Explaining Inaction: US Climate Change Politics & Interest Group Influence in Congress

Samuel Zacher

Yale University

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**Abstract**

The human-caused emission of greenhouse gases, resulting in global climate change, is one of the most significant issues to challenge contemporary political systems. In the United States, some levels (e.g., state, local) and branches (e.g., executive, judicial) of government have crafted policy to reduce emissions, but the US Congress—the institution with the most power to seriously alter the US energy economy—has not passed significant emissions-reduction legislation. This paper seeks to contribute to answering two questions: (1) Why has the US Congress been unable to pass significant climate change mitigation legislation? (2) Are anti-climate interest groups influencing policy; and if so, how? Some researchers have made great progress analyzing evidence to answer these related questions. The purpose of this paper is theory development; it does not do any original data analysis. This paper aims to do two things. First, to apply a causal inference lens to the research questions, reviewing the literature and adding some original theorizing in order to conceptually clarify the *competing hypotheses* we should set our scholarly sights on, to determine why the US Congress hasn’t been able to make policy to mitigate climate change. Second, to use this case of climate change politics to theorize the conditions under which interest group influence on congressional policymaking, on any issue, is most likely to occur. This paper concludes with some normative comments.

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**Introduction**

Capitalism is one of history’s most significant driving forces. The profit-driven production of goods and services around the world has affected not only economic outcomes, but also political, social, and notably, environmental phenomena. Humans, in our quest for development in all forms, have seen many ills of economic production. One ill that dominates our contemporary existence is global climate change, the anthropogenic emission of greenhouse gases that has and will continue to cause catastrophic damage to the human and non-human world. When the aggregate actions of individuals and corporations in the “private market” are causing destruction of such magnitude, governments are the agents with the power to change the course of economic development. The United States, as one of the world’s largest economies and greenhouse gas emitters, has found itself in a powerful position to dictate the world’s response to climate change. Have the workings of the US political system resulted in the federal government to taking any steps to alter its own domestic—which in turn affects its ability to drive international climate policy efforts—energy economy and other sources of emissions? Overall, the answer is a resounding no.

The nature of climate change is unique as a political issue. Peer-reviewed climate science has conclusively agreed that human activity is causing climate change. But at least two major forces stand in the way of government policy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions: (1) The prescribed policy solutions would require short-term costs, of some sort, in exchange for long-term benefits,[[1]](#footnote-1) and (2) there are extremely powerful interests (corporations) who stand to lose from government intervention. Why has the US Congress been unable to act on climate change? What factors have structured the incentives of relevant political actors? What driving forces have exerted the most significant causal impact in preventing Congress from passing legislation to mitigate the US’s impact on climate change? As a positive matter, this is an issue of whether democratic politics can adequately protect human beings from the side effects of capitalism. As a matter for scholars of American politics, this is a question about how our electoral institutions can respond to a specific kind of challenge, and how interest groups might influence policy outcomes—*if* there is significant evidence that they do—in the myriad direct and indirect ways they may do so (i.e., not just impacting the words and actions of politicians, but also voters, the media, policy elites, etc.).

To be sure, these political aspects of climate change aren’t completely unprecedented. Many other countries have also had trouble enacting policy to make serious progress on reducing emissions, so the US isn’t alone—but the US has been infamous for the prominence of its climate denial in half of its major political parties (i.e., the Republican Party) and inability to do *anything* serious, legislatively (Rabe 2010). Additionally, climate change isn’t the only major issue the US Congress hasn’t legislated on in recent memory (e.g., gun violence, income inequality, infrastructure)—but the precise concoction of aspects of the issue (e.g., climate change effects most drastically harm *other* countries; academic scientists informed us of the problem; massive industry and consumers would bear policy costs) make studying climate change politics unique in its ability to enhance our understanding of the workings of the powerful electoral institution that is Congress. Clearly understanding the US politics of climate change can inform us of potential future policy challenges (more on this point to come in the conclusion).

Two quick caveats: First, there are subnational legislatures in the US that have passed legislation to mitigate their state emissions. The focus of this paper is the federal legislature, for which there are unique normative concerns (i.e., it has the most power to reform US society). Second, other branches of the federal government have produced policy decisions that would lead to US government action on climate change. In 2007, the Supreme Court decided in *Massachusetts v. EPA* that the executive branch could regulate greenhouse gas emissions under the Clean Air Act. This has allowed executive administrations like President Obama’s to promulgate rules like the Clean Power Plan to aim to curb US emissions, but judicial challenges and the Trump Administration have rolled back or stalled the actual creation of new US rules. Overall, the US is left without significant policy to decrease US emissions.

To recap, here are the research questions that paper takes on:

*Question #1: Why has the US Congress failed to pass climate change legislation?*

*Question #2: If anti-climate interest groups have influenced the policymaking, how have they done so?*

Scholars have posed and answered these variations of these questions before. (Their research will be covered in the next section.) However, there hasn’t before been a comprehensive analysis that has imagined all the possible answers to these questions and has distinguished *structural factors* from *actions* taken by relevant political players. That is the purpose of this paper—to enhance our theoretical understanding of the politics of climate change, and interest group influence on Congress—in the US, along with suggesting some empirical research strategies to test competing hypotheses. This can enlighten our theoretical understanding of interest group influence, generally, too.

As its most fundamental level, this paper aims to theory-build and breathe new life into a research agenda.

**Literature**

This section will overview the relevant theories of Congress along with existing causalresearch on US climate politics. There’s been far more *descriptive* than *causal* research on US climate politics; that descriptive work will be relevant in the theory-building section of this paper.

