

RADICAL PERSISTENCE

CONVERSATIONS AND INSIGHTS ON THE VERMONT STATE
HOUSE'S POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Middlebury College
ENVS 310: Theories of Change
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Alex Cobb - amcobb@middlebury.edu
Finn Lester-Niles - alesterniles@middlebury.edu
Connor Wertz - cwertz@middlebury.edu

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1. Executive Summary

Vermont stands at a historical crossroads in its response to climate change. Public recognition of anthropogenic climate change has skyrocketed in recent years, as the climate crisis has only worsened and serious calls for change that meets the scope of the problem have been ignored. Vermont, despite its best efforts, has fallen behind its neighbors in curtailing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Legislative action on climate change stalled out in the 2019 session, even with Democrats and Progressives holding a supermajority in both the House and the Senate; while many legislators have worked tirelessly to ensure that this session produces different outcomes, significant challenges stand in the way of Vermont realizing comprehensive climate action.

This report attempts to illuminate these barriers and to recommend strategies to overcome them. With the upcoming session ticking its way ever closer, we interviewed ten legislative professionals--who work inside the State House as Representatives and Senators or outside the statehouse as policy specialists, professors, or reporters--and attended two informative legislative forums on climate. Each time we asked: what holds us back, and what must we do to move forward?

Situating the trove of data collected within social movement theory from legendary change agents such as Jane MacAlevey, Marshall Ganz, and others, this report answers the above questions to its best ability and presents the following findings and recommendations:

Nodes of Power

The nodes of power in the State House reside primarily in three areas: Structural, Organic, and Constituent. Structural power is derived from the rules of the political game, and includes leadership positions, committees, and veto power. Understanding structural power is understanding how an idea turns into a law, and at what times throughout the legislative process people can say “no”. Organic power is derived from playing the political game well. According to one interviewee, between 15 and 30 key players wield disproportionate influence over the State House depending on the year. Organic power is considerably harder to identify and quantify than structural power. Constituent power is derived from the fact that constituents are the people for whom the game is played. Especially in the small state of Vermont, where legislators are uniquely accessible, constituents hold an unrecognized ability to influence the State House beyond elections.

Barriers

While categorical opponents to climate action exist in Vermont, mobilizing moderate legislators to act in an appropriate fashion presents a far more difficult challenge. Barriers to appropriate urgency include the priorities of the legislature (which have historically not included climate), ineffective messaging that fails to reach constituents, and a tendency to water-down bills in order to play to the “sweet spot” and reach a veto-proof supermajority. Some barriers are more elusive than others. For example, a Republican’s presence in the Governor’s office is a tangible barrier that forces Democrats to moderate their legislation and appeal to a supermajority. Another barrier, however, is the lack of a strategic, analytical gameplan among

many of the legislators we interviewed. This report attempts to analyze both the obvious barriers and the barriers that exist in-between the lines.

Tools & Resources

In spite of the many barriers present, there are also tools and resources we can use to help us. These include the accessibility of the State House, the existence of constituencies that are working towards climate action, and the existing momentum of the climate movement generating national and international attention. Identifying and utilizing these tools help execute the following strategic recommendations.

Strategies

The result of reconciling the plethora of strategic recommendations from our interviews with the strategic analysis offered to us from practical experience and our class is presented below. We recommend those wishing to pursue action in State House understand the following formula: Polite, Persistent, Informed, and Radical (PPI&R). Legislators are human. This means that engaging them in respectful and reasoned ways keeps the door open for further collaboration and action. This *also* means, however, that persistence, emotion, and discipline are incredibly effective tools for persuasion as well.

In the spirit of acting in a polite, persistent, informed, and radical manner, we also identify the following tactics for realizing State House action: coalition building, staying informed, clear communication, and electoral disempowerment. Since legislators are representative roles by nature, they listen to their constituents first. In turn, tapping the power of constituents and building a geographically dispersed network of citizens engaged around climate change has huge potential to inspire action. Staying informed on the State House and communicating a clear message will ensure maximum efficacy of action during the session. Finally, challenging or ousting politicians in elections that cannot be persuaded to vote ambitiously on climate will empower climate champions to act even more aggressively in the future.

This will not be easy. This report attempts to grapple with the near-impossible task of balancing how to act *appropriately* with how to act *accordingly*. The ticking clock of ecological degradation demands that we go beyond business-as-usual, while the democratic systems governing us are structured to incrementalize and moderate change. We attempt to, at the very least, begin the dialogue of how to bridge the divide between the two and apply a radical pragmatism that lifts us out of our armchairs and into the streets. In short, we ask what would happen if one were to be polite, persistent, informed, *and* radical? This report explores how to best apply this radical pragmatism to the State House, and can be accessed at all levels of experience. We are in a moment of historic potential. Read on to be a part of history.

2. Introduction

2.1 Political Context

Anthropogenic climate change has been recognized for many years as one of the critical socio-economic and political challenges of our time. It has not been until recently, however, that the scope of the ecological crisis and the scale of the response required has begun to sink in. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Special Report on Global Warming, released at the end of 2018, suggested that only “unprecedented changes in all aspects of society”¹ would mitigate the worst effects of climate change, and gave a 12 year deadline to begin the rapid decarbonization of our economies. Similarly, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) released a report in May of 2019, stating that over 1 million species face extinction, and that “we are eroding the very foundations of our economies, livelihoods, food security, health and quality of life worldwide.”²

Fortunately, people are starting to take notice. In the winter of 2018, Representative Alexandria Ocasio Cortez (AOC) and the Sunrise movement captured the nation’s attention when they unveiled the “Green New Deal” (GND), a policy framework that redefines the government’s role in the fight against climate change.³ In February of 2019, AOC and Senator Markey introduced the GND as a resolution, and in November revealed a public housing modernization bill⁴, that took the first concrete policy step towards realizing the GND on a national level.

While the GND has pushed the overton window⁵ farther along to where we need it to be, states have also taken individual steps towards bolder action. In July of 2019, New York state passed the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act, which contains the countries’ most ambitious climate targets yet and provides a just transition framework for getting there, with a third of the benefits going to frontline communities.⁶ New York joined a handful of states around the country and in New England—including Maine and Massachusetts—that have stepped up and adopted significant climate legislation. Vermont, however still has work to do.

Whereas Massachusetts, New York, and even New Hampshire have decreased greenhouse gas emissions since 1990 levels, Vermont’s emissions have only risen.⁷ Last year, the Democratic supermajority could not agree on significant legislation for minimum wage, paid family leave, or climate, and timed out. This session, however, the legislature seems more unified and determined, and has outlined crucial climate bills that they would like to see passed.

¹ IPCC Secretariat, “Summary for Policymakers of IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C Approved by Governments.”

² Martin, “UN Report.”

³ Roberts, “There’s Now an Official Green New Deal. Here’s What’s in It.”

⁴ Markey, A Bill to provide economic empowerment opportunities in the United States through the modernization of public housing, and for other purposes.

⁵ The Overton Window is an exercise for visualizing the range of policies or topics that are acceptable or mainstream; it is a glimpse of the time’s political context

⁶ Roberts, “New York Just Passed the Most Ambitious Climate Target in the Country.”

⁷ Huvos, “Despite Bold Targets, VT’s Climate Pollution Continues to Rise.”

The Global Warming Solutions Act (GWSA) would put legal requirements on greenhouse gas (GHG) reduction goals that, as of now, are toothless; the Transportation Climate Initiative (TCI) would add Vermont to a regional cap and invest model for transportation. While these bills do not scratch the surface of a true response, they are a notable beginning. Despite this, however, they still face significant barriers to passage, as undoubtedly any future legislation that resonates with a Green New Deal framework in VT (which we call here a Green Mountain New Deal, or GMND) will.

