

LYDIA BEAN AND STEVE TELES

SPREADING THE GOSPEL OF CLIMATE CHANGE: AN EVANGELICAL BATTLEGROUND

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About the Authors



Lydia Bean is author of *The Politics of Evangelical Identity* [Princeton UP 2014]. She is Executive Director of Faith in Texas, and Senior Consultant to the PICO National Network.



Steven Teles is an associate professor of political science at Johns Hopkins University and a fellow at New America.

About New America

New America is dedicated to the renewal of American politics, prosperity, and purpose in the Digital Age. We carry out our mission as a nonprofit civic enterprise: an intellectual venture capital fund, think tank, technology laboratory, public forum, and media platform. Our hallmarks are big ideas, impartial analysis, pragmatic policy solutions, technological innovation, next generation politics, and creative engagement with broad audiences.

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About New Models of Policy Change

New Models of Policy Change starts from the observation that the traditional model of foundation-funded, think-tank driven policy change -- ideas emerge from disinterested "experts" and partisan elites compromise for the good of the nation -- is failing. Partisan polarization, technological empowerment of citizens, and heightened suspicions of institutions have all taken their toll.

But amid much stagnation, interesting policy change is still happening. The paths taken on issues from sentencing reform to changes in Pentagon spending to resistance to government surveillance share a common thread: they were all a result of transpartisan cooperation. By transpartisan, we mean an approach to advocacy in which, rather than emerging from political elites at the center, new policy ideas emerge from unlikely corners of the right or left and find allies on the other side, who may come to the same idea from a very different worldview. In transpartisan coalitions, policy entrepreneurs from the ideological corners recruit endorsers and test ideas, eventually bringing them into the policy mainstream at the local, state and national levels. Unlike traditional bipartisan coalitions, which begin in the center, the established, centrist politicians and institutions are often the last to recognize and embrace a transpartisan vision.

The New Models of Policy Change project studies the successes, failures and key figures of this "transpartisan" approach to policy change. It will produce a set of case studies identifying the circumstances under which this approach can flourish, as well as those under which it falls short. Forthcoming case studies include: criminal justice reform, Pentagon spending reduction, climate change and 'climate care,' opposition to Common Core education standards, and policing reform.

The project will also produce a practitioners' handbook, identifying qualities that equip think tankers, advocates and civic entrepreneurs alike for a world in which more and more of our policy advocacy must cross partisan, cultural, professional and other divides.

The Project is housed in New America's Political Reform program; funded by the Hewlett Foundation's Madison Initiative and directed by Heather Hurlburt, with a steering committee of Mark Schmitt and Steve Teles, who bring to it extensive experience in academia, government service, policy advocacy, and non-profit leadership.

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INTRODUCTION

The environment has never been a core concern of evangelical Christians. Since the 1990s, a small group of evangelicals, working under the banner of “Creation Care,” has tried to change that. Some work far from the centers of power, encouraging evangelicals to find personal engagement with the environment as a way to witness for Christ. Others, however, have taken Creation Care more directly to the political sphere, working in coalition with mainstream environmental activists to pass legislation on global warming. In the period between 2005 and 2009, it appeared that these activists might be able to get evangelicals to tip the politics of the climate, providing just enough of a beachhead in the Republican Party to pass legislation addressing global warming.

The saga of Creation Care helps clarify the conditions under which efforts to create strange bedfellow coalitions among ideological opponents may fail

Like many things in the campaign to address climate change, this initiative did not work.¹ A network of more established evangelical leaders, associated with the Christian Right, reacted sharply against Creation Care for two reasons. First, evangelicals’ political partners saw Creation Care as a menace for economic conservatives and opponents of environmental regulation, and did not hesitate to let evangelicals know it. Second, the evangelical old guard saw the Creation Care activists as threatening their role as the arbiter of evangelicalism’s political engagement. Richard Cizik, the vice president of governmental

affairs of the National Association of Evangelicals, was forced to resign after leading the effort to sign prominent ministers on to a letter supporting climate change action. Ministers who had joined that effort disowned or quietly backed away from the issue, and prominent evangelicals since 2009 have added their voices to the conservatives unconvinced by the threat of global warming. Climate skepticism now appears to have become more deeply anchored as a part of evangelical identity, undoing whatever achievements Creation Care had won in changing minds.²

The saga of Creation Care helps clarify the conditions under which efforts to create strange bedfellow coalitions among ideological opponents may fail. Not every issue is ripe for such a strategy, and reaching across to the “other side” requires very careful attention to the political coalitions under which potential allies operate.

We argue that the Evangelical Climate Initiative failed because the Creation Care movement lacked mobilized power, a base of organized supporters with intense policy demands, willing to engage in sustained conflict.³ Instead, the ECI had only built convening power, the ability to leverage evangelical identity and networks to bring leaders together around Creation Care principles.⁴ As a result, the Creation Care movement did not have the strength to clash publicly with organized opposition from evangelicals aligned with the conservative movement. The Evangelical Climate Initiative’s attempt to use transpartisanship—an approach to advocacy in which, rather than emerging from political elites at the center, new policy ideas emerge from unlikely corners of the right or left and find allies on the other side, who may come to the same idea from a very different worldview—failed. In transpartisan coalitions, policy entrepreneurs from the ideological corners recruit endorsers and test ideas, eventually bringing them into the policy mainstream at the local, state, and national levels, which the ECI was not successful in accomplishing.

Engaging evangelicals on climate change was always going to be an uphill battle. Since the 1970s,

evangelicals have been what Daniel Schlozman calls an “anchor group” of the Republican Party.⁵ This special relationship gives evangelicals enormous sway over the Republican Party, but it also comes with responsibilities. Evangelicals are expected to do what they can to integrate their belief system with that of their coalition partners, and to police unorthodoxy within their own ranks when it threatens those partners.⁶ Thus, not every effort by outsiders to engage evangelicals will be treated the same—those that threaten other core party constituencies will generate much stronger policing efforts than those that do not.⁷ Measures to address climate change like cap and trade challenged the belief in the primacy of unregulated markets that is the ideological glue that holds the Republican coalition together, and threatened to impose very large material costs on core coalition members.⁸ That in and of itself is sufficient to explain the very strong backlash against Creation Care.

Action on global warming was also a threat for reasons internal to the evangelical movement. Since evangelicals became an anchor group in the Republican Party, they have had a very clear hierarchy of issues, with abortion, sexual morality and the protection of their own “religious liberty” at the top. That hierarchy of issues was agreed upon by the major evangelical organizations, the Southern Baptist

Convention and the smaller National Association of Evangelicals. Creation Care was a threat to this well-established hierarchy, as well as to the alignment of evangelicals with economic conservatives. Creation Care had implications for the power to determine how evangelicals should be represented in politics, and by whom. A high-profile embrace of environmentalists by people like Richard Cizik was also tantamount to a rejection of well-established understandings of what organizations evangelicals are supposed to align with—who they consider their allies—on the highest-profile, contested issues.

Efforts like Creation Care, which seek to change group positions on issues with strong support among core party constituents, are not hopeless. In recent decades, one can point to evangelicals’ shifting viewpoints on AIDS, Democrats’ views on school reform, and broad national attitudes on gay marriage as counter-examples. But political activists and their funders need to be aware that, on coalitionally-anchored positions, efforts to change minds are likely to result in a powerful backlash, one that advocates need to be prepared for. Creation Care advocates were not. In their search for financial support they mistakenly pushed directly into a legislative fight, and a battle to define the politics of evangelicalism, for which they were entirely unprepared.

ENVIRONMENTALISTS PULL EVANGELICALS INTO A CLIMATE CHANGE CAMPAIGN

In the mid-2000s, the country’s largest environmental organizations and their donors converged on climate change as a leading priority. In 2006, the environmental movement began preparing for a major national campaign to regulate carbon emissions, with the anticipation that in the November 2008 election the voters would replace President George W. Bush with a new president willing to champion a vigorous response to climate change. In the summer of 2006, an alliance of ten Fortune 500 corporations and environmental groups began meeting secretly to hammer out the principles of a mutually agreeable climate change

bill—a collaboration unveiled in early 2007 as the U.S. Climate Change Action Partnership.⁹

The “Green Group,” an informal network of over thirty major American environment organizations, began preparing to build public support to pass national legislation in the new president’s first term. This “Green Group” was an uneasy alliance among major players with disparate approaches, including the Sierra Club, the Environmental Defense Fund, the Union of Concerned Scientists, and the Natural Resources Defense Council.¹⁰ By 2009, the inner circle

of this campaign became known as the “The Climate War Room.”¹¹

Looking forward to the 2008 election, environmentalists calculated that they could not allow climate change legislation to be framed as a narrowly “liberal” or “environmentalist” issue. Republican votes

To reframe climate change as a bipartisan issue, environmentalists focused on messengers from two groups considered “unlikely bedfellows.”

were vital given the inevitable defections of “Blue Dog” Democrats in coal-producing and burning states.¹² In the period between 2004 and 2008, environmental funders did not think it was impossible to build a solid beachhead of Republican support for federal climate change legislation. Michael Northrup, then with the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation, described the reasoning behind the “Five Year Plan” that environmentalists and funders worked from in that period. “[We] absolutely thought there was a chance and there are a lot of Republicans who understand climate change....Unfortunately in the last several years it’s become so polarized, but 2004-2008 there was a very different sensibility out there. There was a real sense that people were being thoughtful about this, they were paying attention to the science and there wasn’t this crazy denial...there is now.”

