Green activists quit DC rally over inclusion of Jewish groups backing Israel

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The Washington DC branch of a national climate action group turned down a role at a voting rights rally because a “number of Zionist organizations” will be taking part.

“Given our commitment to racial justice, self-governance and indigenous sovereignty, we oppose Zionism and any state that enforces its ideology,” Sunrise DC said in a statement it posted Tuesday on Twitter.

The group named the National Council of Jewish Women, the Reform movement’s Religious Action Center and the Jewish Council for Public Affairs as groups supporting Israel, which Sunrise DC called a “colonial project.”

The Freedom to Vote Relay-Rally on Saturday features a bike ride to the US Capitol from West Virginia, the home state of Senate Democrat Joe Manchin, who is sponsoring a voting rights act named “Freedom to Vote.”

The Jewish Telegraphic Agency has asked the Sunrise Movement, a youth group garnering attention [for its advocacy to stem human-caused climate change](https://www.newsweek.com/activists-sleep-outside-kyrsten-sinemas-office-demanding-action-climate-change-1640457), whether it endorses the statement by its DC chapter. The national group is not listed among the groups joining the rally, although its West Virginia chapter appears to be participating. Sunrise Movement has not responded.

Sunrise DC called for one of the rally’s main organizers, Declaration for American Democracy, to remove the three Jewish groups from a coalition it has put together. Not mentioned in the Sunrise DC statement are two other Jewish groups belonging to the same coalition, Bend the Arc and Workers Circle.

Bend the Arc has no position on Israel and Workers Circle backs the two-state solution, but has been highly critical of Israel, and has called on the US government to [condition aid to Israel on its human rights record.](https://www.circle.org/news/workers-circle-israelpalestine-statement)

Notably, the Declaration for American Democracy coalition includes at least two groups that are highly critical of Israel, the Arab American Institute and Code Pink; neither group appears to have objected to joining in a coalition with the three Jewish groups named by Sunrise DC.

All three Jewish groups cited by Sunrise DC have long-established records of pro-Israel advocacy but have in recent years devoted much of their focus on domestic issues. The three groups all back the two-state outcome; NCJW and the Reform movement’s RAC have sister groups in Israel that advocate for the rights of minorities and for women.

Each of the groups said in statements to JTA that they would not be deterred from attending the rally on Saturday.

“National Council of Jewish Women works for the safety and wellbeing of Americans, Israelis, and Palestinians,” said its CEO, Sheila Katz. “We fight for access to the ballot, an end to gender-based violence, increased equity, and for women to build power despite systemic barriers at every turn. All of this work is done in the coalition, often led by impacted communities, to center those with lived experiences. Our commitment to working across lines of difference includes our willingness to engage in dialogue with groups that take issue with our policies. Let’s move forward together to advance human rights and dignity for all people.”

JCPA, the umbrella group for Jewish public policy groups, and Reform’s RAC have in recent years emphasized voting rights advocacy. “In keeping with our 77-year history, JCPA will continue our ongoing engagement on voting rights efforts in coalition with interfaith and diverse communities, including our involvement in the freedom to vote rally and in support of fair, free and accessible elections for all people,” said its senior vice president, Melanie Gorelick.

Rabbi Jonah Pesner, RAC’s director, said it was “unfortunate that any organization would refuse to join together to protect voting rights. The work of our coalition to ensure that every American has access to the right to vote is too important not to remain in partnership as we push Congress to act. As an organization committed to social justice and our progressive Zionist values, we will continue to work toward the passage of comprehensive voting rights legislation.”

Rep. Jerry Nadler, D-New York, the chairman of the US House of Representatives and a leading voting rights advocate in Congress, also weighed in. “Refusing to participate in civic life with Jewish groups — especially those groups who are committed to social justice here in the US, in Israel and around the world — is misguided, unproductive, offensive and wrong,” he said on Twitter.

Anti-Defamation League head Jonathan Greenblatt tweeted that the appeal by Sunrise DC was “antisemitic — plain and simple.”

“This is the vilification of Jewish nationhood and a litmus test for all who support it,” he wrote.