

Forging the Climate Movement

Robert M. Wilson

For the past two decades, climatologists have issued increasingly dire pronouncements on climate change and its potential effects. Until recently, activists in the United States were unable to marshal much support for measures to address global warming or to mobilize many Americans to demand action from the federal government. Yet in the past five years, American climate activists have forged a robust climate movement to overcome some of the persistent barriers hampering earlier efforts to address global warming. Some of these achievements include convincing US President Barack Obama to veto the Keystone XL pipeline, which would have brought tar-sands oil from Canada to the United States (climatologists and activists contend tar-sands oil has a much higher “carbon footprint” than conventional oil), and demanding he use domestic measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and work with other nations to develop a strong climate agreement.

This project employs approaches from geography and environmental history to examine how a diverse group of climate activists developed the climate movement in the United States. It aims to answer four questions: What sorts of individuals and groups have become involved in the climate movement and why have they done so? How have they sought to work across social barriers, such as race and class, and geographical divisions, such as regions and nations, to forge a coalition to deal with climate change? How have climate activists employed “traditional” tactics (lobbying, demonstrations, non-violent direct action, etc.) and newer forms of social media (Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter) to mobilize support for carbon reductions and effect change? Finally, what other social movements have served as models for American climate activists?