



What's Next For Nature: Perspectives on Political Ecology

Nature and Democracy

Towards a Climate-Capable Democracy



By Gus Speth
July 2025

In 2024 the venerable World Wildlife Fund reported that there has been a catastrophic 73 percent drop in global wildlife populations over the 50-year period from 1970 to 2020.¹ As bad as this is, it will only be made worse, potentially much worse, by the climate change now already here with more coming hard at us.

Some years ago, in response to its new slogan "Saving the Last Great Places," I wrote the leaders of The Nature Conservancy, another of our excellent organizations, that "you can't save the last great places unless you stop climate change." That is even more true today.

Climate change now faces us with a challenge on the scale of mobilizing to win World War II. Perhaps bigger. Here and abroad, unprecedented measures must be put in place both to move completely out of fossil fuels by mid-century and also to pursue far-reaching and costly adaptation. Both globally and nationally, we are still about 80 percent dependent on fossil fuels.

My thesis here is that democracy in America, the democracy practiced every day, is a major cause of the climate crisis and to address that crisis we need a transformation in American democracy. Democratic political action must be the spearhead of the attack on climate destruction and its biological impoverishment, and for that America needs a climate-capable democracy.

It is time to ask, honestly and searchingly, what democracy could rise successfully to the climate challenge? This is a difficult question but a fundamental one. The good news is that we can begin to sketch an answer.

Even at its best, American democracy struggles when trying to confront the climate leviathan. We saw that during the Biden Administration where unprecedented and ambitious climate goals were proclaimed but not followed by actions that could achieve them. More normally and certainly today, our democratic system is actually an integral part of a political economy that is itself the source of the climate problem.

¹ World Wide Fund for Nature "2024 Living Planet Report: A System in Peril." WWF, Gland, Switzerland, www.livingplanet.panda.org/en-US/

Yes, some climate progress can be made working within our current system of political economy. We saw that with the Inflation Reduction Act. But to reduce emissions fast enough and thoroughly enough, we need to change key features of our system of political economy, and to do that we must first transform our democracy from an instrument of climate calamity to one driving deep, transformative change for the better.

You may have seen the banner at climate demonstrations: “System Change, Not Climate Change!” System change is essential because the climate crisis is deeply rooted in defining features of our current system of political economy. Here are some of those features:

- an unquestioning commitment to economic growth at essentially any cost, including the enormous social and environmental costs of climate change;
- a measure of that growth, GDP, that includes as positives the growth of the fossil fuel industry and the costs of coping with the damaging effects of climate change;
- powerful corporate interests whose overriding objectives are to generate profit and to grow, including profit from avoiding the costs of the climate change they cause;
- markets that systematically fail to recognize those costs unless corrected by government;
- government that is both handmaiden to corporate interests and dependent on GDP growth;
- runaway consumerism spurred on endlessly by sophisticated advertising and disparities in status and lifestyle;
- social injustice, economic insecurities, and concentrations of wealth so vast that they paralyze effective political action; and
- a set of social values and cultural norms that support and reinforce this system, including materialism and anthropocentrism.

For decades, and long before the Trump Administration, American democracy and the resulting politics have subsidized the fossil industry, opened federal fossil resources to corporate extraction, facilitated a fossil-based transportation sector, perpetuated the growth imperative, allowed huge emissions of climate pollutants, and on and on.

The United States will never be able to go far enough, or fast enough, doing the right things on climate, as long as our political priorities are ramping up GDP, growing corporate profits, increasing the incomes of the already well-to-do, neglecting the half of America that is just getting by, encouraging unrestrained consumerism, facilitating great bastions of corporate and money power, and helping abroad only modestly or not at all.

Making the needed progress on climate change requires an escape from the fetters of today’s system and an urgent transformation to a new—a next—political economy.

Of course, we must use today’s democracy, flawed though it be, to fight efforts seeking to roll back climate protections, to promote rapid deployment of both technology and policy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and to adapt to changes we cannot forestall. We must do our best in all these regards, but, beginning now, we must also start to build a new democracy that can address the climate crisis here and abroad with the authority needed—a climate-capable democracy.

