

# **The Sunrise Movement's Hybrid Organizing:**

*The elements of a massive decentralized and sustained social movement*

Sarah Lasoff  
Urban and Environmental Policy Department  
Occidental College  
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## **Abstract**

My senior comprehensive project focuses on the Sunrise Movement's organizing strategies in order to determine how to build massive decentralized social movements. My research question asks, "How does the Sunrise Movement incorporate both structure-based and mass protest strategies in their organizing to build a massive decentralized social movement?"

What I found: Sunrise is, theoretically, a mass protest movement that integrates elements of structure based organizing, a hybrid of the two. Sunrise builds a base of active popular support or "people power" and electoral power through the cycles of momentum, moral protest, distributed organizing, local organizing, training, and national organizing with the hopes of using that power in order to engage in mass noncooperation and manifest a new political alignment or "people's alignment" in the United States. Elements of mass protest organizing can be found in their use of moral protest, cycles of momentum, and mass noncooperation. Structure-based strategies can be found in local and national organizing.

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## Introduction

In mid-November of 2018, over 200 Sunrise activists stormed the U.S. capitol building, demanding that Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi and the Democratic leadership put forward a plan for a #GreenNewDeal to combat the climate crisis.<sup>1</sup> Before this historic event, the majority of Americans had never heard the words “Sunrise Movement” or “Green New Deal.” Due to the visibility of the protest and a sustained, strategic, and collective effort by hundreds of activists around the country, the Sunrise Movement shifted the public view, launched the “Green New Deal” into the Democratic party’s agenda, and gained thousands of active members in the process. Just a few months after the mobilization, on February 7th 2019, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and 67 co-sponsors introduced a resolution for a Green New Deal.<sup>2</sup> By March of 2019, a survey by the New York Times revealed that 46 percent of likely voters supported the policy, 34 percent opposed it, and the remaining respondents reported they were unsure.<sup>3</sup> In only a year after the protest, all but one of the remaining twelve Democratic presidential candidates supported the resolution of a Green New Deal.<sup>4</sup> Although Alexandria-Ocasio Cortez receives much of the credit for popularizing the Green New Deal, the Sunrise Movement truly instigated and provided the power for the plan’s swift rise.

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<sup>1</sup> Dino Grandoni, “Analysis | The Energy 202: Green Protests at Pelosi’s Office Signal Rift over Democratic Climate Strategy,” *Washington Post*, November 14, 2018, sec. PowerPost Analysis Analysis Interpretation of the news based on evidence, including data, as well as anticipating how events might unfold based on past events, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/the-energy-202/2018/11/14/the-energy-202-green-protest-s-at-pelosi-s-office-signal-rift-over-democratic-climate-strategy/5beb28131b326b39290547cc/>.

<sup>2</sup> Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, “Text - H.Res.109 - 116th Congress (2019-2020): Recognizing the Duty of the Federal Government to Create a Green New Deal.,” webpage, February 12, 2019, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-resolution/109/text>.

<sup>3</sup> Sean McElwee and Ash Ngu, “Opinion | People Actually Like the Green New Deal,” *The New York Times*, March 27, 2019, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/27/opinion/sunday/green-new-deal-mcconnell.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Benjy Sarlin, “What the ‘Green New Deal’ Is, and How It Would Work,” NBC News, August 23, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/green-new-deal-how-it-works-presidential-candidate-positions-n1044811>.

The Sunrise Movement, started in late 2015 by Sara Blazevic, Varshini Prakash and ten other young organizers, is a movement that is building an army of young people in order to solve the climate crisis.<sup>5</sup> All veterans of more conventional climate organizations like Sierra Club, 350.org, and fossil fuel divestment and anti-pipeline campaigns, these twelve original organizers wanted to create an alternative space for climate organizing. They wanted a more broad-based, democratic, and economically transformative movement that would address the climate crisis with the necessary scale and intensity.<sup>6</sup> Armed with a strategy and set of tools acquired from the training center, Momentum, they decided to build a massive, decentralized social movement that would shift public opinion and force politicians to take serious action to solve the climate crisis.

Only a year after the occupation of Nancy Pelosi's office, after witnessing the rapid growth and increased publicity of the Sunrise Movement, mainstream media started to take interest in Sunrise's organizing strategy. In an interview with Vox Media, Ezra Klein documents the visibility and approach of the Sunrise Movement. He asks Varshini Prakash, co-founder and executive director of Sunrise, how Sunrise plans to build an army of young people and actualize a Green New Deal in the United States. She explains the three tenets of their strategy: the movement aims to 1) build "people power", 2) establish "political power", and 3) manifest a new "political alignment."<sup>7</sup> First, building "people power" means to establish a large, vocal, and active base of popular support. Second, securing "political power" means to outline a credible

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<sup>5</sup> Ella Nilsen, "The New Face of Climate Activism Is Young, Angry — and Effective," *Vox*, September 17, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/9/10/20847401/sunrise-movement-climate-change-activist-millennials-global-warming>.

<sup>6</sup> Sam Adler-Bell, "The Story Behind the Green New Deal's Meteoric Rise," *The New Republic*, February 6, 2019, <https://newrepublic.com/article/153037/story-behind-green-new-deals-meteoric-rise>.

<sup>7</sup> Varshini Prakash in Ezra Klein's "Generation Climate Change," *The Ezra Klein Show*, n.d., <https://www.vox.com/ezra-klein-show-podcast/2019/7/31/20732041/varshini-prakash-sunrise-movement-green-new-deal>.

path to victory through current political institutions around which to organize and mobilize a critical mass of people to put pressure on decision-makers.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, they strive to promote a new “political alignment” for the United States.<sup>9</sup> In the Vox Media piece, Prakash explains how, in the United States, over the past 80 years, there have been two major political alignments. Prakash defines political alignment as the collective effort by social, economic, and political forces to broadly align around a new “common sense” and shared agenda for society.<sup>10</sup> She argues that the first was the New Deal era during the 1930s. The FDR presidency and the Rooseveltian policy making of the New Deal promoted dominant values around an active government that was essential to protecting and preserving basic human rights. For example, the government enacted policies that guaranteed jobs, affordable homes, healthcare, living wages, education and more. During this time, the massive passing of social policy helped elevate and support working Americans to get out of the Great Depression.<sup>11</sup> The second was the Reagan alignment during the mid to late 1980s and 1990s where there was a new set of values that focused on deregulation, market-based solutions, and disinvestment in the public sector. A mentality of government as the problem, fear of communism, individual responsibility, and the philosophy of pulling yourself up by your bootstraps characterized this political shift.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> “Sunrise Movement,” Sunrise Movement, accessed November 10, 2019, <https://www.sunrisemovement.org>.

<sup>9</sup> Varshini Prakash in Ezra Klein’s “Generation Climate Change,” The Ezra Klein Show, n.d., <https://www.vox.com/ezra-klein-show-podcast/2019/7/31/20732041/varshini-prakash-sunrise-movement-green-new-deal>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Amity Shlaes, *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression* (Harper Collins, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Robert Mason, *The Republican Party and American Politics from Hoover to Reagan* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxy/reader.action?docID=807324>.

