

What Climate Progress Is Possible Now?

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Ariana Brocious: I'm Ariana Brocious.

Kousha Navidar: I'm Kousha Navidar

Ariana Brocious: And this is Climate One.

[music change]

Ariana Brocious: We're a couple weeks into the new administration and already we have a sense what direction the country is going to take for the next few years.

Kousha Navidar: Right, the President has signed a pile of executive orders ranging from trying to end birthright citizenship to pulling out of the World Health Organization and the Paris Climate Accord.

Ariana Brocious: Some of this mirrors what he did in his first term, but this time it feels more extreme. And some of it feels performative – I mean, the U.S. is ALREADY the world's top oil and gas producer. But one of Trump's early executive actions was to declare a national energy emergency. Doesn't seem like the fossil fuel industry is really struggling right now.

Kousha Navidar: The administration does seem more focused this time around and they are hitting the ground running.

Ariana Brocious: it's a new administration that feels emboldened by electoral success.

Kousha Navidar: True. However, for climate, the renewable energy space is in a much different place than it was in 2017. We are farther along in the energy transition partly because the Biden administration gave that a boost with the Inflation Reduction Act.

Ariana Brocious: Some of Trump's executive orders will likely be halted by the courts. We've already seen a judge block his attempt to undo birthright citizenship, which is granted in the constitution. But I will say that the **public** response to the second Trump administration feels a little different. I remember covering the Women's March in 2017 and it was just this fiery group of people just taking to the streets full of outrage

Kousha Navidar: And I was at the Women's March in 2017. I was living in D.C. at the time, working as a speechwriter. My mom actually came down from New York and we walked together. And your term fiery was palpable.

Ariana Brocious: This time there was the People's March shortly before Inauguration Day, and while there were thousands of people in the street, it wasn't the record breaking turnout that the Women's March had.

Kousha Navidar: It wasn't. And I'm wondering and I guess I want to ask you, Ariana do you feel like that's the "fatigue" I'm hearing people - I'm sure you're hearing people - talk about, having to go through this all over again?

Ariana Brocious: Yeah, I sometimes feel like burying my head in the sand myself. AND I know that doing something feels better than doing nothing. In this episode, we're focusing on how people who care about climate can navigate the new political landscape.

Dana Fisher is Director of the Center for Environment, Community, and Equity at American University. She's also an expert in climate activism who is routinely out in the streets herself, interviewing and surveying protesters. I asked her how the somewhat muted protests around the inauguration this year compared to her expectations.

Dana Fisher: I'd predicted that there would be a lot of civil disobedience on the day of the inauguration. There was actually a big coalition of folks who were planning on being involved in nonviolent civil disobedience in D.C. on that day. In fact, there were four different events being coordinated simultaneously. However, we had the polar vortex here in Washington, D.C. And the inauguration committee decided to move the entire inauguration inside because it was so cold. So, um, so the swearing in took place in the Capitol, which is extremely fortified. There was no public participation. There was no parade. And the people who came to town to watch the inauguration were invited to go to the Capital One Arena. So there was no open public space for protest. Now there were protesters who were out in the streets engaging in protest, but it was much smaller than expected. I mean, as it was, though, I had one of my, uh, one of my members of my team was at the event and one of the main events. And he's He reported there were a couple hundred people there, which is pretty big considering, you know, the idea was to come out and protest when there were people there and instead they protested alone because there was nobody in the streets to protest.

Ariana Brocious: I remember during the first few weeks of the first Trump administration, he made a lot of decisions and actions that were shocking to the public, the Muslim ban, people being stuck in the airports, lawyers, immigration lawyers, you know, sitting in the airports for hours, trying to help people who were stuck it seemed at the time, there was a lot of things that people reacted to with just shock, And this time, I'm, I'm not sure. Trump has already signed a slew of executive orders. They encompass a lot. a lot of it has to do with immigration, um, deportations and the like. Are we seeing a similar response

Dana Fisher: Well, I think actually we are. I mean, so just to remind you and to remind everybody

the travel ban was announced 10 days after the inauguration of Donald Trump during his first administration. We are on day five. Well, if you include Monday, which was the inauguration, or I guess we're on day four, we have been overwhelmed with executive orders that include closing down offices in all the agencies. There's a whole bunch of limitations that just were announced to limit the National Institute of health. The United States has pulled out of the climate agreement. The United States has pulled out of the World Health Organization. The list goes on and on, and I know that there's a bunch of reports locally about ice raids happening -

Ariana Brocious: Immigration Customs Enforcement.

Dana Fisher: And so basically, all of that means, um, are starting to get outraged and we're starting to see hints of it. I would imagine that we're going to see quite a bit of action. It's just that we're, we're a little early in the game here. I mean, what happened after the first women's march is people got on their buses and they went home and many of them formed organizations, like they formed local hubs of the women's march, which were like these local groups to have women to work together. They formed chapters of indivisible. They got involved in other groups. There have been a ton of meetings this week. To, um, to organize in communities with people who were involved in the people's March, or who are concerned about what's going on. And a lot of it is directing people right to the local level. And we're also seeing a whole bunch of outrage online.

