

Climate crisis: do radical climate activists benefit or harm their cause?

What they said...

'If you haven't got millions of eyeballs, you're not in the ballpark of achieving significant societal change.'
Just Stop Oil spokesperson James Skeet

'I feel like even talking about it is giving them airtime they don't deserve because they are just idiots.'
A competitor in the Snooker World Championships, commenting on the disruption caused by Just Stop Oil protesters

On December 22, 2023, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) published a news report claiming a growing number of climate activists in Britain had been referred to an anti-terrorist education program, Prevent. [🔗](#) This is a multi-agency body, involving police and others, intended to prevent potential terrorists 'slipping into criminal activity'. [🔗](#)

This report has been seen by many as an indication of Britain's serious over-reaction to radical climate activists. Others have seen it as a condemnation of these activists and the disruptive protests they have staged.

The effectiveness of radical protests against the growing climate emergency is a question that is being debated around the world, including in Australia, Britain, Europe, and the United States. How governments and the public should respond to these activists is also being discussed.

Background information

Radical climate activism

During 2022 and 2023 images of climate activists throwing canned tomato soup or potato puree on famous paintings displayed in national galleries have appeared in media coverage around the world. These incidents were followed by reports showing activists using superglue to attach themselves to busy roads. More recently, major international sporting competitions have been temporarily disrupted by the actions of climate protesters. This current intensification of media reports of direct-action climate protests comes after decades of previous action that was far less extensively reported.

The adjective 'radical' refers to something which is fundamental or far-reaching. As applied to a climate activist, this is someone who seeks a fundamental or far-reaching re-organisation of the way in which societies or economies are organised so that further harmful changes to the world's climate can be slowed. [🔗](#)

As applied to a climate activist, 'radical' can also refer to the methods the activist uses to alert governments and the public to the need for fundamental social and economic reorganisation. Radical protest is also sometimes described as 'direct action'. This is using physical action to either stop an opposed activity or draw attention to the activist's opposition to that activity. [🔗](#)

Direct action is often disruptive. It can involve people using their bodies, barricades, or a contaminating substance to cause or prevent something happening. It can also involve using collective physical pressure on a target. Tactics such as blockades, strikes, pickets, occupations, or property damage are examples of direct action.

Direct action and violence

Maria DiCenzo, a professor of feminist media at Wilfrid Laurier University, has noted that most of today's climate activists insist on nonviolence, though they are coming into increasing conflict with state authorities. [🔗](#)

Groups such as *Extinction Rebellion* have declared their commitment to 'non-violent civil disobedience ... through creative, artful, sustained, non-violent protests all over the world.' [🔗](#) Just Stop Oil has similarly stated its commitment to 'non-violent civil resistance'. [🔗](#) None of the paintings that have recently been daubed with paint and other substances by *Just Stop Oil* protesters and their imitators seem to have been damaged; however, conservators are examining the Rokeby Venus since its protective glass was smashed with hammers by two Just Stop Oil activists. [🔗](#)

In June 2023, the French government moved to disband the environmental protest group *Les Soulevements de la Terre (SLT)* following an altercation with the police which resulted in both police and protesters sustaining injuries. [↗](#)

Some of the direct-action climate activist groups

Extinction Rebellion - begun in the United Kingdom in 2018; now has local chapters worldwide, including in Australia. It has blockaded major streets in London, including blocking bridges across the Thames. At the end of 2022, it declared that it would adopt more moderate tactics and attempt to build a larger support base. [↗](#)

Just Stop Oil - founded in the United Kingdom in February 2022, began protesting at English oil terminals in April 2022 and then moved to higher-profile locations. [↗](#)

Insulate Britain - founded by six former members of Extinction Rebellion in July 2021. The group began blocking roadways in September 2021, demanding the government insulate all public housing in Britain by 2025. [↗](#)

Climate Defiance - founded in early 2023 in the United States by climate activists, shortly after the Biden administration approved new oil drilling projects. Their first action was to blockade the White House Correspondents' Dinner. [↗](#)

Earth First - founded in the southwestern United States in 1980 and began taking direct protest action in 1988. The group began by focusing on wilderness protection. [↗](#)

Earth Liberation Front (ELF) - a 1992 offshoot of Earth First which also focuses on direct action to protect wilderness. [↗](#)

Last Generation - formed in Germany in 2021, and also active in Italy and France, the group has staged direct non-violent actions including road blockades and using paint to vandalise yachts, famous paintings, buildings, restaurants, and private jets. [↗](#)

Earth Uprisings (Les Soulevements de la Terre - SLT) - an umbrella group of environmental activist organisations in France. In June 2023, the French government outlawed the body, accusing it of promoting violence. [↗](#)

Blockade Australia - formed in November 2021, this direct-action climate protest group has blocked ports and roads in Newcastle and Sydney to protest Australia's fossil fuel industry. [↗](#)

Fireproof Australia - founded in 2022, in response to the Australian government's inadequate preparation for the 2019-20 bushfires in which 18,000 people were displaced. The group has taken direct action, including obstructing traffic on the Sydney Harbour bridge. [↗](#)

The direct-action methods of protest adopted by the climate activists have led to an active debate in society ranging from outright disapproval of these acts to sympathy for the cause but critique of the modes of protest.

Climate activists, on the other hand, have justified their radical modes of protest pointing towards the consequences of inaction for future generations and their disappointment at governments' piecemeal responses to the climate emergency.

Internet information

On December 22, 2023, The Guardian published an opinion piece by Owen Jones titled '2023 was the year governments looked at the climate crisis - and decided to persecute the activists'. Jones argues that governments have deliberately demonised and prosecuted climate activists to remove the pressure on them to address climate change.

The full text of this comment can be accessed at [↗](#)

On December 22, 2023, BBC News published a report titled 'Prevent: Rise in climate activists referred to anti-terror scheme' The report details the increasing number of climate change activists being referred to an anti-terrorist re-education program.

The full text of this article can be accessed at [↗](#)

On December 12, 2023, Waging Nonviolence published an analysis by Sam Light titled 'The method behind Just Stop Oil's madness'. The article examines some of the group's most recent protest actions and suggests the rationale for them.

The full text can be accessed at [The method behind Just Stop Oil's annoying madness | Waging Nonviolence](#)

On November 9, 2023, Le Monde published a news report titled 'Top French court overturns ban on radical

climate activist group'. The article details the ruling of the French Council of State against charges brought against the climate activist group Les Soulèvements de la Terre (SLT) for supposedly having incited violence. The full text of the article can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On October 17, 2023, Green European Journal published a comment and analysis by Stella Levantesi, an Italian climate journalist, photographer, and author. The article is titled "'Enemies of Society': How the Media Portray Climate Activists". Levantesi examines the way in which the media negatively presents climate activists and argues that it is part of a deliberate attempt to discredit them. The full text of the article can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On October 12, 2023, The Guardian published a report titled 'Human rights experts warn against European crackdown on climate protesters'. The article details the actions being taken by British and European governments to curtail the activities of radical climate activities. It also gives the opinions of several human rights experts. The full text can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On October 12, 2023, The Guardian published a report titled 'How criminalisation is being used to silence climate activists across the world'. The report details the way in which governments are drafting new laws to criminalise, fine and arrest climate activists. The full text can be found at [🔗](#)

