THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
***Climate Sense* podcast**

"How does activism affect the climate debate?"

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Episode Summary:

Activists and civil society groups are very focused on climate change. They use a number of different tactics, from peaceful marches to more disruptive acts of civil disobedience to further their cause. Host Samantha Gross speaks with Dana R Fisher, director of the Center for Environment, Community, and Equity at American University about the goals of these actions, whether they change public opinion on climate, and how they compare to past social justice movements.

[music; montage of voices]

GROSS: Climate activism has gotten more, well, interesting in the past year or two We've seen some stunts like activists throwing soup at the Mona Lisa or gluing themselves to buildings or to the stands at sporting events. These actions get attention, but do they increase support for climate action or turn people off? How does the movement against climate change compare to social movements in the past? Are activists moving the needle on climate action?

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I'm Samantha Gross. I'm the director of the Energy Security and Climate Initiative at the Brookings Institution and I've spent my career focused on energy and environmental issues. I've been in Washington for more than 20 years, working on energy policy in government and private industry before I came to Brookings. But I started my career as an engineer, designing technical solutions to environmental problems. My work now focuses on how to transition to a clean, zero-carbon energy system—the technical, political, and social challenges in getting from here to there.

To answer these questions and more about climate activism, I called up an expert on the subject, who's also a colleague at Brookings.

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FISHER: My name is Dana R. Fisher. I am the director of the Center for Environment, Community, and Equity, and a professor in the School of International Service at American University. I am also a nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. And was also a contributing author to the most recent IPCC assessment. I was actually brought in as a contributing author specifically to write a new section on civic activism and engagement. So, I actually got really into looking at climate change as a case to understand the multiple social actors and how they interact with one another.

And I'm a political sociologist by training, so it was a great case for that, because as you know, climate change is this really wicked, tricky problem where everybody has lots of interests that are vying for opinions and vying for their perspectives to win. And as a result, it's a really interesting place to look at politics. In there, there are NGOs and activists who are part of civil society that are also pushing to express their opinions.

And so, as I've continued to expand the work around climate activism, I've been doing that because activism has been taking up a lot more attention and been claiming a lot more space in terms of thinking through where the climate policymaking process is going and where we're going more broadly.

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GROSS: Civil society groups that care about climate come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes. There's not just one climate movement—there are a ton of groups that don't always have the same opinions about how to best tackle the challenge of

climate change. I asked Dana to describe what the climate movement is and walk us though its different facets.

[4:02]

FISHER: So, basically the question is what is a successful movement, a social movement, right? And the deal is that, you know, movements have various characteristics. They have the characteristic of a target, a goal. Almost all movements have a diverse organizational ecosystem. Right? So, if we think about the contemporary climate movement, for example, the movement is made up of these kind of the big greens, these large scale professional organizations that have boards and annual budgets, and they have members, and they have really nice offices in downtown D.C.

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And it goes all the way from that to these much less institutional, less formal, structures that are in some cases this small scale, little, locally embedded groups. Or now we see these groups that are kind of held together by, like, TikTok and stuff like that. And those are much less formal, and they all make up the ecosystem. So, they're all in there.

GROSS: These different types of groups have very different roles to play in the ecosystem of climate activism. Some play within the lines of the political system, and some don't.

[5:12]

FISHER: Within a movement what you end up with is usually groups that are more formal, more professional, and also tend to work inside the political system. We tend to think of them as working as insiders. I'm using my air quotes, which you won't see. And then these groups that tend to be less formally structured also tend to work, sometimes they work as insiders, they work as voters, they work as citizens, they can come and lobby, they can call their representatives, they can sign petitions, there are lots of things they can do within the political system.

They can do stuff in the judicial system. We see a lot of litigation happening now, frequently initiated by individuals who want to work through the judicial system to achieve their movement goals.

