bracket let's say, you know, someone who makes over million dollars a year. It's a lot of money, right. But they're paying 53% of their salary between the federal and state, all in. I'm not sure you know, at that income, at lower incomes, you know a couple hundred thousand dollars a year in household income in suburban Sacramento, San Francisco, Los Angeles, you know you're not living the lifestyles of the rich and famous. And so, you know look I think it's easy to say more money, more money, more money, you know for everything else. But what I'm saying a lot of the solutions to increased efficiency in the end contain costs, don't cost more. We have tremendous inefficiency everywhere we look.

And you know I'm just saying this analytically, right, that if you are in the climate advocacy side and you're trying to communicate that we have a major problem and we do, right. When you look at the fires in the West and the size and the scale of them. The ferocity of the hurricanes. I think you have to be introspective if you're on that side. And you say why isn't this coalition growing consistent with the increasing obvious severity of the problem, right. And so, it's one thing to you know I think step back and tell people they're wrong or you know that they're not doing this or that or whatever. But these issues are gonna require I think some introspection. Forget the Republican politicians in the house. They're a lost cause. They're a lost cause, right. By the time they get there every one of these people is anti-science with few exceptions. They're beholden to an increasingly extreme base. National Republican party is gonna look more like the state of California Republican Party. And so, the place you have to convince people is at the people level which is below the political class level, you know, to demand, take action and make this an electoral issue.

Greg Dalton: You're listening to a Climate One conversation with former Republican strategist Stephen Schmidt. Coming up - regaining the trust of the people.

Steve Schmidt: If you're an advocate of climate change you have to think about how to deliver this message...to people who have been propagandized, people who have been lied to, people who have been spun a line of BS for 25 years on a collection of very dishonest platforms. [:17]

Greg Dalton: That's up next, when Climate One continues.

Greg Dalton: This is Climate One. I'm Greg Dalton, and we're talking about the politics of energy, jobs and climate. My guest is political strategist Steve Schmidt, a co-founder of the Lincoln Project. He also is a former Vice Chairman of Edelman, a public relations firm with close ties to Chevron. In fact, a former Chevron executive, Dave Samson, is now a Vice Chair of Edelman.

Fossil fuel companies have spent millions on disinformation campaigns, designed to confuse the

public about their part in the climate crisis. And they wield enormous influence in the political realm through campaign financing. Is there a way to unlock that power?

PROGRAM PART 2

Steve Schmidt: Look, I think that as a political matter, the side that denies climate change is on the defensive, right. The side that the climate change side is on the defensive about is what we're gonna do about it side, right. In a way that leads to buy-in from the American people that it's not going to break me economically. It's not gonna shutter my business. I'll give you a great issue, right, that's in the state of California are these bans on single-use plastic bags, right. Now, the climate argument is a serious argument all the time or none of the time in my view. And the reality on that product was you banned a product that was American-made that was made from a natural gas platform and decided instead to import as a solution these heavier gauge bags from China which are made from petroleum basis. And not to mention the tens of thousands of people who work in manufacturing facilities in the state making a living wage, who now all of a sudden are looking at the political class of the state saying, well the plastic bag here is a mortal threat and we're going to eliminate tens of thousands of jobs on a bunch of junk science. Litter is a problem but you can recycle all of this stuff. And so that working-class voter who sees a regulatory regime on a wide range of fronts defaults to being very unsympathetic to the same people who were trying to get rid of their job, who are also telling them about the exigent emergency circumstance of climate change.

