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Abstract

My thesis seeks to explain and situate the meteoric rise of the Sunrise Movement and its implications for the study of radical social movements. In this way, my analysis centers on the developmental approach, strategies, tactics, and messaging that have allowed the Sunrise movement and its complementary Green New Deal framework to balloon from a group of twelve activists in the Spring of 2017 to the sprawling national movement that it is today. Grounding my approach is the Radical Flank Effect framework introduced by Herbert Haines (1984) that seeks to understand the manner in which the emergence of a radical social movement group affects the overall likelihood of the larger movement achieving its desired ends. In this way, my guiding research question asks how does the emergence of a radical flank group affect the ability of the larger social movement to reshape the political landscape and public perception surrounding the movement’s central objectives? And subsequently, how does this shift translate to the overall success of the movement in achieving policy aims?. Ultimately, my findings on Sunrise’s approach to movement activism echo certain components of past radical flank effect (RFE) schemata. However, certain corollaries aside, my analysis highlights how the Sunrise movement has largely trail-blazed a new understanding of radical flank groups that breaks from previous scholarly understandings via its pragmatic shifting of tactics and messaging across its three distinct movement stages. I ultimately argue that this novel approach to radical movement organizing, tactics, and messaging has allowed the Sunrise movement to contribute a far greater positive flank effect than previous radical social movements.
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**Introduction**

Following his Democratic primary victory, then-candidate Joe Biden, privy to the disgruntled progressive voice within the Democratic Party and the power it held in determining his ultimate prospects for election, quickly went to work reshaping and revamping his platform. To go about this transformation and attempt to reconcile the schism between the moderate and progressive wings of the party, Biden partnered with former candidate Bernie Sanders to assemble six marquee policy task force groups. These groups comprised of policy experts selected by the Biden and Sanders campaigns focused on the six key areas of climate change, criminal justice reform, the economy, education, health care, and immigration where Biden had received the greatest scrutiny on the campaign trail (Sprunt 2020; Beals 2020). On the climate task force sat former Secretary of State John Kerry, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and Chair of the House Committee on Climate Change Representative Castor alongside a small group of climate policy experts dubbed the “climate dream team” (Teirstein 2020b; Calma 2020; Lavelle 2020). Amongst these climate big wigs, however, sat a surprise nomination offered by the Sanders campaign, Varshini Prakash, the executive director of the youth-led Sunrise Movement. In the span of three years, Prakash and the Sunrise Movement had gone from a group of outcast climate activists to having a literal seat at the table deciding the path forward for climate action in the United States.

My thesis seeks to chart, explain, and situate this meteoric rise of the Sunrise Movement and its implications for the study of radical flank social movements. Founded by a dozen or so seasoned veterans of more traditional environmental social movement groups, Sunrise was a
movement born largely of anger and frustration at the status quo of climate activism and political action in the United States. Prakash and her compatriots had entered the environmental activist world alongside a generation of eagerly optimistic twenty-somethings during Barack Obama’s presidency and his campaign commitment to “confront this [climate] challenge once and for all” (Broder 2008). For Prakash and thousands of other frustrated activists, however, the Obama administration had reneged on this pledge. In his eight years in office, Obama had failed to deliver the landmark legislation Prakash and other environmental activists felt was needed to tackle the enormity of the climate crisis. Once more, the traditional environmental movements they had been a part of remained stuck in their ways even as initiative after initiative failed to materialize.

Thus the roots of the eventual Sunrise movement emerged in late 2015, when 24-year-old Sara Blazevic¹ and 23-year-old Varshini Prakash, who had worked together in the fossil fuel divestment movement, gathered a small group of activist friends for meetings in Brooklyn and Philadelphia. They pitched their idea for a new approach to environmental action that better harnessed their anger and passion and the similar feelings of thousands of other young activists (Adler-Bell 2019). Thanks to small contributions from grant writers, This core of just twelve activists spent the next two years fine-tuning their plan, learning how to build a successful movement, and how to take their message public and coalesce their youthful impassioned base (Adler-Bell 2019; Matthews et al 2019). By the Spring of 2017, the Sunrise Movement was officially formed and geared up with a new approach to environmental activism.

¹ Blazevic is a Tri-Co alumnus and helped lead a 33-day divestment sit-in at Swarthmore College in 2015. See Goldenberg (2015) for further coverage
At the heart of the Sunrise Movement is its campaign to enact a Green New Deal. As co-founder Varshini Prakash explains, the Green New Deal is best thought of as “a governing agenda that guides every aspect of public policy making. Its many components will not all be accomplished through a single piece of legislation in Congress. Like the original New Deal, it will require dozens or hundreds of bills and executive actions, implemented over the course of a decade” (Prakash 2020b, xvi). In this way, Sunrise operates a politically-oriented social movement with its primary objective “to guide government and society through the biggest task in modern history: decarbonizing our global economy within the next ten to twenty years” (Gunn-Wright 2020, 74). Sunrise’s vision for achieving this lofty goal places a particular focus on decarbonization, jobs, and justice (Roberts 2018a). Its Green New Deal calls for an immediate transition towards a carbon neutral society alongside the creation of millions of good paying jobs via massive government investment in sustainable infrastructure and industry, all while addressing the historic oppression of climate-vulnerable communities including “indigenous peoples, communities of color, migrant communities, deindustrialize communities, depopulated rural communities, the poor, low income workers, women, the elderly, the unhoused, people with disabilities, and youth” (Gunn-Wright 2020, 72-73).

As this brief introduction to their Green New Deal mandate should hopefully make clear, the ambitions of Sunrise span far beyond the traditional calls of more established environmental movements. Once more, the movement has tapped into a combination of traditional and more radical tactics to amass its preliminary base of activists, introduce the Green New Deal to the general public, and then to impress its calls on the political elite. In this way, my analysis centers on the developmental approach, strategies, tactics, and messaging that allowed the Sunrise
movement and its complementary Green New Deal framework to balloon from a group of twelve activists in the Spring of 2017 to the sprawling national movement that it is today. Grounding my approach is the Radical Flank Effect (RFE) framework introduced by Haines (1984) that seeks to understand the manner in which the emergence of a radical social movement group affects the overall likelihood of the larger movement achieving its desired ends. In this way, my guiding research question asks how does the emergence of a radical flank group affect the ability of the larger social movement to reshape the political landscape and public perception surrounding the movement’s central objectives? And subsequently, how does this shift translate to the overall success of the movement in achieving policy aims? In answering this question, I have focused particularly on the messaging and tactical approach of the Sunrise movement and the role it has played in shaping its ultimate RFE.

I begin my thesis with a literature review that discusses and analyzes previous scholarly work in the social movement field, especially as it pertains to radical social movements and their impact. Using Haines’ (1984) introduction of the RFE as a jumping-off point, I then discuss the ways in which his framework has been corroborated, challenged, and expanded over the past four decades. My literature review also includes a discussion of past works dealing with environmental social movements and their implications. From there, I shift to my research design offering a tentative answer to my research question alongside a brief rationale and a more concrete hypothesis formulation. Within this formulation, I present the hypothetical model used to carry out my research and situate my ultimate findings. My research design also includes my justification for situating Sunrise as a radical flank group and presents the methods through which I will carry out my analysis.
Subsequently, I then transition to the three key research and discovery sections of my thesis, the formative, transformative, and reformative stages (all introduced in my hypothetical model). Delineated temporally, the stages focus on the three key messaging and tactical approaches of the movement as it developed, enter the public consciousness, and pushed for political change. I wrap up my results portion with a brief discussion section tying up some unanswered questions and important considerations brought up in my research design and movement stage sections.

Finally, in my conclusion, I make the case for why my thesis research is interesting and important and offer a potential avenue for future research. Ultimately, my findings on Sunrise’s approach to movement activism echo certain components of past radical flank effect (RFE) schemata. However, certain corollaries aside, my conclusion highlights how the Sunrise movement has largely trail-blazed a new understanding of radical flank groups that breaks from previous scholarly understandings. Firstly, my research has contributed a prescient and future-oriented approach that is scant in past scholarship on the RFE. By focusing on one movement actor and its present and potential future RFE, my research has harnessed the RFE as a forecasting tool to analyze Sunrise’s current RFE impact and what that might mean for the future of the environmental movement in this country. This unique contemporaneous lens has allowed me to implement the RFE as both a reflective and predictive unique to past scholarly approaches in the field.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, my research has drawn into question the absoluteness of the moderate-radical movement group dichotomies at the heart of many current RFE understandings. Central to my analysis of Sunrise and its ability to catalyze a positive
radical flank effect has been the movement’s ability to break from the sort of moderate-radical movement dichotomies presented in previous flank effect case studies. By combining the actions and tactics of a radical movement group with a messaging approach focused on catalyzing greater societal resonance typically assigned to moderate movement groups by past RFE scholars (Haines 1984; Killian 1972; Meyer & Stagggenborg 1996), the Sunrise movement introduces a novel approach to understanding radical social movements and their messaging, tactics, and ultimate impact. Rather than residing purely in a moderate or radical movement silo, across Sunrise’s three movement stages exists a combination of more traditional and extreme messaging and tactical approaches geared towards catalyzing the requisite movement resonance with its targeted demographic in each stage. Thus taken in their totality, I ultimately argue that Sunrise’s pragmatic shifting of tactics and messaging across its three distinct though still interconnected (see Discussion Section) movement stages offers a new avenue through which to understand the actions and impacts of a supposedly radical social movement.
Literature Review


While the study of radical groups within social movements and their impacts had been previously examined (Killian 1972; Freeman 1975; Ramirez 1978; Barkan 1979), Herbert Haines’ (1984) introduction of the radical flank effect (RFE) has framed the conversation surrounding radical flanks for nearly half a century (Snow et. al 2014; Tompkins 2015). Haines argued that “nearly all social movements divide into moderate and radical factions at some point in their development” (Haines 1984, 31) and that the emergence of this radical faction spurs either a positive or negative effect on the movement in question. He dubbed these two phenomena the positive and negative radical flank effect (Haines 1984). A positive flank effect can occur when the actions of radical groups improve the bargaining power of moderate groups in the movement thus fostering a greater likelihood of the movement achieving its desired ends. On the flip side, a negative flank effect can occur when the actions of a radical group undermine the efforts of moderate actors by weakening overall support and resources for the movement thus limiting the likelihood of long-term movement efficacy.

To test his framework, Haines analyzed the funding patterns of civil rights groups in the 1960s to study what impact the rise of a more radical flank during the decade—with the emergence of groups such as the Black Panthers—had on the ability of the civil rights movement to reshape the political landscape. He ultimately found that the rise of radical groups catalyzed a positive radical flank effect in that their actions and tactics fomented greater elite support and overall funding for moderate groups such as the NAACP (Haines 1984). In this way, he argued the radical demands of an extreme wing of a movement can make the demands of moderates
seem more reasonable and palatable to those in power who seek to avoid the public uproar, protest, and chaos that tend to accompany a radical flank’s actions. Haines also contended that alongside this increase in funding was a new acceptance of “reasonable” black activism that allowed traditional civil rights groups to protest more openly with less fear of backlash.

Haines’ positive RFE argument echoed many of the tenets of radical activism laid out by Lewis Killian (1972) over a decade prior. In his study of ‘extremism’ in the civil rights movement—the concept of a radical flank effect had not yet been invented—Killian argued that the psychology of perception helps to explain why radical actions are successful in making moderate groups and their demands more reasonable to the political elite (Killian 1972). Killian also went on to expound other aspects of a positive flank effect including its accountability factor. He argued that radical flanks “serve as a constant corrective to what may be illusions of progress which might otherwise cause a relaxation of the struggle” (Killian 1972, 46). In this way, a radical flank can help hold the moderate “face” of the movement accountable to the foundational demands of the movement. Finally, he contended that a radical flank can help bring to the surface unresolved issues within the movement—such as the proper level of confrontation—and that radical groups tend to attract a youth contingency to social movements bolstering the size and long-term viability of the cause.

While Haines (1984) failed to find an example of a negative radical flank effect in his case study, previous scholars had offered more critical perspectives on the potential negative impacts of radical actors on movement success. Using the anti-nuclear movement as a case study, Barkan (1979) argued that the rise of a radical flank can complicate the structure, tactics, and organization of a social movement threatening its near term viability and long-term success. On
the organizational side, the rise of a radical flank can potentially derail a movement by transforming a single-issue cause into a larger push for more radical change. In the case of the antinuclear movement, this tension emerged between moderate members of the movement who wanted to focus efforts solely on halting nuclear energy production in the US and more radical members who wanted to expand the movement to a protest against nuclear weapons and the capitalist world order. In terms of tactics, clashes within the movement occurred between a nonviolence-focused wing and a more radical wing eager to explore the merits of violent protest. These clashes, according to Barkan, split the resources and manpower available to the movement between camps and threatened to halt its progress.

Killian (1972) presented an additional risk of radical flanks in his study of the Civil Rights Movement. He warned that a radical flank and its controversial actions and tactics can be construed by oppositional forces to characterize the movement as a whole. This could seriously threaten public perception surrounding the movement and its ability to pressure change in the political landscape (Killian 1972). These detrimental caveats aside, however, both Barkan (1979) and Killian (1972) found that the risks of a negative RFE were largely outweighed by the positive forces radical flanks bring to a movement and its momentum.

In the wake of Haines’ (1984) seminal work came further analysis and perspective on the newly coined RFE within movements. Just two years following its publication, Jenkins and Eckert (1986) repeated Haines’ experimental design analyzing the connection between elite patronage and professional and radical organizations in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Like Haines (1984), they found that the emergence of less traditional civil rights groups in the 1960s was correlated with a rise in funding for more professionalized groups, but they were less
sure of the causality between the two. They acknowledged that the increase in funding by elite (largely white) groups to moderate movement organizations was likely driven by class interests and the preservation of capitalism and the political system (similar to Haines 1984 & Killian 1972), but were less sure of how that connects to the actions of radical activists. They were also able to pinpoint the lag time between the rise of more radical groups and the time it took to see an uptick in the overall funding of the civil rights movement—about 5-7 years (Jenkins and Eckert 1986). Interestingly, they also argued that the increase in funding and continued professionalization of moderate groups during this period may have ultimately played into the fizzling out of the movement in the 1970s. They found that the more professionalized these large civil rights groups became, partly as a result of the RFE, the more likely they were to stray away from the foundational issues of the movement and bend to accommodate outside influences—an issue prophesied in Killian (1972). This paradox offers an unconventional but nonetheless noteworthy avenue to arrive at a negative RFE within a social movement.

In their case study of the Christian right movement, Rozell and Wilcox (1996) concluded that the key driver of the Christian right’s ability to infiltrate and shape mainstream politics was its tactical shift towards “adopt[ing] strategies of persuasion, not domination” and away from its previous radical orientation (Rozell & Wilcox 1996, 280 emphasis added). In the 1970s and 1980s, the Christian right mobilized largely around extreme and confrontational rhetoric while operating outside professional institutionalized bodies to push for radical change in the American political system. This “moral crusade,” the authors argue, fell largely on deaf ears until the movement shifted towards more mainstream tactics and appeals (Rozell & Wilcox 1996). By broadening their base coalition, having their appeals fall more in line with mainstream agendas,
compromising when necessary, and operating within institutions and secular structures, the Christian Right was able to explode from a fringe voice in American politics to a central player in shaping the Republican party’s platform by the end of the 1990s. The strategy behind this shift was made clear by Rozell and Wilcox—“they [the Christian right] now realize that it is better to compromise, even on abortion, in order to win and get half-a-loaf, than it is to stand 100 percent on principle and lose” (Rozell & Wilcox 1996, 287). This line of thinking is very much at odds with the tenets of the RFE and argues that radical tactics and approaches can do more harm than good if not carried out properly.

Meyer and Staggenborg (1996) presented the risk of countermovements as an additional consideration for RFE analysis and its potential for negative outcomes. They argued that the emergence of a radical flank and radical demands in a social movement can help spark countermovements that hinder the ability of more moderate groups to achieve their desired ends. These countermovements can threaten the legitimacy of the movement’s moderate actions and put public and political pressure on those in power to refrain from sympathizing with the movement’s demands. In a similar vein, they argued that when radical groups make radical demands or take radical actions, it can hurt the overall public opinion of the larger social movement and make it increasingly difficult for the movement to frame issues in a way that can mobilize broad-based support. This threat mirrors Killian’s (1972) warning of radical action and actors being conflated with the movement as a whole.
Contemporary Scholarship on the Radical Flank Effect: 2000 - 2020

Better Defining Moderate and Radical Flanks

Contemporary RFE research has centered largely around expanding its analytical framework and scope to offer increased nuance and insight into its impact. Part of this expanded framework has been the attempt to concretely define what constitutes and what are the key differences between moderate and radical movement groups (Conner & Eptstein 2007; Downey & Rohlinger 2008; Hoffman & Bertels 2009; Snow and Cross 2011; Robnett et al. 2015; O’Brien 2018). In seeking to conjure a more universal and objective marker of group radicalism, scholars have expanded beyond the one-dimensional goals and tactics focus employed by previous RFE scholars (Haines 1984; Jenkins & Craig 1986) in favor of more complex two-dimensional methods of analysis (Downey & Rohlinger 2008; Snow and Cross 2011; Robnett et al 2015). These more nuanced frameworks allowed for a more detailed dissection of movement groups and a greater ability to demarcate their level of radicalism which may not always be apparent at first glance.

At the same time, however, these two-dimensional approaches have incorporated different movement variables as their key demarcations. Snow and Cross (2011), for example, offered that radical groups should be defined by (a) their sociopolitical and cultural context and how the state responds to their actions and (b) how they are perceived by fellow groups within the same social movement (Snow and Cross 2011). Groups that experienced more oppressive state responses to their actions and were perceived as more radical by other movement groups were on the more radical end of their radicalism spectrum while moderate groups encompassed the inverse. Downey and Rohlinger (2008) instead posited that the two axes of movement group radicalism should be (a) their breadth of challenge to preexisting institutions and policy and (b)
the level of appeal they possess with the public (Downey & Rohlinger 2008). Intuitively groups that offered a deeper challenge to entrenched institutions and attained less of a broad base of support within the general public were characterized as being more radical while more mainstream groups fell in the moderate category. In the end, they found that flanks can play a positive role in shaping movement success when movement actors are balanced across the strategic distribution scale—i.e. balanced amounts of moderate and radical groups—and tend to play a negative role when there is an imbalance one way or the other (Downey & Rohlinger 2008). In a similar vein, they found that radical flanks were most effective when well integrated with other groups within the same movement in terms of cooperation and support and were more likely to result in a negative overall outcome if their actions were isolated and disconnected from the rest of the movement’s actors (Downey & Rohlinger 2008). Robnett et al. (2015) offered a similar dichotomy in their parsing of movement groups emphasizing consideration of (a) how a movement group’s tactics are received within the wider cultural and political context and (b) what sort of relationship they have with official institutions and offices of power (Robnett et al. 2015).

Ellefsen (2018), on the other hand, took a divergent approach in his framing of what constitutes a radical group within a movement. Ellefsen suggested including an arena and temporal dimension to our understandings of who constitutes the radical flank and their impact. In the arena sphere, he argued more attention should be paid to the difference in tactics and approaches applied by movement actors, both radical and moderate, in varied environments such as the corporate and the political. By placing a greater focus on the temporal aspect of social movements, he suggests we can better delineate between the near and long-term impacts of a radical flank and its backlash. In this way, “combining the temporal and arena dimensions …
produces answers to the question of when, or in what phase of a conflict, the RFE causes specific outcomes across arenas and for the campaign” (Ellfesen 2018, 115). His analysis concluded that chief amongst the variables in determining the success or failure of a radical flank was how moderates in the same social movement capitalized on the possible outcomes of a radical flank, its opportunities, and risks (Ellfesen 2018). This factionalism or cooperation within a movement was especially key as state repression increased in response to the radical flank.

The increased emphasis on providing a clear methodology to delineate movement groups is present in most contemporary analyses of social movement RFE. Yet, as this small sample size already begins to show, a consensus has yet to be met regarding what markers should be utilized in this more detailed analysis. While not directly addressing the positive or negative impact of the RFE, properly defining what being a radical or moderate movement group entails is foundational to conjuring any larger conclusions in the field. As such, recent scholarship in the RFE has increased focus on making this distinction both more nuanced and clear. The greater specificity and scope these theoretical approaches afford has also allowed for more contemporary RFE research to extend far beyond the simple and generalized conclusions of its predecessors.

**Expanded Case Studies of the RFE Across Movements**

Alongside a further exploration of the moderate-radical dichotomy, recent RFE scholarship has concentrated on testing the RFE hypotheses across additional social movements and situations in the United States and abroad. This deeper probing has allowed for a more refined understanding of the RFE and the role it plays in movement success and failure. For instance, McCammon et al. (2015) argued the concept of the radical flank needs to be expanded to incorporate activist agency in its formation. In their case study of the Texas women’s rights movement, they found that the lines between moderate and radical groups were often
intentionally cultivated by movement actors to help achieve desired goals. When the movement first emerged on the Texas political scene, the entire movement was seen as radical in its demands, but in the movement’s second wave, the activist-driven demarcation of a radical and moderate wing of the movement compelled and arguably hoodwinked lawmakers into conceding to the more palatable demands of the original protest groups (McCammon et al. 2015). In the case of the women’s movement, the schism between radical and moderate was a combination of intentional decoupling by moderate groups and clashes between groups with different ambitions. In this way, the authors also argued that intra-movement conflict and its creation of radical flanks can be a net positive actor in shaping outcomes of political movements.

In their lengthy analysis of the civil rights, animal rights, and AIDS movements in the United States, Robnett et al. (2015) sought to parse the impact of the RFE with specific emphasis on intra-movement relationships between moderate and radical groups. In the end, the greatest insight they offer is that it is difficult to determine the parameters conducive to a positive or negative RFE across social movements. In the case of the civil rights movement, they argued that the flank effect was positive and led to increased concessions by the states after the activists’ peak protests, in line with Killian (1972), Haines (1984), and Jenkins and Eckert’s (1986) earlier findings. Their findings were similar for the AIDS movement. In the animal rights movement, however, they found that the actions of radicals produced a negative effect spurring increased state repression targeted at curtailing radicals (Robnett et al. 2015). In the civil rights context, the authors argued the radical actions of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) helped hold the center of the movement accountable to its foundational goals—iterating Killian’s (1972) positive pressure argument. In the AIDS context, the authors found that as the protests of ACT UP —the radical wing of the movement—increased in size and number, so did state and
national action to address the AIDS crisis. The radical flank in this context was successful in “doing what other AIDS organizations could not do: they brought this crisis to the national level by keeping it in the headlines, forcing elected officials to answer for their inaction” (Robnett et. al 2015, 87). This sentiment falls in line with Barkan’s (1979) argument about the benefits of the anti-nuclear movement. Finally, in the case of the Animal Rights movement, the actions of radical groups caused a negative flank effect in that their actions were ultimately conflated with the entire animal rights movement and resulted in increased state repression of moderate groups. For instance, moderate groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and Animal Legal Defense Fund (ALDF) were labeled by the FBI as terrorist organizations in the early 2000s. The authors hypothesized that this negative effect was likely the result of a weak organizational structure in the flank. This sort of state repression severely hampered the movement’s ability to achieve their policy goals or reshape public perception around animal rights. This negative conflation risk associated with a radical flank was also echoed by Killian (1972) and Meyer and Staggenborg (1996) in preceding research.

Moving beyond individual case studies to a survey of non-violent activism in the United States as a whole, Tompkins (2015) analyzed quantitative movement radicalism data compiled by the Nonviolent and Violence Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO) project to examine the impact of the RFE. She argued somewhat counterintuitively that the presence of a radical flank is associated with an increase in likelihood and degree of state repression and decreased activism following the increase in state repression, and yet does not necessarily imply an overall negative flank effect (Tompkins 2015). She found the presence of a radical flank is often associated with a “half-a-step” increase in state repression (i.e. no repression to mild repression, mild to moderate, moderate to extreme). She also found that the odds of repression are 3.39 times larger for a
campaign with a radical flank than one without. On the overall impact of the radical flank, however, she argued that a radical wing is typically not associated with negative outcomes for a social movement and can even yield a positive effect on the trajectory of the movement. Her findings expressed that even if there is increased backlash and suppression by the state and populace after its emergence, “a radical flank may be a key vein through which a suppressed movement is able to live on, regain strength, and perhaps even reorganize for a stronger comeback” (Tomkins 2015, 130). In this way, she contends that a radical flank can help to supply the energy and endurance and committed base of activists required to sustain a social movement. This leads to her ultimate conclusion that radical flanks are moderately associated with increased campaign progress in the long run.

Outside the United States context, Braithwaite (2013) carried out an examination of the RFE within the Anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa. He found that certain radical flank groups were key to the success of the overall movement. Specifically, he argued that non-violent flank groups whose radicalness stemmed from demands and peaceful protest tactics had a much greater ability to shift the discussion surrounding Apartheid than their violent counterparts (Braithwaite 2013). He also acknowledged, however, that part of the reason that these non-violent radical flanks were more successful could have been the fear and demands of the violent protest groups that fought alongside them—an RFE within a radical flank if you will—though that connection is not totally clear. What is clear for Braithwaite is that protest movements should welcome radical flank groups that are non-violent for they are generally productive in pushing moderate negotiations forward. The prescription is less clear for violent radical flanks where moderate groups need to be more careful and calculated in their decision to associate or disassociate with these activists.
Taken in its totality, the contemporary revisiting of the RFE has expanded the theory’s conceptual framework and applicability across divergent social movements. Scholarship dedicated to more explicitly demarcating moderate and radical flanks within social movements has allowed studies of the RFE to offer greater depth in their analysis of its positive and negative impacts (Conner & Epstein 2007; Downey & Rohlinger 2008; Hoffman & Bertels 2009; Snow and Cross 2011; Robnett et al. 2015). Now within a more concretely defined theoretical framework, recent research into the RFE has expanded beyond the large generalizations made by the first generation of its scholars (Haines 1984; Killian 1972; Jenkins & Eckert 1986; Barkan 1979) towards a more kaleidoscopic understanding of the RFE’s varied impacts across the temporal and thematic variances of social movements. These newfound understandings ostensibly arrive at a net positive RFE conclusion across most recent scholarly analysis, but not without their caveats and warnings (See especially Robnett et al. 2015; Braithwaite 2013; Ellefsen 2018). One takeaway that can be gleaned from this second wave of analysis is that the RFE is far less myopic than earlier scholarly presentations with individual cases of the phenomenon offering a myriad of divergent impacts on social movement successes and failures.

