

# Progress on Climate Change in DC: The Untold Story

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*October 29, 2018*

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To help me tell my untold story, I start by describing Citizens' Climate Lobby (CCL), which I help direct, and how our volunteers interact with the United States Congress, who represent and work for us American citizens. I finish by describing some goals of our advocacy organization and some major conclusions related to my story.

## CITIZENS' CLIMATE LOBBY

CCL is an organization that has two rules. The first is to create the political will for a livable world. The second is to empower our volunteers to experience breakthroughs in exercising their personal and political power. Creation of anything is hard, but to create political will is especially hard. We acknowledge this up front and accept doing the hard work required. A livable world, albeit subject to interpretation, is a high standard to reach, and we are not there yet.

To empower our volunteers to experience breakthroughs in exercising their personal and political power, we push them to the edge of, or even beyond, their comfort zone. After our volunteers experience such challenges, we de-brief them. We talk about what they could have done differently and what they could do better next time. Then we make sure that they continue to tackle all of the demands of being a CCL volunteer and get uncomfortable all over again. Our volunteers often find that they can stretch their comfort zone even further than before. I believe that this kind of personal growth and transformation is necessary to create the political will for a livable world.

Unlike many other advocacy organizations, CCL has only one policy priority: the passage of a Carbon Fee and Dividend Policy by the United States Congress. We believe this to be the best first step to a livable world. It is not the last thing. It is not the only thing. It is the best first step to a livable world. Also, we have one rule: if you cannot express appreciation and respect for the person you are meeting with, then you cannot call yourself a CCL volunteer. Let us unpack that. For our Oklahoma volunteers, this means that they meet with Senator James Inhofe. Perhaps one of the most, if not the most, notorious climate denier in the country, he called climate change the biggest hoax ever perpetrated on the American

people and in winter threw a snowball in the Senate chamber to demonstrate his views. We require our volunteers to find something they genuinely appreciate about Senator Inhofe before they visit his office. Then, yes, they actually have to say to his staff what they appreciate about the work that they are doing. For climate advocates, that is asking a lot.

These acts of appreciation accomplish two useful objectives. First, it makes our volunteers figure out “what do I appreciate?” It makes them go through the hard work of finding common ground before their meeting with congressional staff has even started. By expressing that common ground, they greatly facilitate productive discussions. Second, it surprises the heck out of James Inhofe’s staff. They are not expecting a group called Citizens’ Climate Lobby to come in and say “thank you” for anything. They are expecting to be yelled at, and what happens when humans see something that they do not expect is that they focus on it more. They pay more attention. By finding common ground and snapping congressional staff members out of their expectations, our volunteers encourage the staff to pay closer attention, and that is better for both sides for arriving at a mutually beneficial understanding and moving things forward.

What is the Carbon Fee and Dividend Policy that we advocate? The government would put a carbon fee of \$15 per ton of carbon dioxide equivalence on fossil fuel burning, which would increase by \$10 per ton per year. That is a pretty aggressive rate of increase. A full 100% of the net revenues would be returned monthly as a dividend to households: a full share per adult and a half share per child, up to two children per household. There would also be a border carbon adjustment, which prevents leakage. “Leakage” is when companies relocate carbon-intensive production processes abroad so the same amount, or more, is emitted. Carbon-intensive goods, the result of such processes, coming into the United States would have the same price put on them as carbon-intensive goods produced in the United States. Carbon-intensive goods exported from the United States would get a rebate. The idea again is so we do not have leakage.

What are the benefits of the Carbon Fee and Dividend Policy? We anticipate that this policy would create 2,800,000 net jobs (jobs gained minus jobs lost) after twenty years. As a result, the economy would become \$1.374 trillion larger, and we would have 227,000 fewer premature deaths. For me, this is very important. I actually came to this issue via an interest in medicine. I wanted to be a doctor. Somebody convinced me that if you want to help people, you should pursue a career in public health because preventing a wound is better than putting a bandage on it. I took a geology class and realized how much a poorly cared for environment makes people sick. That statistic about 227,000 fewer deaths, therefore, means a lot to me. Taking care of the environment is the most fundamental form of public health. We would end up with carbon emissions of 50% of the 1990 levels within twenty years. That is pretty good.

