

DEMOCRATIC POLITICS AND THE LONG MARCH ON GLOBAL WARMING: Comments on McCright and Dunlap

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The political impasse over global warming legislation stems from obstacles in the mass media arena, public awareness, electoral politics as well as governmental policy. Advocates of global warming policy have to be simultaneously successful in all four major public arenas to prevail. This article provides an overview of the obstacles in each public arena in the United States highlighting the broader context in which McCright and Dunlap's analysis of polarized public opinion operates. Global warming advocates have had their greatest success in the media arena but are checked by the rise of a conservative counter-campaign as well as media reporting norms, which have contributed to polarized public opinion and limited salience of the issue. Global warming never ranks in the top issue list to which electoral candidates attend, giving it little priority in national electoral contests. Although the House of Representatives passed the Waxman-Markey Bill in 2009, the bill died in the Senate and will not resurface until the Democratic margin is again large enough to overcome opposition vetoes. At the same time, major legislation has often incubated on the margins of these public arenas for significant time until a political crisis removes the normal obstacles to such major "watershed" legislation. For global warming, the long march through American public arenas appears to have begun.

The political campaign for global warming legislation in the U.S. seems to have reached an impasse. On June 26, 2009 the House of Representatives passed the Waxman-Markey Bill by a vote of 219 to 212 along partisan lines that would have created an emissions trading system similar to the European Union, but the bill died in the Senate (where similar legislation has twice been defeated and the Democrats controlled the three-fifths majority needed to invoke cloture) and the November 2012 elections brought Republicans back in control of the House. With Republicans in control of the House and the Democrats losing their cloture-proof three-fifths majority in the Senate, the prospects for significant global warming legislation are nil. As McCright and Dunlap (2010) show, public opinion is roughly evenly divided with only a third or so responding that global warming constitutes a significant threat (see also Pew Research Center 2008). Global warming consistently runs as a minor issue in national election polls, and correspondingly, receives little candidate attention in presidential and congressional races. How did we reach this impasse?

Drawing on Hilgartner and Bosk's (1988) public arenas model and McCarthy, Smith, and Zald (1996) refinements, advocates of global warming legislation must operate simultaneously in four highly competitive public arenas for media attention,

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public awareness, electoral politics, and governmental policy. Each of these four arenas has distinctive actors, institutional rules, cultural definitions, and processes that select out problems for discussion and decision making. The corporate elite and other powerful interests are entrenched in all four arenas in differing degrees. To move from initial problem definition to effective legislation requires a long march through all four areas. This is not a linear process but a highly interactive dynamic with mutually reinforcing feedback loops. If one does not move forward in one arena, it is often difficult to move forward elsewhere. This article sketches these four public arenas and the reinforcing obstacles that they pose to global warming legislation.

First a quick note on the four arenas. McCarthy et al. (1996) argue that each arena has its own actors, rules, cultures, and dynamics and are not simply reducible to “stages” of a linear legislative process. Four semiautonomous arenas means that there are multiple veto points that give opponents of change opportunities to counter movement efforts to bring about policy change. Although the mass media typically plays gatekeeper to the other three arenas, there are distinctive obstacles in public awareness, electoral politics, and governmental policy. These arenas tend to be mutually reinforcing, meaning that obstacles in one arena tend to reinforce obstacles elsewhere. If a movement wants to secure legislative change, it needs to secure favorable media access *and* supportive public awareness/opinion *and* electoral support. Social movements have to operate simultaneously in all four arenas, which is one reason why they are more successful in getting issues onto the governmental policy agenda than actually controlling the content of legislation (Burstein 1986, 2003; Olzak and Soule 2009; Johnson, Agnone, and McCarthy 2010). Historically “watershed” legislation of the sort entailed by global warming has only been passed during major reform periods when center/left governing coalitions controlled the federal government and held a three-fifth majority in the Senate. Despite that type of control, the 111th Congress (2009–2011) did not usher forth global warming legislation. Obviously the obstacles are greater. What are they? Let us turn now to the four public arenas and how they interact.