Scholarship on the Radical Flank Effect within the Environmental Movement:

Political RFE Analysis

Particularly pertinent to the present study, twenty-first-century continuations of RFE research have included an exploration of the phenomena within the U.S environmental movement and its implications. In this analysis, particular attention has been paid to the role the RFE has played in the environmental movement’s success or lack thereof in shaping the US political (Schifeling & Hoffman 2019; O’Brien 2018; Farrer & Klein 2019) and corporate response (Conner & Epstein 2007; Hoffman & Bertels 2009; Hoffman 2009) to environmental
concerns. In the political realm, Schifeling & Hoffman’s (2019) study of the connection between the university divestment from fossil fuel campaign launched by Bill McKibben and 350.org and the framing language of U.S. environmental policy in its wake provides the most clear-cut example of RFE analysis in the field. The authors found that while the radically oriented divestment movement yielded lackluster results, the movement acted as an indirect pathway to larger change by elevating other liberal environmental policies that were previously marginalized to a greater level of attention and legitimacy (Schifeling & Hoffman 2019). By demanding the elimination of fossil fuel investments in major university endowments, the divestment movement “disturbed a polarized debate, and reframed the conflict redrawing moral lines around acceptable behavior” (Schifeling & Hoffman 2019, 228). This shift is demonstrated by the authors through a field level analysis of the changing verbiage employed in environmental policy discussions within academic institutions, businesses, and non-governmental organizations and in the media over the course of the divestment campaign. They found that the discussions of periphery issues such as carbon taxes and carbon budgets gained better traction within and outside the environmental movement across the length of the campaign even though they were not directly associated with McKibben or his efforts (Schifeling & Hoffman 2019). In this way, the authors argue McKibben and his radical flank allowed more moderate groups to seize upon the shift in the debate the university divestment movement spurred to introduce and normalize previous peripheral movement objectives and bolster their legitimacy. This outcome parallels earlier scholarly arguments about one of the key aspects of a positive radical flank effect—greater palatability of moderate objectives in the political and social sphere (Killian 1972; Haines 1984; Jenkins and Eckert 1986 McCammon et al. 2015).
Farrer and Klein (2019), on the contrary, found an example of a negative radical flank effect in their case study of the relationship between radical environmental actions and general support for the Green Party in US elections. In framing their argument, they put forth the premise that all organizations in the environmental movement share a joint reputation amongst voters. This is a negative impact of the RFE that has been explored thoroughly by previous authors (See especially Killian 1972 and Meyer & Staggenborg 1996) Thus, when the actions of a radical group are perceived negatively, this discredits the image of the entire environmental movement. This negative effect as it relates to the Green Party, they argued, manifested itself in three main ways. First, radical tactics and actions by environmental groups made candidates from environmental organizations appear less committed to upholding democratic norms and values. Second, voters may see environmental candidates as being unable to work well within mainstream politics. Essentially, if their counterparts have to resort to radical tactics to accomplish their goals, how will Green Party representatives operate within a traditional political system? And third, environmental candidates may become less symbolically attractive following an uptick in radical environmental actions as their environmental message is muddied by the radical actions of activists. The authors concluded that a combination of these three negative impacts of a radical flank on public perception of Green Party candidates resulted in lower overall voter support for the Party’s candidates (Farrer & Klein 2019).

Private-Sphere RFE Analysis

Alongside research into the role the RFE plays in shaping the political persuasion power of the environmental movement has been an exploration of the RFE’s impact on the movement’s private and corporate sector dealings. In this vein of research, scholars have emphasized the importance of a combined radical and moderate front in shaping approaches that successfully
push for corporate accountability and action in addressing environmental issues. (Conner & Epstein 2007; Hoffman & Bertels 2009; Hoffman 2009). Conner and Epstein (2007), for example, found that the best approach to enacting desired change for the environmental movement is through a combination of what they dub pure and pragmatic movement groups (Conner & Epstein 2007). Pure groups are categorized as having uncompromising stances, carrying out radical actions, and being vehemently opposed to cooperation with corporations. Whereas pragmatic groups are more inclined to work directly with businesses to cultivate market-friendly solutions to environmental dilemmas. In this way, pure groups and their open contempt and aggression towards corporations act as the radical flank to the moderate pragmatic groups who more openly dialogue with corporations and possess a much more cordial relationship with big business.

The authors argued that while these two sets of groups might spar with each other over strategy and tactics, the combination of approaches fuels the greatest likelihood of positive action in the private sector (Conner & Epstein 2007). In their role as the radical flank, purist groups help to make the demands of moderate pragmatic groups more rational—a positive effect expounded upon time and again in RFE analysis (Haines 1984; Killian 1972; Robnett et al. 2015; McCammon et al. 2015 amongst others). At the same time, these purist groups act as an intra-movement accountability mechanism ensuring that larger more mainstream environmental groups do not snuggle up too close to businesses and sidestep their environmental mission in favor of increased legitimacy or good favor with the corporations they are working to sway—similar to the Killian (1972) argument about the accountability factor of a radical flank. The authors point out that the downside to purist groups, however, is they are often dependent on opportune timing or changing political contexts to leverage their greatest impacts. In this way,
purist groups are more beholden to the winds of public sentiment since these groups rely more on public support for their actions to cement their legitimacy in the movement and in their dealings with movement actors. Once more, their emphasis on purity may come at the cost of being ostracized by movement outsiders and movement insiders alike. Yet these drawbacks aside, the authors find that the presence of a radical purist flank in the environmental movement’s interaction with the private business sector is a net positive that brings more benefit than harm and allows more moderate groups to better shape the policies of these corporations (Conner & Epstein 2007).

Similar to Conner & Epstein’s purist and pragmatic paradigm, Hoffman and Bertels (2009) divided environmental movement actors into “dark greens” who seek radical political change to the market system and its relation to the environment and “bright greens” who focus on working within the market system and alongside corporations to develop better designs, technologies, approaches, and policies to ameliorate environmental challenges. Also similar to Conner & Epstein (2007), the authors found that it is through the interlocking actions of radical and moderate groups that the greatest success in the private sector can be achieved. By combining each of their relative strengths—the relatively cordial relationship bright greens posses with private interests and the acute pressure of dark greens on these same organizations—the environmental movement is able to leverage this multi-pronged approach to catalyze deeper private sector action than the traditionally-siloed bright and dark green methods of activism. They interestingly add that it is important for groups within the movement to remain cognizant of where they fall on this “green” spectrum as the overall movement has achieved its greatest successes when member groups did not stray far from their perceived position on the moderate-radical spectrum (Hoffman & Bertels 2009).
Defining Moderate and Radical Environmental Groups

Attention to the RFE impact on the environmental movement has also been expounded upon within the previously discussed school of research dedicated to better defining the relationship between moderate and radical movement groups. Focusing particularly on youth activism within the environmental movement, O’Brien et al. (2018) sought to better parse movement actors across the moderate-radical plane. The authors argued that youth activism on climate change can be separated into three main categories of radicalism—dutiful, disruptive, and dangerous dissent—and that understanding the advantages and downsides to each can help discern the most effective combination of youth protest. In this framework, dutiful dissenters act as a moderate flank working within preexisting institutional spaces and systems to express their concern. The clearest example of dutiful dissent is membership in a mainstream environmental or political organization working on environmental issues. Disruptive dissenters fall closer to the radical end of the spectrum in that they challenge the underlying systems and institutions they see as fundamental to the problem of climate change whilst raising awareness about more nuanced drivers and impacts on the phenomenon. Dangerous dissent is the most radical of the approaches in that its members “generate new and alternative systems, new ways of doing things, new types of economic relationships, and new ways of organizing society” (O’Brien et al. 2018, 42). Dangerous dissenters seek to fundamentally shift the goals, priorities, and assumptions of our capitalist world and argue that that is the only true way to address our climate emergency. In the end, O’Brien et al. argued that a combination of all three approaches exists within the youth environmental movement and that the interplay and even clash amongst the approaches helps foster the ideal climate to push for the change the overall movement seeks. In this way, the dangerous and disruptive radical wings of the youth environmental movement play a positive
role in contributing to the overall impact of the movement’s actions and in shaping its future-focused framework so long as the groups do not become too isolated from the larger movement. This argument falls very much in line with other studies of the relationship between moderate and radical movement groups that emphasize the importance of a balanced distribution of groups and awareness of the roles each faction of the larger movement plays (Snow & Cross 2011; Downey & Rohlinger 2008; McCammon et al. 2015).

Much like the general expansion of RFE research in recent years, analyses within the environmental movement have yielded a greater understanding of the role the phenomenon plays in shaping the movement’s successes and failures across different arenas and situations. In the political sphere, evidence of both a positive (Schifeling & Hoffman 2019) and negative (Farrer & Klein 2019) RFE have been presented, though across differing case studies and approaches to analysis. Scholars of the private sphere RFE in the environmental movement, however, have achieved a closer consensus. Their research largely suggests that the RFE can be positive in the environmental movement’s dealing with the private sector given certain parameters such as the relationship between moderate and radical winds and the general sociopolitical context. (Conner & Epstein 2007; Hoffman & Bertels 2009; Hoffman 2009). Again too, that positive flank impact in the private sphere can be quickly negated if relationships between moderate and radical groups within the movement sour or if the larger sociopolitical atmosphere becomes less supportive of radical protest. If these considerations are properly weighed, however, there exists opportunity for radical actors to positively contribute to the efforts of the larger environmental movement to influence the private sector.
Understanding the Greater Landscape of the Environmental Movement

To properly analyze the role of the RFE within the environmental movement, or any movement for that matter, it is concurrently important to study the general trend of the movement’s scholarly research. In this way, it is important to ask what themes emerge in contemporary scholarly research of the environmental movement and what role do they play in understanding the role of RFE within the movement? Most insightful to the present study, recent scholarship has placed a special emphasis on the role increased efficacy messaging and framing has played in defining the success of environmental movements. Efficacy messaging is best spelled out in Hart and Feldman’s (2014) tripartite framework of internal, external, and response efficacy. In their schemata, internal efficacy refers to the ease in which an individual can take action to address the issue, external efficacy refers to the likelihood that elected officials will respond to the actions taken, and response efficacy stresses the perception of effectiveness for proposed policies to address the issue. Put succinctly, increased efficacy messaging mobilizes environmental activism around the tangible ability of movement actors to catalyze positive change.

Using this framework in a follow-up study carrying out a national survey on climate attitudes, Feldman & Hart (2016) found that messages that emphasized a combination of these sorts of positive efficacies can influence the emotions of voters in a more positive way than traditional messaging that focuses largely on the negative effects of climate change (Feldman & Hart 2016). Perhaps unsurprisingly, they found that the efficacy message was most influential on moderate voters who had less of a hardline stance on the issue and their ability to help address it before taking the survey. They also found that response efficacy was influential in swaying the perceptions of conservative voters. Roser-Renouf et al. (2014) reached a similar conclusion in
those climate communications that focus on building a sense of efficacy amongst their audience are most effective and those that emphasize a sense of direness or hopelessness in their messaging are least effective in recruiting activists and translating sentiment into action. These findings are further bolstered by recent analysis into the mediating role emotions play in shaping environmental movement success and the general consensus that messages of hope and achievability—especially within youth environmental movements (Nairn 2019) — have overtaken the dread and despair framework of earlier environmental movements (Kleres & Wettergren 2017; Cassegård & Thörn 2018).

This positive efficacy paradigm has been dubbed post-apocalyptic environmentalism by some environmental movement scholars (Cassegård & Thörn 2018; Swyngedouw 2013) They argue that “the rhetoric of the coming catastrophe has been a major mobilizing force in the environmental movement for almost 50 years” (Cassegård & Thörn 2018, 567). Yet in recent years, environmental movements, especially those on the more radical end, have begun to adopt a post-apocalyptic view that discards the notion of a coming apocalypse for a framework that sees the prophesied destruction already taking place. Despite its lugubrious tagline, the post-apocalyptic paradigm is unique from the apocalyptic era of the environmental movement in that its messaging is centered around future-oriented optimism rather than pessimism. By accepting that we are already living the environmental apocalypse, these newer movements are better able to present a message of hope and efficacy about a better future that has a stronger mobilizing force than the previously employed apocalyptic framework primarily motivated by future threats (Cassegård & Thörn 2018; Feldman & Hart 2016; Nairn 2019; Roser-Renouf et al. 2014).

Cassgård & Thörn (2018) succinctly summarize this sentiment when they argued, “by [post-apocalyptic movements] accepting loss, energies can be freed for new battles that are felt to be
more meaningful and winnable than those that are lost. Rather than inducing passivity, post apocalyptic visions can be empowering and even attain a utopian function” (Cassegård & Thörn 2018, 574). This association is also tied to a burgeoning sense of anti-establishment sentiment within the radical wing of the environmental movement that sees a brighter future only through a complete reorientation of established systems (Cassegård & Thörn 2018; O’Brien et al. 2018).

The emergence of the post-apocalyptic environmental paradigm and its emphasis on efficacy messaging, positive reinforcement, and the cultivation of hopeful emotions and outlooks lends itself well to a complete analysis of the RFE within the environmental movement. As overall movement tactics and messaging have begun to shift in this direction, it is important to consider how the tactics of radical environmental groups align and interact with this larger shift and what it means for the RFE. This consideration will also offer greater insight into intra-movement relationships, a key focus of recent RFE research (Downey & Rohlinger 2008; Snow & Cross 2011; Robnett et al. 2015). At the same time, it will be interesting to note how radical groups augment or detract from this larger movement transition and what that means for the ultimate RFE within the environmental movement.
Research Design

I. Tentative Answer to Research Question and Brief Rationale

In the span of just over three years, the radical rhetoric, policy ambitions, and tactical approach of the Sunrise movement have infused a burgeoning sense of vitality and momentum into US environmental activism. In this way, the narrative and actions of Sunrise have elevated public perception and concern surrounding environmental issues in this country and enlivened the debate on how best to respond to the crisis. As a result of this increased concern in the public consciousness, political elites have fallen under increasing pressure to adequately address climate change to redress public outcry. Sunrise’s ability to spur this reorientation and pressure on political elites in such a short period of time evinces a compelling argument for a positive radical flank effect. With an increase in public pressure comes an increase in political elite receptiveness to the demands of a movement (Killian 1972; Haines 1984; Robnett et al. 2015). Over time, this expanded governmental openness allows the environmental movement, both Sunrise and its more moderate members, to achieve greater success in shaping public policy than it had before the rise of the radical flank. While those in power, in the end, may not take all the actions demanded by Sunrise and the Green New Deal, this increased public pressure and likelihood of the movement as a whole achieving desired ends is at the crux of Sunrise’s positive flank effect.

It is equally as important, however, to consider the impact of Sunrise in relation to the potential pitfalls of radical flanks. Past critiques of the RFE have been levied across four central concerns: 1. the potential for countermovements spurred by the radical flank (Meyer & Staggenborg 1996); 2. the potential for radical group ostracism from the larger movement inhibiting positive impacts (Rozell & Wilcox 1996; Hoffman and Bertels 2006); 3. the potential
for negative cooptation of radical messaging by oppositional forces (Killian 1972; Farrer & Klein 2019); and 4. the risk of a negative public reception to radical demands (Haines 1984; Robnett et al. 2015; Farrer & Klein 2019; Downey & Rohlinger 2008). A thorough discussion of how these deleterious forces play a role in Sunrise’s ultimate RFE is vital and will be explored in the subsequent analysis and discussion section. In the end, I hypothesize that while Sunrise has to a certain degree induced several of these negative RFE impacts in its ascent—there is some evidence supporting the emergence of threats 2 and 4, but especially threat 3—these inhibiting impacts are outweighed by its larger positive impact on the environmental movement expounded in the preceding paragraph.

The schemata and approach for analysis of the RFE presented above is far from novel and has been explored time and again by social movement scholars (see amongst others Killian 1972; Haines 1984; Robnett et al. 2015; Schifeling & Hoffman 2019; McCammon et al. 2015). However, what this analysis contributes is a prescient and future-oriented approach that is scant in past scholarship. Many RFE scholars have undertaken RFE analyses as a method of reflective examination, that is applying the tenets of the model to explain the success or failure of previous social movements (Haines 1984; Robnett et al. 2015; McCammon et al. 2015; Barkan 1979; Tomkins 2015; Braithwaite 2013). Scholars who have deviated from this model and offered more timely or future-oriented RFE analyses have carried out their research largely on movement-wide scales analyzing overall trends in a movement rather than individual movement actors (Killian 1972; Conner & Epstein 2007; Hoffman & Bertels 2009; Hoffman 2009).

My response to the question of the RFE and its ability to shape public perception and political outcomes trailblazes a new framework of analysis. By focusing on one movement actor
and its present and potential future RFE, my research will in part harness the RFE as a forecasting tool to analyze Sunrise’s current RFE impact and what that might mean for the future of the environmental movement in this country. As Jenkins and Eckert (1986) pointed out, it typically takes between five to seven years—at least financially speaking—to fully realize the impact of the RFE on a movement. With Sunrise only entering its third year of existence, I will be able to analyze Sunrise as it continues to grow and shape the larger environmental movement and political landscape. This unique contemporaneous lens will allow me to implement the RFE as both a reflective and predictive tool combining the two approaches of previous scholars to arrive at my own conclusion.

In my analysis, I also offer a unique consideration of the importance that resonance and targeted messaging tied to movement actions and tactics play in each phase of a radical flank’s development and impact. Through this line of thinking, I place a greater emphasis than many previous scholars on the modular nature of flank group messaging and tactics and the approach these groups take in reorienting their strategic framing as their development ebbs and flows. A radical flank must be able to adjust its messaging and tactics as it seeks to build its foundational coalition, impress its message on the general public, and then seek to influence elected officials and incite political change. In order to ensure its long-term viability, a radical flank group must approach each of these facets of constructing a positive RFE separately and in turn. Each of these societal groups responds positively to flank messaging only when it reflects the group’s social and cultural worldview and corresponding emotional drivers. For example, a 22-year-old student at UC-Berkeley and a third-term Republican U.S. Senator from rural Idaho both play important roles in shaping the outcome of a radical flank group like Sunrise, but the sort of messaging
needed to ensure they positively contribute to the efforts of Sunrise—perhaps joining a protest
for the student at UC-Berkeley, and softening their stance on a piece of emissions-curbing
legislation for the Senator—is radically different. Through my analysis, I will better pinpoint
how this reframing of messaging and tactics occurs across movement actors and how that shapes
the ultimate impact of a radical flank group.

II. Hypothesis Formulation

Stated with greater simplicity, my hypothesis centers around the relationship between an
emerging radical flank and the general public and the subsequent relationship between the
public, the political elite and the flank group (see Model below). I contend that when carried out
strategically, the messages, tactics, and demands of an emergent radical flank can bolster overall
public support for a movement’s central objectives by raising collective attention and concern for
the movement’s central issues. This increased public attention, in turn, places greater pressure on
elected officials to respond to the issues of the movement. I argue that this growing pressure
combined with the concurrent efforts of movement groups in the political sector, ultimately leads
to an improved likelihood of political leaders taking the actions necessary to address the issues
highlighted by the movement as a whole and its radical flank, stimulating a positive radical flank
effect.

I situate my hypothesis through three interdependent phases of radical flank development
and impact—the formative, transformative, and reformative stage. In the formative stage, a
radical flank emerges and begins to recruit its base of support through targeted subgroup
messaging. This messaging is geared towards fostering a collective conviction amongst a
subgroup of the general population that the radical flank’s ambitions are not only necessary but
achievable. Radical groups are able to generate this collective sentiment by tapping into the preexisting grievances of their targeted subgroup that have not been properly addressed or even acknowledged by the political elite or the more moderate members of the larger social movement. At this stage, the flank group is developing what I describe as inward resonance, or a sense of mutual buy-in and purpose amongst the group’s foundation of supporters who see the group and its messaging as echoing their values, angers, and worldview. In Sunrise’s case, inward resonance was fostered in its formative stage through deliberate messaging targeted at younger Americans fed up with the status quo of climate policy and the environmental movement in the country via a call for political upheaval. Beyond giving voice to these younger Americans’ concerns, Sunrise provided an avenue to channel that anger towards a larger and more constructive end.

Once a radical group, through the build up of inward resonance, has mustered a passionate and cohesive base of support, it is now well-situated to enter the transformative stage. In this stage, radical groups tap into their now-established base of support as conduits for movement messaging, organizing, and strengthening. As the movement begins to interact with the larger society and introduce its message to a greater portion of the general public, the group does not necessarily need to generate the same level of support for its specific demands as in its formative stage, nor should it waste its crucial resources trying. Successful radical groups instead, via their emboldened base of support, use their introduction into the larger public sphere to “[disturb] a polarized debate, and [reframe] the conflict redrawing moral lines around acceptable behavior.” (Schifeling & Hoffman 2019, 228). In this way, a radical group’s greatest
impact on the public often occurs as a reorientation and reinvigoration of the public consciousness surrounding their movement issue.

To achieve this larger societal impact, the members, tactics, and messaging of the radical flank must foster a sense of *outward resonance* with the public. In this way, their amplification of movement messaging in the transformative stage must be “connected to audiences’ [i.e. the public’s] socially situated condition or to broader cultural themes and narratives that they recognize.” (McDonnell et al. 2017, 3). Essentially, the radical flank must be able to imbed awareness and concern for their movement’s central issues into the public consciousness via preexisting cultural drivers and themes. Thus, even as a radical group seeks to upheave prevailing public sentiment, its messaging must also be framed in a manner that can withstand the possibility of large-scale backlash and apprehension while shaping a new more receptive public perception of the issues driving the radical group’s actions. As a result, a pragmatic radical group like Sunrise must moderate its messaging in this stage as it seeks to catalyze larger societal support beyond its targeted subgroup. This framework decouples the general public’s perception of the radical group in and of itself and their perception of the underlying issues highlighted by the group. So long as the actions of a radical group in the public sphere catalyze a positive fundamental shift in perceptions of the movement’s foundational concerns—even if a large portion of the public continues to disagree with the radical group’s tactics and actions—the group is well situated to leverage this changing public sentiment in their battle to influence the political elite.

At this point, the radical group has now entered the *reformative* stage. Now with the backing of public sentiment and the subsequent pressure to take action, the demands of the
movement acquire an increased political resonance. This political resonance refers to the level of receptiveness the movement’s objectives possess in the larger political climate. At the onset of a radical movement, the political resonance of radical group demands is inherently low or nonexistent. Members of the political elite are not likely to be receptive to movements or demands that seek to upend the status quo. Following the transformative stage, however, elected officials, privy to the tide of public sentiment and the pressures associated, are likely to be more receptive to the radical group and its demands. At the same time, pragmatic radical groups such as Sunrise can use this changing public sentiment as a springboard to increase their political legitimacy and sway as they begin to directly interact and influence the elected elite. Over time, the increased openness and pressure results in an increased likelihood of a movement being able to successfully shape policy and governmental action. Perhaps to the chagrin of radical group members, these political elites may never fully adopt their radical demands, but the mass public support and pressure these demands helped catalyze place the overall movement in better position to shape the political landscape than before the radical flank’s emergence. In this way, the radical flank is still acting as a net positive on the larger social movement, even if the specifics of the flank’s ambitions are rarely, if ever, fully met.
Hypothesis Model:

**Formative Stage:**
Inward Resonance

- Emergence of RFE Group
- Targeted Subgroup Messaging

**Transformative Stage:**
Outward Resonance

- Amplification of Movement Messaging via Subgroup Activism
- Increased Public Attention and Support for Movement Issues

**Reformative Stage:**
Political Resonance

- Increased Pressure on Political Elites to Address Public Concern
- Increased Political Resonance of Movement Objectives

Increased Likelihood of Movement Achieving Desired Ends
III. Definition of Concepts

Snow et al.’s (2014) definition of the RFE serves as the basis for my hypothesis, analysis, and conclusion of Sunrise’s own RFE within the environmental movement. They define the RFE as an “interactive processes involving radical and moderate factions of a social movement and third parties outside those movements…[that] result in detrimental and/or beneficial impacts of radical group actions upon the reputations and effectiveness of more moderate collective actors.” (Snow et al. 2014). Although a bit generalized, this operational framework provides the proper scaffolding to approach my research and analyze subsequent findings. The definition also stresses the importance of third-party responses to the radical flank—i.e. the public and political elite—which shall also be central to my analysis and approach. Through this framework, I hypothesize that Sunrise has brought about a positive flank effect (Haines 1984) within the environmental movement. While various RFE scholars have arrived at different conclusions as to what exactly a positive radical flank entails, I define a positive flank effect as the increased likelihood of the movement—including both its radical and moderate members—achieving its desired ends as a result of the actions of the radical flank.

The reasoning behind my rather opaque definition of a positive flank effect is two-fold. First, its open-ended nature accounts for the varying degrees to which movement actors define the idea of achieving desired ends. While a radical group like Sunrise may feel it has not achieved its desired end until radical legislation like the Green New Deal has been enacted, its actions in the interim can still build toward the desired ends of the entire environmental movement—that being a stronger action taken to curtail climate change. In this way, a radical flank group can paradoxically achieve a positive flank effect, even if members of the radical
group feel that their specific ends have not been achieved. Second, my definition is ideally situated for the temporal lens of my analysis. By framing the definition through the likelihood of achieving desired ends, I can also utilize this definition in a predictive framework when analyzing the possible outcomes of Sunrise’s flank effect in the future. In this way, I will be able to extrapolate what impact the actions of Sunrise today will have on the future likelihood of achieving both its specific desired ends—Green New Deal legislation—and the desired ends of the larger environmental movement—stronger action taken to curtail climate change.

