

Katharine ([00:00](#)):

A barbecue may not be the first place you imagine making a difference on climate change, but according to Caroline Spears, that's exactly where you want to be.

Caroline Spears ([00:09](#)):

So, if you show up and you request a meeting with your state senator or your city council member, they'll usually take it. And you have that opportunity to ask them about recent votes that they've taken. Ask them about their plans to solve climate change. And that type of pressure is incredibly impactful. They'll be thinking about that conversation next time they take a vote on public transit spending, and next time they take a vote on walkable cities. So, even after someone's elected, don't let them off the hook! Go hang out. Go to their barbecue, their fundraiser barbecue. Go to their office hours, go to their town halls and continue asking them how they're improving on their plans to solve climate change. That has a really big impact.

Leah ([00:47](#)):

That's Caroline, and she runs an organization called Climate Cabinet. At first, Caroline was working at a solar job, but she started volunteering for candidates for office. And before long, that side hustle became her full-time career.

Katharine ([01:02](#)):

It's easy to forget that politics is made up of people. People who we elect, that have office hours and town halls and events you can attend.

Leah ([01:11](#)):

That's right. And what Caroline realized is that those people play such a big role and that we have an opportunity and a responsibility to influence them and the kinds of decisions they make.

Katharine ([01:22](#)):

In politics too, it comes back to that ever present question, what can I do to address the climate crisis?

Leah ([01:30](#)):

And today, in our third and final episode of our miniseries, we ask, what can I do politically on climate change?

Katharine ([01:36](#)):

The question we tend to ask about politics is the simplest, which is, who should I vote for? But there's a whole lot more to our political engagement than casting a ballot a few times a year.

Leah ([01:48](#)):

Political work is about making sure we get good climate candidates running for office, helping them win in the first place. And then once they're there, getting campaigns off the ground to push them to make climate policy happen.

Katharine ([02:02](#)):

There's a quote I love by Dolores Huerta, who as you know Leah, is a political activist and co-founder of the National Farm Workers Association alongside Cesar Chavez. And Dolores says that every moment is an organizing opportunity, every person, a potential activist, and every minute, a chance to change the world.

Leah ([02:23](#)):

And that's what today's episode is all about, working together to change the world. This is a Matter of Degrees, stories for the climate curious. I'm Dr. Leah Stokes.

Katharine ([02:34](#)):

And I'm Dr. Katharine Wilkinson. In this miniseries, we have been working our way outward through widening circles from the personal to the professional, and finally the political. As we grapple with the question, what can I do now? Now Leah, the political is your specialty, so what exactly did you cook up for us this week?

Leah ([02:52](#)):

Well, so often when we think about working in politics, we just think about voting, but that's not the whole story. So to understand the full chain of how we get climate candidates to climate policy, I called up Caroline Spears, who we heard at the top of the episode. She's the Executive Director of Climate Cabinet.

Caroline Spears ([03:11](#)):

What we do is we help candidates run, win and legislate on the climate crisis. So we get in early. Early money is so critical for helping these candidates get off the ground. We have the largest database of local climate action and political opportunity in the country. So we're actively tracking thousands of opportunities across the country to figure out which ones have really high climate value, a high climate ROI.

Leah ([03:34](#)):

What Caroline is saying there with ROI, or return on investment, is basically the idea that we want our biggest climate impact for the smallest effort. She's looking for races where there are razor-thin margins, where a climate candidate winning could mean the difference between a bill passing or one dying on the state Senate floor. So to help voters find these climate candidates, Climate Cabinet puts together a scorecard. What they do is they analyze how often each state legislator in the US is voting for or against climate policy, and then they give them a score on a scale from zero to 100.

Caroline Spears ([04:10](#)):

We elect public service commissioners here, and we elect county commissioners, and we elect city councils, and we elect state legislators and we elect a lot of people. Half a million people to public office every cycle. If you're feeling a little bit overwhelmed by the options, that's why we've tried to make it as easy as possible.

Katharine ([04:26](#)):

Wow. Half a million people elected. And every single one of those elections is an opportunity to nudge our politics one way or another toward climate solutions, toward climate action or further into climate destruction.

Leah ([04:42](#)):

Exactly. And that's where Climate Cabinet wants to help folks figure out who to vote for. Now, of course, there's already one way that we sometimes know that, and unsurprisingly (and unfortunately) there are already some pretty clear partisan divides when it comes to climate voting history. That's something that Climate Cabinet has compiled. And Katharine, I want you to guess, what do you think the average score for a Democrat is running for a state office?

Katharine ([05:09](#)):

Well, I don't know, Leah. I don't have all that much faith in state politics. I'm going to guess 62%.

Leah ([05:19](#)):

Actually, it's a lot higher than that. For the Democrats, their average score is 91.

Katharine ([05:24](#)):

What? That's way better.

Leah ([05:27](#)):

I know. So a lot of Democrats are stepping up and doing the right thing. But now for the sadder part of the story, what do you think the average score is for the Republicans?

