

# Climate bill battleground: a story on gridlock and conflict of interest assignment...

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Climate Bill Battleground: A Story on Gridlock and Conflict of Interest Climate change has been a hot topic lately domestically and internationally. The loss of human life and economic cost worldwide from the catastrophic natural disasters predicted by climate scientists due to rise in sea level and temperature increase are deemed too alarming to ignore (Biello, 2009). To this end, the United States set out to negotiate an international carbon emission reduction plan in the Copenhagen Conference in 2009.

To set an example for the other nations, the House of Representative passed the American Clean Energy and Security Act (ACES) in 2009 (Broder, 2009). Later in 2010, the Senate also attempted to pass a climate bill (KGL bill), drafted by Senator Kerry, Senator Lieberman, and Senator Graham, focusing on cap-and-trade (Lizza, 2010). However, both bills failed to pass in the Senate, thus nullifying any effort to curb carbon emission.

The American political process and regulation created an environment in which senators had essentially limited autonomy and were bound to appease their constituents and oil/coal interest groups for chances of re-election. Specifically, the American political process and regulation, coupled with rising partisanship in Congress, created a gridlock situation in 2009, in which the bill lacked the necessary 60 Senate vote to bypass potential filibuster by climate bill opponent.

Additional factors such as framing (or mis-framing, in some sense) of the climate bill's central issue on cost of carbon reduction and lack of American public support due to pressing issue of economic recovery further repelled the senators from accepting the bills, further exacerbated the situation

created by the political procedure. The Congressional procedure for passing a bill required a 60% support in the Senate to prevent filibustering by opponent of the climate bill (Warshaw, 2013).

The 111th United States Congress was composed of 255 Democrats and 179 Republicans in the House of Representative and 57 Democrats and 41 Republicans in the Senate, with 2 Independents caucusing with the Democrats (Warshaw, 2013). This meant that the Democrats only required 1 Republican support to obtain the required 60 votes. However, conservative Democrats representing states that depended on coal and petroleum (Broader, 2009; Warshaw 2013), saw more downside (angering the constituents) in the KGL bill, thus showed no support.

With every Democrat lost, the KGL bill proponents needed more Republican support. However, partisanship in the Senate between Republican and Democrats made such effort particularly difficult. Most of the Republicans had an informal agreement to oppose any attempt of reform by President Obama (Lizza, 2010). Furthermore, the growing power of the Tea Party, created internal pressure for Republicans to remain conservative in action and opinions (Lizza, 2010).

As one can see, the 60% Senate vote requirement to bypass filibuster in the American Congressional procedure created an barrier in which politicians were forced into constant debate and compromises, thus not only preventing bills from passing in timely manner, but also leading to bills that lost their effectiveness due to extensive compromises. Senators were re-elected every 6 years.

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However, the American political system created a unique situation in which a third of the senators were in the process of re-election every two years, thus many senators were very cautious about their stances on the climate issue. This presented a major weakness in the American political system. The senators must win the party primary in their state before entering the senate race against the opposing party.

Thus senators must appeal to their constituents, and any deviation would result denouncement by the constituent, such as when Senator Graham was accused of betraying the country by his constituents during a town hall meeting in Greenhill, South Carolina (Lizza, 2010). The election campaign funding policy often led to senators and state representatives relying on the funding and endorsement/ support from industrial (oil, coal, agricultural) interest groups, particularly for senators representing the southern states.

In essence, the industrial interest groups controlled the senators. Same situation applies for members of the House, who faced re-election every 2 years. The effect of the proliferation of interest group influence and the pressure of appeasing respective constituents was evident in 2009 when ACES Act passed the House of Representatives with 219 votes in favor and 212 votes against (Lizza, 2010), with conservative Democrats from the Midwest ("blue dog democrats") aligning their interest with that of the petroleum and coal industries (Broder, 2009).

When Senator Kerry, Graham, and Lieberman tried to recruit for climate bill supporter from the Republican rank, the task was nearly impossible because there was a growing opposition against carbon reduction in the Republican

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rank. In fear of losing future re-election, moderate Republicans showed reluctance to support the KGL bill, as seen when Senator Olympia Snowe refused to be named explicitly in the press as the Republican in favor of the bill (Lizza, 2010). Additional factor that pushed the moderate Republicans away from the KGL bill was the framing and misinterpretation of the KGL bill's key component: the linked-fee.

