

April 22, 2020 will mark the 50th Anniversary of the first [Earth Day](#) in 1970. The 1962 publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, as well as the 1969 [oil spill](#) in Santa Barbara and the dismal [air quality](#) of Los Angeles, raised American environmental consciousness, but it was Earth Day that accelerated political engagement. Twenty million people participated in the first Earth Day, which was co-chaired by Senator Gaylord Nelson, a democrat, and Pete McCloskey, a republican. In 1970, the environment was a bipartisan issue.

But it wasn't until after Earth Day - the 1970 congressional elections to be exact - that environmentalism became a true political force. Here's how Denis Hayes, the Earth Day national coordinator, described it for the [40th Anniversary](#):

[T]he environment returned to national prominence in the fall of 1970. The Earth Day organizers jumped into the Congressional elections, seeking to defeat a "Dirty Dozen" of incumbent Congressmen. The targets were selected because they had abysmal environmental records, but also because they were in tight races and were from districts with a major environmental issue that voters cared about.

The first of the seven Congressmen we took out that fall was George Fallon from Baltimore. Representative Fallon was chairman of the House Public Works Committee, the "pork" committee, and a powerful opponent of mass transit. Politicians of all stripes took notice: If Fallon was vulnerable, everyone in politics was vulnerable.

In that single primary election (won by a young upstart named Paul Sarbanes), Earth Day's organizers had made "the environment" a voting issue.

I raise this now, well before the 50th Earth Day and the 2020 elections, because climate change, despite being an existential threat, has not become a voting issue in the United States. To my knowledge, no incumbent has won or lost a race in a primary or general election based primarily on the issue of climate change. Until that happens, climate denial and climate inaction engender insufficient political liability to result in political action.

Despite fires in the west, hurricanes in the east, drought in the south, and multiple other plagues around the country, the Democratic National Committee refused to hold a presidential climate [debate](#), and the Republican party - an entire political party in the year 2019 - led by a president who derides it as a Chinese hoax while promoting coal, denies its

existence and impact. Until there is a political price, until members of Congress lose their jobs because of their inaction, the climate will continue to change but policy inaction will not.

Denis Hayes and the original Earth Day creators changed the political calculus around environmental issues. Seven of the so-called “Dirty Dozen” lost their seats. In 1970, Vietnam, civil rights, and many other issues were at the forefront, just as today, terrorism, inequality, and homelessness vie for attention. But in 1970, environmental issues became voting issues.

Can 2020 be a climate change turning point? Is it time for a “Denier Dozen?”