On October 2, 2023, The Choate News published an opinion piece by Steven Kee titled 'The Hypocritical Vandalism of Radical Climate Activism'. The comment argues that climate activists are taking destructive actions unrelated to their cause and are alienating potential supporters. The full text can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On September 29, 2023, Yes! published a comment and analysis by author and academic Chuck Collins titled 'The Radicalization of Climate Activism', in which he describes and explains the growing radicalisation of international climate activism. The full text can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On September 23, 2023, WNYC Studios broadcast a podcast titled 'The Powerful Think Tanks Portraying Climate Protest as Dangerous'. Produced by Amy Westervelt, the report details the work of think tanks around the world to criminalise climate protest. The podcast can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On September 23, 2023, The Guardian published a profile of a prominent young climate activist whose climate anxiety led him to attempt suicide and who now advocates for a more diverse and mutually supportive form of activism. The profile is titled 'The climate is visiting a mental unravelling on all of us': Charlie Hertzog Young on the dangers of activism - and staying sane on a dying planet'. The full text can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On September 8, 2023, Earth.Org published a comment by political scientist and researcher Alexander Pham. The opinion piece is titled 'Are Climate Activists Reaching Too Far?' Phan argues that the recent radical climate activism is poorly targeted and likely to be either ineffective or counterproductive. The full text can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On September 4, 2023, Forbes published a comment by Nives Dolsak and Aseem Prakash. Both are professors in Sustainability Studies at the University of Washington, Seattle. Their opinion piece is titled 'Vandalizing Museums, Disrupting The Burning Man, And Climate Activism'. They argue that radical climate activists, especially those who target art works, are unlikely to shift either governments or popular opinion toward supporting their views on climate action. The full text of the comment can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On August 14, 2023, Clean Energy Wire published a news report titled 'Fridays for Future criticise radical tactics of Last Generation climate activists' detailing the criticisms being made by the leader of the more moderate climate protesters. She argues that these more extreme actions may lose support. The full text can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On May 4, 2023, The Conversation published a comment by Andrew Matthew Macdonald, a PhD candidate at the University of York whose topic is the effectiveness of youth climate activism. The opinion piece is titled 'Climate change protest: a single radical gets more media coverage than thousands of marchers'. Macdonald explains the reasons for activists adopting more extreme forms of protest and argues that these demonstrations may become more radical.

The full text of the comment can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On May 3, 2023, Politico published a news report titled 'Germany's top Green slams radical climate protesters'. The report details the criticisms that Robert Habeck, Germany's vice chancellor and economy minister (also a prominent supporter of climate action) has made of the disruptive protests staged by Last Generation.

The full text can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On April 24, 2023, the London School of Economics published a comment and analysis by Alessio Terzi titled 'The power and limits of radical activism against climate change'.

The article assesses the strengths and limitations of the current radical climate protest movements and places them in an historical context.

The full text can be accessed at [🔗](#)

Waging Nonviolence is a nonprofit media organization which aims to provide original reporting and expert analysis of social movements around the world.

On November 18, 2022, The Daily Wildcat published an analysis and comment by Sophie Applin titled 'Is radical climate activism effective?' The article considers whether radical climate activism is an appropriate means of raising community consciousness of climate issues.

The full text can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On September 11, 2022, On June 4, 2022, the German news media outlet Deutsche Welle (DW) published an analysis by Elizabeth Schumacher titled 'Should 'radical' climate activism be penalized?' The article examines the responses taken by the German government in response to radical climate activists.

The full text can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On July 7, 2022, The Conversation published a comment by Rob Jubb, Associate Professor of Political Theory, University of Reading and Alex McLaughlin, Research Associate in Existential Risk, University of Cambridge. The article is titled 'Climate activism has so far been fairly peaceful: here's why that might change'.

The authors argue that worsen climatic and social conditions might lead some climate activists to take more violent action.

The full text can be accessed at [🔗](#)

On June 4, 2022, the German news media outlet Deutsche Welle (DW) published an analysis by Alistair Walsh titled 'Disruptive climate protests - do they help or hinder?' The article examines the different types of direction action employed by radical climate activists and considers their relative effectiveness.

The full text can be accessed at [🔗](#)

Radical climate activists benefit their cause

1. The climate situation is critical and more moderate action has been ignored

Those who support or defend climate activists' use of more extreme forms of protest argue that these measures are being adopted because more moderate measures have not succeeded. They argue that the climate catastrophe is now so urgent that more moderate and, so far, unsuccessful appeals to governments, corporations and communities should be abandoned.

It is claimed that extreme protest is employed only as a last resort, after more restrained protest action had been ignored. Governments and corporations are accused of paying no attention to moderate protests and making decisions based on their own economic self-interest. Guardian columnist and author Nesrine Malik claims, 'Protests happen in the first place because the "proper channels" have failed... When Extinction Rebellion occupies central London, you don't see the...corporate lobbyists, complacent politicians, indifferent bureaucrats...that marginalised these concerns for so long that activists knew there was no other way.' Malik

explains that protesters need to act outside conventional channels because they are usually closed out of the centres of power where significant policy choices effecting climate are made. She writes, 'The very nature of being excluded from the spaces in which decisions are made means that the process of managing grievances is already rigged against you.' [🔗](#) Kate Yoder, news editor at Grist, a nonprofit environmental news site, has stated, 'Many activists feel that more conventional means of protesting won't bring results. A phenomenon called the "activist's dilemma" illustrates the problem. Protesters often have to choose between moderate actions that are easily ignored or more extreme actions that might alienate the public.' [🔗](#)

Many protesters believe that the climate crisis is so urgent that they cannot continue to employ restrained measures that have not worked in the past. A Tyre Extinguisher activist has explained, 'It isn't fun: I hate disrupting people's lives, and it's upsetting that it's come to this. But it has come to this. We feel that nothing else will work - we don't have any more time for letters or marches or waiting for more elections. We've had those strategies for 30 years and they're not working. It's time to shake things up.' [🔗](#) (Tyre Extinguishers is an international climate direct action group which deflates the tyres on sport utility vehicles as a protest against the excessive petrol consumption these vehicles are claimed to represent.) This sense of urgency and the lack of other viable protest options is seen in the same activist's comment, 'The UN says we're 'firmly on track for an unlivable world'; our leaders are making it worse; they're still expanding our emissions because that's where the money is. And it's not future generations that will pay the price, not anymore - it's us, it's happening now. Millions are already dying from extreme weather, crop failure, war, and this is just the start. Now it's the only thing I ever think about: it shapes every decision I make. I'll do whatever works, and if that means upsetting people, then that's where we are.' [🔗](#)

Many scientific bodies have stressed the failure of governments world-wide to adequately address the climate emergency. On March 31, 2022, the Australian Climate Council stated, 'Climate change is accelerating, and Australia's overall contribution to this crisis has substantially increased... Since 2013, fossil fuel production has expanded by 19 percent with a negligible reduction in our national emissions. Delaying action has not made the problem go away. It has only shortened the time we have to reduce emissions to avoid catastrophic outcomes and made it harder to do so.' [🔗](#) Similar comments have been made regarding Britain's failure to address climate change strongly enough. On June 28, 2023, Lord Deben, the head of Britain's Climate Change Committee, highlighted that the previous 12 months was 'the UK's warmest year on record'. He condemned the government for its 'failure to act decisively in response to the energy crisis'. He also stated, 'Inaction has been compounded by continuing support for further unnecessary investment in fossil fuels.' He concluded, 'Our children will not forgive us if we leave them a world of withering heat and devastating storms where sea level rises and extreme temperatures force millions to move because their countries are no longer habitable. None of us can avoid our responsibility. Delay is not an option.' [🔗](#)

