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## Warming Skeptics Get Heard on the Hill

More GOP Doubts Expressed as House Prepares to Take Up Emissions-Cap Bill

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After the decade they've had, Capitol Hill's climate-change skeptics might well feel like polar bears on a shrinking ice floe.

Scientists around the globe have rejected their main arguments -- that the climate isn't clearly warming, that humans aren't responsible for it, or that the whole thing doesn't amount to a problem. Public opinion has also shifted and even Exxon Mobil talks about greenhouse gases.

But this spring, it's been obvious: Doubt is not dead.

In fact, as Congress considers placing a national limit on emissions, Washington's climate skeptics have been louder than usual -- and they've been reinforced by other voices in the Republican Party.

"We're cooling. We're not warming," Republican National Committee Chairman Michael S. Steele said on a radio show in March.

"The idea that carbon dioxide is a carcinogen that is harmful to our environment is almost comical," said House [Minority Leader John A. Boehner](#) (R-Ohio) -- although nobody is on record as saying carbon dioxide causes cancer.

These arguments could play a small but key role in the House's deliberations this summer on climate-change legislation. The Democrats' "cap-and-trade" proposal will face ferocious opposition over its potential cost. It will be an even harder sell if skeptics can stir up a debate about whether there really is a problem.

"When we're faced with tough challenges, it's just our nature to hope that we really don't have to" face them, said Manik Roy, a vice president at the Pew Center on Global Climate Change, which supports a cap on emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. "If you believe that there's still a debate here or -- stronger -- if you believe this is a hoax . . . then you will fight like hell."

The odd way that climate-change skepticism fits into Washington politics now -- at the margins, but trying to get back in the fight -- was underscored at a news conference Thursday at the Capitol, when a group of Republicans announced an alternative to the Democrats' bill.

Their leader, [Rep. Joe L. Barton](#) (Tex.), said he does not think humans are causing climate change. But, he said, the desire for a bill is so strong that he was proposing one anyway: a solution to a problem that, in his mind, doesn't exist.

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"The Republican Party is the party of solutions," Barton said. "We are realistic to know to accept the fact that the American people want a solution to this issue."

Most scientists now say there is a consensus about climate change: It is "unequivocal," concluded a United Nations report in 2007. It found that recent temperatures were about 1.3 degrees Fahrenheit higher than a century ago -- and that most of this is "very likely" due to man-made greenhouse gases.

" 'Unequivocal' was not chosen lightly," said Susan Solomon, a senior scientist at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration who co-chaired part of the U.N. effort. She said the proof is in data on shrinking sea ice, higher surface temperatures and rising sea levels.

Public opinion polls have also shown a shift: In 2005, a Washington Post-ABC News poll found that 56 percent of Americans were convinced that global warming was occurring.

Last month, 75 percent said the government needs to do something about it.

Several gas-emitting companies have accepted the idea; Exxon Mobil says that "the risks . . . from increases in CO2 emissions could prove to be significant." The 2008 Republican platform mentioned "the challenge of climate change."

But a handful of lawmakers -- an informal survey found at least 10 vocal ones, all Republicans -- say they still are not convinced. Rep. Steve Scalise (R-La.) said last month at a hearing with former vice president Al Gore that "on the science side, we've had very divergent views."

"There are people who still believe that the moon landing was staged on a movie lot in Arizona," Gore replied.

Scalise's kind of skepticism has been heartening to the movement's old guard, which on the Hill includes Barton, [Rep. Dana Rohrabacher](#) (R-Calif.) and [Sen. James M. Inhofe](#) (R-Okla.).

At the Heartland Institute, a Chicago-based group, the moment feels so ripe that the institute will hold its third international conference of climate-change skeptics next month. Its second international conference was in March.

Institute spokesman Dan Miller said at least three congressional offices have contacted him. "They say: 'Well, what about the science? Is there something there we can look at?' " he said. "And the science becomes a very powerful weapon."

Miller would name only one of the legislators who had contacted him, [Rep. Donald Manzullo](#) (R-Ill.). Asked about Manzullo's views on climate change, his spokesman e-mailed back that "it's irrelevant."

For now, it's not clear what effect the skeptics will have on the debate over the Democrats' bill, which would set a limit on emissions and force polluters to amass "credits" to allow for their emissions.

Some environmentalists worry that the skeptics' questions will erode public support, adding to concerns that the bill will raise the price of electricity, gasoline and manufactured goods. Others think it's the skeptics who are irrelevant.

Duke Energy, a large electric utility that will probably face higher costs under a cap-and-trade system, said the skeptics weren't speaking for the company. "From our perspective, we're beyond that question,"

said spokesman Tom Williams. "We're to the point of, 'Let's go ahead and address it.' "

Still, this spring has brought a variety of skeptical statements.

Steele told a national radio audience that any warming is "part of the cooling process." Asked to clarify what he meant, a GOP spokeswoman said his position was the same as the Republican Party platform. It doesn't mention global cooling.

Solomon, the NOAA scientist, said Steele is wrong. She said that global temperatures had broken from their warming trend in the past few years but that data do not disprove the consensus behind long-term warming.

Perhaps most head-scratching were comments by [Rep. John Shimkus](#) (R-Ill.) suggesting that limiting emissions might starve the world's plants. "If we decrease the use of carbon dioxide, are we not taking away plant food from the atmosphere?" he asked in a hearing.

That's a bold statement, even in the skeptical camp. Patrick J. Michaels, a fellow at the Cato Institute who has challenged the scientific consensus on climate change, said plants would have plenty of carbon dioxide, even if the cap-and-trade bill passes.

"I don't think that's really germane," Michaels said.

*Staff researcher Meg Smith contributed to this report.*

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