The Politics of Global Warming—The Tragedy of the Climate Bill

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The 'tragedy of the commons' refers to the dilemma where individuals/groups pursuing their short-term needs act in a way that ultimately undermines their long-term interests. The term comes from herdsmen grazing their cattle on a common pasture where each rationally wants to increase the size of their own herds, until they have destroyed the pasture and with it their livelihood. The common good (and it could be the ocean for fishermen or the atmosphere for all of us) is destroyed if its exploitation is not brought under control. This was the dilemma facing Congress in 2009 and 2010 when elected representatives recognized global warming as a long-term problem which they were unable to address because of negative consequences to their home states' economies and jobs. Political scientists have long pointed to the difficulty of organizing issues that produced general benefits for society but concentrated the costs on particular organizations that would form an intense opposition. (The opposite is also true with those issues with concentrated benefits paid by diffused costs. For examplesugar and milk subsidies may inflate prices for consumers, but are easy ways to organize farmers.) Theclimate bill could only promise vague universal benefits by preventing a distant disaster while clearly raising the immediate costs of energy for powerful groups of businesses and states. These general benefitsoffered limited incentives for political action. The affected groups—in this case the earth's inhabitants—were unlikely to be represented with the same intensity in Congress.[i]

The problem, if scientists are to be believed, is that carbon-pollutingbehavior needsto be regulated by the government to prevent a disaster for everyone, but the politics of general benefits and concentrated costs make it difficult. One solution to the tragedy of the commons is to privatize the common good, such as by fencing parts of the pasture for individual use or granting fishermen exclusive access to parts of the ocean, thus motivating them to harvest prudently. 'Cap-and-trade', and subsidies for alternative energy were creative attempts to reward private behavior that would curb the use of fossil fuels. Immediate problems including loss jobs, higher energy costs and an economy in recession, proved more politically relevant, as reflected in lobbying by utilities, coal producers and energy industries. The intense pressures on officials came not from the climate above but the political economy below. As analyst Bill Schneider put it,
"We have a political system that doesn't work unless people are facing a particular crisis…There is an economic crisis. Jobs are the crisis. Climate isn't."[ii]

Global warming legislation failed because the particular regional and industry costs overwhelmed the distant general benefits for the climate. The interests that feared these increased costs burdened the House legislation with compensations for their businesses, and derailed similar legislation in the more decentralized Senate that gave greater weight to these state-based interests. Preventing global warming was not sufficient to overcome the immediate costs to American businesses and regions dependent on fossil fuels. Whether this was a reflection of democracy or a failure of democracy depends on your opinion of the outcome.

"You have to save your seat before you can save the world."
--a warning often given to freshman congressmen

After years of denial Washington seemed ready to tackle global warming. During his campaign President Obama had declared that America's oil addiction was "one of the greatest challenges of our generation." After his 2009 inauguration the new president was advised to lead boldly on carbon pollution "before others hijack or derail it."[iii]

The scientific evidencewas clear. More than 2,000 scientists on the Nobel Prize–winning International Panel on Climate Change declared that carbon from burning fossil fuels was warming the planet, causing drought, melting glaciers, rising sea levels,and disease. The Arctic ice-cap was already less than half the size it was 50 years ago. U.S. government agencies predicted that if nothing was done to cut these greenhouse gases the Southwest would become another Dust Bowl, and Florida would flood. Key West would be under water in the next century. Of course the poorer countries of the world would be even more seriously affected than the developed countries. Even before 2010 was over it was declared the warmest year since modern records began in 1880. [iv] Despite opponents' attempts to muddle the science, government experts had for years warned about these findings.

