

Protestors ([00:01](#)):

No ice. No, no, no ice, no, no. In corporations like Hilton.

Aru Shiney-Ajay ([00:50](#)):

We started doing these noise demonstrations. As soon as ICE started to surge its presence in Minneapolis, that was in December. We would research where ice agents were staying and we'd show up in the middle of the night often with only 10 or 15 of us, and you just go there and sometimes people will bring a drum set or a tuba and play bad. It's like a cacophony of music and whistles and banging pots and pans and whatever other noise you can manage to make, and it's kind of awesome. It feels really cathartic and really effective at once.

Dr. Leah Stokes ([01:26](#)):

That's Aru Shiney-Ajay Minneapolis resident and the executive director of the Sunrise Movement. You've probably heard of Sunrise as a youth climate organization, the one that kicked off the Green New Deal back in 2018, but they've also become a leader in the resistance to authoritarianism in this country. Back in December, the Sunrise movement started organizing wide awake protests at hotels across Minneapolis.

Aru Shiney-Ajay ([01:53](#)):

We zeroed in on hotels because they are everywhere and we have a lot of access to them. So the logic here is if ICE doesn't have anywhere to sleep, they can't be here.

Dr. Leah Stokes ([02:05](#)):

Back in December, the Department of Homeland Securities Operation Metro Surge sent thousands of ice agents into Minnesota. From there, they launched a campaign of terror masked agents, roamed the streets, looking for people who didn't fit the Trump administration's definition of who looks American. People were taken from their homes, families torn apart. Communities lived every day in fear.

Aru Shiney-Ajay ([02:32](#)):

We first started thinking about these wide awake actions last fall when we started doing planning about what were potential red lines that might get crossed in Minneapolis, and one of the things we wrote on the whiteboard was it could be that ICE shoots a US citizen, and so we gamed out all these things and we were like, okay, what can we do as a hub to basically make sure that the city is ready to refuse to cooperate with whatever response? The administration.

Dr. Leah Stokes ([03:00](#)):

Then on January 6th, another 2000 federal agents were sent into Minnesota. The next day, one of those agents shot and killed Renee Goode, an American citizen.

Aru Shiney-Ajay ([03:12](#)):

It was scary. I had this sense of like, oh my God, this could have been me, this could have been my friends, this could have been my parents, this could have been anyone I grew up with. I also did have this feeling immediately of they don't know what they unleashed. South Minneapolis is a really well organized area of the city. That's where Renee Good and Alex Preddy were both shot. It's just a few blocks from where George Floyd was murdered and within an hour of Renee, good being shot, there were probably like 300 people at that intersection. And I saw the cops looking uncomfortable about the fact that they were having to hold this barricade, and I was like, oh, everyone is on our side right now and what we are going to see is the unleashing of a whole city. And that's what happened.

Dr. Leah Stokes (04:04):

Renee's murder sparked a citywide response.

Aru Shiney-Ajay (04:06):

What we saw was frankly, a scale of mobilization that feels pretty unprecedented in modern American history. Probably 20 to 30,000 people were in signal chats, actively patrolling for ice every day in one city alone, which is just huge. So there's these incredible neighborhood networks and they really work to do a lot of defense to stop deportations, but at the end of the day, we also need to kick ice out. So we've been asking hotels to refuse to house ice and for hotels that don't and for hotels that are housing ice, we go in the middle of the night and we make a lot of noise and we wake them up. It's kind of this way to let out the anger you're feeling, but also really clearly like, oh, you are making it less possible for ice agents to be in the city. Human rights

Protestors (04:59):

Human rights.

Dr. Leah Stokes (05:07):

Today we bring you a story of how a city came together to resist authoritarianism. This might seem strange for a climate podcast. Why are we talking about ice agents? But the truth is, protecting our democracy is central to climate progress. This is a matter of degrees. I'm Dr. Leah Stokes.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson (05:31):

And I'm Dr. Katharine Wilkinson.

Dr. Leah Stokes (05:34):

I'm sure all of our listeners have been seeing these images come out of Minneapolis in recent weeks and months and felt really horrified.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson (05:44):

Yeah, it's been a lot, I think to witness even from afar what's been happening on the streets of the Twin Cities. And I, for one, have felt a mix of heartbroken and angry and also deeply inspired by what the people of that place have been able to do together.

Dr. Leah Stokes (06:09):

Yeah, I think Aru really put it brilliantly that when people come together, they have more power than I think our federal government realizes.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson (06:18):

Yeah. You wouldn't necessarily think that people with whistles and group chats could push back against people being ripped out of their homes by masked agents, but that's exactly what's happened.