In the face of human-caused planetary degradation, our governments—both nationally and statewide—have pushed aside any scaled notion of responsibility, creativity, or reason.⁸ This report has arisen out of a specific historical context and has an ambition of potentially historic consequences: there are rising tides of political will, feasible policy, and public sentiment for change, but they are not rising fast enough. Though we have no doubt that many constituencies will find value in this report (especially the legislators, academics, and lobbyists whom we interviewed), we specifically aim this report towards those interested in affecting change in the State House. The interviews and our following conclusions will, hopefully, not just inspire but inform further action. We are living in historic times. This report does not pretend to have the ambition to change the tide of history, but it does not shy away from the historic potential of this moment, and attempts to do its part.

2.2 Theoretical Context

Progressive climate legislation that matches the scale and urgency of the crisis at hand will not make it through the Vermont State House without a fight. The Green Mountain New Deal (or similar climate policy) must be carried through the State House on a wave of popular support and strong political willpower directed by sensible strategy. The keyword here is strategy, which, in the words of legendary organizer and movement theorist Marshall Ganz, is what allows you to “[turn] what you have into what you need to get what you want.”⁹ The main goal of this report is to illuminate *what we have* and *what we need*. The specifics of *what we want* (certain policies or programs) is not explored in depth in this report. Instead, this report aims to function as a tool that can be used for passing climate legislation generally; we have attempted to create a *power structure analysis* in the vein of influential (and successful) labor strategist Jane McAlevey. In her book, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*, McAlevey emphasizes the importance of identifying where power lies within the structures that movements are trying to influence.¹⁰ These analyses can be used as tools to identify the smartest places for the movement to apply pressure. The reality is, movements can only amass so much power. Strategy is all about using that finite resource in the most effective way. Power structure analyses can serve as a crucial guide for crafting that strategy.

⁸ It is important to note here that I didn’t say “serious” but “scaled”. Throughout the course of our interviews it has become quite apparent that *many* legislatures are very serious about the climate and progressive change. Yet we saw room for growth in a serious reckoning with the scale of the response.

⁹ McAlevey, “Introduction.”

¹⁰ McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*.

2.3 Objective

In the spirit of McAlevey, we aim to develop a clear picture of the power structures operating in the Vermont State House and how specific nodes of power either function as a barrier to or a force for passing progressive climate change legislation. We ask: where is the power; who has power; how do actors wield power, and conversely, what power influences actors? Throughout the investigative process we rarely found direct answers. As one previous legislator reminded us, the factors influencing one's decision making are numerous and often obscure; predictably, the same holds true of Vermont legislators. Yet, from both what interviewees said and did not say some themes arise to illuminate where power lies and what stands in the way. Firstly, structural power is easier to identify and understand than organic power. Secondly, constituents hold immense power. Third, the primary barriers include the lack of climate action prioritization, poor messaging on the part of the climate solutions caucus, and opposition to climate action from Vermont fuel dealers and libertarians. Though we did not unearth a sparkling, cloudless framework of operating structural and organic power relationships, we still gleaned significant findings and places for future research. Drawing from our analysis, we develop action strategies and tactics to push the GWSA and TCI through the state house in the 2020 legislative session, and push the Vermont legislature towards a comprehensive response towards our changing climate.

3. Theory of Change

3.1 The State Pathway

The design of this project—analyzing power operations within the Vermont State House as a step towards realizing GMND-esque legislation—inherently assumes the State House has a key role in generating change. We implicitly acknowledge the validity of the governmental process by which an idea becomes a law, and accept that legislators hold power to enact this process. Thereby, appealing to legislators is a functional step towards solving climate change, as well as systemic injustice at large. In order to effectively demand action from our representatives, we must understand their modus operandi within the State House.

3.2 Vermont as a Policy Laboratory

We have chosen to focus on Vermont's legislative body for two reasons. We believe that 1) affecting legislative change at the state level is much easier than doing so at the national level and 2) while state-level change may not be enormously influential on its own, it can eventually lead to national change. The classic example in Vermont is the Vermont civil unions movement that took place in the late 90's and early 2000's. A combination of Vermont's accessible polity, strong grassroots activism, and passionate leadership from within the State House led Vermont to be the first state in the country to grant same-sex couples all the rights of

civil marriage (albeit, under a different name: “civil unions”).¹¹ By passing and implementing this legislation, Vermont helped to destigmatize the possibility of same-sex marriage, a key step in its eventual legalization at the national level.¹² Green New Deal activists may be wise to learn from this example. While congressional gridlock remains a huge barrier to passing climate legislation at the national level, progressive states such as Vermont can serve as laboratories for refining and destigmatizing climate justice legislation, doing their part to mitigate the impacts of climate change while inspiring federal action.

3.3 Stepping Stones

State legislative action is a historic and largely accepted pathway for change, but as noted, it lumbers slowly and poses a problem to the urgency of climate change. Yet, even in urgent times, it plays a role. Alternatively, revolutionary change may move fast, but is still far from nimble, and rarely without harmful consequence. And of course, social change is far from a simplified dichotomy of legislation or revolution, it can look like mass public movement,^{13,14} or like non-capitalist, interpersonal relationships we engage in everyday.¹⁵ We adopt the belief that change happens on all fronts, but rarely follows a straightforward, upward trajectory, and so involves numerous steps towards an ever evolving goal. Like Rebecca Solnit states, we will never save the planet because suffering will always exist and so we will always have more work to do. A “transition” like the GND requires stepping stones. People on the far left propose we overthrow capitalism in one fell swoop, and thereby critique the GND’s focus on a just energy transition that relies on capitalism.¹⁶ We do not know where Vermont’s tipping point for revolution lies, and revolution cannot happen any ordinary day, but steps towards change can. Working to influence State action and propel Vermont legislators towards enacting progressive policy is one such step.

3.4 The GWSA and the TCI

Heading into the 2020 legislative session, the GWSA and the TCI are the most significant legislative climate options. Keeping these present possibilities in the forefront, we framed conversations around what it will take to enact these initiatives. However, neither the GWSA nor the TCI tackle climate change and inequity in the way a GMND would. Framing findings around legislation pertinent to this session does not limit the reach of these findings. The strategies we develop apply broadly to strengthening and realizing progressive social change in Vermont, especially through State legislation.

¹¹ Moats, *Civil Wars: A Battle for Gay Marriage*.

¹² Halloran, “How Vermont’s ‘Civil’ War Fueled the Gay Marriage Movement.”

¹³ McAleve, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*.

¹⁴ Smucker, *Hegemony How-To: A Roadmap for Radicals*.

¹⁵ Dempsey and Pratt, “Wiggle Room.”

¹⁶ Bernes, “Between the Devil and the Green New Deal.”

3.5 System Change vs. Individual Change

The dominant narrative in mainstream environmentalism today revolves around the principle that the best way to “save the planet” is to shift your individual consumer habits (e.g. “plant a tree, buy a bike, save the world”).¹⁷ While we agree that shifting one’s consumer habits can be beneficial, we think this narrative is problematic for three reasons: 1) changing consumption habits individual-by-individual will be much too slow to avoid the worst effects of climate change; 2) by stressing the necessity of consuming less, this narrative often alienates working class people who aren’t really the problem and could be part of the solution;¹⁸ 3) the narrative plays into the neoliberal assumption that our power comes from our ability to buy things, as opposed to our ability to engage in the civic process. It paints us as consumers instead of citizens, thereby reinforcing some of the capitalist ideologies that led us to the current crisis in the first place.^{19,20}

In response to this problematic narrative, many people have pointed to the fact that we need “system change” not just “individual change.” While we agree that system change is indeed necessary, we wish to challenge the individual change vs. systemic change dichotomy. We are wary of debates that conclude with the sentiment that our government needs to do something or we’re doomed, there’s nothing we can do as individuals to make a difference since changing our light bulbs will not do much. We believe this sentiment falls prey to the same problematic logic as the mainstream environmentalist narrative and we wish to counter its despair by reminding individuals of their power as citizens. Through our power as citizens, which comes from our willingness to engage with the democratic process through voting, lawful protest, and even civil disobedience, we as individuals have the power to affect systemic change. Let us not accept the capitalist logic that we are merely consumers. The purpose of this report is to expose, through a power structure analysis, the ways in which individuals have the civic power (and responsibility) to affect systemic change at the state level. We believe this is both necessary and possible.