Katharine ([05:38](#)):

I'm going to give them a 6.2%.

Leah ([05:41](#)):

You're being a little too negative there too. It's negative hour here. They're actually a 27. There's obviously a pretty terrible divide, but maybe we can find the unusual Republican that does care or help elect one that would work on climate. And similarly, can we push those Democrats to do even more?

Katharine ([06:02](#)):

I am super down for that.

Leah ([06:04](#)):

And so, what Climate Cabinet helps people do is track all these exciting races that are coming up. For example, Caroline told me about this woman named Erin Zwiener. She's a Democrat, pro-climate state senator who's clinging onto a Texas district where Republicans are gaining ground.

Caroline Spears ([06:22](#)):

She's fantastic. She flipped a Trump district in 2018. She held onto it barely in 2020. She's up for election again this year. There are standout legislators in state legislatures across the country, and sometimes in the case of representative Zwiener, they are very precarious districts. She's a 100% climate score, a 100% from the Sierra Club of Texas. She's not in the majority party in Texas, she's a Democrat in Texas. But she uses the points of order and the rules of the Texas House and the Texas Senate to kill bad bills, sneaky at the last minute. So literally, last session, it's 11:59 PM, the session's ending at midnight. The Senate side messed up their reconciliation language on an anti-electrification bill, and she called a point of order a minute to midnight and killed an anti-electrification bill on the floor of the Texas House. So there are some legislators out there who have an outsized impact on climate. And our goal, we got behind her campaign in a big way in 2020, we raised a bunch of money for her.

Caroline Spears ([07:23](#)):

We're going to keep supporting her this cycle because she really is having that type of impact on climate that's incredible. She's in a very tough race. She won her last race by a thousand votes. That's basically all of our match ups. There's these razor-thin margins, and it's someone who's incredible on climate versus someone who votes against having cleaner cars. That's really the discrepancy that we're looking at.

Katharine ([07:46](#)):

Wow, that was a close call for Erin Zwiener. A thousand votes is a pretty thin margin, and I think it goes to show just how important every individual vote is.

Leah ([07:55](#)):

And there are a lot of important races coming up, but not every person running for office knows as much about this issue as Erin does. And that's another way that Climate Cabinet helps out.

Caroline Spears ([08:06](#)):

I started Climate Cabinet a few years ago when I was working for a solar company. And I started supporting candidates on this side. I was, especially at the time, still really involved with folks running for state and local office where I grew up in Houston, and literally seeing the impact that state and local policy had on our ability to solve climate change. And then I started volunteering for candidates running for those same offices in state and local policy who wanted to be great on climate but didn't know how. Solar and wind are the cheapest forms of electricity we have in the United States. It's definitely true now, and it's been true at this point for a couple years. And I was working with folks running for the same offices that decide how much solar to build in a state or whether we should build solar at all, who didn't know that, who wanted to be good on climate, but had no idea that there were a quarter million people working on clean energy in the state of Texas.

Caroline Spears ([09:00](#)):

So I started supporting candidate after candidate, helping them run, win and legislate on climate. I did that as a volunteer for about two years. And then, as I was supporting more and more candidates, I got to a point where it was taking up a lot of time, and it was starting to become an actual full-time job and there was a clear need because I was getting pretty busy. So I ended up quitting my job and doing this full-time.

Katharine ([09:21](#)):

Well in the spirit of our miniseries, I can't help but call out that I love how Caroline's story is about finding something she was really good at and then turning it into her climate job, into her full-time climate work.

Leah ([09:35](#)):

Yeah, and it was really important that Caroline stepped up.

Caroline Spears ([09:39](#)):

And I just thought when someone ran for office, people would come out of the woodwork and be like, "All right, we're going to help you run for office. Here's what you need to know on all these big policies." And turns out, that might happen for people running for president, but it sure doesn't happen for most folks running for state and local office.

Katharine ([09:55](#)):

I've seen that firsthand. Sometimes a whole campaign on a local election can be one part-time guy.

Leah ([10:03](#)):

And that's why Climate Cabinet is working to help all of us support other candidates in big races this fall. So, for example, in Arizona, there's someone named Lauren Kuby, who is currently a climate champion on the Tempe Arizona City Council. But she's trying to land a bigger job, working on electricity for the state's utility commission.

Caroline Spears ([10:25](#)):

Lauren Kuby is this incredible candidate in office. She ran for city council. She created a sustainability commission. She established the Office of Sustainability, which is so critical for continuing – because we're not just going to pass one piece of legislation and be like, "All right, we're done. Time to head out." We need structural systems that will continue pushing for this over time. And that's why the Office of Sustainability is so important. She passed a 100% renewable energy goal, and she created an equity program to pay social justice organizations to get input on all of our climate plans that we're building in a way that actually makes people's lives better. That's what you can do as a city council member. And a great example of someone who was passionate about this, had an incredible background, and then really executed in office. That's the power of pro-climate candidates. Now, we're supporting her for the Arizona Corporation Commission. She was there on city council, did this incredible work, and now she's running for the Corporation Commission.

