

Handout: What Happened This Summer?

Group 1: Climate Change

“When we frame the issue in terms of, was this event caused by climate change, that's not the right question. The question is, was this event made more extreme by climate change? And that we can conclude with some certainty, because there's basic physics that's operating here.”

—Climatologist Michael Mann

The effects of climate change are becoming clearer and clearer. Each year we see new records for severe weather. As Professor Mann notes in the quote above, it is incorrect to state that the changing climate *causes* extreme weather. But the changing climate *does* create the conditions that make uncomfortable weather severe, severe weather dangerous, and dangerous weather events disastrous.

Take for example the wildfires that rampaged through California and other western states this summer, as well as through Greece, Portugal, Spain, Japan, and even Siberia . All the conditions that increase the intensity and spread of wildfires are worsened by global climate change: heat waves, drought, and slow-moving weather systems. The intense heat and fires have caused hundreds of deaths and destruction of homes, crops, and forests.

But climate change is also responsible for increased water vapor in the atmosphere, which combined with a lingering weather system, causes intense rain and flooding. (In some areas, such as California, people are coping with both wildfires and floods!)

While climate scientists are almost unanimous in their assessment of human causes of climate change, governments have been slow to enact changes of the magnitude needed to slow climate change – such as laws to dramatically reduce our use of fossil fuels.

This weak government response has spurred citizens to demand strong action on climate change from their leaders and political candidates. Organizations like 350.org have mobilized people throughout the world to elect leaders willing to take on the fossil fuel corporations.

350.org was named for the critical safe maximum level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere (350 parts per million). During the summer of 2018, that level increased to 440 ppm.

Questions for the group:

- What is your reaction to this news?
- What reactions will you share with the whole class?

Group 2: Tariffs & Trade

A central theme of President Trump's administration is that the United States has been taken advantage of by many other countries. In response to this perceived problem, the administration has pulled away from NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, a longstanding military alliance), curtailed U.S. involvement in the UN; and moved to withdraw from trade agreements and tariffs on foreign goods.

So what are tariffs? Tariffs are taxes on imported goods and services. They are intended to protect domestic industries by making consumers pay more for imported products. Trade pacts between countries or groups of countries reduce or eliminate tariffs, encouraging more trade among them.

Since World War II and the rise of globalization, many tariffs have been eliminated under global trade agreements such as NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement). But these trade pacts have their problems. They make it easier for businesses to move to wherever wages are lowest, which can lead to shuttered factories, unemployed workers, and a downward pressure on wages in wealthier countries. These international agreements can also trump national environmental regulations, leading to environmental degradation.

Without widespread use of tariffs, countries have found other ways to protect their own industries:

- ensuring that their own currency is undervalued in order to make their products cheaper on the world market
- subsidies for specific industries to make their products more competitive
- in the case of China, requiring foreign companies doing business in China to share their technology
- imposing quotas that limit the number or amount of specific imports

A large part of Donald Trump's appeal to American workers was his promise to increase jobs by reducing the U.S. trade deficit. (A country with a trade deficit has fewer exports than imports. Producing goods for export creates jobs.) Trump began announcing selective tariffs in January 2018. Throughout the spring, he announced or threatened tariffs on such products as washing machines and solar panels, as well as steel and aluminum. In June and July, China, the European Union, Canada, and Mexico retaliated with tariffs of their own.

In a world where countries are so interconnected, the effects of tariffs are often unpredictable and unintended. Steel tariffs, for example, might boost U.S. companies producing steel, but hurt companies that use steel (such as the auto industry), because of the rising cost of steel. Similarly, a tariff on solar panels may help American solar panel manufacturers, but hurt companies that install solar panels, because prices on the panels will rise. If the tit-for-tat retaliation blows up into a full-fledged trade war, there will be many economic repercussions.

It's complicated and it's not clear that President Trump has looked beyond the immediate political value of this "America First" economic strategy.

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Group 3: Iran Nuclear Agreement

In 2015, the Obama administration, along with China, Russia and the European Union, reached an agreement with Iran to stop Iran's production of nuclear weapons. In return for removal of economic sanctions, Iran agreed to a series of steps limiting or halting research and development of uranium enrichment processes. And they agreed to international monitoring of their nuclear facilities.

During the presidential campaign, Trump made it clear that he thought the agreement was a "bad deal"—that Iran took advantage of weak negotiators, and that the world powers should have been much tougher on Iran.

On May 8, 2018, President Trump officially withdrew from the agreement and on August 6, unilateral sanctions on Iran began. Trump escalated the economic attack by promising even more sanctions and also threatening companies from other countries that defy the U.S. sanctions. While other countries in the pact say they will continue with the terms of the agreement, corporations have already begun leaving Iran, fearing U.S. retaliation. The Iranian currency has plummeted in value, prices have soared, and protests have spread in the wake of President Trump's move.