Let’s begin with general theories of congressional policymaking. At a basic level, most, if not all, things that members of Congress (“MCs,” hereafter) do aim to increase their re-election chances (Mayhew 1974). This means appealing to all political individuals and groups who can affect an MC’s re-election chances, not just constituents. Another prominent theory that has seemingly withstood the test of time asserts that Congress passes legislation that will benefit “attentive publics” over “inattentive publics” and that the “traceability” of policy impacts will determine how these publics view legislation (Arnold 1990). Simply put, Congress cares more about what groups that pay close attention and engage in the policy process want, often over the interest of the general public. Both of these general theories emphasize a substantial role for organized interests. Other early research provided interview evidence that also highlights the importance of interest groups—whether corporations, unions, trade associations, or public interest groups[[2]](#footnote-2)—in affecting the policymaking process in Congress (Kingdon 1995).

At this point, political scientists agree that theoretically (and anecdotally), interest groups seem to matter in some way in affecting what Congress does. But through what channels are interest groups attempting influence? Kingdon (1995) offers one list: get their members involved in elections, directly affect the economy (e.g., business groups), and/or choose to unite with other interest groups to form coalitions, big or small. Importantly, interest groups quite often try to *block* policy, not just pass new policy that furthers their goals (Kingdon 1995). Another answer is that interest groups get active in both primary and general elections, making endorsements, producing voting “scorecards,” getting members to volunteer for campaigns, and donating money directly or spending it on advertising (Berry and Wilcox 2007). In the realm of policy thought, interest groups may “culturally” capture the government, in which regulators come to see the world in terms of the same values and frames (e.g., neoliberalism) as the regulated industry, a culture than the industry has helped shape (Kwak 2013). Interest groups may also capitalize on the lack of adequate government policy expertise by becoming a supplier of policy thinking, shaping how favorably government thinks of their interest (McCarty 2013). Essentially, interest groups have many avenues for affecting what all relevant political actors—MCs and also the media, voters, policy elites, and others—think and do. The theory-building section will precisely lay out the relevant theoretical influence pathways for interest groups to impact climate politics.

Epistemologically, how would we know that interest groups are causally influencing congressional policymaking, independent of the other political forces? Carpenter (2013) offers an answer—we must have evidence for three things: (1) some sense of the public interest, (2) a policy outcome that’s serving some end which is strictly different from the public interest, and (3) intent on behalf of the interest group to influence policy.

Now that we have some general model of Congress and interest group influence, what are the existing scholarly accounts of Congress’ lack of action on climate policy, specifically? A handful of unpublished papers offers some explanations. Specifically studying Congress’ attempt in 2009-10 to pass a cap-and-trade bill, Skocpol (2013) points primarily at the rightward shift of the Republican Party and its unwillingness to seriously work to mitigate climate change in any way, in addition to the lack of significant grassroots mobilization by the environmental advocacy coalition. Lowentheil (2013) argues that partisan polarization—writ large, not just on climate—alongside the placement of fossil fuel energy interests in states (e.g., West Virginia) created an uphill battle for cap-and-trade legislation when trying to get to 60 votes in the Senate. Two dissertations (that are becoming books) also offer varying explanations. Mildenberger (2015), examining the history of US climate politics, including the 2009-10 cap-and-trade effort, found that the combination of partial (or sometimes full, depending on the legislative event) opposition to climate mitigation policy from both business interests and labor interests led to legislative failures over the decades. Stokes (2015), studying renewable energy policy battles in US states, found that the relative power of anti- versus pro-renewable power groups determined the fate of policy strengthening or retrenchment; specifically, fossil fuel producers and utilities had significant sway.

In published, peer-reviewed work, McAdam (2017), in a literature review, identifies three causal factors that have likely prevented passage of serious federal climate policy: (1) the inopportune timing of climate’s entry to the political stage during a polarized time (as Skocpol (2013) and Lowentheil (2013) said), (2) the lack of ability to stir up significant grassroots pressure on the issue (as Skocpol (2013) said), and (3) the amorphous nature of the issue, itself, making it hard for voters and elites to easily grasp and easier for confusion to be manufactured. Bang (2015), in a broad overview, similarly lists the following factors as combining to cause policy inaction: the size of US fossil fuel production, party polarization, interest group opposition, and lack of public pressure to act on the problem.

Overall, these scholars have offered answers to the question at hand (Why has the US Congress not passed climate change legislation?), usually offering interview and archival evidence, and occasionally some quantitative evidence. Their explanations all likely correct, to some degree; all their explanations hold theoretical weight that’s backed up by their evidence. However, the problems that remain include: (A) we haven’t properly placed the relevant factors into analytically helpful categories (which this paper will do in the next section—e.g., institutional structures versus actions taken by political agents) and (B) we don’t seem to understand *which* factors have mattered more than others, in isolation or in combination (i.e., “interaction effects”). Does party polarization explain the whole story? How about simply the “nature of the issue”? Before we claim one answer to the question, we must be confident that our answer dominates other possible answers; we must be able to precisely describe the hypotheses that are competing and then test which hold more weight. The next section aims to do just that—to frame the potential answers to the question in a rigorous way, while contextualizing the politics in the structural political environment.