As was expounded in my Literature Review, RFE scholars have offered myriad ways to delineate moderate and radical actors in social movements. In my analysis, I borrow from the Dimensions of Strategic Orientation framework offered by Downey and Rohlinger (2008) to situate and justify the categorization of Sunrise as a radical actor in the environmental movement. In this framework, movement groups are categorized on a dependent bi-dimensional scale based on their depth of political challenge and breadth of political involvement—i.e. public support (see model below). Intuitively, radical actors offer a greater challenge to established political systems while concurrently attaining a smaller albeit more ardent amount of public support with moderate actors encompassing the converse. Sunrise surely iterates the radical categorization in this framework with the level of political upheaval called upon in their Green New Deal and the make up of its smaller and more ardent foundational base of support. What is particularly pertinent about this framework is its emphasis on the dependent nature of these two group delineators. The framework stresses that a balance must be struck between depth of challenge and level of support. If a group poses too strong of a challenge, it risks losing the level of support it needs to push for change (Downey & Rohlinger 2008). This balancing act between
depth of challenge and level of support is central to Sunrise’s strategically varied approaches to messaging especially within its transformative and reformative stages.

![Dimensions of Strategic Orientation](image)

The terms I employ in my hypothetical model are original to this analysis and are defined explicitly in the hypothesis formulation section. In my definitions of resonance, I lean on McDonnell et al.’s (2017) framework of resonance as an avenue through which “actors find novel solutions to their problems or extend familiar solutions to unfamiliar problems” (McDonnell et al. 2017, 9), and as “connected to audiences’ socially situated condition or to broader cultural themes and narratives that they recognize” (McDonnell et al. 2017, 3). My definition of inward resonance reflects a radical movement’s ability to offer actors novel solutions to preexisting sentiments by lending voice to the beliefs of a disgruntled portion of the population. While my definitions of outward and political resonance iterate the ability of resonance to provide a connection to broader cultural themes and narratives—in the shaping of the public consciousness—and its ability to extend familiar solutions to unfamiliar problems in its political context.
IV. Case Selection

I have chosen the Sunrise Movement as my evaluative case study because its emergence, growth, and impact can all be analyzed well through my hypothesis and model. Through my analysis, I will be able to explore the role messaging and rhetoric shaping played in fostering and cementing the youth-centered base of the movement and how this base was then able to amplify its message to the general public. From there I will be able to show how their messaging and campaigning have impacted the public consciousness via public opinion polls surrounding Sunrise’s proposed Green New Deal and climatic issues at large. I will then be able to use these findings to evaluate the final prongs of my model—the resultant increased pressure on political elites and the ultimate greater likelihood of the larger movement achieving its desired goals. In this way, I will examine how Sunrise’s entrance into the environmental movement over the past three years has increased the likelihood of environmental policy enactment, including the Green New Deal, as well as future prospects for further policy implementation. This present and future oriented framework can only be carried out through an analysis of an active and growing social movement group—an additional boon of selecting Sunrise as my lens of analysis.

V. Measurement of Variables

To effectively evaluate the emergence and impact of Sunrise via my hypothetical model, I will focus my measurement and analysis on evincing the movement’s progression through the model’s three main stages—formative, transformative, and reformation—and the causal connection between the phases in the build up to Sunrise’s ultimate RFE. Looking first at the formative stage, I will investigate the emergence and early growth of Sunrise detailing the degree to which the movement harnessed targeted sub-group messaging and inward resonance to amass
its base. This analysis will include insight into the movement’s early-day recruitment and messaging approach and how it has shaped Sunrise’s foundation of support. This analysis will be supplemented with interviews from three members of the movement—Aaron Appel and Anthony Hopkins of the Sunrise Philadelphia chapter, and Troy Turner, Sunrise Pennsylvania’s election coordinator—and their experiences when joining the movement.

From there my analysis will shift to the transformative stage and focus on how Sunrise’s base has amplified movement messaging through activism and protest. This will include an analysis of Sunrise’s tactics, messaging, social media presence, and membership size as they more thoroughly entered the national conversation on climate change. Using this data as backing, I will then analyze what impact Sunrise’s tactics and messaging have had on public attention and support for both Sunrise and environmental concerns as a whole. To get a grasp of this shift in the public consciousness, I will rely on public polling data on climate attitudes at large and Sunrise’s specific Green New Deal framework. In this way, I will be able to measure the degree to which Sunrise’s campaign has mustered the outward resonance needed to seriously challenge established political institutions and spur a positive RFE. In this stage, I will also consider the degree to which Sunrise’s messaging shifted and moderated as it sought to amass this broader base of appeal and build outward resonance.

Finally, I will conclude my analysis with measurements of Sunrise’s ability to successfully leverage outward resonance in the reformative stage. I will first show how political elites have fallen under increasing pressure to respond to our climate emergency as a result of greater public attention and support for the issue. From there, I will dive into Sunrise’s relationship and interaction with elected officials and the political elite to see how the movement
has been able to use the increased pressure catalyzed by outward resonance to build greater political resonance and subsequent legitimacy for their demands. This analysis will be driven by an investigation of Sunrise’s campaigns to elect and support climate-oriented members of the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate, their relationship to Joe Biden’s presidential campaign and the early days of his presidency, and the status and future prospects of the Green New Deal and other US environmental policy initiatives.

VI. Data Collection and Analysis

In the formative stage, my analysis will largely remain qualitative focusing on the types of messaging employed by the movement to muster its base. In the transformative stage, my analysis will take a more quantitative lens looking at how Sunrise has grown and what impact that has had on public sentiment. To measure Sunrise’s growth, I will analyze the changes over the past three years in their social media presence, financial backing, membership size, and other outreach indicators such as phone and text banking. I will then connect these findings to shifting societal sentiments on the issues central to Sunrise’s efforts. To gauge this shift in public sentiment I will analyze public polling data gathered by research organizations such as the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication, the Resources for the Future Climate Insights Survey, Pew Research Survey data, Data for Progress, and pre-election and exit poll data from the 2020 Presidential Election. In the final reformative stage of my analysis, I will revert back to a more qualitative case-study oriented approach to analysis. In this way, I will analyze how Sunrise has helped to reshape the political landscape and increase the political resonance of their demands through their campaigns for representatives of the Green New Deal in Congress, their influence on Joe
Biden’s climate policy platform, and the present and potential future status of the Green New Deal. This analysis will also include a discussion of the early climate-oriented actions of the Biden Presidency and the degree to which they emulate the calls of Sunrise and the Green New Deal. Through these case studies, I will be able to evaluate to what degree Sunrise has been able to increase the likelihood of achieving its desired policy ends and the desired ends of the larger environmental movement.
The Formative Stage

Emergence of Sunrise

Sunrise, perhaps like many preceding radical flank groups, was a movement born largely of anger and frustration at the status quo. Its founders, almost all seasoned members of environmental movements, had grown disillusioned with the progress and efficacy of their countless hours of work in the traditional channels of environmental activism. As Varshini Prakash, co-founder and executive director of Sunrise explained in a 2019 interview, the impetus behind the group’s formation was “…the sinking feeling that the movements we were [previously] building weren’t enough — that we didn’t have the scale or political power to stop what we perceived as the greatest existential threat of our lifetimes” (Klein 2019). Looking at the past decade of national environmental policy implementation helps to explain this lachrymose sentiment. Prakash and her compatriots had entered the environmental activist world along with a generation of eagerly optimistic twenty-somethings during Barack Obama’s presidency and his campaign commitment to “confront this [climate] challenge once and for all” (Broder 2008).

For Prakash and thousands of other frustrated activists, the Obama administration had reneged on this pledge. In his eight years in office, Obama had failed to deliver the landmark legislation Prakash and other environmental activists felt was needed to tackle the enormity of the climate crisis. The administration had instead relied on smaller tweaks and remedies focused on achieving bipartisan and industry support on more moderate climate-protecting measures, all as traditional environmental groups offered their passive support. The ill-fated American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009 serves as a case-in-point of this middle-ground approach. Also known as the Waxman-Markey bill, the legislation sought to implement a market-based approach
to curbing carbon and other greenhouse emissions via a national cap and trade system (Goodrich 2019). The bill was brokered through closed-door negotiations between large established environmental groups such as the Environmental Defense Fund and the National Resources Defense Council and industry CEOs sidestepping grassroots activism in favor of high-level bargaining and compromise (Engelfried 2019; Wallace-Wells 2019). After passing in the House, the bill floundered and was struck down in the Senate thanks to what Michael A. Levi, former Special Assistant to the President for Energy and Economic Policy under Barack Obama, later described as a combination of “…congressional Republican obstructionism, an anemic White House effort, and misplaced reliance on industry and environmental interest groups to deliver votes” (Dickinson 2010).

Compounding the down-trotted sentiment fostered by the failure of the Waxman-Markey bill for budding climate activists was President Obama’s overt expansion of oil production in the United States throughout his Presidency. By the end of his second term, Obama had expanded domestic oil production to historic levels through actions such as his approval for Shell to drill in Alaska’s Beaufort Sea during a period of historic low sea ice in 2012 (Prakash 2020a). Adding insult to injury, Obama boasted on the campaign trail in the buildup to the 2012 election that “We’re opening up more than 75% of our potential oil resources offshore. We’ve added enough oil and gas pipeline to encircle the earth, and then some” (Prakash 2020a, 138). For activists who had pegged Obama as an instant panacea to the climate crisis, these actions only helped to inflame their feelings of anger, frustration, and anxiety building within.

The failure of the Waxman-Markey bill and the continued expansion of climate-destroying practices under the Obama administration helped to usher a generational shift in the
mindset of environmental movement’s younger members. As Matthew Miles Goodrich, an early member of the movement and now Sunrise’s fundraising director explained, “failing to summon the requisite moral urgency, the environmental institutions that tried to broker the cap-and-trade deal between business and bureaucracy disillusioned the younger members of the movement from the possibility of substantial government action on climate. For many, the task, henceforth, was the destruction of the system writ large” (Goodrich 2019). This generational divide surrounding the urgency of the crisis also plays out in Gallop polling data which found in 2018 that 70% of Americans aged 18-34 worried a great deal/fair amount about global warming compared to 56% for Americans aged 55 and over (Reinhart 2018; Nilsen 2019).

It would be within this niche of disgruntled younger Americans disheartened by the lack of action to address climate change, and ready to take on a new more confrontational yet politically savvy method of activism that Sunrise would form its roots, recruit its ardent base of support, and prepare to launch what they believed would be a new and more effective type of national environmental movement. Sunrise began in late 2015, when 24-year-old Sara Blazevic and 23-year-old Varshini Prakash, who had worked together in the fossil fuel divestment movement, gathered a small group of activist friends for meetings in Brooklyn and Philadelphia. They pitched their idea for a new approach to environmental action that better harnessed their anger and passion and the similar feelings of thousands of other young activists (Adler-Bell 2019).

Thanks to small contributions from grant writers, This core of just twelve activists spent the next two years fine tuning their plan, learning how to build a successful movement, and how to take their message public and coalesce their youthful impassioned base (Adler-Bell 2019;
Matthews et al. 2019). Its founders first began by studying the wins and losses of the past 40 years of US environmental activism supplemented with lessons from contemporary and classic activist manifestos such as Bond & Exeley’s (2016) *Rules for Revolutionaries*, Laloux (2014) *Reinventing Organizations*, and Dr. Martin Luther King’s (1968) *Where Do We Go From Here* (Witt 2018). Building off these efforts, its founders soon enrolled themselves in *Momentum*, a movement “incubator” begun in 2014 by veterans of the immigrants’ and labor social movements (Lasoff 2020). Working with the incubator, they were able to develop their theory of action and hybrid approach to organizing that would blend “theatrical encounters with politicians and public figures…with traditional organizing [to] build up a network of activists at the local level” (Adler-Bell 2019). As co-founder Evan Weber explained, through this approach its founders sought to create a movement that could successfully “demand action at the scale that was needed and put forward solutions actually at the scale of the problem” (Nilsen 2019).

Throughout 2016, the budding movement leaders began to experiment with the tactics they had developed participating with other activist groups at protests in Washington DC and at the United Nations Climate talks in Germany (Arrieta-Kenna 2019). By the Spring of 2017, taking the lessons gleaned from past social movements, The Momentum Movement Incubator, and their experiences in DC and Germany, the dozen or so founding members had coalesced a twelve-page “Sunrise Movement Plan” and officially launched the movement (Blazevic et al. 2020). Now came the harder part of recruiting and expanding the ardent movement base it would need to sustain Sunrise and its efforts.
Targeted Subgroup Messaging

From the outset, Sunrise catered its messaging towards a new younger generation of would-be climate activists with preexisting grievances towards the pace of environmental activism, but with seemingly no concrete place to effectively channel that anger. The inspirations for this approach, paradoxical as it may seem, were the lessons its founders accrued observing the campaigns of Bernie Sanders and the victory of Donald Trump during the 2016 election cycle. In the Sanders campaign, the founders of Sunrise saw that there was already an appetite amongst thousands of younger people to break free from the modus operandi of previous activist approaches and chart a new more fiery path forward. The only problem was that young people had lacked a movement to pragmatically harness these powerful sentiments. As Sunrise co-founder Sara Blazevic explained:

In the Bernie moment, I was seeing so many young people who were, like, ‘I would drop everything to be a part of the political revolution.’ After the primary ended in their states, there wasn’t anything to be a part of, and we weren’t seeing many movements or organizations rising to that challenge of creating a way for those people to stay meaningfully engaged longer-term. We certainly weren’t seeing it in our own organizing in the climate movement (Witt 2018).

Blazevic and her co-founders quickly realized that if Sunrise could effectively recruit these activists, give voice to their feelings of political revolution, and transfer their energy from the Sanders campaign to their own movement, Sunrise could relatively-quickly mount and launch a new type of environmental movement.

At the same time, Sunrise was privy to what was transpiring on the other side of the political spectrum, and the implications Donald Trump’s victory had on their approach to crafting a sustainable movement. Rather than souring their prospects, Sunrise saw his victory as an opportunity to double-down on their specific messaging towards many younger Americans who
saw Trump’s victory as the worst-case scenario for the future prospects of US climate action. After all, former President Trump had spent his early days in office de-committing the US from the Paris Climate Accords and nominating Scott Pruitt, a known climate-change denier with ties to oil and gas industry leaders, as the director of the Environmental Protection Agency (Guillén & Restuccia 2016; Davenport 2016).

Sunrise knew it could capitalize on the anger these decisions amongst others would foment in younger, impassioned, would-be activists. As Varshini Prakash spelled out: “After Trump’s election, I knew there were millions of young Americans who wanted to fight climate change, but I didn’t see a youth movement of millions. I knew that…we would need to inspire thousands of people to jump into our movement” (Prakash 2020a, 142-143). In this new era of Trump, fellow Co-Founder Sara Blazevic explained, “Young people aren’t looking for another petition to sign. They want to do something big enough to solve the problem” (Blazevic et al 2020, 188). Now heading into 2017 and the official formation of the movement, taking note of the Sanders campaign and Trump victory, Sunrise had a blue print and strategy to recruit its youthful base and amass a long-term movement. Its messaging would emphasize the push for political revolution that drew thousands of younger Americans to the Bernie campaign while also offering a way for these same younger Americans to channel the grief, anger, and frustration felt towards the ongoing climate emergency and the victory of Donald Trump into a cohesive and effective movement.

With their strategic approach coalesced, Sunrise began to actuate its recruitment plan. Naturally, when beginning to form a youth-driven movement with a youth-oriented message, Sunrise focused on building a large and captivating presence on social media. But Sunrise’s
approach to social media, like most other aspects of the movement, was far from orthodox in approach and action. From its inception, there was a key focus, says co-founder Evan Weber, on making the Sunrise Movement the “cool kids in the climate movement” (Matthews et al. 2018). In this way, Sunrise shied away from the drab professionally-manicured social media feeds of larger more-established activist groups in favor of one that better reflected the attitudes and sentiments of a younger generation and the way they personally interact on social media. On a scroll through the organizations Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram feed, one encounters official movement publications and messaging alongside memes and Tik Tok clips that help translate their message and its resonance to a younger more diverse audience (Calma 2019). As Jon Ozaksut, Digital Director of the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, explains, the importance and innovativeness of this approach to social media messaging is that it allows Sunrise “…to model this [climate activism] idea to young people on the networks where they hang out [and show] that people like [them] care about this, people like [them] are taking action” (Calma 2019). It should come as no surprise then that Aracely Jimenez-Hudis, Sunrise digital media manager, told *The Verge* in an interview that “our social media is the number one way that we reach new young people and bring them into the movement” (Calma 2019).
To sustain and continue to grow this burgeoning movement and its base, however, would require more than a hip social media presence. To fully capitalize on the sentiments of those on the receiving end of its targeted outreach—passionate climate-concerned younger Americans—Sunrise focused its messaging in the formative stage largely on the cultivation of inward resonance. This messaging was geared towards fostering a collective conviction amongst its targeted movement demographic that Sunrise’s ambitions were not only necessary but achievable. To generate this collective sentiment, Sunrise and its early-stage tactfully emphasized the preexisting grievances of their targeted subgroup whilst highlighting the failure of the political elite or the more moderate members to address these concerns. In this way, inward resonance messaging has as its ultimate goal the creation of a sense of mutual buy-in and purpose amongst a group’s foundation of supporters who see the group and its messaging as
echoing their values, angers, and worldview and the group as a way to channel these sentiments into meaningful action.

Sunrise’s early organizational approach inward resonance development predicated largely on mass in-person trainings focused on what Co-Founder Sara Blazevic described as “giving away the DNA [of the movement]” (Blazevic et al 2020, 172). In a 2017 tour across ten states and dozens of community centers, college campuses, and places of worship, Sunrise and its leaders spoke to and added hundreds of eager activists to its ranks through trainings and rallies. These events focused on highlighting what drove people to attend the event—anger at the status quo of climate action, a longing for community of like-minded individuals, transforming a sense of hopelessness into action, a desire to take action—to develop the inward resonance Sunrise knew would be needed to sustain the movement especially during moments of abeyance and failure (Blazevic et al. 2020).

At the same time, the trainings were pragmatic, presenting a clear four year plan of Sunrise’s theory of action leading all the way up to the 2020 election and imparting the basic organizational and tactical skills—how to grow movement hubs, recruit, organize, and protest—that Sunrise would use to achieve their plan (Blazevic et al 2020; Arrieta-Kenna 2019). In my interview with him, Sunrise Pennsylvania's election coordinator Troy Turner spoke to this specific pragmatic focus:

I attended a sunrise training and they talked about political common sense and like how it shifted over history and how we can make a shift again...this training was about imparting the skills and knowledge and all the things you need to be able to take these national frameworks and kind of kind of take control of them in your own community and lead these campaigns and whatnot. So there's was like some hard skills trainings just around like how to create a good meeting agenda, how to facilitate a meeting, things like that, and then some more theoretical work around [Sunrise's] escalation and moral protest module where we went back through the last hundred years and looked at the work stoppages of the New Deal and the lunch counter sit ins led by attack in the civil rights era and looked at historically what the conditions have been that have led to, you know
Soon after its training and recruitment tour, Sunrise shifted its attention towards developing the same sort of inward resonance at the higher levels of the movement as it worked to cultivate a crop of new movement leaders. In the build-up to the 2018 midterm elections, the movement launched the Sunrise Semester fellowship, a six month full-time training and community building experience to amass the group of movement leaders that would carry Sunrise into the future and its transformative stage. Inspired by the movement houses the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) used for its volunteers during 1964’s freedom summer, the program recruited 75 people who each volunteered to take semesters off from their universities and or quit their jobs to live in one of eight Sunrise Houses across the country and fully immerse themselves in the movement. The primary purpose of the Semester, according to Sunrise, was to “learn the ropes of electoral campaigning and social movement organizing… while living together in community, supporting local campaigns for climate and environmental justice, and building our movement for the long-haul” (Negron 2018b). Alongside their training, the Fellows also helped campaign for Sunrise’s endorsed candidates in the 2018 midterm elections allowing them to transfer their skills to the world of advocacy in real time.

Core Themes of Inward Resonance Messaging

Across Sunrise’s formative stage and its inward-resonance focused messaging lie several foundational themes that helped the movement coalesce the preexisting grievances of thousands of individuals into a cohesive and ardent base. The first of these thematic approaches was a particular emphasis on collectivity and grief. Already briefly touched upon, there is a specific

not just mass protests, but also what enabled the institutionalizing of the demands of those protests. And just like how we balance building people power with building political power and really shifting that political common sense to be able to institutionalize those wins (Turner 2021).
focus in the early messaging of Sunrise on the unique burden climate change has levied on younger generations and the shared feelings, experiences, and anxieties of this generation that the climate issue has been ignored or brushed under the rug by the political elite. Co-founder Varshini Prakash calls these concerned younger members of our society the “climate generation” and stresses that this generation “hasn’t lived in a period that wasn’t tainted in some significant form by climate breakdown” (Klein 2019). Rather than sidestepping these potentially souring and disheartening sentiments, Sunrise and its messaging approach them head on and, as fellow co-founder Sara Blazevic explains, transform “the fear and pains of the climate crisis, which we all feel in isolation, into a collective action” (Blazevic et al 2020, 175).

One way in which Sunrise in its formative stage was able to harness and transform sentiments of hopelessness and despair into collectivity and action was through an emphasis on personal narratives and shared experience. Scenes from the Sunrise Semester help shed light on how the power of personal narrative messaging was used to channel collectivity and grief into a powerful message to inspire a novice but passionate activist:

We closed the evening with a grounding ritual. Each Sunrise Semester fellow shared about an object they brought that represents something they love and are fighting to protect from climate change. The purpose of the ritual is to see the diversity and commonalities in the people, places, communities and values that bring us to this fight. As each person brought forward their object, the room said in unity, “and I’m fighting for that, too.” We placed the objects on an altar and lit three candles honoring and holding space for the past (those who came before us in the long fight for a better world, and whose shoulders we stand on), present (the communities currently being affected by climate and environmental injustice), and future (those who we will leave this world to) (Negron 2018b).

In this exercise, individual pains and grief were transformed into a collective pain and power—“and I am fighting for that too” (Negron 2018b). Former fellow Gabriel reflected on the importance of this exercise amongst others and its power to foster collectivity from grief as he recounted, “hearing other people’s stories of what they love and could lose to climate change had
me on the verge of tears…” however, “through sharing our stories, appreciating each other, and singing together, this group of people has shown me how strong of a community and movement Sunrise is. I know this sense of connection can help us through even the most difficult times in our movement” (Negron 2018c). This fostering of a sense of community through mutual grief in Sunrise’s formative stage was a key facilitator in the movement’s ability to amass the requisite inward resonance to solidify and sustain the movement as it grew and prepared to enter the national conversation.

Further bolstering this sense of collectivity in Sunrise’s formative-stage messaging was the movement’s specific emphasis on the power of song. Taking cues from previous upstart social movements, Co-Founder Sara Blazevic says Sunrise utilized song and singing to help “build a healthy group culture and strong relationships, across lines of difference” (Blazevic et al 2020, 173). Fellow Co-Founder Varshini Prakash elaborated on this messaging tactic:

I think singing for us carries a few different tools. In our movements, we use song to build joy. We use it in times of fear or intensity, as a way to show solidarity with one another and show our strength. We use it in times of sorrow or pain to give voice to our feelings. We use it in moments of anger. Like many movements throughout history, we use song to bring people together and give voice to what we’re here to do (Klein 2019).

As Prakash explained, song is used as a tool to overcome fear and anxiety, be that about climate change or confronting the political elite, and to replace that fear with a sense of group solidarity and community. This transformation is key in the build-up of inward-resonance and in solidifying the base of the movement especially in moments of adversity. Early Sunrise activist Dyanna Jaye illustrated this power of song for the movement and its members in her account of her experience on the day of Sunrise’s sit-in in Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi’s office in November of 2018. While the larger implications of the sit-in on the growth and impact of the
Sunrise movement will be expounded later, Jaye’s story of that day helps now to explain the importance of song in overcoming fear and building solidarity for Sunrise and its early activists:

My hands shook as I approached the wooden doors of Representative Nancy Pelosi’s office in Washington DC…[We] carried letters and photos of the cherished people and places we might lose to climate change. We dropped our envelopes on Rep. Pelosi’s desk and shared what we were fighting to protect…Forty or so envelopes in we started to sing:

*We are standing for our Futures*
*We are healing what is wrong*
*We are standing for our futures*
*And together we are strong.*

This song, written by West Virginia organizer Katey Lauer was our cue to start the sit-in. We linked arms, sat down, and declared our intention to stay (Blazevic et al 2020, 166-167).

Jaye’s account offers a case in point of the strength of musical messaging for Sunrise and its early activists. By joining together in a song, activists like Jaye that day were able to overcome the individual fears they felt and instead tap into the collective strength of community and inward resonance singing helped to elucidate.

A second key component in the build up of inward resonance is the ability of a movement to convey that the movement’s ambitions are not only necessary but achievable. As such, complementing Sunrise’s collectivity from grief messaging in the formative stage was a specific focus on communication cultivating a sense of *efficacy* and *empowerment* amongst these same young supporters and activists. Throughout its early mass trainings and longer Sunrise Semester-type leadership workshops, a clear and articulate message was presented by the movement to its early members as to how it would bring about its desired change and the role each activist would play in that effort. This messaging included trainings on the basic skills needed by activists to successfully push for change—how to canvass, protest, organize, and fight through failure—as well as insight into the larger masterplan of the movement in the three or so years leading up to
the 2020 presidential election (Arrieta-Kenna 2019). At the same time, this messaging was
designed in a way to ignite a sense of energy and empowerment in Sunrise’s new members.

Former Sunrise Semester participant and now Sunrise’s digital media manager Aracely Jimenez-
Hudis described this duel role of Sunrise’s early efficacy messaging in her reflections of her time
in the Semester program:

I learned a lot of hard skills during Sunrise Semester, like how to knock on a stranger’s
door and talk about the climate crisis, how to recruit new people, and how to phone-bank
strangers…I [also] started radically loving my community for the first time and I learned
to fight for them as hard as I fight for myself. You need that kind of love to do this work
longterm, to keep you grounded through the ten-hour days, through the movements when
you think you’re losing (Blazevic et al. 2020, 187-188).

This energy and community derived from empowerment and efficacy messaging further helped
to solidify Sunrise’s base of support in the formative stage. This messaging also helped to shape
and instill confidence in the movement’s leaders as Co-Founder Sara Blazevic expounds, “for
young people getting their bearings in a world beset by crises, [Sunrise] trainings offer the
support and camaraderie of community, a place to see and hear ourselves as leaders even if we’d
never thought of ourselves that way before” (Blazevic et al 2020, 175).