To reframe climate change as a bipartisan issue, environmentalists focused on messengers from two groups considered “unlikely bedfellows.” First, they targeted business allies, particularly leaders from the energy industry who could portray carbon regulation as compatible with economic growth and stable energy prices. Second, environmentalists hoped

that evangelical Christians might publicly embrace climate change as a moral issue and an authentically “conservative” concern.

For environmental funders, outreach to business and conservative faith groups was part of a broader portfolio of what Michael Northrup called “constituency engagement development,” based on the widespread understanding that “[i]t can’t just be environmental groups pushing for this stuff. They’re important but they’re not sufficient. Having faith out there as a voice was very much part of that larger idea of building other constituencies into the mix that didn’t necessarily especially identify just as environmental groups.” Other parts of this constituency building strategy for climate changed included “work with scientists, we were doing work with media...work with various parts of the business community...work with young people...work with other elite based groups, some of them just D.C. based groups...work with mayors...work with governors...states and cities.”¹³ In this context, the “work with_____” formula involved getting public statements from representatives of diverse constituencies, rather than building durable new constituencies for environmental priorities.

As this broader climate campaign took shape, funders looked to the Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN) to spearhead evangelical outreach around climate change. The Evangelical Environmental Network had been created in the mid-1990s to be the key evangelical grantee within the National Religious Partnership for the Environment (NRPE). In 1993, founding members of the NRPE were the U.S. Conference of Bishops, National Council of Churches, and the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life. Because there was no natural evangelical counterpart, NRPE’s founders reached out to environmentally-concerned evangelicals like Ron Sider and invited them to create the EEN.¹⁴ Funders recognized EEN as the “anchor organization” in a small field of Creation Care organizations led by evangelicals to foster environmental concern across ideological and partisan divides. Accordingly, environmental donors like the Hewlett Foundation and the multi-foundation-funded Energy Foundation made a series of grants in the mid-2000s to increase the role of climate change in the EEN’s work.¹⁵

The EEN began preparing for this moment in 2000, when its newly-appointed executive director Jim Ball named climate change as the most important environmental issue of the time. But EEN leadership also knew that it was harder to connect core evangelical values to climate change than to more immediate issues of conservation. According to Ball, most evangelicals were attracted to Creation Care through their personal experiences with nature as God’s creation, rather than through scientific arguments or abstract policy analysis. Evangelical concern for the environment typically began as an extension of personal discipleship, with a direct link between personal choices and, say, the protection of an endangered species, and only then proceeded to more abstract concerns about policy.¹⁶ Climate change was a difficult issue because the linkage between individual behavior and environmental devastation was so indirect and hard to explain.¹⁷

From 2000 to 2004, the EEN slowly laid the groundwork for national evangelical institutions to grasp climate change as a moral issue. EEN’s strategy was to integrate “climate care” into the core of the evangelical subculture, by building a bench of national evangelical elites who framed climate change as a moral issue and called for decisive policy action. The expectation was that these ideas would then “trickle down” to rank-and-file evangelicals. This theory fit the broader formula of constituency-building used by environmental funders: funding the EEN to reach out to evangelicals and leverage the moral authority of faith, just as they might fund the Union of Concerned Scientists to reach scientists and leverage the authority of science.

To lay a foundation for “climate care,” the EEN primarily targeted the National Association of Evangelicals, a historic fellowship that represented more than 40 smaller evangelical denominations as well as many Christian schools and organizations.¹⁸ This target made sense to environmental movement leaders and funders, because the NAE had a long history of convening evangelicals as a united voice since its founding in 1942. In 2002, NAE Vice President for Governmental Affairs Richard Cizik emerged as a climate change champion and ally of the EEN.

During the same period, the EEN also laid the groundwork with other secondary targets included Christianity Today, the flagship national magazine for moderate evangelicals. Founded by Billy Graham, Christianity Today had a reputation for being a guardian of thoughtful evangelicalism, generally conservative in politics but not stridently partisan. The EEN also engaged more socially-engaged allies, including national parachurch agencies like World Vision, the largest Christian relief and development organization in the world. World Vision had a long track record of moderate, balanced advocacy around global poverty, and so EEN hoped to move this respected ministry to communicate how climate change affected the global poor.

The EEN also targeted the Washington, D.C. based Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC). The ERLC is the policy arm of the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest evangelical denomination in the country. The ERLC had historically been a challenging target, because of its core role in the Republican Party and its tight focus on issues related to abortion, gender, and sexuality. Yet EEN leaders hoped to win the ERLC’s support for Creation Care,

EEN’s strategy was to integrate “climate care” into the core of the evangelical subculture, by building a bench of national evangelical elites who framed climate change as a moral issue and called for decisive policy action

because even just neutralizing the Southern Baptist Convention in the debate on global warming could disrupt the solid Republican opposition to measures like cap and trade.

In 2006, the EEN decided that it had made sufficient progress building top-down support for Creation Care that it could mobilize those evangelical elites to advocate for a policy response to climate change. With funding from the Hewlett and Energy Foundations, the EEN launched the Evangelical Climate Initiative, the culmination of its four-year effort to encourage major evangelical institutions to develop a public witness on climate change. It convened a small group of evangelical allies to draft a founding statement for the Evangelical Climate Initiative, titled “Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action.” Core leaders of the ECI began collecting signatures for this statement by sending out letters and holding meetings with senior evangelical leaders.

The Evangelical Climate Initiative was formally launched on February 8, 2006, at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. Signatories included the board members of the NAE, presidents of universities in the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities, and executives of groups affiliated with the Association of Evangelical Relief and Development Organizations.

Among evangelical pastors, prominent signatories included Leith Anderson, president of the NAE and pastor of the multi-campus Wooddale Church in Minnesota; Joel Hunter, pastor of multi-site megachurch Northland in Florida; and Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church in California and author of the best-selling book *The Purpose-Driven Life*. The ECI made a national media splash, magnified through paid advertising in print, radio, and television. The NAE’s Richard Cizik was even featured on the May 2006 “Green Issue” of *Vanity Fair* for his religious leadership on climate change.

At the time, many media observers thought that the Evangelical Climate Initiative had made a great step towards enshrining “climate care” as a central moral issue for evangelicals, as evidenced by their glowing coverage of the movement.¹⁹ In supporting measures to reduce carbon emissions, however, this group of evangelicals was not engaging with just any issue, but one with major stakes for major Republican coalition partners and for well-established definitions of evangelical interest in politics.

FAILURE OF EVANGELICAL CLIMATE CARE

As soon as the Evangelical Climate Initiative was launched, a network of Christian Right leaders forcefully attacked it. According to Jim Ball, Christian Right leaders had heard from insider contacts in the NEA that the organization would be issuing a statement on climate change. These Christian Right leaders singled out well-known evangelical climate champions and pressured signatories to withdraw their support.²⁰ This wave of opposition was organized around the Interfaith Stewardship Alliance, a new coalition of conservative faith leaders who opposed action to fight climate change and environmental regulation that interfered with free markets.

The founder of the Interfaith Stewardship Alliance, Calvin Beisner, is a Christian theology professor who has monitored and critiqued the Christian Left since the 1980s. In the early 1980s, Beisner became alarmed that left-leaning evangelical leaders like Jim Wallis and Ron Sider were “embracing a civil social order,

a polity, a theory of economics and politics that the more I studied, the more convinced I became that that was not what best helped people rise out of poverty.” Beisner first began critiquing the Christian Left with a Christian free-market perspective in his 1988 book, *Prosperity and Poverty: The Compassionate Use of Resources in a World of Scarcity*. The book presented “both a biblical case and an empirical and theoretical and economic case that we would see the poor rise out of poverty better with a [free market, free trade] economy” than with a “more mixed economy” or a “socialist approach” that Beisner attributed to the Christian Left.²¹ The book particularly responded to evangelical social justice advocate Ron Sider.²² When Sider helped found the Evangelical Environmental Network in the early 1990s, Beisner became concerned that this movement might lead to greater government intervention in the economy. In 1997, Beisner published a scholarly critique of the Creation Care movement.²³