Throughout this examination of answers to our primary question, it’s impossible to ignore the likely impact of interest group influence on Congress (in direct and indirect ways), which will play a major role in the analysis of climate politics—hence the second research question examined in this paper: If anti-climate interest groups have influenced the policymaking, how have they done so? Thinking through the answer(s) to this question can also inform our general theories of interest group influence, which will be discussed in a later section of this paper.

**Theory: Climate Change Politics in Congress**

This paper has covered existing accounts of climate change politics in the US Congress. Now it’s time to enhance our theoretical understanding of why Congress hasn’t passed serious climate change mitigation legislation over the past few decades, since the time when issue entered the political stage. The question is a causal one, so we are fundamentally studying the relationship between explanatory variables and outcome variables. This section will describe the most relevant the driving explanatory variables, *other* relevant but not direct explanatory variables (categorized as: the institutional environment, the “given” political conditions, and the exogenous shocks), and the outcome variables.

*Dependent variables*. There are three that seem to matter. The big two include (A) whether the majority party in Congress (in either chamber) decides to take on the issue—more concretely, bring a bill up for a vote, both in committee (dictated by the committee chair) and on the floor (dictated by the House Speaker or Majority Leader) and (B) how individual MCs then vote on the bill. This paper identifies a third outcome that’s closely related to the second: the issue positions of MCs before any vote is taken, which matter because what candidates and MCs say about the issue is an illuminating reflection of political pressures on them, and for research feasibility purposes, since there aren’t always bills being voted on, we need some way to understand which MCs are pro- or anti-climate (or somewhere in the middle). What MCs say about an issue certainly seems to correlate with the first DV, a bill being brought to a vote.

Now that we’ve covered the relevant outcomes, let’s turn to the relevant explanatory variables, in their various forms. For analytical clarity, this paper terms only those factors that exert *direct* effects on the dependent variables as “independent variables.” Conceptually, though, the rest of the following explanatory variables (including the institutional environment, given political conditions, and exogenous shocks) can theoretically exert some indirect effect on the outcomes of interest (even if they’re not termed “independent variables” here). Therefore, when theoretically and empirically analyzing all of the following, we should still ask ourselves how the outcomes of interest may be different in the absence of any one particular relevant explanatory force, and possibly how certain forces may work together to affect the outcomes.

*Institutional environment.* The relevant aspects of the institutional structure of Congress seem to be the Senate filibuster, democratic primary elections, and winner-take-all districts. The existence of the Senate filibuster option is important because it requires substantive legislation to receive 60 votes to pass the Senate (e.g., Lowentheil 2013).[[3]](#footnote-3) Second, primary elections have become more democratic in contemporary American politics, so we’ve come to think of “the base” of the Democratic Party or Republican Party as being influential in determining the party’s nominee, as opposed to party elites primarily making the decision (e.g., 2016 Republican primary election). Third, winner-take-all districts effectively give us a two-party system, which holds some theoretical importance because when one party takes one stance on an issue, all opponents of that stance aim to make the other party as extremely opposed to that stance as possible; it’s possible to imagine a multi-party system resulting in a different kind of climate change politics among MCs. All three of these aspects of Congress as an institution structure the incentives of the actors engaging in electoral and legislative battles.

*Given political conditions.* This paper identifies four relevant initial conditions that have seemed to shape the subsequent politics of climate change. Intuitively, “conditions” here means something like: aspects of the political economy that exist prior to any actors’ political engagement on the issue. The first is energy geography—both the sheer size of fossil fuel production that happens within US territory[[4]](#footnote-4) and the allocation of those energy reserves in US states, which has clearly affected the policy interests of various states’ elected representatives (Lowentheil 2013). The second is anti-government ideology: Without a serious degree of distrust in the government (particularly the federal government), Americans may have been readier to let the government dictate energy production and consumption. Anti-government, free-market ideology has generally been a lynchpin of the fight against environmental regulations in the US (Layzer 2012). The third is humans’ psychological ability to understand climate change as a problem that is mostly not immediately visible to American voters and whose effects will be worst felt in the future. (This is certainly not exclusive to the US.) Research has shown that when voters take climate change more seriously when they perceive their local area as more vulnerable to effects of climate change (Wiest et al 2015). The fourth is that people are naturally somewhat self-interested and often care primarily about how issues will affect their own personal (often financial) well-being (Ansolabehere and Konisky 2014). Since climate policy will possibly—or at least if people are convinced it will—raise prices for consumers, mitigation policies can be nonstarters. Once scientists proclaimed the problem of anthropogenic climate change to the public and policymakers,[[5]](#footnote-5) the chances of legislating on the problem were already fighting against these four initial conditions.

*Exogenous shocks.* This paper identifies two primary shocks that aren’t entirely exogenous, though they seem to be *mostly* epiphenomenal to climate change politics. The first is general partisan polarization,[[6]](#footnote-6) as named by Skocpol (2013) and Lowentheil (2013). Essentially, climate change was fighting even more of an uphill legislative battle since it entered the political stage in an era in which the average Republican and Democratic MC agree less and less on most issues. Certainly, party elites were far less polarized in the 1980s and 1990s when climate change started receiving national policy attention, so polarization, as a driving force, seems to matter most in the 2000s and 2010s. Crucially, partisan self-identification has shown to be the primary predictor of individual beliefs about climate change (McCright and Dunlap 2011), so the parties coming apart would have some inherent impact on everyone’s stance on climate change, independent of all other political happenings. Polarization as a variable is certainly tough to isolate, as many other variables would be (and are) measured in some way that shows the polarized nature of them (e.g., public opinion, media coverage). The second is the Great Recession, for two reasons. President Obama took office in January 2009 and was forced to deal with the economic recovery and financial regulation before any other issues, like climate policy,[[7]](#footnote-7) and further, the crippled economy likely caused Americans to be even less willing to favor policy that would impose short-term costs of some sort. Some research has shown that opinions about climate policy are sensitive to changes in economic circumstances (Scruggs and Benegal 2010, Kahn and Kotchen 2011). Both of these exogenous shocks have likely hurt the chances for climate legislation.