An administrator of the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) could state back in the mid-90s that "there's a better scientific consensus on this than on any issue I know—except maybe Newton's second law of dynamics." As early as 1988 a NASA scientist testified to Congress on the human causes of global warming and the need for immediate action. In that same year a notable non-radical British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, warned in a speech that with global warming, "we may have unwittingly begun a massive experiment with the system of the planet itself."[v]Public opinion polls showed that many Americans were concerned about global warming, though not very concerned.A 2006 national survey showed that 44 percent of the public rated global warming as 'very important', though it was only 18th in a list of things they were worried about. By 2009 three-quarters of Americans thought the government should regulate the release of greenhouse gases, and 62 percent declared they would support regulation even if it increased prices. Some 71 percent agreed that steps to reduce emissions would help the US economy become more competitive.[vi] Eight in 10 of those younger than 30 supported federal regulation of emissions while among seniors about four in ten were supportive.With Democratic majorities in both houses and a new president making the issue a priority, legislation might be expected to politically focus and reflect this national support.[vii]

Neither the scientific evidence nor supportive public opinion meant that a politically viable policy solution would match the planet's needs. Scientists thought that carbon emissions had to be reduced by 50 to 80 percent to prevent an environmental disaster. No country could do this alone, and developing giants like China and India were refusing to accept any limits, positions similar to that of the United States under George W. Bush. With an international conference on climate in Copenhagen scheduled for the end of 2009, (which ended inconclusively) it was hoped that the new Administration would provide American leadership to break the impasse. The most straightforward way of limiting carbon would be to tax it, making polluters pay. But for American politicians in an economy floundering from the most severe recession since the Great Depression,passing a new tax on consumers for every activity that burns carbon-based fuels would be a nightmare. The so-called cap-and-trade system seemed more doable.

Cap and Trade: Let the Market Figure it Out

Under cap and trade the government would set a yearly limit on carbon emissions and gradually tighten it. It would then issue "permission slips to pollute," giving companies permits for each ton of carbon they burned. These permits could be bought and sold. The intention was to create a market that would put a price on allowable emissions. Supply and demand would determine how much these permits cost. Tougher standards year by year and fewer available permits would lead to higher prices. Companies would buy permits from each other as long as that was cheaper to do than making the technological changes needed to eliminate their use of carbon. They would pass along the increasing cost of the permits in their prices and presumably consumers would respond by cutting back on using carbon-using products. Europe has had a similar system in place for years with mixed reviews. The results of all this were vigorously debated. The Congressional Budget Office estimated that the costs to a typical family of reducing carbon by 15 percent would be $1,600 a year. Conservative groups did their own studies that found the costs many times more, plus a considerable loss of jobs. Because emissions are a global problem, these reductions by the United States would only reduce the world's total emissions by about 3 percent. Advocates pointed out that this was just a start and that the legislation passed by the House would require reductions of 42 percent by 2030 and 83 percent by 2050. It would also encourage new technologies that would make it cheaper to use alternative energy like wind or sun or clean coal.[viii]

The Waxman-Markey Bill

The legislation in the House attempting to set this up was called Waxman-Markey, after Henry Waxman of California, Democratic chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee, and Edward J. Markey, a Democrat from Massachusetts. The bill, which would win approval from Waxman's committee, also had to go through Ways and Means and Agriculture committees. After months of negotiations the bill was passed by the House in June 2009 by 219–212. Only eight Republicans voted for it, and the GOP denounced it as a national energy tax. President Obama, who actively lobbied for the bill, called it a "bold and necessary step." The bill itself had expanded to over 1,300 pages and even supporters called it a "patchwork of compromises." The bill required a 17 percent cut in greenhouse gases by 2020, mostly through the cap-and-trade system. By then 20 percent of electricity had to come from renewable sources and energy efficiency. In accomplishing these goals the bill gave utilities, coal plants, manufacturers, farmers, oil refiners, and other industries special protections to help them in the transition to new ways of using energy. Originally in President Obama's proposal all allowances to emit greenhouse gases would have been auctioned off by the government. The money from this would have been used for tax breaks and energy assistance for the poor.

