




## Advocating inaction: a historical analysis of the Global Climate Coalition

Robert J. Brulle 

Institute at Brown for Environment & Society, Brown University, Providence, RI, USA

### ABSTRACT

Ever since climate change became a political issue in the late 1980s, a number of industry coalitions have formed to oppose mandatory carbon emissions reductions. One key coalition was the Global Climate Coalition (GCC). This paper conducts a historical and empirical review of the activities of this coalition. This review shows that the GCC engaged in four distinct activities to obstruct climate action: 1) monitoring and contesting climate science, 2) commissioning and utilizing economic studies to amplify and legitimate their arguments, 3) shifting the cultural understanding of climate change through public relations campaigns and 4) conducting aggressive lobbying of political elites. Through these activities, the GCC played an important role in obstructing climate action, both in the U.S. and internationally. Further analysis of similar coalitions can aid in our understanding of the organized opposition to climate action.

**KEYWORDS** Coalitions; Global Climate Coalition; climate change; countermovement

The dramatic testimony of James Hansen and the creation of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 1988 marked the emergence of climate change as a major public issue, and amplified calls for government action to reign in carbon emissions. In response, corporations with strong ties to fossil fuels, acting in coordination with allied trade associations, and a number of other organizations mounted a series of efforts to oppose reductions in carbon emissions (Dunlap and McCright 2015). These efforts form an amalgam of loosely coordinated groups that can be understood as the climate change countermovement (CCCM).

One large component of the CCCM is the building and maintenance of coalitions composed of fossil-fuel related corporations and their affiliated trade associations to oppose mandatory reductions in carbon emissions. These coalitions have acted to enhance the collective political capacity of individual corporations by fulfilling two key functions. The first is to constitute and promote the industry's social identity as a legitimate actor in the

**CONTACT** Robert J. Brulle  [robert\\_brulle@brown.edu](mailto:robert_brulle@brown.edu)

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political system and thereby manage reputational risks to avoid regulation. To carry out this responsibility, these coalitions engage in extensive public relations efforts. The second function is to pool economic and political resources from across the industry sectors to advocate for the coalition's collective interests. As such, these coalitions serve as an institutional vehicle for corporations to pursue collective strategies in the political arena. Downie (2019, p. 235) shows that these coalitions 'act as a command center bringing together members of different organizations to pool resources, share wider information and mediate conflicts to achieve a common purpose within a wider network.'

These coalitions played a critical role in the development of organized opposition to climate change. One of the earliest such coalitions was the Global Climate Coalition (GCC), formed by the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) in 1989 (Franz 1998). Subsequently, a number of political coalitions were formed with the same mission (Brulle 2021). Many of these coalitions continue to obstruct climate action. Yet, despite their significance, there has been very little systematic research on the nature or structure of these coalitions (see Downie 2018 for an important exception).

Many of the key arguments and practices used to obstruct climate action emerged in the late 1980s, led by organizations such as the GCC, as well as the International Petroleum Industry Environmental Conservation Association (IPIECA) (Bonneuil and Franta 2021) and the Global Climate Council (Leggett 2001, pp. 10–11). The GCC, as the first and largest U.S. domestic coalition organized to oppose climate action, played an important role in the development of the approaches other coalitions have utilized to stop or slow climate action. The repertoire of countermovement actions that this coalition developed informed future actions to obstruct climate action. Thus a detailed case study of the actions of the GCC can lend insights into the efforts by industry coalitions to obstruct action on climate change. The objective of this article is to conduct a historical and analytic review of the structure, finances, and activities of the GCC. I start by framing the conflict over climate change policy as a political and cultural struggle over the dominant understanding of this issue.<sup>1</sup> I then discuss the important role played by industry coalitions in the CCCM. To further document this role, I develop a comprehensive historical and empirical analysis of the role of the GCC in climate politics and summarize this coalition's major activities. I conclude the paper with a discussion of the role of coalitions in climate politics.

## Coalitions and the struggle for political and cultural power

The conflict over how to address climate change can be seen as a political and cultural struggle over the dominant understanding of this issue (Brown 1990). From the perspective of cultural sociology, social order is created

through the acceptance of a shared perspective of the situation. This shared definition of the situation forms a taken-for-granted reality and defines norms for regularized patterns of social interaction (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, p. 9). The shared definition of the situation in the policy arena are known as field frames. Field frames ‘identify categories of social actors and their appropriate activities or relationships (Lounsbury *et al.* 2003, p. 75).’ Field frames take the form of ‘political constructions that provide order and meaning to fields of activity by creating a status ordering for practices that deem some practices more appropriate than others (Lounsbury *et al.* 2003, pp. 76–77).’ These ideas form a collective and binding definition in that particular field. In relationship to climate change, the dominant field frame defines the use of fossil fuels as the appropriate practice in energy policy and have linked the availability of cheap fossil fuel energy to a definition of the ‘good life’. These norms are drawn on to justify continuation of the current energy system. Hence the struggle over climate change centers on challenges to the field frame of energy policy centered on fossil fuel use.