*Independent variables*. The following are termed independent variables because they exert likely *direct* effects on the dependent variables of interest through institutional mechanisms (e.g., how the institution of Congress functions). The previously-discussed explanatory variables (institutional environment, given political conditions, exogenous shocks) exert their indirect effects through these factors. Independent variables include: (A) general public opinion, (B) public opinion on the left and right, (C) policy elite ideas, (D) media coverage, and (E) interest group activities. (A) General public opinion means a few things—both the actual opinions that voters might hold and the *perception* of those opinions by elites, the “direction” of opinion (e.g., % of voters that think climate change is a problem), and the “intensity” of opinion (e.g., % of voters that think climate change is a more urgent issue than other issues). General public opinion operates in a few ways. First, MCs must win general elections, so the opinions of all voters in a district on the issue of climate change may have some relation to victory. Second, MCs (and party leaders) are likely attentive to existing public opinion on issues prior to taking stances on bills and strategically act accordingly. Depending on how it’s measured, somewhere between 40% and 70% of the public think climate change is a problem needing government policy solutions; this has fluctuated over time (Brulle et al 2012, Egan and Mullin 2017) but clearly hasn’t gotten high enough to cause Congress to pass a bill. Votes by MCs on climate change bills (four of them, from 2003-09) do correlate pretty well with the opinions on the issue of their constituencies (Vandeweerdt et al 2016). Not nearly as much work has been done to study how the intensity of public opinion has changed over time and what that might be causing.

(B) Specific opinion on climate change on the right and left (i.e., Republican and Democratic primary election voters, respectively) also seems to matter because those are the voters who elect party nominees. Those two groups’ opinions on climate have significantly diverged over time (McCright and Dunlap 2011), with conservative voters becoming increasingly anti-climate in recent decades (Williams et al 2011). (C) Next, the opinions held by the “policy elite”—as seen through think tank reports and press releases, op-eds, and books published—and their work spreading their ideas, sometimes in the form of directly writing bill drafts for legislators (Hertel-Fernandez 2019)—may be persuading MCs. Conservative think tanks have been producing anti-climate policy writing in various forms for decades (Dunlap and Jacques 2013, Elsasser and Dunlap 2013), which has correlated with Republicans becoming more anti-climate. (D) Next, media coverage very likely influences what both MCs and voters think about climate change. Over the past few decades, media coverage hasn’t reflected the scientific consensus that humans are causing climate change (Boykoff and Boykoff 2004, Boykoff 2013). Notably, this includes ideological media (e.g., Fox News, conservative talk radio). Of course, media content is a reflection of many other forces, so there’s likely some degree of reverse causation happening between the variables of media and all others. (E) Finally, and importantly, interest groups engage politically with the aim of affecting what MCs think, say, and do. This “independent variables” sub-section deals only with how interest groups aim to directly impact legislative policymaking, so this paper breaks that influence into two mechanisms: campaign spending and direct lobbying. From 2007-on, anti-climate interest groups such as fossil fuel companies and utilities, among others, vastly outspent pro-climate interest groups on direct lobbying expenditures (Brulle 2018). Direct campaign contributions from industries that oppose climate policy correlate negatively with MC support for climate policy (Ard et al 2017). However, interest groups spend money directly on elections in other ways besides donating to campaigns (e.g., buying advertising, funding advocacy groups), in addition to spending money to indirectly affect elections (to be covered in the next section).

Below is a figure to summarize the relevant variables and what they might be primarily causing (as depicted by the arrows), described up through this point.



**Figure 1.** On the congressional politics of climate change over time—the relevant dependent variables (DVs; green), direct independent variables (blue, red), exogenous shocks (orange), given political conditions (black, top), and institutional environment (black, left). Not yet included: indirect interest group influence on Congress via influencing the independent variables (blue).

*Additional interest group influence*. Now, this paper aims to describe ways that interest groups—notably groups *opposed* to climate policy[[8]](#footnote-8)—also impact what MCs think, say, and do (generally, our outcome variables of interest) in indirect ways. The line between “direct” and “indirect” interest group influence becomes fuzzy at times. The basic point is that interest groups influence policy in far more ways beyond campaign contributions and lobbying. Working from the previously-described “independent variables” typology, interest groups may influence these in distinct ways.

First, interest groups try to influence public opinion on climate change. They try to influence general public opinion (likely in both “direction,” i.e., how many people think climate change is a problem, and “intensity,” i.e., how many people think climate change is an *urgent* problem) through PR campaigns. Lots of academic (Oreskes and Conway 2010) and journalistic (Hoggan 2009, Mayer 2016) evidence has shown that anti-climate groups have at least *attempted* influence through this way, and some academic analysis has shown that this tactic has likely *succeeded*, too (Leiserowitz et al 2010). They also attempt to impact public opinion on the right[[9]](#footnote-9) through these same PR campaigns, in addition to funding “astroturf” advocacy groups, which either *actually* operate by organizing the grassroots, or simply by *posing* as a grassroots group when appealing to legislators (Mayer 2016, Cho et al 2011). We don’t seem to have rigorously-produced causal evidence that anti-climate interest groups have influenced the conservative base opinion on climate change, though we certainly have theory and descriptive evidence (Williams et al 2011). In addition to attempting to directly impact public opinion (in general, and on the right), these interest groups take biased polls to strategically display public opinion in their favor when lobbying legislators (Stokes 2015).

