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Greener Living

Over the past couple of weeks, while COP29 negotiations dragged on in Baku, students on college campuses in the US got fired up about climate. The incoming Trump administration has provided an inadvertent inspiration. You can [read this story](#), as well as our COP29 coverage, for free on [Bloomberg.com](#).

Giving climate action the old college try

By [Ethan M Steinberg](#)

While President-elect Donald Trump has yet to take office, his promise to [roll back climate legislation](#) is helping inspire a new generation of green-minded progressives.

Since the election on Nov. 5, young activist leaders have traveled the US holding mass meetings, organizing school protests and hosting online calls that have drawn thousands of people. The idea is to turn up the volume on environmental concerns and convince policymakers to block legislation that will worsen climate change.

“We’re heartbroken about the election, but we’re really going to do everything in our power to build up locally and win in the states,” said Michael Greenberg, co-founder of [Climate Defiance](#), which calls for “disruptive direct actions.” In the past this has included [interrupting a speech](#) by Federal Reserve Chair [Jerome Powell](#) and descending onto the field during the [Congressional Baseball Game](#).



Climate activists chant on stage after interrupting a speech by Jerome Powell, during the 24th Jacques Polak Annual Research Conference in 2023. *Photographer: Celal Gunes/Anadolu/Getty Images*

“The climate crisis won’t be solved by 55-year-old nonprofit bureaucrats in a cubicle farm on K Street,” he said, referring to a famous avenue for lobbyists in Washington.

Polling data has previously found that [few likely voters](#) — people who have gone to the ballot box previously — identified climate change or other environmental issues as their main priority. The lack of voters [selecting global warming as a major worry](#) in the 2024 election comes despite the US having faced some of its most devastating and expensive disasters, including [Hurricane Helene](#), during what’s likely to be the [hottest year on record](#).

By some measures, President Joe Biden has been one of the more progressive US leaders on climate, passing the Inflation Reduction Act, which was [poised to slash US greenhouse gas emissions](#) in half by 2050. (The US has also had [record oil and gas production](#) on Biden’s watch.) Trump has already signaled he aims to dismantle parts of the law, while also vowing to boost oil production and pull out of the Paris Agreement. Yet there are arguments that Trump may offer more motivation than Biden to get climate-conscious young people more politically engaged.

One of the most consequential youth movements in recent years happened during Trump’s first term. Swedish activist Greta Thunberg was only a teenager when she addressed delegates at the 2018 United Nations climate change conference in Poland, and the subsequent global climate protests preceded a boom period for [net-zero goals](#) and [environmental social governance investing](#).

Since Trump’s re-election, students have staged protests at colleges across the US, from Princeton to Michigan State to the University of California, Berkeley. A call held by the Campus Climate Network, which helps student groups organize, drew 70 climate activists from dozens of campuses, according to its co-founder Jake Lowe.



Climate protestors at Princeton University this month. *Photo credit: Sunrise Princeton*

“Social movements do a much better job of pushing back when they have a common enemy,” said Dana Fisher, a professor at American University who studies climate activism and authored the recent book *Saving Ourselves: From Climate Shocks to Climate Action*.

Trump’s election will unify climate activists and bring more of them into the streets. “There’ll be a lot more people outraged and willing to do something,” she said.

One person who has begun doing so is Aru Shiney-Ajay, the 26-year-old executive director of the [Sunrise Movement](#). She sprung into action almost immediately as vote tallies poured in on election day, flying from Wisconsin to Philadelphia and later traveling to Washington, D.C., to organize campaigns to grow her movement.

The group's goal is to block legislation that undoes incentives to reduce pollution. It is also planning to pressure local and state politicians to prioritize climate.

An online call drew more than 1,600 people, another 360 registered to host in-person events for the group, and students at 80 high schools walked out of class just days after the election with the help of Sunrise's organizing, she said. New chapters have already formed at Emory University, in rural Dalton, Pennsylvania and in Evanston, Illinois.

For activists like Shiney-Ajay, what happens over the next four years could have longer repercussions. The planet is already on a [dangerous warming path](#), which could make the world a much less hospitable place in their retirement.

"It feels a little like the next four years are down to the wire," she said. "This feels a little like our last shot."