Ariana Brocious: We've begun to see a lot more criminalization of public protest and I'm curious how you think that affects the landscape of who's willing to kind of put themselves out there when the risks are getting, you know, um, in some cases, a lot more serious.

Dana Fisher: So the stakes are higher. It's absolutely true. I mean, but I think that one of the things that's worth noting here is that this is a very common progression in a social movement, right? With when we have social movements, people get frustrated. They don't achieve their goals. The state gets repressive, I mean, in this case, we're seeing a highly repressive state and I think the state will become even more repressive and members of social movements who are engaging in activism know that they realize that and, you know, at a certain point, people start to feel like they have no other choice, and this is what they have to do because they are only able to express their political will as outsiders in the political system. My sense from talking to a lot of activists in the past few weeks, and particularly last weekend, is that, um, many, many of the people who are participating in activism right now feel that way. And I think, and they felt that way before Trump even took office, let alone after these executive orders. If we look back to the civil rights movement during the period of the civil rights movement, I mean, obviously most civil rights activists were Black Americans and Black Americans really felt like they were fighting for their legal status. They were fighting to stop Jim Crow. They were fighting to be. You know, to have equality and be treated equally. And obviously that struggle still continues in many ways. I mean, more so now than it was even a week ago at, you know, because of that, a lot of activists chose to engage in nonviolent civil disobedience. The movement was extremely nonviolent and they expected that they were going to fill the jails and they did. And in fact, you know, I just showed my students a video of you know, one time, an interview that Martin Luther King Jr. gave right after, um, one of the big protests in Birmingham, where they filled the jails, and he said, this is the success of our nonviolent civil disobedience. This is part of the process. Systemic change is really hard. I mean, we know that from the climate battle, but we also know that, you know, long term change that involves taking power away from a few who are, you know, clutching it in their cold, dead hands is going to be a process and, you know, fossil fuel interests have shown us that for many, many years with the ways that they've responded to climate activists and people engaging in, you know, pushing for climate action. So I think that it's just now expanding out even more-

Ariana Brocious: To recap just what you said there, I think it's powerful to remember that the

people who were most active in the civil rights movement, many of them did so at knowing, um, this, the amount of risk they were putting themselves in and did it repeatedly and in full knowledge of that, So I hear that. And I also want to make the distinction here. Again, with the civil rights movement and you stressing that they, it was such a non violent movement, such a peaceful movement overall. Um, and you've done some research recently that is leading you to think that maybe we are actually entering an era where a broader group of the public thinks that political violence is acceptable and okay, which is worrying.

Mm hmm. Mm

So in October, the American Values Survey found that 8 percent of Democrats in a representative sample of the United States supported violence. They felt that political violence may be necessary to protect America. When we fielded the same question, it was slightly adapted. The week before the election, 24 percent of left leaning individuals reported the same thing: that they thought that political violence may be necessary to save our country. And when we did this survey at the people's March, we asked the exact same question. 33 percent of the people in the crowd reported that they believe that political violence may be necessary to save our country. And I want to just highlight here that I realized that, you know, people who go to the people's march are not representative of Democrats or not representative of all of America. They're representative of the most engaged part of the population in a lot of ways. They're engaged in going to a peaceful, legally permitted protest and 94 percent of them voted for, you know, Harris in the election. So these are Democrats who are starting to wonder if. Political violence will be necessary. And I think one of the things that's really particularly terrifying about, you know, these data and these findings are we collected our data 2 days before the inauguration. That's 2 days before President Trump pardoned a whole bunch of people for engaging in political violence at the Capitol on January 6th and the message that's being sent is that, you know, maybe political violence is just a natural part of our political culture today. So, that doesn't mean they're going to act on it, but this is a huge shift on the left in terms of their belief about whether or not America can save itself and its democracy without violence. I mean, what's interesting is that the work that we've done so far with the climate movement finds that the climate movement is extremely committed to peace and extremely committed specifically to non violent civil disobedience. Many of them have been trained in non violent civil disobedience for many years.

Ariana Brocious: do you have a recommendation for a way forward for climate activists in particular or advocates, um, and how they should navigate this new political landscape in a way that will be effective?

Dana Fisher: Yeah. I mean, I, so I, I end Saving Ourselves with 3 suggestions and I actually think they're more useful now than they even were before, particularly because in a lot of ways, the federal. Political avenues that had existed to the degree that they existed during the Biden administration are closed. So, 1st, thing that I suggest is that climate activists need to create solidarity and, um, community. Amongst themselves and, you know, one of the things that I know from studying the climate movement, but also studying the environmental movement and reading about it since, you know, for all of grad school and beyond is that the climate movement does not do a great job of connecting people across identity orientation and social class, but it really needs to. I mean, even at this, you know, the people's March, which was not climate activists, the people's March, it was mostly highly educated white people. And that is not really solidarity. So I would suggest that the climate movements spend more time with that, trying to build community and solidarity across. Specifically to unions, specifically to people who are going to be likely facing some of the worst, you know, the brunt of some of these executive orders. 1st. Number 2 is that the climate movement needs to learn from the past and, you know, and particularly, I talk in the book about learning from the civil rights movement and the struggle for women's suffrage, where the