The Kerry-Graham-Lieberman climate bill initially proposed the concept of a linked-fee to be charged onto oil industries for transportation fuels linked to the price of carbon allowances (Tankersley, 2010), where the fee will rise or decline according to the price of the emission permit traded by the energy companies. However, before the triumvirate of the climate bill could announce to the public about the details of the climate bill, Fox News reported the climate bill as a proponent for "gas tax" incurred on oil industries that will spill over to the general public (FoxNews. om, 2010). In this instance, the climate bill was framed as Democratic attempt to incur additional cost to the energy sector, forcing carbon emission reduction instead of negotiating for the reduction. This allowed the conservative Republican and oil interest groups to advocate that gas tax created extra burden on the oil and energy sector, leading to increase in cost of energy consumption for Americans and potentially job loss from these sectors (Weiss, 2010).

Despite American believing in global warming and the importance of mitigating the dangerous effect of global warming (PewResearch, 2010), majority of the American remain reluctant to be the ones bearing the cost of

improving global climate was ce (Weiss, 2010). This was the type of collective action problem that prevented the public from pushing for any momentum on carbon emission reform. In midst of the post-2008 economic crisis, it was reasonable to say that any action that would increase price of energy consumption and potentially create Job loss was viewed unfavorably.

Any senator who supported the KGL bill, in this instance, would be branded as a Job destroyer or unpatriotic, such as when activist William Gheen accused Senator Graham of “ sell[ing] out your own countrymen” (Lizza, 2010), a title enough to end anyone’s political career. In essence, by framing the climate bill as a “ gas tax”, all Republicans, moderate or not, shunned away from the bill. Even the Democrat decided that the climate bill had become too controversial.

Henry Reid, the Democratic Senate Majority Leader, announced in July of 2010 that the Senate would not consider climate reform bills before the end of the legislative term, and would focus mostly on immigration reform (Nevada immigration reform activists exerting pressure on him and his desire to disassociate from the unpopular climate bill to prepare for the re-election race in the fall of 2010) (Lizza, 2010). It was apparent that the American political process and regulation played a major role in the demise of the climate bills in 2010.

The requirement for a 60% supermajority vote from the Senate for guaranteed passing of the bill and non-support from conservative Democrats, out of concern for re-election and aligning their interest with that of their constituents, presented a difficult situation in which Democrats

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required support from 4 to 5 moderate Republican supports. However, moderate Republicans were already hesitant in supporting the bill publically due to pressure within the Republican Party, influence from interest groups representing oil and coal industries, and desire for re-election.

The ultimate blow came from framing the climate bill as a "gas tax" bill. The ensuing controversy pushed both parties away from any association with the bill, resulting in Senate's decision to consider immigration reform before climate reform legislatures. What the senators drafting the KGL bill should consider was that the proposed federal mandate of carbon reduction was a one-size fit all approach, which would not be suitable considering different states relied on different sources for economic growth.

A nationwide standard cap on carbon emission would inflict various degrees of economic impacts, depending state's dependence on oil/ coal industry. A solution to this end would be for the Congress to draft a federal climate bill that mandated all states to propose and implement plans to cut carbon emission, with oversight from the federal government, by the level that was tolerable to the respective economy of the states by a target year, and the method of reduction could be freely chosen by the states or the targeted companies.

This way, the senators could avoid linked-fee issue completely, thus making the bill less controversial. With less explicit statements and targets on the proposed bill, the senators, especially the moderate Republicans, could have more flexing room to justify the bill and appease their constituents and the oil/coal interest groups. Furthermore, by implementing a carbon reduction

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level appropriate for the state economy, the energy sector would be able to transition more smoothly into carbon reduction without impacting the price of energy and profitability of the energy companies.

This potentially would allow Senator Kerry, Senator Lieberman, and Senator Graham to obtain the super majority to pass the bill through Congress, aking a first step in nationwide carbon reduction reform. Bibliography Biello, David.

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