But then we also have lots of folks, and increasingly so, as a proportion that is, folks who believe that the political system, the institutional system, does not provide enough opportunity to achieve the goals. And so, they work outside the system. And that's where we see a lot of these kinds of actions that get a lot of attention. Many of them are quite performative. Non-violent civil disobedience is the most common type of activism within this category. Although sometimes there's violence. We saw violent activism around January 6th. That was a movement and the outcome of a movement as well.

[6:32]

But in terms of the climate movement, most common type of outsider tactic is the legally permitted march or demonstration. And then we're seeing more and more folks who are doing that are also getting involved in civil disobedience. And so, many activists are telling me now they've signed up to get arrested for the first time, or they only recently agreed that they would be willing to get arrested.

But it's worth noting here that in the climate movement, at least, the people who are saying they're willing to get arrested, they're exclusively interested in doing nonviolent civil disobedience. And nonviolent civil disobedience in this case is really quite tame. I mean, it can get more aggressive, but in many cases, we're talking about people who you can sit on a sidewalk and if a police officer asks you to move, that's nonviolent civil disobedience.

Or one of my favorites is when Jane Fonda went on the steps of the Capitol and stood there during her fire drill Fridays as a form of protest. And basically, Capitol Police came over and said, Ma'am, you have to move. And she said, no, and then she got arrested because that is nonviolent civil disobedience.

So, the most common type is this. Right? Which is very benign and mildly confrontational or disruptive, but a lot of it's quite performative. And in that category, I would put people who throw soup. Right? People who throw soup and smear paint on art that's covered in protective coatings—that would fall into the same category because it really doesn't bother any individual person and it makes moderate damage in terms of damage to the coating, but not actually damaged the artwork.

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And so, when we talk about the more disruptive actions, it's a very small proportion of all the types of activism around climate and the environment that we're seeing today.

GROSS: We've seen some new tactics from the movement in the last year or two. Throwing soup at paintings in museums is one tactic. Activists gluing themselves to buildings or roads in protest is another. And I've wondered if these very performative actions are effective in bringing new people around to the cause. They often seem to be removed from the problem at hand. Refusing to leave the steps of the Capitol is one thing—trying to get the attention of lawmakers. But the painting in the museum has a tenuous link at best to the problem of climate change.

[8:56]

FISHER: So, first and foremost, when people are doing these types of performative—and, you know, we'll call them mildly disruptive actions, confrontational actions—these types of actions have a specific goal. And their goal is to get media attention with the hope that their message gets out to the public sphere. Okay? They are not trying to change hearts and minds of anybody who does not think that climate change is an important issue. So, that's number one. They define the success of it as the number of times they get media hits or hits on social media.

This type of activism has always been unpopular. It was unpopular during the Civil Rights movement. It was unpopular during the women's suffrage movement—always unpopular. And a lot of people forget that. So, it is intended and expected to be unpopular.

However, number two, a lot of people are making claims about how it is turning off general sympathizers to the movement or people who are already in the movement. And actually, there's no evidence of that. There's no data supporting that from historical movements or from the current wave of climate related activism.

What actually research tells us is that that when people engage in what we call a radical flank, which is a more radical component of a movement to push for more social change by being confrontational—and when I say radical, I usually use my air quotes here because while the radical flank of, you know, women's suffrage actually did end up blowing up buildings, this radical flank that we're talking about in the climate movement is really quite benign, at least so far. Right? But when a radical flank is actually designed to draw media attention, get public awareness about the issue, and to draw support for more moderate factions in the movement. And that is actually completely working right now within the climate movement.

GROSS: This is the old adage that any publicity is good publicity. Even if people don't support the specific action, even if they are annoyed by it, they are thinking about climate at a moment when they otherwise wouldn't have.

[10:59]

FISHER: I'll give you two pieces of evidence. Piece of evidence one, number one, I mean, this is anecdotal, but nonetheless, I think interesting evidence. So, when the man glued his foot at the U.S. Open. Right? So, Extinction Rebellion activists, there were three activists, they went to the U.S. Open, they unfurled the banner, one of them glued his foot to the stadium. Right?