Second, anti-climate interest groups aim to impact what the policy discussion looks like. This often bleeds into attempts to influence the public and the media. The heart of this mechanism lies in wealthy interests (corporations and individuals) funding think tanks and similar organizations. Lots of *descriptive* environmental sociology research has been published on this, showing that those wealthy interests have donated to think tanks that have pumped out policy reports, press releases, op-eds, and books that are explicitly opposed to government action to mitigate climate change (academic: McCright and Dunlap 2000, 2003, Brulle 2013, Farrell 2015, Jasny et al 2015; journalistic: Mayer 2016). What’s left for us to know is the *causal* *impact*, particularly relative to other mechanisms of influence, of these types of activities.

Third, anti-climate interest groups’ activities have very likely impacted media coverage of climate change. This mechanism functions similarly to PR campaigns aimed to influence public opinion in combination with funding think tanks to produce policy writing. As mentioned, the media has often portrayed the issue in ways that do not reflect the scientific consensus (Boykoff and Boykoff 2004, Boykoff 2013).[[10]](#footnote-10)

Below is another figure to summarize all the relevant variables.



**Figure 2.** On the congressional politics of climate change over time—the relevant dependent variables (DVs; green), direct independent variables (blue, some red), indirect independent variables (remaining red), exogenous shocks (orange), given political conditions (black, top), and institutional environment (black, left).

*Hypotheses.* Up through this point, this paper has described the relevant outcome variables and explanatory variables of interest (institutional environment, given political conditions, exogenous shocks, “independent variables”). To return to the first, and primary, research question (Why has the US Congress failed to pass legislation to mitigate climate change?), there are many possible answers—in the form of one or many, in combination, of the explanatory variables. Deciphering the causal impact of an institutional feature (e.g., the Senate filibuster) from a direct independent variable (e.g., conservative public opinion) is tough to do and doesn’t quite make sense to try to compare the impact on the dependent variable of interest of *each* explanatory variable compared to all the rest. However, there is one important cleavage in the explanatory variables, resulting in two competing hypotheses.

*Hypothesis #1a: The political activities of anti-climate interest groups have been the proximate cause of Congress’ failure to pass climate mitigation legislation.*

*Hypothesis #1b: All explanatory variables* excluding *the activities of interest groups have combined to proximately cause Congress’ failure to pass climate mitigation legislation.*

Disentangling the potential impact of interest groups (aggregated from the collection of their strategies,[[11]](#footnote-11) including campaign spending, direct lobbying, PR campaigns, astroturfing, and think tank funding) from the inherent impact of the rest of the explanations is not an easy chore, but it isn’t impossible. There’s at least one research paper (Brulle et al 2012) that attempts to compare competing hypotheses such as these, when studying public opinion as the dependent variable. One aim of this paper is to conceptually clarify competing explanations so that further research can be done to disentangle various causal impacts on the US Congress.

Now we return to the second research question (If anti-climate interest groups have influenced the policymaking, how have they done so?). The conceptual clarification in this paper would theoretically allow us to test a handful of competing explanations for what factors have most significantly caused anti-climate interest groups to impact congressional policymaking (to the degree that they actually have). It’s now evident that the two research questions are inseparable, via the following logic. Have interest groups influenced policy? If so, through what mechanisms have they? To know how those groups might have influenced policy, what competing explanations do we have to account for, when falsifying hypotheses? We can at least pursue empirical research strategies to focus on two levels of causation: (A) What forces have most impacted each discrete independent variable? (e.g., how has media coverage versus anti-climate PR campaigns impacted general public opinion?) and (B) what independent variables have most impacted the dependent variables of interest? (e.g., how does public opinion on the left and right compare to think tank products, when impacting what MCs think, say, and do?) The next section will offer some thoughts on research designs to test competing hypotheses such as these, to enhance our understanding of how the institution of the US Congress hasn’t been able to pass legislation to mitigate a problem like climate change.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**Possible Empirical Research Strategies**

There are a handful of empirical designs that could be applied to the hypothetical causation described by the previous analysis. First, there are a range of dependent variables that could be chosen, including whether Congress prioritizes the issue or not (dichotomous) and whether Congress passes a bill or not (dichotomous). We could also choose a dependent variable at the MC level, including votes on bills (dichotomous, yes/no) (e.g., Vandeweerdt et al 2016), statements on the issue (could measure dichotomously or continuously[[13]](#footnote-13)), and if an MC is pro-climate, where they prioritize the issue (dichotomously—“prioritize highly” or not, or continuously—how high does climate sit in the MC’s list of issues). Importantly, part of answering the research question(s) involves studying interest group influences on the “independent variables,” so we should also, in different research designs, choose outcome variables that are public opinion (both “direction” and “intensity,” for the general public, left, and right), policy elite ideas (could measure think tank reports, books—such as Dunlap and Jacques 2013, press releases, or op-eds—such as Elsasser and Dunlap 2013), and media coverage (in the aggregate, and by mainstream versus partisan sources—such as Boykoff and Boykoff 2004). By putting these pieces together, we can figure out how interest groups, relative to other explanatory forces, have impacted congressional outcome variables in addition to those variables like public opinion and media coverage that likely affect congressional outcomes.