Prakash argues that now the United States is potentially witnessing another historic political realignment. She contends that the rise of figures like Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders proves that there are people on both sides of the political aisle that are questioning the political establishment and are demanding something new. She also references movements like Occupy Wall Street as examples where the United State is witnessing anger at the dominant way of thinking, constructed through the Reagan alignment, that has existed since the 1980s. She explains how there is a new narrative that is developing in the United States: the concentration of wealth for a few individuals over the last few decades has left out millions of people in the process. Thus, Prakash argues that the Sunrise Movement wants to take full advantage of this historic moment:

“We think there is a new opportunity at this particular rupture for a *people’s alignment* where movements, institutions, think tanks, businesses, and unions that are organized around a new set of values aimed at building a government and economy that actually works for all people could begin to emerge if we do our work right.”<sup>13</sup>

Now in the midst of an unprecedented pandemic crisis, the United States is headed for a far reaching economic depression. In an online webinar hosted by the organization, The Rising Majority, renowned scholars and activists Naomi Klein and Angela Davis echo the potential for political realignment and highlight the importance of social movements at this time. Suggesting the opportunity for a new alignment, Klein argues that unfettered capitalism created the crisis we face today in the United States. The crisis has exacerbated the pre-existing cracks in our society and exposed them to the majority of Americans thus allowing people to rethink the underlying values of American society. However, Klein and Davis also emphasizes the transformative

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<sup>13</sup> Varshini Prakash in Ezra Klein’s “Generation Climate Change,” The Ezra Klein Show, n.d., <https://www.vox.com/ezra-klein-show-podcast/2019/7/31/20732041/varshini-prakash-sunrise-movement-green-new-deal>.

power of crises. Davis suggests that now more than ever due to our collective experience of the crisis, Americans can build and organize powerful movements. Klein, citing her experience in Argentina after their economic collapse in 2001, recognizes that crises can stimulate mass collective action. These two scholars point out that now more than ever we need mass movements to move away from the dominant capitalist narratives and systems. Certainly, Sunrise aims to be this kind of a force.

The Sunrise Movement is a compelling movement to study in that it has quickly spread across the United States and already changed the mainstream political landscape. In this paper, I aim to explore how social movements can learn from their organizing strategies in a time of crisis and potential for political realignment: a time that requires massive powerful social movements more than ever before. While there are many different forms of organizing, I have focused on two of the main theories, structure-based organizing and mass mobilization organizing in order to assess the movement's ability of incorporating two seemingly contradictory popular forms of organizing mass movements. Therefore, my research poses the question, "How does Sunrise incorporate both structure-based and mass protest strategies in their organizing to build a massive decentralized social movement?"

## Literature Review

### 1.) Mass Mobilization & Structure Based Organizing

What does the literature already posit on the interaction between mass mobilization and structure-based organizing? In *Poor People's Movements*, Francis Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward investigate four social movements in the United States, specifically in terms of their organizational structures and how these structures either allowed for success or the failure of movement goals. They suggest that it was not formal organizations, but mass defiance that won the key objectives during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the labor movement of the 1930s.<sup>14</sup> In addition, they argue that increased involvement in organizations leads to a channeling of the movement's energy into organization building and away from disruptive protest. However, other scholars, like Aldon Morris in his work "Black Southern Student Sit-In Movement: an Analysis of Internal Organization," prove that organizations can actually facilitate disruptive action. Morris argues that the Civil Rights Movement appeared when it did explicitly due to the expanding development of black organizations, including the church, the NAACP, and black colleges. These organizations supported the mass disruptions such as the famous sit-ins. Moreover, Steve Vallochi, in his article "The Unemployed Workers Movement of the 1930s: A Reexamination of the Piven Cloward Thesis," similarly demonstrates that during the 1930s workers organizations facilitated the mass mobilizations.

### 2.) Social Movements Organizations

In my research, how do I define what is a social movement organization versus a social movement? In *A Primer on Social Movements*, Snow and Soule provide a gamut of basic

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<sup>14</sup> Francis Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movement: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (Vintage Books, 1977).

theoretical frameworks to aid social movements scholars in understanding the emergence and processes of social movements. In Chapter Five, “Dynamics of Social Movements”, Snow and Soule define four ways to examine social movements and their component organizations. They first define social movement organizations (SMO)s as “a bounded entity of individuals who have come together because of a shared goal concerning one or more grievances.”<sup>15</sup> Next they outline another lense for social movement analysis, a social movement industry (SMI) as the “the set of social movement organizations that are working toward change in the same basic area.”<sup>16</sup>

### 3.) Social Movement Ecology

Instead of using Snow and Soule’s term of social movement industry to understand the interactions of social movement organizations around a similar issue, the concept of “social movement ecology” considers more holistically how social movement organizations are not only in competition with one another but can collaborate and integrate different “theories of change” of strategies for the health of the entire social movement.

In *This is an Uprising*, Paul and Mark Engler, in Chapter Seven titled “The Whirlwind,” describe a social movement phenomenon that is often misunderstood. They define “moment of the whirlwind” as a moment during the timeline of a particular social movement that is “a dramatic public event or series of events that sets off a flurry of activists and that this activity quickly spreads beyond the institutional control of any one organization.”<sup>17</sup> Often social movements attribute this moment to the conditions outside of the social movement. As Engler and Engler note, “they [moments of the whirlwind] are more likely to be treated as freak outliers

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<sup>15</sup> David A. Snow and Sarah A. Soule, *A Primer on Social Movements* (W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Engler and Paul Engler, *This Is An Uprising: How Nonviolent Revolt Is Shaping the Twenty-First Century* (Nation Books, 2016).

than as regular characteristics of social movement campaigns.”<sup>18</sup> For example, Francis Fox Piven and Richard Cloward in their work, *Poor People’s Movements*, suggest that these moments happen as a result of historical or political events and ignore that this rise of participation and activity could be provoked by actors within the social movement itself.<sup>19</sup> In their piece, Paul and Mark Engler prove that social movements have shown to generate a historic upheaval of their own and that, when a moment of the whirlwind may occur spontaneously, there are ways that social movement actors can harness them to better sustain their movement.<sup>20</sup>

Engler and Engler also argue that movement organizers are most successful when they combine and utilize multiple organizing traditions. They specifically outline the potential for interaction between three main theories of change: (1) mass mobilization organizing (2) structure-based organizing (3) countercultural organizing (which fits into the theory of change category of personal transformation):

“Mass mobilizations alter the terms of political debate and create new possibilities for progress; structure-based organizing helps take advantage of this potential and protects against efforts to roll back advances; and countercultural communities preserve progressive values, nurturing dissidents who go on to initiate the next wave of revolts.”<sup>21</sup>

Outlining this interaction, rejects that there is an inherent tension between social movement organizations that hold separate theories of change. Instead, they demonstrate that there can be a collaborative interaction between them. While each theory of change has strengths and weaknesses, the strengths in one category can supplement another’s weaknesses:

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

“Established groups that share the goals of a mass uprising can benefit from the burst of energy and the increased interest in a cause that comes with a high-profile mobilization. In turn, the more established organizations can lend their prestige and resources to outbreaks of resistance when they arise.”<sup>22</sup>

Snow and Soule, also study the interaction of social movement organizations within social movements. At first, they outline how social movement organizations positively interact in terms of “cooperation and coalition.” The authors limit coalition building to “adopting a shared goal” as opposed to analyzing how movement organizations can work together to integrate various theories of change. However, they also focus on the competition and conflict in a social movement sector. They argue that there are limited resources that SMOs are forced to compete for. They distinguish several “strategies” of social movement organizations later in their piece, but fail to analyze how these strategies interplay between movement organizations. Thus, Snow and Soule provide a slightly contradictory case for the interaction between SMOs. On one hand, the authors do recognize that a variation in tactics is useful, as it enables individuals to engage in unique ways. However, apart from this recognition that diversity in organizations is a way to increase engagement, Snow and Soule fall short in outlining the complex dynamics between SMOs.

