

Why did the push for climate legislation fail even though Democrats controlled Congress and the White House in 2008-2010 ? Theda Skocpol, a Harvard political scientist, addressed this issue in a controversial recent paper.. Matt Kahn and I have both blogged before about her paper ([here](#) and [here](#)). Now that I've had a chance to read the 150-page article more carefully, I have a few more observations.

I can understand the angry reaction of people who were involved in the fight to pass climate legislation in Obama's first term. Skocpol sometimes seems airily dismissive of their hard work and faults them for failing to anticipate the rise of the tea party, a failure that was widely shared among political analysts. She also takes a few cheap shots at the pampered lives of "wind and cheese liberals," which come with ill-grace from a professor at a posh Ivy League university. But she has a more serious point that can get lost along the way.

Skocpol's basic point is a little more subtle than most accounts indicate. It's not based on a general theory that legislation has to be based on a mass popular movement. Rather, she argues that a certain kind of grassroots movement is needed under present circumstances. Because of the tea party, Republicans are essentially unavailable to form a bipartisan coalition in Congress. Therefore, pulling Democrats together is the key. To make this work, she argues, we need a grassroots movement that will not only mobilize Democratic voters but articulate a clear policy proposal that can help frame debates. She points to the success of a similar effort in the fight to pass a healthcare bill. She also advocates "cap and dividend" as a policy around which many Democrats could coalesce. I don't know if she's right about this, but it's a point that deserves serious consideration. A variant on her argument is presented by "The Too Polite Revolution," a recent [report](#) to the Rockefeller Family Fund, which also argues for a stronger grassroots political approach.

Skocpol also has some very interesting things to say about the extreme position of congressional Republicans on climate change. It turns out that they are significantly more anti-climate regulation than Republican voters as a whole. Democrats, on the other hand, are closer to their voters. So polarization in Congress is much higher than among the general population. But polarization among the public has also increased because Republicans have become sharply more skeptical of climate change. Fox News's first story on the IPCC's Fourth Assessment was neutral, but starting the same night and intensifying over the next months, Fox began an unremitting series of attacks on climate science. She views the Fox campaign against climate change as "part of a much broader, concerted messaging campaign" involving conservative think tanks, bloggers, and talk radio hosts.

If nothing else, it is clear that the Fox messaging campaign coincided with a shift in views among Republican voters. The result of the shift was an increasingly huge gap between

Democrats and Republicans over whether the threat of climate change. In 2001, the gap was about 25%, while by 2010 it had doubled. But remember that the GOP congressional delegation moved even farther to the right, so that even previous supporters of climate legislation like John McCain were engaging in a “duck and cover” exercise.

The effort to draw lessons from past failures is commendable. But there are two caveats to keep in mind. The first is that *failure* to enact legislation is the default political outcome because our political system is filled with obstacles to legislation. The second is that the political situation has been quite volatile in recent years, so past events may have limited future relevance. No one predicted in 2006 that we would soon see our first African American president; few predicted in 2008 that ultra-conservatives would soon take over the House. So we need to combine an understanding of past experience with the imagination to adapt to the future.