



In an era of growing American fascism, for progressive organizations, there are successful strategies, and unsuccessful strategies. And then there is the Sierra Club, which appears to have destroyed itself, according to [a depressing and enraging expose in the New York Times](#) (co-written by David Fahrenthold, one of their best reporters):

“Sierra Club is in a downward spiral,” a group of managers wrote in a letter reviewed by The New York Times to the club’s leadership in June.

That spiral helps Mr. Trump. But it was not his doing. The Sierra Club did this to itself.

During Mr. Trump’s first term, when the Sierra Club was flush with donations, its leaders sought to expand far beyond environmentalism, embracing other progressive causes. Those included racial justice, labor rights, gay rights, immigrant rights and more. They stand by that shift today.

They might stand by it, but they have succeeded in potentially fatally injuring the organization that they stand by.

The downside, according to interviews with people involved with the group and a review of financial records and internal documents, was that the Sierra Club lost its focus, then its strength.

By 2022, the club had exhausted its finances and splintered its coalition....

Because of increased salaries, health care costs and additional hiring, labor costs would double between 2016 and 2024, according to an internal club budget document.

At the same time, the club asked its supporters to agree with positions farther from the environmental causes that had attracted them in the first place.

It issued an "[equity language guide](#)," which warned employees to be cautious about using the words "vibrant" and "hardworking," because they reinforced racist tropes. "Lame duck session" was [out](#), because "lame" was offensive. Even "Americans" should be avoided, the guide said, because it excluded non-U. S. citizens....

Jim Dougherty, an environmental activist and Sierra Club director, said he had raised objections to a 2019 budget that called for the equivalent of 108 full-time employees to work on a "national equity investment." Most of those were not new hires; rather a refocus of the responsibilities of many current employees...

"I said, 'We have two F.T.E.s devoted to Trump's war on the Arctic refuge, and we have 108 going to D.E.I., and I don't think we have our priorities straight,'" Mr. Dougherty said, using the acronyms for "full-time employees" and "diversity, equity and inclusion."

Mr. Dougherty said no other board members agreed, and the budget passed....

"We didn't have a direct 'Trump bump' in the same way we did for the first Trump administration," Ms. Blackford said in an interview.

In the month after Mr. Trump won the 2024 election, the club's internal count of the group it called champions declined. As of August, internal tracking documents show it stood at 1.5 million, down about 60 percent from its high in 2019. The Sierra Club said it had reduced its efforts to recruit these more casual supporters in 2023, after the bulk of this decline occurred.

Its hardest-core supporters have also dwindled: The number of dues-paying members has fallen by 27 percent from its level at the start of 2021.

What in the world is going on here? I think that we can identify a few patterns, some of which are old, but many of which are new and figure to get more extreme.

- **Liberal founders, Left staff.** This trend has occurred elsewhere: donors want to do something good for the world, and found an organization based upon their liberal principles. All very well and good.

But who often *works* for many organizations? People who are younger, and somewhat more to the Left than the founders. They are very committed to more radical principles – those who are not probably have a harder time putting up with the lower salaries (although that is not the case with high-level staffers; the Times reports that former Sierra Club Ben Jealous awarded his senior staff salaries in excess of \$300,000). They push the organization in that direction. Thus, the founder of Human Rights Watch quit after he saw the organization's staff embrace an unremittingly hostile attitude toward Israel – not its politics, but its existence.

I encountered this when I was a “Global Justice Fellow” at the American Jewish World Service ten years ago. Although the organization purported to foster broad principles of democracy and liberalism, staff was much further to the Left. We were advocating for changes in USAID (z”l) policies concerning the empowerment of women, and I suggested to our consultant that one way to reach Republican support was to pitch it as a way to fight sex trafficking. He was enthusiastic. But absolutely not, according to staff. Why? Because fighting “sex trafficking” meant that we would somehow not be respectful of sex workers. (We saw this in the NYT piece when the Sierra Club stopped using the phrase “lame duck” because it was disrespectful to the disabled).

- **Group polarization.** Group polarization occurs when the consensus opinion of a group is more extreme than opinions previously held by the individuals in it. Psychologists have recognized this phenomenon for decades. But it derives from several different mechanisms. It's possible that the more extreme side just has better arguments: hard to say that occurred here.

Instead, it makes better sense to think of polarization here deriving from social comparison: people try to make themselves stand out, and engage in one-upmanship. And that is particularly true when one group holds beliefs more firmly. Liberalism is about procedural fairness and self-questioning: "a liberal," Robert Frost famously noted, "is someone who will not take his own side in an argument." That is not a problem for the harder Left. And that is especially true when at least ostensibly the group shares the same commitments. As Cass Sunstein has noted, **de**polarization can happen under certain circumstances. If the people in a group do not believe that they have things in common and share an identity, then there is less likelihood that polarization will develop. Groups will also depolarize if there is divided opinion within the group and both sides have about the same amount of power and commitment to their opinions.

But the Sierra Club case had exactly the opposite tendencies. It is an article of faith in many precincts of the Left that all problems are interconnected (which for the record is **not** what "intersectionality" means). But even liberals share a generalized belief in racial justice: how could they really *oppose* a new focus on DEI?

So now the Sierra Club appears to have come close to collapse and is unable to provide many resources in the existential fight against environmental destruction. And I think it will get worse, because these sorts of problems will become greater in the internet/social media era. Social media is in fact an engine of group polarization. [Sunstein warned of](#) "internet information cocoons" 20 years ago, before social media. We are seeing it exponentially increase now. The only saving grace might be that *everyone* will have stronger views and so group polarization will occur less because everyone will be surer of their views. Possible: but I still think that the tendency for one-upmanship will just accelerate.

In the era of Trump, George Floyd, and Israel/Palestine, we will continue to see the attempt to connect everything to everything. I think that group polarization through the web will be part of it. Greta Thunberg used to advocate to fight climate change: now she is spending her time on a flotilla to Gaza.

So it goes.