There are a few ways to attack the research question(s) temporally—by studying specific moments in time (cross-sectional) versus changes over time (panel). Some aforementioned climate politics research has pursued the moment-in-time approach, studying the 2009-10 cap-and-trade bill in Congress (academic: Skocpol 2013, Lowentheil 2013; journalistic: Lizza 2010)—primarily using qualitative data—and other research has studied a few separate bills (Vandeweerdt et al 2016) as discrete moments in time (using regression analysis). Case-study approaches applied to moments in time are certainly useful, though the biggest moment in time, the 2009-10 cap-and-trade bill (a “near miss”), has been studied through that method. If we’re able to properly measure all the relevant explanatory variables, we could apply regression analysis to specific moments (looking at the outcome variable of many or all MCs). Regardless of if we can or can’t attempt regression analyses, we should employ qualitative methods where they haven’t been employed before.

The changes-over-time approach (panel data) has been employed mostly by the environmental sociology work focused primarily on conservative think tank activity (Brulle 2013, 2018, McCright and Dunlap 2000, 2003) and a bit on public opinion (Brulle et al 2012, McCright and Dunlap 2011). Most of this work hasn’t been causal, in the sense that it’s not analyzing data to weigh competing hypotheses about which IVs affect a common DV (except for the attempt by Brulle et al 2012, which has some potential flaws but is getting closer to causal evidence, and Leiserowitz et al 2010), is the direction we need to go. Once we’ve chosen our dependent variable of interest (whether at the level of the whole Congress, individual MC, public opinion, think tank, or else), and we can properly measure the relevant explanatory variables, then we can apply regression analysis. Qualitative work can also be extremely enlightening in this realm, by digging deeper than regression analysis to better show us mechanisms through which influence happens—by studying things like individual cases of MCs (or districts with different MCs over time) who changed their rhetorical stance and/or vote on the issue, or individual think tanks or think tank communities who changed over time, to process-trace what’s happening to the outcome variable through time. Efforts like Mildenberger (2015) aim to process-trace the US Congress as one body, and its change on the issue over time.

One specific way to study factors that may be causing changes in the outcome variables of interest is the difference-in-difference design (traditionally quantitatively, or using a qualitative, deep case-study approach). We would have to choose outcome variables for which there are many (e.g., MCs, districts, states, think tanks, media outlets) and see which are “treated” with explanatory variables of interest (e.g., funding from a corporate interest group) and which aren’t, and see if those in the treatment group seriously differ in their outcomes (of course accounting for potential omitted variables that could be affecting the treated group differently, as well). Observational studies like this are possible to do, though the road to finding causal evidence certainly seems tough. Overall, the challenges to observational research like this, for both qualitative and quantitative approaches, seem to be about (A) measurement (e.g., PR campaigns—how do you accurately measure those?), (B) endogeneity (e.g., what’s causing Republican MCs to change their stance immediately after Obama is elected?), (C) reverse causation (e.g., are elites causing public opinion to change, or the reverse, or both?), and (D) generally, we’re often seeking to explain outcomes that *aren’t* happening (e.g., lack of votes on a climate bill during a session of Congress), so we’re forced to theorize about adequate proxy measures.

**Theory: Interest Group Influence on Congressional Policymaking**

The particular issue of climate change (over time) provides potential insights into theories of interest group influence on the US Congress.[[14]](#footnote-14) The following conditions—applicable to any issue—are borne out of insights from existing research and the previous conceptual analysis on climate change politics. In the case of each condition, if we observe that condition, then we should look out for policy biased in favor of the interest group in mind and away from the “public interest” (however defined by the issue).

This first group of conditions is the most fundamental, which set the stage for all the rest. Essentially, if the interest group has lots of money behind it, and if its opposition is weak or nonexistent, then the interest group may win.

On relative interest group strength:[[15]](#footnote-15)

*Condition #1: If there is no organized, united opposition to the interest group.[[16]](#footnote-16)*

*Condition #2: If the organized opposition has substantially less money behind it.[[17]](#footnote-17)*

The next group of conditions has to do with public opinion. Because public opinion (both “direction” and “intensity,” and for both general and primary election voting bases) affects what MCs think, say, and do, these conditions are likely very important. Notably, there is nothing on this list about campaign finance—that’s because the impact of money relies on public opinion, either in its existing form before interest groups engage politically, or the public opinion that remains after interest groups have manipulated it. If you imagine campaign spending for or against a candidate, that has an effect on candidates because they worry about how the relevant voting base will think differently of them after the ad has been run—either because of what people just think, or because of how the interest group has manipulated the opinion.

On public opinion:

*Condition #3: Opinion direction—if not enough of the general public (e.g., a high enough percentage) thinks Congress should act on the issue.[[18]](#footnote-18)*

*Condition #4: Opinion direction (pro)—if not enough of the primary election voting base of the party opposed to the interest group (e.g., a high enough percentage) thinks Congress should act on the issue. (i.e., are enough active Democrats pro-climate?)*

*Condition #5: Opinion direction (anti)—if enough of the primary election voting base of the party favoring the interest group (e.g., a high enough percentage) thinks Congress should* not *act on the issue. (i.e., are enough active Republicans anti-climate?)[[19]](#footnote-19)*

*Condition #6: Opinion intensity—if not enough of the general public (e.g., a high enough percentage) thinks that Congress should prioritize the issue highly.*

*Condition #7: Opinion intensity (pro)—if not enough of the primary election voting base of the party opposed to the interest group (e.g., a high enough percentage) thinks Congress should prioritize the issue highly.*

*Condition #8: Opinion intensity (anti)—if enough of the primary election voting base of the party favoring the interest group (e.g., a high enough percentage) thinks Congress should highly prioritize* not *acting on the issue.*

The next group of conditions focuses on the policy ideas in circulation. Essentially, if enough policy voices are arguing for policies that help the interest group—whether the interest group has engaged politically to lift up those voices, or not—the interest group may win.