In 1999, Beisner was introduced to policy advocacy by Robert Sirico, founder of the Acton Institute, a conservative think tank dedicated to the intersection of faith and free-market principles. Sirico founded the Interfaith Council for Environmental Stewardship as a rival to the National Religious Partnership for the Environment. The Interfaith Council for Environmental Stewardship began as a fairly loose network, little more than a list of names with no full-time staff. But in 2000, the Acton Institute pulled together 1500 signatories for a statement called the Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship, signed by prominent Christian Right leaders like Charles Colson, James Dobson, Richard John Neuhaus, and D. James Kennedy. The Cornwall Declaration stated that human beings should exercise dominion over the earth and that free markets were the best engine of ecological stewardship.²⁴

Between 2000 and 2005, this conservative network remained largely dormant until the Evangelical Environmental Network started introducing climate change into the evangelical conversation. In Fall 2005, Beisner launched another loose network of conservative intellectuals opposing environmentalism, with help from the Committee For a Constructive Tomorrow (CFACT), a leading right-wing policy group founded in 1985 to oppose environmentalism. This new project was initially called the Interfaith Stewardship Alliance. According to Beisner, the primary leaders included Dr. Roy Spencer, climatologist at the University of Alabama, Paul Driessen of CFACT and the Council of Racial Equality, and David Rothbard, co-founder of CFACT. According to Beisner, the project began as a “very, very small thing...basically, we just thought we occasionally might produce an article or something.” Their first event was sponsoring a presentation by Roy Spencer, dissident climatologist, debunking the case against “dangerous man-made global warming,” and “so that became a significant interest for us and we grew from there.” In 2006, Beisner rebranded the Interfaith Stewardship Alliance as the Cornwall Alliance, with help from communications consultant Chris Rogers, an expert on fostering climate science skepticism.²⁵ The Cornwall Alliance became an institutional hub for coordination between economic conservatives, climate change skeptics, and evangelicals.

Even though the Evangelical Environmental Network had invested years in their relationship with the NAE, it turned out that Creation Care did not have deep enough support within the member institutions of the NAE to weather public criticism

In January 2006, the Interfaith Stewardship Alliance put out a “Letter to the NEA on the Issue of Global Warming.” The letter called on the National Association of Evangelicals to refrain from taking a public position on climate change. It was timed to preempt the ECI’s founding statement, “Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action,” released in February 2006. The Interfaith Stewardship Alliance letter was accompanied with a round of calls to denominational leaders who were members of the NAE, asking them to put a stop to the NAE’s leadership on climate change. In response to this letter, Richard Cizik withdrew his name from the ECI’s Call to Action.²⁶ Even though the Evangelical Environmental Network had invested years in their relationship with the NAE, it turned out that Creation Care did not have deep enough support within the member institutions of the NAE to weather public criticism.

Christian Right leaders continued to attack Cizik throughout 2006 and 2007. In May 2006, the same month that Cizik was featured on the cover of Vanity Fair, James Dobson attacked him on his Focus on the Family Radio show, heard by millions of evangelicals across the country, warning that “Evangelicals taking on the issue of environment will divide evangelicalism and destroy the U.S. economy.”²⁷ Chuck Colson also lamented that the secular media loved to highlight divisions among Christians over climate change,

as a way to dismiss the authority of the Christian worldviews on issues like abortion.²⁸ In 2007, James Dobson, Tony Perkins, and other Christian Right leaders wrote a public letter to the NAE board of directors, urging trustees to censure Cizik and call for his resignation.” Though the NAE trustees did not comply, these attacks had a chilling effect on the ECI’s ability to recruit new signatures to their Call to Action.

Between 2006 and 2009, the same network of Christian Right elites continued to denounce efforts to rally evangelicals for climate action. In March 2008, a public statement called the “Southern Baptist Declaration on Climate and Creation Care” was published, led by a young Southern Baptist writer named Jonathan Merritt. The SBECI was signed by the then-president of the Southern Baptist Convention, Johnny Hunt, as well as three former executives of the SBC—Jack Graham, Frank Page, and Merritt’s father, James, pastor of a Southern Baptist megachurch. Right before the SBECI was due to launch at the National Press Club in Washington D.C., Jonathan Merritt reported receiving a phone call from a research fellow the Ethics and Religious Life Commission, who delivered a message attributed to Richard Land, then the head of the ERLC. Merritt recalls being told that if he went forward with the SBECI, Land would “release the full power of the arsenal of his email contact list, sending out an email to every Southern Baptist” challenging his credential to speak for Southern Baptists on climate action.”²⁹ In December 2008, Cizik was forced to resign from the NAE after stating in an interview that he was open to supporting civil unions.

Despite the attacks on climate care, the environmental movement continued to hope that evangelicals might help advance their “strange bedfellows” strategy. In April 2008, for instance, Pat Robertson appeared in an ad for climate action, albeit without endorsing any particular policy response. In mid-2009, it still seemed plausible to environmental strategists that climate change still had credibility as a bipartisan issue that transcended ideological lines.

In June 2009, the House passed H.R. 2454, the American Clean Energy and Security Act, known as Waxman-Markey.³⁰ While the bill did receive eight Republican votes, all but one of them came from the left-most members of the Republican caucus.³¹ It was the first time that either chamber had passed a

bill to address climate change. In October 2009, Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C) and Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.) published a joint editorial calling on Republicans and Democrats to work together to pass a climate change bill in the Senate.

Any illusion of bipartisan momentum was shattered in the summer of 2010. Lindsey Graham publicly reversed his stance on climate change, declaring that he was no longer persuaded by the science.

Throughout 2009 and 2010, the Cornwall Alliance escalated its efforts to rally Christian Right leaders and interest groups to attack climate action. In June 2010, the Cornwall Alliance released a video and package of congregational resources called “Resisting the Green Dragon.” This media campaign was jointly produced with the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank also active in climate change denial. This media package was represented as a resource for congregations to protect their flock and their children from radical environmentalism as a theological threat.³² Starting in 2009, Calvin Beisner started speaking regularly at ERLC events, consolidating global warming denial in the Southern Baptist Convention.³³

Any illusion of bipartisan momentum was shattered in the summer of 2010. Lindsey Graham publicly reversed his stance on climate change, declaring that he was no longer persuaded by the science. It is unclear what behind-the-scenes pressure might have motivated Graham’s abrupt change in position on climate change. But it is reasonable to infer that a campaign of party discipline occurred in summer

2010, as evidenced by the swirl of anti-climate action activities by conservative groups like CFACT and faith-based partners like the Cornwall Alliance.

In July 2010, climate change legislation was declared dead in the Senate. In November 2010, Republicans re-took the House of Representatives, following the rise of the Tea Party. In March 2012, Pat Robertson reversed his previous high-profile support for action on global warming and denied the reality of climate change.³⁴ Only in retrospect did the environmental movement recognize why Republican and conservative support for climate change had evaporated so quickly. Between 2007 and 2010, there had been a well-funded, aggressive campaign to impose party discipline on Republicans to adopt a strategy of absolute non-cooperation with the Obama administration. This campaign was carried out by a network of conservative think tanks, conservative media sources, and the emergent Tea Party. The primary target of this anti-Obama crusade was stopping health care reform, but it also included a concerted effort to oppose climate action as another example of the administration's alleged big-government tyranny.³⁵

This conservative counter-campaign reached directly into the Republican grassroots through Fox News,

television and radio ads, and other partisan media outlets. This created a real threat of primary challenges from the right for Republicans like Lindsey Graham who had previously been a champion for climate action. Opposition to climate action also became part of the rising Tea Party movement. Because this campaign animated far-right Republican primary voters, Republican elected officials could no longer support climate change legislation without being branded as traitors who were complicit with Obama.³⁶ During the Obama administration, policy attitudes on climate change actually swung backwards: conservatives were more opposed to climate action at the end of 2011 than they were in 2001.³⁷

After 2010, the evangelical Creation Care movement did not give up its efforts to recruit evangelicals into policy solutions to climate change. But the consensus among movement leaders is that their work is significantly harder now than it was in the mid-2000s, before the backlash.³⁸ Once conservatives and Christian Right elites united against climate action between 2005-2009, opposition to climate action became solidified as the official "conservative" position, and it became more difficult to attract "strange bedfellow" support from leaders identified with conservative politics and the Christian Right.

THE LIMITS OF CONVENING POWER

The Evangelical Climate Initiative crumbled quickly in the face of opposition because it lacked mobilized power, which we define as a base of supporters with intense policy demands, willing to engage in conflict with organized opposition. Instead, the Creation Care movement had only built convening power, what Michael Lindsay describes as the ability to bring disparate people together through identity and networks (Lindsay 2007; 215). The collapse of the ECI shows the limits of convening power in the face of organized opposition.

Specifically, the ECI failed to build a base of evangelical leaders with sufficiently strong demands for climate action that they were willing to defend from Christian Right attacks. Even though the ECI was

signed by many prominent mega-church pastors, none of these pastors was willing to publicly criticize James Dobson for his attacks on Cizik. Indeed, Christian Right leaders quickly learned that they could attack the Creation Care movement with total impunity. Despite the support that Creation Care leaders had built up within the evangelical subculture, there was no cost to evangelical leaders who wanted to crush the movement and wage ad hominem attacks on its leaders.