And so, I think the climate advocates really need to think very hard about how do you communicate to working-class people in this country. People who work with their hands who build things work in manufacturing sectors that are under strain and stress about what a picture of a future looks like that they can be full participants in an economy that's in transition both from a technological perspective and from an environmental perspective. That they are not gonna be left out of the ability to climb. Because we're in this giant mess in this country because at the end of the day 40% of people have \$400 cash savings and have completely lost faith in expertise, in science, the American dream, and have taken on a nihilistic approach to politics. And what animates them is animus towards the other tribe and that's where we are. And so, you know, my point here is that -- and the Supreme Court fight is a great example of the type of majoritarianism that the founders warned the country about and Federalists had. We're deeply worried about this, right, the inability for the faction to suppress the debate around the obvious public good and climate change fits into that. But I think that if you're an advocate of climate change you have to think about how to deliver this message, because it's an urgent one, to people who have been propagandized, people who have been lied to, people been spun a line of BS for 25 years on a collection of very dishonest platforms, and it's an enormous strategic task. But there is introspection called for on the question of how can we do this better on the climate change side of it.

Greg Dalton: And back to your former boss Arnold Schwarzenegger. He was better than anyone at sort of making debunking this idea that the economy and the environment are always at odds. He was very persuasive in saying, look, these things can go together. Look at California since that law he signed; the economy has thrived. Tesla has now changed the American the global auto industry and helping drive down the cost of batteries. Solar electricity some of the cheapest electricity on the planet right now. Markets are working, right? Why aren't Republicans embracing those market innovations in progress which are a lot of that's American grown?

Steve Schmidt: I think like part of it is understanding -- I mean, first off, right, Republicans in the state of California don't have any political power at all. They can't stop anything from happening, right. So, if anything is or isn't happening the one group that isn't responsible for good or bad, is a group that has no power. The Republican legislative minority has as much influence in California, as does the Nevada Republican legislature. They've put themselves in that position. But if you look at

it just from a public opinion perspective, you know, California is a nation-state and if you look at the diffusion - let's just take it back to when they was still a healthy Republican Party in the state or at least it wasn't in super minority status. Two very different states economically, right. Republicans are overrepresented in the Central Valley and in the northern part of the state and that's a very different economy from the coastal areas of the state.

I mean you want to talk about income inequality, drive to Palo Alto, right, stop, look at the tower, turnaround and drive back 35 miles into the valley. I mean you have Great Depression economies in some of these places. And so, from an agricultural base drought states water policies and disaster and has been you know for probably most of our lifetimes. Republicans are representing a downscale economically part of the electorate. And, you know, both Trump and Hillary Clinton lied when they went to West Virginia to talk to the voters there. So Hillary went there and she said, listen coal miners and all that, the clean energy jobs are coming. Clean energy jobs aren't coming to Eastern Kentucky and West Virginia. They're not. Trump went there and said all the coal mining jobs are coming back. Well they're not, they're not, right. But what's easier to believe, something that never existed or a past that you can still touch, right?

Greg Dalton: So, where and how does energy matter in the presidential and down ballot races this year?

Steve Schmidt: I don't think it does, particularly. I think that there's, you know, look, and I'm involved in a group called The Lincoln Project and we have a point of view in the race. And we were deeply troubled watching the Democratic primaries in the fall because there was a name not often spoken in them. Thy name is Trump and, you know, our point of view is the first issue. The second issue. The third issue and the next 147 after that are all one thing, Donald Trump. Donald Trump is the biggest worst problem the country is facing and is the easiest one to fix. Can't fix anything until he's removed from power. And here's the reality and I believe this to the bottom of my heart. We're not getting back to energy policy in this country. In fact, we're not getting back to anything until COVID is under control. And I think a lot of Americans look at this and they think well God this has been going on since March. So, like it's got to be halfway over, right. It's not. We're still at the beginning, we're gonna have a death count that exceeds our total World War II casualties may be much higher. A disaster for the ages. Disaster for the ages. The economy is shattered. One out of every 1500 black people in America is gonna die of COVID. It's extraordinary to ponder the racial inequity and the distribution of the mortality of the disease, the impact on small business in this country. The disruption of education; we've ended the American way of life fundamentally, right. I mean grandparents can't see their grandkids. Grandparents can't see the birth of a grandchild. Football games tailgates bar mitzvahs first communions, graduations, proms, because of Trump. None of this had to happen. And so, you know, climate change is an emergency. They need look no further than think California. But in the middle of the pandemic that there could be an emergency that even has primacy over that is just testament to the profound dysfunction, incompetence, malice, malfeasance that you see out of this administration. It's just unbelievable.

