

## The Pragmatism of the Radical Climate Left

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Even before the 2020 election cycle, centrist Democrats had a habit of portraying leftists and progressives as unflinching ideologues imposing purity tests on their fellow party members. Counter-examples, of course, have abounded. And now there's a particularly good one in the Georgia runoff election ending January 5.

Politicians and organizations that backed Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primary are now pouring time and resources into electing candidates who have little interest in their platform. Jon Ossoff, the Democratic challenger running against Republican incumbent Senator David Perdue, has repeatedly stated his opposition to the Green New Deal. Despite that, thousands of young Sunrise volunteers are phone-banking in the hopes of sending him to Washington.

This isn't because Ossoff is secretly a "radical liberal." Rather, it's because Democrats on the party's left wing are more practical than the party has ever given them credit for. They understand the stakes of these races for dealing with the climate and a whole host of other pressing crises. Democratic control of the Senate could dramatically shift the bounds of possible policy in the next few years, while Republican control could serve as a hard brake on bills to meaningfully curb emissions.

A rotating cast of supposedly enlightened Republicans continues to tell media outlets that the Senate doesn't need Democratic control to stop climate change: It just needs centrist cooperation. In a piece published by E&E News last week, former Florida Congressman and Climate Solutions Caucus Chair Carlos Curbelo said that the Biden administration needs to "identify someone or bring someone in who is going to be responsible for reaching out to Republicans. There's a growing number of Senate Republicans willing to engage." Who these Republicans eager for a grand bargain on climate are is anyone's guess—they seldom go on the record themselves.

Reformed former CATO Institute climate skeptic Jerry Taylor, similarly, begged for moderation—i.e., carbon pricing—as an olive branch to free market fundamentalists who apparently need this gesture in order to be willing to help save the planet. "It bodes ill if using market-oriented tools to address climate change are immediately subject to progressive left hostility," Taylor said. "That doesn't bode well for the future of this discussion, especially if we're trying to find some means of gaining bipartisan support."

There's little evidence, though, that Republicans are actually interested in taking such measures over the finish line—whatever their ability to actually lower emissions. The Climate Leadership Caucus is a fossil fuel industry-funded carbon tax push fronted by octogenarian Reaganites, and

it gets prime op-ed real estate every few months to propose its preferred climate plan, which entails kneecapping the Environmental Protection Agency. The track record for climate-friendly Republicans is patchy at best: Curbelo lost his seat in 2018 to Democrat Debbie Murcarsel-Powell. More famously, Bob Inglis—a former South Carolina Congressman—lost his seat in 2010 to a Koch Brothers-backed Tea Party challenger after going on the record as saying some sort of climate action would be necessary; notably, he hadn't voted for the cap-and-trade bill that had riled the libertarian industrialists. That bill itself—Waxman-Markey—was supposed to be proof of concept for bipartisan and corporate-friendly climate compromise, backed in the beginning by the likes of Lindsey Graham and BP. Both eventually withdrew their support, and the measure died without ever coming to a vote in the Senate.

If there's a silent majority of Republicans ready for meaningful climate action, they haven't materialized. And if you're looking to divine the future of bipartisan climate policy, talking to Republicans without a constituency in their own party seems like an odd way to go about it. No one has cracked the nut of passing comprehensive climate policy through Congress, of course. But there's at least a decade of evidence showing what hasn't worked.

The Democrats' left flank, including Justice Democrats and Sunrise, are trying to learn from past mistakes. Republicans killed cap-and-trade partly through successful right-wing primary challenges. Inglis—with his broadly right-wing voting record—was subject to a successful climate litmus test from his party's insurgent wing, which both defeated Waxman-Markey and helped Republicans take back the House in 2010, the Senate in 2014, and the White House in 2016. Militant primaries have long been a reliable tactic for Republicans, even when they've failed in the short run. Barry Goldwater's insurgent 1964 presidential bid set the stage for Ronald Reagan's bitter and narrowly defeated 1976 primary challenge to incumbent Gerald Ford, who lost to Jimmy Carter after Reagan essentially refused to campaign for him; the "Reagan Revolution" was more important. The Reagan administration would proceed to reshape the party in his and Goldwater's image once it took office four years later, laying the groundwork for Donald Trump. In theory, a likeminded approach could help climate activists push the Democratic Party to drop prejudices against big spending and activist government that have kept it from embracing climate policy at the scale needed to address the crisis. On the right and the left, primaries are a means to an end: transforming the party so that it will deliver the policy outcomes you want.

Climate campaigners' willingness to make calls for Ossoff signals a strategic calculation, not undying loyalty. Backing him makes sense for now. It follows a long-held Sunrise mantra: "No permanent friends, no permanent enemies." As cofounder and Executive Director Varshini Prakash has explained, "Even if we are allied with somebody like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in this instant, that doesn't necessarily mean that we will in the future." It's not about liking a politician or their record but about whether they deliver. That also means the door is wide open for less historically progressive lawmakers to step through. Ed Markey, for example, voted for the North American Free Trade Agreement and the war in Iraq; but after he publicly supported the Green New Deal, young climate activists defended him against a tough primary challenge from Joe Kennedy III.

The climate activists campaigning for candidates they don't care for in Georgia are pursuing the strategy Republicans have for half a century: playing to win. Dethroning Mitch McConnell as Senate Majority Leader makes that easier. So does backing up their demands on climate with the threat of a future primary challenge.