How does our organization measure itself? We are an advocacy organization that has 419 chapters with over 100,000 people in the United States. What are these people doing? A major focus is meeting with members of Congress. So far in 2018, we have had 881 meetings, 20% of which have been face to face with a representative or a senator. We will have another few hundred meetings in November 2018. That number of meetings will climb. Many students from Juniata College will be joining us. Many of our volunteers write opinion pieces for local papers. By October 2018, 372 have been published. There are only 365 days in a year, so that is better than one per day.

In 2018, our volunteers published 2,538 letters to the editor. When I first joined CCL, I did not know what a letter to the editor was. I did not care, but I care a lot now. I know that members of Congress are reading their local papers every day, or their staff reads them every day. They read those letters to the editor to keep their fingers on the pulse of their districts so they can represent them well. Letters to the editor are a great way to train yourself if you are an advocate. Forcing yourself to publish an idea with only 150 to 200 words focuses the mind and helps one practice what to say. When you are in a discussion with someone who disagrees with you, you then have the response ready. If your letter is published, your representative in Congress can read it, thus drawing attention to your idea.

Our 2,507 outreach events are diverse, including talks, presentations, and tabling events similar to Juniata College's Lobsterfest. Not only do we have chapters in the United States but also around the world. In fact, our most successful chapters right now include those of our Canadian brothers and sisters. A couple of years ago, Prime Minister Trudeau announced that there would be a national carbon price in Canada. The provinces could figure out how they wanted to comply with that, but they needed to get to fifty dollars per ton of CO<sub>2</sub> by 2022. In October 2018, it was announced that for those provinces that did not develop a plan, the federal government would impose on them a carbon fee and dividend plan. That has been a huge success for our Canadian friends.

In addition, our legislative success has been noteworthy. We were told that forming a Climate Solutions Caucus would be impossible, yet it was formed two and a half years ago. A caucus is a group of Congress members formalized by filed paperwork. Caucus members talk occasionally, some more than others. About half of the members of Congress are in a Wine Caucus. I do not think they meet. When they do meet, I do not think they get much done. In contrast, the Climate Solutions Caucus is one of those caucuses that does get stuff done, even though this was supposed to be impossible. I was told you would never get a Democrat and Republican in the House to sit down for a caucus. Even if they would, they would not use climate in the name. Here we are two and half years later, and we have ninety members: forty-five Republicans and forty-five Democrats in the Climate Solutions Caucus. By the way, that is more Republicans than there are in the Freedom Caucus. That is a big deal.

The other success that I point to is the twenty-four cosponsors of House Resolution 195. They are all Republicans, and this nonbinding resolution says climate change is real, humans have an impact, and Congress should do something about it. Again, this was supposed to have been impossible. Eleven Republicans in the last Congress introduced the resolution with seventeen eventually supporting it. After seven of those members left Congress, ten returning members reintroduced it, and now the number of supporting members in this Congress has more than doubled. This is some of the progress that we are making.

## THE PEOPLE OF CONGRESS

Much of our work involves meeting with people in Congress. Believe it or not, Congress members and their staffs are actually normal people. They are passionate people who get overwhelmed, care about their families, and want to do good in the world. They may disagree with each other and us about what “good” looks like, but that is why they are there. Like us, they only have 24 hours in a day, and their job is hard. They are deserving of your appreciation, your respect, and indeed your sympathy. If you have not worked on Capitol Hill, how do you know what their job is like? How do we know who these people are and what they are doing? Most of what we think we know comes from television, movies, the news, and how Congress presents itself. Think about that for a second.

Television and movies are products intended to sell. Directors and producers of these products are focused on attracting viewers. What are their constraints? Well, in a half hour, an hour, or two hours, they need to get you to care about the characters who are portrayed. They need to create tension and crisis. Then they need to resolve that crisis, all within short timeframes. These shows and movies have to be interesting and have characters that you can care about in a limited time. That might result in characters who seem to have superhuman knowledge, knowledge that no human could actually gain about a wide variety of topics. They need to have very interesting lives. They are going to walk and talk, even though science says humans are not good at multitasking. Whether on our BlackBerries in meetings or walking down the hall, we humans are not good at that. I would ask you to consider whether our view of what Congress does is colored by what we see in movies and television. These unrealistic perceptions are not conducive to getting things done.