Katharine ([11:26](#)):

Leah, I am totally all in for the work that Climate Cabinet is doing, but our listeners might be wondering, "Hey, I'm not running for office. I'm just an average person, not a mayor, not a council member. What specifically can I do if I want to be part of climate politics?"

Leah ([11:44](#)):

While I asked Caroline that and she laid out a great roadmap for us. There are four big steps. Are you ready, Katharine?

This transcript was exported on Oct 04, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

Katharine ([11:51](#)):

Totally ready. Got my pen.

Leah ([11:53](#)):

One, you've got to vote for climate candidates – and Climate Cabinet can help you figure out who that is. Two, you've got to campaign for them, particularly helping them to knock doors. Three, you want to donate your money to support candidates in tight races. And four, once they're in office, you want to help them with their climate policy.

Katharine ([12:15](#)):

So here's what I've got. Vote, volunteer, especially door knock, donate and follow up. How's that for a summary?

Leah ([12:24](#)):

I love it. And so, step one is voting. Caroline brought up this interesting study that I hadn't heard of. It's about the 2019 Canadian federal election. And the study found that a single vote could help cut 34 tons of carbon pollution just in terms of pushing a pro-climate person into office rather than an anti-climate person. That's pretty crazy.

Katharine ([12:50](#)):

Well that number, 34 tons, is really going to help me remember step one. You got to bloody well vote. Step two, you said volunteer.

Leah ([13:00](#)):

And it's important to remember that not everybody can vote, right? Age, citizenship, felony disenfranchisement. But that doesn't mean you can't get involved politically. And a key way to do it is through working on a campaign.

Caroline Spears ([13:13](#)):

If you live in a swing state or a swing district, this midterms' election is right around the corner. Go door knocking. What do I mean when I say go door knocking? Here's what you're going to do. You're going to look up who's running for your local state Senate or state House seat, or even the congressional. I don't care, just pick one of them. And you're going to fill out that forum online that's like "Sign up to block walk!" And do it for a few of the candidates just in case one doesn't get back to you. And man, they'll put you to work. Statistically, that has the biggest impact.

Katharine ([13:43](#)):

I have to say. I think the volunteering piece is actually when democracy starts to get really fun. I got quite involved around the elections in Georgia in the last cycle. It feels good to go out and knock doors and feel like you're part of this wild machine that sometimes feels really out of reach. So, super here for it. Alright, step three, Leah: donate.

This transcript was exported on Oct 04, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

Leah ([14:07](#)):

That's right. So many of us are donating to candidates, including right now. And of course you can send money to campaigns anywhere in the country, not just in your own region, but you might not know where to, and that's why Climate Cabinet collates this information so that you could easily find candidates that need your support, who are climate champions.

Katharine ([14:27](#)):

I love this role that Caroline and Climate Cabinet are playing, of supporting the financial underdogs, helping them go up against the candidates that are backed by those deep, deep pockets of the fossil fuel industry.

Leah ([14:38](#)):

That's so true. You know Erin Zwiener, the Texas Democrat who we talked about earlier, the one who won her race for state House rep by only a thousand votes? Well, the difference in campaign donations between her and her opponent was less than \$200,000.

Katharine ([14:54](#)):

That suggests that your money really can matter in races like these, when you might not at all feel that for let's say a presidential election.

Leah ([15:04](#)):

And there's another thing that Caroline told me, which is that when it comes to financial support for these and other candidates, the earlier you give, the better.

Caroline Spears ([15:14](#)):

What basically happens after every election cycle is everyone gets exhausted. So, if you're thinking about donating, and you really care about elections and the consequences they have on climate, go to [climateslate.com](#). I'm going to do an aggressive plug. Go to [climateslate.com](#) right now. We already have elections for March 1st on that website. And you can go ahead and support incredible climate critical candidates today. Because money four months before has an incredible impact, and money two weeks before an election doesn't.

Katharine ([15:45](#)):

I love this. Makes it super easy, and we can be donating not just now, but for the March elections too. So [climateslate.com](#), we'll also put that in the show notes. Leah, what about number four? The follow up?

Leah ([16:02](#)):

The follow-up. A classic move, and very underrated.

Katharine ([16:06](#)):

But isn't that one of the things that we know from our romantic lives? You go on a great date. There's really electric conversation. You're jiving.

Leah ([16:18](#)):

Well, you're talking to a lady who's been with her partner for 15 years, so missed the whole online dating thing, my dear.

Katharine ([16:25](#)):

Yeah, but basically that means you're captain of team follow up.

Leah ([16:29](#)):

Okay! Follow up, follow up, follow up. Always underrated.

Katharine ([16:35](#)):

Like all of us, politicians, they're probably not experts on climate policy. So to succeed, we've got to get them surrounded by the right people. We need to get them the ideas, and you can be that expert. You can help out a local city council member, a mayor, a state representative. If you've got ideas, you should bring them to the people in charge.