movement, the movements both capitalized on. Moral shocks and violence against activists, and particularly the civil rights movement, did a wonderful job of using these moments to expand the movement and bring people out in the streets. And I think, you know, we saw that around George Floyd, as I was mentioning before, but there is this opportunity when there's violence against activists. And unfortunately, I do not see any way we will live through the next four years without there being violence against activists and violence against climate activists will be one of the, you know, one of the things that I think is 100 percent likely. So, given that, I don't think people should hide in their homes. I think people need to, you know, recognize the threats, prepare for them, and need to be prepared to capitalize on it when it happens. And the third thing that I suggest, which is actually, um, not for activists, it's for everybody. And this is that we know that climate shocks are coming. We know they're going to hit more frequently and with more severity. We also know, and everybody who's been paying attention to what's going on in California knows this, that one of the first things that happens in a disaster, is you lose power and you lose cell service. So anybody who thinks, and I always tell my students this, if you think that TikTok is going to come and save you when you, you know, you're stuck in your house

Ariana Brocious: it's your neighbors

Dana Fisher: it's your neighbors, it's your friends, your neighbors, and your community. And so one of the things that I think we all should be doing is cultivating resilience in our communities so that you have these ties to people near you who will be there to help you when, and if disaster strikes.

Ariana Brocious: And that is why you should have a block party. And that is why you should, you know, invite your neighbors over for dinner and get to know your community and become engaged. And we've done a lot of shows with that in mind, because it is not only just a good policy to be a human, but really can help you be more resilient in this time of, of climate chaos.

Dana Fisher is director of the Center for Environment, Community, and Equity at American University. Thank you for joining us on Climate One.

Dana Fisher: Thanks again for having me.

Kousha Navidar: Coming up, reframing the narrative could bring more people into the climate tent.

Nathaniel Stinnett: The greatest trick the fossil fuel industry ever played was convincing us that the climate crisis is a suicide, rather than a homicide.

Kousha Navidar: We'll talk about how that could change, when Climate One continues.

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This is Climate One. I'm Ariana Brocious.

In the 2024 presidential election, voters had a choice between candidates with starkly different views on many issues, including climate policy. But climate change didn't rank high among voters. And in fact, the issue was barely brought up by either campaign leading up to the election.

[music change]

Nathaniel Stinnett is Founder and Executive Director of the Environmental Voter Project. He says that the candidates don't care when the voters don't seem to care. But he's working on that. And he has been for years. Climate One's Austin Colón checked in with him about how he was feeling after the recent election.

Nathaniel Stinnett: Well, uh, I'm a little bit better rested than I was, uh, in October and November, Austin. Uh, yeah, you know, we're sad. It isn't like you can look at the results and see that an enormous number of climate leaders were elected. But we are so proud of the work that our whole team put in. And we're rested and ready to hit the ground running in 2025.

Austin Colón: Right. And I have to say, you know, seeing the results of the election, I have a very similar reaction. And it makes me wonder because I've seen a number that around 70 percent of Americans acknowledge climate change and like 57 percent are concerned about it. And you wrote that the exit polls had a very different story about voters who listed climate as their top concern. And so what did the exit polls say?

Nathaniel Stinnett: Yeah. So. Although about two thirds of Americans said that they'd prefer to vote for candidates who lead on climate, this was in polling data heading into the election, unfortunately, that climate support was a mile wide and an inch deep, Austin, because exit polls showed that only 7 percent of voters in November said that climate change was their top priority. Just 7 percent

Austin Colón: 7 percent

Nathaniel Stinnett: yeah, yeah, compared to like 39 percent for economy and jobs and 21 percent for immigration.

Austin Colón: gotcha. So 7 percent feels like a very small number, definitely not enough to. Though, how does that 7 percent compare to past elections?

Nathaniel Stinnett: So it is growth compared to 2020. So in 2020, 4 percent of voters listed climate as their top priority. So we're doing a little bit, a little bit better, but You're right that it doesn't seem like a lot, Austin, because it isn't a lot. I mean, no matter how you slice it, that's just not enough voting power, and we need to get our act together in the climate movement.

Austin Colón: Right. And what would you say would be like a threshold of support where, you know, political leaders are going to have to listen, whether they want to or not.

Nathaniel Stinnett: Yeah, so it's a very, very good question, and obviously it depends on the election and the location, but to give some context from this last presidential election, The number one priority of voters in exit polls was 39 percent said that economy and jobs was their top priority. 21 percent said immigration, 11 percent abortion, 8 percent healthcare, then 7 percent climate change. So climate change was kind of in the middle, in fifth place. I think we would want to get it at least to third place, get it up into the 15 or 20 percent range so that politicians feel like they're forced to address it. Kind of like Kamala Harris felt like she was forced to address to immigration, even though it might not have been the issue she wanted to talk about, she felt like it was important to so many voters that she had to address it. And climate change isn't there yet.

Austin Colón: And recently you wrote an op ed about three ways to address climate politics differently. So it sounds like you have a plan where we can start, you know, growing that support. So let's start with the first thing, um, how the climate story is told. Why does that top your list?