3.6 Critiquing Our Theory of Change

We are painfully conscious of the fact that our theory of change is far from adequate; indeed, we have been told from a variety of perspectives (and debated at length amongst ourselves) how legislative change will never be nimble or holistic enough for what the planet is demanding. Some argue that the moderative, sloth-like tendencies of representative democracy, and the polarization of climate into a party-based issue will ensure that climate action does not happen in the time-frame necessary. This point has been used to advocate for private sector action as much as it has been used to justify nonviolent (or even violent) revolution.

Others would submit more nuanced objections; for example, as long as a Republican sits in office, some say that it is only worth our time to pressure our representatives and

¹⁷ Maniates, “Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?”

¹⁸ Huber, “Ecological Politics for the Working Class.”

¹⁹ Maniates, “Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?”

²⁰ Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*.

senators. Others fixate on the governor's seat, and say that without their approval you can kiss any half-way serious action good-bye.

We wish the reader not to disregard, but to qualify the following information because of the above disagreements. If there was any one conclusion that we could draw, it is that no one has a conclusive theory of change. We invite you to struggle with, develop and add to your own constantly evolving understanding of change and the concurrent strategies for making change. We hope that the following information helps towards this end.

4. Methods

4.1 Process

In order to understand the forces at play in the State House we interviewed people who work there themselves. Non-profit and lobbying organizations in Vermont are uniquely positioned to inform members of the General Assembly because most legislators do not have personal staff. Given this, we also interviewed members of Vermont Public Interest Research Group (VPIRG) and Rights and Democracy (RAD). Collectively, we interviewed one Senator, four current and one former House Representatives, two non-profit members, a Middlebury Professor of Environmental Policy, a former reporter on Vermont's energy sector, and attended two Climate Solution Caucus (CSC) Forums in Middlebury and Bristol.

4.2 Participant Selection

We used leads from Middlebury professors and existing connections to launch our interview process. From there, our pool of interviewees snowballed with more and more suggestions. At times, whom we talked to depended upon who responded to our emails or phone calls. Additionally, it is worth noting that our geographical location consists primarily of progressive Democrats, and our interview pool reflects this. We did not contact any republicans or legislators from purple or red districts. Consequently, our findings are weighted toward the viewpoints of Champlain Valley Democratic legislators.

4.3 Interview Framework

We did not formally ask for consent for using interviewees' information in this report, but situated each conversation within the context of this project and thus assumed that participation and willingness to talk with us equated to consent. For this reason, we have intentionally excluded specific names from paraphrases and quotes. Four of the interviews took place in person, while the others were conducted over the phone. We approached each interview with a general plan and set of questions, but allowed conversations to evolve organically. The basic interview framework inquired into each legislators priorities, the priorities of their constituents, their sense of how power functions in the State House, and what they see as barriers to the passage of progressive climate change legislation.

5. Nodes of Power

5.1 Structural Power in the State House

Structural Primer

The political structure of the Vermont General Assembly and the policy process greatly influences the State House power structure. As such, it is helpful to have some background on how the General Assembly is structured and how a bill becomes law. The General Assembly is composed of a 150-member House of Representatives and a 30-member Senate. Several interviewees considered the Senate the easier of the two houses to manipulate because of its smaller size. All House Representatives and Senators serve two-year terms with elections held on even years; the next one will take place in November 2020. The legislative session generally lasts around five months, beginning in January and ending sometime between mid-April and mid-May. Every other year, the House elects a Speaker and the Senate elects a President Pro Tempore. According to a former representative, the Speaker of the House holds more power than the President Pro Tempore, in large part because they alone decide which committees consider each bill. In contrast, a group of three Senators conduct the bill-assigning process in the Senate. Committee chairs also hold quite a bit of power because they decide who speaks at committee hearings and when a bill comes up for a vote; in this way they can be hugely influential in whether or not a bill makes it out of committee. Insofar as they are appointed by their chamber leader, committee heads may be viewed as an extension of the power of the Speaker and the President Pro Tempore. Another key actor in the legislative process is the Governor, given their power to veto bills. However, a two-thirds supermajority can overturn that veto. Of course, legislators do not always vote along party lines. In the context of Vermont's current political terrain, moderate Democrats can uphold Governor Phil Scott's veto power by standing in opposition to other members in $\frac{2}{3}$ Democratic supermajority.²¹

The Bill Making Process

Bills can be proposed by any member of either chamber ("How a bill becomes law," 2016). Once a bill is proposed and put on the calendar, it is given a "first reading" on the chamber floor and then turned over to a relevant committee, where most of the work is done. The committees consider the bill and possible amendments and then perform a majority vote to determine whether the bill will leave committee to be considered on the chamber floor. If it does pass through, it is debated on the floor and given a second and third reading, then a vote. Members of the committee from which the bill originated generally hold disproportionate influence during floor debates because they are considered experts on those bills. If the bill passes through that chamber with a majority vote, it is sent to the other chamber, where more debate and readings happen, followed by another vote. If the bill receives majority approval in both chambers and is signed by the Governor, it becomes law.

²¹ Magill, "Vermont's Legislative Process."

Policy Bottlenecks

There are multiple bottlenecks in the legislative process that can potentially kill a bill. A bill can die if it is not put on the agenda by the chamber leader, if it stalls in committee, if it doesn't receive majority support in both houses, or if it is vetoed by the Governor without the support of a supermajority override. We need to consider both the timing of the legislative process and the people who are positioned at various bottlenecks when designing a strategy to pass progressive climate legislation. Key times to keep in mind are election years and the start of the legislative session, as well as times when bills are being considered in committee. One representative mentioned that crossover time, when the bills move from one chamber to the other, is particularly important since it often corresponds with town meeting week when citizens can speak directly to their legislators about what they think policy should look like. Key actors to pressure include chamber leaders, committee heads, and the governor.

Committee Power

One former representative we spoke with pointed to four house committees as being particularly powerful. They are the committees that are required to pass the four major "money bills" each year. The committees (with their associated bills) are the Appropriations Committee (the appropriations bill), the Transportation Committee (the transportation bill), the Ways and Means Committee (the tax bill) and the Committee on Corrections and Institutions (the capital bill). Associated committee members are powerful because they will have a say in legislation that is guaranteed to pass. More research should be conducted on how climate legislation ties into these four money bills.

Other committees to pay attention to, rather obviously, are the committees from which relevant climate bills originate. These committees are generally the House Committee on Energy and Technology (where this session's GWSA, authored by committee chair Tim Briglin is likely to be introduced), the House Committee on Natural Resources, Fish, and Wildlife (which is hoping to review Act 250 this year with a nod towards climate action under committee chair Amy Sheldon), and the Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Energy (chaired by climate champion Chris Bray). It is important to note, however, as one representative pointed out to us, that climate change touches all aspects of our politics and will therefore involve all sorts of committees, not just the obvious ones mentioned above.

5.2 Organic Power in the State House

While much of the power of legislators is determined by the political structure of the General Assembly, legislators may also have organic power unrelated to their specific position. One former representative emphasized the fact that Vermont politics is "a people person process...a relationship game." The influence that each legislator has on the policy process is as much determined by whom they have interpersonal relationships with as it is by their official title. One particularly revealing comment from this former legislator was the assertion that the majority of power in the State House is held by a small handful of legislators, between 15 and

30 depending on the year. Determining who these representatives are requires equal parts observing their interactions and researching their titles. The former representative suggested that a good student of the State House should spend time observing the House during floor votes or sitting in the State House cafeteria during meal times. The student must ask themselves: who's talking to whom and when? The former rep. compared the State House to high school, where social clout and power are dictated by each person's ability to form close relationships with the right people. Relationships matter because many legislators take the advice of trusted colleagues when it comes to placing a vote on bills that are less prominent to their expertise and their constituents' interests. For this reason, it is imperative to identify which legislators are the relationship masters in the State House and pressure them to champion climate action.

This area requires much more research. Our interviewees, many of whom work in the State House, avoided talking about this explicitly. We may contribute this to our lack of pointed-questions, but alternatively it remains possible that legislators were either uncomfortable with talking disclosing information about their colleagues or unaware of the role of interpersonal relationships. Thereby one strategy to locate social clout is through direct observation of the State House, as the former rep. suggested.