Greg Dalton: If you're just joining us, my guest is Steve Schmidt. He's a former campaign strategist for John McCain and George W. Bush and cofounder of The Lincoln Project. Disclosure, a member of my family has contributed to The Lincoln Project.

Coming back to where we started and getting toward the end here. Republicans, there's been talk that they're seeking a new message on climate that they're worried about losing a generation of voters who really care about climate. What is that path is there a path for Republicans and Democrats to come together on climate in a Biden administration. What does that look like?

Steve Schmidt: There's a problem. The problem calls for a solution. Solutions that work are based

in pragmatism. And one thing I'll just say like I'll just react to and, you know, I've always enjoyed our conversations when we've talked about climate. And, you know, I think when you look at people who want to get to the same place but you have to listen to each other. When I hear kind of the term fossil fuel companies just in the state of California. I mean largest employer in the state is Chevron. I mean if Chevron were to suddenly disappear and, you know, all of the jobs associated up and down the economic ladder with Chevron, it's devastating for the state. Not to mention if you actually work for Chevron.

And so, the climate change side of this I mean if you look at the fossil fuel economy in the country it can't be turned off overnight. There are millions of jobs that are dependent on it. And to be honest with you, you know, I've never – it seems to me in the same sense that when people talk about and particularly out of California, right, you know we're at the age of driverless trucks and cars and all of this stuff. I mean, number one living wage job for a non-college-educated white male in America is driving something to somewhere. And I don't have the answers to that stuff but you know, other than from the perspective of what I've done for a living is if the Democratic Party's position is you know through the debates and everything else is that fossil fuel economy and if you work in any you're making equipment you're making automobiles doing whatever. Say well my existence is superfluous to them, it's irrelevant. And it's like that's – so to move forward on this got to be able to bridge people's real anxieties with the edges and circumstance of how we fix this problem.

Greg Dalton: We've been talking about climate and the political divide with Steve Schmidt, former Republican campaign strategist and a founder of The Lincoln Project. When we come back, the leader of The Sunrise Movement has a warning for Democrats - it's time they step up to the plate.

Varshini Prakash: We're done electing and protecting and supporting Democrats just because they have a D next to their name. Just because you're a Democrat it doesn't mean that you're good on climate. It doesn't mean that you are a champion. [:13]

Greg Dalton: That's up next, when Climate One continues.

Greg Dalton: This is Climate One. I'm Greg Dalton.

One week after Democrats took back control of the house in the 2018 mid-term elections, the youth-led Sunrise Movement occupied the office of speaker Nancy Pelosi to demand that she take bold action on climate change. Newly elected representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, one of the architects of the Green New Deal, joined them to voice her support.

AOC: I just want to let you all know how proud I am of each and every single one of you for putting yourselves and your bodies and everything on the line to make sure that we save our planet, our generation and our future. It's so incredibly important. [:19]

My next guest, Varshini Prakash, co-founded the Sunrise Movement in 2017, just after she graduated college. Prakash has written that she felt the arc of history bend a little when she and the other Sunrisers staged their climate sit-in.

PROGRAM PART 3

Varshini Prakash: So, in that moment we knew that if Democrats took back control, they would not prioritize the climate crisis. They would say, well Trump's in office we don't have the chance at

passing legislation let's forget about it for two years until the districts look different. And, I think we realized like if we don't get out ahead that was this, you know, in the same month we had seen the IPCC report that told us we had less than a decade to transform the U.S. economy towards a renewable energy economy.