Caroline Spears ([16:56](#)):

People who are policy makers are regular people. They do not step into that office. They do not run for office and immediately are bestowed with all of the information that they need to make good decisions. So, if you can be a research support to your local city council member, if you can get a relationship with them and say, "Hey, I'm a climate person. I will do whatever climate research you need." You'll be shocked at how useful that is for people running for office or people in office and actually shaping policy.

Katharine ([17:26](#)):

As a member of your community, you are the one with the insight that your local politicians want. If there's an issue you care about, like the climate crisis, you can make your voice heard.

Leah ([17:37](#)):

And Caroline and I talked about this. Very few people are reaching out. People don't realize how few phone calls actually happen and how impactful those phone calls can be. State and federal politicians often have these databases where they literally log every single phone call they get, every single email they get, and they tell the politician who they're hearing from and what they're hearing about all the time. So when you are annoying and you call and you send emails, that's going to make it into the politician's mind.

Caroline Spears ([18:10](#)):

Yeah. Politicians, they listen, but they only listen to the people who talk to them. So you have to go talk to them. And whether that's in person, whether that's calling them, that has a really big impact.

Katharine ([18:21](#)):

And I think it's important to note, you don't have to do this all by yourself. You can join an organization.

Leah ([18:28](#)):

This isn't a solo performance. We're not asking for an improv sketch all alone. It's a group activity. And so joining an organization can help you figure out how to plug into campaigns after the election.

Caroline Spears ([18:42](#)):

Join a local org. First of all, creating community around these things is critical. And then once you join, you will meet a bunch of people who bring a wealth of experience and knowledge about their issues to that organization. The thing about joining organizations is you might go to the first meeting and it's not exactly what you wanted, or you don't vibe with the people. Usually in every community, there's a few different organizations to join. So, if you show up the first time and it's not your cup of tea, make a list of all the other organizations that are in your area and go to those too. It might not work out the first time, and it's a messy process, but it's worth it.

Katharine ([19:17](#)):

Okay, to recap: vote, volunteer to knock on doors, donate and follow up after the election to get policy done.

Leah ([19:26](#)):

When we talk about getting involved politically, it's not all about voting. I know this from personal experience. I only just became a US citizen, and I just voted for the first time, Katharine.

Katharine ([19:36](#)):

That's so sweet, Leah.

Leah ([19:39](#)):

The first time in America, I should say. I have voted in Canada before, but for years I lived in this country and I didn't have that right. And I know we have lots of young listeners on our show too, and maybe other people who are immigrants who don't have that right. It doesn't mean you can't get involved. You can actually still donate, even if you're not a citizen. You can volunteer, too. So there is still so much you can do, whether you're young, or you don't have the right to vote yet for another reason, it's not all about voting.

Katharine ([20:08](#)):

I think this is really reassuring. And I don't know about everyone else, but I certainly find myself kind of wanting ways to be involved in between elections. Elections, they come, they go. There are many months in between. And ensuring that our political system is working for the climate rather than against it just requires that we are engaged at a more regular drumbeat, not just at the ballot box. And that's an ongoing living process. And I think Caroline's suggestions really shine some light and some clarity on how we can plug into it.

Leah ([20:39](#)):

And the other thing is when you get involved with campaigns, whether it's for the election or for policy after the fact, you can actually win. I will never forget volunteering for my first campaign in the United States, which was for Elizabeth Warren when she was first running for US Senate. And that night when

she won, it was just electric. My friend and I, we went down to the victory party in downtown Boston and it felt amazing.

Katharine ([21:05](#)):

I think maybe this is the critical point. If you are more deeply involved in politics, you sometimes get to go to very great parties.

Leah ([21:17](#)):

And maybe make some friends too. Which brings us to our second story for today, the movement for a Gas Free NYC. It was a campaign that won a ban on gas in new constructions and buildings at the end of 2021.

Katharine ([21:33](#)):

Here we are again, folks, electrification. Like we covered in the personal episode, it is very clear that gas is dangerous for our health, our wallet, and of course, our planet.

Leah ([21:45](#)):

Exactly. And the activists behind Gas Free NYC knew about the dangers that gas posed. So they started working early in 2021. And the amazing thing is that their campaign won in less than a year.

Katharine ([22:00](#)):

Wait, that is incredible. So, from start line to victory, less than 365 days. That just shows what getting involved in a campaign for policy can do. You win and then you're off to the next gig.

Leah ([22:14](#)):

It's very inspiring. And to learn more about this successful campaign, I called up Sonal Jessel, Director of Policy at WE ACT for Environmental Justice, which is based in Northern Manhattan in New York City. We talked about how everyday people can make a difference on climate policy.

Sonal Jessel ([22:31](#)):

Hearing from people who are actually experiencing the impacts of not doing this work. That is what is really powerful. And that's what we tell our members all the time, consistently. And even legislators, if you ask them, "What is more likely to move you and get you to support a bill?" They say, "Well, if my constituents are telling me that they need this done." So, it is so important to have everyday people come out and say, "I'm a member of the public and I want to see this happen. I'm a voter and this is important to me." That is really, really important to do, but it's not easy.

