



SUNRISE MOVEMENT

1. A first high-profile sit-in during the 2018 mid-term elections

The non-profit organization [Sunrise Movement](#) was launched in 2017 in the United States by two young women, Sara Blazevic and Varshini Prakash, and a dozen young - and very young - Americans from different associations committed to environmental protection and social justice. The movement aims to bring the climate threat to the attention of elected officials and get renewable energy advocates elected in the 2018 midterm elections, first during the Democratic primary and then during the November 6, 2018 general election.

The Sunrise Movement began to gain momentum and visibility in November 2018 during the midterm elections with the election to the House of Representatives of the Squad, a group of four women of color under the age of 50 consisting of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley and Rashida Tlaib. The latter are committed to climate protection issues and supported by the Sunrise Movement.

A few days after the mid-term elections, the movement found itself in the spotlight. About 200 activists, unconvinced by the commitments of newly elected Democrats to advance climate change legislation, staged a sit-in at the offices of (soon-to-be) Democratic Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi. The activists called for concrete climate action and wanted to hold the newly elected Democrats to their campaign promises. The action, which received the support of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who provided on-the-spot help, was followed by many journalists and became a real media phenomenon.

2. A non-profit organization with strict guidelines

The Sunrise Movement is a non-profit organization, founded by two young women, Sara Blazevic and Varshini Prakash. The latter trained at [Momentum](#), an American incubator that trains people in organization and community action. Varshini Prakash is currently the executive director of the movement.

In practical terms, the movement is organized on two levels:

- **A national leadership that defines campaigns and priorities**, and includes four main divisions: the "organization" division, the "communication" division, the "partnerships and policy" division that works with politicians and institutional figures, and the "operations" division responsible for the movement's infrastructure;



- **More than 400 decentralized hubs** that exist throughout the United States which implement the campaigns defined by the national leadership, and can also organize their own actions (climate strikes, direct actions, etc.).

The Sunrise Movement follows strict guidelines, which all members must commit to:

- Sunrise Movement members communicate with all of their communities (neighbors, families, religious leaders, classmates, teachers, etc.) to spread the movement's messages.
- The Sunrise Movement is open to all and is made up of people of diverse backgrounds and beliefs, united in their differences.
- The Sunrise Movement is non-violent in word and deed, especially to "win the hearts of the public" and convince as many people as possible to join the movement.
- The Sunrise Movement operates on donations of time and money from its members.
- Sunrise Movement members are expected to "take care of themselves, each other and the environment".
- The Sunrise Movement works collaboratively with other movements committed to change and sharing the same values to transform the United States.
- Sunrise Movement members must honor and continue the work of the struggle movements that came before them.
- Sunrise Movement members must work in "a positive and joyful spirit."

Since it was founded, the movement has continued to grow and today it has 130 groups across the United States, with thousands of volunteers between the ages of 20 and 30.

The Sunrise Movement is supported by donations from organizations and individuals.

3. A movement to "stop climate change"

The Sunrise Movement was born out of the belief that we must "stop climate change and create millions of new 'good' jobs. According to movement spokesperson Garrett Blad, *"Sunrise has a fresh look at the climate issue. This is not a 'right vs. left' issue. Rather, the divide is "up vs. down," "people vs. billionaires who support the fossil industry."*

To achieve its goal, the movement is taking actions designed to:

- Raise awareness of the climate issue in the U.S. public to make it an urgent priority for all citizens.
- Combat the influence of fossil fuel industry executives on policymakers.
- Elect policymakers who "stand up for the health and welfare of all"
- Get the Green New Deal environmental agenda accepted and implemented.

4. Big actions that have real impact on American politics



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The Sunrise Movement is now having an undeniable influence on American national politics. Indeed, as the specialist in environmental activism points out, *"until now, environmental groups have targeted corporations. Sunrise is targeting politicians. It has elected allies, which allows the movement to be institutionalized and its action to be sustained."*

Currently, the Sunrise Movement is running the following campaigns:

- **The "Good jobs for all" campaign** to get elected U.S. officials to sign a pledge guaranteeing "good" jobs for all;
- **The Training Programs campaign** to train and support movement members who want to improve their skills to act and become leaders in the movement;
- **The "Wide Awake" campaign** to hold early morning demonstrations (shouting and singing) directly in front of the homes of elected officials (Mitch McConnell, Ted Cruz, Larry Hogan, Bill Barr, Betsy DeVos, etc.) in order to force them to react and act on the issues of the movement;
- **The "Directing Biden's climate policy" campaign** to push President Joe Biden to implement all the necessary measures to stop the climate crisis. Indeed, the movement has campaigned among young people for Joe Biden in 2020, and has given him "a climate mandate" that he "must follow".

In addition to these campaigns, the movement has become particularly well known for its work and actions on the Green New Deal. Members of the Sunrise Movement helped write and carry a House resolution calling on the U.S. federal government to launch a "national mobilization" for climate, modeled on Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal to get America out of the economic crisis. In addition to substantially reducing CO2 emissions within ten years, the Green New Deal advocates a "just" ecological transition, which would be supported by new social protection systems and job guarantees for the most vulnerable.