Dr. Leah Stokes (06:33):

We brought three guests on the show today, Aru Shiney-Ajay is the executive director of the Sunrise Movement, and you heard from her at the top of the episode.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson (06:42):

We also turned to another resident of Minneapolis, Ben Passer of the McKnight Foundation, and to Emily Atkin, a climate journalist and the founder and editor in chief of Heated, we wanted to ask all of them how they're making sense of this moment, how they're showing up right now, how they're protecting communities and democracy and continuing to push on climate.

Dr. Leah Stokes (07:06):

Because as you'll hear from all of these guests, these are not actually different fights. Fossil fuel companies thrive under authoritarianism and have been systematically chipping away at our democracy for years.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson (07:17):

That means that the moment we find ourselves in today has not arrived by accident or happenstance, the erosion of climate and democracy, our two tellings of the same story.

Dr. Leah Stokes (07:32):

Because without our democracy we can't make progress on climate change. And as climate change worsens, it can erode our democracy.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson (07:39):

And as people who care about the climate crisis, we can, we, we must show up for both. So let's head back to Aru and Minnesota, which has been at the forefront of democracy under attack against us.

Protestors (07:51):

We still believe, that goodness, and justice can still prevail. That's why we're showing up.

Dr. Leah Stokes (08:00):

So tell me, Aru, how did you come up with the idea of doing this protest? Have wide awake protests been done before?

Aru Shiney-Ajay (08:06):

The name Wide Awake came from the abolitionist movement in the 1850s, and they would wake up politicians who weren't on their side in the middle of the night and they would call themselves the wide awake. So that's where we got the name from

Dr. Leah Stokes (08:21):

And that's what I find so cool about Sunrise. Since the movement was started, it really has been about taking inspiration from historical movements and trying to understand how change happens and how to get people involved. Can you talk to us a bit about that process?

Aru Shiney-Ajay (08:37):

Yeah. I mean, at the end of the day, we are able to do what we do because movements in the past have shown us the way I think. We take a lot of inspiration from American social movements like the Civil Rights Movement. We also take a lot of inspiration from movements across the world that have fought dictators. There's this group, Otpor, who was really active in Serbia. It was a youth group that managed to successfully topple the dictator Slobodan Milošević. We've been looking at Chile at South Korea, just all across the world. There are these incredible examples of ordinary people, really often young people who

are willing to take a leap of faith and be a little braver and be a little risky and often creative, and they try tactics that catch fire and build power and are able to actually move politicians to their side and unseat dictators, ordinary people, unseat dictators.

Dr. Leah Stokes ([09:27](#)):

I was teaching, I teach this negotiation class and I was teaching letter from Birmingham Jail, which Martin Luther King Jr. wrote when he was put in jail. And it's very similar in some ways responding to the sorts of criticism that gets lodged against the Sunrise movement. It's sort of like, well, why don't you negotiate? Why don't you use these tactics that are less confrontational? And he basically says that if you have a state that is willing to engage in violence that is willing to create this situation for people that is unlivable, you can't negotiate. You have to use direct action to force something to such a crisis point that the state has to come back to the negotiating table.

Aru Shiney-Ajay ([10:07](#)):

At the end of the day, authoritarianism or any type of status quo relies on people going about business as usual. And what we did in Minneapolis is we showed that that wasn't going to happen. Restaurants started refusing ICE service. Gas stations started refusing ICE service. Hotels started to kick ICE out, and everywhere that ICE went, they were met with this vast network of patrollers who would blow their whistle, and suddenly tens of people are coming out to form a crowd around you, and that did stop deportations and ICE said it themselves. The people of Minneapolis were making it hard to carry out their agenda, and yes, it is disruptive. It does disturb people's hotel guests sleep, or maybe it disturbs your workday when you hear whistles outside or maybe it disturbs your commute because there's a crowd of people in the road. We find that those are actually pretty necessary to force the state to see we actually have power, and if you want quiet, you need to negotiate with us.

Dr. Leah Stokes ([11:09](#)):

And how do you see the relationship between fossil fuels and authoritarianism? Because people could look at sunrise and be like, oh, you're in the climate movement. Stay in your lane. Why are you working on this?