Nathaniel Stinnett: Yeah, so, people are probably tired of hearing the word narrative, but the truth

is, a good narrative isn't just a gimmick. It's what, uh, the famous historian Yuval Noah Harari calls our species' superpower. We have, as a species, have evolved a narrative. as like a survival technique, kind of like other animals use camouflage, because it allows us to cooperate with huge numbers of people to solve enormously complex problems. But when we look at the climate crisis, the narrative of the climate crisis, it's broken. And here's what I mean by that, Austin. Most individuals currently view ourselves as the villains of the climate story. Because of our consumer habits. Boy, is it hard to win a battle against yourself.

Austin Colón: And, and also is, I'd like to point out too, that that's not an accident that

Nathaniel Stinnett: That's right, the fossil fuel industry has spent millions for decades with, you know, slick carbon footprint calculators and amazing ad campaigns trying to convince us that like we screwed the planet up and it's all our fault and so we've got to get our act together. Meanwhile, we're ignoring all the coal fired power plants that they built. And, and so I'd suggest that this isn't just. a bad narrative for us. It's also misdiagnosing the problem. Because the truth is that our society is so locked into carbon intensive systems that no amount of personal lifestyle changes could possibly address the enormity of the climate crisis. And as a case in point, many years ago an MIT class calculated that even if Americans lived without homes, or if we lived as itinerant monks,

Austin Colón: Hmm.

Nathaniel Stinnett: Our carbon footprints would still be twice the global average. Twice the global average!

Austin Colón: That, that blows my mind. Hmm.

Nathaniel Stinnett: I know, it blew my mind too! And, and this, this misplaced blame, this collective guilt, Austin, lies at the heart of our narrative problem in the climate movement. Because as I wrote in my recent op ed, the greatest trick the fossil fuel industry ever played was convincing us that the climate crisis is a suicide, rather than a homicide. And I know that sounds harsh and combative, but the truth is, we are the victims, not the villains. And our goal must be to break free of an industry that's locking us into our own demise here. Supply of fossil fuels is always going to be problematic. If you are a for profit industry who has All of this supply, all of this product sitting at your feet. You have to get rid of it, you have to sell it, you have to find people to burn it. It's not that there are people, you know, sitting in their offices twirling their mustaches, finding ways to hurt us. It's that for profit companies need to make profit. And fossil fuel companies do that by selling oil. So yes, we do need to overcome them. And we should not shy away from being combative because, again, you know, by defining a villain and coming together as a cooperative group to reach a collective goal against that villain, I mean, that's how we, that's how we win world wars. That's how we cure diseases. That's how we land on the moon. This is our species superpower.

Austin Colón: Right. So species superpower telling stories Reframe the stories the first steps and then you say the the second point is that there needs to be more focus on voters than politicians, so what does that look like?

Nathaniel Stinnett: Sometimes I like to think of politics as a marketplace with a supply side and a demand side. And usually, all of us focus on the supply side, by which I mean we campaign for candidates on the assumption that if they win, they're then going to automatically supply good climate

Austin Colón: Right.

Nathaniel Stinnett: But that supply side theory has a bunch of problems with it. Two problems in particular. The first is different groups of voters vote in different elections. So, in 2016, 139 million people voted. Four years later, 160 million people voted. Last November, it went down to 156 million. And we in the climate movement need to make sure whenever there's an election, no matter how many people show up, we pack that group with as many climate voters as possible. That's what I mean by a demand side focus. But the second thing, Austin, and I'd suggest this is even more important, is that we need to recognize that even when we do elect good climate leaders, it isn't like they can then just snap their fingers and make good policy happen.

Austin Colón: Right.

Nathaniel Stinnett: they still need to pick and choose what to spend their political capital on, and they're not going to spend it on an issue like climate that so few voters prioritize. And so, ultimately, politicians always go where the votes are because they want to win elections. And right now, we don't have enough climate voters in the marketplace demanding climate leadership. So that's, that's why I say we've got to focus on demand, focus on the marketplace, and just saturate every election with as many climate voters as possible.

Austin Colón: Interesting. Yeah. So it's funny. We've, we've kind of seen for a while that, you know, the supply side theory of economics trickle down does not quite work. So it seems like you're saying trickle down politics isn't going to work for people who are worried about the climate.

Nathaniel Stinnett: It's a great way of putting it. Trickle down politics does not work. And, you know, we can choose to be frustrated by that, or we can see it as empowering.

Austin Colón: hmm.

Nathaniel Stinnett: We can recognize that, like, because politicians are in the business of winning elections, that means that in some ways they are responsive to public opinion. But only, and this is a big, big caveat, Only to the opinions of voters. Because they're the people who actually decide who gets to be a politician. And our problem in the climate movement right now is that all of our potential political power is sitting on the sidelines whenever there's an election. And we've got to change that.

Austin Colón: Right. create a demand, force politicians to listen to us. I get that. And so then the, the third point you prescribe is, the need to be campaigning year round at every level of government. So what does that mean? And especially how does that compare to the way it's done right now?

