Hardly anyone noticed at the time, but Utah enacted an important bill about climate change in 2018. Yes, Utah – where the GOP holds 78% of the legislature. How that happened, and what happened since, is a story worth telling.

The bill itself did not impose any carbon restrictions. But it did call for "the Legislature and the Governor [to] encourage individuals, corporations, and state agencies to reduce emissions through incentives and support of the growth in technologies and services that will enlarge our economy in a way that is both energy efficient and cost effective."

There seem to be a number of reasons why the bill passed. First, the economics of renewable energy have become far more appealing, especially in a state like Utah with ample renewables potential. There are also opportunities for Utah to profit, for instance, by developing a hydrogen industry. Second, air pollution is a really serious problem in Utah. Cutting carbon will also cut air pollution. And third, people in Utah are worried about their climate, including impacts on outdoor sports and industries.

The chief sponsor of the bill was a Morman homemaker, Becky Edwards, who became a legislator. According to her twitter account, she's now left the legislature to serve as a missionary in Samoa. Those biographical details are only significant because they show that she's a long way from the stereotypical climate advocate. She attributed her support of the bill to a group of high school students who came to her with a draft. If you've looked at the photo accompanying this post, you'll see that they're about the most clean-cut group you could possibly imagine. They could easily have walked right out of a Disney movie. Again, not the stereotypical activists. Students from fifteen high schools joined the push for the bill. The effort was spearheaded by a high school senior, Piper Christian, and a junior at another school, Mishka Banuri. (By naming these two, I don't mean to downplay the roles of others — these are just the people who got press attention.) Ms. Christian and others at her high school environmental club were mobilized when they learned of a very different resolution that passed the Utah legislature six years earlier, pooh-poohing climate change and supporting fossil fuels.

Their first effort got nowhere in the legislature. According to High Country News:

> Elected officials responded by claiming there was virtually no chance of getting the resolution introduced, much less passed. "Don't waste your time," they were told. "Try something less ambitious." That response

> discouraged some students, but Christian decided: “We will persist, primarily to see this as something that does not have to be divisive.”

They persisted. They came back the following year with detailed information about how climate change would impact Utah. They also shrewdly massaged the language to deal with objections from legislators. At the same time, they forged alliances with other interested groups, including business groups. One important move was an information session for legislators:

> At the start of the 2018 legislative session, the grassroots groups partnered with Edwards [the sponsor] to create an evening program at the Capitol. It brought together high school students, legislators and a five-member “climate solutions” panel. The panel included a physicist, the director of the governor’s energy office, a student from Brigham Young University and two city mayors.

During the hearings, one high school junior testified that he supported the bill “because it is the first step to creating a livable future for families all over the state .. . .I urge you to take charge in creating this livable future.” In the end, three-fourths of the Republicans in the legislature supported the bill.

The 2018 law funded a University of Utah project to devise a climate roadmap for the state. As the Guardian explains, the roadmap sets out an ambitious goal:

> Among the Utah Roadmap’s top priorities is to reduce CO2 emissions by half over the next decade – a challenge for a state with a growing population. The plan suggests focusing on energy-efficient buildings and clean transportation options. It recommends expanding Utah’s network of charging stations, incentivizing the purchase of electric vehicles, and involving auto dealers in strategies to increase the zero-emissions vehicle supply.

It appears that the legislature is taking the roadmap seriously. As one state legislator said, “There are still a number of Utah legislators who don’t want to look at the science that’s very obvious on climate change, but we’ve come a long way.”

One of the lessons here is that young people can make a real difference. Another is about the dangers of stereotyping. Climate policy can get support from unexpected directions. And finally, it actually helps to get out and talk to people.