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A Climate of Cooperation

These are difficult times for environmental advocates. Temperatures continue to rise worldwide, climate change skeptics run the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and President Trump announced the United States will pull out of the Paris climate accord.

Those developments have helped fuel a hefty rise in public activism, but the movement still struggles to build power to influence public policy on environmental issues. Bridging the gap between passion and impact was “Sustaining Movement Momentum and Building Political Power,” a two-day conference at UC Santa Barbara that brought together academics and activist groups to focus on developing partnerships that would deepen our understanding of ways to organize effective, sustained environmental movements. The conference ran June 19 and 20.

Hahrie Han, associate professor and Anton Vonk Chair in Environmental Politics in the [Department of Political Science](#), noted that policy solutions without considerations of political power are not particularly effective. “Achieving good policy outcomes is not just about designing the right policy, it’s also about developing the political will to pass and support that policy over time,” she said. “We can have the best cap-and-trade policy, in terms of its design, but if Congress won’t pass it, it just sits on a shelf somewhere.”

Han — who co-organized the conference with [Matto Mildenberger](#), an assistant professor of political science, and [Matthew Potoski](#), a professor in the campus’s [Bren School of Environmental Science & Management](#) — said she hoped the conference

would result in new partnerships between activists and academics, and encourage cooperation between organizations.

Groups such as Greenpeace, Sierra Club, 350.org, the League of Conservation Voters, the Climate Reality Project and more joined a dozen academics from UCSB, Yale and other universities for the conference, which was sponsored by the UCSB Department of Political Science, the Climate Advocacy Lab of the Skoll Global Threats Fund and the Scholars Strategy Network.

“This was such a great opportunity to meet other people doing similar work — and facing similar challenges,” said Sarah Rasmussen, digital director for Greenpeace. “But it was also a really rare opportunity to meet with researchers on the cutting edge of studying environmental politics. They are asking a lot of the same questions we are, but have the tools and skills to help us answer those questions in new ways. I already have several ideas of things I want to try to build our grass-roots power for climate action.”

The U.S. retreat from its commitment to combating climate change is both a challenge and an opportunity, Han and Mildenberger noted. Environmental activism has surged in ways not seen for decades. The Sierra Club, for example, saw its membership spike and received roughly \$3 million in commitments after Trump won the presidency in November. Other groups have seen similar surges.

“All these organizations now are faced with the challenge of saying, ‘Generally we face problems of scarcity, and now we’re facing problems of abundance,’ ” Mildenberger said. “How do we take the abundance of activism that we have and turn it into a base that can actually be built up over time to generate the kind of political influence with stuff that they want.”

The conference, which brought together about 50 advocates and academics, played to UCSB’s strengths as a leader in interdisciplinary research. Tackling climate change will require a comprehensive approach.

“I think there are a lot of opportunities both for scholarship to inform the strategies that advocates are using to build movements and engage in climate advocacy,” Mildenberger said. “But there’s also a need and opportunity for people on the ground to inform the research questions and the scholarship we do here and other communities to study climate and environmental policies. I think that dialog of informing advocacy while having advocacy inform how we think about our research

and what we prioritize what we research is the goal.”

About UC Santa Barbara

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