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## Congress Rebukes Trump (after Advocates Exercise Hope)

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Brooks Berndt  
Environmental Justice Minister

A year ago, I took a leap of faith: I began working with volunteers across the country to launch a new network of chapters devoted to advocating with Congress on legislation that resides at the intersection of climate change and societal injustice. I can't say it was a time of rousing inspiration for such an endeavor, as we pitched our program amid seas of despair and anger engendered by the current administration and Congress. We called ourselves Climate Hope Affiliates, and the "hope" part was a hard sell.

In those early days, I remember one phone call in which the incredulity of the person on the other end of the line regarding my fool's errand was—um—evident, to say the least. Despite everything, there were volunteers who signed up. What wonderful souls! The early days were rough, to be sure. Our initial handful of chapters experienced a low point when Congress passed a bill in July that wiped away years of hard-won climate progress.

Rather than giving up, our chapters began pursuing a strategy reflective of one of historian Timothy Snyder's top recommendations for resisting tyranny: defend the institutions that make our society humane and decent. We sought to protect the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) from the Trump administration's attempts to defund and dismantle it.

The administration had proposed cutting the EPA's budget by 55 percent. The only path for countering this attack involved building and strengthening bipartisan resistance in Congress. More than a few naysayers said this could not be



done with a Congress that lacked “spine.”

In a recent interview, Aru Shiney-Ajay, the Executive Director of the Sunrise Movement, made the following comment that would have rung true throughout our ensuing campaign: “When you’re organizing a population against dictatorship, it’s important to understand what the main emotional barriers are that stand in people’s way. In a lot of countries, that ends up being fear. I don’t think the main barrier in the US is fear. It’s skepticism. Most people don’t believe in our ability to change things.”

As true as this comment was, what was even more insightful was Shiney-Ajay’s next observation: “One of the most important things for organizers right now is to pick campaigns that are ambitious, tangible, and winnable.”

It is hard to know what is winnable until it has been won. We were fortunate that this turned out to be the case for us. After the House initially proposed a 23 percent cut to the EPA and the Senate proposed a 5 percent cut, few would have predicted that Congress would ultimately pass, with an overwhelming bipartisan majority, a bill that would cut EPA funding by 3.5 percent, with potential for it to be less in practice.

Reporter Christine Peterson captured the significance of the vote [in writing](#), “The bill was, in many ways, a congressional rebuke of Trump’s request to drastically cut critical federal services related to the environment.”

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across the country exercising their own spines, so that members of Congress could experience some miraculous healing in their lower lumbar region.

In the face of skepticism, we sometimes need to take seemingly preposterous leaps of faith to make the improbable probable. If we want to end authoritarianism (and this can only happen if Congress experiences more miraculous healing), we will need to take more preposterous leaps. [Let me know](#) if you are ready to take the leap of starting a chapter of Climate Hope Affiliates in your community.

*Rev. Dr. Brooks Berndt is the Minister of Environmental Justice for the United Church of Christ and directs the ecumenical Climate Hope Affiliates, a joint program of the UCC and Creation Justice Ministries.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Rev. Dr. Brooks Berndt serves as the Environmental Justice Minister and directs the ecumenical Climate Hope Affiliates (a joint program) for the United Church of Christ in the National Setting of the United Church of Christ.

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