Instead Waxman-Markey gave away free permits to polluting businesses during a transition period of 10 to 20 years.The bill depended heavily on carbon offsets. These were official certificates given for greenhouse gases that *might* have been emitted but were not. U.S. polluters could buy them and pay someone else to reduce emissions instead of doing it themselves. For example foreign companies might be able to reduce their carbon emissions more cheaply than U.S. firms by planting several acres of trees or building solar power generators. This would provide an equal benefit to the climate at a lower cost. But whether such offsets actually happen overseas, whether they can be verified, or whether they would have happened anyway remains debatable. There were other parts of the complex bill. New coal-fired power plants were required to produce 50 percent less carbon than existing plants. A tariff would be imposed after 2020 for goods from countries that refused to limit their carbon pollution. Concessions were made to farm groups that included involving the Agriculture Department in regulating parts of the program because it would be more favorable to these interests than the Environmental Protection Agency. Still, 44 Democrats, mostly from conservative and rural districts, voted against the measure.

Wheeling and Dealing

Getting the votes needed to protect the world's climate required protecting numerous earth-bound interests. The bill did this by changing*who* pays the costs of cutting greenhouse gases. To satisfy Democrats from coal-mining states, allowances were given to coal-based electric utilities, energy-intensive manufacturers, oil refiners, and the auto industry. Instead of auctioning off these permits—with the money going to energy aid for the poor and a tax cut-- the government gave them away, costing the Treasury some $713 billion in the program's first 10 years. Coal-based electric companies would get 35 percent or more of the allowances. Energy-intensive manufacturers such as aluminum, glass, or steel would get up to 15 percent of allowances.[ix]Members representing interests affected by the bill battled for concessions. Congressman Gene Green, Democrat from Houston, Texas, demanded 5 percent of the permits be given to oil refiners to deal with the costs of carbon controls. He won 2 percent of the allowances. Colin Peterson of Minnesota got the list of farming activities that would qualify as offsets expanded, bringing a potential windfall to farmers. He then supported the bill. Members of Congress from Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee tried to protect utilities from their region by weakening the requirements for renewable energy.

The original bill had called for 25 percent of electricity to come from renewable sources like wind, solar, or hydro by 2025. This was weakened to 15 percent by 2020 to gain the votes of congressmen speaking for these southern utilities. Even liberal Democrats got a piece of the action. Bobby Rush, an African-American representative from Chicago withheld his support until a last-minute agreement to provide $1 billion for energy-related jobs for low income workers. In the months of horse-trading, the bill's targets for carbon use were weakened, its requirements for renewable electricity were reduced, and the incentives for industries were sweetened. While some environmentalists backed the final bill, others like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth opposed it. Industry was split. The Chamber of Commerce opposed it while some of the nation's biggest corporations including Dow Chemical, Starbucks, and Ford backed it. President Obama welcomed House passage, though he admitted, "I think that finding the right balance between providing new incentives to businesses, but not giving away the store, is always an art . . . "[x]

On To The Senate

The Senate was expected to be even more difficult. Environmentalists were divided about the complex House bill, and its concessions to industrial polluters. The economic downturn was drawing attention away from environmental concerns, and creating a political atmosphere less welcoming to innovation. The severe recession provided ammunition for opponents, including Sarah Palin who called the House measure "an enormous threat to our economy." [xi]The White House which may have been surprised by the swift House passage of the bill, did not have it at the top of their agenda for Senate action. Health care reform came first. The Senate even with a Democratic majority did not have the same strong party control that the House leadership exercised. With independent minded members, many from energy-producing states, the decentralized Senate presented a number of obstacles. For starters, any climate bill would need 60 votes on the floor to overcome an almost-certain Republican filibuster.

Nonetheless, after months of meetings, Senator Barbara Boxer, (D-California) chair of the Environmental and Public Works Committee, along with Senator fJohn Kerry (D-Massachusetts), introduced a climate bill in September 2009. It was similar to the House bill. The proposal contained a cap-and-trade system that would issue permits for greenhouse gas, gradually lower the amount of emissions allowed, and let companies buy and sell permits to meet their needs. Once again the bill would give away most of the allowances for the next 20 years to energy-intensive industries and customers relying on fossil fuels like coal.