Aru Shiney-Ajay ([11:21](#)):

People often say that the right doesn't have climate policy. I don't think that's true. I think they're very detailed climate policy. It's not climate policy that I like, but I'm like, oh, you want to build a border wall to stop immigration? That's climate policy, that's climate policy that stops people who are suffering from climate disasters from coming into the country. You want to invade Greenland that has historic levels of rare minerals that could be used for production of solar panels. That's climate policy. To me, I think the war in Venezuela is another example of what happens. You are beholden to an oil industry. We invaded another country and ousted their president in order to hand over that country's oil reserves to Chevron. That's climate policy. Again, not climate policy I believe in, but it is climate policy. And I still think climate change is the most existential threat to humanity and authoritarianism and fascism seem to be getting in our way of stopping it. So I'm like, okay, if we got to knock out authoritarianism to knock out climate change, let's go. Let's roll up our sleeves and let's go.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([12:25](#)):

Leah, I appreciate so much what students of social movement, history, the Sunrise movement is because there is so much to be gained from looking at past fights and past winds, and I think that's probably part of what helped Aru and Sunrise make this connection early between climate change and democracy, and then to move really quickly to mobilize their movement when this crisis really took hold in Minnesota,

Dr. Leah Stokes ([13:00](#)):

The skillset that Sunrise really has is building people power. And we see that it works, but we know that there's lots of other organizations in Minnesota and across the country that are responding to this moment, including other environmental groups and climate groups.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([13:14](#)):

To get more perspectives from Minnesota, we reached out to our friend Ben Passer. Ben's the McKnight Foundation's Midwest Climate and Energy program director. He's a lifelong resident of the Twin Cities, and he wrote a really wonderful piece recently reflecting from that place on the intersection of climate and democracy. Ben, welcome. I think it's easy right now to feel like our democracy is coming apart at the seams and you are living in the Twin Cities where it is all happening at an extraordinary pitch right outside your door.

Ben Passer ([13:53](#)):

An understatement to say, these are not normal times and this is not what a normal functioning democracy looks like. And again, Minnesota is sort of the focal point, but also I am really grateful to see the resilience and the courage and solidarity that we're seeing in this moment too. As heartbreaking as it is.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([14:14](#)):

And the reason you and I know each other is because we work on this big diffuse challenge of climate change, and it is urgent for sure. We wouldn't be doing this if it weren't, but I think it can be hard to know how to hold that work at a moment that people are being ripped out of their homes. And I'm curious if you've felt that tension.

Ben Passer ([14:37](#)):

Yes, definitely felt that tension. And to be honest, I think, I hope most folks in the climate space are feeling that tension too. On one hand, climate change is an existential issue, but at the same time, watching throughout Minnesota being targeted systematically has felt pretty existential too. And I think it's a tension, but it's also a false dichotomy. I think we can and should wrestle with both. I'm seeing organizations show up in different ways too. Citizens Utility Board here in Minnesota is traditionally a consumer advocacy organization. They're really focused on rate payer education. They've developed materials to support customers who are having trouble paying their utility bills because of the interruptions that we're experiencing in our daily lives. They're also educating folks on how to identify a utility worker because so many individuals are really concerned about opening their doors. And then one other example I'll give is the Land Stewardship Project. They're an organization that typically is focused on sustainable agriculture and healthier food systems, but they've joined the Immigrant Defense Network. They're stepping outside of their usual lane to show up in this moment.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([15:53](#)):

Those are such beautiful examples. It's really inspiring to hear, and I was really inspired by that piece that you wrote for Atmos lessons from Minnesota to preserve our planet. We must also preserve our democracy. Why is it that democracy is so essential if we want to try to heal the climate crisis and its associated wounds?

Ben Passer ([16:19](#)):

I think what's important to recognize is that despite all of the progress that we've had on climate, it doesn't happen in a vacuum. Democracy is about much more than the right to a free and fair election.

(16:34):

It's the ability to hold and have diverse opinions. It's about the ability to share and publish information. Here in Minnesota across the state, families are sheltering at home. We've seen journalists be intimidated. Young people are walking out of schools, and the fact of the matter is people just don't feel safe participating in public life and that sort of public life, that civic engagement is core for every movement including and maybe especially climate. So I think it's incredibly important for us to connect the dots here. This isn't just the decisive decade for climate action, it's also the decisive decade for our governance framework, the governance framework that makes our climate action possible in the first place.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson (17:23):

And of course, Minnesota was a shining example in 2023 of the way that civic culture and civic practice can drive big climate wind including a nation leading clean electricity standard. And that was like chef's kiss democracy really doing it because we know we have a climate majority. We know that if democracy works, we will see climate progress because that is what the people want.

Ben Passer (17:58):

That's exactly right. That is what is possible when we ensure that folks have the ability to use their voice and to push for what they want and what they need.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson (18:07):

It really struck me, Ben, in your piece, you had this line about sort of pushing back on the idea that from a climate perspective, that working to preserve democracy might be mission creep.

Ben Passer (18:19):

I'll be honest, I think the conversation around mission creep is one that frankly is I think all too familiar in the climate space. I think there's been a sort of a hesitation or a reluctance to really lean in on equity and racial justice, even though we know that the impacts of climate change are deeply unequal. And that isn't just coincidence.