Katharine ([23:09](#)):

It's not easy. I think in some ways when we ask what can I do. Well, getting involved in an activist campaign, it can be a heavier lift. It can just require more of our time.

This transcript was exported on Oct 04, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

Leah ([23:20](#)):

That's true. And that's also why you and I are always telling people, if you want to get involved, join an organization. You don't have to figure this all out by yourself. An organization can clue you in on when there are these high impact moments that your voice and your time will really make a difference.

Katharine ([23:38](#)):

You're not just sort of floundering, hoping that you're doing the right thing. And I think that's really important.

Leah ([23:44](#)):

And so I wanted to share this winning campaign with our listeners today, so that they would have a model for how to get involved in making climate policy.

Katharine ([23:52](#)):

It's so helpful to have a template. So Leah, this campaign, when it went from zero to victory in less than 12 months, where did it start?

Leah ([24:02](#)):

In January 2021, then Mayor Bill de Blasio, made an announcement of his climate plans for the city. He included a gas ban for new construction in buildings, but it wasn't going to go into effect until the year 2030. When Sonal saw that target, she thought, "That's not good enough."

Sonal Jessel ([24:21](#)):

We had kind of been all talking about it, but hadn't really done a lot of action yet. And once he said that, we thought, "Oh no, 2030, that's way too late to do what we considered the lowest hanging fruit in terms of getting buildings off of gas, which is new construction buildings that have not yet been built." Those are the easiest buildings to build with just using electricity. And so, we thought that was a perfect moment to really push the city to do something big, but also within a goal that they had announced was important to them. We had council members that were leaving the council but were running for other positions of power, and they wanted to look like they were doing the right thing for climate. And so we also knew that this was a political opportunity where people would feel pressured into showing their support and showing their desire to address the climate crisis. So we thought that this combination of factors led to a perfect moment to really work on getting off gas in New York City and taking this first step.

Katharine ([25:26](#)):

This is such a smart place to start this campaign because when people are running in a primary or a general, they want to be liked. They want people to think, "Hey, this person's on the right side of whatever my issue is." And so that's a perfect opening to apply pressure.

Leah ([25:42](#)):

Exactly. And that's where everyday people getting involved are key, like the members of WE ACT.

Sonal Jessel ([25:48](#)):

WE ACT does consistent community engagement and organizing. And so, we have a membership of around 800+ people, most of whom are Northern Manhattan residents. And so, they are all aware and very passionate about environmental justice, particularly around how are we improving the community that they live in, in terms of environment and climate. This was not the first time that we brought this conversation to our members. It's been an evolving discussion for a long time, particularly since Hurricane Sandy, when WE ACT held a community visioning process with over 400 residents of Northern Manhattan to say, "Hurricane Sandy hit. This was scary. This was terrible. A lot of you were really impacted. What do you see as a solution to this very clear, pressing problem that's only getting worse?"

Katharine ([26:52](#)):

It's really hard to ignore the climate crisis once it comes literally knocking at your door, battering your apartment complex, flooding your streets.

Leah ([27:00](#)):

And it's this combination, the climate realities of living in New York, the upcoming city council election cycle, that announcement from Mayor De Blasio, all of these things coming together is what kicked everything into high gear.

Sonal Jessel ([27:14](#)):

Essentially, our campaign strategy was an inside-outside strategy, where in the inside you're talking to council members trying to tell them how important this legislation is, trying to assuage all of the myths that they're being told by the fossil fuel industry, which is so many things. At the same time, you are needing, and almost more importantly, putting a lot of public pressure on our legislators and our decision makers to act on climate, which is something I think we've seen across the world needs to happen, otherwise nothing changes.

Katharine ([27:49](#)):

And what this coalition for a Gas Free NYC needed was an ally on the inside. It turns out there was already one politician who had the same idea.

Sonal Jessel ([28:00](#)):

When we submitted the legislation, we found out that Council Member Ampry-Samuel, who represents parts of Brooklyn – particularly Brownsville, which is a heavily Black community, heavily low-income, heavily polluted community – had actually already submitted a similar legislation in previous years. So, we ended up working closely with her and she became our big champion to pass the bill. So, that was actually an interesting turn of events that there were already other people thinking about this legislation as well. So, we got to work with her to build a strong legislation.

Leah ([28:44](#)):

And with the Council Member pushing from the inside, and the activists applying pressure from the outside, the coalition really started making progress. But the next thing they needed was a list of targets. Who else did they still have to convince?

Katharine ([28:58](#)):

So tell me Leah, who did they have to convince?

Leah ([29:02](#)):

While one key decision maker was Speaker Corey Johnson, a Democrat who had held the position since 2018. And so far he had been standing in the way of even getting this idea of a Gas Free NYC debated in the council.