Now why did he do that? I'll tell you why, because a couple of weeks earlier we had the tennis open here in Washington, D.C. And there, there were activists who were related, they were not connected with Extinction Rebellion, but they were connected with another group that does this kind of more confrontational activism. And they designed to just go in, they bought tickets, and they unfurled a banner, and kind of yelled about climate change. They were quickly escorted out, they got not one media hit. Okay?

So, the folks from Extinction Rebellion decided to do the same thing. And they decided to be more confrontational. One of them volunteered to glue his foot, which by the way, crazy gluing your foot to cement, not something I would recommend anybody do because to get your foot disconnected, it involves losing quite a bit of skin.

Anyway, so they did that. Right? And when that happened, I got an email from TMZ Live asking me if I would go on TMZ Live to talk about it, which I honestly thought was a joke to begin with because nobody asks sociologists to go on TMZ live unless they're talking about like gossip or sports. Right? So, I went on TMZ Live to have this conversation. And they said to me well, why are they doing this? It doesn't matter at

all. And I said, I am on TMZ Live talking about climate activism, and we're going to end up talking about the climate emergency and why people are feeling so concerned that they're actually mobilizing and gluing their feet to the stadium.

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That's why they're doing it. I mean, so that's a perfect example. We ended up having a really interesting conversation about people who are feeling such concern about the climate crisis that they're willing to put themselves in harm's way in this way.

And it was a really interesting conversation. And I have to say that the folks TMZ Live were very sympathetic and interested in having that conversation. And moreover, as I mentioned to them, Coco herself, it was her match that got disrupted, she ended up going on to win the entire U.S. Open last year. She actually said exactly why they were doing it. She said, I think climate change is an important issue. I don't support this tactic, but I think we need to be doing more about it. She's exactly the reason they did it. She's saying she supports more moderate factions of the movement.

GROSS: This is fascinating. You don't see a lot of serious conversations on issues on TMZ. But hey, it's an example of a disruption doing exactly what it was intended to do.

[13:41]

FISHER: Example number two, after the people threw the soup at the Mona Lisa recently, which many people were very unhappy about. And, again, I was asked, why are they doing this? And I said, actually, I didn't even say it, one of my colleagues who, who worked with me on that piece that we wrote for *Nature*, posted on, on social media. He said, take a look. Here's a snapshot of the front page of the *Washington Post* right now. It has a video of the activists throwing soup and their demands. Front page *Washington Post*. You can't buy that kind of media coverage. And that is why they're doing it. Because the conversation goes broader than just why they're throwing soup in Paris at a museum.

Then, finally, when you ask me about whether or not it turns off people, I'll give you some evidence from the research that I've done with climate activists. So, I surveyed protesters. This is one of the things that I do, I surveyed protesters at the March to End Fossil Fuels, which took place in New York City in September.

GROSS: September 2023.

FISHER: There were 75,000 people in the streets, and I used a methodology to collect a a field approximation of what we call a random sample of the crowd with a research team.

One of the first questions I asked them is, have they participated in the past year in civil disobedience? So nonviolent civil disobedience, direct action. Less than half of the people in the crowd reported that they had done that. So, most of the people in the crowd were actually folks who were more interested in peaceful marches or in

working through insider legal or political actions. Okay? But many of them were connected with kind of mainstream environmental and climate groups.

[15:15]

Next question I asked them is I said, do you support organizations that organize civil disobedience, including, and I listed sit ins, blockades, throwing food, et cetera, so forth. So, I listed all of that. And one of the things I thought as I was like, oh, it'd be really interesting if we see differences in opinion about this because of demographics, because of the organizations they're connected with, where they're from, you know, something like that.

Not one person in the survey did not support the action. Not one person in my sample. So, even the people who are at this action, who do not do this kind of civil disobedience, support organizations doing it. So, the argument that it's turning off activists is just not true. It's not turning off activists. It's not turning off sympathizers. It may make people not want to give money to those groups, may not want to sign up with those groups, but that's not what they're trying to do.

