

About the Center for Responsive Politics

The Center for Responsive Politics is the nation's premier research group tracking money in U.S. politics and its effect on elections and public policy. Nonpartisan, independent and nonprofit, the organization aims to create a more educated voter, an involved citizenry and a more transparent and responsive government.

Pro-Environment Groups Outmatched, Outspent in Battle Over Climate Change Legislation

by [Evan Mackinder](#) on August 23, 2010

It was supposed to be their time.

With significant majorities in Congress, a president promising action and favorable public opinion all on their side, many environmentalists believed their political stars had properly — and finally — aligned.

Sensing the unique opportunity to address global warming on a national scale, [environmental interest groups](#) poured considerable capital into federal lobbying expenditures in an effort to topple their significantly more wealthy foes in the energy industry whose political standing appeared uncharacteristically wobbly.

At the height of the legislative push, during 2009, pro-environmental groups [spent](#) a record \$22.4 million on federal lobby efforts. That is double the average expenditure between 2000 and 2008.

Advocacy groups lobbied independently of, and in partnership with, like-minded corporations. Industry leaders — the [Nature Conservancy](#), [Environmental Defense Fund](#) and [World Wildlife Fund](#) — hit hardest, investing more than \$6 million. The [US Climate Action Partnership](#), an unprecedented conglomeration of leading advocacy groups, energy businesses and some of the U.S. largest producers, spent \$1 million independently.

Yet even as pro-environment groups seemed poised to capitalize on favorable trends, moneyed opponents girded for a fight with more financial capital than ever before.

Clients in the [oil and gas industry](#) unleashed a fury of lobbying expenditures in 2009, spending \$175 million — easily an industry record — and outpacing the pro-environmental groups by nearly eight-fold, according to a Center for Responsive Politics analysis.

Some of the largest petroleum companies in the world together spent hundreds of millions of dollars in various attempts to influence politics during the past 18 months

[ExxonMobil](#), the industry leader in 2009, spent \$27.4 million in lobbying expenditures that year — more than the entire pro-environment lobby.

And in July, congressional debate on global warming stopped cold.

In other words, Goliath whipped David.

“The way it turned out was a huge disappointment, to put it mildly,” Nathan Wilcox, the Federal Global Warming Program Director for [Environment America](#), one group that lobbied heavily on comprehensive climate change legislation, told [OpenSecrets Blog](#).

“The opposition outspent us, and they took it to a new level this time.”

MOMENTUM GIVES WAY TO DEFEAT

Though only recently coming to a head, the battle over climate change policy — and subsequent dramatic increase in political spending — began a few years earlier for both of these groups.

Energy and climate change became major issues for both groups following the Democratic sweep of the congressional mid-year elections in 2006. Environmental groups scored major victories in the 2008 election cycle, betting heavily on a Democratic majority and the presidential candidacy of [Barack Obama](#).

Individuals and political action committees [contributed](#) nearly \$5.6 million to political candidates in 2007 and 2008. Ninety-four percent of the total went to Democrats.

These same groups favored Obama, who campaigned on a promise to aggressively tackle global warming, if elected. Pro-environment groups poured more than \$1.2 million into his campaign, [donating](#) to his campaign over Democratic rival Hillary Clinton's by a seven-to-one margin.

Oil and gas groups again [outspent](#) pro-environmental groups considerably, and with their own partisan slant. With more than \$35.6 million, individuals and political action committees contributed far more, at a more than six-to-one rate. Seventy-seven percent of contributions from this industry went to Republicans during the 2008 cycle.

Still, it was pro-environmental groups that backed the winning candidates. And it was pro-environmental groups who carried the political momentum into 2009 and the first legislative battleground in the House of Representatives.

Advocacy groups pushed hard for a bill that would tackle global warming by placing an economy-wide cap on carbon emissions. Major industry players lobbied heavily in the first half of the year. Established leaders favoring the legislation — the [Environmental Defense Fund](#), the [Natural Resource Defense Council](#), the [Sierra Club](#) — all lobbied heavily, bringing the industry to more than \$4.7 million during the first quarter.

In the [American Security and Clean Energy Act](#) (H.R. 2454), which passed the House of Representatives in June 2009, most saw a serious victory.

Wesley Warren, director of programs for the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#), today calls the House's passage of H.R. 2452 "proof" that money isn't the final arbiter in legislative matters.