Bonuses for coal-fired plants that stored carbon emissions underground were tripled compared to the House bill—clearly an attempt to win support from mining states like West Virginia. But its overall goals were even more ambitious than those in the House bill. It called for reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 2020 to 20 percent below 2005 emissions, greater than the 17 percent set by the House bill. Of course this was just an opening bid, a proposal open to negotiations and likely to be whittled back in gainingenough support to pass on the Senate floor, if it got that far. From the beginning the Senate measure was in trouble. Ten moderate Democratic senators from Midwestern states sent the President a letter declaring that they could not support any bill that didn't protect American industries from overseas competitors not adopting clean energy goals. Perhaps more to the point was that electricity in these states largely came from burning coal, the main source of greenhouse-gas pollution. Indiana, represented by Democratic Senator Evan Bayh, derived 94% of its electricity from coal, a fact that Senator Bayh repeated each time he was lobbied by his party leaders to support the legislation.[xii]Environmentalists were disappointed by the large numbers of pollution permits that were being given away. Views from within the energy industry were presented by the president of the AmericanPetroleum Institute who described the bill as even more damaging than the House bill. Warnings were heard in the media and from lobbyists that the bill would harm the economy by raising energy prices. The poor state of the economy gave this argument teeth.[xiii]

The bill, Clean Energy Jobs and American Power (S. 1733) was voted out of Senator Boxer's Committee on November 5th. The vote was 11-1 with all the Republican committee members boycotting the vote. Committee rules said that at least two Republicans needed to be present to complete the vote and allow the bill to come to the Senate floor. While Chairman Boxer could circumvent the rules and bring the bill to the floor herself, she hesitated, wanting to keep open the possibility that Republicans would later work with her on the bill. Sensing that the legislation was stalled, Senator Kerry began working with other senators, notably Republican Lindsey Graham of South Carolina on possible compromises that could survive a likely filibuster on the floor. At the time Kerry warned supporters, "We have very little time, a lot of pressures, including election pressures, and we are just going to have to be realistic."[xiv]

The Climate Outside the Senate

For the next several months the issue seemed to disappear. The most immediate reason was that healthcare reform absorbed the attention of the Senate, the Administration and the public. The Obama Administration's priority was health care,--and later financial reform. This would later be cited as a cause for the Senate's failure to act on the climate bill. (One climate activist complained, "What good is health care on a dead planet?") After a yearlong debate, Democrats in both houses finally passed healthcare in March 2010 with no Republican support. Interest groups lobbyingfor and against the climate legislation kept up grassroots activities throughout the country and in Washington as well.Environmentalists argued for Senate action so that the US could attend the climate-change conference in Copenhagen and push for an international treaty. (The Conference, in December 2009, ended up adopting a vague set of goals.) Back home the environmental and energy groups were being outspent by a wide margin by oil and natural gas businesses. In the first six months of 2009 anti-climate bill groups spent over $82 million lobbying Washington, while groups concerned with climate change spent under $19 million. According to the Center for Public Integrity there were 2,810 lobbyists devoted to climate change, five lobbyists for every lawmaker. Of these only 138 were pushing for alternative energy—the rest were working for fossil fuel interests. Many worked for utilities and had a reputation for being tough. One congressional staffer said, "They're kneecap breakers."[xv]

The tensions between global goals and regional interests affected supporters of the bill as well. Environmentalists were not united on whether their message should aim to scare the public with predictions of global warming or seduce it with promises of green jobs. Their opponents focused a blizzard of TV ads calling the bill 'anti-jobs, anti-energy'. Debates and conferences were sponsored questioning the scientific evidence behind global warming. One moderate Republican senator's office reported that letters were running 100 for and 7,000 against climate legislation. Despite this a Washington Post-ABC News poll in 2009 found that 52 percent of Americans supported the cap-and-trade approach of the House climate bill.[xvi]But the year's most politically significant environmental action may have been what didn't happen. On April 21, 2010 an oil drilling rig leased by British Petroleum exploded causing the worst oil spill in US history. Dumping millions of barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico over the next several months. It was an unprecedented disaster. And yet, unlike past disasters—the 1990 sinking of the supertanker Exxon Valdez, the 1969 oil spill off the California coast of Santa Barbara and the fire on Cleveland's Cuyahoga River – that channeled public outrage into Earth Days and a clean-air law, this environmental horror seemed to have little political impact. Opinion polls didn't budge, gasoline demand went up and the Senate remained stalled.