ACCESSING THE PUBLIC ARENAS

The mass media is the primary way in which the public gets its information about topics like global warming. It is also a major scorecard for politicians and governmental decision makers, telling them about public opinion, their rivals running for office and various groups trying to influence governmental decisions. Especially for a movement that lacks strong routine access to centers of decision making, media access is the central lever for influencing these other arenas. But media access is often problematic for movements because of the media reporting norms, competition for media space and corporate hegemony (Gamson et al. 1992; Peoples 2008).

What constitutes media access? Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) identify three criteria: (1) *standing* or visibility in terms of mentions, indicating that media take the movement and its issues seriously; (2) *preferred framing* or the extent to which media accurately present the movement’s perspective; and (3) *sympathy* or the positive/negative tone with

which movement actors and issues are presented. The most influential forum for influencing public opinion is television news, which provides a cue for what topics are important and primary information. Figure 1 charts the monthly number of new stories in the evening news programs of the three major TV news channels (NBC, CBS, and ABC) from 1970 through 2010 as coded from the Vanderbilt Television News Archive.¹ Various high level governmental decisions and United Nations (UN)-related diplomatic events seem to be the most important triggers for these mentions. Science reports per se are relatively unimportant. Until 1988, coverage was highly episodic, limited to a few isolated mentions and important scientific reports were ignored. In January 1970, the Council of Environmental Quality annual report first discussed the greenhouse effect, which received one TV mention. In 1979, both the Charney Report by the National Academy of Sciences and the World Climate Conference of the World Meteorological Organization, which addressed greenhouse warming, were ignored. In 1983, the Environmental Protection Agency issued a special report on greenhouse warming, which received five TV mentions, but then the topic virtually disappeared until 1988 to 1989 when a “killer heat wave” (Ungar 1992), Congressional testimony by NASA scientist James Hansen, and the creation by Presidential Executive Order of the U.S. Global Change Research Program created a sustained basis for global warming research and policy discussions. From then through the June 1992 UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, global warming received significant mentions, as many as 10 in one month, and then it largely disappeared from TV news. In 1997 to 1998, the negotiations over the Kyoto Protocol renewed attention, which peaked in December 1997 with the UN Conference of the Parties (COP 3) meeting in Tokyo, Japan and the U.S. Senate passage of the Byrd-Hagel resolution 97-0 opposing the protocol unless significant developing countries were included. From this point on, global warming has been a staple TV news topic spurred by high-profile diplomatic events (e.g., European criticism during President Bush’s March 2001 tour after announcing that the United States would not sign the Kyoto Protocol; the October–December 2007 Nobel Peace Prize award to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and Al Gore; and the failed UN Conference of the Parties 15 [COP 15] meeting in Copenhagen, Denmark in December 2009), weather disasters attributed to global warming (Hurricane Katrina in August–September 2005) and the promotion of Al Gore’s *Inconvenient Truth* movie in the spring-summer of 2006. Interestingly, the issue seems to have largely disappeared after the failure of the COP 15 conference in December 2009, although similar such TV news lulls have occurred in the past decade. More important, this addresses only the standing of the topic, not the framing or the sympathy of the coverage with the arguments that global warming is occurring and deserves attention.