(18:44):

Equity isn't just an outcome at the end of the work. It's not just a nice to have, it's a through line. It is about who participates, it's about who leads. It's about whose expertise shapes the work. And I think not sufficiently investing in answering those questions is part of why we saw the massive pendulum swing of the passage of the Inflation reduction Act. There were multiple programs that were designed to invest in environmental justice communities, but we didn't have sufficient people power to actually defend them. I think it's part of what we're seeing in this moment in Minnesota. We need to better connect to what people actually care about. So we're really thinking about how do we change narrative and worldview at scale so that progress is harder to undo?

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson (19:33):

Yeah, because policies can move, but if paradigms are still holding, you just can slide right back down the slope.

Ben Passer (19:42):

That's also not to lose sight of the fact that we still have possibilities and pathways in the current moment, things like 100% clean energy laws in several of our Midwest states. There are things like massive investments in public transit in Illinois. So I think we're trying to sort of juggle a few different things at once, to be honest with you, Katharine. And I think that's sort of the moment that we're in holding true to

our belief that we need to invest in a just creative and abundant future. And so much of that really comes down to the safety and the health of our communities, whether it's in the current crisis or in the climate crisis.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([20:22](#)):

And of course, as we know, polluting industry would be delighted if we got so distracted that we didn't keep climate solutions moving forward. It's a moment I think that calls for, I don't know, expansion of our capacity.

Ben Passer ([20:39](#)):

That's exactly right. A lot of what we're trying to think about even beyond just sort of the tactical, how do we continue to move climate progress is how do we take care of our people? How do we take care of ourselves? And that is a real, frankly, it's a real challenge in this moment. We will not succeed if we burn ourselves out. We will not succeed if we try to do it all. So I think a lot of this moment is really trying to figure out what can we let go of so that we're showing up in solidarity with the current crisis and also recognizing the progress that we still believe is possible.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([21:15](#)):

That's really well said, Ben. Yeah. I mean, as we think about the still unfolding front lines of democracy under assault in Minnesota and just daily horrors and tragedy of children being kidnapped, of people being shot by federal agents, but just of people being afraid to live their lives, you just think about the ripples upon ripples of trauma for people who are even not experiencing physical violence, and yet we are also seeing the best of humanity, of neighbors helping neighbors of communities that are coming together in beautiful ways and protestors showing up in weather. Those of us in Atlanta, Georgia can't possibly fathom even entering. How are you feeling? Do you have a sense that both democracy and climate still have a fighting chance?

Ben Passer ([22:15](#)):

Yes. Yes, I believe it. I think even in what feels like a really dark time, Minnesotans are showing up in ways that I think illustrate the best of Minnesota and the best of America. Folks are standing in the cold, putting themselves in potentially harm's way to protect the rights and the civil liberties of their neighbors. Volunteers are organizing rides to and from work, to and from school, other basic needs and services so that individuals in their community can get around safely. The mutual aid that we are seeing in this community is incredible. These moments, and many of them are unseen. Many of them are really just individuals acting under their own accord. They're all acts of courage and they're all acts of humanity. And this I think is really a beautiful illustration of what democracy looks like, what Minnesota looks like, what America can look like at their most fundamental levels. Even in this time of great peril, we're seeing people protect one another, protect their communities, protect our democracy, and protect our country. And that is a beautiful, beautiful thing.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([23:37](#)):

It's a beautiful thing. It's a beautiful thing. I think the last question I want to ask you is for someone who is working on climate and then they're doom scrolling on the side, they may be struggling to stay motivated. What would you say to anyone who's wondering whether this work still matters or matters right now?

Ben Passer ([24:05](#)):

It absolutely matters. I do the work that I do because I believe that if we put everything that we have into addressing the impacts of a changing climate, that future generations will have a chance not only to

survive but to thrive. So I think the advice I would give is that when you don't know what else to do, do the best that you can. Even if the work that you're doing is not directly related to this current moment, to this crisis, you can still channel that energy in a productive way and know that the work you're doing is contributing to a better future when we get there. And part of the challenge of this moment is being able to hold both, but it doesn't diminish the importance of the work that you're doing.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([24:54](#)):

Thank you for that. Thank you for that, Ben.

Ben Passer ([24:59](#)):

The last thing I'll say is just underscoring the importance of showing up. Katharine, you talked about the protests on a day that would be challenging for a resident of Georgia, but I can't say enough how beautiful that was to see. It was one of the coldest, if not the coldest day that we have had this winter. And it was tens of thousands of individuals walking the streets of Minneapolis saying, this is not normal. We care about our community, we care about our neighbors, and we care about our future climate and democracy. They're connected issues and refusing to fall into the trap of a false binary refusing to fall into the trap of that's not where I need to get involved. That's not my fight refusing. That is in itself an active leadership. Everyone has the opportunity to be a leader in this moment. Everyone has an opportunity to show up in solidarity and to work toward the future that we all believe is still possible.