This project has inspired other movements such as, in March 2019, a group of activists in the UK that claimed to be inspired by the Sunrise Movement, and called on the Labour Party to commit to radical measures to "decarbonize" the British economy.

The movement has organized numerous pressure actions to defend and promote this proposed Green New Deal:

- The **November 13th, 2018 sit-in**: with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the movement organized a sit-in in Nancy Pelosi's office to compel Democratic elected officials to refuse donations from the fossil fuel industry and push Nancy Pelosi to create consensus in the House on Green New Deal legislation;
- The **February 2019 sit-in**: the movement held a high-profile, filmed sit-in in Senator Dianne Feinstein's office to ask her to support the Green New Deal;
- The **"Road to a Green New Tour" in April 2019**: the movement organized a tour to gather support for the Green New Deal resolution, introduced in Congress by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ed Markey in February 2019. Participants in the tour included elected official Ayanna Pressley, Senator Bernie Sanders, and others.



The movement is also known for its civil disobedience actions, including the #HeatWeek held in August 2018 across the country to pressure politicians seen as "corrupt" by the influence of the fossil fuel industry.

5. Being both "against" and "part of" the system

In general, the Sunrise Movement openly declares that it is inspired by the methods of action experienced and implemented in the past by the civil rights and anti-Vietnam war movements. For example, the "Wide Awake" campaign is very clearly inspired by a tactic implemented in 1860 by an abolitionist movement that was made up of an estimated 100,000 to 500,000 young people demanding an end to slavery.

Specifically, the Sunrise Movement's method of action is organized on two levels because, as Garrett Blad, the movement's spokesperson, explains, "the goal is both to build a mass movement and to have champions in political circles":

- "Building a mass movement" is achieved via:

==> The creation of activist hubs throughout the United States;

==> Activism training for movement members;

==> Speeches and actions aimed at and adapted to very young Americans (children, young teenagers, etc.);

==> An "opportunistic" network open to all, with the slogan "No permanent friends. No permanent enemies";

==> A strong presence on the internet, through the movement's website and social networks;

==> The editing and broadcasting of striking and inspiring videos;

==> The organization of non-violent but very visual "punch" actions (demonstrations, questioning of elected officials on social networks, sit-ins, etc.);

==> The organization of [local but recurrent demonstrations](#);

==> The highlighting of real and personal examples and stories, linked to the lives of the movement's activists, according to the principle ["We tell our stories and we honor each other's stories"](#);

==> A clear naming of those responsible for the current climate problems (business leaders, certain politicians, etc.) against whom the movement must unite and fight.

- "Having champions in political circles to institutionalize the movement" is done through:

==> Supporting political candidates in elections who are aligned with the movement's positions, with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as the first symbol (the movement supported Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primary for the 2020 elections);

==> Background work on issues, such as contributing to the drafting of the Green New Deal;

==> Monitoring the actions of elected politicians, such as the movement's work with the new Biden administration.

In addition to these methods, the Sunrise Movement has also taken the gamble of talking about both the environment and jobs ("stop climate change and create millions of new



'good' jobs"), as the economy and jobs are considered priorities for American citizens, both Republicans and Democrats. This strategy allows it to attract a wider audience.

6. Lessons from the Sunrise Movement

The experience of the Sunrise Movement shows that a citizen's movement - even one composed of young and even very young activists - can have concrete effects on the commitments, political programs and actions of political representatives.

This requires they:

- **Build on diversity:** Sunrise members do not fit the stereotype of an environmental movement made up of solely white, upper-middle class members. Their families have roots in India, Iran, Croatia, Mexico, and working-class neighborhoods in American cities.
- **Tell real stories:** members of Sunrise tend not to focus on starving polar bears, melting ice caps or ocean acidification. Instead, they talk about family members who have lost their homes in floods or fires, young parents who suffer from asthma, or landscapes they love that have been degraded or destroyed in their short lives. (One of the movement's key principles: "We tell our stories and honor the stories of others.")
- **Don't be afraid of organization or rules:** the founders of Sunrise have formed a strong steering committee within the movement, with a firm set of rules and guidelines that leave room nonetheless for action on the ground, and are adapted according to the situation;
- **Be simultaneously "in the system" and "against the system"** is to continue to attract activists willing to act, while ensuring powerful institutional allies. The movement knows how to be opportunistic and therefore potentially open to all, depending on the situation and the potential benefits, and does not hesitate to rely on a few recognized political and media personalities to take advantage of their visibility and their power of influence;
- **Search for ancestors and roots:** Sunrise is inspired by the methods of movements that have been successful in the past and are strong symbols for the population. Moreover, in its statements, Sunrise makes patriotic appeals to the ambitious mobilizations of America's past, from the New Deal to the moon landing, contrasting a vision of technological innovation and ambition with that of a state paralyzed by lobbies.
- **Designate an Enemy:** Sunrise mobilizes its adherents a corrupt political process, where oil and gas billionaires like the Koch brothers help shape legislation and government policy.