Even the people of Congress are influenced by on-screen portrayals of themselves. They think that if they are not on their BlackBerries and not texting all the time, then they are doing their job poorly. They think that if they do not know everything about a wide range of topics like fictional people in movies and television shows, then they are failing. That is unfair. I ask you to consider, “Why do I think I know some specific thing about a congressional staff member? What do I think I know, and is that fair to

them? Are they really super humans, or are they like me, my friends, and my neighbors? Do they have the same limitations?”

Even on the news, members of Congress present themselves in a particular way. Even for a member of Congress, particularly a representative, getting time on the news is difficult. It is a precious commodity. When you are on TV, you want to make it count. You want to make an impression. You want to lean towards the sensational, and that might not be how you really are. Congress is presenting themselves in a way that is not accurate. It is how they think they should be acting or how they think you think they should be acting. This might not be conducive to actually getting things done.

So what do staffers in Congress actually do? They work fifty- to seventy-hour weeks in a very fast-paced environment. They switch topics very quickly. Meetings that we have average a half hour, and then another group comes in with a meeting on a completely different topic. Staffers work in cramped conditions in Washington DC offices. I have had many hallway meetings; there is just not enough room in the congressional office. We have to go into the marble or granite hallways that echo and make it difficult to hear sometimes. By law, the number of House staff has not changed since the 1970s. Yet in the last decade, each office has received between a 200% to 1,000% increase in constituent mail. I do not know about you, but in the 1970s, forget the Internet and texting; they were still catching up with VCRs and minivans. I mean this. The world has become enormously more complex since the last time Congress was allowed a staff increase. Their job is really hard. The average age is twenty-seven. This means that twenty-seven-year-olds are running our country. I do not know if that makes you feel better or worse, but, nonetheless, it is the truth. I think that they are deserving of your appreciation and respect.

## CHANGING POLITICAL VIEWS ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE

Now consider the current political landscape. After the 2016 election, there was a bit of a crisis for many environmental groups. The newly elected president has clearly not been environmentally friendly. He has opposed the Clean Power Plan developed by the Obama Administration in response to the endangerment finding of the Supreme Court that the Clean Air Act did, in fact, include the ability to regulate greenhouse gases. Environmental groups had dedicated much of their attention, staff, and resources to the implementation of this plan. When it became clear this was not going to happen, it took about a year for many environmental groups to figure out how they would then spend their time and resources that had previously been invested in an administrative policy that was now precluded.

There are some options. One can decide to focus on the international, national, or state levels. I like to think of the environmental community as an ecosystem. Similar to a natural ecosystem, the environmental community includes different organizations filling different niches, the more the better.

The more diverse the environmental community, the more resistant it will be to shocks like the 2016 election.

What has changed? This is the untold story. After the 2016 election, twelve Republicans were outspoken on climate. They were either members of the Climate Solutions Caucus or advocates of House Resolution 195, and they had won reelection. Most of them were outspoken before their primaries. If you are familiar with politics, you know that currently many Republicans are more worried about being challenged from the right in their primary election than they are about their general election. Prior to the 2016 election, the assumption had been that if Republicans were outspoken on climate, there would be a Koch brothers funded challenger from the right who would endanger their continued participation in Congress. With twelve Republicans coming back, we now know that did not happen. In essence, in making the assumption that money would be spent in primaries where Republicans were outspoken on climate but not testing this, people were willing to subsidize the Koch brothers. By helping Republicans find the political will to challenge this assumption, CCL dared the Koch brothers to spend this money in a primary, and they did not spend it.

In the next Congress, even if we have the bluest of blue waves, we are guaranteed to have 14 Republicans coming back. These are safe Republican seats that are likely to remain Republican for the foreseeable future. They are also Republicans talking about climate change constructively. That is a base on which you can build. We are changing expectations. This group of Republicans in Congress is breaking with public perception of what it means to be a Republican today. I think that this is hugely significant.

In 2016, the Climate Solutions Caucus had ten Republicans and ten Democrats. After the 2016 election, it had only six Republicans and nine Democrats due to retirements and lost elections. Then before the 115th Congress even started at the start of 2017, three new Republicans had joined, erasing the disparity and bringing the membership came back to even. Now the caucus has forty-five members from each party.