Snow and Soule provide distinctions between different social movement strategies. They distinguish two classifications of social movement strategy: (1) societal transformation (2) personal transformation. Societal transformation organizations call for tactics that challenge dominant institutions or social structures while personal transformation organizations are focused on therapeutic and self-help organizing.<sup>23</sup> However, Snow and Soule restrict these strategies as

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<sup>22</sup> Mark Engler and Paul Engler, *This Is An Uprising: How Nonviolent Revolt Is Shaping the Twenty-First Century* (Nation Books, 2016).

<sup>23</sup> David A. Snow and Sarah A. Soule, *A Primer on Social Movements* (W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2010).

held by movements. For example, they explain that movement strategies can shift and change over time. Additionally, they call attention to the fact that social movements rarely act purely based on one strategy and, more often, organizations have a blend of two or more strategies.<sup>24</sup> However, they do not acknowledge the ways that social movement organizations center different strategies in their organizing. Therefore, social movements do not have an underlying strategy, but, instead, as Mark and Paul Engler's analysis in *This is an Uprising* shows, social movement organizations in a particular movement more often hold separate strategies or theories of change that can all contribute to a common movement goal through varied tactics.

#### 4.) Importance of Social Movement Ecology

Bill Moyer in *Doing Democracy*, helps us understand how social movements operate overtime. Moyer posits a model for social movements that he calls the "Eight Stages of the Process of Social Movement Success." Moyer's model uplifts an often overlooked part within the timeline of a social movement: "trigger events." Trigger events are highly publicized, shocking incidents that dramatically reveal a critical social problem to the public in a vivid way.<sup>25</sup> Moyer describes how these events cause the movement to enter into stage four, the "Take Off" (similar to Paul & Mark Engler's "moment of the whirlwind" where participation increases). He agrees with Paul and Mark Engler that trigger events can be caused outside of or inside of the movement.

The next stage, Stage Five, is called the "Perception of Failure." Occurring after the stage where there is a dramatic increase in publicity and participation, movement goals are often not

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Bill Moyer, *Doing Democracy: The MAP Model for Organizing Social Movements* (New Society Publishers, 2001).

met instantly after a trigger event and thus activists become dejected.<sup>26</sup> However, Moyer demonstrates that this is the stage in which social movements are poised to secure their most significant gains. He outlines that in order to get to Stage Six, “Majority Public Opinion,” activists must have the knowledge and skills required to understand, participate in, and organize in the next stage. Specifically, he argues nonviolence mass mobilization trainers often play a critical role during the movement take-off but do not have the structure-based organizing skills to sustain the movement into the next stages.<sup>27</sup> Understanding how social movements operate within this framework is essential for my research.

Mark & Paul Engler’s concept of “social movement ecology” categorizes and analyzes the manifestation and interaction of mass mobilization and structure organizing. This “social movement ecology” uses the metaphor of “ecology” to understand how social movement organizations operate within social movements. This theory recognizes that within any particular social movement there exists organizations which have different approaches, theories of change, and cultures. Social movement ecology seeks to understand how these social movement organizations work together, intentionally or unintentionally, to create diversity, health, or tension within the social movement or social movement ecology. Social movement ecology also interrogates what types of relationships and exchanges occur between these organizations.<sup>28</sup> This framing is an important tool for understanding social movements because many social movement theorists highlight and perpetuate a tension between social movement organizations who hold different theories of change. For example, two scholars, Barbara Epstein and Wini Breines,

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> “Movement Ecology,” *Ayni Institute* (blog), accessed November 12, 2019, <https://ayni.institute/movementecology/>.

emphasize tensions between “prefigurative” politics and strategic politics. “Prefigurative” politics describes social movement organizations that embody the desired society, create counter institutions, and meld means and ends.<sup>29</sup> While this distinction is useful for understanding social movements, Epstein and Breins both present a tension between prefigurative and strategic organizing, calling them “opposing forces”<sup>30</sup> or having “contradictory demands.”<sup>31</sup> However, although many scholars have constructed dichotomies and/or tensions between different theories of change, as Mark and Paul Engler outline in their article “Gandhi’s Strategy for Success — Use More Than One Strategy” there are examples of social movement ecologies that show successful integration of social movement organizations working together for the betterment of the movement.<sup>32</sup> The Ayni Institute outlines three major theories of change: 1) changing dominant institutions, 2) building alternative institutions, 3) personal transformation. Within the first category, there are three subtypes: 1) structure, 2) mass mobilization, and 3) inside game.<sup>33</sup>

## 5.) Characterization

Because social movements go through periods of high activity to periods of apathy and disillusionment, in order to determine the character of a social movement’s organizing, I attempt to study an organization over the course of the social movement. However, because Sunrise is still ongoing I consider how the movement has been organizing since it’s launch in 2017, how it

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<sup>29</sup> Barbara Epstein, *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution: Nonviolent Direct Action in the 1970s and 1980s*. (University of California Press, 1991).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Wini Breines, “Community and Organization: The New Left and Michels’ ‘Iron Law,’” *Social Problems* 27, no. 4 (1980): 419–29, <https://doi.org/10.2307/800170>.

<sup>32</sup> Mark Engler, Paul Engler, and 2017, “Gandhi’s Strategy for Success — Use More than One Strategy,” *Waging Nonviolence* (blog), March 17, 2017, <https://wagingnonviolence.org/2017/03/gandhi-strategy-success/>.

<sup>33</sup> “Movement Ecology,” *Ayni Institute* (blog), accessed November 12, 2019, <https://ayni.institute/movementecology/>.

organizes today, and how it plans to organize in the future. Thus, I will be able to take into account “trigger events” and periods where there is a “perception of failure.” My research will help determine whether the interaction between mass mobilization and structure-based organizing is needed to sustain a movement.

In sum, in this paper, I study how mass mobilization and structure-based organizing interplay in the Sunrise Movement in order to understand how to build a massive decentralized social movement. While Sunrise calls themselves a movement rather than an organization, I generally theoretically conceptualize, using Snow and Soule’s definition, the Sunrise Movement as a social movement organization with the broader climate movement. However, in my findings and analysis, organizers and myself often refer to the Sunrise Movement as a “movement” rather than an organization due to their name. Additionally, due to its intersectional framework and policy proposals, the Sunrise Movement spans across different social movements fighting to tackle a wide variety of progressive issues. Therefore, I find it difficult to neatly categorize Sunrise Movement into either a social movement organization or a social movement; I believe it falls somewhere in between.

In my paper, I use the Engler and Engler’s framework to understand their organizing and the interaction between distinct theories of change, specifically between structure-based and mass mobilization organizing. I attempt to determine if there are tensions between these two different types of organizing, essentially aiming to test whether organizations often undergird large protests or if organizations lead away from the effective mass protests. To understand how Sunrise fits into a social movement ecology, I analyze specifically whether Sunrise has been primarily focused on mass mobilizing, or maintaining their structures, and to what extent they

used these two theories of change in collaboration with each other. I also keep in mind the framework of a “moment of the whirlwind” in order to understand the Sunrise Movement’s organizing and to characterize the interaction between mass mobilization and structure-based organizing.