Dr. Leah Stokes ([26:09](#)):

I really loved your conversation with Ben, Katharine. I felt like those stories that he told about environmental groups, climate groups, broadening their work and showing up in solidarity for everyday people during this terrible ice surge in Minneapolis, it was just such a hopeful story, such a powerful story of solidarity.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([26:27](#)):

I completely agree, Leah. And I think while we have this existential threat called climate change and this acute need to protect democracy, we need examples like this that show us these are really just two sides of the same coin, and we can't solve one without the other.

Dr. Leah Stokes ([26:46](#)):

And I think so many of our guests today make a really clear point, which is that this erosion of our democracy is really bought and paid for, funded by the fossil fuel industry.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([26:58](#)):

It's enough to frankly piss you off. And so we also wanted to talk to one of our favorite anger fueled climate journalists, Emily Atkin, to expand on this link between big oil and authoritarianism. She wrote two timely articles on this very topic and what it feels like to be someone who does climate amidst an unraveling democracy. So the day after federal agents shot and killed Alex Preti in Minneapolis, you published a piece titled, I Don't Know How to Do This and that title. And of course, the piece that sat beneath it, I think spoke to a lot of us, Emily, feeling pretty utterly shattered by what's happening in this country.

Emily Atkin ([28:00](#)):

Yeah. Well, contrary to my public persona, I do have a wide range of emotions that I'm capable of. I built this platform called Heated, and I think I'm most known for being heated and being rageful and being

like, look, can you believe this? And I'm comfortable there. I almost like being there sometimes because it's empowering, and I've talked about that a lot of times in the newsletter, but I get gloom cloudy a lot as well. But what I don't like about it is that it's rarely catalyzing. I have to figure out a way to get out of it or else I live there and I don't want to live there. And very often getting pissed off again is the way to get myself out of it. And then that is what can motivate me to get back to work. And so that's what I was trying to do with this piece about how the climate crisis and government capture by big oil is extremely well connected to everything else happening in our country.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([29:04](#)):

And I thought the questions you asked at the beginning of that article were really poignant. Here's what you wrote. How am I supposed to keep writing about and caring about climate change and pollution and government capture by big oil when the government is executing people in broad daylight? How am I supposed to watch the country descend into full throated fascism and then log onto my computer and say anyway about those methane regulations?

Emily Atkin ([29:37](#)):

It felt almost insensitive to try and direct people's attention somewhere different, or at least somewhere that felt different. And I think that was what really drove me to write the piece, is that I was stuck in this place where I felt like I would be distracting from what was really important, this militarized police state kidnapping our neighbors. And I had to write this piece to align what I was feeling with what I actually know intellectually, because very often being a climber reporter, I still have this feeling that it's some niche issue when it's not.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([30:23](#)):

Those things are feeling disconnected or far afield. But the thing that you know is that the heating of our planet and the heating up of authoritarianism and fascism are deeply entangled.

Emily Atkin ([30:37](#)):

The number one thing that really made it click in my brain was the fact that none of the horrors that we're witnessing today would be possible without big oil, without big oil dollars in government. The fossil fuel industry was one of, if not the largest corporate backer of Trump's return to power. We don't know exactly how much money they gave them because of the horrific dark money laws that we have, but we know that they gave at least 75 million to his campaign and PACs and at least 20 million to his inaugural fund. Fossil fuel industry was also one of the biggest donors to Republicans in 2022 and 2024. They're one of the main reasons that we have a Republican majority in both House of Congress. They are the reason we have a political movement that is openly hostile to democratic norms. It's simply because authoritarians are better for fossil fuel business. One of the biggest things that I found while writing this story was research showing that countries become significantly more democratic when their oil production starts to decline. So that was so interesting to me because I'm like, oh, that means that when we talk about transitioning towards renewable energy, of course we're talking about a solution to climate change, but we're also talking about a potential path to healing democracy, a potential path away from authoritarianism.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([32:08](#)):

And my God, we could use some solutions that might actually not just kind of try to curb the fronts of fascism, but actually get to some of those root drivers.

Emily Atkin ([32:22](#)):

Exactly. And so much of what I'm doing with my journalism and why I needed that reminder was reporting on what big oil is doing. And so when I get into these funks where I'm like, it doesn't even matter. Why am I reporting on big oil and corruption and government capture by, I'm like, oh, actually their actions are directly connected to everything else that we're seeing going on. So that was really helpful to me. But there were a bunch of other points as well. I think one of the ones that resonated with people a lot was just the idea that climate change is state violence. It's not something separate from state violence. Obviously it's more acute when we see an ice agent or five ice agents just start pouring bullets into a bystanders back that's very acute. But climate change is a direct decision by policymakers in the US and it kills people. And the people who decided that they were going to not do anything about climate change made a direct decision to kill people and knowingly doing it where it's like not everybody is affected the same by climate change. The people who have the most adverse health outcomes and who die from climate impacts are generally black and brown people and people in low income communities. So it's always something I think about. I always think about The Nutmeg's Curse by Amitav Ghosh. Do you know that book?

