

Climate Change Legislation



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION OF CONGREGATIONS

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The Dilemma

Your congregation is ready to call your representatives, write op-eds and make some noise demanding that Congress act. But wait. Congress has been busy too, introducing over half a dozen climate change bills for consideration. Which one should you support?

Even though there are half a dozen bills in play, only two are worth consideration in the Senate:

1. America's Climate Security Act (S. 2191), introduced by Lieberman (I-CT) and Warner (R-VA). It is the bill most likely to move, expected to be voted on in June or July, 2008.
2. The Global Warming Pollution Reduction Act (S. 309), introduced by Sanders (I-VT) and Boxer (D-CA). It is the bill that almost all environmental groups agree is the "gold-standard" of climate change legislation. (Waxman - H.R.1590 is the House counterpart to this bill.)

So do you support the one most likely to succeed or the one that is the better bill? Knowing when to compromise and when not to is key in effective legislative advocacy.

The Considerations

Realistically speaking, there are many environmentally concerned groups, of which Unitarian Universalists are but one. However, Unitarian Universalists have a long history of advocating for economic, racial, and gender justice. We have done internal work to help us see how systemic bias continues to oppress non-privileged groups. Most other environmentalist groups are not looking at the issue of global climate change through this lens. We can be a prophetic voice, bringing the issues of racial, economic, and gender justice into the national discussion on global warming. For this reason, the UUA looked at the following considerations in deciding which climate change bill to back.

1) **Is it effective?** Given that the effects global climate change are already disproportionately affecting the poor and communities of color in this country and throughout the world, we recognize the urgent need for *effective* action.

AND

2) **Is it just?** We also recognize that too often, it is the poor and communities of color who suffer most both from environmental problems and their proposed solutions. Therefore, the legislation must pursue goal of carbon gas pollution reduction in a way that is *equitable*.

Comparing Bills by Effectiveness

The scientific consensus is that the average global temperature has been rising since the beginning of the industrial age due to an excess of carbon gas emissions. The rise has already begun to cause changes in global weather patterns, increased glacial melt, and a rise in sea levels. In order to avoid massive species extinction and glacial loss, we must prevent the average global temperature from rising more than another two degrees Celsius. Scientific consensus predicts that in order to avoid the two degree or more rise, we must cut our global emission levels 80% below 2000 levels by the year 2050.

As currently written, Lieberman-Warner would cut greenhouse-gas emissions 70% below 2005 levels by 2050. However, the NRDC says that when all the provisions are taken into account it will actually only reduce emissions 51-63% by 2050.

As currently written, Sanders-Boxer would cut greenhouse-gas emissions 80 percent below 1990 levels by 2050. Only Sanders-Boxer (and its House counter-part, Waxman) require the necessary reductions as they are written.

Comparing Bills by Justness

All of the proposed legislation on limiting carbon gas emissions use the strategy of putting a monetary value on emissions, thereby creating a financial incentive to pollute less. This will impact the cost of energy production and thus home energy costs. Much talk has been about compensation to companies for this increased cost. Less talked about but at least as important is offsetting the increase in energy costs for low-income families, as they are the ones who would be most heavily impacted.

Assuming a modest emissions reduction (15%), the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities estimates that between \$50-300 billion per year can be generated by well-designed climate change policies. Approximately 14% of the generated federal revenue would be required in order to fully offset the increased costs for the poorest one-fifth of U.S. families. Similarly, for energy companies and other industries, the Center estimates that it would take less than 15% of the generated resources. (This would leave about 40% of the resources generated to fund programs such as conservation and research for alternative energy sources.)

Over the life of the legislation, the Lieberman-Warner bill would give away 49% of emissions credits for free to industry, much more than what is necessary to offset their costs, at an estimated worth 2.3 trillion dollars. In contrast, the bill allocates about 4.5% of estimated resources for low-income energy assistance, well below what the Center for on Budget and Policy Priorities recommends.

The Sanders-Boxer bill does not outline the specifics of how resources would be distributed, leaving a great amount to be decided by the Environmental Protection Agency. Whether this is better or worse will depend on the EPA.

Given that climate legislation will in effect be creating a new kind of commodity, worth trillions of dollars, the equitable distribution of these resources should be a major concern.