## Methods

In order to understand how the Sunrise Movement is structured and how or if they mass mobilize, I will be conducting interviews with prominent local and national activists in the movement. To supplement this, I will also be gathering information about the movement that is available in the media via journal articles, newspaper articles, podcasts, and other media avenues. I will use these sources as well as reach out to Sunrise activists I know to identify leaders within the movement. I will use my personal connections with these activists to connect with other Sunrise organizers. Because the Sunrise Movement has groups in cities across the country, I will conduct in-person interviews with those that I can in Los Angeles, but I will also hold video interviews with activists who are in other cities.

I will then summarize and organize the information I gain from my interviews. As organizers describe their experience, I will then determine if the organizing stems from a theory of change that is mass protest or structure. Theory of change is how an organization or network perceives that they will enact change in society. Accordingly, organizing undergirded by a mass protest theory of change will be actions that are taken by activists with the understanding that mass protests are key to enacting change. On the other hand, organizing undergirded by a structure-based theory of change will be actions that are taken by activists with the understanding that maintaining organizational structure is key to enacting change. Thus, Interview questions that I ask will be centered on: (1) how Sunrise is structured (focusing on leadership development and organizational structure) (2) if and/or how Sunrise organizes mass mobilizations (focusing on how the movement protests and to what scale).

## Findings

Through interviews with both national and local organizers in the Sunrise Movement and through studying reports and articles on the Sunrise Movement, I build an understanding of the Sunrise Movement's organizing strategy and how it incorporates elements of both mass protest and structure-based organizing. In my findings, I summarize parts of my interviews with national and local Sunrise organizers: Sara Blazevic (National Managing Director of Sunrise and Co-Founder), William Lawrence (National Director of Strategic Partnerships and Co-Founder), Monica Guzman (Los Angeles Strategy Coordinator), Danielle Reynolds (Los Angeles Co-Coordinator of the People Power Team), and Ina Morton (Los Angeles Coordinator of the Actions Team).

On Vox Media's "The Ezra Klein Show," Ezra asks Sunrise founder Varshini Prakash to explain Sunrise's theory of change. Theory of change is how an organization or network perceives that they will enact change in society. This strategy, also laid out in Sunrise's orientation training, consists of three planks: 1) people power 2) political power 3) political alignment. People power is the goal to attain a large vocal base of active support. Prakash clarifies that active support is the whole range of movement activities that people can engage in: including voting, donating, sharing something on social media, signing pledges, participating in actions, etc. Ultimately, the movement hopes to energize, specifically, around 11 million people. Prakash explains that this number comes from a study conducted by social movement scholar Erica Chenoweth.<sup>34</sup> Chenoweth found that, historically, it takes 3.5 percent of a population

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<sup>34</sup> Varshini Prakash in Ezra Klein's "Generation Climate Change," The Ezra Klein Show, n.d., <https://www.vox.com/ezra-klein-show-podcast/2019/7/31/20732041/varshini-prakash-sunrise-movement-green-new-deal>.

engaged with sustained nonviolent resistance to topple brutal dictatorships.<sup>35</sup> The Sunrise founders believe that, if they engage 3.5% of the United States population, which is approximately 11 million people, in sustained nonviolent resistance they can achieve comparable revolutionary change. The second objective, political power, is a critical mass of enthusiastically supportive public officials who back up their support with action. And the third plank is called political alignment, or a grouping of social, economic, and political forces that are able to define a set of shared agenda for society. The founders determined that there is a new opportunity for movements, institutions, think tanks, businesses and unions to be organized around a new set of values at this particular point in American politics; a response and end to the Reagan alignment that began in the 80s.

Foundational to the first plank of the strategy, building “people power,” was a training institute called Momentum.

### 1.) Cycle of Momentum - Integrating Mass Protest & Structure

In my interviews with national organizers, I discovered that a large part of their strategy came out of a movement training institute called Momentum. In 2015, two years before Sunrise launched, movements like Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter were igniting mass decentralized protests and organizing across the United States. It became clear that mass protest organizing was taking off. As William Lawrence, one of the founders of Sunrise recalls, “it was mass protest movements that were moving the needle.” As they witnessed the power of these movements, many of the founders of Sunrise were involved in fossil fuel divestment and other climate change organizing and they wanted to bring mass protest to the climate movement.

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<sup>35</sup> Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (Columbia University Press, 2011).

Fortuitously, Momentum offered a craft on how to build these kinds of movements. As stated on their website, Momentum combines and systematizes best practices from past movements and critical movement theory in order to give organizers the tools to build massive, decentralized social movements.<sup>36</sup> Momentum claims to integrate mass protest and structure based organizing.<sup>37</sup> However, this characterization of their teachings is up for debate. Lawrence suggested that, instead, their theory of change should be characterized as mainly one based on mass protest that integrates structure-based organizing, or “how to use structure-based organizations to build more effective mass protest movements.”<sup>38</sup> Once equipped with Momentum’s tools and theories, these organizers came together to strategically plan for a new movement led by and for young people to stop climate change and they called it Sunrise.

Clearly influenced by Momentum, Lawrence explains that Sunrise is essentially a mass protest movement that has built in elements of structure to help them grow their capacity. It is clear that the movement is predicated on the understanding that mass protest is the effective way to institute widespread change, “Our theory of change at its core is a mass protest theory of change because what we’re trying to do is shift the political weather, to make all kinds of different victories possible.”<sup>39</sup> He goes on to explain that’s why the movement is pushing for the Green New Deal, an ambitious national policy or “big win” as Lawrence describes it. “We’re not going after the sort of incremental victories that structure-based organizations often do.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> “About Momentum,” Momentum, accessed February 23, 2020, <https://www.momentumcommunity.org/about-momentum>.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> William Lawrence, February 18, 2020, interview.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

Simultaneously, Sunrise supplements mass protest organizing with structure based organizing. For example, Sunrise designed a fellowship program in 2018, where they were able to “structurally build our leadership and our membership.” This program allowed them to build a base of leaders and members large enough and skilled enough to bring about 250 people to Capitol Hill on November 13th of 2018 and sit in at Nancy Pelosi’s office. Lawrence reflects, “It was the structure that got us there but then that was fundamentally a mass protest tactic.”<sup>41</sup> After the action and the resulting national media attention it received, Sunrise organizers knew what to do; Momentum had a model for exactly what movements should do to take advantage of these kinds of moments. Momentum calls these moments “trigger events” and the resulting movement activity from these events “moments of the whirlwind.”<sup>42</sup> Momentum argues that these moments are crucial for recruiting large numbers of previously passive bystanders as active participants in the movement. This process of recruiting masses of new activists is called “absorption” and is key to integrating mass mobilization and structure-based organizing models. Absorption, which happens mainly through mass calls and trainings, allows movements to “absorb” the power of a mass protest action and move people, who participated in or who are inspired by a protest action, into a structure.<sup>43</sup>

One of the tactics for moving people into the Sunrise structure has been mass calls. Lawrence recounts, “the action was on a Tuesday and we had a mass call at the end of the day on Thursday.”<sup>44</sup> He recalls that 400 people joined that call to learn about the movement. And then

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<sup>41</sup> William Lawrence, February 18, 2020, interview.

<sup>42</sup> Mark Engler and Paul Engler, *This Is An Uprising: How Nonviolent Revolt Is Shaping the Twenty-First Century* (Nation Books, 2016).