Studies of media framing and sympathy suggest that, while the topic is receiving growing attention, a significant share is unsympathetic and is framed as either neutral or negative and systematically misrepresents the mainstream climate science consensus on global warming (Boykoff and Boykoff 2004, 2007; Antilla 2005; Boykoff 2007, 2009; Freudenberg and Muselli 2010). When applied to a controversial and complex topic like global warming, the media norm of journalistic balance is typically seen as requiring

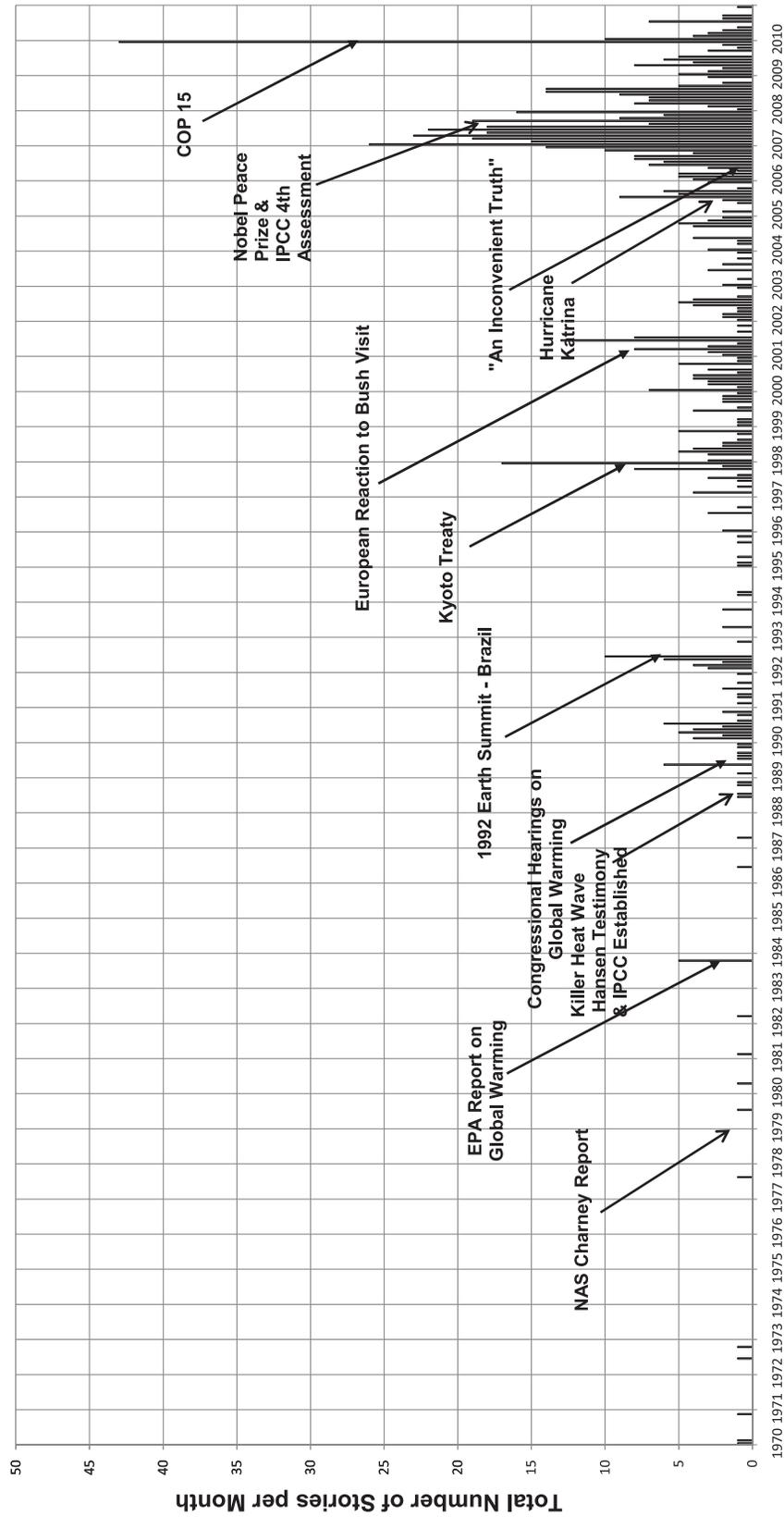


FIGURE 1. Nightly News Stories on Global Warming (NBC, CBS, and ABC).

