When the campaign to cut carbon emissions began in the last decade of the 20th Century, there seemed to be a clear path forward. International negotiations would begin with a framework convention, followed by a later global agreement capping carbon emissions. Within the US, Congress would enact legislation cutting carbon emissions. By the end of the first decade of the new century, both parts of this top-down strategy had collapsed, and new strategies had begun to coalesce.

The international side of this strategy never quite got off the ground. The Kyoto Protocol was the hoped-for follow up to the framework convention. But there was never any chance that the US would join Kyoto. Even before the agreement was signed, the US Senate had passed a resolution by a vote of 97-0 against US agreement to specific emission limits unless developing countries were also covered. The Kyoto Protocol covered only developed countries.

With the election of George W. Bush, it was clear that the US would not budge on this issue. Perhaps more importantly, the rise of China as a global economic power also made it clear that an agreement like Kyoto, limited to developed countries, would never solve the problem. Yet developing countries like China would not agree to binding restrictions on emissions.

The Bush Administration also saw the emergence of new US strategies after Bush abandoned a campaign pledge to regulate CO2 emissions. California passed ambitious climate legislation without waiting for the federal government. And near the end of Bush’s term, the Supreme Court ruled that EPA had the power to regulate greenhouse gases under a 1970 air pollution law. Still, there was hope that after Bush, Congress would step up and pass a new climate law. And indeed, a major climate bill did pass the House. But it died in the Senate, and any hope of reviving it ended when House Democrats were routed in the 2010 elections.

Thus, by the start of the 2010s, it was clear that Congress would not take the lead in regulating carbon, and that prospects were dim for a global agreement with binding limits on carbon emissions. And to this day, those realities have not changed.

Rather than giving up on climate policy in the face of these disappointments, advocates and policymakers set off on an alternative path. Within the US, state and EPA regulation dominated, while international negotiations took a new turn in the 2009 Copenhagen agreement. That, however, is a story for another day.