<sup>43</sup> “About Momentum,” Momentum, accessed February 23, 2020, <https://www.momentumcommunity.org/about-momentum>.

<sup>44</sup> William Lawrence, February 18, 2020, interview.

one week after the Pelosi action they had 150 individual, distributed actions at local Congressional offices in dozens of states around the country. In a span of three weeks, they went from having 25 to over one hundred “hubs” or local organizing chapters. Having the strategic foresight to organizing a large protest action aimed to inspire the public would only get them halfway. Knowing what to do with the masses of newly inspired people was essential to grow their scale and reach.

In the Momentum training, organizers are taught to see this process of action and absorption as a cycle. The “Cycle of Momentum” is a tool for how social movements can harness the actions of everyday people to grow participation, influence, reach, and political power.<sup>45</sup> Escalated action disrupts the normal order or expectations of society, involves a personal sacrifice by participants, and exposes a moral issue or injustice. Absorption is the intentional process of recruiting previous bystanders to become active participants, allowing the structure of the movement to grow. With the new energy and power of an expanded volunteer base, the movement must then prepare their new recruits to take further escalated action. Thus, the cycle of “escalation, preparation, and absorption” continues until the movement has achieved high enough levels of participation to win their goals and demands. This organizing theory is baked into all components of how Sunrise operates: from their five-year strategy to how they train their volunteer leaders.

The Sunrise Movement is currently continuing to build toward even more massive protests in the future. Sunrise has five stages to their movement: 1) Stage 1, 2017: Launch the movement, 2) Stage 2, 2018: Make climate change matter in the midterm election, 3) Stage 3,

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<sup>45</sup> “About Momentum,” Momentum, accessed February 23, 2020, <https://www.momentumcommunity.org/about-momentum>.

2019: Make the entire country feel the urgency of the crisis, 4) Stage 4, 2020: Win governing power by bringing it home through the 2020 general election, and 5) Stage 5, 2021: Engage in mass noncooperation to interrupt business as usual and win a Green New Deal.<sup>46</sup> Overall, they intend to build people power and political power until Stage 5, when they plan to facilitate mass noncompliance. Mass noncompliance, Lawrence says, is “the holy grail” of mass protest movements.<sup>47</sup> He defines mass noncompliance as a meaningful portion of the population engaged in ongoing non-cooperation with the status quo in a variety of ways. He cites the uprisings in Hong Kong and Chile and Lebanon as examples of mass noncompliance. He reflects on the significance of this stage,

“You don’t get the kind of transformational change that is redistributive and all the things we want it to be without mass noncompliance which actually allows people, workers, to wield our power to shut down the economy and inflict pain on the people at the top.”<sup>48</sup>

Stage Five is when Sunrise hopes to be able to engage 3.5% of the population or 11 million Americans. Sunrise calls this the “North Star” strategy. Danielle Reynolds, a Los Angeles Sunrise organizer relays, “our North Star, which is what we are trying to build up to, we want it to be the largest day of mass non-cooperation in human history and we want that to occur in either December of 2020 or January, 2021.”<sup>49</sup> Monica Guzman, another L.A. organizer and Coordinator of the Strategy Team, echoes this understanding, “The North Star is getting 3.5% of the population on the streets to bring out the Green New Deal.”<sup>50</sup> To get there, Sunrise’s strategy is to consistently increase the size of their protests or strikes. Reynolds describes this process:

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<sup>46</sup> “Sunrise Movement,” Sunrise Movement, accessed November 10, 2019, <https://www.sunrisemovement.org>.

<sup>47</sup> William Lawrence, February 18, 2020, interview.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Danielle Reynolds, February 20, 2020, interview.

<sup>50</sup> Monica Guzman, February 19, 2020, interview.

“We vote, we strike, and we build up to bigger and bigger strikes until we have the largest day of mass non-cooperation in human history.”<sup>51</sup> Ina Morton, another local organizer, similarly

describes her understanding of the North Star strategy,

“our timeline for the theory of change within like the year and this past year, it’s just been increasing and doubling mobilization [...] so that the next one is always twice as large as the past one [...] not specifically twice as large but we’re always trying to multiply.”<sup>52</sup>

Clearly, local organizers are aligned with and actively engaging in this strategy.

## 2.) Building People Power - Structure-Based Organizing

Sara Blazevic explains that there are four ways that Sunrise builds “people power” in their movement: 1) moral protest 2) distributed organizing 3) local organizing and 4) training.<sup>53</sup> I have added national organizing as a fifth strategy. Throughout these five organizing strategies, Sunrise uses a combination of structure-based and mass protest organizing. In each category, I provide a brief explanation of each of these types of organizing and then provide examples from the movement provided by local and national organizers.

### *A.) Moral Protest*

“Moral protest is really about illuminating the crisis that we face and inviting millions of people to empathize with it. It’s about turning private suffering that many many people experience either because they are directly impacted by the climate crisis or because they live in fear everyday of losing their homes, their lives, their livelihoods to the climate crisis, and really bringing that fear into the public in a way that allows people to resonate with it and allows people to feel that fear as well and also feel the hope of being able to be apart of something that can transform that fear to address the crisis.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Danielle Reynolds, February 20, 2020, interview.

<sup>52</sup> Ina Morton, March 5, 2020, interview.

<sup>53</sup> Sara Blazevic, February 26, 2020, interview.

<sup>54</sup> Sara Blazevic, February 26, 2020, interview.

Therefore, this includes all the protest actions, both large and small, that Sunrise members participate in. In their interviews, Sunrise organizers recount multiple instances where they have participated in moral protest, both nationally and locally: nationally, the Pelosi occupation and the DNC Climate Debate protest and locally, the Aliso Canyon protests. Moral protest is promoted and facilitated by the structure-based organizing that I outline below. Additionally, the mass protests that Sunrise plans to facilitate in the future fall under this category of “moral protest.”

### *B.) Distributed Organizing*

Distributed organizing is how the movement gives people an easy and meaningful avenue to take the first step into being a part of the movement with the ultimate goal of building the movement’s membership base or “capacity.” Blazevic describes how a lot of distributed organizing is digital because in order to allow anyone anywhere to be able to participate in the movement you need to be able to access people from a ton of different locations. Blazevic walks me through an example of how a distributed organizing tactic brings people into the movement:

“We engage someone through distributed organizing, through a national call to action, for example, where we have everybody call their representative, and ask them to sign onto the resolution for the Green New Deal. And then the hope is that that goes really well and then we’re like, ok do you want to start a hub?”<sup>55</sup>

Distributed organizing in tandem with a mass protest theory of change and structure-based strategies, allows the movement to engage people all over the country.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

### *C.) Local Organizing*

Local Organizing is how the movement sustains its distributed leaders and members for the long haul. Critical to maintaining long-lasting hubs was providing local organizers with a combination of structure and autonomy. From my interviews, I discovered how local hubs are formed. Blazevic describes how Sunrise gives people guidance on how to build hubs wherever they are: “We give people some tools and some basic structures and say these are some roles you should probably have [...] we give people a lot of online training and coaching to give them more guidance on how best to do that.”<sup>56</sup> For example, Sunrise’s Peer Coaching Network supports hubs in building strong horizontal cultures, building campaigns, designing escalated actions, and organizing big strikes that advance Sunrise’s strategy.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, Blazevic succinctly acknowledges that,

“It’s really about trying to do two things at once, which is maintaining unity while facilitating autonomy. So we want there to be a level of discipline around the strategy, the stories people are telling, the types of practices and structures they use in their hub to facilitate their organizing.”<sup>58</sup>

More simply, Sunrise gives local hubs basic guidelines for the structure of their hubs, but then gives them power to do what they want as long as they follow Sunrise’s eleven principles. Ina Morton, a local organizer with the Los Angeles hub, describes how Sunrise facilitates and supports hub structures and growth:

“They give loose guidelines and there’s not like a president or vice president or like a core team of leaders. Hubs are led by hub coordinators and it’s like very heavily emphasized that these roles are not supposed to be roles that are possessed by someone that acquires after having passed the test or gone through the hazing or been a member of

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<sup>56</sup> Sara Blazevic, February 26, 2020, interview.

