

POLITICS

How do you shift Republicans on climate? Be nice

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An episode of the documentary series "Years of Living Dangerously," which focuses on global warming, features Rep. Lee Zeldin (R-N.Y.) meeting with climate activists. *National Geographic/YouTube*

Hundreds of advocates from around the country are pressing their Republican lawmakers to take action on climate change through a rarely deployed, yet highly effective, tactic.

They're asking nicely.

In June 2016, Ashley Hunt-Martorano, a member of the Citizens' Climate Lobby, met with Rep. Lee Zeldin (R-N.Y.) to request a favor: Would the Republican who vehemently opposed the Clean Power Plan please join the bipartisan House Climate Solutions Caucus?

The caucus, which formed last year, is dedicated to studying market-friendly approaches to climate adaptation and mitigation.

The moment was captured on film for an episode of the eight-part documentary series "Years of Living Dangerously." In the installment, Zeldin leans against his desk, arms folded. A handful of climate lobbyists sit on the couch opposite him.

The camera pans to Hunt-Martorano. "So I'll throw our ask in here," she says timidly and entreats Zeldin to join the caucus. To everyone's surprise, he says yes.

In the year leading up to that moment, Hunt-Martorano met with Zeldin's office at least 40 times. Over that period, she developed a positive working relationship with both the congressman and his staff.

She has worked to support Zeldin in other environmental efforts, like preserving Plum Island in New York, and he has agreed to co-sponsor climate-related legislation. Eventually, she moved a conservative who had not touched the politically toxic issue of climate change to join a caucus that has "climate" in its name.

And she's not alone. Since the Climate Solutions Caucus' inception in 2016, CCL and others have had unprecedented success pushing Republican representatives to join. The grass-roots advocacy organization is angling for the caucus to take up a carbon fee and dividend approach to curb emissions.

While members of the "Noah's Ark" group, which adds Republicans and Democrats in pairs, have co-sponsored a number of climate-related bills, like renewable energy tax credits, they have yet to broach a carbon tax. Still, activists are encouraged by growing membership, which reached 52 this summer ([E&E Daily](#), Aug. 3).

Through the combination of respect; building relationships; and consistent reminders through letters, visits and calls, advocates are successfully, albeit slowly, moving Republicans on climate action.

"There are times things don't get done because of partisan fighting," Zeldin says in the video after agreeing to join the caucus, "but I love your approach."

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

During her first meeting with Zeldin after his election in 2015, Hunt-Martorano began with appreciation, as is CCL's custom. She thanked him for his public service as a member of the military and then as a New York state senator, where he supported legislation for peer-to-peer programs for veterans.

"Right away that had a huge impact on our relationship," Hunt-Martorano said. "And he literally said, 'Hold on a minute, I don't mean to interrupt you, but your approach thanking me and appreciating me is not normal.'"

She added, "He actually said 'not normal.' I remember that really well."

In a recent interview with E&E News, Zeldin said his experience with CCL has differed greatly from other environmental lobbyists.

"There are people who will come in lobbying on a particular issue and there's so much untapped potential of building a relationship because a particular individual or group may prefer the tactic of opening up a relationship by punching someone in the face, and it doesn't work well," he said.

"And you're really missing out on a lot of opportunities, and CCL's approach is one that maximizes all of that potential," the congressman added.

Tom Moyer, a CCL volunteer who works with Rep. Mia Love (R-Utah), said it's impossible to convince anyone of anything if you fundamentally don't like them.

"If you walk in thinking they're an idiot and evil, you're done from the start, it doesn't matter how logical your position is," he said. "You have to put yourself in a place where you can find something to respect."

The Friends Committee on National Legislation, a Quaker lobby group that has also been central to the mission of bipartisan congressional support on climate action, has similarly found success through respect.

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— *Tom Moyer, Citizens' Climate Lobby*

"At FCNL, we emphasize constituent lobbying and relationship building across party lines," Emily Wirzba, a legislative representative with the group, said in an email. "We ultimately need both parties — not just half of the country — to be part of the solution."