The public reaction to the spill was anger at BP and preventing future accidents, not the Big Picture costs from pollution resulting from the nation's dependence on fossil fuels. Arguably the dismal economy and the public's fears of more expensive gasoline trumped all other concerns.[xvii]

The Executive Branch Acts

Within the Obama Administration, the warming climate had to compete with a full agenda from a deteriorating economy, overseas wars, and numerous domestic political demands. The president's first moves on climate were encouraging to his environmental supporters. He appointed Carol Browner, head of the EPA under Bill Clinton and a close ally of Al Gore to be his 'climate czar', overseeing the issue from a special office at the White House. His Secretary of Energy, Steven Chu was a Nobel-prize scientist, who understood the need to confront global warming. Shortly after taking office the Administration moved on its own to regulate carbon emissions. It required automobile companies to increase their fuel economy of new cars and trucks by 2016, thereby decreasing carbon pollution. The ailing automakers, dependent on Washington for aid, not surprisingly embraced the effort.

The EPA was acting in response to a 2007 Supreme Court ruling, *Massachusetts v. EPA*, declaring that the agency had a responsibility to regulatecarbon dioxide as a pollutant under the Clean Air Act. Obama's EPA, unlike the previous Republican Administration appeared eager to take the lead. It tightened the screws in December by announcing, on the first day of the international climate conference in Copenhagen, that six gases including carbon dioxide posed a danger to the environment and that the agency would draw up regulations on them. By May, 2010 EPA released their final rule on greenhouse gas regulations, initiating a phased-in approach that forced power plants and refineries responsible for 70% of all emissions to use the best available technology to minimize these gases. The EPA promised to begin enforcing this in January 2011.[xviii]

TheseAdministration actions put Congresson notice that the Executive branch would act on global warming with or without legislation. They were clearly tactics to get Congress to move, as well as a threat to the energy companies fighting the Climate bill. The Administrator of EPA put it this way, "There are no more excuses for delay…This administration will not ignore science and the law any longer." Senator Boxer warned, "If Congress does nothing, we will be watching EPA do our job." Senator Kerry added, "..if Congress won't legislate, the EPA will regulate." And this meant that if the powerful energy interests balked at Congress's efforts to curb carbon pollution, federal regulators would be unleashed to do the job. And they would do it without the numerous concessions to business interests in the cap-and-trade legislation that any bill passing Congress would contain.

Underlining this commitment to act on global warming was an executive order that President Obama issued in October, 2009. The order required all federal agencies to measure their greenhouse-gas emissions and set specific targets to reduce them in buildings and vehicles. The president reminded the public that the federal government occupies nearly 500,000 buildings, operates more than 600,000 vehicles and employs 1.8 million civilian workers. Reducing fuel use, cutting costs, using environmentally-responsible products and improving energy efficiency, could be expected to appeal to taxpayers. As the nation's largest consumer of energy the federal government by example was asserting leadership on the environment.[xix]

The Senate Revisits the Climate

A slimmed down version of the climate bill resurfaced in the Senate in April 2010. This moderation of ambitions was not surprising. Republican support for the climate bill—sparse at best--showed no sign of increasing, indeed the leading Republican backer, Lindsay Graham of South Carolina, pulled out of negotiations in late April, charging Democrats with acting in bad faith. Other moderate Republicans, notably Olympia Snowe of Maine made a number of demands for her state, such as exempting home heating oil and protecting Georgia's Bank from drilling, without ever supporting the bill. One person involved said, "She would always say that she was interested in working on it, but she would never say she was with us."[xx]The oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico focused attention on federal regulation of drilling. The partisan conflict between the parties intensified, the economy continued depressed and Republicans sensed that the midterm elections could make them the majority party in one or both houses of Congress. Even the Democrats victory on health care reform seemed to leave their other legislative priority--the climate bill--embattled and sinking.

