

# In cap and trade fight, environmentalists had spending edge over opponents, new report finds

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New research challenges the commonly-held view that cap and trade legislation failed because of the spending advantages of opponents and false balance in news coverage. The report, "Climate Shift: Clear Vision for the Next Decade of Public Debate," was released today by American University Professor Matthew Nisbet.

"There is a tendency among [environmentalists](#) and scientists to blame political inaction on the spending advantage enjoyed by conservatives and on false balance in media coverage," says Nisbet. "However, this analysis shows that the effort by environmentalists to pass cap and trade may have been the best financed political cause in history and that news coverage of climate change overwhelmingly reflected the consensus view among scientists."

As leaders and experts consider next steps in the climate change debate, the report is intended to inform decision making. The report's analysis finds that:

- In 2009, the 45 national environmental groups working on climate change generated \$1.7 billion in revenue and spent \$394 million on climate change and [energy policy](#) efforts. In comparison, the 42 conservative think tanks, groups and industry associations aligned against cap and trade legislation generated

about \$900 million in revenue and spent \$259 million opposing action on climate change and energy.

- Limited in what they could spend directly on lobbying, environmental groups augmented their legislative influence through alliances with several dozen of the world's largest corporations. This alliance allowed them to close the gap in spending on direct lobbying over past legislative battles. In 2009, six of the world's 15 largest publicly traded corporations supported the cap and trade bill.
- In 2009 and 2010, at The New York Times, The Washington Post and CNN.com, nine out of 10 news and opinion articles reflected the consensus view among scientists that climate change is real and human-caused. At Politico during this period, at least seven out of 10 articles portrayed the consensus view. Only at The Wall Street Journal did this trend not hold up, yet the difference in portrayal was confined to the opinion pages.
- In December 2009, as the Copenhagen meetings took place, approximately 20 percent of articles at the five news organizations mentioned the debate over Climategate (the story first was reported on Nov. 20). In the months following, The Wall Street Journal continued to focus on the story while the other news organizations did not.

The report also examines the decision making of nine aligned major foundations, led by ClimateWorks, which funded a network of organizations advocating for a mandatory cap on greenhouse gas emissions.

"Contrary to conventional wisdom, these major foundations have been as strategic in targeting specific policy outcomes as even conservative

philanthropists such as the Koch brothers," says Nisbet. "Yet this focus and strategy has overlooked several key dimensions of societal action."

Nisbet estimates that the nine foundations distributed at least \$368 million between 2008 and 2010 to organizations working on climate change and energy policy. More than half this funding was given to just 25 groups, 14 of which were national leaders in the effort to pass cap and trade legislation. As the top recipient of funding, nearly one out of every 10 dollars (\$34.6 million) went to the Bipartisan Policy Center, exceeding the \$31.3 million distributed by Koch-affiliated foundations to all conservative organizations active on climate change between 2005 and 2009. (Exxon Mobil gave \$8.9 million during this period).

Yet the 50-page strategy document that guided the foundations' investments, according to Nisbet's analysis, was notable for its "absence of any discussion of social, political or cultural dimensions of the challenge." As his analysis shows, there were comparatively limited amounts of funding focused on the role of government in promoting new technology and innovation. Nor was there equivalent investment in adaptation, health, equity, justice, job creation or economic development.

Nisbet's report additionally reviews the likely causes for the decline in public concern and belief in climate change in recent years. As he finds:

- The peak in public concern over climate change that occurred in 2006 and 2007 came during years that marked a decade low in unemployment. Opinion trends show historically that concern with the environment declines appreciably with a rise in unemployment levels, as was the case in 2009 and 2010. Studies by economists also demonstrate strong linkages between individual perceptions of climate change and unemployment

levels at the state and county level.

- Republicans are deservedly blamed for promoting polarization on the issue, yet admired Democratic leaders also shoulder responsibility. Since 2002, Al Gore has consistently sought to mobilize progressives politically, pairing his messages about climate science with strong criticisms of Republicans. Research suggests that these messages – and the corresponding response from Republicans – have led to wide differences in views on climate change between Democrats and Republicans.
- Today, Gore remains the public figure most closely associated with both climate science and policy action. Yet as of 2010, only 44 percent of Americans had a favorable impression of Gore, a level equivalent to that of George W. Bush (45 percent) and Sarah Palin (44 percent).
- Belief in the reality and risks of climate change are also linked to the proposed policy solutions. Among conservatives, studies show that answers to polling questions about climate science are much more likely to be indirect reflections of opinions about cap and trade policy and an international agreement.

Nisbet also examines how ideology, just as it does among the general public, shapes the views and the interpretations of [climate change](#) advocates. Analyzing a representative survey of members of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), Nisbet concludes that a strongly one-sided ideological outlook likely leads many scientists and environmentalists to overlook how economic trends and their own actions might diminish public concern, and instead focus on presumed flaws in media coverage or the activities of conservatives. Moreover, as organizations such as the AAAS train and encourage their members to engage in public outreach, most participants are likely to

view politics very differently from the audiences with which they are trying to communicate, a challenge that merits greater attention as part of these trainings.

**More information:** The report can be found at [www.ClimateShiftProject.org](http://www.ClimateShiftProject.org)

Provided by American University

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