House Resolution 195 is the one that says climate change is real, humans have had an impact, and Congress should do something about it. At the end of 2016, we had seventeen co-sponsors on this resolution, all Republicans, representing eight states and including two members of the Freedom Caucus (aka the Tea Party), which is significant. People might assume that if you are a member of the Tea Party, you definitely do not care about climate change. However, that is not true.

At the start of the new Congress in 2017, ten of those seventeen Republicans returned. The resolution now has twenty-four co-sponsors representing twelve states. We are broadening the dialogue around climate to include more perspectives. The Climate Solutions Caucus is a place for respectful discussion on policies between the parties. How many places are there in today's politics on any issue

where Republicans and Democrats can sit down and speak to each other, trying to find solutions on anything? I told you that if you meet even once in your caucus, you are doing pretty well. The Climate Solutions Caucus has one member-level meeting per quarter. They have also had several delegations, and they are sharing relevant bills and gathering co-sponsors to help get them passed. This is how legislation moves. You introduce it, gather co-sponsors and a record of support, and then, in the next Congress (since most bills must be introduced in several consecutive Congresses before they pass), go back and get more. The caucus shares relevant legislation by encouraging bipartisan exchange of ideas, which helps these bills move forward, gather momentum, and ultimately get passed.

The Climate Solutions Caucus also makes progress with votes, and I will highlight some examples. House Joint Resolution 36 was a measure about methane leakage. Eleven Republicans took the pro-environmental vote on that resolution. Then there was an amendment to House Resolution 2810, the National Defense Authorization Act. Forty-six Republicans, including twenty-two out of twenty-four in the Climate Solutions Caucus at the time, voted saying the military should be able to account for climate change in their long-term planning. This is so far the only vote that the caucus chairmen have actually whipped their membership on, and they got twenty-two out of twenty-four to take the right vote. One member was not present, and the other one voted the wrong way. What are you going to do?

The law of the land now includes bills that the caucus proposed. They asked their membership to get co-sponsors, and now two of those bills have become law and been signed by the president. Both of these were incorporated into the Budget Act. The Technologies for Energy Security Act uses tax credits for technologies such as geo-thermal, small wind, and combined heat and power to bring more of these to market for commercial and residential use. The Carbon Capture Act permanently extends the Section 45Q tax credit, a section of the tax code that provides a tax credit for carbon capture and sequestration.

For those of you who have read the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report,<sup>1</sup> or at least the policymakers' summary, one of the things I am sure you noticed is that it emphasizes carbon capture and sequestration. The mission of this report was to compare the realities of a world 1.5°C warmer than before the Industrial Revolution to a world 2°C warmer than before the Industrial Revolution because that is where the temperature target had been. The report laid out some scenarios where the world actually overshoots 1.5°C, but then it comes back by pulling emitted CO<sub>2</sub> out of the atmosphere. That is accomplished using bioenergy and carbon capture and sequestration. There has been a hesitance around using carbon capture and sequestration technologies, but the message from the scientific community is that we are past the point of cuddly options. This is something that I want to really emphasize. What is all this building to? Why is it significant? What is the task that is necessary?

What I communicate to our CCL volunteers is that we are going to need sixty votes in the Senate to get the Carbon Fee and Dividend Bill passed. For the foreseeable future, that means eight to twelve

Republicans need to vote pro-climate and for relevant Carbon Fee and Dividend bills in order for our volunteers to be successful. If we are doing that, we will need a large majority of the American population to believe that climate change is real, that humans have had an impact on the climate, and that Congress should do something about it. How do we do that?

Important guidance can be found in a recent study published in the journal *Environmental Politics* that examines how American opinions about climate change shifted from 2002 to 2013.<sup>2</sup> In this study, the authors examined five factors and one control, and the factor that they found that had the largest effect on public opinion was elite cues. The authors defined an elite as a member of Congress. Thus, an elite cue is an action taken by a member of Congress that regular people respect and use to inform their own opinions. Regular people, who have jobs and kids and are trying to put food on the table, do not have enough time to study all the issues. They use elites as people to trust and with whom to identify. They believe that “I am like that person. That person shares my values. Whatever they say on this issue is how I am voting.” In this study, the elite cues of the members of Congress had the largest effect on public belief or disbelief in climate change.