Driven by these values, FCNL board member Bob Schultz successfully lobbied his lawmaker, Rep. Ann McLane Kuster (D-N.H.), to join the caucus with Rep. Mike Coffman (R-Colo.).

For Moyer, it was finding common ground and working from there. He first met Love at a "meet the candidates" night in Utah before she was elected.

The event was in a fairly liberal area, and constituents were clamoring to speak with the Democratic politicians. Moyer — noticing few were in line to meet with Love — seized the opportunity to chat with her.

"We found plenty of things to agree on," he said. "We talked about public lands and trail access and clean air and stuff like that, and I let her know I would love to see Republicans start taking climate change on as a topic."

After months of conversation, Love eventually joined the caucus last January.

"They come in and they say 'this is a problem that we have, and we're wondering if you can help us solve this problem' instead of 'you're the problem,'" Love said at the time.

"It not only changed my mind about my involvement," she said, "but really changed my heart about what we should be doing."

Beginning a meeting with appreciation does two things, Moyer said: It puts the lobbyist in the "right frame of mind" and creates a respectful note.

"The attention to building relationships and getting to know people as human beings is really, really important," he said. "They need to know that we're not environmental wackos."

The criticism from progressive activists and environmental groups, however, is that the caucus members are not taking action quickly enough to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Moyer insists that CCL and the caucus are taking the steps they can. He said that "certain things are doable now and certain things will be doable later."

Success will come when Republicans change their minds, and the way to change their minds is by talking respectfully as equals, he said.

Rep. Carlos Curbelo of Florida, the Republican co-founder of the climate caucus, said CCL's commitment to kindness and respect is "certainly" a direct factor in persuading Republicans to join the group.

"Their approach is all constructive, all the time," Curbelo told E&E News in a recent interview.

"And while other groups prefer to threaten and use public shaming tactics that only further deteriorates the public discourse in our country, this group is the exact opposite," he said.

"And they're not just advancing the cause of sound environmental policy," he said, "they're also contributing to improving the nature of our politics in this country, which is sorely needed."

Hunt-Martorano stressed this point, noting that CCL leaders often say the group is dealing with the two most important issues of the day: "climate change and declining democracy."

"I've told our volunteers, if you're not at the table, you're on the menu," she said. "You don't know who that other person is and what their goals are unless you're talking with them."

Influence 101

Thomas Nelson, a professor of political psychology at Ohio State University, said appreciation and forging personal relationships is an effective strategy and "a standard influence tactic."

"It builds on a couple of things. One, people like to be flattered, there's no surprise there," he said. "We like people who like us, that automatically increases our positive feelings toward them and we tend to do things for those we like. This is straight out of Influence 101."

It also makes people feel as if the person has done their homework if they're coming in with some knowledge and background, he said, which increases trust.

And on another level, appreciation of a lawmaker's environmental record can adjust their "self-concept," or the way the person understands their own identity, he added.

"They may not come out of that exchange and say, 'Oh, I'm a tree hugger,' but they might see themselves as less hostile to the environment," he said.

Nelson claimed that very few people are actually anti-environment — "that's like hating mothers or puppies," he said — but rather are concerned about the cost of protecting it, which means there is room for flexibility.

"These people are more against environmentalism or environmentalists, in some ways. They think environmentalists go about it in the wrong way, they're too extreme, too strident," he said.

"So you can subtly suggest to them: 'You're the kind of person who can be depended on to provide sensible solutions to these kinds of issues,'" Nelson said.

Changing tides

Almost a decade ago, Jay Butera, CCL's top congressional liaison, left his life as a successful entrepreneur to volunteer his time and resources with CCL.

"Depolarizing the issue and bridging the dysfunction" were his initial objectives, he said in a recent interview in the cafeteria of the Rayburn Office Building. "Talking face to face, that's when we can start to find common ground and break down walls."

About four years ago, Butera was in line for sushi in the cafeteria when he started chatting with Rep. Ted Deutch (D-Fla.) about a bipartisan climate caucus ([E&E Daily](#), April 19, 2016).