In response to this perceived political weakness Senators Kerry and Joe Lieberman, Independent from Connecticut, discussed the idea of introducing a 'utility-only' bill. Such a measure would seek to lower the carbon output *only*of utility companies rather than the entire economy. Since utilities accounted for 40% of the nation's carbon output this seemed a reasonable place to start. A provision to toughen offshore drilling safeguards following the BP oil spill was added, and several senators voiced support.

Moderate Republican Senator George Voinovich of Ohio declared that he might be able to back a 'utility-only' bill, but would seek to add amendments to increase nuclear power and clean-coal technologies. Predictably electric companies argued that this approach was unfair in discriminating against one sector of the economy while other sources of carbon emissions such as manufacturing and transportation, went untouched. Early in July Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nevada) said he would introduce an energy bill that reflected these discussions. It would aim to cut pollution from energy utilities and power plants, leaving aside transportation, agriculture and other polluting sectors of the economy. This scaled-down version of the House bill sought to cut utilities' emissions by 17 percent from 2005 levels by 2020 and 83 percent by 2050. Utilities were required to provide 15 percent of their power from renewable sources by 2021, considerably weaker than the House requirements. Under the bill individual states would be prohibited from enforcing their own cap-and-trade programs to curb greenhouse gas emissions. In a move to protect Congress's jealously-guardedturf the Environmental Protection Agency would be barred from regulating greenhouse gases as pollutants.

Other senators focused exclusively on what they saw as this executive challenge to legislative power. They signed on to a resolution to veto the EPA's finding that greenhouse gases were a threat to human health. This would prevent the EPA from regulating carbon dioxide without a mandate from Congress. Interest groups representing industry were working the issue in the halls of the Capitol. The President of the American Petroleum Institute called the EPA regulation "intrusive, inefficient and excessively costly." In June 2010 a bipartisan group of senators led by Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska) backed a resolution prohibiting EPA from regulating climate pollution from utilities, manufacturers and other stationary sources. The measure instructed the agency to ignore the Supreme Court decision requiring EPA to regulate carbon as a pollutant under the Clean Air Act. Despite some Democratic backing it failed in a 53-47 vote. In a reflection of White House priorities Carole Browner declared that this was one legislative battle that Obama didn't duck. "We worked very hard to beat the Murkowski amendment back." While declaring his preference for a broad legislative solution, the President was unwilling to "unilaterally disarm before Congress has passed a bill."[xxi]

By mid July 2010 what was now called a 'utility first' option was also being described as a 'last-ditch' attempt to pass a scaled-back climate bill. Proposals for significant investments in energy efficiency and renewal as well as additional assistance to people hurt by fuel price increases were attempts to sweeten the package. The problem was that in reducing the bill's scope it was losing its intensely-committed supporters without picking up any neutrals or adversaries. Two meetings that Senator Kerry held on July 13 illustrated the competing pressures facing the senate. In the first, environmental groups including the Sierra club, the Natural Resources Defense Council and Environment America declared that they would oppose legislation if it included major concessions to relax standards for pollutants like soot, smog and mercury. Part of the utility-only proposal had concessions to industry that would prevent the EPA from regulating several of these pollutants.[xxii] That same evening Kerry met for 90 minutes with the powerful National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA), representing hundreds of mostly westernutility co-ops. By the next day Glenn English, who heads NRECA, urged senators to reject the 'utility-only' approach, saying it discriminated against the co-ops in the Midwest, South and the Plains states that burned mostly coal to generate electricity. In a jab at Kerry, a New England senator, he noted that northwestern and northeastern states depending on hydropower would not have to pay the price. For other regions this meant higher electricity bills, a message that English promised to send to lawmakers.[xxiii]