<sup>57</sup> Nikola Yager, “Explainer: Regional Peer Coaching Model,” Google Docs, accessed April 14, 2020, [https://docs.google.com/document/d/14riBa8aiu2r11B8-nhoHpDXw6PgHUUm-tzUu-ftjMIk/edit?usp=embed\\_facebook](https://docs.google.com/document/d/14riBa8aiu2r11B8-nhoHpDXw6PgHUUm-tzUu-ftjMIk/edit?usp=embed_facebook).

<sup>58</sup> Sara Blazevic, February 26, 2020, interview.

Sunrise for months. They are very much meant to be rotational to allow as many people to participate as possible. When you hear someone talk about how they're like a spokesperson for their hub, or they are the hub coordinator for their hub, it very much signifies the work that they've committed to Sunrise but it doesn't necessarily symbolize any hierarchy."<sup>59</sup>

Morton highlights an important point here: in their guidance, Sunrise makes sure to emphasize a horizontal, role-based, rotating leadership structure.

Additionally, through local organizing, local members autonomously build community around the climate crisis. In our conversation, Blazevic mentions, "A lot of people say in Sunrise that we came for the mission but we stayed for the community." This value is reflected in Sunrise's fifth principle: "We tell our stories and we honor each other's stories. We all have something to lose to climate change, and something to gain in coming together. We tell our individual stories to connect with each other and understand the many different ways this crisis impacts us."<sup>60</sup> One local organizer, Monica Guzman, clearly reflected this point. Now a coordinator of a team in the Los Angeles hub, she recalls her first experience with Sunrise. She attended a video screening that Sunrise organized. From there, she was invited to a hub meeting where an organizer shared a compelling story that Guzman heavily resonated with:

"Preston Lopez shared a beautiful story right off the bat about being queer and brown and now understanding like how he fit into the bigger picture about climate justice and how Sunrise changed his life [...] and I was very moved by his story and I went up to him afterwards and I said like, thank you so much for sharing that. And he looked deeply into my eyes and said, we got to talk."<sup>61</sup>

Soon after, in small groups, Guzman discovered her own economic struggles and frustrations with leaders in society not taking enough action to change things. Near the end of the interview

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<sup>59</sup> Ina Morton, March 5, 2020, interview.

<sup>60</sup> "Sunrise Movement," Sunrise Movement, accessed November 10, 2019, <https://www.sunrisemovement.org>.

<sup>61</sup> Monica Guzman, February 19, 2020, interview.

she says, “it’s a really beautiful community [...] we’re deeply affected by the things that we have in common now, and that forms bonds more than anything.”<sup>62</sup> Guzman emulates this purpose of local organizing. She demonstrates how participants can identify with the collective struggle against climate change as well as the intersectional issues that Sunrise aims to tackle, like creating good green jobs.

In terms of structure-based organizing, there are guidelines that Sunrise gives to each hub when they begin organizing. One of the structures that they suggest is creating teams. All of the local organizers reflected on their experience with teams and their leadership within the teams. In our interview, Ina Morton described the local team structure and how it operates. There is a coordinator that represents every team. There are teams on political engagement, actions, culture team, and people’s alignment.<sup>63</sup> Teams allow people to take responsibility and get involved where they are interested and where they can utilize their particular skills. Sunrise aims to match up people’s skills and plug people in where it makes sense. When Sunrise LA was first starting out, they would have a one-on-one meeting with every single person to try and get them plugged into the right teams. But, soon enough, too many people were signing up. They decided to change their strategy and now run welcome calls where they pitch and explain the teams to everyone on the call.<sup>64</sup> Additionally, team members are encouraged to do what they can.

Sunrise’s sixth principle states,

“We ask for help and give what we can. We all have something to offer to the movement. Some of us give time through volunteering anywhere from 1 to 50 hours per week. Some of us give money. Some of us donate housing or meeting space. We invite our community into the movement by asking for the help we need.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ina Morton, March 5, 2020, interview.

<sup>64</sup> Danielle Reynolds, February 20, 2020, interview.

<sup>65</sup> “Sunrise Movement,” Sunrise Movement, accessed November 10, 2019, <https://www.sunrisemovement.org>.

Guzman reflects on how this principle has affected her organizing:

“I think one of Sunrise's greatest strengths is giving young people the liberty to do what they can, which is one of our founding principles. We all do what we can. I personally have felt invited to do my best work and I am doing my best work and I don't think I could be doing my best work anywhere else.”<sup>66</sup>

This value along with the structured teams allows Sunrise to promote local sustained organizing.

Across the movement, Sunrise has another structure in place, the snowflake model. The “snowflake” describes the shape of a structure that is designed to grow organizations and movements by creating interconnected teams and opportunities for leadership development. The “snowflake” structure was coined by Marshall Ganz, an organizer with the United Farm Workers Movement. In Ganz’s Organizing Handbook, he argues that the snowflake model promotes distributed leadership, so that no one person holds all the power and there can be mutual accountability across the structure (View Appendix Figure 1 & Figure 2). The snowflake model is reflected in the structure of both their coaching program as well as hubs internal structure.<sup>67</sup>

Guzman describes how this horizontal leadership structure plays out in leadership of the LA hub: “the hub coordinators kind are coordinating all the team leaders who are coordinating their team members, no one's really directing anyone anymore. Hub coordinators are just there to support all these initiatives and every team leader or team coordinator.”<sup>68</sup> Local organizer, Danielle Reynolds, explains the power of this model in allowing Sunrise to increase their membership and

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<sup>66</sup> Monica Guzman, February 19, 2020, interview.

<sup>67</sup> Nikola Yager, “Explainer: Regional Peer Coaching Model,” Google Docs, accessed April 14, 2020, [https://docs.google.com/document/d/14riBa8aiu2r11B8-nhoHpDXw6PgHUUm-tzUu-ftjMIk/edit?usp=embed\\_facebook](https://docs.google.com/document/d/14riBa8aiu2r11B8-nhoHpDXw6PgHUUm-tzUu-ftjMIk/edit?usp=embed_facebook).

<sup>68</sup> Monica Guzman, February 19, 2020, interview.

leadership development, “We're trying to build a model where we can build people power as quickly as possible by allowing as many people to activate as possible.”<sup>69</sup>

Another structure that Sunrise puts in place in their seventh principles is the “rule of three.” Any group of three people can take action in the name of Sunrise as long as they follow all of Sunrise’s principles. If any individual member of Sunrise wants to start an initiative, all they have to do is find two other people. Guzman explains that this is how the podcast team started at the LA hub. She reflects, “it’s that easy to get stuff done, all it takes to make a decision in the name of Sunrise is three people.”<sup>70</sup> Another aspect to this principle is “We ask for advice, not permission, from each other to make this happen.” Reynolds relays her take on this principle, “We take initiative, it’s different to feel that in your bones, like, Oh I don’t need permission, I just need community.”<sup>71</sup> The rule of three along with teams and the snowflake model are all structure-based elements of Sunrise’s local organizing because they all promote the structure and longevity of the movement.