"I thought he would be a good Democrat to bring to this mythical table I was envisioning," Butera said.

Deutch was indeed receptive.

"When I met Jay in the Rayburn cafeteria and we talked about [CCL's] efforts in trying to make climate change a bipartisan issue, I was really encouraged," Deutch told E&E News.

"But what I've seen since is the success they've had not just in bringing members to the table," he said, "but what makes me so hopeful is the success they've had in really energizing citizen activists to engage with their members of Congress on climate."

Since 2010, when just 25 CCL volunteers lobbied on the Hill, the group has mobilized more and more people.

This year, a record 1,300 CCL volunteers from 49 states descended on the Capitol to urge members to toss partisan politics surrounding global warming and embrace a market-based solution ([Greenwire](#), June 13).

In the initial stages, Butera would go door to door through the halls of Congress trying to gain support. He said in some cases people would laugh in his face; others said he could never have the word "climate" in the name of the caucus if Republicans were to join.

It took three years of searching, but Butera finally found Curbelo, a well-liked freshman who understood the realities of sea-level rise.

"For me this is not some exercise in theory, in South Florida the issue of sea-level rise as a direct result of climate change and a warming planet is a local concern that's already posing many challenges to local government," Curbelo said.

"So when this idea of the caucus was raised, I thought it was a wonderful way to start the process of depoliticizing the issue, of bringing Republicans and Democrats to the table, to start figuring it out," he said.

In February 2016, the group was a caucus of two. But it has grown rapidly, and more members are expected to join. Analysts are attributing the rapid growth to lay lobbyists on the left and the right pushing for action, many of whom have embraced the model of respect.

Increasingly conservative Americans are joining those on the left to urge their elected officials to take a stance on climate. There are emerging networks of young evangelicals, conservatives for clean energy and hard-line libertarians taking up the issue ([Greenwire](#), June 16).

Wirzba of FCNL said that constituent lobbying is key to encouraging greater climate action from congressional Republicans. "My own lobbying work here in D.C. is made possible by the relationships our constituents are building around the country," she said.

As a result, it is no longer a given that speaking out on climate change revokes conservative credentials, Butera said.

"When you get past emotional politics, it's a conservative thing to do," he said. "Address risks head on, protect the economy. There's nothing inconsistent with conservative beliefs."

And although there are many congressional Republicans who continue to question the science of climate change, "the days of Republicans losing their seats because of their climate work are over," Butera said, referring to former Rep. Bob Inglis (R-S.C.), who lost his seat in 2011 after speaking out on climate.

Butera said the tides are turning. As voter sentiment changes and more Americans demand climate action, inaction could cost GOP members their seats.

He speculated that Curbelo and Rep. Patrick Meehan (R-Pa.) may have secured their positions in the last election because they are active on climate.

And the traditional division across party lines over environmental issues continues to blur. In the 2016 race, EDF Action, the political arm of the Environmental Defense Fund, gave money to Curbelo's campaign and released an ad that highlighted his work protecting the Everglades.

The center-right environmental group ClearPath Action also donated \$50,000 to Curbelo's campaign. And in 2014, EDF Action spent \$759,000 out of \$2.9 million total supporting Republican candidates.

Still, the caucus has a way to go. Deutch said he was disappointed it failed to issue a joint statement when President Trump pulled out of the Paris climate accord.

"I know some members individually did, but it's moments like that where we ought to be able to come together," he said.

"This isn't easy and ultimately my colleagues joining the caucus is an important statement, but speaking out on behalf of their constituents and supporting legislation that's consistent with what the caucus does is more powerful," he said, "and that's where the focus needs to be going forward."

Curbelo said for the caucus to accomplish its mission, it has to move at the pace of its members. He said he hopes in the next year they can become a "proactive force" for climate policy and legislation but that his members are not ready to support, for example, a carbon tax yet.

"I'm never going to get out ahead of the caucus," he said. "For this to work it has to be member-driven, it has to develop organically, and if an idea like that comes out of the caucus it's because the caucus has reached a general consensus, but I don't think we are close to [a carbon tax] yet."

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