Sonal Jessel ([29:16](#)):

If you're not familiar with how New York City works in terms of politics, the speaker of the city council is sort of like the head of the city council. And what they say goes, essentially. If they want to bill to pass, it'll pass. If they want to introduce a new legislation, it'll get introduced. They just have a lot of power here. So he was our number one target. How do we target Speaker Corey Johnson to want to pass this legislation? We had to pressure him.

Leah ([29:46](#)):

And one activist, [inaudible], asked the Speaker directly, "Would he support the bill?" And Johnson, the Speaker? He said, "Yes." The activist got that on camera.

Katharine ([29:59](#)):

That is amazing.

Leah ([30:00](#)):

It was a hopeful moment. But as is always the case with policy change, the legislative calendar was running short.

Sonal Jessel ([30:09](#)):

It got down to the wire. We were getting closer to the end of the year. We were getting closer to when all of these council members were going to mentally and physically kind of check out. And so we were really upping the public pressure. We had a lot of events with many members of the public coming out and rallying outside of the Speakers' office, rallying outside of city hall, holding press conferences. We had a mixture of experts like architects, engineers that could speak to the actual feasibility of going electric in New York City, which was important. But also we had members from WE ACT, from New York Communities for Change, from NYPIRG, from all these other groups, from Food & Water Watch, really speaking about the importance of getting this done. And that combination was really powerful because it showed from this sort of engineer, architect side, people that work in building construction, they say, "Yes, you can go electric in New York City. It's possible. Don't believe the fossil fuel industry that tells you you can't do it, the technology's not there. That's a lie. It's not true."

Katharine ([31:25](#)):

This really shows that so many people, with all different jobs that we might not think about as climate jobs, here they come together lending their time and their expertise to this campaign. It's pretty cool.

This transcript was exported on Oct 04, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

Leah ([31:36](#)):

And they needed all the help they could get. Remember last season, Katharine, when we covered the push for a gas ban in my backyard, in Santa Barbara?

Katharine ([31:44](#)):

How could I forget that, Leah?

Leah ([31:45](#)):

Well, you may remember that the fossil fuel industry showed up with all these lies and manipulation.

Katharine ([31:52](#)):

Yes, they did.

Leah ([31:53](#)):

Well, that started to happen in New York City too.

Sonal Jessel ([31:56](#)):

We saw the fossil fuel industry was funding lobbyists and all sorts of other interest groups to go to the decision makers and convince them that this was a horrible idea. So we had to do a lot of work to myth bust, which is common in these situations across the US when these bills are going forward. This is what the fossil fuel industry does. They try to scare decision makers out of progress. And so we had to do a lot of myth-busting on that too.

Leah ([32:27](#)):

But the campaign kept pushing back against this fossil fuel propaganda and they managed to secure a hearing. They got their issue on the docket for the city council, and that was an important step.

Sonal Jessel ([32:38](#)):

The hearings in New York City, they happen in the middle of the day, in the middle of the week. They can start at 9:00 AM, and this one was quite long. It started at around 10:00 AM and didn't end until maybe six or 8:00 PM. I don't remember exactly, but it was quite long.

Leah ([32:53](#)):

For many people, if not most of us, the chances of attending an hours-long hearing in the middle of a work week, well, that's unlikely.

Katharine ([33:03](#)):

Politicians might get paid to sit through these things and have their minds numbed, but the rest of us have to take time out of our day when we need to work and get paid to show up and fight for the future. It's a pretty hard ask.

Leah ([33:17](#)):

And despite the barriers, folks did just that.

Katharine ([33:20](#)):

Wow, that's awesome.

Leah ([33:22](#)):

The community came out in spades. It was experts, people who do buildings, like architects and engineers, but it was also everyday people that live in these buildings in New York City. Normally in these hearings, speakers from the public are given five minutes to make their case. But the Gas Free NYC campaign brought so many people that the council was forced to limit speaking time to just two minutes. And despite that, the hearing lasted for over five hours.

Sonal Jessel ([33:52](#)):

That was important, combined with members of the public saying, "Hey, my apartment flooded during Hurricane Sandy and I really don't want this to keep happening. I don't want to have to leave New York City because it becomes uninhabitable because extreme heat gets so bad in the summer, and hurricanes get so bad in the summer to late fall, and it gets too cold in the winter for this to be a habitable place." Or, "I have poor air quality in my home and I have asthma and I think that my gas stove is a huge source of that." There are studies to back that up. And so having the combination of those narratives from the people that create the buildings to the people that are living in the buildings was a really powerful intersection that helped really move the needle on moving the bill forward.

Katharine ([34:43](#)):

Wait, wait, wait. Leah, weren't you one of the people giving testimony and making this thing go on for hours?

Leah ([34:50](#)):

Look, I stuck to my two minutes. But yes, I was one of the chorus of voices, one of those people, I used to live in New York City in the past, who showed up to give some testimony.

Katharine ([35:02](#)):

Well, in your two minutes, did you charm the powers that be?