Nathaniel Stinnett: I mean, right now, I'd say the best case scenario is that people view politics as something that only happens every two years. I say that's the best case scenario

Austin Colón: Yeah. As I said, that's generous.

Nathaniel Stinnett: it's generous, right? There are probably a lot of people who only think about it every four years. But the truth is, climate policy is made at every level of government, and so we've got to start viewing each and every election As a precious opportunity for the climate movement. And so let me give you some examples, Austin. Just this year, 2025, we've got big statewide elections in places like Virginia and New Jersey, where the governors and state legislators who are elected are going to have control over utility regulation, transportation funding, building codes, so many important things. And then, there will also be thousands, literally thousands of local elections, including a mayoral election in our biggest city, New York. And in all of these cities and towns, mayors and city councilors will control zoning codes, traffic laws, open space, and other important

areas of climate policy. And so, simply put, like, the climate crisis isn't waiting for us, and we've got to fight and win every battle we can, and that means we can't keep our powder dry, we can't just sit and wait for 2026, we've got to get involved in these local elections and make sure that that climate voters show up and help climate leaders win and ultimately enact good local climate policies.

Austin Colón: Right. And, you know, local climate policies are important. As you said, there's an election for mayor here in New York City where I live and you know, we've just seen the long battle over congestion pricing and it's finally been implemented and so far, I mean, obviously it's really early and we don't have a ton of data, but you know Travel times through Manhattan have been cut down. There's definitely less cars on the road, at least in the first, you know, a couple of weeks of, of implementation and our governor wavered, but you know, I worry that if we had somebody who's even less committed, it just wouldn't have happened at all, given how difficult it was to get past.

Nathaniel Stinnett: That's right, Austin. And I think this is a perfect example because often when we think of the climate crisis, we think of things that don't necessarily impact our daily lives, like sea level rise or disasters that might not be in our neighborhood. But when you talk about like dramatically reducing someone's daily commute. I mean, that, that directly impacts their quality of life, and this is something that just in a matter of days has changed in a really significant fashion in the biggest city in our country. And so these local and state climate policies can really impact people's lives and their wallets and their happiness.

Austin Colón: And do you think it's going to be much more difficult for people to act on a local level, given all of the, noise and distraction that are going to be happening, at the federal level.

Nathaniel Stinnett: Well, it, it. It is always harder to get messaging through to voters in lower turnout elections, like local elections, than in federal elections. Uh, because, you're right, most of our attention is devoted to what's going on at the federal level. That being said, there's also huge opportunity in these local elections. Because so few people vote, if you think of this, if you think of an election as a fraction, The denominators are so much smaller in local elections, so few people vote, that if you just increase turnout of climate voters by one or two or three percent, you can end up having a dramatic impact. So yeah, it's harder to communicate with people about local elections, but it's also so much easier to make a big difference in the outcome.

Austin Colón: Right. So, what first steps do you think organizations or individuals should take to make these, you know, big changes that you're suggesting?

Nathaniel Stinnett: I'd say the first step is, as organizations, we need to do a better job of educating our membership in how important and powerful these below the radar elections are. And I understand why that's hard, right? Everybody is focused on presidential elections and midterm elections. And that's often where you get the most volunteers and where non profits get the most donations. And so, you know, It's so much easier to just think about those as the important milestones, but if we can start educating our members and our volunteers about the enormous opportunities in these local elections, well, then not only will it be easier to get the movement involved in these opportunities, but I think that so many people will feel less hopeless and frustrated about the climate crisis. Because, all of a sudden, there will be opportunities almost every day to make a difference in climate politics. Rather than having to wait every two or four years.

Austin Colón: right. Well, Nathaniel Stinnett, founder and director of the Environmental Voter Project. Thank you so much for joining us today on Climate One.

Nathaniel Stinnett: Thank you for having me, Austin.

Kousha Navidar: Coming up, at a time when the fossil fuel industry is being told to go wild, how should proponents of clean energy channel their efforts?

Arnab Datta: Rather than focusing on the supply, I would say, focus your activism, your efforts, on the demand side.

Kousha Navidar: That's up next, when Climate One continues.

Ariana Brocious: This is Climate One. I'm Ariana Brocious.

Kousha Navidar: And I'm Kousha Navidar.

Ariana Brocious: So far in this episode, we've talked about what the new political landscape might mean for climate activists and climate voters. But those aren't the only levers we have to work with.

Kousha Navidar: That's right. In this country, economics shapes the future at least as much as politics. And President Trump likes to think of himself as a savvy businessman. He's surrounded himself with billionaires. And he seems to care what effect his policies have on Wall Street. He's made a lot of statements about unleashing America's energy production. It seems it's more a way to let the fossil fuel industry slam the gas pedal all the way to the floor.

Ariana Brocious: I see what you did there. But yeah I agree. And that really makes me think: what does the future of renewable energy look like over these next few years. To find out we invited Arnab Datta on to chat about the energy landscape. He's Director of Infrastructure Policy at the Institute for Progress, and he's a good friend of yours, right Kousha?