The Senate Pulls the Plug on the Climate Bill

The end of Julysaw the effort to pass a climate bill through the Senate collapse. Majority Leader, Harry Reid who was trying to draw together the different approaches to reduce carbon emissions announced the bill's failure on July 22nd. "We know that we don't have the votes," he said simply. There was some hope expressed that in abandoning this comprehensive approach the way could be cleared for a more limited bill that would require BP to pay for the cleanup of the Gulf oil spill, tighten household energy requirements and increase funds for conservation efforts. Such hopeful pragmatism was to prove futile.[xxiv] In many ways the bill was not so much rejected as abandoned. The president had stopped pushing for it; he certainly didn't give it the full-court press that includes both serious face time with the chief executive and realistic threats by his staff toward any obstruction. The president's calculation is not hard to fathom. There were alternative solutions available in executive action by his own EPA to regulate carbon emissions, which looked more comprehensive and quicker as the bill was increasingly burdened by compromises. The equally complicated, politically difficult health care reform was a higher priority for the executive's time and political resources. As one editorial writer concluded the president didn't sell out his supporters. He prioritized. "The president had the political capital and the numbers in Congress to pass something big. He chose health care."[xxv]

Key supporters in the environmental community were alienated by all the industry giveaways, and may have decided that EPA regulation was the cleaner option. Given the Republican strategy of polarizing issues that the Democrats were introducing through a unified opposition, the votes in the political center were simply not there to be moved toward support through rewards. Too few senators had any incentives to pass a rational climate policy that was in the long term interests of the country. There was no public outcry against global warming, perhaps because “the climate-energy debate got disconnected from average people.” We needed less talk, an environmentalist suggested afterward, about ‘climate’ and more about conservation saving money, creating jobs and preserving resources that people need and use. [xxvi]

But this argument only illustrates the problem. Both the polls that reflected the public’s concern with jobs and energy independence, and elected representatives’ immediate concern for the interests of utilities and industries in their own states, steered the Administration away from their stated priority: preventing climate change. Instead they focused on the particular interests being challenged by the legislation; they accepted the Beltway wisdom that it was impossible to pass a bill without the approval of the polluters. Special interests involved in carbon production were crucial, they had to be persuaded and seduced. The result was handing out hundreds of billions of dollars worth of allowances to pollute and what Obama’s own budget director called “the largest corporate welfare program that has ever been enacted in the history of the United States.” By the end of the lobbying free-for-all Campbell Soup was getting concessions for the carbon-intensive job of making chicken noodle soup.[xxvii]

Just as bad, little effort was putinto mobilizing the public around the global benefits of the law. And yet overcoming the carbon polluters’ resistance to change required public pressure: people outraged by a planet in peril. This wasn’t done. One critic compared it to President Lyndon Johnson in the 1960s insisting to Martin Luther King, Jr. that he talk only about the expanded businesses and jobs that Southerners would gain when they passed a civil rights bill. As a result the loudest voices misrepresented the science of climate change, spread fear about loss jobs, and focused on the costs of these changes to particular industries and regions. They argued for doing nothing; and that’s what happened.[xxviii]

Conclusion

There aren’t many incentives for lots of senators to vote for a reasonable climate bill. Senators from coal states and the South worried that their regions would be disproportionately hurt. The effects of climate change won’t be dire for years; and Congress, with its frequent elections, isn’t good at accepting short-term pain for long-term gain.” Stephen Stromberg, The Washington Post