5.3 Constituents

Again and again, legislators and experts affirmed the power of constituents in Vermont. Our observations suggest the same. Of the six legislators we contacted only one did not respond. The five who did, responded personally with willingness to talk. This alone demonstrates the accessibility of the State House and the value legislators place on constituent interests. One representative said, "we listen to constituents first." As though to reiterate, another stated plainly, constituents have enormous impact; Vermont is a functioning democracy and legislators run to represent the people. The small scale of Vermont enables this accessibility, both to policy-makers and to the State House itself. Several participants noted the unique openness of the capitol building: anyone can walk in and take part in policy action, whether sitting in the chamber while a bill is on the floor or walking directly to a committee to take up an issue with your representative.

Not only do the people wield power by showing up and advocating for their interests directly, but also by setting a precedent for legislators. As one representative stated, legislators reflect society, and consequently go only so far as they think people are ready to go. For legislators to act progressively on climate change, constituents must demonstrate inclination towards radical climate change action. In other words, the more progressive the people, the more progressive the legislator. We observed this fact in the structural difference between the Middlebury and Bristol CSC forums. At the CSC in Middlebury, a member of Extinction Rebellion criticized legislators for not giving citizens enough space to talk. At the following forum, in Bristol, the caucus arranged chairs in a circle and devoted more time to questions. The responsiveness to feedback and willingness to rework the forum structure, much like the accessibility of the State House and our legislators, indicates their high regard for constituents.

Though constituents, broadly elucidated, exercise influence on their representatives, some specific groups wield unique power, especially in regards to supporting or opposing climate change action. These include youth, retirees, farmers, fuel dealers, and libertarians; the latter two we will elaborate on in the following section

Youth

Interviewees consistently pointed towards a general upswing in public sentiment concerning climate change, and it is clear that students and youth have had a disproportionate impact in this regard. Both interviewees from inside the legislature and out cited the power of the Vermont youth climate congress in November of 2019, and the climate strikes of September 2019, both which activated youth from across the state

Anecdotally, it is also clear that legislators are willing to enter into dialogue with youth. Throughout the course of this project we were able to interview multiple legislators outside of our district; in one conversation, RAD suggested that we as students would have better success contacting and talking with legislators than they would because of our status. It is clear, then, that students and youth have added symbolic constituent power (even if they are too young to vote) both in larger actions and in interpersonal conversation.

Retirement communities

One representative noted that retirees are the most active constituents, consistently involved, informed, and with lots of time on their hands. This positions retirees to be particularly vocal and ready to act.

Farmers

Another powerful constituency in Vermont is the farming community since agriculture is both culturally and economically relevant in the state (currently valued at approximately \$2.6 billion).²² According to a current representative, Franklin and Addison counties are two districts with particularly prominent agricultural constituencies. Franklin county in particular has been known to elect officials who listen closely to farmers, though the same is true for districts throughout the state. Many farmers are part of regional coalitions that use their collective power to advocate for farmer-friendly legislation. For example, in January of 2019, three Vermont farmer organizations, The Champlain Valley Farmer Coalition of Addison and Rutland counties, the Franklin-Grand Isle Farmer's Watershed Alliance and the Connecticut River Watershed Farmers Alliance, joined forces to present a proposal for a statewide payment for ecosystem services scheme that would reimburse farmers for the ecological and aesthetic benefits that their farms provide.²³ Due to their cultural and economic significance, and their organizational abilities, it will likely be very challenging to pass climate legislation the agricultural community does not support. Currently, many farmers in Vermont are highly dependent on fossil fuels (alas, viable electric tractors are not yet on the market). For this reason, policies and programs that

²² Cotton, "What Do Act 64 Regulations Mean for Addison County Farmers."

²³ Ross, "Farmers Want Credit for Their Work Keeping Land and Air Clean."

aim to reduce emissions (e.g. the TCI) may be viewed warily by farmers. This must be kept in mind as climate policies are crafted; policy makers would be wise to include agricultural exemptions to strict emission regulations while prioritizing policies that emphasize the role of farmers as land stewards (such as the aforementioned payment for ecosystem services scheme).

5.4 Climate Solutions Caucus

Caucuses in the State House are a loose grouping of affiliation between interest groups; they do not necessarily divide along party lines, and hold no formal value. The CSC is a grouping of over 80 members in both the Senate and the House. They meet informally out of session and in session to strategize for passing climate legislation.

Short of party affiliations, the caucus is one of the biggest issue-oriented groupings in the legislature with over 80 members. The CSC met consistently over the session break to iron out a unified front, and has gone on “roadshows” to engage their constituents about their planned legislation for this session.

Despite this, the CSC has less political power than it appears on paper. While they are considerably more organized than in past years, the CSC does not have the same authority over its members that one might expect of a party. Furthermore, the majority of its members are junior legislatures, and thus do not possess a lot of organic power. Such a large caucus makes a unified vision difficult, and collective action unwieldy. When citing the factors that influence their vote, the CSC ended up last on one legislature’s list, a sentiment that is undoubtedly shared among many. While the roadshow has given the CSC prominence in activist circles, a simple Facebook search is also indicative of their constituent power: it has fewer than 1,000 likes. While individual members of the CSC have worked hard to present a strong climate plan at the beginning of the session and the caucus as a whole is poised to gain prominence soon, its overall power in the legislature is underwhelming for now.

6. Barriers

Democrats and Progressives together hold a supermajority in both the Vermont House and Senate, and several of them ran on a platform that emphasized climate change action. In fact, most of the representatives we interviewed proclaimed climate change to be one of their top priorities. Yet, Vermont has fallen behind in comparison to neighboring states when it comes to comprehensive climate policy for decreasing GHG. So what is standing in the way? Below we outline key barriers, which include the lack of climate action prioritization, historically disordered messaging on the part of the CSC, and opposition or hesitancy to climate action from republicans, moderate democrats, fuel dealers, and libertarians.

6.1 Where the Democrats Fall Short

“Our job is about compromise”

Prioritization

One policy expert and long time Vermont resident pointed to a lack of prioritization as a key barrier. Though our interviewees may champion climate change, the democrats collectively place social issues, like health care, child care, and education far above climate issues. One representative shared that for most democrats, the environment ranks number five on their priority list. We do not suggest social issues should be deprioritized, in fact they should go hand in hand with climate issues. However, if we are to take the steps and leaps necessary to drastically cut greenhouse gas emissions, climate change needs to be at the top of the list together with social issues like minimum wage and paid family and medical leave.

When talking about prioritization it is necessary to consider trade-offs. One legislator noted minimal time and money as a block in the road to climate legislation. The General Assembly session only lasts about five months, and raising funds for a bill can pose challenges. Agreeing on how to spend money takes time. For every bill legislators spend time and money on, there is another bill that receives less attention and resources.

Accountability

Though limited time and money may present a challenge to prioritizing climate action, the successful passing of GND-like legislation in nearby states demonstrates legislatures can overcome these barriers. Clearly, other roadblocks must be in effect in Vermont. The relative deprioritization of the environment despite climate-championing campaigns illustrates one such barrier: a lack of accountability. Democrats, especially from blue districts, face minimal consequences for falling short on climate action because they will likely still be the best candidate (a Republican is unlikely to be a better choice for implementing climate change policy). Not only does the political landscape let democratic legislators off the hook; some also feel wary about legal accountability. For example, the GWSA enables citizens to sue the state if it does meet its goals. One legislator posited that this ultimately could backfire because the state would have to pour resources (ie. time and money) into a lawsuit rather than climate change policy. However, a different legislator argued that people in power must be held accountable. Whether representatives fear accountability or advocate for it, the present lack of accountability demanded of legislators to follow through on climate change policy stands in the way of realizing our goals.

Strategy (or lack thereof)

A major barrier that we have discussed comes from what was *not* mentioned by a majority of our interviewees: an explicit strategy or theory of change. We would like to mention here that our conversation questions focused more explicitly on structures of power than

personal strategies. It is also entirely possible (and perhaps likely) that most people interviewed had personal reasons for keeping their strategies to themselves.