Commentators and researchers have noted that an increasing sense of crisis is promoting activists to take more extreme action and that this trend is likely to increase as the consequences of climate change become more severe. In July 2023, Dana Fisher, senior researcher with the Brookings Institute in Washington stated, 'As the climate crisis worsens and more and more concerned activists lose confidence that institutional politics can address the problem, the radical flank will grow...For those who believe they can stop this wave of confrontational activism by prosecuting one group or imprisoning one activist, think again.' [🔗](#) In September 2023, Fisher paraphrased the views of radical climate protesters: "'We tried going to a legally permitted march, we tried carrying signs, we tried going to our elected officials' offices.'" And I can tell you from data I've collected that they do all of those things. And what they'll say is, it doesn't work. It's not gotten the attention. It hasn't helped change the conversation.' [🔗](#) The urgent message some of the current radical protesters are offering was stated by a Just Stop Oil activist, who had taken part in vandalising a work by Vermeer in The Hague. He stated, 'How do you feel when you see something beautiful and priceless apparently being destroyed before your eyes? Do you feel outraged? Good. Where is that feeling when you see the planet being destroyed?' [🔗](#)

2. Radical climate activism succeeds in attracting media, public and government attention

Radical climate activists argue that their first aim is to attract media attention and, as a result, government and public attention. They claim that their more extreme actions have succeeded in making them a focus of media attention.

The term 'media hype' once used to refer to a particular episode that was made the focus of intense and sustained media attention not justified by its significance. Originally the driving force for this hyperbolic or exaggerated media blitz was the media itself, usually seeking readers, viewers, and advertising revenue. The

independent academic publisher IGI Global defines this type of 'media hype' as 'a deliberate and sustained effort of the mass media to exaggerate a particular subject in order to get audience attention...' [↗](#) In December 2005, the European Journal of Communication similarly referred to 'media hype' as 'self-inflating media coverage'. [↗](#) More recently, however, it has been recognised that the subject of the media attention, in this case radical climate protesters, are actively seeking the media attention they receive. Groups such as Just Stop Oil stage disruptive protests at events that they regard as 'culturally relevant' because this will attract media attention. They stage protests at events that the public considers important and that automatically gain them publicity. The group says its reason for targeting sporting events is to raise awareness of the climate crisis and to prompt action to stop new oil, coal and gas licences being issued. Protesting at events that are televised ensures a ready-made audience. [↗](#)

Radical climate activists have adopted a range of strategies to attract widespread media attention. On April 17, 2023, the Snooker World Championships being played in London were disrupted when two Just Stop Oil activists infiltrated the competition, and one poured a yellow powder over a snooker table. Just Stop Oil chose this event because of the wide international audience it draws. The final of the competition was watched by a television audience of 3.6 million. [↗](#) The BBC was covering the competition and continued to telecast the protest as it occurred. A BBC spokesperson noted, 'We reacted as quickly as possible during the live snooker broadcast and, just like other national news outlets, decided to cover [the Just Stop Oil protest action] as a news story across the BBC to keep audiences informed.' The BBC subsequently also posted the coverage on their social media channels. [↗](#) Just Stop Oil spokesperson, James Skeet, has claimed that the snooker disruption 'made the front page of every major newspaper'. [↗](#)

In Britain over the course of 2022-23, Just Stop Oil has disrupted a series of sporting events with worldwide audiences. The English rugby union Premiership final at Twickenham was delayed by 20 minutes after two male protestors invaded the pitch and threw orange paint on it. The second cricket Test match between England and Australia at Lord's - the most prestigious cricket venue in the world - was interrupted when two men ran onto the field, clad in white T-shirts displaying the same message, 'Just Stop Oil', and attempted to throw orange powder over the wicket. In the first week of the Wimbledon tennis championships, orange paper petals were thrown over the court during a match between Katie Boulter, the British women's No 1, and Daria Saville, as well as the men's tie between 21st seed Grigor Dimitrov and Sho Shimabukuro. Many millions of people witnessed these events. [↗](#)

Radical climate activists have similarly attacked other cultural icons unrelated to sport to draw a different but equally wide audience. Two activists from Just Stop Oil entered London's National Gallery and covered Constable's painting 'The Hay Wain' with an image of environmental destruction before gluing their hands to the frame and awaiting arrest. Another pair of activists went to the National Gallery and threw tomato soup at Vincent van Gogh's 'Sunflowers.' In the Netherlands, one activist glued his head to Johannes Vermeer's 'Girl with a Pearl Earring,' while another poured something red over him. In Vienna, members of Last Generation, an organisation named to make the point that we are the last generation able to prevent catastrophic climate change, poured black oily liquid over Gustav Klimt's 'Death and Life.' And in Potsdam, others smeared mashed potatoes onto Claude Monet's 'Haystacks.' [↗](#) All these actions are intended to draw media coverage and public attention. They are intended to outrage people. Radical climate activists claim that public attention is the first step on the path to raising public awareness of the urgency of the climate crisis. Most activists believe that public awareness will then lead to government, corporate and private action to address the crisis. Just Stop Oil spokesperson James Skeet has stated, 'What we're attempting to do is force the issue to the forefront of public consciousness, and up the media agenda. If you haven't got millions of eyeballs, you're not in the ballpark of achieving significant societal change.' [↗](#)

Moderate, peaceful climate protests are far less successful in gaining media coverage. In an article published on October 4, 2023, Kara Anderson writing for Greenly noted, 'The fact of the matter is that peaceful climate protests are no longer headline-grabbing, and civil disobedience tends to attract more public attention.' [↗](#) [↗](#) As an example of this occurred shortly after Just Stop Oil staged its widely covered protest at the Snooker World Championships. Extinction Rebellion (XR) held four days of peaceful protest in central London attracting an estimated 60,000 people. XR received front page coverage only twice over the period of the peaceful protests and each of these front-page reports was negative. There was very little television coverage. [↗](#)

3. Radical climate activists have been misrepresented; they are rational and informed

It has been argued that radical climate activists are environmentally knowledgeable, have logical policy positions, diverse backgrounds, and are deliberately misrepresented by their opponents and many media outlets.

Defenders of radical climate activists claim that despite their often-disruptive protests, they are not, as their critics frequently maintain, 'completely crazy'. [A 2020 study](#) conducted by British and Danish researchers noted the environmental knowledge and the policy sophistication of radical climate protest groups. The researchers found that radical groups actively engaged with climate policy dilemmas and made policy choices which prioritised the measures most likely to effectively reduce greenhouse gas emissions. [For example](#), Insulate Britain has been noted as a radical climate activist group showing practical knowledge of measures which would reduce the United Kingdom's emissions. The group has blocked major roadways in support of its demands that the government fund insulation in all social housing by 2025 and retrofit insulation in all other inadequately insulated homes by 2030. Though the group's protest actions have been condemned, its demands have received widespread endorsement from climate change authorities in Britain and Europe. A September 2022 report from the Institute for Government found homes in the United Kingdom to be less energy-efficient than those in Europe. [Jan Rosenow](#), the European director of the clean energy think tank, the Regulatory Assistance Project, has stated that other countries, including Germany and France, have longstanding government-funded programs in place to support retrofitting and improving home insulation. He claims, 'It works in other countries.' [A](#)

