

What the climate movement gets wrong about disruption

February 26 2024



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The 1963 Civil Rights victory in Birmingham, Alabama paved the way for the 1964 Civil Rights Act. In their latest article, [published](#) in *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, UMass Amherst

Associate Professor of History Kevin Young and Yale University environmental social scientist Laura Thomas-Walters ask: What are the lessons from that monumental victory for today's climate movement?

"We wanted to think more deeply about the concept of disruption with an eye toward being useful to the climate movement," Young says. "Lessons from 1963 are often misunderstood."

Conventional thinking suggests that the success came when nonviolent protesters won the hearts of northern white liberals, who then pressured the Kennedy administration to intervene. Drawing on accounts of Black organizers, Young and Thomas-Walters emphasize the role of the economic boycott in compelling Birmingham's downtown business elite to push for an end to segregation.

They note that that [public opinion](#) was not on the side of demonstrators, but that the economic pressure applied to downtown businesses made the difference, rather than the public's reaction to the protests.

Young and Thomas-Walters argue that the historical lesson is that "disruption is necessary." And that it's most effective when it imposes "sustained and escalating costs on elite sectors that can force politicians to confront the climate emergency."

They suggest targets of disruptive strategies by the climate movement should include [financial institutions](#) that fund [fossil fuels](#) as well as organizations and [pension funds](#) that consume and invest in them.

More information: Kevin A. Young et al, What the climate movement's debate about disruption gets wrong, *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* (2024). [DOI: 10.1057/s41599-023-02507-y](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02507-y)

Provided by University of Massachusetts Amherst

Citation: What the climate movement gets wrong about disruption (2024, February 26) retrieved 14 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-02-climate-movement-wrong-disruption.html>

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