Outsider perspectives on the environment at Sunrise’s training help to corroborate these
assertions. Reporting from a Sunrise training bootcamp, a Politico reporter described the vibe of
the camp as “a cross between a summer camp for hippies and a high school pep rally” describing
how “there were a lot of songs sung in circles, as facilitators shared many favorable videos and
articles about Sunrise published over the past year, and people snapped incessantly to show
support whenever anyone said anything remotely vulnerable or profound” (Arrieta-Kenna 2019).

A Vogue Magazine reporter was also struck by the feelings of empowerment, energy, and a sense
of efficacy palpable at Sunrise trainings during her visit. As she described, “The mood is playful
and sometimes astoundingly earnest [at the training]. But taped to a wall behind a group
presenting their parody of “Old MacDonald”—naturally changed to “Old McConnell”—there are
savvy diagrams of how to stand during a protest for maximum visual impact” (Malle 2019). As
these reporters were likely beginning to sense, the messaging and values imparted during these
Sunrise trainings were forging a new crop of climate activists who were beginning to amass the
energy, conviction and know-how to help see Sunrise’s aspirations move closer to reality.

Understanding Formative Messaging through the Post-Apocalyptic Paradigm

Sunrise’s decision to focus its formative-stage messaging towards sentiments of grief,
collectivity, empowerment, and efficacy be understood through the post-apocalyptic
environmentalism paradigm. The paradigm argues that in recent years, environmental
movements, especially those on the more radical end, have begun to adopt a post-apocalyptic
view that discards the notion of a coming climactic apocalypse—which was and largely
continues to be the operative framework for traditional environmental groups—for a messaging
model that sees the prophesied destruction as already taking place. At the crux of this view is the
idea that “the climate crisis is no longer a story to be foretold in the future tense” (Wallace-Wells
2020, 3).

Reflecting on the messaging approach of Sunrise in its formative stage, it quickly
becomes clear that the movement situated itself firmly within this post-apocalyptic paradigm
while tapping into and harnessing the mobilize force it can help to catalyze. Testimonials from
erly Sunrise activists and leaders help to showcase this transformative power of post-
apocalyptic messaging and its ability to mold individual grief into a cohesive collective
consciousness through feelings of hope and efficacy. Sunrise Semester fellow Gabriel illustrated this mindset following the conclusion of his training program:

Hearing other people’s stories of what they love and could lose to climate change had me on the verge of tears; learning about the ways in which fossil fuel billionaires have endangered us all by corrupting our democracy and buying out politicians made me furious; leveling up my canvassing, fundraising, storytelling, and management skills made me feel more capable than ever. But more than anything, I’m leaving this week feeling hopeful (Negron 2018c, italicizes added).

As wrenching as it may have been to the newly-recruited activists, the movement understood that by situating climate change as something happening here and now, Sunrise could channel the anger and hopelessness felt in budding activists by this realization into a sense of urgency and unity. Supplemented with trainings on the skills needed to transform their grief into pragmatic action, Sunrise activists emerged from their trainings, as one observer put it, “caught between idealism and fury” (Malle 2019). At the same time, as Gabriel mentioned in his training reflection above, Sunrise’s formative-stage messaging helped to illicit a sense of hope in place of despair—a key approach of the post-apocalyptic paradigm adopted recently by more radically-leaning environmental social movements. Even in its name Sunrise offers a sense of hope and new beginnings as Evan Weber, Sunrise’s Political Director, spelled out:

I’d say a lot of our members are showing up for the first time. They’re young adults that are just kind of freaked out about the climate crisis and political moment we’re in. Sunrise’s name alludes to that feeling, that the night is always darkest before the dawn of a new day. The youth are scared, but they’re also hopeful (Nilsen 2019).

Situating Sunrise’s Formative Stage Messaging

Within Sunrise’s approach to formative stage messaging and inward resonance build up emerges an implicit paradox. Alongside offering an avenue to channel collective angers and anxieties felt towards the climate crisis into feelings of hope and political revolution, the
movement’s messaging presented concrete and pragmatic approaches to achieving that end. In this way, Sunrise’s messaging called for a political upheaval while imparting in its activists the skills to effectively operate and push for their desired change in the traditional political arena. While Sunrise’s strategic messaging approach may seem rather intuitive—offer a radical idealistic solution alongside the principled means to achieve it—in reality, it marks a clear break from traditional radical flank messaging and its accompanying scholarly interpretations.

While formative-stage messaging in many preceding radical flank movements did focus on channeling the anger of a targeted subgroup towards a drive to enact meaningful change, for most movements it failed to concurrently deliver the wherewithal and skillset within activists to push for that change in the larger political climate. As a result, many of these movements were left with a strong and committed core of activists, but no clear plan to utilize that energy beyond general protest, non-cooperation, or violence. This disconnect between ambition and efficaciousness in groups of budding activists can oftentimes spur the petering out of a movement as was seen in the Christian Right movement (Rozell & Wilcox 1996) and the anti-nuclear movement (Barkan 1979) of the late twentieth century. Scholars have even pointed to how this phenomena has played out within the environmental movement and the deleterious impacts the efforts of renegade groups such as Earth First!, the Earth Liberation Front, and the Animal Liberation Front have had on the success of environmental policy initiatives and candidates when protesting outside traditional political channels (Farrer & Klein, 2019).

Interestingly, many previous scholarly interpretations of radical groups consign all fringe movements into this capricious and wholly non-traditional framework of messaging and operation. In their analyses, Conner and Epstein (2007), Hoffman and Bertels (2009), and Obrien
et al (2018) each categorize radical environmental groups predominately as having uncompromising stances while working outside the traditional channels of protest without coherent plans to integrate their actions within the larger sociopolitical context. In their schemata, these radical groups are juxtaposed alongside more traditional environmental movement groups who work within the political system with clear objectives and more moderate ambitions.

Sunrise and its formative stage messaging, however, carve out a new category of radical flank group that combines the ambitious energy and message used to coalesce previous radical groups with the articulate planning and approach of more traditionally moderate movement groups. This strategic fusing of styles allowed the movement to amass and sustain the conviction within its base that not only are Sunrise’s ambitions necessary, but achievable. By offering a concrete framework to achieve these ambitions, Sunrise also situated itself and its activists to be better able to challenge entrenched power compared to previous flank groups who often lacked the strategic backing to sustain their efforts and foster change. Even as the movement began to exit the formative stage and introduce their message to a larger audience, Sunrise would continue to rely on this combination of radical ideals and pragmatic action to catalyze and sustain favorable public sentiment.

**Formative Stage Impact**

Through its emphasis on inward-resonance messaging in its formative stage, Sunrise was able to amass a burgeoning movement with a zealous base of youthful energetic activists in relative short order. In the span of approximately a year and a half between its official inception in April of 2017 and its proper introduction into the national political conversation in November
of 2018—discussed further in the proceeding section—Sunrise blossomed from a group of twelve outcast climate activists into a sprawling movement primed to take their message to a national audience and challenge entrenched political powers. Six months after inception, Sunrise had trained a modest 275 people across 10 states (Blazevic et al, 2020). As the movement continued to expand and refine its recruitment and messaging approach in 2018, however, that number and the overall strength of Sunrise began to mushroom.

By implementing a recruitment messaging approach that transformed the individual anxieties felt by thousands of young people across the country into a sense of collective grief, providing the organizational and tactical scaffolding to effectively channel that anger, and then empowering this newfound community to take decisive action Sunrise successfully struck a powerful chord with its targeted subgroup. By November of 2018, on the precipice of their entrance into the transformative stage of the movement, Sunrise had grown to encompass 25 movement hubs across the country, trained a crop of 75 young movement leaders through the Sunrise Semester program, and added an additional 1,500 activists to its ranks (Blad 2019). The state of Sunrise’s finances across this window also helps to bear this growth out. In 2017, Sunrise raised $77,791 in grants and donations and had $31,210 in expenditures (Sunrise Tax Return 2018). In 2018, that number exploded to $618,877, a nearly eight-fold increase from the previous year allowing Sunrise to spend $412,722 in expenditures to help spread its message and build up of inward resonance for young people across the country (Sunrise Tax Return 2019).

It is important to note that alongside growing the movement and solidifying its base, the efforts of Sunrise in its formative phase also netted a modest outward political impact. Across 2017 and 2018 its newly minted activists contacted over 250,000 voters in tightly contested mid-
term elections and successfully signed on 1300 candidates in races across the country to Sunrise’s *No Fossil Fuel Money Pledge*—committing the candidates to not to taking contributions over $200 from oil, gas, and coal industry executives, lobbyists, and PACs (Blad 2019; Prakash 2020). At the same time Sunrise endorsed and campaigned for 30 candidates at the state and federal level, with 19 winning their elections, including pivotal future allies of the movement in Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Deb Haaland, Rashida Tlaib, and Ilhan Omar (Prakash 2018, Blad 2019). Alongside these impressive early accomplishments, Sunrise had amassed the movement energy and conviction it needed to successfully enter its transformative stage.
Transformative Stage:

Introduction to Transformative Stage

Having amassed the requisite inward resonance and passionate and cohesive base of support in its reformative stage, Sunrise was now well-situated to enter the transformative stage. In this stage, radical groups tap into their now-established base of support as conduits for movement messaging, organizing, and strengthening. As the movement begins to interact with the larger society and introduce its message to a greater portion of the general public, the group does not necessarily need to generate the same level of support for its specific demands as in its formative stage, nor should it waste its crucial resources trying. Successful radical groups instead, via their emboldened base of support, use their introduction into the larger public sphere to “[disturb] a polarized debate, and [reframe] the conflict redrawing moral lines around acceptable behavior” (Schifeling & Hoffman 2019, 228). In this way, a radical group’s greatest impact on the public often occurs as a reorientation and reinvigoration of the public consciousness surrounding their movement issue. This shift in focus, also results in a shift in messaging and tactics approaches in the stage which will be further examined below.

To achieve this larger societal impact, the members, tactics, and messaging of Sunrise in this phase centered their efforts on the fostering of a sense of outward resonance with the public. In this way, their amplification of movement messaging in the transformative stage focused on “connect[ing] to audiences’ [i.e. the public’s] socially situated condition or to broader cultural themes and narratives that they recognize” (McDonnell et al. 2017, 3). Essentially, Sunrise sought to imbed awareness and concern for their movement’s central issues into the public consciousness via preexisting cultural drivers and themes. Thus, even as Sunrise sought to
reshape prevailing public sentiment, its messaging was also framed in a manner that could withstand the possibility of large-scale backlash and apprehension. At the same time, this messaging worked to shape a new more receptive public perception of the issues driving the radical group’s actions. This framework decouples the general public’s view of the radical group in and of itself and their feelings towards the underlying issues highlighted by the group. So long as the actions of Sunrise in the public sphere catalyzed a positive fundamental shift in perceptions of the movement’s foundational concerns—even if a large portion of the public continues to disagree with the radical group’s tactics and actions—Sunrise would be well situated to exit its transformative stage with the leverage of this changing public sentiment in their battle to influence the political elite.

Sunrise entered its transformative stage and introduced its Green New Deal messaging into the public consciousness in earnest following their flashpoint sit-in at newly-promoted House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s DC office on November 13, 2018. Having worked tirelessly and successfully throughout the 2018 midterm election cycle to help Democrats regain control of the House of Representatives (see formative stage impact section), Sunrise and other environmental groups were keen to elevate climate change to the top of Speaker Pelosi’s agenda in the new Democratically-controlled House (Roberts 2018a). Adding weight to their pressure was the release of the newest UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report a week prior painting a grim outlook for the world’s capability to stem the tide our changing climate offering the incredibly narrow timeframe of just twelve years (2030) to halt the worst of climate change’s impacts (IPCC Report 2018; Irfan 2018).
In the face of this pressure, however, Pelosi and her fellow House leadership balked. Hoping to placate the calls from groups such as Sunrise, House leadership offered an anodyne approach to the historically tension-filled climate policy debate offering a plan to revive the House Committee on Climate Change and to focus on what Speaker Pelosi celebrated as the “bipartisan marketplace of ideas that makes our democracy strong” (Wallace-Wells 2018; Cama & Lillis 2018; Anapol 2018). The original House Committee on Climate Change was created by Pelosi during her first iteration as Speaker of the House in 2007 through compromise with Republican lawmakers who successfully ensured that the committee would be advisory in nature, without the legislative authority granted to standing committees (Abrams 2007; Hebert 2007). The largely powerless committee was ultimately scrapped in 2011 when Republicans reassumed the majority in the body (Sheppard 2011). Pelosi’s solution to revive the hapless committee in 2018 infuriated liberal Democrats in the House—many of whom could credit part of their victories to the work of groups like Sunrise—as well the activists who demanded a response with teeth that could seriously plan to meet the ambitious targets implied by the IPCC report (Roberts 2018a).

In the wake of Speaker Pelosi’s plan, Sunrise alongside fellow activist group Justice Democrats quickly prepared their response and subsequent protest actions. In the span of days, working on a collaborative Google Document, the groups hashed out a proposal for a Select Committee on a Green New Deal and its mandate (Wallace-Wells 2019). Requiring its members to assemble a draft plan by January 1, 2020, and draft legislation by March 1, 2020, the Committee would have "authority to develop a detailed, national, industrial, economic mobilization plan for the transition of the United States economy to become carbon neutral and
to significantly draw down and capture greenhouse gases from the atmosphere and oceans and to promote economic and environmental justice and equality (Roberts 2018b).

With their demands in place and their training and theory of action in tote, Sunrise and its base of activists were now ready to take their protest to Pelosi, the Democratic establishment, and the American public. Co-founder Evan Weber further elaborated on the importance of staging their first large-scale public action in the immediate wake of Speaker Pelosi’s plan and the IPCC report. Strategically, he explained “we knew there was a critical period of time after each election where agendas are set and groups can influence the debate. So the thought was what if we do an action in DC the week after the election before anyone else is ready to move?” (Matthews et al. 2018).

And so on November 13, 2018, exactly one week after the midterm elections, more than 200 Sunrise activists descended on the Capitol building and Speaker Pelosi’s office chanting calls for a Green New Deal, asking lawmakers “we have 12 years, what is your plan?” all in their effort to enter the transformative stage and “disturb a polarized debate” (Schifeling & Hoffman 2019, 228; Malle 2019; Prakash 2020b). Their message was amplified many fold by the surprise visit and voice of support from newly elected Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the scores of camera crews scrambling to capture the rookie Representative directly challenge her boss in the House (Green 2018). Co-founder Sara Blazevic explained pointedly the impact of Cortez’s support, “we were saying all the same shit on November 12, as we were on November 13, but having Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez saying it with us really did change everything.” (Arrieta-Kenna 2019). In the end, 51 Sunrise members were arrested for “unlawfully
demonstrating in the Cannon House Office Building” charged with crowding, obstructing, or incommoding (Green 2018).

Those arrests, however, were a small price to pay for the gargantuan impact the sit-in had on the growth of the movement and its presence in the mainstream of American political discourse. In the 48 hours following the sit-in, an estimated 5,000 articles were written about Sunrise and its call for a Select Committee on a Green New Deal while the movement’s Twitter following tripled to nearly 30,000 followers (Klein 2019; Matthews et al. 2019). One report in the New Yorker went as far as to describe the sit-in as “a turning point in American climate politics” (Nwanevu 2019). Reflecting on the protest’s impact a fellow analysis elaborated: “Achieving this sort of moment, in which the horizons of political possibility expand with an almost audible snap, is what every social movement hopes to accomplish. But only some do” (Adler-Bell 2019). At the same time, the success of the protest helped to bolster the confidence and conviction amongst the activists at the protest and recruit scores of new members to the movement—each of which would help spur the movement’s impact in the transformative stage. Troy Turner, Sunrise’s Pennsylvania election coordinator, explained the morale-boosting impact of the protest’s aftermath as he detailed:

I went there [to DC for the sit-in], and there was this fledgling organization full of scrappy young people. And we did this training in a church basement, ate pizzas and slept on the stone floors of churches. And with that I was kind of skeptical. This is not like anything I’d ever seen before. And the rest is history. Everything kind of went off so quickly. People told stories, it was a major splash. And I was like, wow, this handful of scrappy young people could take pennies compared to what other organizations have and have this massive impact (Turner 2021).

This revelation of Sunrise’s capabilities in shaping the public consciousness and the climate change debate also helped to catalyze an explosive growth of movement hubs and members. While there were just 25 Sunrise hubs before the sit in, that number would balloon to over 100
by January 2019 helping to spread the tentacles and reach of the movement as it continued its push to enter and reshape public perceptions surrounding climate change.

*Scenes from November 13 Sit-in - Courtesy of Sunrise Movement*
Transformative Stage Tactics - Non-violent mass-noncooperation

Central to Sunrise’s approach towards the cultivation of outward resonance and public awareness and support in the transformative stage is a reliance on non-violent, mass-noncooperation events. Co-founder Varshini Prakash elucidates the rationale behind this approach: “the course of history changes when ordinary people bring business-as-usual to a halt…If we are going to win, we have to bring society and even our economy to a standstill again and again” (Prakash 2020a, 154-155). In this way, Sunrise on the macro level has relied largely on disruptive actions that “prompt a direct confrontation with power holders” (Blazevic et al. 2020, 175) to amplify movement messaging and garner public support. Through these trigger events—like the one spelled out above at Speaker Pelosi’s office—Sunrise seeks to stage a form of moral protest which as co-founder Sara Blazevic explains “is really about illuminating the crisis that we face and inviting millions of people to empathize with it.” She elaborates, “It’s about turning private suffering that many people experience…and really bringing that fear into the public in a way that allows people to resonate with it and allows people to feel that fear as well and also feel the hope of being able to be apart of something that can transform that fear to address the crisis” (Lasoff 2020, 25). Perhaps more simply, Blazevic explains “moral protest forces the public and the power holders to ask themselves: Which side are we on?” (Blazevic et al. 2020, 175). In this way, “By visibly pitting people with a unique stake in the climate fight against entrenched corporate and political interests, the movement is building a compelling public narrative” (Engelfried 2019).

Across Sunrise’s transformative stage, there are numerous examples of this moral-protest confrontational approach employed to raise public awareness and galvanize support for the
movement’s aims. Building off the success of the first large-scale moral protest at Speaker Pelosi’s office in November, the movement returned to the Capitol on December 10, 2018, this time with 1000 protestors to double down the pressure on congressional leaders to back a Select Committee for a Green New Deal. On their return trip, the movement made further strides in elevating support for the Green New Deal inside the Capitol and in the public consciousness. Most notably, through their moral protest corollary tactic of bird-dogging—eliciting a public response through a strategic question or series of questions (Arrieta-Kenna 2019)—Sunrise was able to get Massachusetts Rep. Jim McGovern, the top Democrat on the House Rules Committee, to go on the record as committed to establishing the House Select Committee on a Green New Deal (Connelly & Kopp 2018). Once more, the sit in netted over 40 signatures of support for the committee including from soon-to-be presidential candidates Senator Bernie Sanders and Cory Booker (Roberts 2018a). Like the first protest in November, Sunrise’s civil disobedience resulted in scores of their activists arrested—138 this time around—and resulted in thousands of additional articles posted about the movement and the Green New Deal (Connelly & Kopp 2018).

Unfortunately for Sunrise, when the format for the ultimate committee was introduced later in December, Speaker Pelosi largely gave its activists the cold shoulder. Democratic leadership had not granted the committee subpoena powers severely curtailing its authority and had appointed Rep. Kathy Castor—a moderate Democrat and Green New Deal skeptic—to head the committee which would remain titled the House Committee on Climate Change (Cama 2018; Roberts 2018a). Despite this setback, however, the mass-noncooperation moral protests staged

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2 For a more extensive discussion of bird-dogging see (Blazevic et al. 2020, 177-181).
by Sunrise in November and December of 2018 in DC helped to continue the buildup of outward resonance, awareness, and support for the movement’s objectives as it continued on its trajectory in the transformative stage. As one analysis put it “All of the sudden, the left has found something it had lacked for years: an ambitious, positive climate program, something as bold and catchy as “Medicare-for-all” in healthcare. Advocates and activists are on board and wonks are thinking about the mechanics” (Roberts 2018a). Ocasio-Cortez’s campaign manager Saikat Chakrabarti echoed this transformative power of Sunrise’s actions and messaging when he opined “We thought it would take a year to get a movement going around the Green New Deal. Instead, it took weeks” (Roberts 2018a).

Moving into 2019, the movement continued to tap into its confrontational framework towards generating increased outward resonance. A case-in-point of this approach was the protest staged by members of the Sunrise Movement in tandem with Youth vs. Apocalypse and Bay Area Earth Guardians—two fellow youth-led climate activist groups—at Senator Diane Feinstein’s office in San Francisco. Relying on a similar set of bird-dogging confrontational tactics employed by the movement at their two DC sit-ins in the months prior, the activists aged 11 to 24 arrived at her office to get the Senator on the record in support of the Green New Deal and to shelve the more moderate climate plan she was planning to unveil in its place (Wire 2019; Chávez & Grim 2019). Feinstein responded to their impromptu visit and demands with condescension and dismissal telling the activists, many of them children, “There’s no way to pay for it…It doesn’t have a single Republican vote, and the Republicans control the US Senate. I’ve been in the Senate for over a quarter of a century, and I know what can pass and I know what can’t pass” (Beckett 2019). She later derided one of the young activists, “well, you know better
than I do. So I think one day you should run for the United States Senate and then you do it your way” (Kelly 2019).

The complete twenty-minute interchange, caught on video by one of the activists, was quickly uploaded to Sunrise’s social media page and went viral. In a matter of hours, #Feinstein became the top trending topic on Twitter as the video racked up over 9,000,000 views (Blazevic et al. 2020; Chávez & Grim 2019). Later that week, the interaction was even parodied on Saturday Night Live further elevating coverage and awareness of the clash (Nordyke 2019). For Sunrise, the Feinstein interchange helped to cement the moral authority and credibility of the movement’s demands and actions. Bill McKibben, co-founder of 350.org and longtime climate activist, elaborated on this public consciousness shift in receptiveness to Sunrise—which shall be explored further in the forthcoming section—especially as it relates to their youth-dominated makeup. In his analysis of the day’s events, he argues:

Feinstein was, in fact, demonstrating why climate change exemplifies an issue on which older people should listen to the young. Because—to put it bluntly—older generations will be dead before the worst of it hits. The kids whom Feinstein was talking to are going to be dealing with climate chaos for the rest of their lives, as any Californian who has lived through the past few years of drought, flood, and fire must recognize. This means that youth carry the moral authority here, and, at the very least, should be treated with the solicitousness due a generation that older ones have managed to screw over (McKibben 2019, np emphasis added).

The leaders of Sunrise were also privy to this impact of the day’s actions on public perceptions of the movement. Co-founder Victoria Fernandez explained that through the exchange, the obstacles to enacting climate change in the public consciousness began to further crystallize as “Feinstein came to represent some of the people in both parties who are standing in the way of progress” (Stuart 2019). Fellow co-founder Sara Blazevic added, “the complacency of an elected
leader, previously unremarkable and invisible, suddenly became a political liability because of young organizers’ moral clarity and nonviolent confrontation” (Blazevic et al. 2020, 178).

As 2019 continued into the Spring, Sunrise steered its non-violent mass-noncooperation tactics and actions towards the 2020 election. Specifically, Sunrise would take its next decisive moral protest in defense of Governor of Washington and presidential candidate Jay Inslee’s call for the Democratic National Committee (DNC) to host a climate-specific presidential debate (Resnick 2019). His request, however, was quickly dismissed out of hand by DNC leaders claiming its impracticality, as DNC spokeswoman Xochitl Hinojosa asserted: "we [the DNC] want to make sure voters have the ability to hear from candidates on dozens of issues, not just climate, of importance to American voter” (O’Connor 2019). In response to the DNC’s denial, Sunrise planned a sit-in inside their headquarters in Washington DC. When Sunrise activists arrived at the DNC headquarters, however, things quickly went awry. Sara Blazevic laid out the scene:

In late June, a hundred young people arrived on the steps of the DNC headquarters in DC, ready to sit in inside the building. Our action plan was moot before it even kicked off: we couldn’t get past the doors. Locked outside the group improvised and decided to take over the front steps. It was late June in DC, and it was hot. By sunset, the group had dwindled to about thirty of us, red-faced, thirsty, and tired (Blazevic et al. 2020, 179).

Despite the setback, the activists remained resolute, standing firm on the steps for three more days live-streaming the actions, and encouraging Sunrise hubs to call on their local DNC delegates to vote in favor of the debate when it next came to a vote (Blazevic et al. 2020). In the weeks following the sit-in, twenty of the twenty-three Democratic presidential candidates voiced their support for a climate-specific debate—an impressive feat spurred to some degree by a group of thirty sun-burnt activists (Leber 2019).
Much like was the case with Sunrise’s previous moral protests, however, the movement traded short-term success for long-term impact in the DNC’s ultimate decision. In a vote of 222-137 the DNC ruled that it “should not hold debates devoted to one specific topic, nor can it agree to requests for such debates by individual presidential candidates” (Levy & Santiago 2019). DNC chair Tom Perez hoped to offer further clarity on the decision when he argued “if we change our guidelines at the request of one candidate who has made climate change their campaign’s signature issue, how do we say no to the numerous other requests we’ve had?” (Perez 2019). Nonetheless, the actions taken by Sunrise surrounding the push for a climate debate furthered their efforts to amass outward resonance. As co-founder Sara Blazevic celebrated “we lost the battle with the DNC, but we won the war to ensure climate change became a top issue in the presidential race” (Blazevic et al 2020, 180). The ultimate impact of climate change sentiment in the 2020 election will be explored later, but in the immediate wake of the DNC decision, the first inklings of this more pronounced role for climate concerns amongst voters were already becoming evident. Following the decision, for example, CNN hosted a seven-hour climate town hall on its network where it spoke with each candidate one-on-one on their approach and proposed solutions to the issue (Wagner et al. 2019). By the time CNN ended their town hall, climate change had already received more national news coverage than in any other presidential race (Blazevic et al. 2020).