Defenders of radical climate activists also note that they are a diverse group that have among them many educated and experienced people. Many young people with varied backgrounds are members of radical climate action groups, drawing on their passion and concern for the future to motivate their actions. However, studies in the United States have found that radical environmental activists are a more mixed group than the media's 'young activist' stereotype suggests. In America, radical environmental activists are predominantly female (61 percent) and educated (33 percent have completed masters or doctorate degrees). Most are middle-aged, with an average age of 52; 25 percent are 69 or older. [Older people](#) also figure prominently among Australia's radical climate activists. On September 16, 2023, the ABC published a report on the part played by older people taking direct action in climate protests. One of those interviewed was Alan Glover, a 62-year-old volunteer firefighter who, in April 2022, used a firetruck to block part of the Sydney Harbour Bridge in a protest staged by Fireproof Australia. Glover has stated, 'My background as a firefighter is important because I'm not speaking from a place of ignorance, I'm coming from a place of great knowledge and hands-on experience. That's a very important thing about who I am and why I'm speaking up.' [Another group](#), the Knitting Nannas, now an international organisation, was founded over ten years ago, in 2012, in opposition to gas mining in New South Wales. Its members have been climate activists for all the subsequent decade. [All are middle-aged women and older](#). The Knitting Nannas have been involved in road blockades and other direct action; however, they refuse to have their actions cast by the media as 'extreme'. Their 'Nannafesto' states, 'The Knitting Nannas aims are to bring attention to the issues surrounding unsustainable resource exploitation; to show the people, the media, the politicians, and the exploiters just how far from radical the "extremists" who oppose their practices are.' [A pair of British researchers](#) drew the following conclusions about the climate activists they studied: 'They are typically well-informed about the climate and ecological crisis: they have read peer-reviewed scientific papers, listened to respected scientists, and acknowledged changes happening in the environment. They are engaged and aware. They look beyond the mainstream headlines and are mindful of the largely unreported consequences of climate change unfolding across the globe.' [A](#)

Defenders of radical climate activists claim that the most common tactic used against direct-action climate protesters is to present them as 'insane' or 'idiots'. The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) has analysed the language being used by British and European media. ISD found 'climate hysterics' to be the most prominent anti-climate activism narrative among the 8,698 media stories it looked at, published between 1 November and 15 December 2022. Mocking language of this kind included descriptions of 'idiots', 'freaks' or 'nuts'. When climate activists focused on museums and art galleries towards the end of 2022 references to the protesters being 'hysterical' became more common. Alternative outlet InfoWars used 'More Idiots Allowed to Damage Priceless Art...' in its coverage of Last Generation throwing flour on an Andy Warhol work in Milan. French-language mainstream outlet BFMTV referred to the protests as 'une explosion de crétins' (an explosion of morons). [A](#)

Defenders of radical climate activists also note that these protesters and their actions are frequently

demonised or falsely reported by their opponents and the media with a strong emphasis placed not just on their 'insanity' but on the danger they represent to ordinary people. A recent study of media representations of radical climate activists in Germany, the United Kingdom and Italy found the actions of these groups were generally heightened and cast negatively. Jennie King, Head of Climate Research and Policy at the non-profit Institute for Strategic Dialogue, noted the protesters were presented as threats to civil order and in some cases as a 'security threat'. Over the period of the study, some 400 headlines described the activists as a 'security threat'. Among other terms used to depict the protesters as violent and dangerous were 'sociopaths', 'vandals', 'eco-anarchists', 'fear mongers' and 'fanatics'. It has been claimed that the media frequently tends to adopt these antagonistic and polarising terms because they add to the drama of the story and help to attract readers.



Governments and others who oppose the demands of the protesters for climate action, often also deliberately exaggerate the risks to public order that the demonstrators' actions present. Giancarlo Sturloni, communications director at Greenpeace Italy, has noted that false claims and negative language can be used to fuel the perception that these are 'violent' groups and are, ultimately, 'enemies of society'. In Britain, in October 2022, The Sun and the Daily Mail reported that two Just Stop Oil protesters who shut down the Queen Elizabeth II Bridge in East London for two days had prevented ambulances from quickly responding to an incident on the M20 in which two women died. The ambulance service has since stated that its crew was not delayed and arrived at the crash - which was more than 10 miles from the protest - 'well before' the 40 minutes reported by the newspapers. A spokesperson also pointed out that an air ambulance attended the scene. A similar false claim was made by New South Wales Police who pressed charges against Fireproof Australia activists for obstructing an ambulance when they took part in a protest action that blocked the Sydney Harbour Bridge. The sentencing magistrate rejected this 'false fact' and New South Wales Police subsequently withdrew the allegation that the four climate change protesters had obstructed an ambulance, acknowledging that the claim was inaccurate.

4. Some radical climate activists have succeeded in having governments begin to act on their demands

Those who support radical climate protests argue that they are beginning to be effective in compelling some governments to take action to reduce the effects of climate change. Those who hold this view argue that by disrupting citizens' lives, some radical protest groups can force governments to agree to their demands. Currently, the mechanism by which they are effective appears to be that the radical group makes relatively moderate demands that governments can meet. Some governments have chosen to acquiesce so the disruption will cease.

Germany is a key example of a country where radical climate protests are beginning to affect governments' actions. The primary radical climate protest group in Germany is Last Generation. The organisation was founded in August 2021, when a group of seven climate activists, frustrated by the slow progress on reducing carbon emissions in Germany, set up tents in Berlin's seat of government, the Regierungsviertel, and began a hunger strike. After unsuccessful negotiations between hunger strikers and Germany's next Chancellor, in January 2022, Last Generation began blocking roads in Berlin. Last Generation's first wave of protests in Berlin lasted five weeks. The organisation recorded 69 blockades, 254 arrests, and over 100 cumulative hours in police custody. Protests by Last Generation in Germany greatly increased in number and impact throughout 2022. Activists repeatedly disturbed inner city traffic by gluing themselves to the asphalt, or startled museum visitors by covering exhibition pieces with washable paint and other substances.

Despite the disturbance caused by its actions, Last Generation has deliberately presented national and local governments with modest climate demands - a 100 km/h speed limit on motorways; a -9 (\$14.50 AUD) public transport monthly ticket; a citizens' council to plan how to scrap fossil fuels by 2030. Hanover, the state capital of Lower Saxony with a population of more than half a million people, was the first major city to strike a deal with Last Generation. Smaller towns, such as Marburg, followed Hanover's example. A ZDF survey found that more than half of the people in Germany (55 percent) support brokering deals with the activists. German government attitudes toward the demands of Last Generation seem to be softening. The 9- a month public transport ticket was introduced by the German government for three months during the summer of 2022 to relieve the German population from high energy, food, and transport prices, and it was used by over 52 million people. Studies have shown that this strategy of coupling highly disruptive protest with demands to government that are relatively easy to achieve has proved to be successful.

Britain's Extinction Rebellion (XR) has some similar demands which are beginning to influence current and

potential governments. Extinction Rebellion is demanding that the British government 'must tell the truth by declaring a climate and ecological emergency.' It is also demanding that government's give truthful and accurate statements of their progress toward emission reductions. Finally, it wants the creation of citizens' assemblies to guide climate policy and action. There has begun to be some limited action toward the achievement of these demands. [🔗](#) In January 2019, Oxford City Council became the first UK local authority to establish a citizens' assembly to help address the issue of climate change and consider the measures that should be taken in Oxford. City Council members unanimously declared a climate emergency and agreed to create a citizens' assembly in Oxford to help consider new carbon targets and additional strategies to reduce emissions. The Oxford City Council is commissioning research to develop options and timescales for carbon reduction in areas such as housing and transport, which will be put to the citizens' assembly. The citizens' assembly will involve a randomly-selected representative sample of Oxford residents. [🔗](#) The British Labour Party has also spoken in support of Extinction Rebellion. Jon Ashworth, the shadow health secretary, has pledged to make climate change a central focus of Labour's health and wellbeing policy and expressed his support for a citizens' assembly. [🔗](#) In 2020, both France and Britain held citizen assemblies to advise government on the framing of climate policies. [🔗](#)

5. Radical climate activists can change attitudes to the climate crisis and create acceptance for more moderate campaigners

It has been claimed that though some governments may refuse to negotiate with radical climate activists and many members of the public may disapprove of their demonstrations, these protesters can succeed in creating wider acceptance of their views.