But, caveats aside, there seemed to be no shortage of knowledge about what was holding climate legislation back, but little about how to move it forwards. Multiple legislatures encouraged us to “keep up the noise”; the CSC was the only meeting that tried to lay out the bare bones of a game-plan. But, aside from a general call to change the zeitgeist around climate change, there was a notable lack of strategy presented to us about how to get legislation passed this session. We have used in our class the metaphor of the yellow brick road: how do we get from point A to B? What bricks need to be laid? Who needs to be tapped for favors, who are the specific people who stand as barriers, and how can we change their mind (or get around them)? All of these remained, to a large degree, unanswered.

As one of our interviewees suggested, this gap can likely be explained by both a lack of a strategic analysis and an unwillingness to be forthcoming about their strategy. Nevertheless, this lack of strategy is concerning and stands as a barrier with perhaps unquantifiable consequences.

Messaging

One representative we spoke with emphasized the fact that the Climate Solutions Caucus lacks a clear voice (in part due to the large size of the caucus). While the statewide CSC forum tour is admirable, without a streamlined message to rally behind, it may be ineffective at energizing Vermonters. This was a problem that was brought up by a local resident during the Q&A section of the Middlebury forum where legislator’s list of priorities was long and a bit confusing. One rep. we spoke with identified this as a recurring problem for liberal politicians: they get so caught up in speaking to the specifics of how policy is going to work that constituents lose interest. The rep. suggested we need short, clever soundbites, something that conservatives are much better at generating. He added the caveat, however, that we must not lose the nuance of our message. He suggested that one of the main reasons that the former Shumlin gubernatorial administration was voted out of office was because it failed to follow through on campaign promises involving public health care. According to the rep., these promises sounded good on the radio during the campaign, but lacked nuance and left voters disappointed when they failed to materialize (for somewhat inevitable reasons) once Shumlin took office. In order to make progress on climate issues, climate champions in the state must craft a message that is easy to digest, void of technocratic jargon, but also nuanced and attainable; it is a hard balance to achieve.

The Sweet Spot

Though Democrats/Progressives hold a supermajority, the party does not stand united on all fronts. The standpoints of Vermont Dems range from centrist to leftist, and their constituencies span an even larger political spectrum. As one representative put it, “our job is about compromise.” For any given bill, some reps. will think it goes too far, while others do not think it goes far enough. The bills best poised to win must hit what many legislators referred to as the “sweet spot”. One rep. breaks down the result into two options: shooting for 76 votes (a

simple majority) with a killer bill, or compromising for 100 votes (a supermajority able to overturn a veto) with a watered down bill.

The entire process of drafting and amending and redrafting bills must thread legislation through a narrow margin. In committees with a smaller Democratic majority, like the House Committee on Natural Resources, Fish, and Wildlife, this margin is especially tight. Five of the nine representatives in the committee are Democrats²⁴, and can be expected to vote for legislation like the updated Act 250. But it needs six votes to get to the floor, yet alone through the whole General Assembly. In these circumstances, drafting a perfect bill and enacting a winning strategy becomes “a big chess game.” There is minimal wiggle room and so collectively, whether because of opposition or weak support, legislators push bills to the middle, trying to find the sweet spot.

Playing the “chess game” not only happens internally amongst legislators, but also gets played out with constituents, especially for Democrats representing purple or red districts. These representatives must consider the risks of disavowing constituent interests and not winning reelection posed by acting too progressively for climate change legislation. If constituencies see climate policy as hurting rather than benefiting them, representatives may fall on the sword, as one legislator phrased it, if they stand strong for climate legislation. But legislators can also make the sword less sharp. Raising climate change saliency, educating constituents, and making policy to serve Vermonters needs while drastically cutting GHG emissions—strategies we elaborate on in section 7—can get constituents on board with climate action. Yet, conservative constituents remain likely to damper the progressivist potential of Democrats from purple and red districts.

The range of viewpoints held by democrats and progressives in the State House minimizes the wiggle room for legislators to craft winning bills that will meet and surpass our goals, while the challenge of representing mixed constituents constrains the progressiveness of some reps. It’s a balancing act and the sweet spot is hard to hit; consequently democrats typically go for the middle even when a moderate stance will not cut it in the face of global climate catastrophe.

6.2 Opponents

“He talks a good game with climate but doesn’t want to stir the pot”

Phil Scott

While Republicans on the national level have been widely demonized (often correctly) for being active opponents to climate action, most Vermont Republicans will rhetorically acknowledge climate change, but do little in terms of sufficient action. Phil Scott says that he supports Vermont’s goal to achieve 90% renewable energy by 2050, and has joined the U.S. Climate Alliance of governor’s that pledge to keep track with the Paris Agreement standards. He

²⁴ Speaker of the House and Democrat Mitzi Johnson appointed the four Republicans who comprise the rest of this committee. The consequence of her decision making, in this case forcing Democrats drafting a revised Act 250, which relates to regulating land use and development, to lean more moderately, points to the influence that structural power bears on legislators willingness to act progressively.

will often cite the creation of the Climate Action Commission, which has recommended tangible action for reducing GHG while growing Vermont's economy. Further, he has entered regional talks for the TCI and seems (to some of our interviewees at least) poised to consider signing it into law.

However many times Republicans support climate action by word, they have proven hesitant to actualize change. Scott's "No new taxes for nuthin'" mantra is fundamentally opposed to market based incentives such as a carbon tax; he also successfully ran for reelection using the Democrat's carbon tax as a crucial talking point²⁵. If Phil Scott approves the TCI, he will almost certainly veto the GWSA, having spent his political capital on one climate initiative in the session²⁶. One legislator said that while he talks a good game, he does not want to stir the pot (the pot, it should not have to be said, is almost certainly going to have to be stirred).

Republicans

It is interesting to note that while Phil Scott was continually brought up as a key barrier towards climate action, Republican representatives and senators were almost never mentioned. The complete lack of Republicans as a potential group with which we should expend energy, when compared to the frequency with which moderate democrats or purple district representatives were suggested as targets, lead us to conclude that Republicans should not be a focus for exercising our influence. Therefore we would suggest that most Republicans not be considered as "on the fence" legislators but rather as barriers that need to be overcome (though one veteran legislator suggested you should never absolutely sign off Republicans as potential supporters, especially in Vermont).

While most of our interviewees spoke in generalizations, a few geographic regions consistently re-occurred as areas with representatives who are resistant to progressive climate legislation. These include the purple or red districts of Bennington, Rutland, the North East Kingdom, and Franklin County. Specific constituencies within these areas present notable challenging barriers, as we elaborate on below..

The Anti-Taxers: Fuel Dealers

The Vermont Fuel Dealers Association (VFDA) is a trade association that represents fuel dealers in the state.²⁷ The organization aims to advocate for the political interests of member companies in the State House and beyond. The VFDA is categorically opposed to putting a price on carbon and uses its influence and outreach to lobby against climate legislation. In a May 2019 broadcast on Rutland Community Access TV, the executive director of the association, Matt Cota, painted Carbon taxation as a costly and irresponsible policy that hurts rural, low income Vermonters while benefiting the wealthy, out-of-touch, Tesla-driving city-dwellers in Chittenden county.²⁸ A VFDA-sponsored website, "stopthetaxes.com," describes

²⁵ Interview with Tom Hughes

²⁶ Interview with Caleb Elder, Tim Briglin, Tom Hughes, and the CSC meeting in Bristol.

²⁷ "Vermont Fuel Dealers Association."