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([33:57](#)):

I do.

Emily Atkin ([33:58](#)):

It's a great book. And in it, there's a lot of descriptions about how colonizers came over, started killing a lot of native people, and that started to become unpopular with people because even then people were like, it's kind of brutal to just be killing all of these indigenous people just shooting 'em and stabbing 'em and all that. So that's why there started to be more indirect ways of killing indigenous people. One of the ones that he lays out so poignantly is the killing of all of the buffalo and bison that indigenous people were relying on, and then they started dying off because they didn't have food. And then that was seen as more of a natural consequence. Well, survival of the fittest. That was just a nature thing that happened, but it's indirect violence. It's still violence. It still has the same outcome. And that's exactly what I mean when I say that climate change is state violence. It's a more palatable way to achieve the same ends as overt killing, but you destroy the natural conditions that people need to survive. That's the same outcome as shooting them in the back

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([35:14](#)):

Completely. The existence of Cancer Alley is state violence. The running of pipelines through people's lands is state violence and all the more challenging, and I think speaks to the necessity of your work that it is so diffuse, right? It is hard to pin down agency from fossil fuel burning being the number one killer on the planet because so many people and so many entities are participating in that system. So it is the kind of state violence that can go without notice or go without attribution in a different way.

Emily Atkin ([35:53](#)):

Totally. And there is attribution though, when an administration is dismantling climate environmental rules like saying, we're no longer going to have regulations on Mercury or we're going to severely weaken this regulation on climate change.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([36:07](#)):

They are like PFAS, right?

Emily Atkin ([36:08](#)):

Right.

(36:09):

They do that knowing how many people it's going to kill. They have cost benefit analysis sheets that tell them how many lives those regulations were purported to save through however many less heart attacks, less asthma deaths, less premature births, less illnesses, all that stuff. They know how many lives that was supposed to save. And then they're saying indirectly by repealing that we're no longer going to save those lives. And then you think about how the EPA just announced that when it makes these cost benefit analyses, it's going to stop tallying the cost of human lives saved altogether. They no longer even want to look at that column.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson (36:55):

And especially not in an era of growing climate litigation, growing, using the tools of the law to go after these folks. Nobody wants to have that evidence on hand, right?

Emily Atkin (37:08):

Yeah. I mean, it makes it easier for them to hide from the consequences, but it doesn't make the consequences any less real.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson (37:16):

And I think this to your point earlier about the fossil fuel companies operate best and most effectively in authoritarian regimes, and of course they do because what they're doing to the planet is deeply unpopular. So if the majority has the capacity for decision-making, you might very well be reigned in and ultimately be run out of business. I mean, this is part of the effort to constrain democratic effectiveness.

Emily Atkin (37:48):

Exactly. I mean, I don't think it's a coincidence that countries that are less bought and paid for by the oil industry are making the transition away from oil and towards renewable energy faster. It's because renewable energy is very popular. The oil and fossil fuel industry's number one goal has always just been to delay climate action delay what they know is inevitable. And so it's very hard to achieve delay of something natural and inevitable unless you have completely bought off all the people in power. And so they don't care about what the other consequences of that is of them buying off people in power. It doesn't matter to them like, well, if I buy the government, then they're going to start killing trans people. That doesn't matter to them. Whatever the side effects are of having an authoritarian government doesn't matter to the fossil fuel industry. So long as they achieve delay of climate policy, delay of the energy transition, everything else is whatever, because it benefits them.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson (38:55):

It's all just, yeah, these are externalities to the business model. Even if that means masked agents shooting people in the streets.

Emily Atkin (39:05):

It was a big reason why I wrote another piece about the connections between ICE violence and crack down on protestors against ice violence. The connection between that and big oil and climate change was because I remembered that five years ago I was in Minnesota with protestors who were being cracked down against arrested called domestic terrorists, and they were indigenous people in northern Minnesota who were protesting a pipeline

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson (39:36):

That was exactly the same playbook.