In response to Trump's move, President Emmanuel Macron of France, Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany and Prime Minister Theresa May of Britain noted that the UN Security Council resolution endorsing the nuclear deal remained the "binding international legal framework for the resolution of the dispute." Former President Obama and his Secretary of State John Kerry expressed dismay over Trump's withdrawal from the agreement, which the Obama administration had spent years trying to achieve. Kerry said in a statement: "Instead of building on unprecedented nonproliferation verification measures, this decision risks throwing them away and dragging the world back to the brink we faced a few years ago."

Underlying the decision to withdraw are these factors:

- President Trump has made it a top priority to undo President Obama's achievements. The Iran nuclear deal was Obama's biggest foreign policy accomplishment.
- Israel strongly opposed the Iran agreement and Prime Minister Netanyahu urged Trump to withdraw.
- As a regional power in the Middle East, Iran has opposed the U.S. in such places as Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon.
- Trump has surrounded himself with "hawkish" foreign policy advisors like Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor John Bolton.
- President Trump has presented himself as a top notch negotiator, and as with North Korea and NATO and our trading partners, promises that he will deliver "excellent deals."

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Group 4: Battles in Palestine

On March 30, 2018, Palestinians began a six-week campaign demanding that Palestinian refugees and their descendants be allowed to return to the land they were displaced from that is now in Israel.

On the first day of what was called the Great March of Return, thirty thousand Palestinians gathered at the wall between Israel and the Palestinian-governed region of Gaza. In response to an angry group of demonstrators (some throwing stones) in a security zone close to the wall, Israeli troops opened fire. Some 1,400 Palestinians were injured (800 from live fire) and fifteen were killed. The Israeli Army disputed the number of casualties reported by the Gaza Health Ministry and claimed that militants from the Palestinian group Hamas were armed and throwing Molotov cocktails as well as stones. What is not in dispute is that no Israelis were injured.

In the following weeks, the conflict continued: Thousand of demonstrators would gather at the wall and some would attempt to breach the wall or hurl stones or Molotov cocktails or fly burning kites over the wall. The meager weaponry was vastly mismatched against the well-equipped and trained Israeli Defense Force (IDF), with its tanks and aircraft. Doctors Without Borders called the disproportionate IDF response "inhuman and unacceptable." According to Human Rights Watch:

The use of live ammunition cannot be justified by automatically deeming every Palestinian who attempts to breach the fences to be an imminent threat to life, and in fact Israeli forces also shot medics, journalists, children, and others who were hundreds of meters away from the fences.

The protests continued into the summer. Hamas has fired rockets into Israel and Israel has used aircraft to bomb Palestinians in Gaza. By August, over 150 Palestinians had been killed and thousands (18,000 according to Gaza health officials) injured. Among the injured and dead are children, journalists, and medical personnel. At least six Israelis have been injured.

Though the fight for Palestinians' "right of return" dates back to the creation of Israel in 1948, recent events have also impacted the situation in Israel and Palestine:

- On December 6, 2017, President Trump announced that the United States would move its Israeli embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, reversing decisions by prior presidents. The embassy opened on May 14, 2018. Because East Jerusalem is part of the territories occupied by Israel after the 1967 war, the Israeli claim to the city is not recognized by the international community and the U.S. move is a deep affront to Palestinians.

- On July 18, 2018, Israel officially declared the country as a Jewish state. Included in Israel's "Basic Law" are provisions making Hebrew the official language, the menorah the official symbol, establishing Jewish holidays and the Sabbath as official days of rest, and the creation of Jewish settlements in Palestinian territories a "national value." The move was strongly opposed by the Arab population (about 20% of the total population of Israel) and by many Jews as well. According to the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, "Israel's new nation-state law is loathsome, damaging, divisive and mainly superfluous..."

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Group 5: Midterm Elections

The 2018 U.S. midterm elections will be more important than most. With the country sharply divided along party lines and the policies of the Trump administration provoking intense grassroots opposition, the battle for control of Congress looms large. Battles are also underway over control of state legislatures. These contests are especially important this year, since state governments will be responsible for redrawing congressional district lines based on the 2020 U.S. Census. (The drawing and “gerrymandering” of district lines affects which party is most likely to prevail in a district.)

Who wins in the midterm elections depends on voters, and the extent to which everyday people speak out, organize, vote, and encourage others to vote for particular candidates. Some commentators argue that Democrats may have an edge in the 2018 elections, since historically the party holding the presidency loses seats in Congress in the first midterm elections of the administration. In addition, turnout in Democratic primaries has been high.