#### *D.) Training and Mentorship*

Training is how the movement gives people the skills, tools, and confidence that they need to do organizing work, to pull off actions and protests, to take on roles in the movement, and to become leaders. For example, to pull off the Climate Debate Protest at the Democratic National Convention, 200 to 300 people were trained the day before. Morton recalls, “Many of them were new to Sunrise or at the very least brand new to actions.”<sup>72</sup> In terms of leadership development, all of the local members who organize with Sunrise are required to attend the

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<sup>69</sup> Danielle Reynolds, February 20, 2020, interview.

<sup>70</sup> Monica Guzman, February 19, 2020, interview.

<sup>71</sup> Danielle Reynolds, February 20, 2020, interview.

<sup>72</sup> Ina Morton, March 5, 2020, interview.

Sunrise 101 Orientation Training where they learn about the story and strategy of Sunrise. If you want to take on more leadership, Sunrise offers a Sunrise 201 Training or “Sunrise Organizers Training.” There are also outreach trainings, where people learn to do one-on-ones. Reynolds also described a leadership training that is a weekend retreat where participants attend two full days of training. She describes how local organizers who are really plugged in reach out to all the people who they have noticed have leadership potential. Last January, LA organizers recruited 50 people who attended the last leadership training.<sup>73</sup>

Sunrise National puts on their own trainings mostly digitally but sometimes will call for in person national trainings. Local hubs are also encouraged and trained to put on their own trainings.<sup>74</sup> Sunrise National will hold a “Training for Trainers” to teach people how to train. Morton described how she was trained by members of her hub who had been trained by national trainers.<sup>75</sup>

Sunrise has also instilled the value of constantly empowering people and encouraging them to take on leadership in ways that they can and how they want to.<sup>76</sup> All of the local organizers that I interviewed emphasized this point. First, Monica Guzman recalls someone in her first Sunrise meeting saying that Preston and her had the power to build an army for a Green New Deal. She recalls, “How did this lang on my plate? [...] This was some giant mistake. I had literally just gone to one meeting, you know, one meeting with Sunrise [...] It was surreal. And that’s how my experience with Sunrise has consistently been.”<sup>77</sup> Morton had a similar experience when first joining Sunrise. She reflects, “It’s very much more than just welcoming people to

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<sup>73</sup> Danielle Reynolds, February 20, 2020, interview.

<sup>74</sup> Monica Guzman, February 19, 2020, interview.

<sup>75</sup> Ina Morton, March 5, 2020, interview.

<sup>76</sup> Sara Blazevic, February 26, 2020, interview.

<sup>77</sup> Monica Guzman, February 19, 2020, interview.

come into leadership positions, it's awarding people leadership right off the bat."<sup>78</sup> Only after a month of being in Sunrise, Morton was asked to scout, plan, and lead an action at the Aliso Canyon Oil Field where a massive natural gas leak was discovered in 2015. She recalls,

"I was absolutely blown away. I had maybe been to a couple hub meetings and I knew some people, but I certainly didn't think that I was at the point to which people would be awarding me responsibility. But that is how we try to do it at Sunrise. We are not waiting for people to prove themselves to be dependable enough to do it [...] Sometimes it is so bold where I'm like what if I was absolutely terrible [...] there is always that risk, but it's a risk we are willing to take because it's always an incredible outcome when it does work out well. That's how we turn out people who are willing to dedicate tens of hours of week to Sunrise."<sup>79</sup>

Additionally, Sunrise promotes continuous leadership development. Reynolds embodies this in her mentorship of her fellow co-coordinator of the People Power team. Reynolds is coaching and mentoring her fellow co-coordinator to take over the coordinating role herself.<sup>80</sup> Morton also cites how a former hub coordinator would keep a list of names of people who were in the movement in order to allocate them different responsibilities.

Sunrise also strives to empower and center youth leadership and voices in their work. For example, Reynolds describes how a 17 year old became a hub coordinator. She came to a leadership training last June, Reynolds remembered how organizers saw her leadership potential and asked her, not only despite the fact that she was 17, but because she was 17.<sup>81</sup> Morton further illustrates this point. She recalls again the DNC Climate Debate action in San Francisco and seeing young people in leadership positions, "It is really amazing watching like 20 to 24 year olds even like 19 or 18 year olds attempt to, not just put on an action that they think will be

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<sup>78</sup> Ina Morton, March 5, 2020, interview.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Danielle Reynolds, February 20, 2020, interview.

<sup>81</sup> Danielle Reynolds, February 20, 2020, interview.

useful, but put on actions that are informed by histories and theories of movement building.”<sup>82</sup>

Morton herself is 20 years old and is coordinator of the actions teams. Clearly, training, together with bold leadership allocation and mentorship, allows Sunrise to promote their overall structure by maintaining and investing in leaders.

### *E.) National Organizing*

Sunrise’s national organizing is made up of both paid staff and national volunteers who are responsible for guiding the movement and providing capacity in places where needed. The national organizational structure, what organizers call “National” or “Sunrise national,” consists of the executive director, the managing director, and a number of different departments including communications, organizing, political and partnership work, training and more. Within each of these departments, there are even more teams or departments. However, Blazevic clarifies that the national organization is not the movement:

“We’re not the movement. The movement is out there, it’s thousands of people everywhere, on the ground [...] the movement both locally and nationally needs to have a degree of autonomy from any staff structure and we’re building some structures to try and make that possible.”<sup>83</sup>

But for now, the national organization and its staff structure remain a part of the movement.

Morton reiterates and adds to this point, “The hubs are like the heart and soul of the movement and they kind of feed into national and then national feeds back into us in this way that we are like almost representing two wings within the same movement that is just constantly working in tandem with each other.” Clearly the national organization and its respective organizing work

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<sup>82</sup> Ina Morton, March 5, 2020, interview.

<sup>83</sup> Sara Blazevic, February 26, 2020, interview.

together with the local organizing to propel the movement forward. The national staff is another structure that allows the movement to support the capacity and growth of the movement.

### 3.) Building Political Power - Electoral Organizing

Although based heavily on the Momentum strategic model, the Sunrise Movement's organizing strategy departed from the model in one significant area: electoral politics. During the movement's incubation period, Donald Trump was elected president of the United States. Founders of the movement decided that building a massive, decentralized movement was not going to be enough. They watched as Donald Trump rolled back all of the climate-related victories of the last of the Obama years in the first three weeks of his presidency. Will Lawrence, a Sunrise co-founder, recalls how the founders of Sunrise decided that they needed to have a "more sophisticated approach to the political process."<sup>84</sup> Blazevic, a founder and now acting managing director of Sunrise, describes how Sunrise had to restructure their strategy:

"We realized that our whole theory of popular support kind of hinges on the idea that assumption that there will exist a liberal government in place like the Obama government that is receptive to public pressure, mass protest movement, and that can institutionalize public support for legislative wins and policy."