It has been found that the public does not turn against proposals to solve a social or environmental issue because they dislike the radical actions of protesters. This has been demonstrated by several groups of researchers. Social Change Lab, a group of international researchers, conducted a survey to gauge the effect of Just Stop Oil's disruptive campaign in April 2022. They found high levels of awareness (over 60 percent of the British public had heard of the campaign); however, support for Just Stop Oil as an organization fell across three surveys, leading to only 18.1 percent of respondents saying they supported the Just Stop Oil protests. Despite this, they found no reduction in support for the climate policies backed by Just Stop Oil, or any reduction in the belief that climate change is a global emergency. [🔗](#)

Historical studies looking at the impact of radical, non-violent protest have found other more positive effects. One of these is 'agenda seeding', that is, the high-profile protests increase the visibility of the issue and help to put it on the agenda or action plan of governments, political oppositions, and other organisations. These other organisations can be very varied and may include investor groups, corporations more generally, education bodies including schools and universities, non-government organisations, cultural groups, churches, and civic groups. These groups all have the capacity to influence both governments and public opinion. Omar Wasow, a professor in UC Berkeley's Department of Political Science, has found that nonviolent direct action during the United States 1960-1972 civil rights movement positively influenced public opinion, media coverage and congressional discussion of civil rights. [🔗](#)

Radical, non-violent protest can also help to shift the language used to discuss issues. Groups such as Extinction Rebellion have it as part of their agenda that the way the world talks and thinks about the climate must change. Their first demand is 'Tell the truth. Governments must tell the truth by declaring a climate and ecological emergency, working with other institutions to communicate the urgency for change.' [🔗](#) The actions of climate change activists are intended to make the public and governments recognise the urgency of the threat the world faces. Alan Glover, a 62-year-old climate activist who is part of Fireproof Australia used taking part in a blockade of Sydney Harbour Bridge to promote the idea of an emergency. He told ABC reporters, 'I have known for decades about climate change, global warming, or whatever term you want to use. Now "the climate emergency" is the appropriate one, because we should be on a war footing. This is not a joke.' [🔗](#)

The activists' actions appear to be changing language and thinking. Several juries around the world have rejected charges of criminal activity against climate activists because they have accepted the 'climate emergency' as a 'necessity' defence justifying the activists' actions. In 2018, a United States judge downgraded the charges against pipeline protesters to civil infractions and then found them not responsible based on the necessity of their actions. [🔗](#) A British peer, Lord Deben, head of a climate change advisory committee reporting to the British government, has similarly accepted the urgency argument put by climate

activists. Defending the position of climate activists, Deben urged the government to treat climate change as an emergency. [↗](#)

Another more subtle way that radical tactics can support the goals of an overall movement is by a mechanism called 'the radical flank effect'. This refers to the way radical tactics, such as those employed by Just Stop Oil or Last Generation, can increase support for more moderate groups within the climate movement, such as Friends of the Earth. It is speculated that when the public is exposed to a group whose protest actions seem particularly extreme (a radical flank), supporting more moderate groups seems quite reasonable in comparison. The difference is usually more apparent than real as moderate, and 'more extreme' groups generally have similar policy agendas. The distinction lies in the way the radical group goes about drawing attention to an issue. [↗](#)

Research published in 2022 by academics working out of the University of South Carolina, Sandford University and the University of Toronto substantiates the existence of a 'radical flank effect.' The results of two online experiments conducted with diverse samples, including a study of the animal rights movement and the climate movement, showed that the presence of a radical flank increases support for a moderate faction within the same movement. Further, it is the use of radical tactics, such as property destruction, rather than a radical agenda, that drives this effect. These results suggest that activist groups that employ unpopular tactics can increase support for other groups within the same movement, pointing to a hidden way in which movement factions are complementary, with the more extreme actions of one group advancing the agenda of the more moderate group. [↗](#)

Radical climate activists harm their cause

1. Radical climate activists alienate many potential supporters

Critics of radical climate activist groups have argued that their disruptive and confrontational protest strategies have alienated both the general public and supporters who might otherwise join these groups.

It has been claimed that the prospect of confrontation with police and appearing before the courts with the possibility of fines or imprisonment has prevented some potential supporters from becoming active members of radical climate activist groups. In January 2023, Marijn van de Geer, the media director of Britain's Extinction Rebellion indicated that the group was temporarily shifting away from disruptive protests in 2023 to draw in more supporters including those who would be afraid of getting arrested. The climate group's radical protests have included activists gluing themselves to public buildings and roads, blocking newspaper deliveries, smashing windows, and spraying fake blood on government buildings. Van de Geer said the group realized their activism turned away less 'privileged' supporters who were wary of the police. Van de Geer stated, 'As a White middle-class person in a quite privileged position my experience with arrest has been fairly normal, but there are people from other backgrounds who might have a very different experience and who have very different association with getting arrested. They are, with our tactics, automatically excluded from joining us on the street.' [↗](#) Among the groups that are particularly vulnerable to arrest and possible deportation through taking part in radical climate protests are those who are not permanent British citizens. One former activist who has lived in the United Kingdom for four years since the age of 18 and is Russian born, revealed to interviewers that 'I made the decision to put my direct-action ambitions on hold while my personal geopolitical security is in the hands of the Home Office.' [↗](#)

Critics have also claimed that the disruptive actions of radical climate activists are losing them the support of not only potential new active members but of the public as a whole. In April 2023, this claim was made about the German radical activist group, Last Generation, by more moderate German climate activists. Green parliamentary group leader Irene Mihalic said Last Generation's 'elitist and self-righteous protest achieves the opposite of what we need in the current situation.' Mihalic further asserted, 'The activist group undermines social unity regarding climate action and alienates people by making their already difficult everyday life even more difficult.' Other critics have stated that Last Generation has become notorious for its repeated acts of disruptive civil disobedience, such as blocking roads during rush hours. The more moderate German climate activist group Fridays for Future which is comprised substantially of students and was founded in Sweden by Greta Thunberg has condemned Last Generation. Fridays for Future has managed to generate broad societal support for stronger climate action with peaceful street protests led by school students. A Fridays for Future spokesperson, Annika Rittmann, has claimed that the more radical climate activist group has set 'people against each other.' She has also argued that tackling the climate crisis 'requires solutions that include all of society - and we will only find and agree on them together.' [↗](#)

Those who oppose radical activists protesting through actions like blocking roads claim that such protests only serve to anger ordinary commuters and effectively punish them while not putting pressure on the governments whose policies the protesters want to change. Critics claim that these protests frustrate and irritate those who are their misplaced victims. In October 2019 an Extinction Rebellion protester was hauled off the roof of an underground train in London at Canning Town tube station by irate commuters. The man was then attacked and had to be rescued by London Underground staff. [↗](#) In December 2021, Last Generation protesters blocking roads in Rome were attacked by motorists. Protesters claim they were slapped, kicked, and spat at by angry drivers after they assembled along the Maglianella viaduct on the A90 motorway. [↗](#) Similar scenes have occurred in Australia where Sydney motorists were photographed hauling protesters off a road they were blocking. The then New South Wales premier Dominic Perrottet advised the protesters, 'If you really want to lose support in the community for your cause, keep acting like that.' [↗](#)