Both major parties have faced challenges from their populist wings. The establishment Republicans have maintained control of their party for decades despite the efforts of the “Tea Party” faction to assert themselves nationally. Donald Trump, who won the 2016 nomination with virtually no support from the Republican establishment, has held sway since his election. His control of the party stems less from his political ideology (which is inconsistent) than from his loyal base of supporters. The Party leaders are attaining policy goals long on the Republican wish list (such as lower taxes, especially for the wealthy, and fewer regulations on business) and many choose not to challenge Trump’s actions for fear of alienating followers. The result has been a near complete capture of the Republican Party.

The fight within the Democratic Party is ongoing. The insurgency represented by Bernie Sanders’ 2016 presidential candidacy was an enormous boost for the progressive wing of the party. The campaign:

- Made the label “socialist” acceptable to millions of Americans for the first time in one hundred years
- Energized large numbers of young people who had never before participated in the political process
- Drew support in states not considered friendly to Democrats (such as Alaska, Idaho, Nebraska)
- Established “Medicare for All” and a \$15 per hour minimum wage as popular Democratic positions
- Proved that large numbers of small donations could compete against the big money contributions.

There has been a surge of left-leaning candidates in Democratic primaries. They are winning fewer races than establishment candidates in head-to-head primary battles, but the progressive agenda is increasingly adopted by Democratic candidates of all stripes. Medicare For All—a plan to insure every American not through their employer but through the federal government’s Medicare program—used to be a considered a policy supported only by the party’s progressive wing. It is now endorsed by one third of establishment candidates. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez won a primary race to represent a Congressional district in New York City, defeating a long-time incumbent. She has become a symbol of the left insurgency: a young, left woman of color who is outspoken, allied with Senator Sanders, and also with the Democratic Socialist of America. According to an article in Vox, progressive candidates accounted for almost 40 percent of non-incumbents running in midterm primaries. The burgeoning of progressive groups (including Our Revolution, Justice Democrats, and Democratic Socialists of America) organizing inside and outside the electoral process almost ensures that the fight within the Democratic Party will continue past the elections in November.

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Group 6: Mueller Investigation

Scarcely a day goes by without some news relating to the investigation by the U.S. Justice Department's Special Counsel Robert Mueller into Russian interference in American politics. Mueller was given broad authority to investigate efforts by the Russian government to influence American elections.

These efforts have included:

- use of bots and fake accounts to bombard social media with pro-Trump messages
- use of social media to intensify existing political divisions in the U.S.
- gaining influence among political leaders through direct contacts and through influential organizations like the National Rifle Association
- the use of Russian loans to buy influence in the Trump circle of businesses
- attempts to hack the electoral apparatus

As of August 2018, the investigation has uncovered evidence of the Russian campaign and has charged Russian nationals with cyber crimes and several Americans with campaign violations and lying to the FBI.

Some developments in the investigation, as of August 2018.

- On August 21, 2018, Michael Cohen, President Trump's longtime personal attorney and self-described "fixer," pled guilty to eight counts of breaking tax, banking and campaign finance laws. Cohen's most striking testimony was that during the 2016 presidential campaign, then-candidate Donald Trump directed him to pay hush money in exchange for two women's silence about alleged affairs. Cohen said the payments were meant to influence the 2016 election. Cohen now faces up to five years in prison.
- Also on August 21, Paul Manafort, the former manager of President Trump's campaign, was convicted of five counts of tax fraud, two counts of bank fraud, and one count of failure to disclose a foreign bank account. The jury was unable to reach a verdict on the remaining 10 counts. Manafort had built a career out of lobbying governments and consulting with politicians. In fact, Manafort's firm pioneered the combination of lobbying and consulting, which had always been separate specialties. Manafort would first serve as a consultant to help candidates get elected, and then get paid by corporations to lobby those same officials for favorable legislation. His firm was enormously successful in attracting large corporate clients, amassing influential "friends" inside presidential administrations, and getting his political clients (Republicans and Democrats) elected. Hundreds of millions of dollars passed through his firm from arms dealers and foreign dictators.
- In an upcoming second trial, Manafort will be tried for money laundering, illegal lobbying, and witness tampering. Because of Manafort's long relationship with the pro-Russian Ukrainian president, this trial may connect some of the dots between the Trump campaign and Russian interference in the 2016 election.
- The Trump Tower Meeting: In June 2016, three top officials of the Trump campaign (Paul Manafort, Donald Trump Jr., and Jared Kushner) met with Russian operatives in order to get "dirt" on Hillary Clinton. Everyone involved in the meeting has changed their story about the meeting after it became news. Since the Mueller investigation is focused on Russian/American collusion to elect Trump, this meeting is central to the case.

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