People very rarely sign up to join a movement and say, I'm going to join a movement, I want to be radical. I mean, every once in a while, I get somebody like that, but it's very uncommon. What's more common is, I want to join a movement, I want to do something, I'm going to join my local branch of the Sierra Club, or I'm going to join Mom's Clean Air Force, do stuff around electric school buses in my community. And then people may get frustrated and become radicalized and start to think about doing nonviolent civil disobedience.

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But that's not the gateway. So, they're not thinking about that. That's not their goal. So that's, those are some examples for you.

GROSS: Dana mentioned previous social and protest movements, like for civil rights or women's suffrage. How does the climate movement compare to these past movements for social change, which, by the way, achieved many of their goals over time?

[17:05]

FISHER: In a lot of ways, the climate movement is completely classic in what we've seen in other social movements. Right? It is very classic. There are differences today. Some of them are differences because the world has changed. Earlier movements were, you know, the Civil Rights movement, struggle for women's suffrage, struggle against apartheid. Right? These movements didn't have social media. Social media has changed the landscape quite substantially. And in some of the ways it's because the way that people connect to one another in civil society and just in general, but also in terms of organizationally when you want to get involved in a civil society organization is so different now. And the way that we used to think about membership, which involved your sign up for something, you might pay dues, you might get a calendar, and then you go to meetings, or you go and do hiking.

And at the same time, and this I noticed when I was doing my work with American Resistance—so that included climate activists, but it was activists across the left—is that people today are much less likely to be one organizational people. Right? You're not like, I'm a member of this group and this is my identity because of the way the organizations work. So, people will be connected with multiple organizations simultaneously, and they will do some activities with different groups all at the same time.

GROSS: These connections to multiple organizations make total sense in a world where it's so easy to make connections through social media. The cost of being associated with multiple groups, in terms of time and commitment, is really low, so it's not surprising that people do it.

But climate change is a very different kind of social problem than previous ones.

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The movement isn't arguing for greater rights for a particular group of people, for instance. Instead, it's demanding action on an issue that has the potential to affect everyone. I'm not sure if that makes it easier or harder to mobilize people.

[19:06]

FISHER: A couple of things that I do think are unique about the climate movement. One is the the degree to which it's an international problem changes the way the movement works. Right? The movements frequently kind of burble up from the bottom, from the grassroots, from the locality, and when you're targeting an international regime, it happens really differently.

Today though, the climate movement is working in localities around the United States, in localities around the world, but it's also working at multiple scales and it's crossing paths, crossing regions, and crossing between the north-south divide in really interesting ways. And so, that's unique to the climate movement. I mean, there are some other movements that have that kind of multi-scaled, multi-layered governance approach. But the climate movement is really particularly there.

And the other thing that I would say that's unique about the climate movement is that it continues to be remarkably peaceful given how long the struggle has taken. Because we know from historical movements that a radical flank tends to form, and then they get more and more confrontational quite quickly. And there's been a real push within the climate movement and among activists and among groups to stay peaceful.

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So, I would say that that's the unique thing so far is the degree to which we're really seeing, you know, a tempered expansion of the movement. And when I say expansion, I mean, the movement is quite demobilized at the moment, which is very common during a Democratic administration in the United States. So, we would expect that. But while we're seeing fewer people engaged than were during the Trump administration, what we are seeing is a higher proportion of them willing to

and interested in engaging in civil disobedience and a lot more of the actions are focused there rather than focused around letter writing campaigns or town hall meetings or, you know, whatnot.

GROSS: Given that climate change is a problem that impacts everyone, is it strange that there aren't more people out on the streets protesting and a greater degree of activism? Or does the ubiquity and the slow-march nature of climate change lull us all into complacency?