*Transformative Stage Tactics - Local Organizing*

To harness the amplification of movement messaging and public attention resultant from their flashpoint mass-noncooperation actions, Sunrise relies on a strong and ever-growing local organizing apparatus. While the national Sunrise movement handles the broad strokes of
strategic planning and large-scale non-cooperation events, the day-to-day work of continuing to strengthen public awareness and support through campaigning, community building, and local actions is left to its network of "hubs". These hubs, typically led by part-time volunteers, largely operate autonomously from the national movement, choosing where and what to protest, what actions to take, and whom to endorse in local elections (Arrieta-Kenna 2019). Co-founder Sara Blazevic best explains the operating framework and focus of hubs:

Healthy hubs are true communities of friends old and new. Trust and relationships are built through practices like sharing personal stories, singing and—yes—partying together. Your local hub meeting is where you can go to learn about developments in movement-wide strategy and make local plans. Hubs run campaigns like targeting elected officials to take the No Fossil Fuel Money Pledge and to back the GND. Hubs endorse and canvass for political candidates; organize protest actions; host fundraisers, parties, and community events; hold grief circles or vigils to respond to local climate related crises; and show up in solidarity with sister movements in key moments (Blazevic et al. 2020, 185).

Blazevic added in a separate interview that, “hubs are the heart and soul of the movement and they kind of feed into national and then national feeds back into us in this way that we are like almost representing two wings within the same movement” (Lasoff 2020, 34). This hub and spoke method of movement organizing has allowed the movement to continue its expansion and reach into the life of everyday Americans in cities large and small across the country.

At the same time, the framework is also advantageous in elevating the ease of access to the movement for would-be activists. As Aaron Appel, a member of the Sunrise Philadelphia hub helped to elucidate, hubs act as an activating channel for people interested in contributing to the movement. In my interview with him, he expounded, “Sunrise is in a lot of ways an easy to access, widespread movement focused on youth. And a lot of the youth that are plugging into sunrise probably haven't experienced political engagement before. Like it's an activating group in a lot of ways…Folks that are plugging in to our movement tend to be newcomers to activism”
By helping to draw more activists into Sunrise’s ranks, the movement’s hubs help to expand its manpower, resources, and the ultimate reach of its messaging.

Additional key spurs of the movement’s hub approach to local organizing are its potential for coordination across hubs and the ability to amplify and carry out national campaigns/actions at the local level. First looking at hub coordination, Anthony Hopkins, Sunrise Philadelphia hub co-coordinator, discussed how this collaboration played out at a counter-protest the hub staged outside the Philadelphia Convention Center in defense of the validity of the 2020 presidential election vote counting taking place. When discussing the impact of their actions on that day Hopkins described how the hub members who showed up “got a lot of media attention there because we brought banners we had specifically strategized to make with folks throughout [Sunrise] Pennsylvania that had similar coloring, similar messaging, because those types of strategic choices for media are what can tend to make the most intense impact for people who watch, people who read and see the images” (Anthony Hopkins Interview 2021).

Hopkins went on to discuss how hubs can tap into national campaigns and actions to achieve desired change at the local level. Specifically, he discussed how Sunrise Philadelphia carried out a local version of the larger Wide Awake Campaign launched by the national movement. Inspired by the Wide Awakes, a pro-abolition, mass youth movement in the 1860s that staged boisterous protests outside the residences of anti-abolitionist representatives around the clock, Sunrise had launched a campaign to use those same tactics on climate-change-denying representatives in the House of Representatives and Senate (Sunrise Movement 2020a). He explained how the Philadelphia hub was able to transfer those tactics to take action on the local level against Pennsylvania Senator Pat Toomey: “we did a wide awake action at Toomey’s House in Zionsville, Pennsylvania using the same framework as the Sunrise national. And we found out
a couple of weeks later that he was no longer running for Senate reelection. So we don't know if we had influence, but it sure feels good that close to the timing of his decision” (Hopkins 2021).

Sunrise Pennsylvania election coordinator Troy Turner echoed this replicability facet of the hub structure, “it's really cool to be able to give that [national framework] to anyone and then you can take it and craft local specific messaging based on that framework. And it'll be really effective and speak to so many people in their communities” (Turner 2021).

Of course, the hub structure and approach to local organizing is not without its flaws, which also emerged in my discussion with members of the movement. One of these downsides is the potential for fractured relationships between the national movement and local hubs. Anthony Hopkins elaborated on this potential for disconnect:

And so at times there we worked really well together at. But sometimes there have been tensions. Right, because the national organizers are decentralized. So they don't always know what’s best for movement bodies on the ground. There have definitely been periods in Sunrise Philly, where it was hard listening to the national movement and what they were requesting of us because we weren't ready or we weren't capable of making it happen (Hopkins 2021).

There is also a concurrent risk in the autonomous hub approach of Sunrise that movement resources may fail to be properly distributed leaving some hubs, especially newer forming hubs, overburdened without the proper infrastructure, support, or guidance. Troy Turner, Sunrise PA election coordinator spoke about this challenge when recounting his experience launching a local hub in his region of Berks County, Pennsylvania:

We had these frameworks, we had these skills. But building an infrastructure is like really complicated. And also just putting theory into practice doesn't you know, it's messier than learning in a classroom or whatever the basement of a church. It was honestly, it was just like a lot of fucking up. There was a lot of fucking up and learning and fixing it and trying again (Turner 2021).
Across Sunrise’s transformative-stage tactics and actions at the national and local hub level, there is a specific focus on crafting an outward-facing message that seeks to reframe and reinvigorate the climate debate. The impetus behind this messaging backbone, as co-founder Varshini Prakash explains, is “we [Sunrise] need to make the climate crisis, and the Green New Deal, an inescapable, urgent, immediate, issue for the broad public and its political representatives” (Prakash 2020a, 150). To muster this requisite sense of urgency and support in the public eye, Sunrise’s messaging diverges largely from both previous radical and moderate environmental movements in that it places extreme emphasis on “connecting to audiences’ [i.e. the public’s] socially situated condition or to broader cultural themes and narratives that they recognize” (McDonnell et al. 2017, 3). In Sunrise’s view, environmental movements of the past have failed spectacularly at making this connection, relying on science, data, parts per million of CO2 in the atmosphere, and polar bears on floating icebergs to rally public interest and concern, or going to far in their actions and messaging resulting in the alienation of previous radical movement group (Nilsen 2019; Gunn-Wright 2020).

Learning from the failures of these past movements and their abstract focuses, Sunrise’s outward-resonance generating messaging instead “strategically centers on something much more immediate and—in some ways—selfish. It hone in on what climate change will do to humans” (Nilsen 2019). Prakash elaborated on this strategic decision:

I know a very small number of people who get very excited about decarbonization as a thing. Instead we focus our messaging on economic injustices, green jobs, and a livable future… Those are things people intuitively understand because they relate to their everyday lives. I feel like climate activists are always frustrated people don’t care about their issue … the problem is we’re not listening to what people care about (Nilsen 2019).
In this way, one of Sunrise’s central messaging themes is, as Sunrise PA election coordinator Troy Turner told me “make it matter” (Troy Turner Interview 2021). He continued “And the climate movement has been really bad at this [making it matter]. It's always about polar bears and ice caps, but what matters to people is their material needs and their day to day lives. So talking about how climate change impacts that is central to Sunrise’s messaging” (Troy Turner Interview 2021).

One way Sunrise works to make its message matter is by highlighting the interlocking components of the climate crisis and its present and potential future impacts on our society. As professor of public law at the University of California, Berkeley Ian Haney López commented on their Green New Deal messaging, Sunrise offers “the only plan put forward to address the interwoven crises of climate catastrophe, economic inequality, and racism at the scale that science and justice demand” (Haney López 2020, 38). This expansive and connecting messaging is at the center of all Sunrise actions and is the movement’s self-proclaimed ‘North Star’ (Prakash 2020a). An analysis of the Green Neal Deal Resolution and its demands helps to further bear this broader inclusion of climate concerns in Sunrise’s messaging out. The proposed Green New Deal legislation calls for the “promot[ion] [of] justice and equity by stopping current, preventing future, and repairing historic oppression of indigenous peoples, communities of color, migrant communities,...” (HR 109 2019, 6) as well as “guaranteeing a job with a family-sustaining wage, adequate family and medical leave, paid vacations, and retirement security to all people of the United States (HR 109 2019, 13) and “providing all people of the United States with high-quality health care; affordable, safe, and adequate housing; economic security; and clean water, clean air, healthy and affordable food, and access to nature” (HR 109 2019, 14). By attaching social justice, racial, economic safety, healthcare, and livelihood concerns to their
climate change message via the Green New Deal, Sunrise “captures the values and vision that resonate with Americans failed by decades of neoliberal consensus…[and] signals ambitious change in an era when Americans long for it” (Gunn-Wright 2020, 90). Long-time climate activist Naomi Klein further expounds the importance of Sunrise’s expanded messaging and people-centric focus, “I understand that it sounds more practical to just have a narrow climate policy, but we live in a time of tremendous economic stress and hardship, and if we aren’t able to show people that it is possible to tackle the climate crisis while actually improving quality of life, we will keep losing” (Malle 2019).

An additional key focus of Sunrise’s transformative stage messaging is what Troy Turner of Sunrise PA described as Sunrise’s “broad us, narrow them” framework (Turner 2021). Tapping into the same populist, anti-establishment sentiment that fueled the rise of Bernie Sanders and the election of Donald Trump, Sunrise pays particular attention in its messaging towards raising attention and placing blame on the specific power brokers inhibiting progress on the climate issue and away from everyday Americans. In this way, Sunrise seeks to emphasize that a very small percentage of our society—mainly fossil-fuel barons and the elected officials who do their bidding—have largely caused the crisis we face and should be the ones responsible for taking action to correct it. Co-founder Varshini Prakash explains “I think the problem is we talk about the climate crisis like it’s something middle- and working-class people need to take on the brunt of when it’s been 100 corporations that have contributed to 71 percent of emissions” (Klein 2019). Troy Turner elaborated on how this principle manifests itself in Sunrise’s messaging: “we never say fossil fuel industry, we only ever say fossil fuel CEOs or billionaires because we're not against workers. Right. People need to feed their families. Even if that's laying down pipelines or working at an oil rig, people are going to have to make money” (Turner 2021). In shifting blame
towards elites, Sunrise’s broad us, narrow them messaging invites greater sympathy from societal
groups across demographics who share in the same sorts of angers further helping to broaden
their base of support.

At the same time, Sunrise’s broad us, narrow them framework paints a "them" beyond
what most other environmental groups tend to depict as the enemies to climate progress. More
specifically, Sunrise and its messaging remains unafraid of crossing the political aisle, and
grouping moderate Democrats into their "them" category and targeting leading Democrats who
posture to the climate lobby and activists without taking serious action. Their introductory sit-in
at House Speaker Pelosi’s office offers a case in point to this messaging philosophy as well as
excerpts from the speech co-founder Varshini Prakash gave to those assembled that day:

Meanwhile establishment Democrats take hundreds of thousands of dollars from fossil fuel
executives and lobbyists and say they have no intention of putting forward a real climate plan
before 2021. That’s a death sentence for my generation…We will no longer tolerate empty
promises and words without action from the Democratic establishment. If Pelosi and the
leadership don’t step up, they need to step aside…They have no idea what the fuck is happening
or what to do about it. The power elite has fallen asleep at the wheel (Prakash 2020b, xii).

While more moderate environmental groups largely present leaders of the Democratic party as in
favor of climate action if only they were not hamstrung by Republican opposition and the
filibuster (Babbitt 2020), Sunrise has opted for this more adversarial approach. While the
messaging approach may cost the movement more moderate followers, it allows the movement
to say “it’s not just Republicans who are the easy boogeymen—it’s Democrats, too, that have set
in this mentality that we can wait” (Herndon 2019). Activist Aracely Jimenez offered a similar
sentiment: “just any Democrat having a D next to their name doesn’t necessarily mean that
they’re going to be fighting for immigrant rights or housing justice or climate justice” (Arrieta-
Kenna 2019). This targeted messaging in combination with their push for a Green New Deal
allows movement messaging to clearly articulate the problem—the fossil fuel industry and elected officials on both sides of the aisle—and offer an ideal solution—the enacting of meaningful and beneficial climate policy highlighting the interlocking components of the climate crisis. Through this approach, Sunrise works to develop the outward resonance and support needed to lend credibility to their politically-oriented efforts in the reformative stage.

**Transformative Stage Impact - Movement Growth**

Throughout Sunrise’s transformative stage actions and organizing, the movement continued its rapid growth that first began in the wake of the Speaker Pelosi sit-in. While Sunrise does not keep track of official members, the movement estimated that over 15,000 people showed up for in-person actions and over 80,000 showed up for indirect actions—phone-banking, emailing, social media organizing—throughout 2019 (Nilsen 2019). In 2019, the movement also launched its Road to a Green New Deal Tour. Spread across 46 states and 200 town halls, the tour shared the message of the Green New Deal while energizing thousands across the country to become part of the effort to make it a reality (Sunrise Movement 2019). The tour concluded in April 2019 at Howard University where 1,500 people turned up for the sold-out event to hear Ocasio-Cortez, Senators Bernie Sanders and Ed Markey, Green New Deal policy writer Rhiana Gunn-Wright, co-founder Varshini Prakash and climate activists Naomi Klein rally support for Sunrise and its efforts (Cohen & Chávez 2019).

At the local level, the movement also saw a mushrooming of its hub network from 25 hubs in November of 2018, to 100 in January of 2019, 350 by early 2020, and almost 500 hubs today (Blazevic et al. 2020). This network includes over 30 hubs in Pennsylvania including hubs on the Bryn Mawr and Haverford campuses, and at least one hub in every US state. Sunrise also saw a sizable uptick in its social media following alongside its growing hub and activist
numbers. The movement saw its first major uptick in social media following the Speaker Pelosi sit-in in November of 2018 where their Twitter followers tripled from 10,000 to nearly 30,000 in the ensuing weeks (Matthews et al. 2019). By March of 2020, thanks to Sunrise’s various actions in the transformative stage, their Twitter following had grown six-fold to 183,066 followers, and today is nearing 280,000 followers (Trendsmap 2021).

Alongside the quantitative growth of the movement, a second key impact of Sunrise’s transformative stage actions was the increase in public attention and support and resultant

*Map of Sunrise Hubs - Courtesy of Sunrise Movement*

*Total Followers - Last Year*

*Transformative Stage Impact - Increased public attention and support for movement issues*
buildup of outward resonance for the movement’s central issues. Perhaps the most straightforward method of gauging this increased awareness and support is through national polling numbers. Looking first at increased awareness, polling carried out by the Yale Program on Climate Communications in tandem with the George Mason Center for Climate Change Communications found that in December of 2018, only a month or so after the first Pelosi sit-in, most registered voters (82%) were unaware of the Green New Deal, having heard “nothing at all” about it (Gustafson et al. 2019). Yet, when they carried out a second national poll of awareness of the Green New Deal in April of 2019, the proportion of registered voters who had heard at least “a little” about the Green New Deal more than tripled from 17% to 59% while the proportion who had heard “nothing at all” decreased by half – from 82% to 41% (Gustafson et al. 2019).

![Graph showing increased awareness of the Green New Deal](image)

"How much, if anything, have you heard about a policy being proposed by some members of Congress called the Green New Deal?" December 2018 and April 2019.

Courtesy of Gustafson et al. 2019, 1-2
Complementing this increase in public attention, the same polling found that principles of a Green New Deal were supported by a majority of Americans across the political spectrum, at least initially. The poll provided a one-paragraph description of the goals of the Green New Deals as follows:

Some members of Congress are proposing a "Green New Deal" for the U.S. They say that a Green New Deal will produce jobs and strengthen America’s economy by accelerating the transition from fossil fuels to clean, renewable energy. The “Deal” would generate 100% of the nation's electricity from clean, renewable sources within the next 10 years, upgrade the nation’s energy grid, buildings and transportation infrastructure, increase energy efficiency, invest in "green" technology research and development, and provide training for jobs in the new "green" economy. How much do you support or oppose this idea? (Gustafson et al. 2019, 2).

The December 2018 poll found that 81% of registered voters—including 64% of all Republicans—supported this presentation of the Green New Deal (Gustafson et al. 2018). By April 2019, however, thanks in large part to the smear campaigns launched against the Deal by Republican lawmakers and right-leaning news channels, political support had become far more polarized. While Democratic support remained high and relatively stable, support amongst Republicans dropped a full 20 percentage points including a 25% dip in support from conservative Republicans. A deeper analysis of this polarization surrounding the Green New Deal will be explored in the discussion section as it relates to the potential negative flank effects of the Sunrise movement.
Despite this partisan dip in support for the Green New Deal, overall public opinion remained favorable of the proposition into 2020. As of April 2020, about seven in ten registered voters (72%) voiced their support for the Green New Deal in a national poll, including a large majority of Democrats (95%) and a majority of Independents (69%). About half of Republicans (48%), including two in three liberal/moderate Republicans (66%) but fewer conservative Republicans (37%) polled also support the Green New Deal (Leiserowitz et al. 2020a).

Interestingly, and important to the efforts of Sunrise, the April 2020 poll found support for the Green New Deal among those in the "middle" of the ideological spectrum had trended upward over the past year, with support among moderate/conservative Democrats, Independents, and liberal/moderate Republicans each increasing by five percentage points (Leiserowitz et al 2020a). When they asked about support for the Green New Deal again in their December 2020 national poll, the researchers found that support for the Green New Deal had dipped slightly to 66% but remained highly supported in Democratic circles—91% support of Liberal Democrats and 86% for conservative and moderate Democrats (Leiserowitz et al. 2020b). On the Republican side,
they found six in ten liberal/moderate Republicans (59%) supported the deal with fewer conservative Republicans (24%) also voicing their support (Leiserowitz et al. 2020b).

Changing support for the Green New Deal (December 2018 to December 2020)
Courtesy of Leiserowitz et al. 2020b, 24

Of course, focusing solely on public opinion's surrounding the Green New Deal fails to paint a complete picture of the shift in public consciousness spurred by Sunrise’s efforts. While the causation between changing public sentiments surrounding climate issues outside the Green New Deal and Sunrise’s actions may not be as direct, they nonetheless offer interesting insight into the overall shift in public consciousness requisite for Sunrise to enter its reformative stage with the outside public pressure needed to push elected officials to act. On the most simple and macro level, the percentage of Americans who think global warming is happening is currently at 75% — the highest level ever recorded by the Yale Program on Climate Communications
(Leiserowitz 2020a). A smidge under, 72% of Americans support transitioning the US economy from fossil fuels to 100% clean energy by 2050—an objective stated in the Green New Deal resolution (Leiserowitz 2020b). Also, a positive sign for Sunrise and its push for a Green New Deal is the researchers finding that about six in ten registered voters (61%) think increasing production of clean energy in the U.S. will produce more new jobs than will increasing fossil fuel production (Leiserowitz 2020b). A fellow public opinion poll also found that two-thirds (66%) of Americans support future federal stimulus packages that include increased funding for the creation of new jobs and technologies to reduce global warming (Krosnick & MacInnis 2020). With the creation of green jobs a central pillar of the Green New Deal framework and Sunrise’s messaging, this support offers encouragement that the movement’s messaging has resonated well with everyday Americans, and has set the movement up well to successfully push for a green jobs or infrastructure plan at the national level.

On the federal level, more than half of registered voters (56%) would "strongly" or "somewhat" support a U.S. president declaring global warming a national emergency to act on it if Congress does not (Leiserowitz 2020b). This represents an astonishing 24% increase in support for enacting a climate change national emergency compared to 2019. In a similar vein, a January 2020 Pew Research Center survey found that nearly two-thirds of U.S. adults (64%) say protecting the environment should be a top priority for the president and Congress, (Funk & Kennedy 2020), equaling nearly as many Americans who listed strengthening the economy (67%) as their top priority in the survey (Pew Research Center 2020). Much like with support for the Green New Deal, however, there still exists a sizable partisan divide within these findings. Overall, 85% of Democrats say protecting the environment should be a top priority for the president and Congress, up 11 percentage points from the share who said this in 2019. Fewer
than half as many Republicans (39%) rate environmental protection as a major priority. Yet, Republican levels of top priority support for environmental protection are still up 8 points since the last round of Pew polling in 2019, and represent the largest Republican share in that sentiment in any Pew Research Center survey over the past decade (Pew Research Center 2020).

**Increased support for prioritizing policies on the environment, climate change since 2011**

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<th>Dealing with global climate change*</th>
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<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>64</td>
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*In 2014 and earlier, respondents were asked about dealing with “global warming.” In 2015 half the sample was asked about either “global warming” or “global climate change”; 34% called “global climate change” a top priority while 38% said this about “global warming.” Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 8-13, 2020.

**For the first time, environmental protection rivals the economy among the public’s top policy priorities**

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<td>2020</td>
<td>67</td>
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**Environment rises as a priority, but partisan gap persists**

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Climate change</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>78</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


**Courtesy of Pew Research Center 2020**

**Courtesy of Funk and Kennedy 2020**
Perhaps also speaking to the impact of Sunrise’s transformative stage tactics and messaging approach, public opinion polling finds a stark generational divide in the political prioritization of climate issues and protecting the environment amongst voters. For example, a Pew Research poll found that Americans under the age of 30 and Americans over the age of 65 had a 22% (77% to 55%) difference in the percent who said protecting the environment should be a top priority for the president and congress (Pew Research Center 2020). Equally as interesting, separate polling found that particularly amongst the Republican Party, there exists a sizable difference in views relating to climate change and the environment by generation. The poll found that Republicans born in or after 1981 are 21% more likely (52% to 31%) to think government efforts to reduce climate change are insufficient (Funk & Kennedy 2020).

**Understanding Transformative Stage Impact**

Taken in their totality, the public opinion polling relating to the Green New Deal and corollary climate-related policy sentiments presented above help to paint a picture of Sunrise’s unique impact on the climate change debate and public perception in the United States. Across the data, there exists a near-uniform uptick in public awareness, concern, and support for climate-related policy issues both directly related to Sunrise’s push for a Green New Deal, and general political action to stem our changing climate. Sunrise’s transformative stage tactics, actions, and messaging played a key role in this shift. By combining flashpoint confrontations with elected officials with messaging geared towards mustering moral authority and public sympathy, Sunrise has galvanized public sentiment in favor of more transformational climate action and set the stage for an energized entrance into its reformative stage.

In this way, Sunrise’s tactical and messaging approach towards reorienting and reinvigorating public consciousness breaks from the traditions of both the more radical and
pragmatic wings of the environmental movement. It’s combination of extreme tactics like its Capitol sit-ins and arrests with traditional local organizing through its hub network offer a novel and hybrid movement framework. This hybrid approach has allowed the movement to buttress the larger public ostracism past radical environmental movements have encountered (Farrer & Klein 2019). By complementing controversial confrontations and potential adverse media coverage with local organizing, Sunrise is able to hinder the negative cooptation of its message while working to increase awareness and support for movement’s aims.

Helping to further stymie this negative perception and augment the general resonance and receptiveness of Sunrise more polarizing actions in the transformative stage has been the movement’s ability to cultivate moral authority. As co-founder Varshini Prakash elucidated, central to their confrontational approach is the drive to “create a national moral crisis, [where] our movement makes visible the injustices of violence, inequality, and oppression that power holders have long suppressed and perpetrated” (Prakash 2020a, 150). By directly challenging the entrenched powers responsible for past climate inaction (see Pelosi, Feinstein, and DNC sit-ins above) Sunrise seeks to shift away the trust and support the general public had traditionally placed in established political elite and towards its movement and movement-aligned elected officials. In this way, the movement showcases to the general public, as activist Abby DiNardo put simply, “it’s our future on the line not their’s” (Lakhani 2020).

Helping to establish this moral authority and public support is the youth-dominated makeup of the movement. With the movement largely comprised of middle and high school, and college-aged activists, their actions, as climate activist Naomi Klein expounded, present a “justified rage and rightful disappointment with the people who were supposed to protect their future” (Calle 2019). This stark contrast between old-guard politicians and fiery activists paired
with the typical condescension and dismissal Sunrise activists receive in their confrontations (see especially the Diane Feinstein clash) helps to further solidify their moral authority and perhaps strikes a different and deeper chord with Americans previously ambivalent to the climate crisis. To some Americans who might otherwise have paid no mind to Sunrise or climate action in general, these clashes can instead offer resonance and perhaps lead to support of the movement on the parental or familial level. The idea of children and young adults putting so much time and effort into an action just to be dismissed out of hand may help to ignite an interest and anger for many in middle-America that further cemented the moral authority and outward resonance of the movement. Unfortunately, this consideration goes beyond the scope of my thesis, but would serve as an interesting study for future scholars.

Furthering the outward resonance and impact of Sunrise’s transformative stage was its emphasis on messaging that reinvigorated and reframed the climate action debate in a way that better aligned with the preexisting struggles and wants of the public. As was espoused at length in my analysis, Sunrise and its Green New Deal framework offered a new avenue through which to imagine addressing climate change that also addressed other ongoing systemic issues. Co-founder Varshini Prakash explained that the purpose of this messaging is to show the everyday American that:

the Green New Deal is not only about tackling the climate crisis. It’s also about providing people with tens of millions of good jobs. It’s about trying to reinvigorate an economy and put money back in the hands of working people. It’s about alleviating inequality between different groups of people. It’s about ensuring we have clean air and clean water (Calle 2019).

Through this messaging approach, Sunrise sought to make climate action something Americans across the sociopolitical spectrum could get on board with. As intuitive as that may sound, however, such a messaging approach was largely nonexistent within the US environmental
movement before the emergence of Sunrise and the Green New Deal. Leah Stokes, a political science professor at the University of California Sant Barbara who specializes in environmental social movements explained, “the environmental movement [of the past] thought science would convince the public, but that hasn’t worked, in part because scientists aren’t the best messengers. Scientists trade on uncertainties and caveats. We needed a voice to say climate change is happening now and that it’s connected to and compounds ongoing societal inequalities” (Nilsen 2019). By filling that mandate and crafting a more holistic climate message, Sunrise was able to further support for the movement and its outward resonance. Having summoned the requisite public attention and support to seriously pressure political elites into taking actions towards implementing their desired policy changes, Sunrise was now ready to swing its weight more directly in the political arena.
Reformative Stage

Introduction to Reformative Stage

Sunrise quickly seized on the opportunity to channel the public awareness and sentiment generated in its transformative stage into electing fresh faces in Washington as well applying increasing pressure on those already in power. At this new reformative stage, Sunrise focused and continues to focus its tactics and messaging on increasing the political resonance of its movement demands. This political resonance refers to the level of receptiveness the movement’s objectives possess in the larger political climate. By working to augment the political resonance of their Green New Deal calls originally introduced in the transformative stage, Sunrise seeks to catalyze an increased likelihood of the movement being able to successfully shape policy and governmental action.