Kousha Navidar: Yes, so there's a story here. Back at the end of December I called a good friend of mine - like, good enough that he was at my wedding. We were catching up, and he asks how work's going. I say, "oh I'm about to start co-hosting this show about climate policy, It's called Climate One." And he goes silent for a second and then he laughs and goes, "you're kidding me. I'm going to be a guest on climate one next month!" And that's Arnab! So the first email I sent the climate one team was, "Hey small world, but I'm really good friends with someone you're going to have on the show next month." And the team's response was, "well I hope you guys will stay friends because he's going to be your first guest!" So I called Arnab back and told him to prepare himself, because I was going to grill him.

Ariana Brocious: OK. So not a soft interview we're about to hear.

Kousha Navidar: We taped this interview the day after President Trump's inauguration and before we dove deeper into the details of the energy market, I wanted to know how he was feeling now that the new administration is in power.

Arnab Datta: I think one thing I generally try to live by is breathe and like wait for us to see how this all comes out. You know day one is always a day of executive orders, but executive orders are really about implementation and there's a lot of difficulty and details to be sorted out in that process and I think it's important to sustain over the next four years to like keep that perspective.

Kousha Navidar: So you're breathing right now.

Arnab Datta: I'm breathing. I'm only breathing.

Kousha Navidar: You're only breathing

Arnab Datta: Yeah,

Kousha Navidar: a lot of executive orders. You're saying that is kind of to be expected. Uh, take a deep breath. It's going to be four years. Look ahead. Cause there is kind of a road ahead. You're saying,

Arnab Datta: I think there is. Yeah. And I think, you know, there's, um, a lot of constituencies to manage when you're in power and, uh, they're like any political party, like any president, um, president Trump is going to experience that. So we'll see how it

Kousha Navidar: it's interesting to talk about the road ahead because you wrote a op ed in the New York times. Late last year. It was it was in December, right? Am I remembering that correctly?

Arnab Datta: I think that's right. Yeah.

Kousha Navidar: in it. You wrote that since 2020 America's energy market has evolved. And that fact means that we shouldn't feel all is lost for the climate under the Trump administration. So help me make make sense of that. First of all, I think it's super important to talk about how the energy market has evolved. How have you how do you think it has evolved?

Arnab Datta: I would point to three big things, I think big macro factors for the energy market, um, over the past four or five years. Um, one, I think from a legislative perspective, um, we passed the bipartisan infrastructure law and the Inflation Reduction Act. Um, and what those laws did is they made, big investments in energy infrastructure and innovation. And ultimately, the incentives of those laws were to make decarbonization good business. And as a result of those bills, we've seen a surge in new investment in clean energy. So since the passage of the Inflation Reduction Act has been over a half a trillion in public and private investment in clean energy. in the past year. To 2024, there's 272 billion invested across the U. S. In the manufacturing deployment of clean energy. Um, and a record of this 71 billion occurred in the third quarter of 2024. And these are dollars spent on facility construction, retail purchases. So like this is real money that is being invested in these sectors.

So, that's really one big macro factor. I think a second one, um, is you saw coming out of COVID, and then also following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. I think there is a new focus actually on resilience and diversification and making sure that we're not too dependent on any one country. And so in the U. S. That's meant a wave of investment in supply chain resilience. Try to decouple a bit from China, which is dominating a lot of important markets for energy production, you know, critical minerals and different sectors in Europe. You've seen that in natural gas, where, as a region, they're pretty dependent and have been pretty dependent on Russia for natural gas, and they're trying to decouple away from that. The sanctions, you know, We're a forcing mechanism towards that, but that's really changed energy markets as well. and then the third big macro factor I would add is that we, over the last four years, went through a period of very high interest rates and interest rates restrict rate. capital investment of all kinds from housing to manufacturing to energy. And this is really actually the biggest barrier to energy investment, I don't think people talk about. And because energy investment is, you know, a lot of costs up front, you have to purchase, you know, equipment, facilities, That tends to be pretty interest rate sensitive, and now we're in a period where interest rates are coming down. The pace of that remains to be seen, but that could be a big boon for clean energy investment as well. You know, one interesting fact about the first Trump administration is that it was a huge boon for clean energy investment. And a major factor in that was that interest rates were quite low for a period of it.

Kousha Navidar: So I hear you say there is a path ahead. You can point to at least three big

macroeconomic forces here. Do you think all of that provides insulation from climate change? Potentially hostile Trump policies.

Arnab Datta: Yeah, I think so. I mean, look, there's always going to be changes, um, at the margins in policy one way or another, um, when, government changes power. And so we should expect that. But these forces I mentioned are happening, you know, regardless of, you know, any individual policy that the Trump administration pursues. And I don't think they're changing.

Kousha Navidar: he, he recently backed out of the Paris agreement that he said in his executive order to have that happen yesterday. There's talk of striking the words like climate change and clean energy from every federal website. Uh, what parts of Biden administration, uh, climate policy do you think is going to survive?

