How the climate movement is trying to fix Joe Biden



On Wednesday, Joe Biden announced a new set of task forces to shape his campaign's policies on important topics – including climate, an area where he's struggled to win over activists. The new task force will attempt to bridge that gap, helped in large part by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), who is serving as co-chair.

For some, one of the most surprising members of the task force is Varshini Prakash, the executive director of the grassroots activist group Sunrise Movement. Sunrise has been harshly critical of Biden's stance on climate, particularly his mixed messages on fracking and lukewarm support for a Green New Deal. Throughout the primary, Sunrise threw its support behind the rival Sanders campaign, with many chapters refusing to endorse Biden even after Sanders dropped out of the race. With Biden now pushing to unify the party, some activists within Sunrise Movement are hoping to pull the presumptive nominee to the left on climate – if they can.

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The Verge spoke with Prakash about what she thinks might come out of the task force and what it will take to get serious about addressing climate change. This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

What are you hoping to achieve by joining the task force?

My goal is to bring all of the exciting policy agenda, the vision, and political strategy that has been the centerpiece of the Sanders campaign into the task force. Hopefully, we can take Joe Biden's climate agenda and make it a climate justice plan,: a plan that really speaks to young people, working people, and people of color.

I'm kind of cautiously optimistic. If the Biden campaign can actually take seriously many of the suggestions that are going to emerge from this task force, I think we could be in a really powerful position.

A lot of Sunrise chapters have said they won't endorse Biden, but you're working with the campaign. Is this a split in the movement?

It is a disappointing moment right now to be having to vote for Joe Biden. He has been on the wrong side of several issues that really matter to young people. So this is an opportunity for the Biden campaign to show that they're serious about engaging young people. It's an opportunity to show that they're serious about taking climate action and ensuring that frontline communities have a voice. It's an opportunity to re-envision what the future of America can look like, rather than sort of touting this return to normalcy that Biden has been talking about on the campaign trail so far.

"It's an opportunity to re-envision what the future of America can look like"

Are you putting any pressure on those chapters to endorse?

No, we're not. We made a pledge that if we were going to

undertake a decision as big as endorsement, that it would be a conversation that we had as a movement. That doesn't stop individual hubs from endorsing him. But we don't have any immediate plans with the national movement to undergo that process unless people feel really excited about it.

How successful has Biden been at winning over more young voters since becoming the presumptive Democratic nominee?

He's made some strides forward. The student debt plan that he released definitely helped. He's been communicating about the climate crisis in better ways. But truth be told, I think most young people feel like he's falling pretty short of where he needs to be to earn their vote, particularly on issues of climate change. People are also really concerned about the sexual assault allegations by Tara Reade.

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Biden has denied those allegations from Tara Reade who said that Biden assaulted her in 1993 when she was working as a Senate aid. On Medium, you wrote that you're "following the lead of survivor justice organizations in their approach to addressing and responding to Tara Reade's [sexual assault] allegations." How do you ensure justice and accountability here?

We have a long way to go before we are powerful enough to fully hold elected leaders and powerful politicians accountable to many things – not just around sexual assault or climate, but around any number of issues where they have caused harm and not faced any repercussions or a kind of public accountability for it. People have called for basically an independent external investigation to take place, not through the DNC or something like that, and so that is the call that we are reinforcing and amplifying.

Despite calls to pair economic recovery from the COVID-19

crisis with efforts to build a greener infrastructure, House Democrats released a stimulus bill this week that does nothing to address climate change. What does that say to you about Democratic commitment to climate?

Obviously, it's disappointing. Part of it is that we have found that our political leaders can't be trusted, honestly, to embrace climate policies on the level necessary without the push and power of social movements.

I believe that there is a lot that people can be doing to combine the stimulus packages, the economic recovery work that will need to happen over the next few years, and addressing the top existential threats to American society and global society like the climate crisis. It is high time that we took a page out of FDR's book and started communicating about the fact that we need a federal jobs guarantee. Every person in the United States should be guaranteed a good, high-paying job that has access to a union and that is available to young people, people of color, working people, and poor people. We should be using this as an opportunity to invest in our infrastructure and do it in really sustainable ways and employ people through that process. We could be looking at the biggest jobs creation task force in I don't know how long — definitely decades, if not a century. This could be a huge opportunity for us in the midst of crisis to actually make life better than it was before we entered this recession.

"Our political leaders can't be trusted"

The Trump administration plans to intensify its attacks on Biden's support for a GND. How has the pandemic affected the momentum that was building for a Green New Deal?

Literally, Mitch McConnell makes millions of dollars off the fossil fuel industry. He and Donald Trump are providing meetings to bail out the oil and gas industry during this time while letting the renewable energy sector suffer. I'm not surprised at all that they would be hating on the Green New

Deal.

We've had to change our organizing strategy quite a bit because we're not able to gather, which is slightly important for a movement. But I think what it has allowed us to do actually is take some pause, visit our underlying strategy, and determine how we continue with the broader vision of the Green New Deal in this new political moment.

We'll continue to fight for a Green New Deal. It might look and sound like different things in different places. To me, the brand, the name, I don't really care about. What matters to me is that it holds true to the principles and vision of solving the climate crisis in the most just and equitable way on the timeline that saves the most people possible.

What do you want to see from Biden's climate policy moving forward?

"People need to see Biden communicating with authenticity"
Fundamentally, people need to see Biden communicating with authenticity about this issue. They need to see passion. We need to see him on social media communicating about it. He was in a conversation with [Washington Governor] Jay Inslee recently; it was a lot better than conversations I've heard from him before. I want to see more of that. I want to see him connecting and telling the stories of frontline communities in places like Detroit, and in "Cancer Alley" in Louisiana. I want to see him feeling the frustration and anger toward polluters and fossil fuel executives that many young people feel – actually being able to mirror the kind of existential dread that so many young people live with, day in and day out, when they think about the fate of humankind in the midst of this crisis.

I haven't seen Joe Biden step up like that quite yet. I'm not positive that he has personally integrated a deeper understanding of the climate crisis and what it is and how it

relates to all of the other issues that we have in American society today. Until I see that, I’m not sure exactly what the effects of these task forces will be.

https://www.theverge.com/2020/5/14/21258678/joe-biden-climate-change-task-force-sunrise-movement-varshini-prakash