So during this time we had over 200 Sunrisers who marched to Nancy Pelosi's office and held envelopes that said, "Dear Democrats, what is your plan?" and we delivered these envelopes that contained the stories of what people had loved and lost to the climate crisis or were in fear of losing to climate change. And for two hours afterwards, we demonstrated, we chanted, we sang, we told powerful stories. I remember one story where one of our leaders, Claire, talked about how her aunt and uncle had lost their homes in wildfires when at the same time the Camp Fire was on the TV screen in Nancy Pelosi's office. And so, it was this just electric moment and was made even more powerful when Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez came and joined us and said, you know, collectively we've got to have Nancy Pelosi's back in pursuing the most ambitious energy agenda this country has ever seen. I'll never forget that moment. And over the course of the next couple of days we saw five like over 5,000 articles that were written about climate change and the Green New Deal within like 24 to 48 hours. That is like unheard of for climate news. You know, we saw all of a sudden, this concept, this term of a Green New Deal becoming a rallying cry. We saw it immediately starts to become a litmus test for Democratic candidates on the campaign trail to the presidency.

And ultimately, I think what was achieved in that moment was two things. One, a complete destruction of the debate of is climate change real? And a departure from that and an evolution to a conversation about we know it's happening what are the solutions and how big and at what scale do we need to pursue them. And the second thing that happened was a connection between the climate crisis, racial justice and the economy in a very public way. You know this is stuff that environmental justice communities, indigenous peoples have been calling for for centuries literally. But now it was part of the national mainstream discourse and has propelled some of the most intersectional and like powerful legislation and policy plans from a lot of different congresspeople and presidential candidates that we've seen yet.

Greg Dalton: As someone who follows thinks about climate full-time, I certainly, Sunrise for me came out of nowhere burst on the scene very, very dramatically and certainly shifted the debate during the Democratic primary season and got there to be these those climate town halls. I saw Sunrise very much driving that. And then there was a little bit of a lull and the Democratic establishment said, well, Green New Deal is not really a plan it's a rallying cry. Once Joe Biden got the nomination he appointed this counsel to try to bring in the Bernie supporters, the more aggressive climate people. Tell us about that transformation because Joe Biden's in a very different place now on climate than he was six or nine months ago.

Varshini Prakash: Yes, yeah. And, you know, so I participated alongside folks like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and environmental justice advocate Catherine Flowers in the Bernie-Biden unity task force process. And the primary goal at least for me in being on that task force was to see, you know, could we push Joe Biden to increase his ambition, to move up the timelines by which we have to decarbonize our economy to center justice and equity in every part of his climate change legislation. And in doing so, could he actually begin to ignite excitement and a sense of inspiration amongst a demographic of people who care deeply about the climate crisis but have really, really not been supportive of Joe Biden, young people. And, you know, through this task force process we were able to move up the timeline on decarbonizing the power sector from 2050 to 2035. He made commitments around net zero new buildings by 2030. He is proposing a \$2 trillion green jobs and infrastructure plan in creating 2 million jobs with a commitment that 40% of that investment will go to frontline communities.

You know, I could go on and on about many of the things that were additions to that policies as policy as a result to, as a result of young people being a part of the process. And I think ultimately, we've come out the other end where now we're witnessing these fires just demolishing, you know, 5 million acres of land in a matter of days and weeks. We're seeing, you know, there are like - last time I checked there were eight storms brewing across the world simultaneously. We've seen the Gulf Coast being hit again and again and again. Iowans have absolutely not recovered following the derecho of a few weeks ago. You know, we are in a climate emergency and I think that young people are also really realizing and understands the difference between somebody like Donald Trump and somebody like Joe Biden with the understanding that ultimately Joe Biden, while he may not be everything that we hope that he would be on climate he has move considerably and he has proven that he is amenable to his platform shifting. Which I think is extremely important for change agents to keep in mind.

Greg Dalton: One of the differences I see that Sunrise has brought to the politics is politicians on the right had always feared that if they came out on climate, they would face a primary challenge from the right funded by the Kochs and Tea Parties. On the left it wasn't the case. The Democrats were always afraid of primary fights and with Jamaal Bowman and others you've shown a willingness to take down Democratic establishment figures. So, tell us about that dynamics.

Varshini Prakash: Yeah, I mean, look, we're done electing and protecting and supporting Democrats just because they have a D next to their name. Just because you're a Democrat it doesn't mean that you're good on climate. It doesn't mean that you are a champion. Just because you vote the right way doesn't mean that you want to actually understand what is at stake the threat that we are under and the fact that we have delayed action for so long for 40 years that we have just half a decade to turn this around or like, my generation and a lot of people are completely screwed. And so, I think, you know, we set out in large parts we engage in primaries because we don't just need to fight against the GOP we need a set of people and a party that we can fight for. And so many young people are fully disenchanted with the political process because they don't see people on either side of the aisle who represent their interests who are ready to fight hard, take political risks perhaps to their career to be on the right side of history.

And so, for us we decided, you know, the only way that the Democratic Party is gonna take this seriously is honestly if some of them get kicked out for failing to do so. And so, you know, we helped Jamaal Bowman, who is an amazing, amazing guy from the Bronx who was a middle school principal it's just like a huge champion of the Green New Deal. We made upwards of 800,000 of his 1.3 million phone calls to voters in the midst of a pandemic and like literally these are teenagers on Zoom making these calls. And we were able to topple a 31-year incumbent, you know, who had simply not made this a priority and hadn't made a number of things a priority like, you know, being in his district when they were undergoing some of the worst rates of COVID in the country. And so -

Greg Dalton: And he even said if I wasn't a primary, I wouldn't be here -

Varshini Prakash: Exactly. Like I'm sorry, you don't deserve the office. You don't deserve the office if you can't actually help your people when they're needed. And, you know, there's a reason why it's called the public servant there's a public service. And I think, you know, when people hold on to these positions for too long and sort of rest on their laurels and rest on their relationships, times are changing and the crisis that we are facing right now have reached such a fever pitch that it's not enough anymore just to kind of coast and make the right votes. We need people who are gonna be fighters because we have a lot of trouble coming our way.

Greg Dalton: If you're just joining us my guest is Varshini Prakash, Executive Director and cofounder of Sunrise Movement. She's coeditor of a new book, *Winning the Green New Deal: Why*

We Must, How We Can.

One of the youths said, was in Nancy Pelosi's office that day I've known her since she was a baby. And I saw her on 60 Minutes I thought, uh-oh, do your parents in Hong Kong know what you're doing? I think they were proud. I later attended a Sunrise chapter meeting at Yale with her and I was impressed how respectful and inclusive the student activists were. So how do you get young people all fired up to take power without getting them high on power?

Varshini Prakash: Yeah, that's an interesting question. You know, I think ultimately, we are very clear that we are losing badly right now. And we are well aware that our opponents have frankly unfathomable levels of amounts of money, endless resources, they are coordinated, they are organized and they have been running the same playbook for half a century. The delay, the deny, the deceive playbook and it has been working. And so I think we're clear that we can't just be sort of like small groups of individuals like being morally righteous but not actually perhaps like growing our ranks. We have to be talking to new people. We have to be bringing in lots of folks who are worried about this crisis but have never taken action before. Because if we're just preaching to the choir, we're never gonna win.

And so actually I think interestingly enough, to build power you have to share power. To build power you have to bring people in. You have to be inclusive. You have to make it a welcoming space. You have to give everybody a role. You have to make sure that you are teaching people who have never done this before how to run a meeting, how to have a one-on-one conversation with somebody else, to bring them in. How to canvass, how to phone bank. You have to teach people how to do a direct action. How to tell the story. Like the number of things, I had to learn from scratch when I was younger, I mean, you know, it's because people invested in my leadership. So I think, you know, if we are serious about getting millions and millions of people into this movement we've got to get off our high horse, we can't, you know, be using all this jargon and words that people don't know or creating sort of unrealistic expectations for the kind of person that joins a movement. We've got to make it as accessible and open and welcoming as possible because we need every person that's gonna come through that door.

