



What Killed Climate Change Legislation?

JOHN HUDSON - OCTOBER 23RD, 2012

The presidential debates are over and to the chagrin of earthly-minded individuals, the topic of global warming was roundly ignored by the moderators and both candidates. The lack of discussion wasn't due to a sinister corporate plot, but the reality that no climate legislation is even remotely in the works in Congress, and few foresee it happening anytime soon. How come? As *New York Times* columnist [David Brooks](#) pointed out last week, the outlook wasn't always so grim: "The period around 2003 was the golden spring of green technology. John McCain and Joe Lieberman introduced a bipartisan bill to curb global warming ... You'd go to Silicon Valley and all the venture capitalists, it seemed, were rushing into clean tech." Now, any sense of optimism is considered naive. So what killed climate change legislation?

Republicans. It's impossible to start a checklist any other way than with the Republican Party, which has shifted its position on climate change dramatically in recent years away from government fixes aimed at curbing carbon emissions. This is most clearly visible by comparing the GOP platform in [2008](#) [PDF] to the one in [2012](#) [PDF]. It might seem surprising, but just four years ago, the GOP had a lengthy section on "Addressing Climate Change Responsibly":

The same human economic activity that has brought freedom and opportunity to billions has also increased the amount of carbon in the atmosphere. While the scope and longterm consequences of this are the subject of ongoing scientific research, common sense dictates that the United States should take measured and reasonable steps today to reduce any impact on the environment. Those steps, if consistent with our global

competitiveness will also be good for our national security, our energy independence, and our economy.

That platform came at a time when John McCain supported a cap-and-trade program as a presidential candidate and Republican Senator John Warner was co-sponsoring a bill to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions. But fast forward to 2012 and the aforementioned section is nowhere to be seen on the platform language. Gone. Erased. In its place is a platform that opposes "any and all cap and trade legislation" and urges Congress to "take quick action to prohibit the EPA from moving forward with new greenhouse gas regulations." So there you have it, in the span of four years, a transition from tepid openness to united resistance, which created an environment where only a filibuster-proof majority could break the partisan gridlock.

Al Gore Then you might ask, why did Republicans sour on the idea of climate legislation? In his column, David Brooks offered an answer that some have accepted but many find unjustifiable: Al Gore made the issue of climate change politically toxic with the release of his 2006 documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*. Per Brooks:

The global warming issue became associated with the highly partisan former vice president. Gore mobilized liberals, but, once he became the global warming spokesman, no Republican could stand shoulder to shoulder with him and survive. Any slim chance of building a bipartisan national consensus was gone.

In response to Brooks's theory, The Washington Post's Ezra Klein doesn't find it necessarily wrong, but finds Brooks's lack of condemnation of the GOP "astonishing." "This isn't a story of overreach, misjudgements, and disappointment," he writes. "It's a story of Republicans putting raw partisanship and a dislike for Al Gore in front of the planet's best interests." But surely, others soured the mood as well.

Industry-funded research. One contributor to the shifting mood on climate change is the rise of climate skeptics who contend that the burning of fossil fuels is not causing climate change. Many climate skeptics have become targets of green groups who've pointed out funding ties to entities such as the Koch brothers, whose subsidiaries own refineries, oil pipelines, and coal and cement transportation systems. Writing for Yale, Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway have a lengthy analysis of this movement led by think tanks such as the CATO Institute and American Enterprise Institute. "In the case of global warming, there is strong evidence that this contrarian campaign is enjoying success, with recent polls showing that more than half of Americans are not particularly worried about the issue and that fully 40 percent believe there is major disagreement among scientists about whether climate change is even occurring," they write. "This confusion is no doubt due, at least in part,

to the persistent campaigns of obfuscation by the Competitive Enterprise Institute and other global warming deniers who use right-wing talk radio, the Internet, and television programs such as Fox News to propagate their message of doubt."

Barack Obama. It's easy to forget that early on in his first term, President Obama enjoyed a filibuster-proof majority in Congress. Why didn't he move to pass climate legislation? As a candidate, he told voters during his second debate with John McCain that energy policy would be his first priority when entering office, ahead of health care. "That would be priority number one. Health care is priority number two," he told NBC's Tom Brokaw. In his first term, however, he exhausted his political capital in his effort to pass health care reform, which coincided with the ascendance of Massachusetts Sen. Scott Brown taking over Ted Kennedy's Senate seat and breaking the filibuster-proof majority. Now, Obama was able to set aside \$90 billion for renewable energy loans and grants, but while the program has had some successes, blots like Solyndra have further damaged the cause of bringing Republicans on board to the issue. Of course, Republicans are in the party that has steadfastly opposed climate legislation, so there's where your complaints can begin.