[21:16]

FISHER: I think that to be honest, the most wicked aspect of this wicked problem, if I can say it that way, is the fact that when we think about climate change a lot of people have a lot of suggestions for what should be done. A lot of activists do. But even if they achieve their goals, even if the administration declares a climate emergency, or let's say that they stop extracting fossil fuels or stop building out fossil fuel infrastructure and fossil fuels are phased out, let's say that they achieve that by 2030, right? Which would be, a lot of activists would be very happy with that that goal, if they achieve that goal. The problem is we'll still experience the climate crisis. And climate change will continue until we stabilize and then reduce, stabilize at least, if not reduce concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.

So, though it is a really wicked problem because even if the activists achieve their goals, we won't feel the effects of it. And I think that that means that it's harder for the movement to mobilize the masses to get behind the issue because it's such a wicked challenging problem.

And that's one of the reasons why in my new book I talk about how it's not likely that we will see people mobilizing in the kind of mass mobilization way that is most likely to yield the types of changes that are being called for until people individually experience the climate crisis themselves. And I mean that in terms of experiencing climate shocks, like extreme weather, flooding, the tornadoes, wildfires or, you know, extreme drought, et cetera and so forth.

The problem is that at the point that people are experiencing that are we going to be too late? How far gone will we be and what level of recovery is possible?

So, it's a really wicked problem and it makes it very challenging for activists. My sense is that a lot of activists try not to think about this because it's really hard to get your head wrapped around it. And then think about what's the best thing to do and how to organize when you're dealing with this kind of a problem.

So, I can tell you those of us who study the activism as well as study how to address the problem from all sides, from the social science side, have been struggling with this for quite some time.

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GROSS: How does activism change based on politics? Dana mentioned earlier that fewer people are engaged now than were during the Trump administration. But we

have an election coming up that could radically change how the United States approaches climate change and our energy system.

[23:51]

FISHER: Well, as research shows us, when Democrats are in the White House, progressive activism tends to go down. So, we should expect to see less activism in the streets generally and certainly around political issues like climate.

This is also exacerbated by the fact that we had January 6th, which happened right during the transition of power. And after that, there was actually a bunch of protests that was scheduled around the inauguration, because there usually is protests around the inauguration. And I think there were some climate activists who were planning to be a part of that. All of that got canceled.

And, you know, in general, people on the left got in line behind President Biden and were supporting Biden, the peaceful transition of power. And also, the climate policymaking that came immediately afterwards. I mean, right away, Biden, re-engaged with the Paris agreement, made a bunch of like very aggressive statements, started pushing for Build Back Better, which eventually became the Inflation Reduction Act. And climate activists were, you know, supportive of that.

What we do know is that if we end up with a Republican president back in the White House, particularly a Donald Trump back in the White House, given his climate policies, as well as his responses to peaceful activism in the past, we should expect that, one, there's going to be a lot more activism generally on the left, and two, that it's very unlikely to stay peaceful, because, as you and I both remember probably, there were tanks in the streets here in D.C. by the end of the Trump administration.

And I've had a conversation with a number of people in the media, as well as folks who study protests like me, and we all feel pretty confident that we'll see tanks back in Washington, D.C., pretty quickly. I know a bunch of activists who are talking about protests around the inauguration, which, you know, is standard and will happen. I would expect we'd see it whoever comes into the White House.

The Women's March 2017 was the largest single day of activism in U.S. history. and it also was an amazing, beautiful, peaceful, colorful array. That's the kind of thing we saw in 2017. I don't think that's what we'll see if we see another Trump administration.

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If we see a Harris administration, it'll be very different, but I do not think that we will see as little climate activism as we're seeing now.

GROSS: We saw a huge change in the presidential race this summer, when President Biden dropped out and his vice president, Kamala Harris, stepped into the democratic nomination. I asked Dana how the activist community changed after the Democratic candidate changed.