Critics claim that such negative public responses to radical activists show that their protests are counterproductive. Robert Habeck, Germany's vice chancellor and economy minister (and also a prominent supporter of climate action) has criticised the disruptive protests staged by Last Generation. He claims they are 'not only unhelpful, but downright wrong.' He accuses Last Generation and other radical climate activists of forgetting that they live in democracies and cannot afford to alienate voters. He states, 'In a democracy it's always about creating majorities. And that is recognizably not the case [here].' [↗](#) Survey results published in July 2023, suggest that Germans' support for the climate movement has halved following the rise of highly controversial street blockades by more radical activists. The conductors of the survey, More in Common Germany, claim, 'All parts of society are much more critical of the climate movement today than they were two years ago - it has not gained or maintained ground with anyone... It seems to many that the most important point is that it is not right to want to hit citizens directly in their everyday lives with actions.' More in Common Germany suggests that street blockades have the capacity to split the protest movement off from the support base it is supposedly seeking. They state, 'Once a culture war gets going on the basis of false or unnecessary antagonisms - such as the supposed dividing line between activists on the one hand and commuting workers on the other - it can sweep away the . . . climate protection potential that exists in people's minds.' [↗](#)


2. Radical climate activists divert attention from the issues they are supposedly promoting




Critics of radical climate activists claim that their actions are confronting and confusing and tend to divert media attention toward the protest itself rather than the cause the activists are intending to advance.

It has been claimed that many people do not recognise what current protests have to do with addressing the climate crisis. Some members of the public are confounded by the nature of the actions being taken. When Extinction Rebellion staged a series of disruptive demonstrations in the London Underground many commuters could not understand the rationale of the protest. Some were quoted expressing their confusion at electric transport being targeted by a group whose prime objective was to stop the use of fossil fuels. One commuter was reported asking a protester, 'Is an electric train good or not? Is this train good for the environment?' [↗](#) Similarly, people do not understand what interrupting major sporting competitions has to do with making a statement about the climate crisis. Many people see no connection between the protest action and the cause being promoted and so actively reject what has been done. This was shown when two Just Stop Oil activists disrupted the Snooker World Championships. One of the competitors commented, 'I feel like even talking about it is giving them airtime they don't deserve because they are just idiots. What are they trying to gain from what they have done?' [↗](#) A lack of clear focus and purpose is a frequent criticism made of sports-related climate protests. In April 2023, Last Generation disrupted the E-Prix in Berlin. Some of the drivers were left confused as to why the protesters chose an electric race to raise their concerns. Porsche's Antonio Felix da Costa stated, 'I think we are all fighting for the same, right? I'm not sure what they are trying to do because we are probably the worst category in motorsport for them to come and do this at. We are by far the most ecological, sustainable, and net zero series that ever existed.' [↗](#)

A major criticism of radical activist protests is that the protest itself becomes the focus of attention. Attacks made on art works become news events because of the potential to harm valuable and famous cultural icons. Media coverage focuses on what was done rather than why the action was taken. There may be some discussion of whether the action was appropriate, but the issue the activists were seeking to promote is generally not covered. This point was made on November 3, 2022, by Nikhil Kamath writing in the Indian opinion and current affairs publication YKA. He stated, 'If you pick up any media coverage on such acts, you



will see more mentions of how an artwork or public property was defaced and how the public stood against them. Such reports carry maybe one or two lines mentioning that the act was a protest against the climate crisis. It only dilutes the cause many are fighting for, putting climate action in a bad light.'  The same point was made by a student commentator, Angelina Padilla-Tompkins, whose opinion was published in Northern Star through Northern Illinois University. Padilla-Tompkins wrote, 'Reporters and readers are not talking about climate change or how to solve the issue. Instead, they discuss how bizarre the activists are acting and how individuals should not attempt to destroy classic art pieces.' 



Jonathan Jones, who writes on art for The Guardian, has explained further that such attacks are a dangerous distraction and are not advancing an informed discussion of the climate emergency. Jones states, 'Attacking "iconic" art gets attention and purportedly causes a debate. Yet, the only debate here is one about protest. I am yet to see evidence of renewed thought or sensitivity about the climate crisis. Instead, they spawn articles...about the rights and wrongs of the act. Dramatic gestures in museums do not express and heal the pain of the planet, collective action does. That has to be based on democratic agreement, not coercion by a man with a petrol bomb standing by Picasso's Guernica. Which is where we appear to be heading.' 

The concern is that the nature of these radical protests is beginning to overwhelm or obscure their message. Sofia Phillips, writing for Medium, explained, 'Simply put ... people are now beginning to associate activism with sensationalism and theatre, instead of optimism and passion. In their opinion, protests should be directed towards the systems of power that cause injustice, rather than targeting something precious which offers a momentary escape from reality.'  Similarly, Marsha Lederman, writing for The Globe and Mail, has noted, 'The issue needs to be addressed in a way that doesn't overshadow the point. Has this led to meaningful conversation about the climate catastrophe? Or just a bunch of finger-pointing at these Gen-Z activists who are being painted as having no respect for fine art and the institutions that preserve it?'  The distracting effect of these protests was summed up by Steve Kee in an opinion piece published in The Choate News on October 2, 2023. Kee stated, 'It's difficult for people to empathize with activists when they're disrupting, scaring, and irritating society. To the general population, vandalizing paintings and gluing people to cars are unrelated to climate change; they only make these protests appear irrational and unreasonable.' 

3. Radical climate activist groups have a potential for violence that will further reduce their support

Some of those who object to radical climate activists are concerned about their potential for violence that may become more extreme as they seek greater media attention and influence on governments. Several critics claim that the use of violence by activists reduces support for their cause.

Social commentators note that many climate activists appear to be motivated by anger and frustration. Three psychologists at the Norwegian Research Center and the University of Bergen's Norway Center for Climate and Energy Transformation have found, via survey, that the chief motivating factor that gets people to participate in climate activism is anger. In their study, reported in the journal *Global Environmental Change*, Thea Gregersen, Gisle Andersen and Endre Tvinnereim, surveyed more than 2,000 Norwegian adults about their feelings regarding climate activism related to slowing climate change.  Commentators have suggested that being motivated by anger was likely to lead to growing extremism. Similarly, numerous climate activists have shown a mounting frustration with traditional forms of protest and have declared a need for more extreme measures. Indigo Rumbelow, a Just Stop Oil activist, has stated, 'I've tried all the conventional main means of creating change - I've had meetings with my MP, I've signed petitions, I've participated in public consultations, I've organised and taken part in marches. The conventional ways of making change are done.' From a related perspective, Marion Walker, spokesperson for the Tyre Extinguishers, has claimed, 'We want to live in towns and cities with clean air and safe streets. Politely asking and protesting for these things has failed.' 

