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In DNC Chair Race, Climate Activists Chose Purity Over Progress



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This weekend's Democratic National Committee candidate forum was intended for prospective chairs to share their plan to combat the party's historic unpopularity. Instead, climate protestors turned the evening into another exhibit of the damaging influence of activist groups without a constituency.

Protestors from Sunrise Movement and other groups repeatedly interrupted, with scattered demands that candidates spurn fossil fuel companies, declare a climate emergency, and dedicate themselves to speaking for 'people like me' and not 'billionaires.'

The problem with all this is that the people the Sunrise Movement and its peers represent are a minority of a minority. When they demand Democrats speak for them instead of the billionaire class, Sunrise merely asks the party to trade one fringe faction for another.

Sunrise Movement and its allies espouse an array of policies that simply don't appeal to key constituencies for Democrats and, worse, actively REPEL the voters the party is trying to win back. Let's break it down:

- **Banning New Fossil Fuel Projects:** Only 31% of Americans support phasing out fossil fuel projects. The vast majority prefer to leverage a mix of fossil fuels *and* clean technologies.
- **Declaring a Climate Emergency:** Just 33% of swing voters support declaring a climate emergency. When positive information is provided explaining what new authorities a climate emergency declaration would unleash, support drops to 24%.
- **Abolish the Police:** Only 15% of US adults support abolishing police departments—a figure that has remained largely unchanged since 2020.

The group's online platform also calls for other vague reforms, including support for the 'Green New Deal,' a plea to 'overhaul every sector of society to face the climate crisis' and, somewhat incomprehensibly, a call to 'phase out existing projects that don't leave anyone behind.' These ideas are often vague and rarely include specific policy proposals, which makes it almost impossible to conduct rigorous public opinion research on their popularity.

That's likely in Sunrise's interest: if you asked the median American if they'd like to remake the entirety of society to address a luxury issue like climate change, they'd likely laugh you out of the room.

The most recent polling we could find on the Green New Deal simply framed it as a program to 'put tens of millions of people to work in good-paying, union jobs [and slow] the pace of climate change.' Respondents were not presented with a price tag, specific legislative proposals, or anticipated impacts on local economies. Unsurprisingly, the Green New Deal received blanket support from respondents. Of course, it did—who doesn't like puppies and candy?

Almost all recent polling comes from groups with a vested interest in advancing the Green New Deal. But older polling from the Washington Post and the Kaiser Family Foundation presents respondents with a detailed set of pros and cons, and their results tell a different story. More than half of respondents felt the proposal was unrealistic and 67% said they would oppose the Green New Deal given its anticipated impacts on federal spending. That's consistent with Third Way's recent findings on Americans' concerns about the cost of the clean energy transition.

The vagueness of Sunrise and their allies allows them to speak purely in terms of values: what good Democrat doesn't want to fight climate change or create good-paying jobs or strengthen unions or uplift the middle class? It's an excellent strategy to disrupt debate—and a terrible way to broaden the popularity of a party in decline.

Amid the tremendous challenges we currently face—a ticking clock on climate, a president hell-bent on destroying clean energy, and the declining popularity of the Democratic brand—we don’t have the luxury of experimenting with vague, unpopular policies or spurning allies because they fail to pass ideological purity tests.

It is imperative that clean energy supporters build power, win elections, and effect change. The Sunrise playbook will do just the opposite.