Leah ([35:05](#)):

I don't know. But I tried to bring some facts, and, working with everybody else, all the other people who showed up that day, I was proud to be a small part of this tide of people working together. And the amazing thing is, after that hearing, right at the end of the session in December 2021, the bill officially passed.

Sonal Jessel ([35:28](#)):

So actually our legislation was the last one to be discussed at the final meeting of the city council of the year, and of that city council. Which was really exciting because it meant that it was extremely important and a big deal, and the speaker wanted to make a big deal out of it, which was a great sign for us. So it was really exciting to see that happen. And then a couple weeks later, the mayor did hold a bill signing. It was a very cold day. I personally was not able to be there, but we had our executive director, Peggy Shepard, who is a leader in the environmental justice movement there, as well as members and

representatives from WE ACT and from the other organizations that worked with us all were there to kind of stand by the mayor and say a few remarks about the importance of the legislation.

Sonal Jessel ([36:19](#)):

And so, it was signed on a desk outside of City Hall, they kind of dragged a desk down the stairs outside to be COVID safe. And he sat there and signed the bill and everyone stood behind him and cheered. And it was a very exciting moment and something we were honored to have the mayor do as one of his last policy moves for the city as a mayor.

Leah ([36:44](#)):

It's official! Starting in December 2023, there'll be no more new gas in any new construction under seven stories tall. And starting in 2027, a few years after that, the same rule is going to apply for all those tall buildings in New York as well.

Katharine ([36:59](#)):

This is significantly faster than the Mayor's original goal, 2023 and 2027 compared to 2030. That's pretty impressive. And who's to say that 2030 would've even happened anyway?

Leah ([37:12](#)):

And in a fight like this where every single year matters, every single ton of carbon pollution counts, Gas Free NYC's victory is a huge win for the planet. And it's a huge accomplishment, not just for WE ACT, but for all the other organizations and people who showed up to fight beside them.

Katharine ([37:30](#)):

And it's honestly a huge success for all New Yorkers who are going to reap these incredible benefits of electrification.

Leah ([37:37](#)):

It just goes to show the power of an organized group of concerned citizens coming together to hold politicians accountable for their action and their inaction.

Katharine ([37:46](#)):

It's kind of lovely when democracy works.

Leah ([37:48](#)):

Yes, it does still work on occasion. We can't get too sad.

Katharine ([37:52](#)):

So the passage of the gas ban in New York City is super exciting, and it's not the end. Organizations like WE ACT are continuing to put on the pressure and keep demanding accountability and change.

Leah ([38:05](#)):

That's right. WE ACT is still working. Whether they're pushing to electrify school buses, replace outdated lead pipes that are carrying water into people's homes and electrify affordable housing.

Katharine ([38:17](#)):

This is really exciting and really important work that just keeps chipping away at the big carbon problem in New York City and frankly, other environmental justice issues.

Leah ([38:28](#)):

And all of this work, it all takes everyday people working together to change the world and get policy off the ground.

Sonal Jessel ([38:36](#)):

There was a lot of pressure work going on. We had a lot of social media work, many moments of having people speak about why this is important to them. Just doing a lot of pressure work. And frankly, organizations can't do that without people. I don't think that works very well. You need the public to say that this matters in order for decision makers to enact legislation that is meaningful and bold, otherwise you don't see that movement happen. So having the public be really involved via all sorts of different actions we did was absolutely vital.

Katharine ([39:19](#)):

Leah, hearing these stories from Caroline Spears and Sonal Jessel, it makes me think about what we mean when we say get involved "politically." We've got to work to help elect climate champions. We've got to vote, to volunteer, to donate – but the work does not end there. It does not end at the ballot box or even at that electoral victory party. That's the follow up that Caroline talked about, and that's what Sonal Jessel was doing, what WE ACT was doing with this campaign. Democracy just simply doesn't end on election night.

Leah ([39:54](#)):

Once politicians are in office, even the most progressive ones, don't look away. Keep up that pressure. Politics is not just some machine where we pull a lever and then we let it run on autopilot. Democracy is manual labor. We've got to work on it. We've got to return to it every single day.

Katharine ([40:15](#)):

So this feels a little bit bittersweet, but I think we've come to the end of the mini series.

Leah ([40:20](#)):

We've tried to answer for all of you that perennial question.

Katharine ([40:24](#)):

The one we hear again and again, "What can I do?"

Leah ([40:28](#)):

And when it comes to this work, Katharine, it isn't all eat your vegetables. It's actually a lot of fun, and that's because we're doing work that matters, and we're doing it in community. So this brings me back to Sarah Lazarovic. Remember from our first episode about personal action? She said something that really stuck with me.

Sarah Lazarovic ([40:48](#)):

There's that Bill McKibben quote that's like, "Organize, organize, organize," which I actually think is amazing, but hard. So I just change it to, "Join, join, join." Because I think when people get climate radicalized – or not radicalized, because there's nothing radical about wanting to have a future habitable planet – when people get climate concerned, they just immediately run out and they assume that no one's done anything before and they've got this thing that they've got to do. But usually if you look around, there's like a bunch of other people who are already agitated about that thing too. So you've got to just find those people first because it will make life a lot easier.