²⁸ PEGTV, "Matt Cotta, Executive Director of VFDA Speaks on Vermont's Energy Policy."

carbon taxes this way: “a regressive scheme to harm those who choose to live outside of Burlington”. The website continues: “raising the cost of living in a cold, rural state is not a solution to anything but economic ruin.”²⁹

Cota’s basic argument, that rural Vermonters are more reliant on fossil fuels than city dwellers, has some truth to it. They often have further commutes to work and lack the infrastructure to heat their homes without fossil fuels. A professor pointed out to us that reducing GHG emissions from the heating and transportation sectors (the two largest GHG polluters in the state³⁰ will be much more difficult than reducing emissions from the electricity sector (something that Vermont has already managed to do through RGGI^{31,32} (the Regional GHG Initiative) since it requires more behavioral change and individual action. Whereas electricity consumers can have the same habits whether their power is coming from coal or solar, reducing transportation or heating emissions will likely require behavioral changes such as carpooling, charging electric vehicles, and installing heat pumps. For this reason, more rural (and low income) parts of the state, such as the Northeast Kingdom, are often reluctant to support climate legislation.

The Anti-Taxers: Libertarians

Vermont’s libertarian cohorts share these anti-tax sentiments. The Vermont news source *True North Reports* (TNR) and the free market think tank the Ethan Allen Institute (EAI) serve as the voice for this constituency’s concerns. An article from TNR described Carbon taxes as “regressive, ineffective, inefficient,” claiming that it “disproportionately burdens the poor”.³³ Meanwhile, the EAI is unequivocally opposed to carbon taxes and dismayed by climate activism, referring to this year’s climate strike as “angry mobs of disgruntled Leftists [blocking] traffic around the state in hopes of intimidating Vermonters into supporting their radical “green agenda”.³⁴ It is unlikely that these ideologically-motivated libertarians will get on board with proposed market solutions to reduce emissions but it remains to be seen whether they will convince rural, low-income Vermonters that deregulating markets and reducing government involvement is in their best interest. We should consider the former group a barrier to climate progress and the latter a group to fight for.

²⁹ “Stop The Taxes”

³⁰ Energy Action Network, “2018 Annual Progress Report.”

³¹ “Elements of RGGI | RGGI, Inc.”

³² The Regional GHG Initiative (RGGI) is a cap and reduce program between nine states in New England and the Mid-Atlantic that aims to reduce CO₂ emissions from the power sector. The program has successfully reduced power sector emissions in Vermont, which is why the TCI, a similar program, is so popular among members of the CSC.

³³ Klar, “Vermont’s Fire and Brimstone Carbon Tax.”

³⁴ Roper, “Help Us Make a Difference in 2020!”

7. Tools & Resources

While our interviews seemed to illuminate no shortage of barriers to legislative action, our conversations often naturally turned towards a more optimistic topic: the tools and resources available in Vermont we can use to affect change in the State House. Below, we summarize some of the recurring resources that surfaced from our research.

7.1 Accessibility of Representatives

In the process of raising the public prominence of policy to address the climate emergency, constituents can utilize the accessibility of representatives. The small size, part-time nature, and openness of the Vermont General Assembly enables Vermonters to personally communicate with their representatives. Constituents can harness the indispensable approachability of State Representatives to persistently press for action on climate change and environmental justice.

7.2 Climate activist and advocacy organizations

Multiple activist and advocacy organizations already exist within the state, and present potential for collaboration. We found that both advocacy and activism have potential to significantly influence legislator's decision-making; therefore it is important for us to consider the power of each group and to establish relationships with them.

One such group is the Climate Coalition, a network of preeminent climate advocacy organizations who have come together to endorse a unified platform for environmental policy. The group includes VPIRG, VNRC, the Sierra Club, Vermont Conservation Voters, and the Audubon Society, among others. While "outside game" players such as 350VT have been keeping tabs, the Climate Coalition mainly functions as a policy & advocacy organization, the "inside game", and rarely mobilizes its base beyond actions like signing petitions. They effectively function with a similar theory of change as the CSC but do so as lobbyists and interest organizations as opposed to legislators.

In addition to advocacy groups, there are multiple activist organizations operating throughout the state. These range from centrist (VT youth lobby) to more radical (Extinction Rebellion) and have varying degrees of institutionalization with which to organize. Activist groups bring people power. Advocacy groups can provide paid professionals. Bringing the two together in coalition will amplify our message as loudly on the streets as in the halls of the State House.

7.3 Rise of climate in saliency of public

Interviewees frequently mentioned the rise of the climate "movement" as critical to the new wave of momentum in the State House to pass climate legislation. The rise of climate saliency in the public has significant potential to influence legislators, especially if communicated effectively and consistently. A few legislators said they have never experienced this level of public engagement, pointing to the large turnout at CSC meetings and the Climate

Strikes in September 2019. Interviewees both in and out of the State House mentioned the symbolic power of youth-centered events and suggested that youth be considered a “special population” with the power to put climate at the forefront. While the climate movement (broadly interpreted) often can play out on the national and international scale, harnessing public interest in climate action and amplifying its sentiment in Vermont has the potential to create further momentum for change in the State House. No one wants to be on the wrong side of history, and the rise of popular interest in climate can play to peoples’ courage to act in historic times.

8. Strategy Recommendations

Given the above recommendations, we present strategies and tactics we believe grow organically out of the components of the State House and the strategies that work best under this framework. Section 8.1 summarizes recommendations given by our interviewees to us, while section 8.2 details our own analysis and presents personal recommendations.

This is in no way a comprehensive list; in fact we hope you build on our recommendations to formulate your own strategies, as creative license is perhaps the most important aspect of any successful political movement. That being said, we advise against cherry-picking singular recommendations without taking into account the holistic nature of our recommendations. We hope the following stimulates and inspires you to turn ideas into reality.

8. 1 Strategies Recommended to Us

Polite, Persistent, and Informed

Representatives repeatedly stressed that the best manner for constituents to advocate for the issues they care about is to be polite, persistent, and informed, or what we are deeming, PPI. We intend the second P, persistent, to also encompass physical presence, especially in the State House. Nearly every legislator advised against, and even criticized, XR’s note-card throwing action during the 2019 session. According to several legislators, such action is counterproductive insofar as it delays action when representatives have limited time to work through bills. In fact, the General Assembly was working on a bill to regulate PFAS, a dangerous environmental pollutant, at the time. Additionally, one legislator fears that disruptive activism can hurt our “functioning democracy” by setting a precedent that opens the door for militant, right-wing activists to similarly disrupt the peace.

In contrast to disruptive criticism, relating to representatives as imperfect people working their hardest, will be well received. This means exercising good manners. This means following up—demanding action once is not enough. This means knowing the ins and outs of the issue, of the specific bill you want passed. This means contacting your representatives and showing up in their committees (most do not even have offices) to approach them face to face and present your expertise and demands. One representative gave the example of a goat farmer concerned about a specific issue who showed up day after day, even bringing along his home-schooled daughter for experiential learning. The committee responded to his polite persistence and

eventually addressed the issue concerning him. Like the farmer, if we know the issue, show respect for representatives, and continuously press our interests, (we are told) we will be effective.³⁵

Build Coalitions

As Middlebury students, we are working within a generally liberal district where our representatives share our values. In effect, our pressure is unlikely to dramatically change our legislators stances. However, the same does not hold true across the state. The well-informed pressure Middlebury students are willing to apply needs to spread geographically. Interviewees repeatedly suggested coalition-building as a strategy to distribute and amplify constituent pressure. As college students, representatives suggested we build relations and act in accordance with other colleges, especially (but not exclusively) those located in red and purple districts. Interviewees also suggested we build coalition with retiree communities and social service networks, both well organized and active constituencies. Such an alliance can be harnessed to organize congruent action and apply pressure across the entire state.

Creative Policy

Many of the potential problems with climate legislation that on-the-fence Vermonters point to as reasons to be skeptical are problems that can be remedied by clever policy-based solutions. For example, the concern (put forward by the VFDA, among others) that putting a price on carbon will disproportionately hurt low-income Vermonters can be put to rest by adding a redistributive component to the tax that allocates some of the tax's revenues towards helping low-income Vermonters (through tax rebates or weatherization assistance, for instance). Another concern, that pricing carbon will make Vermont less attractive to businesses than neighboring states, can be remedied by adding a stipulation to the bill that it will only go into effect once neighboring states enact similar policies. The policy expert that we interviewed suggested that innovative policymaking is key to quelling constituent concerns in order to build broader climate action coalitions across the state.