Arnab Datta: I think I expect the Inflation Reduction Act to be, um, pretty resilient itself. that bill, um, was, you know, even though it was a partisan reconciliation bill, um, it was a bill that reflected, um, a lot of diverse constituencies from businesses to farmers. And a lot of people are invested in that. And you see that, you know, in wake of, uh, kind of. calls to repeal it, that, you know, the CEO of ExxonMobil is saying that this is a good bill and, and should stay intact. And so I really think that there's a potential for that bill to stay in place. And that means that a lot of those investments will stay in place.

Kousha Navidar: because the business incentive aligns with the climate incentive in those cases?

Arnab Datta: Yeah, exactly. And, and I would even go broader, you know, it reflects a diverse set of constituencies, you know, a lot of the Inflation Reduction Act, the, the top districts, and I think nine out of the top 10 districts receiving Inflation Reduction Act money are red districts. You saw this before the election that 19 House Republican members sent a letter to Speaker Johnson defending the bill, saying that it was supporting innovation and good jobs in their districts. And so I think, you know, with a two vote majority, it's going to be pretty hard to, um, to pull that back. Joe Manchin said to President Trump, and this was in respect to the Affordable Care Act, which was also, you know, referred to as Obamacare, it was that people in my state might not know who gave them health insurance, but they will definitely know who took it away. So the fact that there are real investments here that could be pulled back, and that's going to mean, you know, fewer jobs, fewer, um, facilities built in your district, that's something that, um, could be really challenging.

Kousha Navidar: You know, I think that's a really important point. There's this whole concept in behavioral economics about how much more acutely people feel lost than they feel gained. In your work, you've described kind of this old paradigm for climate activists in which there's this all or nothing, almost antagonistic approach through protest and litigation. Let's, let's move away from the IRA for a second and just kind of focus on the narrative here. What, in your opinion, did that kind of like old school climate activism as you see it look like. Can you give an example of it?

Arnab Datta: Yeah. So I'll give you two examples from recent history. Um, I think just to zoom out, there was a focus on the supply side of the fossil industry. So a number one priority for several large environmental groups was to basically end all export facility permitting for liquefied natural gas for LNG. And I think this was really misguided for a number of reasons. For one, just because a facility is permitted does not mean that it will be constructed. And right now, you know, we have billions of cubic feet per day of liquefied natural gas export capacity that is not being constructed, and that's simply because the market will not support it, and it won't support it for the foreseeable future.

Kousha Navidar: So permitting in and of itself isn't enough, you're saying. What else?

Arnab Datta: I think also related to that like there's a you know there's a political challenge there right is that when you when you focus on the supply side Um, you tend to get pushback right like people demand. People consume this energy because it gives them something. It lets them flourish. It lets their lives. Countries do it because, you know, they want to build manufacturing capacity so their citizens can flourish. And when you antagonize that development, I think you turn people against you. And this would be fine if the climate impact of it was secure. But with, LNG pause, You know, there was basically negligible impact from that, you know, all those years of advocacy for that LNG pause. And I think that's really problematic.

Kousha Navidar: it's funny that you use the term antagonizing because I could imagine a listener, uh, who identifies as a climate activist listening right now and feeling slightly antagonized because what they might be hearing, and I see you smiling right now, so I think I might be hitting on something, what they might be hearing is, you know, Listen, you have to compromise, you have to make strange bedfellows, and sometimes that means incentivizing the very businesses that are the cause of a lot of the climate stuff, the climate challenges we're dealing with today. When you go out and say things like, there is a path ahead, and it involves working with fossil fuel companies, etc. Do you get that push back on that. And what push back, if any rings true for you?

Arnab Datta: Yeah, I certainly do. And I also don't think that you should abandon all, you know, regulatory or like restrictions on supply as we would call it. I think pollution standards are very important and I think that's something we should be fighting for. But if we go back to the LNG example, you know, if the LNG pause, which is, you know, again, overturned on day one, if that activism had gone to defending those pollution standards, which are popular, which have political salience because people don't like pollution in their communities, that would probably have been a better, um, tactic. So, I think that is like a prioritization that I'd like to see

Kousha Navidar: Okay, so prioritization. Let's, let's make it more general. I think that's such an interesting example. You're you're touching on reframing the way that we think about activism in a certain sense here, where the opportunity lies. What do you think would be more effective climate activism, especially given our current and emerging political landscape?

Arnab Datta: Yeah, so I think there's like a fundamental understanding that fossil fuels will continue to be produced as long as people need energy and demand it, And so, rather than focusing on the supply, I would say, focus your activism, your efforts, on the demand side. How do we make sure that clean, carbon free alternatives are not the alternative, that they're the default, that they're the choice that everybody wants, right? And, and there are reasons why people, why countries, why, um, companies, why individuals would demand that clean energy. But it requires, uh, you know, you to take very seriously, the cost of those alternatives and right now they're just not competitive and most people aren't going to choose to pay more for something because of the climate benefits. And so what I would say is really focus on changing that demand picture by reducing the cost of those alternatives. And that really requires you to look at what actually drives the cost of producing and deploying that energy

Kousha Navidar: Does that focus, that frame shift apply for everyone from like political leaders that you're talking about all the way down to the individual? And if so, how does it kind of differentiate as you go down that stack in terms of influence? Like, what are you suggesting to folks who are creating policy versus me as just somebody who cares a lot about the climate and, and is trying to navigate this, this, uh, new environment that we're in, how does it look different between those two parties?