"It's not only about the money," he told *OpenSecrets Blog*. "Having money helps, but the other side will always have more and they don't always win."

Far from united on the issue, however, many environmental activist groups cried foul over perceived carve-outs for special interests, citing massive amounts of carbon offsets given to energy and coal companies, which would exempt large parts of the industries from a cap on carbon emissions.

[Greenpeace](#), a group that is well-known for its environmental activism and which also lobbied on the bill in 2009, went on [record](#) as not supporting the legislation. It called H.R. 2454 a "victory" for lobbyists from industries of oil, coal and others.

Indeed, looming over the negotiations throughout the first half of the year was the oil and gas industry's influential shadow.

During the first half of the year, oil and gas groups spent more than \$86.5 million on legislative influence. Some of the largest oil companies in the world — who double as industry spending leaders — lobbied heavily on H.R. 2454. [ConocoPhillips](#), [Chevron Corp](#), [ExxonMobil](#) and U.S. petroleum conglomerate [Koch Industries](#) each individually spent millions of dollars lobbying Congress that quarter. Each listed H.R. 2454 repeatedly on their federally mandated lobbying reports in 2009.

"It was a major job-killer," Bill Bush, a spokesperson for the [American Petroleum Institute](#), a trade association that represents oil and gas interests, told *OpenSecrets Blog*. "It wasn't an efficient way to go about the problem of climate change — it would have placed a great burden on those Americans who use and are employed by oil and natural gas companies."

The fight between pro-environmental and oil and gas groups would only grow more bitter as the fight shifted to the notoriously slow-moving Senate.

Negotiations over legislation to reform the nation's health care system had inflamed an already deep partisan divide between Democrats and Republicans. It was the perfect situation for opponents of climate change legislation: As Democrats wrangled with the moderate factions of their party over health care, oil and gas groups hammered away in the background.

In the year following the House's initial passage of H.R. 2454, the oil and gas industry lobbied about \$163 million at Congress, bringing their 18 month total to nearly \$250 million. Many of the same leading oil and gas interests lobbying on H.R. 2454 also focused on the Senate versions of the legislation — the [Clean Energy Jobs and American Power Act](#) (S.1733), sponsored by Senators [John Kerry](#) (Mass.) and [Barbara Boxer](#) (Calif.), and which later became known as the American Power Act.

By the time it was over in July of this year, with legislation stalling out in the Senate, the oil and gas industry had outspent environmental interests more than seven-to-one.

PRO-ENVIRONMENTAL GROUPS REFLECT

What's next for environmental groups isn't completely clear.

Some of the largest groups, such as the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#) and the [Sierra Club](#), are turning their attention to the oil spill disaster in the Gulf of Mexico and the fight to hold oil giant BP responsible for the incident.

On the fight for comprehensive climate change legislation, opinions are mixed as to what it will take to move legislation forward, but many groups argued they've already made progress.

Nathan Wilcox at [Environment America](#) said he believes environmental groups will "undoubtedly" have to spend more money. But he also notes that in the process of a long debate, pro-environmental groups succeeded in bringing together many organizations that don't always agree with one another — something that he thinks helped move legislation forward to some degree.

"An unprecedented number of groups [came] together in support of climate," he said, including the renewable energy and national security fields. "We really raised the profile of the issue."

Such partnerships, notes Bob Bendick, government relations director at the [Nature Conservancy](#), can also help break a standard narrative in the climate change debate: that the issue pits jobs against the environment.

Bendick cited Nature Conservancy's work with the [US Climate Action Partnership](#) as one example: USCAP, he said, "presented to the American people that this isn't about: 'Jobs versus Climate', but that climate can be a very important part of the future of our economy."

Another advantage groups cited was an ability to bypass Congress and take its message directly to the American people.

Joe Smyth, a spokesperson for [Greenpeace](#), said environmental groups need to pressure Congress from the bottom-up, rather than relying on buying a seat at a committee room through federal lobbying.

"We as a community are not going to be able to out-lobby [oil and gas], or other industries," he said. "We need to take our fight elsewhere. There needs to be grassroots pressure on members of Congress."

And grassroots pressure is one thing that advocacy groups do particularly well. With millions of members among them, such an effort may help them outflank oil and gas interests in the next debate.

As Smyth puts it: "It's the only way that we are going to break out of the stranglehold they have over the issue."

<http://www.opensecrets.org/news/2010/08/pro-environment-groups-were-outmatc/>