input from both sides. Hence, despite a clear climate science consensus, media stories about global warming in both print and TV coverage typically give equal weight to the views of the critics. This has given the critics, who have been heavily funded by corporations and private foundations to make the case against global warming legislation, an opportunity to cast doubt on the reality of global warming, its causes and future benefits. Journalists are also interested in novelty and drama, which creates “newsworthiness” and leads them to focus on the “dueling scientists,” prominent politicians and celebrities. It also means that advocates of global warming have to continually create drama to maintain media attention. There is also self-censorship with newspapers avoiding complex and controversial topics, like positive climate system feedbacks that might create tipping points towards irreversible climate change (Antilla 2010). Immediate impact is more important than long-term benefits, leading to a media focus on the immediate economic costs of global warming policies rather than future benefits of effective remedies (Pooley 2009). This is also reinforced by economic changes in the structure of mass media with newspapers undergoing a major shrinkage of writers, especially those assigned to cover science, and, with the development of cable TV, the growth of “advocacy journalism” with highly segmented viewer audiences. Overall, this has produced fragmented, confusing news coverage and contributed to the pattern of polarized public opinion that McCright and Dunlap document. As they contend, this casts serious doubts on the effectiveness of the information-based strategy that has been central to the environmental movement’s campaign on global warming.

What about the electoral and governmental policy arenas? In terms of electoral politics, global warming has never entered into the national electoral agenda as a leading issue that drives a significant numbers of voters. The most consistent polling that we have across time is the Gallup series on the “top problems facing the nation.” Unfortunately this poll has never used “global warming” but the ranking of “the environment,” which should capture a major share of this priority, has rarely been identified by more than 3 to 5 percent of the respondents as the number one or two problem. The peaks in the percent mentioning the “environment” all occurred during the international oil embargoes of 1973 to 1974 and 1979, suggesting that concern about limited resources was the reason for this ranking. Hence, candidates for office rarely cite global warming as key to their election prospects.

Another gauge is the growth in the number and public visibility of organizations advocating for and against global warming legislation. Figure 2 charts the number of annual mentions of pro- and anti- global warming organizations as reported in the *New York Times* between 1981 and 2003.² This provides a measure of the number of organizations active on these two sides of the issue and how they have fluctuated over time. From the early 1980s through the mid-1990s, global warming advocates had the upper hand in terms of the number of organizational mentions. But starting in 1997 when the Senate passed the Byrd–Hagel resolution, the opponents of global warming legislation have had rough parity and, at the end of our time period, surpassed the pro- global warming advocates. To counter the institutional bias toward the status quo, it seems likely that major legislation requires an imbalance toward proponents of change. During