Vigorous defense of the ECI was not forthcoming from its signatories, because most joined the campaign with low personal commitment to climate action. When environmental scholar Katherine Wilkinson interviewed ECI signatories, she found that few were

willing to expend significant time or take leadership risks beyond contributing their signature. For example, North Park's John Phelan stated, "I signed the document. I get their materials. I read the stuff that they send...I keep tabs on what they're doing and support and encourage people to look at it, but I've not been heavily involved." Duane Litfin, president of Wheaton College, emphasized that his primary responsibility was to give leadership to his university, though the president of EEN, Jim Ball, and others wished he was more "high profile, public, out-there, on-the-frontline" for climate action. Andy Crouch, editor of Christianity Today, told Wilkinson that he was "just part of the shimmering penumbra of signatures" that gave the ECI credibility with evangelicals.³⁹

One anonymous source told Wilkinson that the signatories "didn't turn out to be everything that we hoped they would be. They certainly didn't turn out to be everything that our funders hoped they would be. Our funders and, I think, some of our inside team to a lesser extent, hoped that this group would become zealots, would kind of be a new army for the community, and would really marshal the troops to

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this new height. The number of them that have done that is really small. It's a handful actually."⁴⁰

A major source of vulnerability for prominent ECI signatories was that they found limited support for climate action within their own base. For example, Joel Hunter, senior pastor at Northland Church, was one of the most prominent signatories of the ECI. His support was highly significant, given that Northland is a church of over 20,000 people with over three different

campuses across Florida. But even at Northland, the basic science of climate change was still considered highly controversial during this period. Hunter's assistant pastor, Raymond Randall, who led Creation Care ministries at Northland in the late 2000s, actively avoided the issue of climate change for fear that it would deter members from getting involved in Creation Care more broadly.⁴¹

This lack of grassroots support made it difficult for sympathetic evangelical elites to engage in public conflict with Christian Right leaders who opposed climate action. In retrospect, Rev. Mitch Hescoc, the EEN's current president, identifies this as the primary reason that grassroots leaders were unwilling to stand up against Christian Right attacks:

What we failed to do was really have the grassroots support of the local congregations, the local people. For them to really understand climate, be aware of climate and support these [ECI signatory] leaders out there. When the big money started flowing in the opposite direction from the Koch brothers...and the Heartland [Institute] and The Heritage Foundation, The Family Research Council and Focus on the Family, it really put some of those leaders into retreat. It showed that we [EEN] had not done a good enough job...of really trying to understand and mobilize the people and their peers.

It is difficult for evangelical leaders to take policy positions that are strikingly out of step with their rank-and-file following, particularly when rival evangelical leaders use their stand as evidence of theological heresy. Evangelicalism is a decentralized religious tradition that lacks a clear hierarchy like the Catholic Church. For evangelicals, religious authority is legitimized by one's ability to build and keep a mass following, as well as one's reputation for theological orthodoxy and authenticity as a "true" born-again Christian.⁴²

If the Creation Care movement had built mobilized power for climate action that included a grassroots evangelical base, it might have held together in the face of Christian Right opposition. Why did the Creation Care movement fail to build mobilized power that included a larger grassroots base? To answer this question, we must look back to the early history of evangelical Creation Care.

WHY CREATION CARE FAILED TO BUILD MOBILIZED POWER

The activists who shepherded the evangelical Creation Care movement from the 1970s to the mid-90s recognized the need to build a deep leadership base.⁴³ Faith-based environmentalism was founded in reaction to the perceived failures of the secular environmental movement, particularly its overreliance on policy analysis, law, and secular, technocratic thinking. Accordingly, a guiding concern of faith-based environmentalists was to establish a solid moral and theological foundation based on their faith's core symbols and teachings. Religious-based environmentalists define themselves by their ethics-based advocacy focused on awakening personal values and grounding advocacy in everyday life, as distinct from what they see as mainstream environmentalism's focus on technocratic fixes to discrete policy issues.⁴⁴

This emphasis on bottom-up constituency development was particularly salient to evangelical leaders in the Creation Care movement. Because of their distinctive theology, evangelicals were even more committed to this ideal of fostering personal conversion than more ecumenical or interfaith advocates. Among evangelicals, there was also a concern that environmentalism was associated with neo-pagan and new age ideologies, and so there was a need to ground policy advocacy in more daily practices of piety, solid theology, and Bible study.⁴⁵

Despite this ideological commitment to build power from the grassroots up, the evangelical Creation Care movement ended up adopting a top-down theory of change. EEN became locked into a grassroots strategy in the mid-1990s, when funders and secular allies learned the wrong lessons from their first issue-based campaign. Evangelical "Creation Care" first made national headlines in 1996, during the re-authorization of the Endangered Species Act. Dr. Calvin B. DeWitt, a professor of environmental studies at the University of Wisconsin, was quoted in the New York Times saying that the Endangered Species Act was "the Noah's ark of our day" and that "Congress and

special interests are trying to sink it."⁴⁶ Dewitt was one of the founders of the Evangelical Environmental Network, a new organization created by the National Religious Partnership for the Environment to raise environmental awareness among conservative Protestants. Since the late 1970s, a small network of evangelicals like Dewitt had labored in obscurity to integrate their faith with environmental concerns.⁴⁷ But in 1996, a broader set of national funders and allies came to believe that there was a viable evangelical movement to protect the environment, one ready to influence legislation in Washington.⁴⁸

Religious-based environmentalists define themselves by their ethics-based advocacy focused on awakening personal values and grounding advocacy in everyday life

The EEN and other evangelicals were widely credited with reviving public sympathy for the Endangered Species Act, and helping to thwart conservative efforts to prevent its reauthorization.⁴⁹ Though still tiny, this Creation Care movement was able to generate significant publicity for the Endangered Species Act, through paid advertising, extensive media coverage, and even appearances on late-night talk shows.⁵⁰ It is unclear whether Creation Care swayed actual votes, which broke down largely along predictable lines. But since environmental votes generally inspire little

public attention, environmentalists were glad for media coverage about unconventional allies.

From this small victory, both Creation Care activists and mainstream environmentalists derived a lesson about the potential of faith-based outreach on environmental issues. The Creation Care movement

Before evangelicals could take on bigger policy fights, Creation Care ideas first needed greater legitimacy within the evangelical subculture

learned that when conservative pastors spoke about legislative issues, the media listened. Environmental funders learned that it was useful to have “strange bedfellows” support for environmental priorities, to help shape the debate around their key legislative priorities. Secular environmental leaders learned that it was valuable to have national spokespeople sharing the moral reasons for environmental legislation, not just the scientific and legal ones.⁵¹ But they may have learned the wrong lesson by concluding that a relatively thin evangelical engagement could have real impact—but on an issue which lacked the potential for full-bore counter-mobilization that global warming possessed.

Movement leaders, funders, and the environmental movement were optimistic that this small victory could be the foundation for even more ambitious legislative goals. But before evangelicals could take on bigger policy fights, Creation Care ideas first needed greater legitimacy within the evangelical subculture. Evangelical advocacy groups needed to demonstrate that environmentalism had mainstream appeal within their own religious tradition, beyond a small, marginal group of advocates. If just a handful of evangelical spokespeople could shape public debates about the

ESA, then they hoped that a much larger network of national Creation Care spokespeople could move even more ambitious legislative priorities. Based on this thinking, environmental funders invested in building the convening power of the Creation Care movement between 1996 and 2006.

Thus from 1996 to 2006, the dominant strategy for the Creation Care movement became to build a deeper bench of national evangelical elites who could frame environmental concerns as moral issues. This approach was distinctively “grasstops,” in that it focused primarily on evangelical elites who were distant from everyday ministry with rank-and-file evangelicals in local congregations. These leaders were primarily found in denominational offices, Christian higher education, nationally-recognized megachurches, and national parachurch ministries, or special purpose religious organizations independent from both churches and denominations.

This strategy was led by the Evangelical Environmental Network. Looking back at the history of the EEN, Jim Ball described the trickle-down strategy as: “Let’s get mainstream evangelical organizations to start. Basically we wanted to, in effect, borrow their relationship with their constituencies and have them engage their members on this issue and have it be in a way that would appeal to their constituency.” According to Ball, the thought at the beginning was to establish an “institutional beachhead” within evangelical institutions. Not in the local churches, but in institutions that were believed to represent “the church writ large, in other words, the evangelical community.”⁵² The assumption was that if national evangelical elites were articulating the key ideas of Creation Care, these ideas would “trickle down” into the lived religion of rank-and-file evangelicals.