One way Sunrise began to amass political resonance for its movement messaging was through the campaigning for down-ballot Green New Deal champions. Focusing efforts within the more traditional channels of political activism, this campaigning comprises actions such as phone banking, canvassing, and other get-out-the-vote efforts. In this way, part of Sunrise’s outward-facing messaging approach in the transformative stage shies away from the divisive rhetoric employed in its transformative stage in favor of more docile diction focused on driving people to the polls. By working to increase the number of climate-motivated representatives through these down-ballot campaigning efforts, Sunrise seeks to apply increased pressure on other members of Congress and the President to take necessary action against the climate crisis. Sunrise leader Waleed Shahid helped to expound the purpose behind this shift to a more traditional political activism approach:
Movements push for change from the outside and are often focused on changing public opinion and forcing an issue onto the national agenda; then parties translate those changes into law. But parties can choose to ignore the protests and public opinion or dilute the movement’s demands with compromises. But if the movement’s demands are popular with the base of the party, and now the politicians who chose inaction are facing primary challengers, suddenly the politicians might start singing a different tune (Rojas & Shahid 2020, 252-253).

Fellow Sunrise activist Matthew Miles-Goodrich reaffirmed this sentiment quite simply arguing, “For Sunrise, protest without politics was a recipe for endless defeat” (Goodrich 2019). In this way, Sunrise understood that changing public opinion in and of itself would not ensure the long-term success or impact of the movement.

At the same time, Sunrise’s reformative stage approach has also encompassed direct interaction, cooperation, and collaboration with members of the old-guard political elite—namely with presidential-candidate and now president Joe Biden. Again, this strategic formula differs greatly from its previous stages, as Biden represents many of the political values and frameworks that Sunrise seeks to upend. As this section will show, however, Sunrise was willing to compromise on its earlier messaging and value when interacting with the leader of the Democratic party and now the nation so long as it elevated the level of political resonance for movement objectives and led to ultimate implementations of favorable policies. As this section will also show, however, this relationship with Biden in the reformative stage still leaves room for Sunrise and its activists to exude outside influence and pressure through protest if the Administration fails to follow through on its commitments to Sunrise and the rest of the climate-concerned general population. Thus, Sunrise’s tactical and messaging approach towards the Biden Administration and the transformative stage, in general, comprises largely a juggling act of "keeping one foot inside the halls of power and another with its activist ranks on the streets, [an approach] that grassroots organizations often tout but rarely accomplish” (Krieg 2021).
Reformative Stage Tactics - Down-Ballot Campaigning

As Sunrise leader Waleed Shahid argued, “Unseating incumbents is the clearest way our movements can demonstrate our political power in terms of sheer votes—and occasionally elect game-changing champions to Congress” (Rojas & Shahid 2020, 255). Ironically, Sunrise developed this focus on electoral impact from the lessons it gleaned from the Tea Party insurgency under president Barack Obama. When studying the tactics of the Tea Party movement, Sunrise’s leaders discovered that the key to their success was the ability to “bring the movement’s outside protests and ideas inside the [Republican] party by running movement-aligned candidates in primaries…The biggest lesson to be learned from the Tea Party’s playbook is that they didn’t work for the Republicans—they made the Republicans work for them” (Rojas & Shahid 2020, 248). As these Tea-Party-supported candidates began securing upset wins over more moderate incumbent Republicans, and even moderate Democrats, the Tea Party movement was better able to pressure Republican leaders to make demands and use more aggressive tactics in opposing President Obama. Sunrise planned to use this same electoral pressure model to increase the political resonance and potency of its message amongst the political elite and increase the likelihood of actions towards the Green New Deal.

In this way, campaigning for Green New Deal down-ballot candidates is not a tactic new to the transformative stage of the movement and has been a tactical strategy employed by the movement from the outset. Across 2017 and 2018, for example, its newly-minted activists contacted over 250,000 voters in tightly contested mid-term elections and successfully signed on 1300 candidates in races across the country to Sunrise’s No Fossil Fuel Money Pledge—committing the candidates to not to taking contributions over $200 from oil, gas, and coal
industry executives, lobbyists, and PACs (Blad 2019; Prakash 2020a). At the same time, Sunrise endorsed and campaigned for 30 candidates at the state and federal level, with 19 winning their elections, including pivotal future allies of the movement in Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Deb Haaland, Rashida Tlaib, and Ilhan Omar (Sunrise Movement 2018, Blad 2019).

While Sunrise has worked to elect supported candidates from its outset, the movement paid particular focus to the tactic in the buildup to the 2020 congressional elections. Months before election day, these efforts began with massive campaign drives for Senator Ed Markey in his tight battle against Pelosi-supported primary-challenger Joe Kennedy in Massachusetts. The movement mobilized massively for Markey, who introduced the original Green New Deal Resolution in 2019 alongside Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, placing 200,000 calls to his constituents in the build-up to the primary and creating what critics dubbed one of the best and most impactful campaign ads of the entire 2020 cycle (Roberts 2019; Lakhani 2020; Goldberg 2020; Loofbourow 2020). The ad christened Markey “the Green New Dealmaker” and echoed key themes of Sunrise’s messaging calling for action to stop the climate crisis while creating millions of new jobs in the process. It also reaffirmed Sunrise’s call for a government-wide effort to address the crisis with Markey concluding the ad with “We were asked what we could do for our country, we went out, we did it. With all due respect, it’s time to start asking what your country can do for you.” This point was made especially poignant by its calling out of John F. Kennedy’s famous oration “ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country” with his challenger being Kennedy’s grandnephew (Loofbourow 2020).

Markey ultimately survived the primary challenge and would cruise to victory in the November general election (Kaplan 2020). The movement’s support for Markey, a 74-year-old,
decades-long Washington insider, was also meant to signal an open invitation to other more moderate Democrats of Sunrise’s willingness to campaign and support those willing to meet them on their demands. As Sunrise executive director Varshini Prakash told CNN:

Most people just see [Sunrise] as the agitators who are never happy, who are never really going to back anyone, who are just constantly throwing stones but not willing to go to bat for any political leader, besides maybe AOC…[The Markey campaign] was an opportunity to show that we are willing to back you if you back us, and that we are willing to throw down if you are willing to take the risks to your friendships, your image or whatever it is that you're worried about (Krieg 2021).

Sunrise also threw its electoral weight in support of outsider Jamal Bowman in his primary against 16-term House Representative Eliot Engel in New York tallying 846,000 calls in the campaign which ultimately saw Bowman score an unexpected victory bolstering the energy for progressives across the country in the buildup to the ultimate November elections (Weber & Prakash 2020; Strauss 2020). As the primary season concluded, Sunrise shifted its down-ballot campaigning efforts to closely contested general elections in the House and the Senate in which candidates ran on a Green New Deal platform. In total, the national movement delivered 1,341,423 calls and 46,845 texts across 11,200 volunteer shifts to the constituents of 10 key congressional races (Weber & Prakash 2020). Local hubs supplemented this effort with over 80,000 additional calls alone placed in Pennsylvania for locally-endorsed candidates (Turner 2021).
Unfortunately, since the movement tends to focus its efforts largely on supporting outsiders, its candidates more often than not lose their contests. For example, of the 10 nationally endorsed down-ballot congressional candidates in 2020, only 1—Jon Hoadley—won their general election (alongside landslide victories for primary-supported candidates Jamal Bowman and Ed Markey in heavily Democrat-leaning races). Yet, through these losses, Sunrise continues to amass political resonance for its Green New Deal climate framework. As movement co-founder and political director, Evan Weber described:

When we fight and lose but get close, it helps us grow our political power and changes the political calculus. Bernie lost, but now one of our movement’s leaders, Varshini, is helping to write Biden’s climate plan. In 2018, we endorsed Abdul-El Sayed for Governor in MI and Cynthia Nixon for Governor in NY. They both lost to Whitmer and Cuomo, but we moved them both to the left significantly on climate and the environment, and they’ve now governed in a more progressive stance than they would have had we not challenged them with those primaries. If we leave it all on the field, but fall short on election night, we will still shift the political calculus in these states and districts for a progressive agenda (Weber 2020).

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At the same time, taking a chance on these political long shots can pay massive dividends for the candidates that do win and make a splash once in office. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez serves as a case in point of this potential for a massive landscape-shaping impact as Sunrise political director Aracely Jimenez-Hudis explains “we probably wouldn’t have a Green New Deal if AOC hadn’t been elected. We need to keep finding AOCs if we want to sustain our movement, even if most of our candidates don’t end up winning” (Stuart 2019).

Reformative Stage Tactics - Coordination with Biden Campaign

From its inception, Sunrise emphasized the pivotal importance of the 2020 presidential election in its five-year theory of change (Blazevic et al. 2020). Sunrise understood that Donald Trump needed to be defeated and replaced by a Democratic challenger willing to take the systemic action needed to abate the climate crisis. In 2016, climate policy had resided firmly on the back burner of the lead Democratic candidates. Hillary Clinton’s platform called for a meager 33% renewable electricity generation in the United States by 2027, with even the most ambitious plan put forth by Bernie Sanders committing to a now modest 80% cut in carbon dioxide emissions by 2050 (Prakash 2020a). While a bevy of factors and missteps by the Democratic Party and their ultimate candidate Clinton helped spur President Trump’s victory, the party’s ambiguity on a coordinated climate response may have played at least a partial factor. As one analysis of the Democratic failures of 2016 in the Atlantic described, “the Democratic party does not have a plan to address climate change…It does not have a consensus bill on the issue waiting in the wings; it does not have a shared vision for what that bill could look like; and it does not have the guiding slogan—like “Medicare for all”—to express how it wants to stop global warming and to get voters excited for their candidates” (Meyer 2017).
Thanks to the work of Sunrise in its transformative stage alongside fellow activist groups, the movement had successfully generated the outward resonance and increased political pressure to ensure that climate policy would play a much stronger role in candidate messaging and campaigning in the Democratic 2020 primary and general election cycle. Unlike in 2016, each of the major candidates unveiled large-scale climate platforms with many including explicit Green New Deal frameworks. Progressive front runners Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren each presented economy-wide plans with Sanders calling for a $16 trillion investment to convert the entire electricity and transportation sector to 100% renewable by 2030 with the complete elimination of fossil fuels in the US economy by 2050 (Friedman 2020). For her part, Warren introduced a $10 trillion self-dubbed ‘Green Marshall Plan’ focused on achieving carbon-neutrality by 2030 (Grandoni & Stein 2019). The 2020 primary season also included candidate Jay Inslee who ran on a commitment to make responding to the climate crisis his top priority as president (Merica 2019). The prominence and audaciousness of these plans in and of themselves offers compelling evidence of the increased political resonance for climate action and speaks to the impact of changing public sentiment on the actions of the political elite. As the New York Times reported, “what once seemed like progressive moonshots on climate have now become a critical litmus test for moderates and liberal presidential candidates” (Herndon 2019).

As the crowded primary field dwindled, however, establishment-candidate Joe Biden’s ultimate victory signaled a massive call for concern for the Sunrise Movement and other progressive activist groups. Throughout the primary, Sunrise had endorsed and campaigned for Bernie Sanders and had painted Biden as one of the candidates least fit to tackle and enact Green New Deal Policy (Herndon 2020). While Biden possessed a long and noteworthy career in the
climate policy realm—he maintained an 83% lifetime score as a Senator with the League of Conservation Voters, had introduced the first major climate bill in the Senate in 1987, and had helped direct $90 billion of the 2009 Recovery Act toward clean energy investments—Sunrise saw his campaign commitments on the climate front as lackluster (Teirstein 2020a; Teirstein 2020b; Friedman 2020). Biden’s introductory climate plan committed a relatively paltry $1.7 trillion towards combating climate change with few specific commitments beyond an aim to achieve a carbon-neutral economy by 2050 (Friedman 2020). Sunrise gave Biden’s climate plan an F-score of 75/200 and deriding, “while the plan is comprehensive in scope and rhetoric, it lacks many policy specifics on the goals it sets. We need to see more details, and more overall ambition from former Vice President Joe Biden” (Sunrise Presidential Scorecard 2020; Dennis & Grandoni 2020). For reference, Sanders’ plan received an A- 183/200 score and Warren’s received a B- 165/200 (Sunrise Presidential Scorecard 2020). Activist Liam Shaffer echoed this frustration of the movement in Biden’s approach, “he represents a return to the way things were run under Obama, I guess I just don’t feel that’s enough” (Friedman 2020).

Thus, as Biden secured the Democratic ticket, Sunrise joined forces with a group of other progressive groups to send an open letter to the Biden campaign. The letter sent a signal to the campaign that “exclusively anti-Trump messaging won’t be enough to lead any candidate to victory. We need you [candidate Biden] to champion the bold ideas that have galvanized our generation and given us hope in the political process” (Kapur 2020). These ideas included calls for a Biden endorsement on initiatives like Medicare for All, canceling all student debt, better taxing wealth, and the Green New Deal framework of a fully clean energy economy by 2030 (Kapur 2020). For their part, the groups committed to spending more than $100 million to...
mobilize young voters in the upcoming election if Biden showed good faith. In this way, Sunrise and its compatriot groups flexed their outreach capabilities in a bid to re-up the political resonance of the progressive ideals in the Party.

Biden, privy to this disgruntled voice within the Party and the power it held in determining youth turnout and his ultimate prospects for election, quickly went to work reshaping and revamping his platform in the build-up to the general election. To go about this transformation and attempt to reconcile the schism between the moderate and progressive wings of the party, Biden partnered with former candidate Bernie Sanders to assemble six marquee policy task force groups. These groups comprised of policy experts selected by the Biden and Sanders campaigns focused on the six key areas of climate change, criminal justice reform, the economy, education, health care, and immigration where Biden had received the greatest scrutiny on the campaign trail in an attempt to win over younger progressive voters (Sprunt 2020; Beals 2020).

On the climate task force sat former Secretary of State John Kerry, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and Chair of the House Committee on Climate Change Representative Castor alongside a small group of climate policy experts dubbed the climate dream team (Teirstein 2020b; Calma 2020; Lavelle 2020). Amongst these climate big wigs sat a surprise nomination offered by the Sanders campaign, Sunrise’s executive director Varshini Prakash. In under three years, Prakash and the Sunrise Movement had gone from a group of outcast climate activists to having a literal seat at the table deciding the path forward for climate action in the United States. While working directly with the Biden campaign may have seemed antithetical to the confrontational and outsider tactical approach of Sunrise’s earlier development
stages, Prakash maintained the strategic importance of the action and directly involving the
movement in shaping his climate platform:

This is an opportunity for the Biden campaign to show that they’re serious about engaging young people. It’s an opportunity to show that they’re serious about taking climate action and ensuring that frontline communities have a voice. It’s an opportunity to re-envision what the future of America can look like, rather than sort of touting this return to normalcy that Biden has been talking about on the campaign trail so far…Fundamentally, people need to see Biden communicating with authenticity about this issue (Calma 2020).

In this way, Prakash’s involvement in the committee signified the preexisting political pressure of Sunrise’s messaging while offering an opportunity to reify its political resonance through direct interaction with Biden’s platform formation. Prakash also remained realistic about her objectives on the task force as she explained, “For me, going into the task force, the goal was never to walk out with Bernie Sanders’ Green New Deal in hand. But we were able to make some pretty significant strides forward” (Teirstein 2020b). It was not only Prakash who saw the task force as bound for compromise with one task force advisor expressing, “I don't think you could find any issue that we couldn't find an agreeable resolution on, that everybody in the room said, 'That will work.' There was plenty of give in take on both sides” (Detrow 2020a).

After six weeks of deliberation, edits, and compromise the task force announced its policy recommendations. Their recommendations called for a substantial shift to the left in Biden’s climate plan as part of a stronger more all-encompassing framework with more specific commitments. Importantly, thanks to Prakash’s direct involvement, the proposal signaled the growing political resonance of Sunrise’s Green New Deal approach. This resonance was showcased in part by the heightened emphasis on environmental justice concerns—a key pillar of Sunrise’s climate framing— in the recommendation packet. Signs of this greater acknowledgement and emphasis emerge within the opening lines of the proposal, “like so many
crises facing the United States, the impacts of climate change are not evenly distributed in our society or our economy. Communities of color, low-income families, and indigenous communities have long suffered disproportionate and cumulative harm from air pollution, water pollution, and toxic sites” (Kelly et al. 2020, 1). The proposal then goes on to offer concrete ways to address environmental injustice including a call to create an environmental justice fund to make historic investments across federal agencies aimed at eliminating legacy pollution and to establish a White House Council of frontline Environmental Justice community and national leaders who would inform the design and execution of climate change laws, policies, and programs (Kelly et al. 2020).

The emphasis on good-paying union jobs, federal investment in infrastructure, and community resiliency building within the recommendations further echoed the key tenets of the Green New Deal framework. The rationale offered for this workforce and economically-focused climate response again draws stark parallels with the arguments in favor of the Green New Deal presented in Sunrise’s transformative stage. The recommendation acknowledges, “We believe that federal investments in infrastructure should help cut carbon pollution, build resilience and protect communities from the impacts of climate change, promote racial equity and sustainable economic development, and come with livable wages and robust labor protections that empower workers” (Kelly et al. 2020, 2 emphasis added). Tying climate change to these larger systemic issues is at the very crux of Sunrise’s Green New Deal message. Alongside a broader emphasis in the environmental justice and green jobs sector, the group recommended more specific actions to beef up Biden’s climate efforts including a commitment to achieving net-zero greenhouse gas emissions for all new buildings by 2030, eliminating carbon pollution from power plants by
2035, installing 500 million solar panels, 8 million solar roofs, 500,000 public charging stations, and 60,000 windmills, and converting the entire 3 million federal vehicle fleet to electric vehicles (Kelly et al. 2020).

In the weeks following the task force’s recommendation, Biden released a new revamped and reenergized climate policy commitment. In place of his previous $1.7 trillion 10-year plan, Biden offered a new $2 trillion 4-year plan which adopted all the major recommendations of the task force including each of the specific commitments spelled out in the preceding paragraph (Glueck & Friedman 2020; Erickson 2020). When unveiling the plan, he also pressed the need to link environmental action to racial justice, describing how pollution and other toxic harms disproportionately affect communities of color and setting a goal for disadvantaged communities to receive 40 percent of all clean energy and infrastructure benefits proposed (Beals 2020). During the news conference covering the plan’s release, Biden spoke to scale at which he now intended to approach the crisis, "If I have the honor of being elected president, we’re not just going to tinker around the edges. We’re going to make historic investments that will seize the opportunity, meet this moment in history” (Glueck & Friedman 2020). He also made an impassioned plea to the younger Americans who had worked to put the pressure on his campaign to reimagine a proper climate response, “I want young climate activists, young people everywhere, to know: I see you. I hear you. I understand the urgency, and together we can get this done” (Dennis & Gradnoni 2020).

Reception to Biden’s updated plan across various climate activist camps was one of pleasantly surprised, but cautious, optimism. In his appraisal, former climate-centered presidential candidate Jay Inslee said “this is not a status quo plan. It is comprehensive. This is
not some sort of, ‘Let me just throw a bone to those who care about climate change” (Glueck & Friedman 2020). Prakash offered more cautious support, “what I’ve seen in the last six to eight weeks is a pretty big transition in upping his [Biden’s] ambition and centering of environmental justice,” (Dennis & Grandoni 2020) adding “Joe Biden's climate plan isn't everything, but it isn't nothing at all…If he is able to make good on those promises, it would represent a seismic shift in climate policy at the federal level” (Berardelli 2020). The larger Sunrise movement echoed this tapered support in a mass bulletin published following the plan’s release:

> It’s no secret that we’ve been critical of Vice President’s Biden’s plans and commitments in the past. Today, he’s responded to many of those criticisms: dramatically increasing the scale and urgency of investments, filling in details on how he’d achieve environmental justice and create good union jobs, and promising immediate action — on day 1, in his first 100 days, in his first term, in the next decade — not just some far off goals…Two things are clear: Movements matter, and there’s more work to do (Sunrise Movement 2020c).

A CNN analysis of the plan furthered corroborated the large-scale shift the task force was able to catalyze: “of the six working groups, none yielded as much movement from the Biden side as the group gathered to address climate policy” (Krieg 2021). Professor Leah Stokes, energy and environmental politics expert at the University of California at Santa Barbara furthered, “Biden now has the most aggressive climate change plan of any presidential candidate in US history” (Berardelli 2020).

Unsurprisingly, the plan did not include everything Sunrise has pushed for in its Green New Deal messaging. Particularly in the energy and electricity sector, Biden’s plan aimed for a carbon-free power sector by 2035 a carbon-neutral economy by 2050 whereas the Green New Deal calls for a 2030 target date for a carbon-free power sector and a completely carbon-neutral economy to be achieved within the decade after (Berardelli 2020). To the chagrin of activist
groups like Sunrise, Biden’s plan omitted a ban on natural gas fracking (a controversial environmentally-destructive mining technique) which Biden had promised voters in the fracking-rich swing state of Pennsylvania was “not on the chopping block” (Erickson 2020). Thus, when crafting his plan, “Biden wanted to win over younger and more liberal voters but also avoid alienating voters in swing states” (Dennis and Grandoni 2020). Jason Grumet, president of the Bipartisan Policy Center, elaborated on this challenging juggling of wants in Biden’s climate policy approach “All [Biden] needs to do is blend the ambition of progressives and scientists with the pragmatism of organized labor, the energy industry and moderate Republicans. That’s no easy task” (Dennis & Grandoni 2020).

Reformative Stage Tactics - Presidential Campaigning

Although Sunrise still held reservations about Biden’s updated and expanded climate platform, the movement nonetheless understood the absolute importance of throwing its entire force behind his presidential bid in the build up to the general election. In August of 2020 as the movement prepared for the final sprint of electoral activism before the election, it sent a rallying message to its hub leaders and activists:

As it stands now, Biden’s plan is not everything we want. But, with Biden, we will actually have a window of opportunity to pass the largest federal climate justice policy in the history of the United States in time to make a difference. Whatever happens, we will be defined by how our generation votes going into November, whether we like it or not. That’s why we’ll be putting all of our people power into getting out the vote to elect Green New Deal Champions to the Senate, the House, and local offices. And yeah, while we’re there, we’re gonna vote out Donald Trump too (Sunrise Movement 2020b).

This call to action again highlighted the moderating tone and tactics of the movement in its transformative stage. While acknowledging that Biden was far from the perfect candidate, Sunrise understood the pragmatic imperative of helping to ensure his victory. Once more, the
movement complemented its call to campaign for Biden with an emphasis on down-ballot Senate, House, and local races. The purpose behind this tactic was likely two-fold. It allowed the movement to hedge its losses if Trump defeated Biden by helping Democrats retain control of Congress and if Biden were to win, their down ballot campaigning would put pressure on Democratic members of Congress to support Biden’s climate platform.

Thus, over the next months, Sunrise set out on its electoral campaigning mission focusing its efforts primarily on registering thousands of young voters in swing states who were most likely to cast votes for Democratic candidates (Brady 2019). The movement particularly focused on voters in Michigan, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin—several of the key states in either candidate’s path to victory. In those states alone, Sunrise reached 3.5 million young voters by election day (Jefferson 2020; Milman 2020). In total throughout the election cycle, Sunrise’s hub and national network reached over 9,000,000 voters via 777,570 postcards and 2,616,834 total texts sent, and 5,820,265 calls made (Weber & Prakash 2020). At the same time, the movement spent approximately $1,000,000 in campaigning efforts including $262,000 in digital ads for swing state recruitment and down ballot candidates that reached 1,672,676 voters (Weber & Prakash 2020).
It is important to note that by dialoguing with millions of Americans throughout this campaigning, Sunrise also built upon the outward resonance of its Green New Deal message developed in its transformative stage. This complementary outward-resonance by-product was greatly compounded by the heated interactions between candidates Biden and Trump during their first presidential debate. While the three 2016 presidential debates between Trump and Clinton spent less than 5 total minutes combined on the issue of climate change, the first 2020 debate included a more than 10-minute exchange between the candidates on their climate positions (Calma 2019; Chow 2020). Moderator Chris Wallace’s decision to focus so heavily on the issue in part came as a result of an open letter signed by 71 House members, 37 senators, 45 progressive and climate groups (including Sunrise), and hundreds of thousands of grassroots voices evincing the outward and growing political resonance of climate action (Climate Power 2020). It was also the first time in 12 years that a presidential debate moderator asked a question.
about climate change and doubled the total amount of time in all 2000 minutes of presidential debates since 1988 focused on the issue (Chow 2020).

While Trump unsurprisingly offered a panacean lauding of the cleanliness of America’s water and air in response to Wallace’s question of “what do you believe about the science of climate change and what will you do in the next four years to confront it?” Biden introduced his updated climate plan and inadvertently thrust the Green New Deal into the national spotlight. In his response, Biden explained “we can get to net zero, in terms of energy production, by 2035. Not only not costing people jobs, creating jobs, creating millions of good-paying jobs. Not 15 bucks an hour, but prevailing wage, by having a new infrastructure that in fact, is green” (Donald Trump & Joe Biden 1st Presidential Debate Transcript 2020). Trump quickly interjected claiming “he’s talking about the Green New Deal. And it’s not 2 billion or 20 billion, as you said. It’s $100 trillion.” Amid the following flurry of cross-chiding Biden perhaps unintentionally argued “the Green New Deal will pay for itself as we move forward” (Donald Trump & Joe Biden 1st Presidential Debate Transcript 2020). Wallace jumped on the word slip, “So, do you support the Green New Deal?” to which Biden responded, “No, I don’t support the Green New Deal” (Donald Trump & Joe Biden 1st Presidential Debate Transcript 2020).

While Sunrise was angered by Biden’s disavowal, it elevated awareness of the Green New Deal and Biden’s climate plan in minds of America’s voters especially amongst younger demographics. Google Trends data shows that searches for the Green New Deal and climate change in general spiked tremendously following the debate and the vice-presidential debate the week after which also asked about the Green New Deal. While Biden continued to distance himself from the Deal publicly in the final weeks leading up to the election his campaign
privately worked with Sunrise to target young voters with information about his climate plan and its relatedness to the Green New Deal (Krieg 2021). In the final days of the race, the Biden campaign also ran a climate-focused ad on the youth-demographic dominated Comedy Central and the Cartoon Network to affirm his commitment to the issue and lend credence to Sunrise’s and other environmental group’s vote-driving efforts (Atkin 2020). In the ad he asserts:

> Americans face this historic infection point. A time of real peril, but also a time of extraordinary possibilities…I believe that every American has a fundamental right to breathe clean air and drink clean water. I know we haven’t fulfilled that right yet. Especially in low-income, white, Black, brown, and Native American communities. It’s not going to be easy. But it’s necessary. And I’m committing to get it done…We’ll create good paying union jobs, put Americans to work. Building a stronger, more climate-resilient nation [with] 1.5 million new energy efficient homes and public housing units that will benefit our communities three times over by eliminating the affordable housing crisis, by increasing energy efficiency, and by reducing the racial wealth gap linked to home ownership (Joe Biden Climate Ad, 2020).

The ad’s rhetoric again iterates the impact of Sunrise’s efforts on Biden’s framing of the climate issue and the political resonance of the movement’s demands. The specific acknowledgement of the interconnection of climate issues to other systemic challenges such as income, housing, and racial inequality in Biden’s message was also greatly effective in mobilizing voter turnout. Third-party analysis by Swayable—a media-marketing analysis firm—found that viewers of the ad were 3.8% more likely to vote than before seeing it. This was the highest mobilization score of any of the 70 pro-Biden ads the group analyzed (Atkin 2020).
By election day, the impact of Sunrise’s youth-focused electoral work in tandem with Biden’s targeted messaging began to show in national polling figures. For example, a *New York Times* and Sienna College poll carried out a week before the election found that Biden’s $2 trillion climate plan was wildly popular among voters age 18 to 29, who supported his climate plan 80% to 18% (Kaplan 2020). On the more macro scale, A Pew Research poll found 68% of Biden voters said climate change was a key consideration in determining their vote leading up to election day (Pew Research Center 2020; Tyson 2020). As vote totals started coming in, this impact was further confirmed with two-thirds of voters saying climate change is a serious problem and was amongst the determining factor in their vote in exit polling conducted by Edison Research (Grandoni 2020).
Speaking more directly to the electoral work of Sunrise and other youth-oriented vote-getting efforts, youth turnout was much higher in the 2020 election than in 2016. Based on votes counted as of November 18, researchers at Tufts University estimated 52%-55% of voting-eligible young people, ages 18-29, cast a ballot in the 2020 presidential election while youth voter turnout in 2016 was estimated to be a mere 42-44% (Grandoni & Ellerbeck 2020). The same researchers also found that climate change was the third most important issue for these voters ahead of both economic and reproductive health concerns, with over half (52%) of young people saying they are “very concerned” about climate change, and 78% saying they are “very” or “somewhat” concerned (Grandoni & Ellerbeck 2020).

For Sunrise the impetus and impact of this shift were clear, “the youth vote in swing states clinched the states for Biden — our movement swung the election for Biden. He was not our guy, but we rose to the occasion to defeat Trump. Biden owes us big time. We will not let him forget it. We will come knocking on the White House door January 20th, 2021 and make our Green New Deal demands” (Jefferson 2020). Executive Director Varshini Prakash added, “we delivered for Biden, now it’s his time to deliver for us” (Milman 2020). The backing for Sunrise’s sentiment and excitement were further reiterated by Nathaniel Stinnett, head of the Environmental Voter Project, “in elections this close, there are dozens of things that are difference makers, but there’s no doubt in my mind that young climate voters were one of them” (Grandoni & Ellerbeck 2020).

Reformative Stage Messaging - Moderating to Bolster Political Resonance

As the preceding discussion of Sunrise’s tactics makes clear, the movement’s outward-facing messaging takes on a more flexible and moderating tinge in their reformative stage.
Sunrise is willing to undergo this loosening of movement demands and confrontational rhetoric so long as it helps to bolster the political resonance surrounding their ultimate policy aims. This increase in political resonance in turn places heightened pressure on elected officials to take Sunrise’s desired actions elevating the likelihood of the movement realizing its demands. Unlike in the movement’s formative and transformative stages, messaging in the reformative stage is more explicitly intertwined with its tactical approach. Through its electoral campaigning and coordination with the Biden climate policy task force Sunrise showcases its reformative stage messaging to the general public and the elected elite respectively.

Looking first at its messaging towards the general public, Sunrise’s 2020 electoral campaigning for Joe Biden and down-ballot Green New Deal champions presented a moderated message of pragmatic action in an unideal situation. Even after the release of Biden’s updated climate plan, Sunrise remained lukewarm in their excitement for the candidate. In a movement-wide mobilizing missive, its leaders argued:

> Our vision of the future is ambitious and abolitionist…the candidate whose record on these fronts is painful. If Biden is elected President, however, along with a Senate and House majority full of the Green New Deal champions we have been throwing down for all primary season, our movements will be better set up than ever before to pass climate policy rooted in racial and economic justice within the new administration’s first 100 days (Sunrise Movement 2020b).

My conversations with members of the movement further exhibited this unenthused position with Anthony Hopkins of Sunrise Philadelphia describing Biden as “a member of the GOP with a smiley face” (Hopkins 2021) and Pennsylvania electoral coordinator Troy Turner’s observation that “obviously Joe Biden was not anyone’s favorite unless you’re maybe over 40 or 50 (Turner 2021).
Interestingly, rather than masking the conditionality of their support, the movement tapped into that sentiment in their voter outreach efforts and messaging via an approach to electoral organizing Sunrise calls deep canvassing. Pennsylvania electoral coordinator Troy Turner elaborated on this messaging framework and how it shaped the way the movement interacted with its targeted demographic of apathetic would-be youth voters:

We used the term deep canvassing. So instead of asking the traditional canvassing questions like, hey, what do you care about? Will you vote for Joe, yes or no. OK. We would ask how are you feeling about the election? And nine times out of ten people are like, I don't know if I'm going to vote. I don't like either of the candidates. There's also this taboo in politics of not saying anything negative of the candidates, but we rejected that. We were like, yeah, I totally hear you. Here is why I am uncomfortable voting for Joe Biden and then we would connect on that because that's a shared stake right there. And then we'd be like, but here's why I am going to vote for Joe Biden and then talk about the strategy, not the morality of the situation, and then invite them into this community of young people in their state who are all making that same strategic choice (Turner 2021).

Through its deep canvassing approach, Sunrise harnessed its obligation to moderate its values to support Joe Biden into a powerful mobilizing message for those woebegone by their choices in the 2020 election. Besides successfully working towards removing President Trump from office (as was illustrated in the preceding discussion on the movement’s election impact), this messaging allowed the movement to strengthen the political resonance and pressure of their demands as Biden began to form his executive branch and enter his first 100 days in office. As Anthony Hopkins of Sunrise Philadelphia described, “we're going to be going after Biden’s first one hundred days. We’re going to have a lot of accountability actions with him because the movement bodies of the US did the work to get him elected in the name of fighting fascism, not because we wanted him elected. We now have the electoral impact to hold him accountable” (Hopkins 2021).
Sunrise was able to further elevate the movement’s political resonance through its second key reformatory stage tactic of collaborating with the Biden-Sanders climate policy task force. While the movement’s electoral campaigning work helped strengthen the backing of public sentiment and the subsequent pressure on the Biden administration to take action from the outside, its direct interaction with the campaign team helped to develop a complimentary prong of political resonance messaging from within. By placing the seeds of a Green New Deal framework within Biden’s climate commitments, the movement secured an additional leverage point through which to apply accountability pressure on the eventual administration. As executive director, Varshini Prakash warned after the release of Biden’s second plan, “I haven’t seen Joe Biden step up quite yet. I’m not positive that he has personally integrated a deeper understanding of the climate crisis and what it is and how it relates to all of the other issues that we have in American society today. Until I see that, I’m not sure exactly what the effects of his climate plan will be, and our movement will be there to make sure he sticks to his word” (Calma 2020). In this way, Sunrise’s reformatory stage efforts sent a message to the Biden team that the movement was ready to play ball and moderate on its ideals for the sake of victory and progress, but that it expected the eventual administration to hold up its end of the bargain. If not, the movement was ready to tap back into its combative transformative stage tactics and messaging. One of the movement’s key principles is no permanent enemies, no permanent friends (Klein 2019), and their messaging with the Biden team surely iterates that sentiment.

**Reformatory Stage Impact - Early Biden Administration Action**

The dividends of Sunrise’s reformatory stage actions and messaging investments began to accrue soon after Biden’s ultimate victory and have continued to pan out at a steady pace across
the first 100 days of his presidency. In the immediate aftermath of the election, Sunrise “together, with willing partners in Biden's inner circle… helped craft the structures -- at least on paper -- that could position the administration to pursue audacious goals to meaningfully combat climate change in the coming years” (Krieg 2021). In a position unique to outsider movements, Sunrise remained in consistent contact with Biden transition officials as he began to form his climate team (Krieg 2021). As a result, the movement was able to maintain pressure on the commitments his campaign team had made in their climate plan by pushing for the nomination of strong voices on climate in his inner circles. The resultant nominations by the administration included Gina McCarthy, a former EPA administrator who oversaw the first national standards for reducing CO2 from power plants as the national climate advisor, as National Climate Advisor, John Kerry, former Secretary of Stater who played an instrumental role in the Paris Climate Accords as Special Presidential Envoy for Climate at the international level, and Representative Deb Haaland to lead the Interior Department (Detrow 2020b). Sunrise’s political director Evan Weber lauded the selections, “Biden has built his team by assembling trusted hands. On the climate-oriented positions is actually where….I would argue -- it's the most progressive team overall in the administration. You’ve got a really visionary, bold team, who's really serious and ambitious about the task at hand and are really all advocates and public servants” (Krieg 2021).

When Biden and the climate team assumed office in January, it began to make good on its climate commitments. On day one, Biden signed several executive orders which re-entered the United States into the Paris Climate Accords, revoked the permit for the controversial Keystone XL pipeline, and reinstated a bevy of Obama-era environmental regulations which had been slashed by the Trump administration (Gander 2021; Arvin 2021; Chemnick 2021). These smaller
actions set the table for Biden’s major executive orders signed several days later on January 27th, a day the administration celebrated as “Climate Day” (McKibben 2021). The executive orders codified Biden’s climate campaign commitments of achieving a carbon-pollution free electricity sector by 2035, a complete transition to zero emissions vehicles for federal, state, local, and tribal government fleets, including vehicles of the United States Postal Service, building a network of 500,000 electric car charging stations, reserving of 30 percent of federal land and water for conservation purposes, and doubling offshore wind production by 2030 (Nuccitelli 2021; Friedman et al. 2021; Friedman & Plumer 2021). The executive orders also hinted at a larger systemic shift in the way the administration would tackle climate change establishing a White House Office of Domestic Climate Policy and a National Climate Task Force that would bring federal agencies together to jointly address climate change, alongside an order to impose a moratorium on new oil and gas auctions on federal lands and waters and a commitment to eliminate fossil fuel subsidies from the federal budget from 2022 onward (Durkee 2021; McEvoy 2021).

The actions also showcased the impact and increased political resonance of Sunrise’s Green New Deal framework. For example, one of the executive orders called for the establishment of a Civilian Climate Corps focused on creating jobs to “to conserve and restore public lands and waters, bolster community resilience, increase reforestation, increase carbon sequestration in the agricultural sector, protect biodiversity, improve access to recreation, and address the changing climate” which was a direct push of Prakash on the task force (Nuccitelli 2021). Like the Green New Deal, jobs remained front and center in Biden’s executive order messaging as he told reporters: "Today is climate day in the White House which means today is
jobs day at the White House” (Friedman 2021 et al. 2021). Overall, the text of his executive orders mentioned the word jobs fifteen times, calling for the creation of 1,000,000 new jobs in the green auto sector, and an additional 10,000,000 jobs across the rest of his green infrastructure plan to help build 1,500,000 million new energy-efficient homes, to manufacture and install 500,000 electric-vehicle charging stations, and to seal off 1,000,000 leaking oil and gas wells all at prevailing wage with the protection of unions (Raymond 2021; Friedman et al. 2021). Biden has already begun to actuate this plan announcing in March a goal of developing 30,000 megawatts (enough to power 10,000,000 homes) of offshore wind turbines by 2030 creating an estimated 77,000 direct and indirect jobs alone (Friedman & Plumer 2021).

The emphasis on environmental justice concerns within the executive orders further illustrated the impact of Sunrise’s actions on Biden’s climate policy approach. In the executive orders signed on climate day, Biden established the Justice40 Initiative to recommend how green federal investments can be made in a way that directs 40% of the total benefits towards disadvantaged communities (Nuccitelli 2021). Biden doubled down on this commitment pledging to put environmental justice at the heart “of all that we do” to help stem the effects of climate change on already burdened communities (Milman 2021).

Taken in their totality, the executive orders of Biden’s climate day signified "the most remarkable day in the history of America’s official response to the climate crisis, at least since that June afternoon in 1988, when James Hansen told a congressional committee that the planet had begun to heat” (McKibben 2021). Biden for his part offered the impetus behind calling for such systemic actions so early in his administration: “this isn’t time for small measures, we need to be bold. It’s about jobs, good paying union jobs, it’s a whole of government approach to put
climate change at the center of our domestic, national security and foreign policies. We can do this, we must do this and we will do this” (Milman 2021, emphasis added). Interestingly, voices of the industries most responsible for our changing climate also positively responded to the actions with GM committing to an all-electric vehicle fleet by 2035 and Ford calling for a $29 billion investment in electric vehicle development in the weeks after (Eisenstein 2021; Baldwin 2021). Once more, ExxonMobil, Shell, BP, and Chevron all issued statements of support for Biden’s decision to rejoin the Paris Climate Accords as well as the American Petroleum Institute hinting perhaps at a larger societal and industrial shift in the way we conceptualize and respond to climate change (Davenport & Friedman 2021).

Biden’s actions were also well-celebrated by the activist community with Gene Karpinski, president of the League of Conservation Voters calling Climate Day, “the single biggest day for climate action in more than a decade” (Friedman et al. 2021). Importantly both Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Sunrise were pleasantly surprised and tentatively supportive of Biden’s early and strong actions. Cortez offered, “It [Climate Day] communicates that he meant what he said on the campaign trail that he would make climate change a central priority of his administration. It also signifies a good faith openness and relationship to environmental activist organizations” (Cole 2021). Sunrise also lent its support with a hint of caution saying in a tweet “seeing this type of action from the Biden administration is great but also just the beginning of what we need to fully address and stop the climate crisis. Our movement isn't going anywhere @joebiden” (Cole 2021). Perhaps the reason why Sunrise and Cortez offered this relatively excited initial support was as NBC correspondent Geoff Bennet said the executive orders
“reflect[ed] major elements of the Green New Deal...without actually being the Green New Deal. Some political sleight of hand” (Cole 2021).

The administration presented its first indications as to how it would achieve the lofty goals of its early executive orders within Biden’s $2 trillion infrastructure plan introduced in March. As Biden had promised, climate considerations and actions would be caked into all major federal actions, and an examination of the plan elucidates this focus. Over a quarter of the price tag, $541 billion, is allocated for green infrastructure improvements and job creation including $85 billion to update mass transit systems nationwide, an additional $85 billion to update and revitalize the Amtrak network, $100 billion to update America’s electricity grid to support clean energy sources, $174 billion for electric vehicle development alongside an additional $46 billion to amass an all electric federal vehicle fleet, $16 billion to help fossil fuel works transition to clean energy sector positions, $35 billion for general federal climate resiliency research and development (Kolbert 2021; Stein et al. 2021; Davenport et al. 2021; Worland 2021). The plan also calls for an extension and expansion of federal tax credits and incentives for private wind and solar development and proposes the creation of a clean electric standard encompassing a federal minimum mandate on electricity sourced from zero-carbon sources (Friedman & Tankersley 2021; Davenport et al. 2021). Through these efforts, Biden sought to interweave desperately needed infrastructure updates with what he dubbed “transformational progress in our effort to tackle climate change” (Kolbert 2021).
The introduction of the plan signified a fundamental shift in the way Democrats think about solving the climate crisis. As one analysis explained, Biden’s plan would:

fuse the rebuilding of America’s creaky infrastructure with record spending to fight climate change, a combination that, in scale and scope, represents a huge political shift, even for Democrats who have been in the climate trenches for decades. The underlying message — *that the next step of America’s economic recovery is fundamentally tied to countering the climate crisis* — represents a major pivot in the way Democrats make the case for tackling global warming. No longer merely an environmental imperative like saving the polar bears, or a side element of a stimulus package like it was under the Obama administration, *climate change has become the centerpiece* (Friedman and Tankersley 2021, emphasis added).

This centering of the climate imperative in large-scale federal action is at the heart of the Green New Deal framework and offers the best case of its political resonance. As Green New Deal champion Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez celebrated in her response to Biden’s plan, “One of the big goals we had when we introduced the Green New Deal was to shift climate change from being a...
billion dollar problem to a trillion dollar opportunity. The fact that climate and infrastructure is seen as part of the same endeavor is, I think, highly reflective of that shift” (Friedman & Tankersley 2021). Of course, Cortez and her allies at Sunrise are far from ready to declare victory and fold in their efforts. Both still want to see more from Biden, with Cortez also believing the size of the plan as “not enough” (Kurtzleben 2021). Sunrise echoed this sentiment in their press release after the plans reveal:

If it’s passed, this plan would be the largest investment the federal government has made to address social and economic crises in fifty years. It’d create millions of good jobs and be the biggest investment our country has ever made in fighting the climate crisis. Still, this plan is nowhere near enough to meaningfully combat the climate crisis or transform our society and economy. To really do those things, we need at least $10 trillion in federal spending over the next decade (or $1 trillion/year), and we need to start making those investments as soon as possible (Shelly 2021).

It remains to be seen if Biden’s plan will even make it through Congress with the Democrat’s razor-thin majority in the Senate and Democratic Senator Joe Manchin of coal and natural gas-rich West Virginia likely holding the deciding vote (Roberts 2021; Davenport & Friedman 2021). At the moment, however, the mere introduction of the plan already sets the precedent for four more years of climate considerations taking center stage in federal action.
Discussion

Contemporaneity of Movement Stages

While the preceding analysis of the development and impact of the Sunrise movement was delineated across three central stages—the formative, transformative, and reformative—it is important to note their often-times dynamic and interconnected nature. In this way, the movement, rather than linearly and seamlessly transitioning between stages, harnessed the tactics and messaging of preceding or proceeding stages throughout its development and impact. As such, the frontiers between stages often remained far from absolute to Sunrise as it at times found itself tapping into transformative stage massaging in its formative stage, formative tactics in its reformative stage, and reformative actions in its formative stage amongst a multitude of other mixing-and-matching combinations pulled from its central tool kit. Though the growth and impact of the movement can be charted by the primary tactics and rhetoric employed across its three central stages, a discussion of this contemporaneity and blending of stages at times helps to paint a fuller and more nuanced understanding of Sunrise’s approach to growing and sustaining its efforts.

Whereas the movement’s specific focus on recruitment tactics and massaging were confined predominantly to the formative stage in my analysis, Sunrise continued, though to a lesser degree, its recruitment efforts in its transformative and reformative stages. Alongside its primary goal of raising public awareness and support for movement priorities, Sunrise used its transformative stage action and tactics as an avenue of recruitment and movement building. Sunrise’s specific actions after its sit-in at Speaker Pelosi’s office help to illustrate this point. Alongside its gangbuster introduction into the public consciousness, Sunrise and leaders saw the
wide-scale coverage of the sit-in as an opportunity to invite thousands of additional young people into their movement. As co-founder Sara Blazevic described in the wake of the sit in, “tens of thousands of young people were learning about Sunrise for the very first time. We could either rest on our laurels until their attention drifted elsewhere, or immediately invite them into action and turn them into members of the movement” (Blazevic et al. 2020, 177). And so in the days after the sit in, Sunrise re-upped its outreach and recruitment efforts holding in person and online recruitment drives and rallies (Blazevic et al. 2020). Movement hub growth in the following months helps to bear out the impact of these efforts. While there were just 25 Sunrise hubs before the sit in, that number would balloon to over 100 by January 2019 (Blazevic et al. 2020). Anthony Hopkins of Sunrise Philadelphia helps to further elucidate the recruiting potency of the movement’s outward facing messaging: “our messaging is trying to create a wider message to bring more people into the movement work…that is hopefully going to motivate people to want to take direct action with us” (Hopkins 2021).

Whilst helping to amass the political power and resonance of the movement’s aims, Sunrise’s reformative-stage tactics and messaging also served as an additional avenue of movement recruitment. In fact, both members of the Sunrise Philadelphia hub that I spoke with were introduced and ultimately recruited into the movement via canvassing efforts. Anthony Hopkins reflected, “I got involved through canvassing…they reached out to me and so…I was just doubling down on the weekends, canvassing, making the trips, and we just worked together really well. It all happened so fast. And that was what kind of grounded me in working with Sunrise Philly” (Hopkins 2021) Fellow Philadelphia hub member Aaron Appel shared a similar
introduction to the movement, “I started to do work alongside them [Sunrise Philly] for the
election of Kendra Brooks and have been a part of it ever since” (Appel 2021).

On the flip side, the examples of Anthony and Aaron highlight the harnessing of
reformative stage tactics much earlier in the formative stage. Electoral work and canvassing,
while far more dominant in the build up to the 2020 federal elections, also was a feature of the
movement’s earlier formative stage in 2017 and 2018. In fact, across those two years its newly-
minted activists (including Anthony and Aaron) contacted over 250,000 voters in tightly
contested mid-term elections and successfully signed on 1,300 candidates in races across the
country to Sunrise’s No Fossil Fuel Money Pledge—committing the candidates to not taking
contributions over $200 from oil, gas, and coal industry executives, lobbyists, and PACs (Blad
2019; Prakash 2020). At the same time, Sunrise endorsed and campaigned for 30 candidates at
the state and federal level, with 19 winning their elections, including pivotal future allies of the
movement such as Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Deb Haaland, Rashida Tlaib, and
Ilhan Omar (Sunrise Movement 2018, Blad 2019).

Sunrise’s formative stage also included a key instance of its confrontational bird-dogging
tactics central to its public-awareness-raising approach in the transformative stage. The incident
surrounded Scott Wagner, the 2018 Republican gubernatorial candidate in Pennsylvania, and
Rose Strauss, a 18 year old newcomer to the Sunrise movement and political activism. At a
candidate Town Hall for Wagner, Rose walked up to the open microphone and pleaded with the
candidate, “my name is Rose, I’m 18, and I’m really concerned about the future of our country.
Two-thirds of Pennsylvanians think climate change is an issue that needs to be addressed, but
you’ve said that climate change is a result of people’s body heat and are refusing to take action
on the issue. Does this have anything to do with the $200,000 you have taken from the fossil fuel industry?” (Dunbar 2018). Wagner’s response dismissed Strauss’ concern out of hand adding “you’re 18 years old. You know, you’re a little young and naive” (Dunbar 2018). Echoing the public uproar following Senator Feinstein’s clash with Sunrise activists discussed in the transformative stage, the interchange quickly exploded into a viral phenomenon with the video of the interchange accruing five million views and the hashtag #YoungAndNaive soon trending on Twitter (Negron 2018a; Levin 2018). Wagner’s challenger and now Governor of Pennsylvania Tom Wolf joined the fray with his campaign printing and selling t-shirts reading ‘Young and Naive Voter’ (Negron 2018a). Ironically, Wolf soon also found himself in hot water with Strauss and Sunrise who were angered by his appropriation of movement momentum given his relatively weak commitments on the climate front and his acceptance of $98,000 from groups and individuals connected with the oil and gas industry during the 2018 election cycle (Hughes 2018).

Also much like in the transformative stage, Sunrise used the flash-point confrontational action as an avenue to rally public awareness and support. In the days following the altercation, Sunrise PA organized a #YoungAndNaive rally where 50 activists gathered “to come out against the kind of corruption and ignorance Wagner represents and to support the “young and naive” volunteers, organizers, and community members who are fighting to make sure people like him don’t stay in power for long” (Negron 2018a). Alongside the rally, the volunteers knocked on more than 2,250 doors working to register voters and voice their angers at candidate Wagner (Negron 2018a). The exchange also made modest shockwaves on the national level with a New
York Times article profiling Strauss (Levin 2018) and Strauss herself penning an Op-ed in Teen Vogue which read in part:

In August, three months before the November elections, I will link arms with my friends in Sunrise Movement and turn up the heat on politicians of both parties who take money from fossil fuel CEO’s and lobbyists. We’ll collect support from thousands of people and come together for a week of bold office sit-ins and loud petition deliveries at key offices across the country. We’re putting our politicians on notice: stand up for our generation, or we’ll knock thousands of doors to replace you this November with someone who will (Strauss 2018).

Co-founder Sara Blazevic elaborated on the bourgeoning larger-scale impact of Strauss’ actions and its implications for the movement: “Rose’s confrontation showed young people across the country how to confront their politicians and helped grow a nationwide campaign to get fossil fuel money out of politics” (Blazevic et al. 2020, 177). While the movement was still focused on its formative actions and messaging and months away from entering its transformative stage in earnest, Strauss’s case study offers further evidence of the fluidity and interrelatedness of Sunrise’s key developmental and impact phases.

Negative Radical Flank Effect (RFE) Considerations

Through the research and analysis presented above and in an attempt to evaluate my hypothesis, my work sought to uncover the ways in which the Sunrise movement evinces a compelling argument for a positive RFE. Underpinning my theoretical approach was an understanding that if a radical group is able to muster an increase in public pressure and support for movement goals through its actions and messaging, what results is an increase of political elite receptiveness to the demands of a movement (Killian 1972; Haines 1984; Robnett et al. 2015). Over time, this expanded governmental openness allows the environmental movement, both Sunrise and its more moderate members, to achieve greater success in shaping public policy.
than it had before the rise of the radical flank. While those in power, in the end, may not take all
the actions demanded by Sunrise and the Green New Deal, this increased public pressure and
likelihood of the movement as a whole achieving desired ends is at the crux of Sunrise’s positive
flank effect.