Katharine ([41:19](#)):

I love this point that Sarah makes, and it actually reminds me a lot of something that Amanda Suter said. You all heard her in our second episode, and she was describing what was ultimately the linchpin of making this transition from oil and gas work into climate work. And it was the community that she found at the climate education program, Terra.

Amanda Suder ([41:39](#)):

I just found this whole community that supports me, and so I turned back to that community. I turned back to Terra. I reached out to the people within my energy transition class, my oil and gas transition class. I reached out to people within my cohort. I practiced for my interview with the City of LA, my second one, with people that were in my cohort.

Leah ([42:01](#)):

And it's all about relationships at the end of the day, and you make those in the work. We heard that so many times from Sonal Jessel in that campaign for a Gas Free NYC.

Sonal Jessel ([42:12](#)):

I think that the lessons learned from this Gas Free NYC campaign is that getting involved in your local organizations is a really, really powerful way to move the needle on climate action. So whether you have a base building group that is somewhere near where you live doing local work, you can really get heavily, heavily involved. And that's something that we like to do with our members, is they become experts in one or two specific policies that they find really interesting and are along for the ride. When it comes to strategizing, "Where should we hold these rallies? What should we say? Who wants to speak? Who wants to call this council member? Who wants to call that council member?" Having members be really involved I hope was empowering for people, and it really did make a huge difference in passing such a big legislation. And so, across the United States, people can get involved by volunteering with their local community-based environmental organizations and really push for policies through that realm. And also because it's going to be applicable to your everyday life.

Sonal Jessel ([43:25](#)):

This transcript was exported on Oct 04, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

You live in that place, you know it better than anyone else. And you can speak from experience, and that is a very powerful thing.

Katharine ([43:35](#)):

So, what can I do? So much. Should we go through all the things really, really fast, Leah?

Leah ([43:42](#)):

Who can go faster? Rapid round. Ok! Electrify your home.

Katharine ([43:49](#)):

Move your money.

Leah ([43:50](#)):

Push for climate solutions in your workplace.

Katharine ([43:52](#)):

Strike out on your own journey. Find a climate job in need of your skills.

Leah ([43:57](#)):

Vote, door knock, donate, follow up.

Katharine ([43:59](#)):

Join a campaign. Join an organization.

Leah ([44:05](#)):

Woot woot! But I think even more than any of those specific answers, the key thing is to keep asking the question, "What can I do on climate change?"

Katharine ([44:14](#)):

I can't help but think of our friend Rilke, who is a big fan of living the questions themselves. And if we keep living into the question, "What can I do?" We're going to keep getting to different and hopefully better answers over time.

Leah ([44:28](#)):

That question is going to change for different people, different places, different parts of their lives.

Katharine ([44:34](#)):

And I think the thing that happens, Leah, when we keep asking it, and when we ask it, not just alone, but in community, the question itself starts to shift.

Leah ([44:44](#)):

This transcript was exported on Oct 04, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

That's right. It moves from "What can I do?" to "What can we do together?" A Matter of Degrees is co-hosted by me, Dr. Leah Stokes.

Katharine ([44:56](#)):

And me, Dr. Katharine Wilkinson.

Leah ([44:59](#)):

We are a production made in partnership with FRQNCY Media, the 2035 Initiative at UC Santa Barbara, and the All We Can Save project.

Katharine ([45:07](#)):

Thanks to our funders and supporters who make the show possible, Energy Foundation, NorthLight Foundation, McKnight Foundation, Bloomberg Philanthropies, and the 11th Hour project.

Leah ([45:17](#)):

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

Katharine ([45:25](#)):

Jordan Rizzieri is our producer. Catherine Devine is our associate producer. Enna Garkusha is our supervising producer, and Michelle Corey is our executive producer.

Leah ([45:36](#)):

William Cagle and Ellie Katz wrote the script. And Isabel Moncloa Daly and Becca Godwin were script editors. Matthew Ernest Filler is our lead audio engineer, mixer and sound designer. With dialogue editing and additional mixing by Claire Bidigare-Curtis.

Katharine ([45:52](#)):

Rose Wong designed our new show art and Sean Marquand composed our theme song. Additional music came from Blue Dot Sessions.

Leah ([45:59](#)):

Research, fact checking and production support by Amarachi Metu and Daniela Schulman.

Katharine ([46:04](#)):

Come back soon as we tell more stories for the climate curious.

Leah ([46:13](#)):

Whenever we have technical difficulties, me and my friends who do climate work together, we're like, "It's the fossil fuel industry. They're (beep) with us."

Katharine ([46:19](#)):

This transcript was exported on Oct 04, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

That's true.

Leah ([46:22](#)):

They're like, "Reduce her power."

Katharine ([46:23](#)):

Exactly. Exactly.

Leah ([46:24](#)):

"Get her off the internet."