The primary tactics of the EEN were to organize conferences and events about Creation Care, and to author public statements on Creation Care signed by authoritative institutions and leaders. In its early days, the EEN convened a network of faith-based organizations to integrate environmentalism into their charity and development work. Notable members of this network were World Vision, Habitat for Humanity, and Intervarsity Christian Fellowship. Each of these institutional partners received between \$5,000 and

\$10,000 to name a Creation Care chair in their senior staff.⁵³

Immediately after defending the Endangered Species Act, the EEN identified the National Association of Evangelicals as a primary target to bring Creation Care into the center of their subculture. For example, in March 1999, the Evangelical Environmental Network helped put on a conference called “Compassion and the Care of Creation” at Malone College with the National Association of Evangelicals, the goal of which was to link compassion towards the poor with environmental stewardship. Although the EEN funded the conference, it was officially sponsored by the NAE. At the time, environmentalism and climate change were considered controversial for the NAE, so much that the EEN could fund a conference but not appear as an official co-sponsor.⁵⁴

When environmental studies scholar Jim Ball became the new executive director of EEN in 2000, he came in with a strong conviction that evangelicals must respond to the threat of climate change. But Ball felt “[T]he community wasn’t really ready yet...for just climate.”⁵⁵ So the EEN looked for ways to connect environmental issues to aspects of everyday Christian discipleship, like stewardship, personal choices, and compassion for the poor. In 2002, the EEN launched a well-publicized campaign called “What Would Jesus Drive?” playing off the popular Christian motto “What Would Jesus Do?” or WWJD. Jim Ball took a hybrid car tour from Austin, Texas to Washington, D.C. The campaign generated more than 4,000 press hits and created a sense in the popular media that Creation Care had significant momentum.⁵⁶

At the same time, the Creation Care movement kept working to recruit evangelical champions to respond to climate change. In July 2002, the Au Sable Institute, founded to develop evangelical Christians for vocations as environmental scientists, co-hosted Climate Forum 2002 at Oxford University with the UK-based John Ray Initiative. The attendees called on Christians to recognize the reality of climate change, and to respond from their concern for creation and for the poor. One important outcome of the Climate Forum was recruiting NAE head lobbyist Richard Cizik as a climate change champion. During the forum, Cizik reported a climate change “conversion”

through conversation with Sir John Houghton, a British evangelical, climate scientist, and founder of the John Ray Initiative.⁵⁷ Richard Cizik went on to push the National Association of Evangelicals to deepen its engagement with Creation Care.

In June 2004, the EEN achieved its greatest milestone of legitimacy for Creation Care yet, when it co-hosted the Sandy Cove conference for American evangelical leaders with the two of the most respected institutions in evangelicalism: the National Association of Evangelicals and Christianity Today. The Sandy Cove conference was attended by Barrett Duke from the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, as well as then-NAE president Ted Haggard, who was beginning to grow in his environmental concern (before being abruptly deposed after a sexual scandal in 2006).

In June 2004, the EEN achieved its greatest milestone of legitimacy for Creation Care yet, when it co-hosted the Sandy Cove conference for American evangelical leaders with the two of the most respected institutions in evangelicalism

The gathering produced the Sandy Cove Covenant, which invited the evangelical community to engage in “a discussion about the question of climate change with the goal of reaching a consensus statement on the subject in twelve months.”⁵⁸ The Sandy Cove Covenant represented a significant advance from 1999, when climate change was considered too controversial by the NAE to even discuss. While the Sandy Cove conference did not put forward an evangelical consensus on climate change, it at least

set a time table for a meaningful dialogue that might lead to such a consensus. Later in October 2004, the NAE board of directors signed a new declaration on social responsibility that included Creation Care, called “For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility.” At the time, it seemed that declarations like these had made Creation Care into a mainstream evangelical issue, which laid the foundation to move evangelicals to action on climate change. After laying this groundwork slowly with national evangelical elites, EEN decided to finally take on climate change as a policy issue in 2006. From 1996 to 2006, EEN leaders and environmental funders believed that the Creation Care movement was on a trajectory of growing legitimacy and power.⁵⁹

In retrospect, this belief was wrong. The Creation Care movement had not built a strong enough

foundation among evangelicals to enter a policy fight for climate legislation in the mid-2000s. As soon as organized opposition emerged from the Christian Right, it became apparent that their movement needed mobilized power—a real base of leaders with intense policy demands for climate legislation, who had the backing of their evangelical constituency to engage in conflict.

To mobilize this kind of power among evangelicals for climate action by 2006, the Creation Care movement would have had to build a following among rank-and-file evangelicals starting in the 1990s, one integrated into everyday sites of evangelical piety like local congregations, Christian universities, and parachurch ministries.

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED: BUILDING MOBILIZED POWER

Other founding leaders in the Creation Care movement believed an exclusive focus on convening leaders from national evangelical institutions was an incomplete strategy. For example, Peter Illyn was an evangelical pastor and long-term environmental activist who had helped lead the Endangered Species Act campaign as leader of Christians for Environmental Stewardship (an organization founded during this campaign which rebranded as Restoring Eden in 2001). Illyn drew a sharply different set of lessons from the Creation Care movement’s experience with the Endangered Species Act, with drastically different implications for strategy in the 2000s.

Illyn observed that evangelicalism was a decentralized community, in which many rank-and-file evangelicals did not recognize or care about the opinions of national evangelical elites who signed Creation Care statements.

That’s the curse of the Evangelicals: we don’t have one hierarchy. [T]here’s probably 100,000 gatekeepers, and

100,000 gates. Every local pastor in some way is a gatekeeper, and on independent Baptist churches, where each congregation really stands alone. Nobody has kind of the ecclesiastical authority to say, “I speak for everyone.” If any of you do that, you hear, “The hell you do. You don’t speak for me.”⁶⁰

Leaders like Illyn did not trust Creation Care ideas to “trickle down” from national statements to the masses, because there was no obvious connection between these leaders and the everyday spiritual lives of the larger evangelical populace. To build a sustainable Creation Care movement, he felt it necessary to create real communities that helped local evangelical leaders connect their faith to environmental action. In retrospect, this was the kind of local base that could have generalized mobilized power for climate action.

From the late 1990s to 2015, Illyn focused on building a base among Christian college students and young

adults, whom he found to be the most receptive to Creation Care.

The tension started when I was part of EEN. EEN didn't see value in emphasizing the Christian colleges...I was finding—I was getting invited to Christian colleges to speak—that these colleges had young, kind of starry-eyed environmental clubs on campus.⁶¹

Illyn focused on building a base among Christian young adults in three ways: building faith-based environmental clubs in Christian colleges and universities, organizing summer immersion experiences in nature, and going to Christian rock festivals. For Christian college students, Illyn created a methodology for immersing Christian young adults in personal experiences with nature, then drawing connections between those experiences and public policy decisions that affected the environment.

[W]e always brought young Christians from the Christian colleges to D.C. for this week of learning about government. It was usually during their spring breaks. We would typically be part of a conversation, either on the Arctic Refuge or on stopping mountaintop removal or protecting endangered species. The students from all these Christian colleges would be part of a training, and then they would go and they would engage their elected officials.

Working with local evangelical congregations, Illyn found little evidence that national Climate Care framing was “trickling down” to the grassroots. Illyn found it difficult to persuade local pastors to engage Creation Care in their congregation, unless it was hyper-local and disconnected from public policy. The Christian Right groups, such as the Acton Institute and the Cornwall Alliance, succeeded in undermining EEN's strategy simply by creating a public debate on Creation Care. In Illyn's assessment, as long as there was organized opposition of any kind in the evangelical world, the easiest decision for pastors was just to say no.

[Conservative groups like the Acton Institute and the Cornwall Alliance]... don't have to win the debate. They just have to create a debate, make the debate public, and the majority of pastors go, “I'm already busy. This is not a core battle for me. I don't wanna sort through whose atmospheric study is right. The one guy says that we're gonna melt down next year. The other says this is the biggest hoax ever played. I'm gonna dig a well in Africa. That's a good thing I can do. I gotta get a sermon ready.”

According to Illyn, this tendency to say no was particularly strong in the case of climate change, because the issue was “more abstract.” At least in the case of endangered species, “you could be talking about protecting tangible things that people could see.” But when the conversation seemed distant from local church life, any threat of controversy was enough to deter most pastors.

The same pattern was reported by other locally-based Creation Care organizations who worked with evangelical congregations. For example, Georgia Interfaith Power and Light is an ecumenical organization that primarily works with Mainline Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish congregations on energy efficiency projects. Despite its ecumenical identity, Georgia IPL has built strong relationships with a number of Southern Baptist and nondenominational churches across their state by offering to help reduce their energy bills. Rev. Alexis Chase, an Episcopal priest who leads the organization,

Illyn found it difficult to persuade local pastors to engage Creation Care in their congregation, unless it was hyper-local and disconnected from public policy

works with a variety of evangelical leaders who care deeply about the environment and want to integrate these concerns into their local church. But her evangelical leaders are adamant that taking on the policy issue of climate change—or even specific policy regulations—provokes strong opposition from conservatives in their home churches.

