



With all the coverage that the huge (400,000 person) People's Climate March has received in the media, we still have to ask: what is a march for? How exactly does it fit into a coherent political strategy to combat global warming?

You might say that by pointing to the media coverage, I have answered the question. But media coverage is not a goal. It is a method, which brings us back to the original question. A method for what? The theory of social movements seems to be at somewhat of a loss here.

Consider [Charles Tilly](#), perhaps the greatest of all scholars who studied on social movements. Tilly emphasized street demonstrations as a fundamental tactic of social movements, but in [his *summa on the subject*](#), he was ambiguous about how precisely they produced political change. Tilly even suggested that social movements diverged from traditional electoral politics, which seems to me quite wrong: the point is that social movements use whatever resources they can to achieve their ends. Mobilization does not exist for itself. Tilly pointed to demonstrations such as "People Power" in the Philippines, where large street protests led to the removal of Ferdinand Marcos and later Joseph Estrada. That doesn't seem to work here, though: the protests the other day certainly

demanded action, but they were not demanding removal of particular political leaders and did not have the power to achieve it in any event.

The street demonstration also serves as a way of raising an issue's salience. That certainly appeared to be the function of civil rights marches: they made it very clear that Jim Crow was not a peculiar institution of the South that only arrogant northern liberals despised. But that does not seem quite right here, either. Lots of people know about the controversy surrounding climate change, and indeed, as I have suggested before, the Republican Party needs the climate issue as a way of trying to maintain its "three-legged" political coalition between evangelicals, neoconservative hawks, and the wealthy. The Civil Rights Movement's greatest allies were thugs like Bull Connor and Jim Clark, who played right into their hands on live national television. Modern climate deniers are much slicker and better funded, and have their talking points ready. They even have their own television network.



W.B Yeats: The Poet Laureate of the People's Climate March

Instead, it seems to me that here, the task is not so much raising the public salience of the issue, but combating precisely the salience that the other side has achieved. On an issue where, in Yeats' words, "[The best lack all conviction, while the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity](#)," the goal is to increase the intensity on the side of those who recognize the danger to the planet and to civilization. If so, there was a lacuna in the call during the march: there were no specific actions that people were supposed to take after the march was over. In order for intensity to deepen and continue, people need something to **do**.

But there is plenty to do. If you watched the march, or biked to the Climate Summit, or were moved by the March, start writing letters, register voters, get out your checkbook, and demand of your representatives that you will vote on this issue. If you do not, no amount of marching will make a difference.