Critics note that some radical climate groups appear prepared to place others at risk through their actions. Although groups such as Just Stop Oil have a declared position of 'non-violent civil resistance'  this appears only to mean not deliberately harming people or causing what they regard as unnecessary destruction. The group disputes claims that their road blockades have delayed ambulances and caused deaths. They also claim that they have a policy of moving to let ambulances with blue lights through. However, they have stated 'nevertheless, we accept that our actions do cause disruption.' The implication seems to be that some unintended deaths may occur.  Other groups have shown a greater readiness to possibly endanger lives. The German climate activist group, Last Generation, part of the international A22 network that includes Just Stop Oil, claims to have sabotaged 30 fuel pipelines across Germany in the spring of 2022. The group showed a preparedness to adopt extreme measures to achieve their objectives. Its spokesperson, Lars Werner, stated,

'We asked ourselves, what can we do to really put pressure on the government to give us a reaction towards our demands?' The only reason the group later reverted to its previous strategy of blocking roads was that neither the government nor the gas corporations reacted to the disruption of the pipelines and the sabotage attracted little media coverage. Werner stated, 'The government could ignore what we were doing because there wasn't much attention.' [German prosecutors are investigating the group for closing a valve on the Transalpine Pipeline in Bavaria and staging a disruptive protest at a refinery in Brandenburg.](#) [Interfering with fuel supplies is seen as potentially endangering lives.](#) [In May 2023, French riot police used tear gas and pepper spray against hundreds of climate activists seeking to block shareholders from accessing Total Energies' annual shareholder meeting. This is one of several violent interactions between climate activists and police that have occurred recently in France, some of which have involved injuries on both sides.](#)

Some commentators have observed that radical climate activists' attacks on famous artworks show an increase in violence. Initially almost all the paintings which were daubed with paint or food were being displayed behind glass and generally the only damage that was done occurred to frames when protesters stuck themselves to them. [However, the nature of these attacks seems to be shifting. Jonathan Jones, art writer for the Guardian, has described a recent attack in which protesters for Last Generation Austria smeared 'non-toxic fake oil' all over the glass covering Gustav Klimt's 'Death and Life'. Jones notes, 'The aggression of the attack takes this wave of action a step further than tomato soup on Vincent van Gogh's Sunflowers and mashed potato on a Monet.'](#) Jones argues that this protest comes significantly closer to threatening to damage the piece. www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/nov/16/klimt-climate-activists-crisis-petrol-picasso In November 2023, two activists from the group Just Stop Oil targeted Velázquez's 'The Toilet of Venus,' also known as 'The Rokeby Venus,' with small hammers. Photographs showed the protective glass panel punctured with several holes. Conservators were reported to be assessing any damage. Ben Davis, Artnet News's national art critic, has speculated that if activists are seeking to shock, they are going to have to begin taking more extreme action in order to keep attracting attention. He states, 'But because these actions are based on shocking people into paying attention, the campaign has only two ways to go-to peter out as the media begins to treat them as PR stunts, or to escalate to keep up the momentum.' [Some climate activists have confirmed Davis's suggestion. In an interview with Sky News, Just Stop Oil spokesperson Alex De Koning said that his group has considered following the example of suffragettes who 'violently slashed paintings in order to get their messages across. If things need to escalate, then we're going to take inspiration from past successful movements and we're going to do everything we can.'](#)

Some critics of radical climate activists argue that any use of violence will reduce public support. A study first released by the American Sociological Association in 2018 concluded 'the use of violence leads the general public to view a protest group as less reasonable, a perception that reduces identification with the group. This reduced identification in turn reduces public support for the violent group. Furthermore, the authors argue that violence also leads to more support for groups that are perceived as opposing the violent group.'

[4. There are more effective ways to encourage individuals and communities to support measures to reduce climate change](#)

Those who oppose radical climate activists claim that more moderate, positive, and collaborative measures, focused on educating the public, are likely to have greater effect in changing popular attitudes and behaviours.

Social commentators claim that a general desire for climate action is dependent on the public being well informed. Dr Anthony Leiserowitz, Senior Research Scientist and Director of the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication Research has noted that 'public will' - strong public demand for climate change measures - 'increases the likelihood that governments will prioritize climate change action.' [Research has indicated that information and public education are vital in forming this 'public will'. Survey work undertaken by the International Monetary Fund \(IMF\) indicates that people across the world worry about climate change, but that concern alone does not translate into support for policies to reduce the climate crisis. These policies involve change, dislocation, and sometimes significant loss \(including job losses and increased taxes\) for sections of the population. Studies have found that most people will not accept these policies unless the relative benefits and gains are explained to them. A recent IMF survey of almost 30,000 people in 28 countries showed that providing information on policy effectiveness and benefits - including co-benefits, such as improved air quality and better health - can create greater popular support among the public for the actions needed to slow global warming. Many of the policies associated with greenhouse gas reduction, such](#)

as carbon pricing, are not immediately attractive to people. The IMF survey showed that people are more supportive of carbon pricing if they know the revenues it generates will be used to shield economically vulnerable groups from the adverse impact of climate policies. [🔗](#) Multiple studies have indicated that if the public is informed of the effectiveness of carbon taxes in reducing emissions and is shown that the taxation revenue will be used equitably, they are likely to accept the taxation. [🔗](#) The United Nations has declared, 'Education is a critical agent in addressing the issue of climate change. Education can encourage people to change their attitudes and behaviour; it also helps them to make informed decisions.' [🔗](#)

The IMF recommends that governments and climate advocates should educate the public about the causes and consequences of climate change and the costs of inaction. They recommend widespread public discussion about the costs of pollution and extreme weather events, and the benefits of addressing these, like improvements for air quality, health, and protection of low-income households. [🔗](#) The UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme) has stated, 'In a green economy, growth in employment and income are driven by public and private investment into such economic activities, infrastructure and assets that allow reduced carbon emissions and pollution, enhanced energy and resource efficiency, and prevention of the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services.' [🔗](#) This is a vision of a clean future which suggests that losses can be offset by other gains. Critics of radical climate activists complain that they are not undertaking this necessary education work. Instead, they are disrupting people's lives and spreading alarm, without spreading information which would help people accept, let alone demand, policy changes by government. Tom Comez, writing in *The Speaker* in an opinion piece published on November 2, 2022, argued for a dramatic change of approach among radical climate activists. He stated, 'If Just Stop Oil wants to win over hearts and minds... it needs to move away from noisy and disruptive demonstrations and start focusing on more constructive methods of protest. The group would be better off hosting informative events.' [🔗](#)

The successes achieved within the current Biden administration in enacting policies to reduce the impacts of climate change have been partly attributed to climate activists who focused on popular education and the development of publicly acceptable policies. Critics of alarmist climate advocates have claimed that the more co-operative and conciliatory tactics being used in the United States are more successful. Climate activists in the United States have encouraged the Biden government to adopt a positive climate agenda which has been far more attractive to the American public. The policy focus is on 'Lowering utility bills, creating American jobs, leading the world to a clean energy future.' [🔗](#)

It has been claimed that climate activists would be more effective in winning popular support if they focused on solutions rather than dramatising problems. Leah Thomas, founder of Intersectional Environmentalist and environmental and climate action lobby group, has stated, 'Climate doom messaging has been used to compel people to act. We've had a humongous amount of climate organizing, but unfortunately it has also led to an extreme amount of climate fatalism. That leads to apathy and inaction, because if you feel like there's no hope for the future, why are you going to act? What's really worked for me is showing people that there is hope.' [🔗](#) Thomas suggests that activists should highlight local solutions. In that way, those listening see a direct pathway for action in their own community. This strategy involves drawing on people's pre-existing social commitments and concerns, such as the health of their children and their future employment prospects, or social and racial inequality within their communities, and linking these to the climate change agenda. [🔗](#) In 2028, Tabitha Whiting, a specialist in climate communications, has stated, 'The best methods of communication demonstrate positivity (gain) rather than negativity (loss), as well as being local and relevant to the individual. The current language and conversation around climate change isn't doing this, and instead is spreading a narrative of doom, gloom, and despair.' [🔗](#)

5. There are more effective ways to lead governments and corporations to reduce the impact of climate change

Those who criticise radical climate activists who focus on direct protest action argue that there are more effective ways of influencing governments and the corporations who have so much power in determining fossil fuel production and the level of emissions.