On policy elite positions:

*Condition #9: If there are enough individual “policy experts” who champion the position of the interest group in the policy community (i.e., think tanks, universities).[[20]](#footnote-20)*

*Condition #10: If there is enough disagreement in the policy community (i.e., think tanks, universities) on the side opposed to the interest group.*

The next condition is also intuitive: If the media covers the issue in a way that favors the interest group’s position over the interest of the general public, the interest group may win.

On media coverage:

*Condition #11: If the mainstream media portrays enough disagreement among experts about the problem and/or solutions.[[21]](#footnote-21)*

The final set of conditions focus on the nature of the problem, itself, and accompanying policy solutions.

On the issue itself*:*

*Condition #12: If the issue is complex or unintuitive enough to voters.*

*Condition #13: If the harmful effects of the issue aren’t seen or felt enough by voters.[[22]](#footnote-22)*

*Condition #14: If the solutions to the issue require voters to bear tangible costs.[[23]](#footnote-23)*

*Condition #15: If* any *of the solutions to the issue require voters to bear tangible costs—as interest groups are able to spread that fear about all solutions.[[24]](#footnote-24)*

Any of these conditions, if observed, might give us a hint that interest groups are receiving policy benefits over the interest of the general public. However, the existence of one or more of these conditions doesn’t prove that interest groups have actively *influenced* politics. To prove that, we must employ causal research designs, such as those discussed in a previous section of this paper. Any of these conditions might inherently help an interest group win policy benefits, but moreover, if an interest group sees the existence of even *potential* for any of these conditions to exist, the interest group may pounce on the opportunity to exacerbate one or multiple of these conditions.

From both a theoretical and empirical perspective, we should pay extremely close attention to *interaction effects* in this whole effort to understand what factors are causing Congress to pass legislation or not, on an issue. This means that we can’t just look for the existence (or lack thereof) of an explanatory variable (or condition under which influence might happen)—we should think through the *combination* of factors that might be causing congressional behavior. For example, does an interest group only require general public opinion to be on its side? Or does the right combination of forces include both general public opinion and the policy elite community partially supporting their position? What happens if that’s the case, but public opinion intensity on the opposed side is vehement? Understanding interaction effects like these will further our precise understanding of both climate change politics and interest group influence on congressional policymaking, generally.

**Conclusion: Path-Dependence & Normative Concerns**

For decades now, the scientific community has informed the public and policymakers that humans are causing climate change. We must drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions in order to avoid civilizational collapse.[[25]](#footnote-25) Why has the US Congress, the only political institution with the power to force the entire US to reduce its emissions, not done anything serious to mitigate this problem? This paper has reviewed the literature, while adding some original theorizing, to conceptually clarify all possible theoretical ingredients to the answer to this question, focusing on how interest groups opposed to climate policy have engaged politically through discrete mechanisms to influence policy in their favor. A secondary purpose of this paper is to the stage for possible causal empirical research designs that can enhance our understanding. This paper also used the case of climate change politics to theorize conditions under which interest groups may be receiving policy benefits over the public interest—and are therefore conditions to begin with, to look for evidence of interest group influence.

Normatively, it’s bad for human welfare that Congress hasn’t been able to force the US to significantly reduce the country’s emissions. The US has been the world’s top emitter (though has been recently surpassed by China), so it has caused—and will continue to cause—severe destruction to human and non-human life around the world. Stated more bluntly, the US’s economic activities are killing human beings around the world, primarily in low-lying, coastal, poor, non-white countries, but also in the US itself. The US’s inability to seriously mitigate its own emissions has likely caused less aggregate international cooperation on the issue, since the rest of the world sees one of world’s biggest economies and polluters neglecting climate mitigation.[[26]](#footnote-26) If Congress had legislated on climate mitigation, policies may have burdened Americans with certain personal costs (depending on the policy of choice), but in terms of global human welfare—current, but especially future—the lack of US federal legislation is bad for the world.

This paper concludes by proposing that Congress’ failure to pass climate mitigation legislation has been a path-dependent outcome. A few fundamental economic, psychological, and political ingredients have combined to prevent the US from seriously creating government policy to deal with climate change. The first of those is the US’s capitalist economy. “Capitalism” is a vague term, to be sure, though fundamentally, when corporations are able to freely produce goods and services with some significant degree of freedom, they will produce those products aiming at profit, with no serious incentive to care about the harmful effects of their production. The second ingredient is the US’s fossil fuel energy reserves and other economic sectors (e.g., manufacturing, agriculture). This has led to a massive share of the US’s economy to be dominated by these activities that are harmful to the climate, which means that policies to shrink the size of those sectors will inevitably raise prices for consumers and eliminate jobs for lots of American workers (until substitutable industries exist in similar sizes). The third ingredient is the 1st amendment of the US Constitution (and subsequent judicial interpretations of its application to political activities). This has allowed anti-climate interest groups to muddy the public understanding of the problem (climate change) and policy solutions (and the realistic costs they’ll impose, ignoring the benefits of mitigating climate change), in addition to spending lots of money in politics, which has likely had an effect on what MCs think, say, and so. The fourth ingredient is human psychology—the inability to fully grasp the mostly invisible changes to the climate that will have the worst effects in far-off places and in the future. Anti-climate interest groups have certainly leveraged this—and possibly made this last ingredient a salient force, which may not have been true without that interest group activity—in their favor.