Arnab Datta: Yeah, it definitely looks different because, you know, policymakers have different trade offs that they're balancing. for policymakers. I think they need to understand that right now

for 24 7 available energy the biggest barrier for competition for clean sources is the cost. And so they need to find ways to bring that cost down. If you're an individual, you know, you have to balance what you can afford, what you can pay for and, um, and your other, you know, your values that you want to live by. As an individual, you can also choose to activate and, and, uh, be an activist for certain policies. And so I would say, you know, really focus on the policies that will change that demand picture, help reduce the cost of those, um, alternative energy sources. So I would say, you know, one big thing over the next couple of years is going to be defending the Inflation Reduction Act, um, which is, you know, a place that people can put their personal, um, activism. You know, they can call their congressperson, but also, in terms of a proactive policy, I would say, you know, A huge source of consternation within the energy and climate policy world over the past couple years has been this concept of permitting reform. How do we change how we build and permit energy infrastructure? How we do it now creates huge costs for clean energy development, because there's a lot of litigation, there's a lot of costs of that process. We need to bring that cost down. That's one way to bring the cost of those alternatives down. And so I would say for individuals, you should, you know, you should organize and activate for those policies as well.

Kousha Navidar: Policies to get it more streamlined to have permitting pass you're saying?

Arnab Datta: Yes, to streamline permitting. Yes,

Kousha Navidar: Well, that's important because there are good reasons that environmental regulation exists, right? I mean, we want to avoid ecological harm if possible. So you're not saying make it less important. You're just saying make it more efficient. Is that fair?

Arnab Datta: I would say that. Yes. And I think there's, you know, it's important to, you know, differentiate here between substantive environmental laws. I don't think we should relax our air pollution standards, our clean water standards. But there are laws on the books that are purely procedural. Um, one good example of this is the National Environmental Policy Act, which requires the federal government to undertake an analysis of the environmental impacts of any major action that it takes. And what this has become, even though, you know, it ostensibly served a good purpose when it was introduced in the 1970s, it's really become a magnet for litigation and litigation just blows up the costs for energy project development for transmission, which is absolutely, absolutely essential for clean energy development. We need to build more transmission infrastructure. Um, and so if you blow out that cost, it just, you know, it makes it uneconomical as a alternative.

Kousha Navidar: My mind keeps going back to this idea of kind of in this New emerging political landscape climate advocacy looks like aligning business interests with climate interests, which is not something necessarily new. But I keep going back to this idea of allowing fossil fuel companies to, for instance, create new infrastructure, which could potentially lock in their use for decades and further entrench some of the bad behavior that has gotten us to the place where we are now. Isn't that enough of a reason to advocate for reducing or banning this kind of behavior from fossil companies outright?

Arnab Datta: People demand those energy sources, and until we can change that, I don't think it's fundamentally really going to change, um, how much of that infrastructure is built or not. And so I think it really, you know, behooves us to focus on the demand side. And also, if that is going to be built, yes, I would rather it be built in the US, where we have better pollution standards, where we have better environmental standards, where we have better labor standards. Like, this is really important. We have a global energy market for these commodities, and if we shut down production here and supply here, you know, it goes to Russia. And, and it's not great there, you know, and so I think it's, it's better for us to really acknowledge that this stuff will be produced as long as people demand it. I'd rather it be produced cleanly. That's a place where, you know, Some oil companies

really do want to play a role in reducing the carbon footprint. You know, the CEO of Occidental is, you know, she's been a real leader on this, on advocating for this. I think there are companies to partner with here.

Kousha Navidar: Arnab, if you had a magic wand. I do. And you could wave it and change one behavior that we read about in the news or that you see in your work to get to the outcomes that, that, that, that you believe are possible. How would you wave that wand? What behavior would you want to see change and why?

Arnab Datta: Yeah, decarbonization is fundamentally a problem of can we build a decarbonized society. And to me, I see that as an investment challenge and a challenge of building. And so we need to start from a mindset of we need to build, we need to build a lot of stuff and we need to build it fast and we need to build it to further decarbonizing. And so any barriers to building are really hindering decarbonization. the environmental movements that came out of the 70s because pollution was really bad, air pollution, water pollution, was one about blocking you know, industrial activities because it was having these really harmful effects. Now, decarbonization requires a fundamentally different mindset, a mindset of building. And so I would like to see, you know, activists, climate policy people, um, everyone really buy into that mindset.

Kousha Navidar: Arnab Datta is the Managing Director of Policy Implementation at Employee America and Director of Infrastructure Policy at the Institute for Progress. Arnab, thanks so much.

Arnab Datta: Thanks so much for having me.

Kousha Navidar: And that's our show. Thanks for listening. Talking about climate can be hard, and exciting and interesting — and it's critical to address the transitions we need to make in all parts of society. Please help us get people talking more about climate by giving us a rating or review. You can do it right now on your device. And if you like what you hear, consider joining us on Patreon and supporting the show that way.

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