Chase observed a radical disconnect between national climate change organizing in 2005-2009 in the Georgia evangelical congregations with whom

If a key pastor championed Creation Care, it was possible to see these theological themes integrated into the life of the church. But this integration inevitably focused on personal discipleship and local activities like recycling, never a policy issue that could create conflict within the church.

she worked, where the notion of “climate care” was at best unfamiliar, and at worst controversial. Chase never observed a single example of Creation Care ideas “trickling down” from EEN thought leaders to pastors to congregants. Instead, Chase found that she usually built a relationship first with motivated lay leaders in evangelical megachurches, who gave her access to small group settings to present on Creation Care. Once Chase had built up a base of lay leaders, she was sometimes able to get a meeting with a head pastor or key staff pastor. If a key pastor championed Creation Care, it was possible to see these theological themes integrated into the life of the church. But this integration inevitably focused on personal discipleship and local activities like recycling, never

a policy issue that could create conflict within the church.

Chase recalled a notable exception: lay leaders from five Southern Baptist churches made calls to their local electric membership corporation to prevent the building of three proposed coal-fired power plants in Georgia. But even these calls were framed in entirely apolitical terms. Chase persuaded the Southern Baptists to get involved the coal power debate by organizing a series of energy audits in Southern Baptist churches. Then she hosted a HEAT class to train lay leaders how to save energy and money in their own homes. At the end of the class, the Georgia IPL organizer would give them the phone number of the people they need to call. Partly as a result, two proposed coal-fire plant projects were shut down completely. But the policy campaign was smuggled into the class as an extension of personal discipleship.⁶²

The experiences of Restoring Eden and Georgia IPL show a radical disconnect between the Evangelical Climate Initiative and the lived experience of rank-and-file evangelicals. To bridge this disconnect, the evangelical Creation Care movement would have needed more than four years, doing this kind of work on a far greater scale at the local, state, and national levels simultaneously. This kind of long-term investment on the local and state level would have required a dramatic departure from common strategic thinking about constituency development among environmental funders. Building mobilized power among evangelicals required a very different set of practices and a much longer time-line than building convening power.

Indeed, interviews with EEN leaders suggests that their choice of an elite convening strategy was driven primarily by the need to attract foundation funding. Jim Ball, president of the EEN during the climate fight, explained that their board and staff had always aspired to build a long-term grassroots movement. But they found that only a handful of foundations had the appetite for this kind of long-term base-building work.

...A lot of times when we want to do things that are not so much tied to a specific policy, supporting a specific policy, but like doing more kind of grassroots outreach, it's hard to

get funding for that....In our view, you need to create a moral movement—the equivalent of the civil rights movement—to really affect the scale of change that we’re gonna need the rest of this decade. That’s not gonna happen with just kind of like, “Hey, help us pass this bill. I’ll give you 150 K to run this public media campaign. We’ll pay for that ad,” or whatever.

In Ball’s assessment, environmental funders’ focus on policy outcomes made it difficult for EEN to invest in the slow work of building a local church base. He estimated that connecting a grassroots evangelical base to a specific policy fight would require at least “three to five years’ worth of work.” This time frame was arguably even longer for an issue like climate change, which was not a logical first policy fight for new evangelical leaders to take on. But this went far beyond the typical funding cycle of even the most patient foundations.

This tension between funding cycles and the internal strategic insights of movement leaders is a common problem in faith-based environmentalism. In their

survey of religious environmental organizations, Smith and Pulvers (2009) found that movement leaders almost universally preferred to take a long-time horizon to changing culture and building a grassroots base. But to win funding from foundations, they felt pressure to take a shorter time-horizon and engage in issues-based advocacy that often was not well-matched to broadening support for Creation Care among their religious base.

This disconnect was related to a broader problem: that evangelicals lacked a seat in the central strategic conversations of the environmental movement.⁶³ Since the mid-1990s, environmental funders recognized the need for a broader field of faith-based movements who could expand the influence of environmentalism to unlikely allies. They also recognized that evangelicals had a special role to play in this religious portfolio because their religious community was closely associated with the Republican Party. But despite their special challenges and unique vantage point, evangelical leaders did not inform the strategic thinking of the broader environmental movement.

WHAT CLIMATE CARE WAS UP AGAINST: COALITION MAINTENANCE ON THE RIGHT

Neither funders nor evangelical grantees anticipated the scale of the opposition they would face from the Christian Right. The Evangelical Environment Network successfully anticipated many of the cultural barriers to environmentalism within their religious subculture, and addresses these barriers by creating their own set of biblical and theological frames. But they failed to anticipate the political barriers to Creation Care rooted in evangelicalism’s place as an “anchor group” of the Republican Party.⁶⁴

The EEN did not fail to convince the old guard of the Christian Right because they had the wrong messaging. They failed because taking on climate change threatened to disrupt the place of evangelicals within a powerful Republican coalition. Climate care was unacceptable to leaders associated with the

Christian Right for two reasons. First, it challenged the faith in unregulated markets that holds the Republican coalition together, and created problems for their allies in the energy industry and economic conservative camps. Second, it threatened the credentials of Christian Right leaders to represent evangelicals and impose a clear hierarchy of issues with abortion, a particular understanding of religious liberty, and sexual morality at the top.

These were the principal factors that pushed the Southern Baptist ERLC to oppose the Evangelical Climate Initiative. In the early 2000s, the EEN had hoped that they could persuade figures like Richard Land and Barrett Duke to at least remain neutral in the climate change debate—or even become allies. But instead, these coalition dynamics pushed

ERLC leaders and their allies in other major social conservative organizations to expend significant political capital to oppose climate care.

Barrett Duke, the Policy Director of the ERLC, explained that in the early 2000s, he was open to the EEN's message about climate change. Duke joined the ERLC staff in 1997, and was assigned to direct its public policy work in 2003, just when global warming was first gaining attention in the evangelical community. Duke recalls that global warming was "one of the first things that people were asking me to take a look at. I said okay." To explore the issue of climate change, Duke attended the June 2004 Sandy Cove conference, co-sponsored by the EEN, the NAE, and Christianity Today. Duke recalled listening to a presentation by Sir John Houghton, co-chair of the Nobel Peace Prize winning Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's scientific assessment working group.

And one reason I was told that I needed to believe this guy is because he was an evangelical. And I was thinking, 'Wait, because he's an evangelical

could, then I started asking other people, 'What's right here? What's not right here?'"

While Duke was figuring out what to believe about climate change, he "stumbled across Cal Beisner" at a Heritage Foundation event. "Cal was talking there, and I listened to him, and I asked him questions." Beisner threw doubt on the reality of climate change by suggesting that there was uncertainty about the data collection sites and about the role of the sun. "It was obvious to me that Sir Houghton and none of these other climate change people have apparently given any consideration to the role of the Sun in affecting the climate."

But confusion about the science of climate change was not the greatest barrier for Barrett Duke. What raised his concern about climate action was the large-scale, government solution being proposed. While weighing the competing scientific claims of Houghton and Beisner, Duke asked himself "Okay, suppose they are right. What's their solution?" In retrospect, the lack of an acceptable solution weighed heavily in his thinking.

They weren't really solving the problem...They're talking trillions of dollars of investment, a complete restructuring of the economy in order to simply slow down the rate of warming...I said, okay, millions of people will lose their jobs. The entire energy industry will be basically recalibrated. Plus, energy will be more expensive, and the undeveloped world will be plunged into poverty for another generation.

Duke recalls that by 2006, he had settled on a belief that climate change was not human-caused and that the large-scale government solutions being proposed would impose unacceptable human costs.

Duke became convinced that the ERLC should oppose climate action in mid-2006. "What really brought it to a head was that...article with Richard Cizik on the front walking on water." Duke flagged two problems with Cizik's public recognition. First, it interfered with the ERLC's ability to represent evangelicals as a united voice, a concern echoed by James Dobson and Charles Colson in statements discussed above. Second, Cizik's leadership created a problem for economic conservatives that the ERLC valued as allies.

Duke recalls that by 2006, he had settled on a belief that climate change was not human-caused and that the large-scale government solutions being proposed would impose unacceptable human costs

I'm just supposed to believe him?'...Just because he is an evangelical...it does not require that I therefore assume that he's right...I listened, and I got the books from him...He gave me the whole stack of books, and I worked with it as best as I

For one...that created...a concern for a lot of people on the Hill that Rich was being promoted as the leading evangelical figure in Washington D.C. on an issue that most evangelicals certainly had to come to a consensus on...And that was affecting not only the witness of evangelicals in D.C., but it was also impacting the financial, the economic conservatives who saw what a global warming policy at the federal level was going to do to the country economically.

According to Duke, “it was actually the fiscal conservatives who were more concerned with the impact of Rich’s position on global warming than it even was for the faith community.”

Duke described a flurry of conversations that happened within the conservative movement in 2004 and 2005 about the threat of the Evangelical Climate Initiative.

They [economic conservatives] were pushing back on the effort to create policy here in DC on reining in carbon emissions, and they saw that Rich was being used by those forces to enact these carbon emission standards, and so they saw him being used as a faith person.