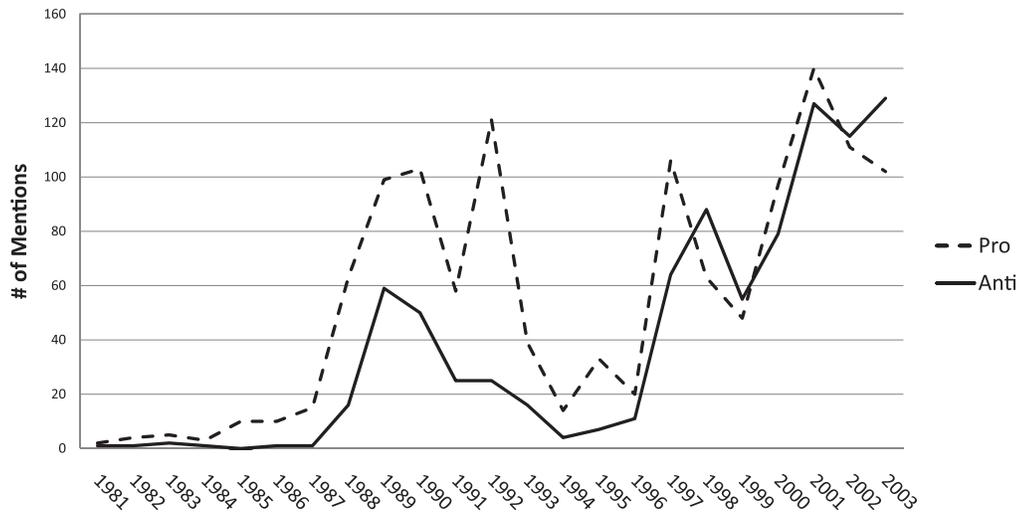


FIGURE 2. *New York Times* Mentions of Pro- and Anti- Global Warming Organizations, 1981–2003.

this period the Bush administration withdrew from the Kyoto Protocol negotiations (2001) and the Senate defeated the McCain-Lieberman Stewardship Act, which would have created a cap- and- trade system to reduce greenhouse emissions, by 55 to 43 (Pew Center on Global Climate Change 2008). This was later reinforced in June 2005 when the Senate voted again 60 to 38 against the same legislation, suggesting that the post-2003 advocacy imbalance remained in place.

These trends indicate that opponents of global warming legislation have been able to create a stalemate. Although global warming proponents have been able to secure hearings, introduce bills and force Congressional votes, they have not been able to secure the passage of legislation. Even with the strong Democratic margin enjoyed in the 211th Congress, only the House passed legislation, which then died in the Senate.

CONCLUSIONS

The political debate over global warming has produced a legislative stalemate because of the obstacles to favorable media coverage, public attention, and relevance to elections and governmental decision making. The movement has experience more success in the media arena, gaining growing but distorted and often unsympathetic coverage. This has contributed to polarized public opinion with some responding emotively to global warming and others ignoring it as an abstract and distant topic. This has discouraged candidates for office from treating global warming as a priority in their campaigns and discouraged Congress from passing legislation. The opponents have mounted a well-resourced and effective campaign that exploits media reporting norms, journalists' inclination to avoid controversial and complex topics that might threaten advertisers, and, by creating drama around the “dueling scientists,” has created public skepticism

about mainstream climate science (Dunlap, Xiao, and McCright 2000; McCright and Dunlap 2000; Jacques, Dunlap, and Freeman 2008). The pattern of polarized public opinion that McCright and Dunlap so well document calls into question the entire information-based education strategy that has been the core approach of the pro-global warming movement. The problem is not one of scientific information but changing people's ideology and core beliefs, which is far more complex and requires a different approach.

At the same, the global warming issue remains a significant topic in the mass media and has gained some Congressional and White House attention. It remains a secondary topic on the governmental policy agenda, an issue on which hearings are held, bills drafted and occasional roll call votes occur. Many pieces of major "watershed" legislation have often incubated on the margins of the governmental policy agenda for many years before a crisis created opportunities for legislation. In most cases, these bills were part of a reform period in which a strong center/left governing coalition was able to override obstacles to major legislation. The abolition of slavery and radical reconstruction in and immediately after the Civil War, the "Second New Deal" in the mid-1930s, and the Civil Rights Acts and "Great Society" legislation in the 1960s all fit this pattern. The strong Democratic margin in the 111th Congress was enough to secure the House passage of the Waxman–Markey Bill but the legislation died in the Senate, which had already voted three times in the past decade against global warming. Until a comparable governmental margin again occurs, it seems unlikely that the issue will again become the subject of legislation. Meanwhile its proponents will have to continue to press their cause through the mass media, in the arena of public opinion, in elections and before Congress and the White House.

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NOTES

¹This time series was coded by Robert Brulle from keyword searches for all mentions of "global climate," "global warming," "greenhouse," and "sea level" in the "Evening News" stories of the Vanderbilt Television News Archive (<http://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu>).

²This time series was coded by James Hein (2011) from a review of all news stories in the *New York Times Historical* electronic archive dealing with all stories mentioning the keywords "global warming," "greenhouse effect," and "global climate change."

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