[26:32]

FISHER: I was on book tour for the past spring. And during my book tour, I did a number of events with activists, climate activists, around the country. And one of the things that was surprising to me initially was that the youth climate activists, many of them were talking about how they were not supporting the Biden administration, which surprised me initially. And then I actually remember doing the event, one of my events in Los Angeles where I had a well-known Democratic operative who works on climate politics in the crowd. And when one of the activists said that they were telling people in their group not to vote, I watched her almost fall off her chair. I mean, because I think a lot of people were not aware of the degree to which climate activists, youth climate activists particularly, were unsupportive of the Biden administration.

Now, I spent this summer, this past summer studying this 12-week long mobilization called the Summer of Heat, which was a mobilization targeting big banks that were supporting fossil fuel expansion. It involved a whole bunch of civil disobedience in New York City and other places. And I was surveying the participants involved. In the end, I surveyed over 300 participants in the Summer of Heat. And it happens to be that we have the sample split between people who were taking my survey before Biden stepped aside, and then about half of them took the survey afterwards. So, I actually have this kind of natural opportunity, a natural experiment in the effects of Biden versus Harris on climate activists and their perspectives on the election.

So, back when Biden was running, and Biden was expected to be the nominee, 19% of climate activists told me that they would choose not to vote in the election, which is extremely high for the record. And I actually, when I split the data and looked at young people, that is people who are 30 and younger, it went up to 33%, which is crazy, but there it is. So, those were the data until Biden stepped aside.

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Now, since Biden stepped aside—as I said, I continued collecting data—and in the end, once Harris became the nominee, that number went down, so only 4% of the climate activists who took my survey after Harris took over instead of Biden said that they would choose not to vote, which is much more in line with what we might expect of people who might support a Green candidate or people who would just choose not to participate, which, you know, you get in any election.

So, there's been a big shift. Now, the question is why? And initially it was very clear to me that many of the climate activists felt like Harris, because of her policies prior to coming into the White House as vice president, had quite progressive policies around fracking, around a Green New Deal. And many activists thought that she might re embrace those policies. We just had the debate between Harris and Trump, and it is very clear from what we did hear, there wasn't that much on climate, but from what we did hear there is no reason to think that those policies will be part of Harris's platform.

So, what will that mean? I think that at this point people are much more excited about a younger candidate, a candidate who has a progressive history. But I know there are some conversations about how to push what will hopefully be a Harris

administration to be more aggressive on climate change, to move beyond the IRA, not just stay the course with the IRA.

GROSS: I don't think a potential President Harris will get much of a honeymoon with climate activists if she wins. Her candidacy has energized younger voters, but there's still the problem of incrementalism. Changing to a zero-carbon energy system and eliminating greenhouse gas emissions is going to take a long time, raising questions about whether any candidate will have strong enough policies to keep activists happy.

[30:24]

FISHER: There is incrementalism that is basically achieving what's politically feasible. And I think that the Inflation Reduction Act is a great example of that. It's a lot easier to push back against regressive policies, let's say it that way, than it is to push back against certain components of the incremental policymaking that you wish were stronger. Right?

But all of us who have been in politics for many years and have been observing politics for many years know that the best way to actually achieve goals is through getting to a successful outcome and then ratcheting it up, which is basically incrementalism.

But folks who are the most critical in the movement, most of them have not had that experience. Many of them are young and it tends to be that young people are not as comfortable with incrementalism. I would also just say that this is very similar to the arguments that happened within the Civil Rights movement that have been well documented in books. I mean, I wasn't alive, but I mean, I've read a lot of those books and it's very common in movements to have that.

GROSS: This is truly a conundrum for those of us that care a lot about the climate. It's easier to mobilize people against a clear enemy and incrementalism isn't inspiring.

But climate change is such a multi-faceted problem that one piece of legislation or executive action will not significantly move the needle. We need years of sustained action in multiple areas—not just energy, but agriculture, buildings and zoning, transportation, trade. It's hard to keep people motivated through this process when they want a fix now.

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Many thanks to the experts I talked to in this episode.

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find my work on climate change and research from the Brookings Initiative on Climate Research and Action on the Brookings website.

I’m Samantha Gross, and this is *Climate Sense*.