In their interviews, Blazevic and Lawrence suggest that these original organizers decided they needed to have a government receptive to public pressure and therefore added electing those leaders into office as part of their strategy to win. However, this strategy does not come without its own obstacles. Local organizer Ina Morton points out:

"Sunrise is under fire a lot for specifically calling out Democrats who are with fossil fuel interests so a lot of mainstream Democrats will see that as really problematic or as dangerous for the cause rather than focusing on Republicans. But the way that we see it is

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<sup>84</sup> William Lawrence, February 18, 2020, interview.

that we have to push the people who have influence and who also have an ear open to what we have to say to actually enact change.”<sup>85</sup>

Her statement shows how Sunrise has chosen to only support elected officials who publicly and fully support Sunrise’s demands. Additionally, Lawrence claims that engaging in electoral politics was also a way to effectively target the public and grow their organization: “we inserted ourselves in between them and the election.” Thus, Sunrise also saw the political process as an effective way to build the movement. The movement therefore is not only focused on building a powerful army of young people to enact change through mass protest, they also consider electoral power fundamental to enacting change.

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<sup>85</sup> Ina Morton, March 5, 2020, interview.

## **Recommendations**

### 1.) What Movements Can Learn from Sunrise

Sunrise has shown how to use a combination of moral protest, decentralized organizing, local organizing, and training to build a massive, sustained, and decentralized social movement. Momentum and their theories of organizing have been a crucial influence to Sunrise's tactics and strategies. As I outlined in my findings, the "Cycle of Momentum" strategy has been key to getting Sunrise to a national scale and sustaining the movement. Moral protest has been a compelling force to gain national attention. Decentralized Organizing has allowed Sunrise to grow and sustain the movement by allowing anyone anywhere to join and make long-term commitments to the movement. Local Organizing has also promoted the growth and endurance of the movement by providing structure to develop autonomous non-hierarchical local organizing groups. And finally, Training has also promoted growth and sustained organizing by cultivating highly trained and highly skilled leaders throughout the movement. Therefore, social movements searching for ways to grow and sustain their movements could explore ways to incorporate these tactics. In regards to social movement theory, Sunrise has clearly incorporated many elements of structure-based organizing proving the value of this type of organizing when there are horizontal and decentralized elements incorporated into it.

### 2.) Future Research

In terms of allowing social movement theorists to determine whether structure-based and mass protest organizing can truly be integrated, future research would have to be conducted once Sunrise enters into Stage Five of their movement. Interestingly, although mass protest as a theory of change has been the driving force behind their movement, Sunrise has not yet proven that they

can facilitate mass protest. Founders of the movement outlined five stages for the movement. Right now, the movement is in Stage Four. The next stage, Stage Five, is set to happen next year where they hope to facilitate mass noncooperation to interrupt business as usual and win a Green New Deal. Therefore, in order to truly answer my research question and fully discover whether Sunrise was able to incorporate both structure-based organizing and mass protest organizing in their movement, I would have to wait and see if and, if they succeed in doing so, how the movement was able to pull off mass protest.

Sunrise has also incorporated Political Process Theory in their strategy shown through their inclusion of building on electoral power. However, the same predicament stands here. Although Sunrise has been able to build some electoral power, we can not determine whether or not electoral alignment is completely necessary for the movement to win concessions until the movement has run its course.

## Conclusion

The climate crisis is one of the biggest threats to face modern civilization. This deepening ecological crisis, facilitated by disaster capitalism, threatens to set loose yet unimagined terrors of the world's population, terrors that will likely be suffered and endured by those least equipped to handle them.<sup>86</sup> This has been extensively and consistently proven by scientists in the last 50 years. One of the first markers of a public reckoning with the climate crisis in the United States was when, in 1988, climate scientist James Hanson sounded the alarm to a Congressional Committee, linking global warming to the build up of greenhouse gases and carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.<sup>87</sup> Then in 1990, we sailed past the threshold that defined the highest level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere that is considered safe.<sup>88</sup> Once past this threshold of 350 parts per million of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere the earth has started to witness irrevocable changes to the climate and the environment. The haunting reality is that we are far past the deadline for taking serious and bold action to stop climate catastrophe.

However, in her book, *On Fire: The Burning Case for a Green New Deal*, Naomi Klein thinks that now more than ever before is an opportunity for historic climate action. Due to events like the youth climate strikes in Europe and North America, a mass protest movement, she argues that now society at large has accepted the morality and severity of this issue.<sup>89</sup> Another distinguishing characteristic of this moment, is that there is not only a mass concern but also that

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<sup>86</sup> Alex Khasnabish and Max Haiven, "Why Social Movements Need the Radical Imagination," July 22, 2014, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/why-social-movements-need-radical-imagination/>.

<sup>87</sup> Philip Shabecoff and Special To the New York Times, "Global Warming Has Begun, Expert Tells Senate," *The New York Times*, June 24, 1988, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/06/24/us/global-warming-has-begun-expert-tells-senate.html>.

<sup>88</sup> Nicola Jones, "How the World Passed a Carbon Threshold and Why It Matters," Yale E360, January 26, 2017, <https://e360.yale.edu/features/how-the-world-passed-a-carbon-threshold-400ppm-and-why-it-matters>.

<sup>89</sup> Naomi Klein in Zoya Teirstein's "Why Naomi Klein Thinks Now Is the Moment for Climate Action," *Grist*, October 1, 2019, <https://grist.org/article/why-naomi-klein-thinks-now-is-the-moment-for-climate-action/>.

there is a popularized plan to get us out. Klein presents a rousing case for the ambitious domestic policy, the Green New Deal, that promises “an intersectional and holistic response to multiple overlapping crises: unemployment, economic insecurity, racial injustice, gender exclusion, a crisis of respect for Indigenous people.”<sup>90</sup>

While the Green New Deal offers us a bold and transformative vision for the next economy, we need a movement to actually enact it. This is where Sunrise comes in. With the promise of organized mass noncompliance in 2021, Sunrise could be the movement to force the United States government to take action. As Sunrise states, “Together, we will change this country and this world, sure as the sun rises each morning.”<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Naomi Klein in Zoya Teirstein’s “Why Naomi Klein Thinks Now Is the Moment for Climate Action,” *Grist*, October 1, 2019, <https://grist.org/article/why-naomi-klein-thinks-now-is-the-moment-for-climate-action/>.

<sup>91</sup> “Sunrise Movement,” Sunrise Movement, accessed November 10, 2019, <https://www.sunrisemovement.org>.

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## Appendices

Figure 1: Ganz's snowflake model as displayed in *Organizing: People, Power, Change*

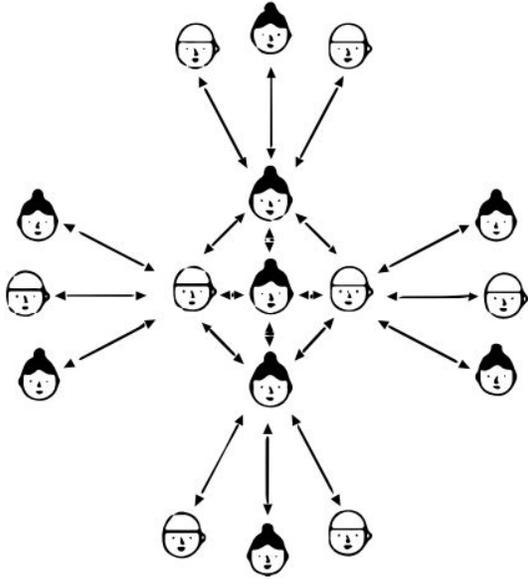


Figure 2: The snowflake model in Sunrise's Peer Coaching Network