The ‘tragedy of the commons’ played out in the inability of the Congress to pass a Climate bill. The tension between short-term, local and business interests and longer-term, devastating global changes was resolved in favor of voters. This bill, like many attempts to pass alternative energy measures in Congress since the 1970s, fell victim to the struggle between federal goals and intense regional interests. Curbing the use of carbon resources was politically difficult for Senators and representatives who may have recognized climate warming as a legitimate problem but had constituents to represent. In many states, like Alaska, Texas and Oklahoma and West Virginia a fossil-fuel energy industry is an important part of the local economy. Even the potential of alternative sources of energy is regionally divided, with biomass potential clustered on the West and East coasts while the Great Plains is largely barren of these resources. Utilities in the Southeast didn’t support renewable energy mandates because of their dependence on coal and gas from the region. Voters and interest groups from these regions focused on jobs and the economy over the planet’s long-term viability. In the Housethe representatives of these industries limited the overall targets, were richly compensated to make necessary changes in their energy use, and got the costs of the permits shifted to consumers. In the Senate because of the greater power given individual senators and the lack of centralized party control, even these compromises failed.

The same state and regional interests that defeated the climate legislation may yet provide a tapestry of solutions to address the problem. Some 29 states have created their own renewable energy standards. Others are using federal matching funds to deploy smart meters for monitoring power use, to provide incentives for clean energy investments and to encourage an electric vehicle fleet. A regional cap-and-trade program has been operating in 10 Northeastern and mid-Atlantic states, and may be expanding elsewhere. The Executive branch’s EPA remains committed to reducing carbon use and imposing standards on industry in 2011. Conservative groups have put forth proposals to increase federal spending on clean energy to $25 billion a year. Separating energy issues from climate politics by emphasizing conservation, cost savings and even a bit of patriotism toward the environment may prove more successful in changing peoples’ behavior. [xxix]America’s decentralized politics may have derailed congressional action but may also offer alternative means of accomplishing at least some of the same goals.[xxx]

Meanwhile an M.I.T. study suggested that the planet was warming much faster than previously thought; melting Arctic Sea ice was releasing even more greenhouse gases in feedback loops that amplified the effects. But this was as former vice president Al Gore (who backed the Climate bill) put it, "an inconvenient truth" for many political and economic interests. The combination of executive branch actions, conservation programs by many of the states, and innovations like the smart grid and wind energy provided fall-back solutions. Whether these efforts, without coherent national and internationalpolicies to reduce global warming, would be sufficient was doubtful. As one scientist noted, "the laws of physics don't compromise."

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[ii] As quoted by Peter Behr and Christa Marshall, "Regional and state interests may dominate future climate and energy policy," ClimateWire, July 26, 2010.

[iii] Jeff Goodell, "As The World Burns," Rolling Stone, January 21, 2010, p 32.

[iv] J. Jowit, "Global Warming Pushes 2010 Temperatures to Record Highs," The Guardian, July 28, 2010.

[v] Maxwell T. Boykoff and Jules M. Boykoff, "Balance as bias: global warming and the US prestige press," Gobal Environmental Change, 14, (2004), ps 125-26. For a general treatment of the science behind climate change See John Houghton, Global Warming: the Complete Briefing, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2009.

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[vii] Steven Mufson and Jennifer Agiesta, "Limits on Emissions Have Wide Support," The Washington Post, June 25, 2009.

[viii] Coral Davenport, et.al. "Carbon, From the Ground Up," CQ Weekly Online, August 3, 2009.

[ix] David A. Fahrenthold and Steven Mufson, "Deconstructing The Climate Bill," The Washington Post, July 6, 2009.

[x] John Broder, "Adding Something for Everyone . . . " The *New York Times*, July 1, 2009.

.Sarah Palin, "The 'Cap and Tax' Dead End", The Washington Post, July 14, 2009.

[xii] Ryan Lizza, "As the World Burns," The New Yorker, October 11, 2010, p 72.

[xiii] John M. Broder, "Climate Bill is Threatened By Senators," The New York Times, August 7, 2009. Steven Mufson and Juliet Eilperin, "Senate's climate bill a bit more ambitious," The Washington Post, October 25, 2009.

[xiv] http://motherjones.com/mojo/2009/11/there-tr-partisan-path-forward-climate-bill

[xv] Goodell, p 33.

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