The Climate Solutions Caucus and House resolutions are elite cues. I am looking to the fourteen safe Republicans who are coming back next Congress for elite cues. I am looking to them to make conservatives feel that they can be conservative and conserve. I am looking at them to suck the poison out of this issue and to insert a little bit of gray into this. Black and white politics are no fun. There is no room for compromise. You need gray in politics. You need surprises. You cannot know everything about every position that a person is going to have when they walk in the door.

In the above study, the second most impactful factor identified was movement/countermovement advocacy like that carried out by CCL. The third most important factor was media coverage, but this was largely explained by the combination of the two factors already mentioned. Surprisingly, extreme weather events, such as Hurricane Katrina, had no effect on public opinion. Unfortunately, public access to accurate scientific information also had no effect on public opinion. All of these effects or non-effects were observed after controlling for economic factors because it is known that oil prices and how the economy is doing affect people's belief in climate change.

## FUTURE GOALS FOR CITIZENS' CLIMATE LOBBY

Now that my untold story is told, how does it bear on my vision for the future goals of CCL? First, I want to build upon the insights of the environmental sociologist Robert Brulle and colleagues to de-politicize discussions about climate change. I do not want the American public to pre-judge the opinions that Republicans have about climate change. I want us all to think a Republican wants to do something about climate change. I think we need to do something that matches the scale of the problem.



Second, I want to increase the number of Republicans introducing, voting for, and passing pro-climate bills. To achieve substantive action, Republican votes in the Senate must reach sixty or more to overcome a filibuster. I want to force the Republican leadership and funders to make a choice. They can defend their majority or enforce the current party line. For example, if the Koch brothers are going to drop money to enforce their party line that “no Republicans back climate change,” there will be political casualties. Republicans will lose to Democrats if they encourage this behavior. Like Roy Moore in Alabama, they will become unelectable, and that is going to cost them on their other priorities. Right now, they are starting to have to make that choice. I want to force Republican leadership and funders to make that choice. As a result, Republicans will be unable to deny climate change if they want to continue to be elected. The way we do that is by getting more Republicans to be outspoken on climate. I want them to introduce pro-climate bills such as the Carbon Fee and Dividend bill.<sup>3</sup>

## SUMMARY

There are real people in Congress, and they do a very difficult job. We may have a bias against Congress because we are getting our information through the filter of movie and television directors and producers. We perceive financial motives that do not reflect reality or the way things should be done to actually accomplish what this country needs. Recent action by congressional Republicans on climate change may signal a critical opportunity to depoliticize this controversial issue and get something substantive done.

## NOTES

1. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2018, “Summary for Policymakers,” in Valérie Masson-Delmotte, Panmao Zhai, Hans-Otto Pörtner, Debra Roberts, Jim Skea, Priyadarshi R. Shukla, Anna Pirani, Wilfran Moufouma-Okia, Clotilde Péan, Roz Pidcock, Sarah Connors, J. B. Robin Matthews, Yang Chen, Xiao Zhou, Melissa I. Gomis, Elisabeth Lonnoy, Tom Maycock, Melinda Tignor, and Tim Waterfield, eds. *Global Warming of 1.5°C: An IPCC Special Report on the Impacts of Global Warming of 1.5°C above Pre-Industrial Levels and Related Global Greenhouse Gas Emission Pathways, in the Context of Strengthening the Global Response to the Threat of Climate Change, Sustainable Development, and Efforts to Eradicate Poverty* (Geneva, Switzerland: World Meteorological Organization, 2019), pp. 3-24, <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>.
2. Jason T. Carmichael and Robert J. Brulle, “Elite Cues, Media Coverage, and Public Concern: An Integrated Path Analysis of Public Opinion on Climate Change, 2001–2013,” *Environmental Politics*, 26 (2017): 232.
3. Since I gave this talk, three bipartisan carbon fee and dividend bills have been introduced. They are HR 7173 in the House in the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress, S. 3791 in the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress, and H.R. 763 in the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress.