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5 Reasons Republicans Are Warming To Climate Action, And When They Will Act

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If the federal government ever takes meaningful action to combat climate change, political strategists say, it's going to have to be led by Republicans.

"Any conversation about moving forward on the climate front is basically a conversation about moving the Republican Party from where they are into a better place," said Jerry Taylor, a lifelong conservative and policy analyst who spent 23 years at the conservative Cato Institute before founding the libertarian Niskanen Center in 2015.

That's because Republican opposition can scuttle climate legislation even if the Democrats take the White House and both houses of Congress in 2020, Taylor said. History is full of examples of majority party failures: the failure of the Waxman-Markey bill in 2010, the failure of Republicans to repeal Obamacare last year.

"It's extremely hard for a political party to enact its agenda without a significant degree of bipartisan support," Taylor said in a [webinar](#) hosted by the Security and Sustainability Forum. "The Republican Party are the blocking agents on climate policy. We would have maybe an unsatisfactory climate policy were it not for Republican opposition, but we would have some kind of climate policy. The reason we don't is the institutional position of the GOP."

But cracks are widening in that institutional position. Republican elder statesmen led by James Baker and George P. Schultz have proposed a [carbon dividend](#) plan that would tax carbon pollution and return the proceeds to taxpayers, and Republican support for their proposal appears to be growing as the following five developments press Republicans toward climate action:

1 The Obvious

"There is increasing recognition that climate change is real even in Republican ranks," Taylor said, which is why Republican denialism has evolved from denial of change to denial of its cause.

How To Get Closer To Increasingly Complex, Yet Highly Predictable Customers

If climate change is like a coming hurricane, said Democratic Senator Sheldon Whitehouse, then we're now experiencing landfall. There's an "increasing sense of urgency and risk among people like coastal realtors who weren't really interested in this before," Whitehouse said.

In 2016, Freddie Mac warned of a collapse in coastal property values, and in 2018 that collapse began to appear as realized losses in eight Atlantic states.

"On the Republican side," said Ted Halstead of the Climate Leadership Council, "there's just only so long that the GOP can keep denying the obvious and positioning itself on the wrong side of history."

2 Businesses Want Something Done

The Climate Leadership Council has assembled a coalition of leading corporations in support of the Baker-Schultz carbon dividend—including BP, Exelon, Exxon-Mobil, Johnson & Johnson, GM, Shell, Total, Unilever, Pepsi and MetLife. The Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures has pressed thousands of corporations worldwide to disclose and mitigate climate risk and hundreds of them have joined the effort.

"More and more, corporate America is stepping up because they realize that we need a national solution," Halstead said. "The Republican Party has usually been the party of business. It would be nice if they listened to business because business wants a climate solution."

3 Green Energy Is Big Business

Renewable energy is now a larger industry than the coal industry, with more employees and more revenue, Taylor said. Many renewable energy businesses are becoming powerful players in red states, like wind energy in Texas.

"It's always been the party of business," Taylor said, "so it's important we're creating green-energy businesses because they're natural feeders into the Republican Party."

4 Millennials

The Climate Leadership Council's polling has found that support for the Baker-Schultz Carbon Dividend is as high among young Republicans as it is among young Democrats. Twenty-three college Republican groups have joined campus Democrats and Environmental groups in Students for Carbon Dividends, Halstead said.

"Another thing that gives me hope is the Millennial generation," he said, "which is about to be the largest voting cohort. The millennials care deeply about climate policy, and the GOP cannot be the party of the future without the voting block of the future."

Taylor considers climate the issue that Republicans can use to appeal to Millennial voters. It's easier for Republicans to move on climate than on issues like gun control or immigration, he said, where they are more bound to their positions by the NRA and by white identity politics.

"Republican voters are old and dying off. They're being replaced by Millennials slowly and surely and they care a lot more about this issue."

5 Deniers Are Losing Power

As Trump has moved the party closer to white working-class voters, the power of corporations that have traditionally opposed climate action has weakened, according to Taylor.

"The coalitional actors that demand denialism in the Republican party—by that I mean the coal industry, the oil industry, the Koch Brothers operations—they are all losing power within the party," he said, as demonstrated by their failure to budge Trump trade and immigration.

That doesn't mean climate action will happen under Trump. Trump is still rhetorically committed to the coal and oil industries, and he likes to surround himself with coal miners at rallies and photo ops. But the weakening of denialists could pay off once Trump departs the office, and both Taylor and Halstead are looking toward 2020 as the next best opening for political progress on climate.

"So long as Donald Trump's in the White House it's unlikely you'll see a lot of Republicans breaking on this topic," Taylor said. "In the course of thinking about what the prospects might be for carbon pricing I think we have to acknowledge that they're not very good. We're in the political wilderness, as it were, and likely to remain in the political wilderness until Donald Trump is not in the White House."

Nonetheless, Halstead expects to see the Baker-Schultz carbon dividend before Congress in 2019. A new non-profit, Americans for Carbon Dividends, co-chaired by former Senate Republican Leader Trent Lott, is meeting with members of Congress to line up co-sponsors for a bill. They'll be targeting potentially sympathetic GOP senators like the 13 who sent a letter to Trump in June urging him to approve a climate-related amendment to the Montreal Protocol.

"What we've been able to do over the last year is build a surprisingly broad coalition around a concrete end game," Halstead said. "In terms of timing, our hope is that a bill along the lines of what we're proposing is introduced somewhere in the middle of next year, with a number of Republican cosponsors not only in the Senate but in the House as well."