

CHANGING CLIMATE POLITICS

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U.S. Policies and Civic Action

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Protect, Ban, Save, and Stop

How Climate Change Became Environmentalist

ON JULY 9, 1977, SHELDON Kinsel, a young lawyer working with the National Wildlife Federation, took the stand in front of a congressional hearing on energy policy. It was the first time that an environmental organization was entered into the congressional record on a topic that, at that time, still had no agreed name. Kinsel called it the “climate shift” and declared that “other *environmental* problems pale beside it.” Even at this early stage, this was not just an *environmental* issue; it was the biggest *environmental* issue of all.

To begin with, environmental organizations simply expanded their existing activities to include climate change. A few years later, as the scientific and political momentum built, they clustered together in coalitions starting with the Climate Action Network in 1989 and, three years later, the Sustainable Energy Coalition. The movement built steadily and took off around 2005. There are now more than five hundred organizations campaigning on the issue.

Environmental organizations have always seen climate change as an obvious environmental issue. After all, it deals with atmospheric pollu-

The US National Climate Change Movement

Robert J. Brulle

Most other environmental problems pale beside the implications
of a major climate shift.

—Sheldon Kinsel, National Wildlife Federation, June 8, 1977¹

CLIMATE CHANGE ENTERED into the political arena in 1977. In a congressional hearing on the environmental implications of the Carter administration's energy plans, the representative of the National Wildlife Federation noted that the development of the proposed synthetic fuels program would lead to massive releases of carbon dioxide and destabilize the planet's climate. Since then, climate change has been propelled to the forefront of environmental concern. Accompanying this concern has been the rise of a social movement that has advocated for strong action to mitigate CO₂ emissions. In just 30 years, the climate change movement has grown from a small contingent of organizations that were involved in atmospheric environmental concerns into a major component of the US environmental movement.

How did this movement develop? What are the different viewpoints represented in this movement? What are the most influential groups? In this chapter, I provide a detailed empirical description of the national climate change movement in the United States. In the first part of this chapter, I provide an overview of the unique role that social movements play in the process of social change. I then detail the historical development of the US national climate change movement from 1980 to the present. Then, based on a sample of climate change coalitions, I discuss the different discursive frames that define this movement and the comparative organizational makeup of the different coalitions. I conclude with an analysis of