According to Duke, most of the discussions about Richard Cizik and the Evangelical Climate Initiative were initiated by economic conservatives who were concerned about evangelicals advocating for large-scale government intervention. In 2004 and 2005, it was economic conservatives’ concerns about coalition maintenance that drove internal movement conversations about how to respond to the ECI. “There were some other policy groups that are in D.C., The Heritage Foundation, the Weyrich Luncheon, group folks, and folks like that definitely expressing to me

their concern about where Rich was and where the NAE was going on this...I know Rich’s name came up at least a couple of times at those [Weyrich] policy luncheons as someone who was doing the conservative cause great harm.” Duke stated that these conversations between economic conservatives and evangelicals were often brokered by Beisner, “trying to coalesce a group to push back on the alarmism.”

In short, the Evangelical Climate Initiative offered Southern Baptist leaders a most unappealing proposition: take a strong stand on an issue that divided their base, angered their conservative allies, and gave away their credential as the arbiter of evangelical political priorities. This mismatch with their organizational self-interest made it difficult for Southern Baptists to accept the case for climate action. It was not impossible for the ERLC to take action on Creation Care, on strictly theological or moral grounds. In 1992, Richard Land of the ERLC had edited a book on Creation Care called *The Earth is the Lord’s*. As late as 2004, Barrett Duke was given the latitude within his organization to explore the evangelical conversation on climate change. But by 2005, it was clear that climate legislation threatened the conservative coalition in existential ways that more local conservation fights did not.

Could a broader-based movement for evangelical climate action have overcome these coalition dynamics, to motivate ERLC leaders to at least remain neutral in the climate debate? Perhaps, but climate action would have needed to show a much stronger constituency among Southern Baptists, so that attacking the ECI cost them something with their base. As things stood in 2004, the cost of accepting the reality of climate change was unacceptably high from the ERLC’s organizational perspective, something that no amount of better messaging could have changed.

LESSONS

Environmental funders are used to the idea that they need to build cross-party coalitions to move legislation, of the kind that they once put together routinely with moderate Republicans like John Chafee of Rhode Island or William Cohen of Maine. Advocates of global warming were counting on Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) to perform a similar role in shepherding at least a small group of Republicans—an expectation that proved to be ill-founded.

Foundations' support for Creation Care represented a different, and to some degree more creative, effort to build cross-party support in a more transpartisan mode, rather than the classic approach of reaching out solely to what is left of the moderate, establishment parts of the Republican party. While our conclusions about how this engagement turned out are necessarily critical, the fact it was attempted shows some recognition that the center-out strategy might be a thing of the past, and that advocates needed to explore other approaches.

The Importance of Issue Type for Political Strategy

The first, and most important lesson, is that the form of transpartisan engagement depends critically on issue type. In particular, it matters a great deal whether a policy position is anchored by a strong, mobilized, core party coalition member, or if a party's position is simply opportunistic or shallowly held. In two of the most prominent issues where transpartisan coalitions have been successfully built—criminal justice reform and the Pentagon budget—Republicans did not have such a coalition member anchoring their positions. This meant that, when the electoral appeal or profile of the issue shifted, activists and politicians had some room to maneuver without bringing party discipline down on their heads.

Opposition to global warming did have a very strong party coalition partner behind it in the form of the coal and oil industries and their allies in cross-industry business organizations. On issues like this, efforts to reach out to strange bedfellows will, inevitably,

generate a well-funded, highly mobilized counter-mobilization. What we have called “coalitional etiquette” will be a very strong force, leading to a predictable effort by the relevant coalition member to ask its partners to “do their part” by squashing opposition in their ranks. That is precisely what happened, successfully, in the case of Creation Care.

When one party has a position that is deeply rooted coalitionally, purely partisan strategies are the only ones that are plausible in the short term, because more superficial, short-term transpartisan strategies of the kind that were used in the case of the Pentagon budget are simply too easy to counter.

Time Horizons

This work operates on a very different time horizon, because when transpartisan entrepreneurs challenge the deep structure of agreements between members of a political coalition, they need to have more than names on a page—they need to have an army of true believers willing to run to the sound of the guns. That was a level of engagement well beyond the campaign model that the supporters of Creation Care thought in terms of, or were culturally equipped to foster.

As noted above, we do have examples of civic entrepreneurs and funders, working for years or even decades to pull constituencies out of an opposition coalition, or even change the views of an entire coalition. Some of these opportunities were available to environmental funders going back into the 1990s. Funders could have invested more seriously into building the organizational capacity of Creation Care organizations, and committed to funding them for the long term. If they had done so, at the very least the conflicts that occurred later on (in which funders became frustrated with Creation Care activists diverting funds to cover general operating expenses) would have been avoided. But even more seriously, such investments would have allowed evangelicals sympathetic to the environment to work on building mobilized power, especially in “soft targets” like

Christian universities, where there was serious interest and the possibility of building a cadre of activists.

In addition, such support would have opened up the possibility of actually organizing the evangelical ministers who Creation Care activists focused mainly on signing on to declarations, building them into a community. To ensure that these ministers would not run when global warming activists attempted to muddy the waters and questioned the religious authenticity of the movement, Creation Care leaders needed to produce “unit cohesion” among those ministers through person-to-person connections, and by giving them a deep foundation of knowledge on the issue. That kind of mobilized power is the product of repeated, in-person interactions over years, precisely the sort of action that Creation Care activists were in no position to produce.

ECI signatories might have stood publicly against Christian Right attacks on climate care if they could have demonstrated significant grassroots support from the congregations and evangelical institutions that they led. In criminal justice, for instance, evangelical advocates for reform know that they have support from the thousands of evangelicals who have done work in prisons, who would stand behind them if they were attacked. Waging a public battle with other evangelicals, by contrast, would have been a significant leadership risk for ECI signatories, since they lacked precisely that sort of grassroots support. It is possible that ECI signatories might have taken this leadership risk together, but only if they had formed a strong bond with other signatories in advance. Just putting their name on a statement was not enough to motivate them to take significant risks for the cause.

Indeed, Christian Right leaders might have decided to sit this battle out, if ECI organizers had demonstrated a stronger grassroots base among evangelicals. Attacking climate action, however, was essentially cost-free to conservative evangelical leaders: there was no reason to suspect that opposing climate action would require them to expend any political capital or hurt their reputation within evangelicalism. Christian Right leaders thought that leaders like Richard Cizik had feet of clay, that climate care did not have mobilized backing within local congregations, Christian universities, or donors. And they were right.

ECI signatories might have stood publicly against Christian Right attacks on climate care if they could have demonstrated significant grassroots support from the congregations and evangelical institutions that they led

Deep Understanding Among Partners

What explains the mistakes made by Creation Care activists and the donors that supported them? Our answers are necessarily speculative, but our suspicion is that the core of the problem was donor assumptions about how advocacy campaigns, in general, and the evangelical community in particular, function. In the run-up to the effort to pass what became Waxman-Markey, donors had a specific sense of what it is they wanted Creation Care activists to provide to the larger campaign, which that was a statement of support signed by a large number of major figures in the evangelical world. They got that. But as it turned out, in the heat of battle that was not worth much—in fact, if anything it may have actually backfired by making future evangelical engagement more difficult.

The donors who pushed for this “deliverable” did not really understand the internal dynamics of the evangelical world, and thus did not see this backlash coming, or understand what its consequences would be. Their lack of deep knowledge of the evangelical community meant that they could not recognize strategies with a plausible likelihood of success, or activists who had a chance of actually delivering. They did not understand what a very difficult issue global warming was for evangelicals, as compared to other potential areas of environmental concern with a greater potential for creating a personal connection to creation. As the donors themselves will admit, they were too busy to really understand the internal

dynamics of the evangelical activists that they were working with, or appreciate their organizational fragility.

As Michael Northrup put it, foundations were unable to anticipate the unique threats to evangelical Creation Care movements, because they lacked deep knowledge about evangelicalism and failed to engage in deep strategic conversations with evangelical leaders on the ground. According to Northrup:

[T]he cultural differences in terms of who they were and we were, were so profound. For us to have engaged at that level of due diligence, it's not something we do practically...We have an ability to really go deep on institutional development for a fraction of the work that we do. We're good actually when we really engage that way, but this was... much more of a tactical play than it was an institutional play.

If they had, foundation strategists might have anticipated the possibility of backlash, “played some defense”, and “suggested some strategies for more effectively building what they needed to do.”

Serious transpartisan work, especially under the challenging conditions that faced the cause of Creation

Care, requires advisors with very deep networks and relationships within the community that they are attempting to mobilize, if they don't have that capacity in-house. Without such sources of information, the delicate work of sowing the sources of dissent in rocky ground is unlikely to succeed.