Another possible way to inspire greater support for climate action is by bundling climate policy with other progressive legislation. If one of the major barriers to passing climate policy is the fact that liberals prioritize other issues, why not combine these initiatives so that legislators don't have to prioritize one issue over the other? After all, climate change intimately intersects with so many facets of Vermonters' lives. GND-esque legislation seeks to put this idea into practice. For example, the public housing modernization bill, proposed in Congress in 2019, aims to simultaneously address both climate change and the housing crisis. A GMND for Vermont would be wise to adopt a similar strategy so that legislators don't have to prioritize health care or a living wage over the climate crisis but instead confront both at once. This is not only just, but strategic.. Health care, living wages, housing concerns: these are problems that

³⁵ It is interesting to consider what the suggested modus operandi may reveal about how to generate organic power. Clearly, Vermont still values political politeness. Demonstrating PPI may be a means for garnering respect and exercising influence, whether use by a constituent appealing to representatives or by a legislator building internal support for an issue.

affect Vermonters everyday in a way that climate change does not. By bundling climate policy with so-called “kitchen table issues,” climate champions can tap into the everyday concerns of their constituents, illuminate the ways in which those concerns are related to climate change, and inspire them to support progressive climate legislation.

The one drawback to this strategy, mentioned above in section 6.1, is that policy tweaks are hard to explain succinctly to constituents. For every long-winded explanation about how clever policy tweaks to carbon-pricing bills can cushion the financial burden of the bill for low-income Vermonters, there is a Republican who can simply say “taxes are bad” and win the debate. Innovative policy on its own is nothing more than wonky technobabble. It is imperative that Democrats and Progressives combine clever policy with clever messaging to communicate efficiently and effectively how the policy fixes help Vermonters in order to inspire a broader base of climate champions in the state.

Be Informed

While one might describe an activist as passionate before they would call them informed, having a comprehensive grasp on what is going on in the State House is crucial for effective action. First, knowing important dates during the session (such as crossover day) will inform timing of actions. Second, staying up to date with what is going on will help the action’s message remain clear and avoid potential pitfalls³⁶. Third, legislators like to consider themselves as rational actors, and will be more likely to listen to a passionate message if it is well-informed and appeals to logic as well as emotion.

Clear Demands

The I of PPI holds great importance because it allows us to construct a clear demand. As representatives relayed, it can be challenging to know how to act when constituents demand they “do something,” such as “stop climate change,” but do not communicate a specific demand upon which they can act. As a result, the “Informed” part of PPI is crucial for effective messaging. Comprehensive and detailed understanding of present State House happenings informs a well crafted, easy to grasp, and memorable request.

8.2 Recommended by Us

Geographic Power Analysis

Power structure analyses can be conducted at any level: within a workplace, a county, the state, or the country. One tool that we think would be incredibly useful is a geographic power analysis of Vermont that identifies priority districts in the state (based on where powerful legislators are located) and powerful institutions or constituencies within those districts. For instance, hugely influential House Speaker Mitzi Johnson represents the Grand Isle-Chittenden district; therefore that district is a priority. Now we must ask ourselves the following questions: With which constituents in this district should we build coalition? Who has the most influence or

³⁶ See section 8.1: *Polite, Persistent, and Informed*

potential influence? Is there a retirement community that could be easily mobilized? Does Mitzi listen closely to farmers in the area that would get behind a payment for ecosystem services scheme? Is there any progressive energy from local college activists that could be tapped? We encourage readers, especially those in high priority districts, to map out the organic power structures in their districts in order to determine how they could best mobilize the most influential constituents in their district to pressure their representatives to champion climate action.

Build a coalition

We have reiterated throughout the report the need for a geographically dispersed grassroots upswell. Legislators take the needs of their constituents seriously; if only Burlington, Montpelier and Middlebury elect climate-champions, then only Burlington, Montpelier and Middlebury legislators will fight for climate legislation in the State House. Actively working to bring more constituencies into the push for climate action is difficult, but was one of the most repeated recommendations from our interviews. Below, we include some advice for how to build a smart and effective statewide coalition.

- Target areas of high priority and high potential: High priority x high organizing potential = place to prioritize. Using a geographic power analysis (such as the one described above) can illuminate which areas should be prioritized in building a coalition. Create a comprehensive map or list that factors in both the regions that need to be changed and the places that have high potential to be organized.
 - ◆ E.g. The Northeast Kingdom is of high priority, but low organizing potential. Middlebury has high organizing potential but low priority, because it consistently elects legislators who are good on climate. Bennington has high priority and high potential because it is a relatively urbanized location with a college, and has been identified as a barrier.
- Action Items > Talking: Coalitions form around action, not just talk. The September Climate Strike formed statewide connections because people were reaching out and connecting over an end result; the same should be applied towards your own coalition building. Actions can (and must) be creative and have a variety of scales—helping coordinate a town hall information session builds as many connections as planning a large rally at the State House. Working around local elections in the upcoming summer and fall offer ripe opportunities for dispersed action items.
- Use education to get a foot in the door: While it is advisable to attach to existing organizations because they have structure in which to organize, using education can be an easier way than telling people what to do. See the below recommendation in the *Grab Bag* section for more details.
- What not to do - give orders: Do *not*, however, pretend that you have all the answers. Allow each community to decide if and how intensely they would like to join, or if they would like to stick to their own actions. Most of the time you will only get *no* if you present yourself as someone who is there to give answers; being there to provide

information and support (and also relying on them as much as they may rely on you) is the basis of supportive, equity-based coalitions.

Stay informed

The Climate Coalition will hold weekly meetings during the session to keep each other informed and sharpen their unified message. This is an excellent opportunity to keep tabs on what climate advocacy organizations are planning, and if any substantive changes are being made. Committees' schedules are publicly available, so it is possible to know when a bill is being discussed (though the schedules usually go off track). Finally, VNRC releases a weekly climate dispatch which updates subscribers about where climate legislation is during the session.

Be Explicit and Radical

Explicit messaging is key to making climate change a top priority and holding state actors accountable. For example, with strategic messaging we can pigeon hole Phil Scott; since he signed on to the Paris Accord, any climate legislation he opposes can and will be used against him in future messaging. A similar strategy can be used for CSC members if they vote against significant climate legislation.

When developing messaging and demands, it will serve well to abide by PPI. However, in order to challenge legislators to go even further, we add *radical* to our equation, making PPI&R. Only by infusing a tenacious and polite strategy with radical demands can we begin to create changes appropriate to the scale of the crisis.

Disempower Opponents

While it is usually more energy-efficient and more gratifying to amplify the voices of your allies, there comes times when it is beneficial to disempower your opponents. In the realm of electoral politics, this mostly manifests in supporting opposing campaigns (or calling out legislators for wrongdoings on their reelection campaigns). Directly ousting barrier politicians from power (as long as a better one wins) takes a lot of work; with community allies however, it is possible to lend support at crucial times. Even a serious challenger to an incumbent can usually humble a politician to their constituents (in this case making it more likely that they support climate action).

The most pressing individual that we would recommend replacing is Phil Scott, though we do not pretend that that is an easy task given his popularity throughout the state and his incumbency status. We recommend that throughout the session you keep tabs on the fence-sitters, and as election campaigns kick off focus on defeating those who cannot be influenced to support climate legislation in the State House.

(*Tip*): A useful tactic to actualize this recommendation is pressuring candidates to take the "No Fossil Fuel Money pledge" if they have not already. This could work for contested elections as well as for established Democrats who have not taken the pledge (e.g. Mitsi Johnson).

Educate Constituencies

An important part of strengthening constituencies and building coalition is getting everyone on the same page. No one will advocate for a GMND if they have no idea what it is. At the same time, educating people about what we think they *ought* to know rather than what they *want* to know is not an effective approach. In this vein, our peers conducted a project to engage and inform the Addison County community about the GMND by surveying a broad range of people to collect data on what they do and do not know, what they want to learn, and how they prefer to learn it. From these findings they built a website to disseminate useful and desired information about the GMND and provide resources, like a short presentation and ideas for action.

