

2-12-2009

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### eCommons Citation

Horan, Tracey, "Climate Change: One Light Bulb at a Time?" (2009). *Rivers Institute Blog Archive*. 6.  
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Thursday, February 12, 2009

# Climate Change: One Light Bulb at a Time?

Tracey Horan

If today's youth are supposed to be politically apathetic, more engaged in Facebook than the fate of the world, no one told Jessy Tolkan. The 26-year-old activist spent Nov. 2 to 5 in Washington at the Power Shift summit, where over 6,000 college students from every state in the country gathered to agitate for federal action on climate change. For Tolkan, the executive director for the Energy Action Coalition, an umbrella group of youth-oriented environmental groups that helped organize the conference, Power Shift was "by far the most incredible thing that I have ever experienced in my life. I'm going to be running off that energy for a long time."

Energy — and results — is something that the campaign to create political action on climate change in the U.S. has often lacked. Over the past few years there has been a grassroots groundswell on global warming, but the focus has been on personal action, small behavioral changes individuals can make — or more often, buy — to reduce their impact on the Earth. It's the light bulb theory — switch your wasteful incandescent lights for more energy-efficient compact fluorescent bulbs, and you're doing your bit to save the planet.

But while individual action is important — and the increasing ubiquity of green consumerism is a sign that the business world is getting the environmental message — the sheer scale of the climate challenge is so overwhelming that only a worldwide revolution in the way we use energy will be enough to stave off the worst consequences. That requires far-sighted political action from the top, starting in the capital of the world's biggest carbon emitter: Washington. Unfortunately, while scattered cities and states across America have begun to move on climate change — Gov. Schwarzenegger, take a bow — the federal government has been more roadblock than revolutionary.

That will change only if politicians hear loud and clear that global warming matters to Americans, not just in the brand of light bulbs they buy, but where they cast their vote. The focus on individual solutions "rings hollow to a lot of people," says Jesse Jenkins, a member of the Cascade Climate Network and an environmental blogger. "The solution is to organize and organize and organize." And the agents of that change will be young people like Jenkins and Tolkan, the college-age members of the Millennial generation, born after 1980. These post Cold War kids have grown up with the threat of global warming — just as their parents grew up with the fear of nuclear war — and they know that they'll be left to cope with a warmer world tomorrow if nothing is done to slow carbon emissions today.

So can Millennials shake off their reputation for apathy and create environmental change on a national level? Last weekend suggests they might be on their way. At the Power Shift conference, student activists gave testimony to members of Congress and demanded a slew of

aggressive measures on climate change, including a 30% cut in carbon emissions by 2020 and 80% cuts by 2050. While students marched on Washington, activists from around the country launched Step It Up 2 on Nov. 3, a nationwide, single-day campaign to kickstart political movement on climate change. (The first Step It Up day of action happened in April.) The brainchild of environmentalist and author Bill McKibben and a group of students from Middlebury College, Step It Up aims to shove global warming to the center of the national political agenda, and it's exactly the sort of sustained campaign needed to make climate change matter at the ballot box. (Listen to McKibben talk about Step It Up on this Greencast.)

For the Millennials, climate change is emerging as the defining issue of their time, just as civil rights or Vietnam might have been for the generation before. "This is a new generation that sees itself at the forefront of a great movement, just like the greatest movements of the past," says Tolkan. With health care, Iraq and the economy all jostling for voters' attention, it remains to be seen whether climate change — still an amorphous threat to most Americans — can seize center stage, but Washington should know that there is a growing core of young activists out there who care about nothing more. "This past weekend, we gave politicians a bit of a heads up that we're watching and we're demanding change," says Katelyn McCormick, a 20-year-old junior at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville. "We've said what we want and now it's time for them to do something about it." With the Millennials set to be the largest demographic bloc in America history, it might be time for Washington to listen.

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So, I found this article and thought it was relevant because Powershift 2009 is coming up, and it seemed related to the conversations we had last time. There are several aspects of this article that I find thought-provoking.

It is interesting to me that this writer claims climate change is the "civil rights" or "Vietnam" of our time because, at first glance, climate change seems less profound in its relation to Americans. I don't think any of us would charge climate change with the death or oppression of many, and maybe that is part of the problem. We see climate change as something far off, something that doesn't directly affect us, but that could someday affect us, so we should start worrying about it sometime in the near future. We don't see climate or energy issues as issues of social justice, but they often are. Often the poorest communities are the ones who bear the brunt of pollution and would benefit the most from a cost-effective and earth-friendly energy solution. I think this is part of the problem. We might ask, then, what other aspects that we don't think about are perpetuating a cultural numbness to climate change?

Another thing to consider is the fact that this article is a little out-of-date. It was written pre-election, so the focus is on pushing votes as a catalyst for action. Now the way we might look at this issue is a little different. If we can't use votes to make change happen, what can we do? What does it say about our nation that it takes leverage to force stewardship of our resources? Do the small changes we put into action actually make a difference?