At the same time, however, it is important to consider the degree to which Sunrise’s
actions have also spurred some of the potential pitfalls of radical flanks posed by previous
scholars. Past critiques of the RFE have been levied across four central concerns: 1. the potential
for countermovements spurred by the radical flank (Meyer & Staggenborg 1996); 2. the potential
for radical group ostracism from the larger movement inhibiting positive impacts (Rozell &
Wilcox 1996; Hoffman and Bertels 2006); 3. the potential for negative cooptation of radical
messaging by oppositional forces (Killian 1972; Farrer & Klein 2019); and 4. the risk of a
negative public perception of the radical movement and its demands (Haines 1984; Robnett et al.
2015; Farrer & Klein 2019; Downey & Rohlinger 2008). What follows is a discussion and
analysis of how Sunrise has to a certain degree induced several of these negative RFE facets and
what impact their catalyzing has had on the overall success and impact of the movement.

1. Emergence of Countermovements

In their seminal study on countermovement mobilization, Meyer & Staggenborg (1996)
expounded, “by advocating an alternative discourse and challenging the established field frame,
social movements create conditions for mobilization of their opposition. Countermovements
originate as the change movement starts to show signs of success by influencing public policy,
and threatening established interests” (Meyer & Staggenborg 1996, 1635). In this way, as
insurgent social movements begin to catalyze meaningful change, they tend to engender a strong
challenge from established interest groups keen on maintaining the status quo. Meyer & Staggenborg (1996) go on to discuss instances of countermovement action in response to the advances of the pro abortion, Equal Rights Amendment, gay rights, animal rights, gun control, cigarette smoking, marijuana use, busing, racism, pornography, school textbooks, language rights, nuclear power (See Meyer & Staggenborg 1996, 1630). Their work also discusses “property rights” countermovements aimed at advances made by previous environmental movements focused on preserving wilderness areas and public lands.

Piecing together the role countermovement actions have played in the efforts of Sunrise is a difficult endeavor as the organized opposition to the movement and their environmental policy objectives remain largely clandestine and diffuse across the political arena. As a recent scholarly analysis of environmental policy countermovements explained, “opposition to climate action in particular, and environmental protection in general, is maintained by a comprehensive set of institutional mechanisms that work integrally to develop, promulgate, and advocate for a series of conservative policies across political and cultural arenas” (Brulle 2020, 338). As such, rather than relying on large, outward-facing, people-led countermovements such as the pro-life or anti gun control movements, environmental counter movements are dominated by elite business interests—particularly in the fossil fuel industry—who seek to weaken environmental initiatives through the power of the purse and high level lobbying with allied elected officials (Meyer & Staggenborg 1996; Brulle 2018; Brulle 2020).

Between 2000 and 2016, a report from the Public Accountability Initiative found that fossil fuel companies had spent nearly $2 billion in lobbying efforts, with $333 million alone funneled into federal election campaigns (Phillips-Fein 2019; Seidman 2019). Concerning for
environmental movement efforts, these contributions span both sides of the political aisle with Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi taking in over $790,000 in campaign contributions from oil and gas interests between 2017 and 2019 (Hiar & Farah 2019). The countermovement sways these contributions wield is quite telling when cross-compared with Congressional support for the original Green New Deal resolution. According to a MapLight analysis, the average congressional opponent of the Green New Deal Resolution had received 24 times more campaign cash from the nation’s largest oil and gas companies than sponsors of the climate change resolution (Bass 2019). The analysis continued that:

The 90 House sponsors [of the Resolution] had received a total of $37,175 in campaign donations—an average of $413 each—from the 10 largest publicly traded U.S. oil and gas companies since 2017. Meanwhile, the 344 opponents of the resolution cumulatively received 91 times more money. The opponents, who include all 197 House Republicans and 145 Democrats, took almost $3.4 million from the energy companies, an average of $9,876 per lawmaker (Bass 2019, emphasis added).

*Average Fossil Fuel Campaign Contributions of GND Co-Sponsors and Non-Sponsors*

Courtesy of Bass 2019
The movement inhibiting power of fossil-fuel-interest-driven oppositional funding has and will continue to pose a serious challenge in Sunrise’s ultimate impact and ability to push for the implementation of Green New Deal-modeled legislation. The Sunrise movement, for their part, has made the limiting of this countermovement avenue central to their efforts and messaging from the outset. Spearheaded in 2017, Sunrise’s No Fossil Fuel Money Pledge campaign—committing the candidates to not to taking contributions over $200 from oil, gas, and coal industry executives, lobbyists, and PACs—has amassed over 3,200 signatories to date from candidates and elected officials across each level of government and across the country (Blad 2019; Prakash 2020; No Fossil Fuel Money Pledge 2021). The pledge was also signed by 40 presidential candidates in the 2020 election cycle including high-profile candidates, Beto O’Rourke, Amy Klobuchar, Kamala Harris, Cory Booker, Elizabeth Warren, Pete Buttigieg, Bernie Sanders, and, perhaps most importantly, eventual Democratic nominee and now President Joe Biden (No Fossil Fuel Money Pledge 2021). While the checks written by fossil fuel interests undoubtedly continue to pour into the bursars of elected officials across the country helping to shape their climate policy positions, the signatories of the pledge alongside increasing public pressure to move away from a fossil-fuel driven world offer hope that the power of this countermovement approach will begin to wane in the years to come.

2. Risk of Radical Group Ostracism from Larger Movement

An additional deleterious risk posed for radical social movements is the potential for ostracism from the larger social movement it is situated within (Rozell & Wilcox 1996; Hoffman & Bertels 2006). These scholars contend that if a radical movement’s messaging and tactics stray
too far from the central objectives of the larger movement, established groups and voices may
distance their support for the group or even openly condemn their actions. The loss of this greater
movement support can then weaken the resources, larger resonances, and ultimate impact of the
radical flank group (Rozell & Wilcox 1996).

In the case of the Sunrise movement, there are definitely hints of repudiation of the
movement’s aims and actions amongst the traditional leading voices and organizations in the
environmental movement. The most clear cut example of this distancing came in 2019 as Sunrise
penned an open letter to lawmakers pushing for the creation of a select committee for a Green
New Deal. The ultimate letter was affixed with signatures of support from over 600 small and
medium scale environmental groups across the country (Meyer 2019). The letter was also telling,
however, in the groups that did not offer their signature. Absent from the signatories were many
of the large national environmental groups that have dominated the environmental movement for
decades including the Sierra Club, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Environmental
explaining their non-signature, Andrea McGimsey of Environment America helped to flesh out
this hesitation from larger environmental groups, “we wholeheartedly support the [letter’s] call
for 100 percent renewable energy…but much of the rest of the plan is outside our lane” (Atkin
2019).

Unlike the case with fossil-fuel driven countermovements, however, alienation from the
traditional voices and power brokers in the environmental movement has had little impact on
Sunrise’s ability to grow and enact change. If anything, the differentiation may have served as a
boon for the movement as it sought to show to its targeted recruitment demographic of
disillusioned younger Americans that it was unlike its laggard movement compatriots. Once more, the movement did not need to rely on the resources or support of movement allies to propagate. From the get-go Sunrise organized in an insular fashion that allowed the movement to strengthen through grassroots efforts unbound to larger environmental movement support or direction.

3. Negative Cooptation of Radical Group Messaging

Traditionally, one of the largest inhibitors to radical group success and impact has been the risk of negative cooptation and representation of radical group messaging by oppositional forces (Killian 1972; Farrer & Klein 2019). Sunrise and its Green New Deal messaging have faced this challenge essentially since its proper introduction into the public consciousness following the Speaker Pelosi sit in. As word of the scale and scope of the Green New Deal disseminated, its purported objective became twisted by oppositional voices and groups, especially in conservative circles and media outlets. Antagonistic pundits quickly pounced on the legislation decrying the Deal as a “radical front for nationalizing our economy (Bourne 2019), and as an “untrammeled Dear Santa letter without form, purpose, borders or basis in reality proposed by an unmarried, childless bartender [referring to Rep. Ocasio-Cortez]” (Cooke 2019). Justin Haskins of the Washington Examiner went as far as to describe the Green New Deal as “the sort of thing you’d see in the Soviet Union, not the United States” (Haskins 2019).

Further negative representations of the Deal were iterated on Fox News in the build up to the formal introduction to Congress of the Green New Deal Resolution in February of 2019. According to an analysis by Media Matters, in the four days leading up to the introduction, Fox News aired 34 prime-time segments on the Green New Deal, more than triple the combined
number of segments aired by its counterparts at MSNBC and CNN (MacDonald 2019). Of these segments, just 14 even mentioned its relationship to climate change, with the majority instead presenting the Deal as a “pretext for implementing a radical left-wing agenda” (MacDonald 2019).

Prime-Time Segments on the Green New Deal - February 7 - February 11, 2019
Courtesy of MacDonald 2019

How often did prime-time cable news shows cover the Green New Deal?
Number of segments from February 7 to February 11

The negative impact of this aggressive Green New Deal smear campaign is noteworthy. Interestingly, between December 2018 and April 2019, familiarity with the Green New Deal increased most amongst conservative Republicans. About twice as many conservative Republicans (38%) as liberal Democrats (17%) had heard “a lot” about the Green New Deal by
April (Gustafson et al. 2019). Speaking to the power of this negative messaging and portrayals, Republicans who had heard the most about the Green New Deal were the least likely to support it (Gustafson et al. 2019). In an eye-catching discovery, public polling on the Deal found that only 4% of Republicans who had heard “a lot” about it between December of 2018 and April of 2019 supported it, while Republicans who had heard “nothing at all” about the Green New Deal and were shown just a description of what it entails offered 85% support. In their analysis of the data, the author’s concluded:

These data suggest that many Republicans support the aspirational goals of the GND in principle, but came to reject the GND after hearing more about it (941)… Overall, these findings demonstrate a dramatic growth of political polarization in public opinion about the GND between December 2018 and April 2019, and they strongly suggest a likely mechanism driving this polarization: exposure to partisan media (Gustafson et al. 2019, 943 italicize added).

Democratic and Republican Support of the GND, by how much they have heard about it
Courtesy of Gustafson et al. 2019, 943
4. Negative Public Perception of Radical Movement

The ultimate impact of the negative cooptation of Sunrise movement messaging discussed above connects to the potential fourth key detriment to radical group action, negative public perception of the radical movement and its demands (Haines 1984; Robnett et al. 2015; Farrer & Klein 2019; Downey & Rohlinger 2008). Intuitively, even as a radical movement seeks to upheave prevailing public sentiment, it must also muster some degree of public support and positive perception for its actions and demands to lend legitimacy and political pressure to its calls. In the case of Sunrise, thanks to its success in generating outward resonance in its transformative stage, the movement has attained a relatively positive overall public perception of its Green New Deal messaging, though the negative cooptation of movement messaging by oppositional forces has made a serious dent in that support in conservative circles.

A December 2020 poll found that overall support for the Green New Deal was at 66%—with 91% support from liberal Democrats and 86% from conservative and moderate Democrats (Leiserowitz et al. 2020b). On the Republican side, however, they found about six in ten liberal/moderate Republicans (59%) supported the deal with far fewer conservative Republicans (24%) voicing their support (Leiserowitz et al. 2020b). This 24% represented a 33 percentage point decrease in conservative Republican support for the Green New Deal since the first Green New Deal opinion poll just a year prior in December of 2019 (Leiserowitz et al. 2020b). While support for the Deal had dipped slightly for the other groups polled across that same period, conservative Republicans saw by far the largest dip in support. All that being said, however, large-scale negative public perception of the movement and its calls for a Green New Deal beyond conservative Republican circles has yet to emerge. Two-thirds of Americans still support
the Green New Deal negating the majority of inhibiting factors negative public perception can have on the support and impact of a radical movement like Sunrise.

*Changing support for the Green New Deal (December 2018 to December 2020)*

*Courtesy of Leiserowitz et al. 2020b, 24*
Conclusion

Key Findings

Through an analysis of the messaging and tactics employed across its formative, transformative, and reformative stages, my thesis has attempted to connect and contrast the development and impact of the Sunrise movement with previous explorations of radical flank social movements. Ultimately, my findings on Sunrise’s approach to movement activism echo certain components of past radical flank effect (RFE) schemata. Namely, the movement iterates the tendency of previous radical flank groups to serve “as a constant corrective to what may be illusions of progress which might otherwise cause a relaxation of the struggle” (Killian 1972, 46). A key messaging and tactical approach of Sunrise has been the deliberate emphasis on the unsuccessfulness of moderate environmental movement groups in catalyzing any sort of meaningful or systemic political change. Like previous radical flank groups, Sunrise has also distanced themselves from moderate established groups of the larger movement painting them as part of the problem, not the solution. As member Matthew Miles-Goodrich lambasted, “Failing to summon the requisite moral urgency, the environmental institutions that tried to broker the cap-and-trade deal between business and bureaucracy disillusioned the younger members of the movement from the possibility of substantial government action on climate” (Goodrich 2019).

Such open antagonism towards more conservative-minded movement counterparts is a hallmark of previous radical flank group analyses (Barkan 1979; Robnett et al. 2015; Conner & Epstein 2007; Snow & Cross 2011)

The ability of Sunrise to raise public awareness and concern for larger movement issues in part through radical actions and messaging also aligns with previous RFE frameworks.
Through its efforts, the movement, like successful previous flank group, has “disturbed a polarized debate, and reframed the conflict redrawing moral lines around acceptable behavior” (Schifeling & Hoffman 2019, 228). Further iterating the tenets of previous RFE scholars, this feat has been accomplished by Sunrise through its ability to “bring the crisis to the national level [and] keeping it in the headlines, forcing elected officials to answer or their inaction” (Robnett et al. 2015, 87). The discussions presented in the transformative and reformative stages help to bear out this facet of Sunrise’s actions and impact.

However, these corollaries aside, my analysis of the Sunrise movement has largely trail-blazed a new understanding of radical flank groups that breaks from previous scholarly understandings. Firstly, my research has contributed a prescient and future-oriented approach that is scant in past scholarship on the RFE. Most previous RFE scholars have undertaken RFE analyses as a method of reflective examination, that is applying the tenets of the model to explain the success or failure of previous social movements (Haines 1984; Robnett et al. 2015; McCammon et al. 2015; Barkan 1979; Tomkins 2015; Braithwaite 2013). Scholars who have deviated from this model and offered more timely or future-oriented RFE analyses have carried out their research largely on movement-wide scales analyzing overall trends in a movement rather than individual movement actors (Killian 1972; Conner & Epstein 2007; Hoffman & Bertels 2009; Hoffman 2009). By focusing on one movement actor and its present and potential future RFE, my research has harnessed the RFE as a forecasting tool to analyze Sunrise’s current RFE impact and what that might mean for the future of the environmental movement in this country. This unique contemporaneous lens has allowed me to implement the RFE as both a
reflective and predictive tool combining the two approaches of previous scholars to arrive at my conclusion.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, my research has drawn into question the absoluteness of the moderate-radical movement group dichotomies at the heart of many current RFE understandings. The majority of past analyses in the field have parsed movement groups into their relative moderate and radical categories using bifurcating schemata, though with slightly differentiated parameters. Snow and Cross (2011), for example, offered that radical and moderate groups should be defined by (a) their sociopolitical and cultural context and how the state responds to their actions and (b) how they are perceived by fellow groups within the same social movement (Snow and Cross 2011) Robnett et al. (2015) offered a similar dichotomy in their delineation of movement groups emphasizing consideration of (a) how a movement group’s tactics are received within the wider cultural and political context and (b) what sort of relationship they have with official institutions and offices of power (Robnett et al. 2015). Downey and Rohlinger (2008) instead posited that the two axes to gauge movement group radicalism should be (a) their breadth of challenge to preexisting institutions and policy and (b) the level of appeal they possess with the public (Downey & Rohlinger 2008).

This approach extends to analyses of environmental social movement groups as well. Conner & Epstein (2007), for instance, split environmental movement groups into two camps of pure groups—categorized as having uncompromising stances, carrying out radical actions, and being vehemently opposed to cooperation with corporations—and pragmatic groups more willing to work with established powers and compromise. Similarly in their work, Hoffman and Bertels (2009) divided environmental movement actors into “dark greens” who seek radical
political change to the market system and its relation to the environment and “bright greens” who focus on working within the market system and alongside corporations to develop better designs, technologies, approaches, and policies to ameliorate environmental challenges. While O’Brien et al. (2018) incorporated a slightly expanded tripartite division to delineate youthful environmental activism, they nonetheless followed a similar unbending demarcation of movement actors. The authors argued that youth activism on climate change can be separated into three main categories of radicalism—dutiful, disruptive, and dangerous dissent with dutiful dissenters acting as a moderate flank working within preexisting institutional spaces and systems to express their concern, with more radical disruptive dissenters challenging the underlying systems and institutions they see as fundamental to the problem of climate change, and the most radical dangerous dissenters geared towards “generat[ing] new and alternative systems, new ways of doing things, new types of economic relationships, and new ways of organizing society” (O’Brien et al. 2018).

Central to my analysis of Sunrise and its ability to catalyze a positive radical flank, however, has been the movement’s ability to break from the sort of moderate-radical movement dichotomies presented in previous flank effect case studies. By combining the actions and tactics of a radical movement group with a messaging approach focused on catalyzing greater societal resonance typically assigned to moderate movement groups by past RFE scholars (Haines 1984; Killian 1972; Meyer & Staggenborg 1996), the Sunrise movement introduces a novel approach to understanding radical social movements and their messaging, tactics, and ultimate impact. Rather than residing purely in a moderate or radical movement silo, across Sunrise’s three movement stages exists a combination of more traditional and extreme messaging and tactical
approaches geared towards catalyzing the requisite movement resonance with its targeted demographic in each stage.

In the movement’s formative stage, Sunrise worked to recruit its base of support through targeted subgroup messaging. This messaging was geared towards generating a sense of mutual buy-in and purpose amongst the group’s foundation of supporters—younger Americans fed up with the status quo of climate policy and the environmental movement in the country—by echoing their values, angers, and worldview. Beyond giving voice to these younger Americans’ concerns, Sunrise provided an avenue to channel that anger towards a larger and more constructive end. In this phase of the movement, messaging focused on themes of collectivity and grief, personal narratives, and empowerment and efficacy. Through these themes, Sunrise made an intentional effort to transform “the fear and pains of the climate crisis, which we all feel in isolation, into a collective action.” (Blazevic et al. 2020,175). By implementing a recruitment messaging approach that transformed the individual anxieties felt by thousands of young people across the country into a sense of collective grief, providing the organizational and tactical scaffolding to effectively channel that anger, and then empowering this newfound community to take decisive action, Sunrise successfully struck a powerful chord with its targeted subgroup. At this stage of the movement, Sunrise’s messaging was most emblematic of the messaging typically associated with radical flank groups. To these young activists, Sunrise presented a call for mass political upheaval and disturbance of the status quo akin to the “pure group” (Conner & Epstein 2007) “dark green” (Hoffman & Bertels 2009), and “dangerous dissenter” (O’Brien et al. 2018) frameworks used by previous scholars to define radical environmental social movements. Once more, its formative stage messaging iterated many facets of the post-apocalyptic paradigm
previous scholars have consigned predominantly to radical-leaning environmental social groups (Cassegård & Thörn 2018; Swyngedouw 2013).

At the same time, however, Sunrise largely relied on traditional movement tactics in its formative stage to supplement its radical-oriented messaging. Throughout its formative stage, Sunrise shied away from taking the sorts of drastic radical actions that would define its transformative stage in favor of smaller-scale protests and a specific focus on amassing the movement infrastructure to sustain efforts as it expanded. This included a focus on expanding its hub and spoke movement network, setting out on a cross-country town hall tour to recruit new activists, and the carrying out of movement leader trainings such as the Sunrise semester program. None of these tactics are purely radical in nature, and in fact are similar to the sort of approaches moderate movement groups in any social movement might take in their efforts to amass a movement base.

In its transformative stage, Sunrise’s messaging and tactics flipped with the movement beginning to take its message public in an attempt to augment the outward resonance of its aims. In this stage, Sunrise tapped into their now-established base of support as conduits for movement messaging, organizing, and strengthening. Central to the movement’s transformative stage messaging and tactical approach was a combination of flashpoint confrontations with elected officials and messaging geared towards mustering moral authority and public sympathy by connecting climate action to larger systemic challenges like labor, racial, and economic inequality. In this way, Sunrise’s tactical and messaging approach towards reorienting and reinvigorating public consciousness breaks from the traditions of both the more radical and pragmatic wings of the environmental movement. Its combination of extreme tactics like its
Capitol sit-ins and arrests with traditional local organizing through its hub network offers a novel and hybrid movement framework. This transformative stage approach thus fused the unconventional confrontational tactics and actions typically consigned to radical flank groups with more moderate and pragmatic messaging. Through this messaging approach, Sunrise sought to make climate action something Americans across the sociopolitical spectrum could get on board with and to ward off the negative reception radical flank groups typically encounter when entering the public consciousness. At the same time, however, Sunrise’s transformative stage messaging still retained a certain radical bent in its willingness to call out the Democratic allies of more moderate environmental movement groups like in its Speaker Pelosi and Senator Feinstein sit-ins.

Finally, in the movement’s reformative stage, Sunrise has geared its tactical and messaging approach towards generating the requisite political resonance to realize its central aims. At this point in the movement, Sunrise has further relied on the traditional messaging and tactical approaches of more moderate activists groups. Primarily this has involved compromising on the combative and absolutist values that dominated its previous two movement stages. In this way, Sunrise’s messaging in its reformative stage is geared towards the political elite and signaling an openness to collaboration in exchange for a seat and influence at the policy-making table. Co-founder Varshini Prakash’s work on the Biden-Sanders Climate Change Unity Taskforce offers a case in point in this shift in movement tactics and messaging. While Sunrise and Prakash understood that Biden was far from their ideal candidate, they also saw the political potential of working with the campaign at the expense of their previous movement values.
Even though the ultimate climate policy platform that emerged from the task force was far more conservative than the ambitions of Sunrise’s full Green New Deal, the efforts of Prakash and other progressive members successfully magnified the depth and scope of Biden’s commitments. In this instance, Sunrise’s approach interestingly most reflected the argument against radical flank movements presented in Rozell & Wilcox’s (1996) case study of the Christian right movement in the United States. In their analysis, the authors concluded that key to the success of the Christian right movement in shaping public policy was the movement leader’s realization that their cause would be best served by abandoning the radical messaging of their previous moral crusade with it being “better to compromise, even on abortion, in order to win and get half-a-loaf, than it is to stand 100 percent on principle and lose” (Rozell & Wilcox 1996, 287). Sunrise’s mirrored approach in its reformatory stage speaks to the uniqueness of the movement’s tactical and messaging approach and further calls into question the absoluteness of previous moderate-radical paradigms. While Sunrise operative framework unquestionably remains far a truly moderate movement group—at least in previous scholarly definitions—its pragmatic moderating approach in the reformatory stage challenges the degree to which it fully aligns with previous definitions of radical flank groups. Importantly, the fruits of this moderating stance have already begun to bear for the movement via Biden’s prioritization of climate action in his first 100 days and its specific attention to issues and frameworks called upon in the Green New Deal and Biden’s emphasis on connecting climate change to larger systemic issues such as labor and income inequality, and racism and environmental justice.

Thus taken in their totality, Sunrise’s shifting tactics and messaging across its three distinct though still interconnected (see Discussion Section) movement stages, offer a new
avenue through which to understand the actions and impacts of a supposedly radical social movement. In its formative stage, Sunrise relied on a combination of radical messaging and traditional movement organizing and recruitment to rally its base of activist and muster inward resonance. Moving into its transformative stage, Sunrise then pivoted staging combative and polarizing radical movement actions to raise public awareness and attention to their cause. At the same time, however, Sunrise’s transformative stage messaging relied on a more restrained approach that worked to align movement demands with preexisting social concerns such as racial and economic inequality while offering their panacea via the Green New Deal. Through this messaging approach, Sunrise sought to make climate action something Americans across the sociopolitical spectrum could get on board with and to develop the outward resonance for climate action that previous environmental social movements had failed to catalyze. Finally, in its reformative stage, Sunrise has shape-shifted once again iterating many of the key tactical and messaging tenets previously prescribed to moderate social movement groups. Moving away from the public clashes and divisiveness that defined its transformative stage, the movement has adopted a messaging and tactical approach that invites its former enemies in the political elite to dialogue and negotiate towards a mutually beneficial end. Through this shift and resultant concessions, Sunrise seeks to elevate the political resonance of its movement demands thus increasing the likelihood of large-scale action to address the climate crisis, even if it falls short of the full radical demands made in preceding stages of the movement.
Opportunities for Further Research

The findings of my analysis offer a compelling jumping-off point for further study. Particularly, the limitations of my research inhibited a more thorough investigation into how best to situate and define Sunrise’s unique radical flank approach and effect in relation to the larger RFE field. Previous understandings of the RFE for various social movements have pulled largely from Haines’ (1984) delineation of positive and negative flank effects. In his framework, a positive flank effect can occur when the actions of radical groups improve the bargaining power of moderate groups in the movement by making their demands seem more reasonable and palatable thus fostering a greater likelihood of the movement achieving its desired ends (Haines 1984). On the flip side, a negative flank effect can occur when the actions of a radical group undermine the efforts of moderate actors by weakening overall support and resources for the movement thus limiting the likelihood of long-term movement efficacy. My work and response to my hypothesis in this thesis have been framed with the rationale that Sunrise evinces a compelling case for a positive radical flank effect in that its efforts have elevated the likelihood of the environmental movement as a whole achieving desired policy change.

Yet, there is also a case to be made within my findings that the work and impact of Sunrise go far beyond a simple increase in receptiveness to moderate environmental policy demands that would qualify a positive RFE. Further investigations into Sunrise could in this way assess the degree to which Sunrise in its introduction as a radical flank group has redefined the entire conversation surrounding climate action in the national zeitgeist. Looking at the impact of Sunrise’s reformative stage, the bolstered environmental actions taken by Biden in his first 100 days in office often go far beyond the previous pushes of moderate environmental groups instead
adopting the more ambitious frameworks and demands of Sunrise and its Green New Deal paradigm. Rather than simply increasing the receptiveness of moderate demands in its RFE, Sunrise may in fact be on its way to reshaping the larger landscape and prerogative of the US environmental movement and subsequent approach to climate policy action on a more significant level.
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