Greg Dalton: One of the things the Green New Deal challenges is sort of markets and reshaping or certainly constraining markets that have been quite unleashed since Milton Friedman in the 70s and said shareholders are primary. How has market fundamentalism shape the way the United States views and responds to climate disruption?

Varshini Prakash: When you have an economic system that has said leave everything to the markets, deregulate industry. Let industry do whatever it wants. You know, there's no need for government to enforce industry or stop pollution or make some of these like big, monumental investments to actually invest in the green energy sector. When we have created an economic system that is about profit for profit's sake without consideration of, you know, literally the future of the planet or at least humanity's role in it. I think this has created a sense that, you know, ultimately there was a deep imbalance over the last 40 years that has been tailored very much to the markets and far less to the role of government in actually being able to implement the kinds of policies to solve the problem.

And so now you're seeing a lot of people saying enough is enough like the markets had a chance to change this to address this problem for 40 years and they utterly failed. And honestly, it's a lie anyways because the government actually props up the fossil fuel industry as we've seen through this pandemic or through fossil fuel subsidies and tax breaks. And I think when we look back in history any time where there was an all hands effort to address some form of existential threat whether it was World War II, whether it was the great depression. Whatever it was you saw the

government taking a very active very critical role in uniting Americans, you know, people industry academia, unions, movements and bringing people together to face that common threat. And I really think that we have that opportunity in the climate crisis as well, but to pass the kinds of like honestly dozens of pieces of legislation that we will need to do to address this issue over the next decade it's gonna require our government we can't just leave it to the markets to do that.

Greg Dalton: You know, last question is, the science is dark, the odds are long the weight of the future of the world is on young people's shoulders. How do you carry the weight of all of the intensity that you think about every day and not get consumed by it?

Varshini Prakash: Yeah, I mean I think there's a couple of things. One is I do let myself get consumed by it. And I actually think most of the time that it feels overwhelming and terrifying is actually us resisting the actual grief and pain that we feel. And so sometimes what you got to do is you just got to stop and cry or light a candle or do whatever, say a prayer, do whatever you need to do to actually feel what you're trying to feel. Because I find that like the pain oftentimes is like more in the resistance to the actual feeling than anything else.

The other thing I'd say is having to develop like more spiritual practices really helps me and I think as part of that one of the greatest teachings is basically the balance between the fact that you don't really have any control over the world's destiny in a real way. It is not like solely my responsibility to fix the world. And at the same time, I have an immense amount of power to shape what I can touch and that could potentially change the course of history. And both of those are true they're held at once. But I think being clear about that reality and being able to let go a little bit of the pressure and the ego of that I think is immensely helpful.

Greg Dalton: You've been listening to Climate One. We've been talking about the politics of climate with Varshini Prakash, executive director and co-founder of the Sunrise Movement and the author of *Winning the Green New Deal: Why We Must, How We Can*. My other guest today was political strategist Steve Schmidt, a co-founder of The Lincoln Project.

Greg Dalton: To hear more Climate One conversations, subscribe to our podcast on Apple Podcasts, Spotify or wherever you get your pods. Please help us get people talking more about climate by giving us a rating or review. It really does help advance the climate conversation.

Greg Dalton: Kelli Pennington directs our audience engagement. Tyler Reed is our producer. Sara-Katherine Coxon is the strategy and content manager. Steve Fox is director of advancement. Anny Celsi edited the program. Our audio team is Mark Kirchner, Arnav Gupta, and Andrew Stelzer. Dr. Gloria Duffy is CEO of The Commonwealth Club of California, where our program originates. I'm Greg Dalton.