Some critics suggest that people who want to affect what governments do to address the climate crisis should either join political parties or run as independents. In a letter published in *The Guardian* (British edition) on March 16, 2023, Paul Chandler argues that working within the political system can achieve greater results than campaigning outside it. He writes, 'I would love to see some academic work try to quantify the effect of publicity-seeking "stunts" against patient political footslogging. Having spent most of my life doing the latter, I feel politics does work. I was born into a world where homosexuality and abortion were illegal and mixed-race marriage regarded as immoral. That has changed. Conventional politicians ...did their stuff - and succeeded.' [🔗](#) Commentators have noted the success of many Green parties around the world in having

members elected, expanding their policies and support base and being able to directly shape governments' climate crisis policies. [↗](#) In Australia and many other countries worldwide, many established parties are no longer able to achieve a majority and are having to work in coalition, either permanent or intermittent, with a Green party. Commentators claim that this has given these climate-conscious parties growing influence in determining climate policy. Bob Brown, founder, and former leader of the Australian Greens, has stated that the Labor Party needs to 'get over this idea that it is going to have solid majority power in the future. It is going to need to share it with the Greens.' [↗](#) Climate-conscious independents can also be in a position to affect government policies. After the success of a loosely aligned group of climate-focused independents, the Teals, in Australia's last federal election, the Albanese government structured the first fortnight of parliament to satisfy demands by the independents that they would be able to join the debate on Labor's climate change legislation. [↗](#)

One effective strategy that climate activists can use to change the behaviour of corporations is to become shareholders. In an article published on April 23, 2023, Monash University's Centre for Commercial Law and Regulatory Studies stated, 'Australian listed companies are experiencing increasing levels of climate change-related shareholder activism.' As an example, it notes that in March 2023 'activist shareholders filed formal member statements with Woodside Energy, calling for the company's other shareholders to vote against the re-election of Woodside directors at the company's 2023 AGM in response to Woodside's perceived inaction on climate change.' [↗](#) In an article written by Dr Tim Bowley and published by the Energy & Resources Law Association, the author explains that activists now expect companies to do more than simply provide disclosure about how they are addressing the implications of climate change. They also expect companies to demonstrate concrete action to adapt their business models to address the implications of climate change and will seek to hold companies and their directors directly accountable for any apparent failure to act. [↗](#) A similar pattern is emerging worldwide with Climate Action 100+, an investor-led initiative to ensure the world's largest corporate greenhouse gas emitters take necessary action on climate change, moving from climate-related disclosure to pushing companies to lay out strategies and climate transition plans. This strategy is having some success. More than 30 percent of shareholders at JP Morgan Chase, Wells Fargo and Goldman Sachs (with Bank of America not far behind at 28.5 percent) have voted in favour of resolutions filed by United States shareholder advocacy group As You Sow asking the banks for detailed climate transition plans on how they will align their financing activities with their 2030 emissions targets. [↗](#)

Another strategy available to climate activists is to encourage large investing institutions to withdraw their investments in fossil fuel megaproducers. In June 2023, the Church Commissioners for England, which manages the influential Church of England's 10.3 billion pounds endowment fund, announced it had decided to exclude all remaining oil and gas majors from its portfolio, concluding that none is aligned with the goals of the Paris Climate Agreement, as assessed by the Transition Pathway Initiative (TPI). [↗](#) Withdrawing investment from a corporation is termed 'divestment'. Divestment is reducing the viability of major fossil fuel projects. Protest action can encourage divestment. This can be seen with the troubled progress of the Adani corporation's Adani's Carmichael coal mine in central Queensland. Thousands of protester actions against the project have led to a growing international list of banks, investors and insurance companies withdrawing from involvement in the project because of the serious reputational risk involved. Over 100 major companies have ruled out working with Adani. Rather than taking further physical action, protesters have now published the names of those companies connected with Adani, either directly or through investment, and those who have publicly declared they will not be involved. [↗](#)

Further implications

Radical climate change activists stress the difficulty and the importance of drawing attention to the climate crisis.

These activists claim that more moderate action, such as simple street marches or even more radical actions performed away from the public eye have failed to attract media interest. They have justified their disruptions of sporting events, their blockading of public roads and their daubing of famous artworks by referring to the 'millions of eyeballs' that will be turned toward these demonstrations. [↗](#) This argument suggests the importance of the media in shaping the type of action that many climate activists take. Whatever they do must be headline-worthy.

Unfortunately, many media outlets seem interested only in the sensationalist value of climate activists' demonstrations and have a poor record overall in dealing with the scientific reality of the climate crisis. On

March 17, 2021, Mark Hertzgaard, writing for the Columbia Journalism Review, noted, 'Media coverage of the climate crisis has long lagged behind warnings from scientists and other experts - especially in the US, where coverage was sporadic at best, and often descended into a scientifically indefensible bothsidesism that portrayed corporate flaks and real scientists as equally credible.' [↗](#) Rather than provide informed and credible treatments of the climate emergency, many media outlets seem interested in presenting a confrontation narrative, initially between climate protesters and polluters [↗](#) and more recently between climate protesters and the general public. [↗](#)

Any representation of climate activists as at war with the average person is problematic in terms of advancing acceptance of the measures that will need to be taken by governments and individuals to reduce the serious threats associated with the climate crisis. Some social commentators have pointed out that there are many roles to be played in the worldwide effort to contain climate change within manageable parameters. Some theorists like to present radical climate activists as the shock troops who heighten awareness so that the general public and governments can then accept the advice of other more moderate-seeming climate advisers who come in as the clean-up brigade. [↗](#) There are problems with this theory, as both the obviously radical and less obviously radical advice on what is needed to address climate change are generally very similar. As Jack Shenker noted in an opinion piece published in The Guardian on March 6, 2023, 'In truth, few believe that when it comes to the climate emergency there is a binary choice between radical protests and less confrontational forms of activism.' [↗](#) Different groups may wrap the package differently, but the contents is essentially the same - to address the climate crisis, many aspects of human life will need to change in significant and not always pleasant ways. [↗](#)

What the world is going to need is a style of presentation that will help populations accept the measures they need to adopt. We require a different narrative. In an opinion piece published in The Guardian on January 12, 2023, Rebecca Smidt stated, 'Every crisis is in part a storytelling crisis. This is as true of climate chaos as anything else. We are hemmed in by stories that prevent us from seeing, or believing in, or acting on the possibilities for change. Some are habits of mind; some are industry propaganda. Sometimes, the situation has changed but the stories haven't, and people follow the old versions, like outdated maps, into dead ends.' [↗](#)

Both climate activists and the media have a role in changing our narrative. Perhaps, for a while, there will remain a role for radical climate activists to keep sounding a strident note of alarm. But someone is going to need to come in behind with a more positive message. Not just, this is what we must do, but also, this is how we can do it. Clearly, the media has a role to play here in disseminating another message, but while they remain obsessed with scripting conflicts and casting villains, they will not be able to perform that role. [↗](#)