Those four ingredients existed in the US prior to climate change entering the political stage. When we look back at the moment that climate scientists began sounding the alarm, it almost seems inevitable that these ingredients put us on this track that led to congressional failure to pass legislation to mitigate climate change. Of course, there’s no certainty that this outcome was *inevitable*. After all, the 2009-10 cap-and-trade bill did come relatively close to passing (it at least passed the House). Though it’s possible to imagine that if the bill got closer to passing the Senate, the anti-climate interest groups would have ratcheted up the political engagement.

The point of all this is that these ingredients exist in the same or somewhat analogous forms for other political issues. The most prominent other issues are the harmful effects of the massive US technology industry’s products (e.g., social media’s effects on youth development, self-driving cars, artificial intelligence writ large). Imagine if we start learning about effects that are more detrimental than previously thought. Do we expect Congress to be able to act in the public interest? Or is that another scenario ripe for a self-interested industry to sway policy in its favor? It’s worth repeating that the evidence that the US anti-climate policy community has definitively influenced policy is mostly anecdotal (though theoretically convincing). But we should be aware of the existing state of our political system, and its potential for significant interest group influence by powerful industries.

We as political scientists have more work to do to figure out *specifically why* Congress can’t pass legislation on a grave issue like climate change. Is it because humans aren’t able to psychologically grasp the severity of the problem? Or because humans aren’t willing to bear short-term policy costs? Or because the anti-climate interest groups have manipulated public opinion in their favor? Or because those groups have spent oodles of money on elections? The list of possible answers goes on. And, what precise combination of these forces is the right answer? Surely, it’s not one major mechanism doing all the causal work, but more likely the interaction of multiple forces.

Until we figure out how exactly our political system is preventing policy problem-solving—and change the way the system works—we will continue to live in a world in which Congress is ineffective at preventing us—and the rest of the world—from experiencing the harm and destruction of our own economic production.

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1. This is generally true, though the groups bearing the costs would certainly vary based on the choice in policy solution. Also, anti-climate interest groups have engaged in PR campaigns to attempt—and likely succeed on some level—to make the public think the costs of climate policy are larger than they would actually be (Oreskes and Conway 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This paper understands “interest groups” as something like this list, from Kingdon (1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This was on clear display during the 2009-10 cap-and-trade effort, during which the House—needing only 50%+1 votes to pass a bill—passed the bill 219-212, but the Senate—anticipating its 60-vote bar (if the “budget reconciliation” option isn’t utilized)—never brought a bill to vote. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The US was the world’s top producer of oil and natural gas (combined) each year from 2012-2017, topping Saudi Arabia and Russia (Energy Information Administration 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Jim Hansen’s 1988 testimony to Congress about human-caused climate change is usually credited as the moment when the issue found its place on the mainstream political stage. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Partisan polarization is *mostly* exogenous, but partially endogenous, because the enhanced political engagement by anti-climate interest groups likely contributed to the already polarizing parties. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Obama’s team ended up moving on healthcare before climate policy, legislatively, anyway. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Readers may notice that pro-climate interest groups are missing from this paper’s account. They’re likely an important feature of the politics of climate change. This paper creates a black box for interest group influence. Presumably, the influence of anti-climate groups is far greater than pro-climate groups, since they’re spending far more money, so we can imagine the interest group influence pathways as described in this paper as the *net* influence, roughly as the anti-climate groups’ influence minus the pro-climate groups’ influence. The differences in strategies and impacts of those two groups’ influence is a subject for other papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. And possibly the political left, though the right is already primed to accept the arguments of anti-climate groups. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This has seemingly changed in recent years, though conservative and some mainstream media outlets still explicitly state or imply doubt that humans are causing climate change. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Which does not appear to be a straightforward matter. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. A reminder on the temporal nature of these research questions and possible answers: The aforementioned explanatory variables that did exert some causal impact on Congress likely do so to different degrees over time. We must take note of the particular time period we choose to study with each empirical design and adjust our hypotheses accordingly—e.g., if we’re wondering why Congress didn’t legislate on climate in the 1990’s, partisan polarization is likely less relevant, and public opinion intensity (lack thereof) is likely more important. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I (the author of this paper) did this for my B.A. thesis, coding statements by MCs in four ways: Agreement, Acknowledgment, Skepticism, and Denial of climate change. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This paper acknowledges it isn’t aware of many theories of interest group influence on Congress. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This echoes Hacker and Pierson’s (2010) description of politics as “organized combat” by interest groups. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. As implied by Mildenberger (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. As implied by Brulle (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. As implied by Egan and Mullin (2017) and many others. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. As implied by McCright and Dunlap (2011) and Williams et al (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. As implied by McCright and Dunlap (2000, 2003) and Brulle (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. As implied by Boykoff and Boykoff (2004) and Boykoff (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. As implied by Wiest et al (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. As implied by Scruggs and Benegal (2010) and Kahn and Kotchen (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. As implied by Oreskes and Conway (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Of course, the degree of collapse depends on what portion of emissions we reduce, and at what points in time. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Although this seems to be an empirical question, itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)