The nature of community engagement across the state, as manifest in town meetings, select boards, and neighborly conversations, contributes to an environment conducive for disseminating information, enlivening discourse, and organizing action. Offering education may enable everyone to engage in critical conversations and acknowledge opportunities for exercising their power as constituents.

8.3 Grab Bag Recommendations

These are final, specific recommendations that are not overarching strategies but rather potential tactics. Most are not fully fleshed out and intended as a brainstorm that will hopefully inspire more ideas.

- Encourage legislators to join the CSC: While the CSC does not hold a lot of official power, it has gained notice in the past year for how rapidly its climbed in numbers. More members in the caucus clearly demonstrates at the very least a rhetorical willingness to act on climate, and legislators can use this rising saliency to their advantage. Additionally, members of the CSC can more easily be held accountable for voting the wrong way on climate legislation.
- Build a media presence/find a media partner: Building a social media presence can only stand to benefit us in the long-run in terms of bargaining power and outreach potential. This can manifest in weekly report cards or updates like VNRC's climate dispatch, social media features with various candidates, or in more traditional formats such as news and radio.
- Find friends in relevant committees, and show up for them: One legislator said that when working in the State House, legislators need a friend in every committee. We believe that extending this idea to outside groups is valuable as well; having friends in relevant committees (such as where the GWSA and TCI bills are sent) will keep you up to date and informed about when the best time for an action might be. The road, however, goes both ways: you are more likely to get a friend if you can show up for that legislator when they call on you too. Being prepared to get allies to a hearing or a rally is an important first step to any friendship in politics (demonstrate what you can do for them before asking for help).

- Phil Scott Tracker: Phil Scott ostensibly publishes a schedule of what upcoming events he will be at. Take on the extra work (or find someone willing) to keep tabs on where he is going and inform our allies in the various geographic areas. This is not only an opportunity to test and strengthen our network, but to continually show up as often as possible to ask tough questions and hold Phil Scott accountable.

9. Conclusion & Further Research

9.1 Conclusion

The Green Mountain State may indeed be ready for a Green Mountain New Deal. A combination of progressive legislators and an accessible polity may constitute the perfect storm for Vermont activists looking to make legislative progress on issues around climate justice. For one, Democrats and Progressives currently hold a supermajority in the House and Senate, and two, the small size of the state means they are open to hearing constituents' concerns in a way that politicians in most other states are not. That being said, progressive climate legislation has failed to materialize in Vermont.

In an attempt to explain why Vermont's government has fallen short, we conducted a series of ten interviews with state representatives, senators, professors, reporters, and lobbyists to gain insight into Vermont's legislative process. We also attended two forums hosted by the Climate Solutions Caucus, a coalition of over 80 members of the Vermont legislature who are prioritizing climate action in the upcoming legislative session. The findings from interviews combined with a power structure analysis of Vermont's Legislative Process led us to identify key barriers, and develop possible strategies local activists and constituents at large can effectively leverage to propel Vermont to step up and be a leader on climate justice.

Nodes of Power

We identified two types of power present in the State House: 1) *structural power*, the power that comes from having an important title or being situated at a crucial bottleneck in the bill-making process; and 2) *organic power*, the influence that comes from having strong interpersonal relationships with other legislators. While structural power is easy to research and understand, organic power is more amorphous and understanding how it operates requires further investigation, such as direct observation of legislators within the State House walls. Each legislator wields a certain amount of structural and organic power, which combine to determine their overall influence in the legislature. Unsurprisingly, some legislators possess more influence than others. Moving forward, it will be useful to identify these people, determine what influences them, and strategize how we can influence them to promote progressive climate legislation.

We found influencing legislators is easier than one may think. Their accessibility give constituents who make their voices heard immense power. Many current legislators we interviewed stressed how closely they listen to the people who elected them. Particular constituencies hold unique power, namely youth, farmers, and retirees, positioning them especially well to influence policymakers. Whatever your demographic, we hope this report

serves to empower you to speak up to your representatives in a meaningful and effective capacity.

Barriers

Analysis of findings identified several key barriers to enacting climate action in Vermont. The first is lack of prioritization. Although there are many liberal legislators in the State House, they often prioritize other progressive causes (such as health care or minimum wage) over climate action. Another barrier is accountability. If Democrats (or Progressives) fail to follow through on their climate agendas, they face little political backlash since it is unlikely that their competitors (often Republicans) will have more progressive environmental platforms. A third barrier is a lack of clear strategy and messaging on the part of climate champions. The Climate Solutions Caucus has so far proved unable to speak with a coherent voice, producing instead a messy message that fails to capture the attention of many Vermonters. Yet another barrier are moderate or timid Democrats who lack the political willpower to support holding the Vermont government accountable when it comes to climate goals or fear a potential veto from Governor Scott. Governor Phil Scott, too, stands in the way of progressive climate legislation. While he is more open to climate action than many other Republican Governors, he has yet to turn words into actions and his “no new taxes for nuthin” mantra does not align well with the proposed market-based climate solutions that the legislature will likely consider in the coming years. Other anti-tax sentiments arise from libertarian think tanks throughout the state and from the Vermont Fuel Dealers Association, a trade association that lobbies for the interests of fossil fuels and disseminates anti-climate legislation propaganda.

Strategy

While the barriers to passing climate legislation are substantial, we find hope in the rising tide of climate activism throughout the state that has manifested in strikes, marches, and civil disobedience. In order to inspire progressive climate legislation, this civic engagement must continue (and expand), particularly with a critical eye towards power structures and in a manner that is polite, persistent, informed, and radical (PPI&R). Building geographically dispersed coalition with the capacity to apply state wide pressure will be key to achieving broad legislative support of climate policy in the State House. We should focus on building a coalition with districts that have powerful legislators (such as Grand Isle-Chitenden, home of House Speaker Mitzi Johnson) and purple districts (such as Bennington). Again, these coalitions then need to organize and act as a polite, persistent, informed, and radical bloc. While aggressive, disruptive actions may be justified in this urgent time, many of the representatives insisted that politeness is the best way to achieve results. One former rep. implored us to think about what sorts of rhetorical strategies influence all humans: reasoned arguments or screaming? Probably the former. But just showing up to the State House once is not enough. Persistence is key. Showing up and talking to legislators as much as possible with informed, radical stand points can convey the same urgency but with the effectiveness of thoughtful civility.

So here's to the future of Vermont, towards which we stride in solidarity with radical persistence, passion, intelligence, and courage. This tiny green state has the potential to inspire a massive green movement towards a just, regenerative civilization worthy of its name. We hope this report, in its small way, will inform and encourage you to turn this potential into a reality.

9.2 Further Research

We will be the first to admit that this report functions as a silhouette, not a portrait, of the political landscape in Vermont's State House; while we hope specific themes have emerged, we found few concrete or clearly defined conclusions. Further research is necessary to comprehensively inform effective activist presence in the Vermont State House. While we encourage you to make your own critical observations and conclusions about what needs to be studied, we have identified the following as areas in need of further research.

- PSA of important districts: While we identified the need for a PSA numerous times, we want to iterate again that the few areas and constituents we identified are in no way conclusive (or even well researched). Not only finding new areas where growth is needed, but digging deeper into each area to find potential nodes of power to tap into (from individual people or organizations) is going to be crucial to an informed coalition building strategy.
- Identifying Organic Leaders: While structural positions of power are relatively easy to understand, we did not identify specific organic leaders in the process of our research. Either through interviews or direct observation, identifying organic leaders is crucial to informing where best to put pressure.
- More interviews from purple/red districts: Our interviews drew from legislators and workers primarily in Addison County, with a few from Burlington and Montpelier. Without any voices from purple or red districts, we are left mostly in the dark about barriers unique to those areas and strategies to overcome them.
- Can the CSC become more powerful?: If the CSC were to gain prominence and political power, they could bargain behind the scenes for a *lot* more. Gaining a deeper understanding of the limits or potential power of caucuses in general and how to best amplify or empower the CSC, may lead to a critical power shift in the State House in the future concerning how they prioritize climate.

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