Building a climate-capable democracy should proceed down two paths.

First, today's political reality cries out for many straightforward pro-democracy reforms. We know a lot about what is needed in this regard. Senator Klobuchar and her colleagues have introduced impressive proposals to shore up voting rights, protect election integrity, and otherwise greatly strengthen our democracy's functioning.

Beyond such measures, however, deeper changes are needed. We need to recognize that democracy depends for its success on a great many factors in the social and economic spheres as well as the political. Consider the following ways our democracy is constrained today.

When economic inequality mocks political equality, democratic progress is difficult. When corporate power dwarfs people power, democratic progress is difficult. When money is the be all and end all of campaign success, democratic progress is difficult. When the voting public is subjected to repeated lies and endless misinformation and propaganda, democratic functioning is difficult. When future generations and the natural world are not accorded political rights, democracy is deprived and unrepresentative.

In America, political unrepresentativeness and deficits in democracy are also created by anomalies like the Electoral College, the US Senate, gerrymandering of Congressional districts, and state control of federal elections.

Additionally, what we know about climate change and climate politics dictates some key features of a climate-capable democracy. A climate-capable democracy will be largely free of corporate money and control. It will embrace the rights of future generations, for they have the most at stake. It will also embrace the rights of nature, for climate change is impoverishing the natural world. It will ensure the process of regulating in the public interest is strong and independent.

A democracy that is climate-capable will be capable of many things, but the politics of the climate crisis focuses us on certain matters, especially curtailing the political power of the corporate sector and its big money spawn, focusing growth not on GDP but on things society needs more of, combatting fossil fueled misinformation, and facing up to a dominant culture and value system that is destructive of human and natural flourishing.

In sum, the future of nature and its biota is dependent on our climate future and what we make of it. Our climate future in turn is heavily dependent on our democratic success. And our success as a democracy across many issues including climate change is dependent on deeper transformations that will challenge long existing features of our interlinked economic and political systems, our political economy.

These understandings suggest a difficult agenda of change. The good news is that they also point to the opportunity for a combining of coalitions, a coming together as a mighty force of all those communities seeking transformative change. More than ever, our various constituencies need to recognize that they share a common foe and a common fate, win or lose. The further good news is that the agenda I have described is easily organized into many smaller, discrete objectives that already have activists pursuing them. For example, one objective high on my list is ending the reign of GDP with a new set of national indicators that measure and inspire genuine progress.

About the Author



James Gustave "Gus" Speth is one of the most influential environmental leaders of the past half-century, known for his groundbreaking work at the intersection of environmental science, public policy, and social justice. A co-founder of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) in 1970, Speth helped shape modern environmental law in the United States and has remained a guiding voice in global sustainability efforts.

Speth served as Chair of the U.S. Council on Environmental Quality under President Jimmy Carter, where he advanced federal policies on energy conservation and sustainable development. In the 1990s, he was appointed Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), becoming a leading advocate for the integration of environmental concerns into global development strategies. His tenure at the UN emphasized poverty reduction, democratic governance, and environmental stewardship as pillars of human progress.

An academic as well as a practitioner, Speth served as Dean of the Yale School of the Environment (formerly the School of Forestry & Environmental Studies), where he mentored a generation of environmental leaders. He later joined the faculty of Vermont Law School and was a founding member of the New Economy Law Center, promoting systems change to address climate, inequality, and ecological breakdown.

Speth is the author of several influential books, including *Red Sky at Morning*, *The Bridge at the Edge of the World*, and *America the Possible*, which challenge traditional growth-oriented economics and call for a transformational shift toward a just and sustainable future.

A lifelong systems thinker and reformer, Speth continues to argue that solving the ecological crisis requires confronting its deeper causes: a failing political system, runaway consumerism, and corporate dominance. His work has inspired advocates around the world to see environmentalism not only as a scientific or legal challenge, but as a moral and democratic imperative.