The example of Creation Care shows quite clearly the dangers of political movements that are more organized around “campaigns” and less around movement-building and organizational development. Viewed on the time horizon of a campaign, which by definition culminates in a particular act of government, thinking about Creation Care as providing “cover” for Republican politicians made a certain degree of sense. And that sort of political action—symbolized by “statements” with lots of signatories—can be effective on issues where activists do not have mobilized opponents, and are stymied primarily by inattention. Those same strategies do not work when mobilized opponents are prepared to challenge the status of signatories and thus undermine their capacity to provide political cover. In cases like that, all of the important work to establish what sort of positions can be held by adherents to political movements is done far before a campaign ever gets started and well after it is over.

THE FUTURE

Even now, Creation Care is not a lost cause. The original instinct that there is an untapped potential for environmental activism in the world of evangelical Christianity is certainly the case. While the most visible evangelical leaders, who have deep partisan commitments, are unlikely to join the cause, the movement is much larger and more diverse than its most notorious standard-bearers.

Since 2009, the Creation Care movement has learned from the failure of the Evangelical Climate Initiative. The EEN's new President, Mitch Hescox, has begun negotiating more assertively with foundations and allies about how their expertise as evangelicals leads them to different strategic conclusions.⁶⁵ Movement leaders have also deepened their commitment to more long-term, values-based organizing in local

evangelical spaces. Efforts like Flourish, led by ECI veterans Rusty Pritchard and Jim Jewell, are seeking to de-couple Creation Care from short-term policy debates. There is widespread understanding that the movement needs both tracks: a track that makes strong policy statements, and a softer track that breaks through partisan polarization and builds a grassroots base among rank-and-file evangelicals.⁶⁶

It is in evangelical universities and in individual congregations—the places where the next generation of evangelicals are learning what it is that their faith commits them to do in the public sphere—that the next battle for Creation Care will be fought. That is a battle that will not translate into changed votes in Congress for a decade or more, but it is a battle worth fighting.

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ENDNOTES

1 For a summary of this effort to pass climate change legislation, see Judith Layzer (2011). There is widespread controversy within the environmental movement and among outside observers about what went wrong in the climate change fight. See, for example, the heated debates around Theda Skocpol's argument about how environmental strategy went awry during Obama's first term. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/01/24/you-cant-change-the-climate-from-inside-washington/>

2 Between 2007 and 2010, the percentage of self-identified conservatives who believed that global warming was already occurring declined from around half before the debate on climate change legislation began, to 30 percent by 2010. (McCright and Dunlap 2011)

3 Here, we draw on work in political science which conceives of parties as coalitions of groups with intense policy demands (Bawn et al. 2012). We use the concept of mobilized power to reference a central question in the civic engagement debates: whether national advocacy groups have lost their ability to mobilize grassroots constituencies into civic participation (Skocpol 2003). Our concept of mobilized power indicates that national advocacy groups and social movement organizations have varying abilities to move leaders at the local and state level into policy debates, and this variation affects these group's ability to influence debates and policy outcomes. See, for example, the work of Andy Andrews and his collaborators. (Andrews 2001, Andrews and Edwards 2004, Andrews et al. 2010)

4 (Lindsay 2008)

5 (Schlozman 2015)

6 See Chapter 1 in Bean (2014) for a discussion of how the Christian Right polices the boundaries of evangelicalism to maintain its coalition with conservatives and the Republican Party.

7 (Karol 2009)

8 Historians have documented the strategic effort by economic conservatives and Christian Right leaders to weave their disparate beliefs together into a seemingly coherent ideology. Conservative business interests first attempted to weave evangelical theology with free market ideology in the 1940s to stop the New Deal (Lichtman 2008, Phillips-Fein 2010). This weaving of free market ideology and evangelical theology took center stage in the 1980s with Reaganomics and the New Christian Right (Crouse 2013, Martin 1996). Evangelicals have a particularly close historical relationship with free market advocates in the oil industry (Dochuk 2013).

9 Layzer (2011), p. 325.

10 Pooley (2010), p. 25-29.

11 **Mike Allen and Jim Vandehei**, "Green groups open 'climate war room,'" Politico, September 21, 2009. <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0909/27369.html>

12 **Michael Northrup**, author interview.

13 Ibid.

14 **Paul Gorman**, author interview.

15 See Hewlett Foundation grant record for National Religious Partnership for the Environment, <http://www.hewlett.org/grants/22673/national-religious-partnership-environment>; and Energy Foundation grant record for Evangelical Environmental Network, http://www.ef.org/grants-database/?fwp_keywords=evangelical

16 (Smith and Pulver 2009)

17 **Jim Ball**, author interview.

18 For more on the history of the National Association of Evangelicals as a central institution in the evangelical movement, see Williams, p. 4-23. (Williams 2010)

- 19 (Bixler 2006)
- 20 **Jim Ball**, author interview.
- 21 **Calvin Beisner**, author interview. For a discussion of the 1980s debates between pro-Reaganomics evangelicals and Evangelical Left voices like Ron Sider, see (Crouse 2013), pp. 109-112.
- 22 (Sider 1977)
- 23 (Beisner 1997)
- 24 (Zaleha and Szasz 2014)
- 25 According to documents filed with the Virginia State Corporation Commission, the Cornwall Alliance shared an office with Chris Rogers' consulting group, CDR Communications, and his nonprofit hub, the James Partnership. According to a June 19, 2010 ThinkProgress report, "Rogers, who heads a media and public relations firm called CDR Communications, collaborates with longtime oil front group operative David Rothbard, the founder and President of the Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow (CFACT) and Jacques Villarreal, a lower level staffer at CFACT, for his James Partnership group. In the past, Rogers' firm has worked for the Bush administration and for the conservative planning group, the Council for National Policy." <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2010/06/19/206237/the-oily-operators-behind-the-religious-climate-change-disinformation-front-group-cornwall-alliance/>
- 26 **Richard Cizik**, author interview.
- 27 Cited in Heltzel "Jesus and Justice" 2009, p. 154.
- 28 In his radio broadcasts on Breakpoint, Colson continued to show sympathy towards the cause of Creation Care. His primary concern appeared to be the prospect of liberals dividing evangelicals politically. See, for example, his broadcast on November 2, 2007, "Just Do It." <http://www.breakpoint.org/bpcommentaries/entry/13/10606> and his broadcast on January 30, 2008 "It's All Worldview," <http://www.colsoncenter.org/bpcommentaries/entry/13/10544>
- 29 **Jonathan Merritt**, cited in Wilkinson, p. 116.
- 30 (Layzer 2011), p. 334.
- 31 H.R. 2454 (111th): American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009. <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/votes/111-2009/h477>
- 32 Wilkinson 2012, p. 70.
- 33 **Cal Beisner**, author interview.
- 34 Wilkinson 2012, Chapter 4. For the broader history of Waxman-Markey and the failure of climate legislation in the Senate, see (Loewentheil 2013).
- 35 (Dunlap and McCright 2015, Jacques, Dunlap and Freeman 2008).
- 36 (Bartosiewicz and Miley 2013). (Skocpol 2013).
- 37 (McCright and Dunlap 2011) On the interaction between ideology, political identity and science communication, see (Nisbet, Cooper and Garrett 2015). On how evangelical discourse on the environment became fractured along partisan lines, see (Danielsen 2013).
- 38 Wilkinson, Chapter 6.
- 39 Wilkinson, 50-51
- 40 Wilkinson, 51.
- 41 (Feder 2011)
- 42 (Bean 2014), pp. 27-34.
- 43 **Fred Van Dyke, Stan Lequire, and Ron Sider**, author interviews.
- 44 (Smith and Pulver 2009)
- 45 (Kearns 1996)
- 46 **Steinfels, Peter**. "Evangelical Group Defends Laws Protecting Endangered Species as a Modern 'Noah's Ark'." New York Times, January 31, 1996. <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/01/31/us/evangelical-group-defends-laws-protecting-endangered-species-amodern-noah-s-ark.html>
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48 **Steinfels, Peter**. “Evangelical Group Defends Laws Protecting Endangered Species as a Modern ‘Noah’s Ark’.” New York Times, January 31, 1996. <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/01/31/us/evangelical-group-defends-laws-protecting-endangered-species-amodern-noah-s-ark.html>

49 **Paul Gorman**, author interview.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

52 **Jim Ball**, author interview.

53 **Peter Illyn**, author interview.

54 (Wilkinson 2012), 21

55 (Wilkinson), 22.

56 (Kearns 1997)

57 **Richard Cizik**, author interview.

58 Text of “Sandy Cove Covenant and Invitation” (2004), reprinted in Appendix C of Wilkinson 2012, 149.

59 **Paul Gorman, Richard Cizik, and Jim Ball**, author interviews.

60 **Peter Illyn**, author interview.

61 Author interview.

62 **Alexis Chase**, author interview.

63 Even more powerful allies like organized labor felt that they were excluded from important strategic decisions during this climate change fight. Evangelical Creation Care leaders were further removed. For a detailed description of the climate change coalition and its internal dynamics, see Bartosiewicz and Miley (2013)

64 (Schlozman 2015)

65 **Mitch Hescocx**, author interview.

66 Wilkinson 2012, Chapter 6.



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