Emily Atkin ([39:38](#)):

It was exactly the same playbook. And then I realized, wait, I've read about this for years of the crackdown against peaceful protestors in the environmental movement, in the climate movement against water protectors and to characterize them as domestic terrorists, environmental terrorists, and deploy police forces that are working on behalf of the oil industry. That's where that playbook came from. And I think I remember one of the things that I reported on the most when I was in Northern Minnesota covering the Line three pipeline in 2021, was the fact that the foreign oil company Enbridge a Canadian oil company that was building the pipeline in Minnesota,

([40:25](#)):

They were funneling lots of money to the cash strapped local police department so that they could buy all of this fancy new riot gear to crack down on protestors. And so much of what I was reporting on was just those people's experience of having their local police force essentially turn into an arm of the multinational oil company to work against them. So yeah, we're talking about the same things here When we're reporting on climate change, when we're calling attention to climate change, they're all part of the same fight, and that's why I get so pissed. I'm sure you do too. When people are like, the climate people really got to stay in their own lane, just make it about the environment.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([41:11](#)):

The fossil fuel industry is clearly very capable of thinking beyond climate. If they can do it, surely we can too.

Emily Atkin ([41:21](#)):

Yeah, I mean, the fossil fuel industry isn't staying in its own lane, obviously, and I don't know who it benefits to say that climate people, people who care about climate change, need to just stay focused on that one thing. I mean, I guess I get the argument to a degree, but I don't know.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([41:37](#)):

I think the piece that I can have empathy for is if we take our eye off the ball of the methane regulations, who is going to keep their eye on it? If not us, then who? And that can't be the only answer because it would just seed so much of the board. Right?

Emily Atkin ([41:58](#)):

Yeah. I mean, I just wrote about the endangerment finding. I'm not saying that people who call attention to climate change for a living should not be talking about methane regulations, but it's like you totally have the capacity and probably responsibility, I would argue, to also talk about other horrible things that are happening as well, or at least it's not a dereliction of responsibility. I don't think it distracts from the movement. I think it makes the movement bigger. I lose subscribers every time I have an article that's about something that's not just climate change, because there are people that are like, I'm here to learn about climate change. And I'm like, well, I'm telling you about climate change. I'm just telling you a part of it that you don't want to hear, but that's not my problem. There's just this section of the environmental movement that likes the environmental movement because they want it to just be about trees and bears and ecosystems, but it's not. It's about people.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([43:03](#)):

Totally.

Emily Atkin ([43:04](#)):

What I don't understand about that is, okay, so you're essentially telling a bunch of people who could be also involved in the environmental and climate movement that you're not willing to defend them outside of this movement.

([43:22](#)):

And this is what I've heard from a lot of activists is that when they see that, they're like, well, how am I supposed to trust that you actually have my best interest at heart, that you really want to protect the environment for me when you're not willing to defend me getting shot by a cop? It's why I really think just from my conversations with lots of activists over the years, that that's a big reason why the environmental movement continues to be so overwhelmingly white is because the people who are most affected by environmental problems and climate change don't feel like a lot of people in the movement respect their personhood because they want to stay in this one lane. Right?

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([44:10](#)):

Yeah, totally. Let's talk about where you are seeing really positive leadership on this front of we're a climate entity, and so we are expanding or we are engaging in different ways because of the political moment that we now find ourselves in.

Emily Atkin ([44:30](#)):

I described this in one of my pieces, but there are a lot of climate organizations like Climate Justice Alliance and the Sunrise Movement that are more engaged in showing up to anti-ice protests and that have made fighting for democracy itself part of, or even I think in sunrise movement's case central to organizing for climate justice and for climate action. So yeah, I do seem more and more activists adopting that as a strategy, particularly climate justice activists and young activists. The connection is clearer to them. Their synapses are firing quicker. You know what I'm saying?

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([45:20](#)):

Yeah.

Emily Atkin ([45:21](#)):

And it makes total sense when you think about it too, right? You obviously, you can't pass climate laws or past climate regulations or achieve accountability in an authoritarian state. Just to bring it back to what we were talking about before, you can't do it without the will of the people being foremost. So it makes sense that democracy work is climate work. It makes sense that climate groups, especially in this particular political moment, we'd be working on democracy, and it actually feels good to be in the climate space right now despite all of this acute violence and other stuff that's happening, because I know that it's needed because not a lot of people are doing it. So if I'm here, it's something that I can point to to be like, well, I'm in this lane because someone's got to be in the lane.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([46:09](#)):

And I think at the end of the day, we are very, very lucky to get to do this work.

Dr. Leah Stokes ([46:22](#)):

One of the things that stayed with me most from that interview was the idea that climate change itself is state violence, that the longer we delay action, the more people are harmed and pay with their lives. It's not the same as being shot in the back, but it is still that same outcome.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([46:41](#)):

I think that kind of framing and insight is exactly what Emily brings to the climate conversation and to climate reporting that is fresh. It's important, and frankly, it cuts through to the quick of the truth, if you know what I mean. And it would be remiss if we didn't suggest to our listeners who don't already read Emily's newsletter Heated to go check it out. It's on Substack and it is absolutely full of this kind of wonderful insight.

Dr. Leah Stokes ([47:09](#)):

And these days with more and more outlets just laying off their climate journalists, we need to, as a movement, be supporting independent journalists like Emily Atkin.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([47:21](#)):

After our interviews with Emily and Ben, Trump's border czar are announced that the federal immigration surge in Minnesota would be coming to an end.

Dr. Leah Stokes ([47:28](#)):

While this is good news, there is still a lot that's uncertain.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([47:32](#)):

We don't yet know the pace of the drawdown. We don't know if agents may just go somewhere else.

Dr. Leah Stokes ([47:36](#)):

And we don't know all of the long-term impacts this existing surge will have on Minnesota.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([47:43](#)):

Everyday life was disrupted for Minnesotans and that feeling of fear, and in many cases, terror will not go away overnight. Rebuilding community trust and stability will take a long time, even under the very best of circumstances.

Dr. Leah Stokes ([47:59](#)):

There's been a lot of harm from what's happened, but it's also a hopeful story just watching everyday people resist.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([48:05](#)):

And of course, Aru and the Sunrise Movement have been at the very heart of that. So let's end this episode. Going back to Aru for some thoughts on where things have landed.

Dr. Leah Stokes ([48:20](#)):

In the last week, the Trump administration announced that it was ending this immigration enforcement surge in Minneapolis. Have you seen things shift or not? And do you feel like it's a victory for the movement?

Aru Shiney-Ajay ([48:32](#)):

So as of two days ago, we hadn't seen a decrease in the number of agents at the federal building that might change. They said it would be the end of this week. Trump is like a master propagandist and a master manipulator of narratives. And this is one of the very few instances that I've actually seen him

have to go on defense on what was supposed to be in his mind, his best issue of immigration. Ordinary people managed through nonviolent organizing to beat back what is basically the biggest military superpower in history, purely through density of relationships. And because we care about our neighbors. That's amazing.

Dr. Leah Stokes ([49:13](#)):

And whistles and signal chats, I do find it also moving, to be honest. I really do.

Aru Shiney-Ajay ([49:18](#)):

It's very moving. There's been so many moments where I've just been on the verge of very proud tears. I've said this before, but it's remarkable to me that Renee Good and Alex Prett were murdered, and the response of tens of thousands of people in Minnesota and across the country was to pick up and do the exact same thing that they were murdered for. I mean, these murders are meant to be intimidation. They're meant to keep people at home. And I don't think the Trump administration realized the level of solidarity we would feel, and actually that it had the opposite effect. It brought us out. Instead, I hope that it serves as inspiration to the rest of the country because frankly, this isn't going to be the only city they try this in. To me, Minneapolis feels like a turning point. People understand that we can win, which is really critical.

([50:16](#)):

So we do that first, and then we keep doing it city after city. We force them to retreat during the midterms, and then we unseat Trump and win actually structural changes to our democracy. So we don't have a democracy bought out by oil billionaires and by billionaires in general. That's what we need to actually win the type of future that we deserve. So I'm really proud to be from Minneapolis. It's felt, I mean, it's also felt exhausting. It's like a collective trauma that the city is going through. I left for a day or two last week, and I was shocked to realize how much my body relaxed when I didn't feel like ice could be around the corner at any moment. So it's been exhausting, but it's also been really beautiful, and I'm very proud of my city.

Dr. Leah Stokes ([51:07](#)):

A Matter of Degrees is co-hosted by me, Dr. Leah Stokes.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([51:10](#)):

And me, Dr. Katharine Wilkinson. We are a production made in partnership with the 2035 Initiative at UC Santa Barbara and The All We Can Save Project.

Dr. Leah Stokes ([51:21](#)):

Thanks to our funders and supporters who make this show possible, including the Anton Vonk Chair in Environmental Politics and the 11th Hour Project. If you'd like to help us make more episodes, please reach out.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([51:32](#)):

And if you're digging the show, hop on Apple Podcasts or Spotify and give us a five star rating or leave us a review

Dr. Leah Stokes ([51:40](#)):

Script writing, fact-checking, communication research and production support are by Lucas Boyd and Christin Palmstrom. Sameer Sengupta is our editor and sound designer.

This transcript was exported on Feb 26, 2026 - view latest version [here](#).

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([51:51](#)):

Rose Wong designed our show art. Sean Marquand composed our theme song. Additional Music came from Epidemic Sound.

Dr. Leah Stokes ([51:59](#)):

You can find us online at degreespod.com and on YouTube.

Dr. Katharine Wilkinson ([52:05](#)):

Stay tuned for more stories for the climate curious. He's a homegrown Minneapolin. Is that a word?

Dr. Leah Stokes ([52:14](#)):

I don't know, but I like it. Minneapoli?