The maintenance of this dominant field frame maintains the economic and ideological interests of vested interests, especially the fossil fuel industries and conservative groups opposed to government action. Thus the maintenance of the status quo is in the interests of the incumbents, who seek to maintain the currently dominant field frame. Challengers to this energy policy seek to substitute an alternative field frame, and thus enable an alternative approach to energy policy (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, p. 14). Accordingly, the struggle for social change involves a competition between the dominant field frame upheld by the incumbents and alternative frames developed and championed by challengers. This involves a political and cultural struggle to transform the field frame, and thus redefine what appropriate energy policy should be. This struggle over what constitutes the appropriate field frame is carried out in both the cultural and political spheres and involves the exercise of intellectual leadership, compromise, material incentives, and coercion by incumbents and challengers (Gramsci 1971)

An organized effort to maintain a culture field in the face of challenges takes the form of a countermovement. Countermovements begin when social movements start to successfully challenge the dominant field frame by influencing public policy and threatening established interests (Meyer and Staggenbord 1996, pp. 1635–1640). To protect their interests, the elite respond to this threat by fostering countermovements to oppose the challenging social movements.

The countermovement operates through organizational entities (Laumann and Knoke 1987, p. 9). Accordingly, to better understand countermovements, scholars have focused on the structure and activities of political coalitions (Poloni-Staudinger 2009). Coalitions are key components

in the creation and maintenance of collective action and define formalized and regular patterns of cooperation in the development of collective action to impact the policy process (Downie 2019, p. 16). The focus on coalitions enables the examination of the political and cultural conflicts over energy policy (Dunlap and McCright 2015).

### The development of climate change countermovement coalitions

The CCCM first emerged in 1989, just after the formation of the IPCC (Rowell 1996). In the ensuing thirty three years, the CCCM has grown to include numerous organizations (Dunlap and McCright 2015). These organizations form an amalgam of loosely coordinated actors that can be seen as a countermovement. This integrated network of organizational relationships (sometimes termed the ‘denial machine’) exists to influence the public, media, and political arenas to slow or stop climate action (Brulle 2018). One important institutional component in the formation of a countermovement is the existence of political coalitions. These political coalitions create the CCCM’s institutional capacity to develop and implement collective political activities (Downie 2019). These coalitions have played an important role in shaping public discourse about climate change through their funding of advertising campaigns and coordinating member organization’s advocacy efforts.

Some of the first activities of the CCCM were led by the GCC. Simultaneously, International efforts to undermine climate science were carried out by IPIECA, led by Exxon (Bonneuil and Franta 2021). Additionally the Global Climate Council worked to undermine international climate efforts (Leggett 2001). The GCC, as the first and largest coalition organized to oppose climate action, established a repertoire of actions that have served as a playbook for other coalitions to emulate in their efforts to stop or slow climate action. Thus an analysis of the GCCs actions can provide important insights into the nature of organized climate obstruction efforts.

### Methods of analysis

The purpose of this paper is to conduct a close historical and analytic examination of the GCC to provide insights into the nature of climate obstruction efforts. It focuses on four key questions.

- *What were the overall structure and finances of the GCC?*
- *What were the major activities of the GCC?*
- *What were the core arguments employed by the GCC in pursuit of its objectives?*
- *What events did the GCC seek to influence?*

To answer these questions, I constructed a historical narrative of the activities of the GCC from its origins in 1989 until its demise in 2001. To construct this narrative, I utilized seven different sources. First, I conducted a comprehensive review of both academic and advocacy group publications that discuss the GCC. I then supplemented this review by conducting Lexis-Nexis search of all available media utilizing the term 'Global Climate Coalition' from 1989 to 2001. This search identified 842 unique press mentions of the GCC. Third, I reviewed all of the files held by the Climate Investigations Center regarding the GCC.<sup>2</sup> Fourth, I searched the archives of NAM held at the Hagley Archives in Wilmington, Delaware for any material relevant to the operation of the GCC. Fifth, I retrieved and reviewed all eighteen instances of Congressional testimony by the GCC from 1989 to 2001. Sixth, I reviewed all publicly available tax documents for the GCC. These included the original IRS 1023 Application for Status as a Nonprofit, and the income tax returns for 1996 and 1997. Additionally, to compile income and expenditure data, I retrieved the IRS filing data for the GCC from 1994 to 2001 from the National Center for Charitable Statistics. Finally, I conducted interviews with GCC and IPCC officials.<sup>3</sup> Where the individual is not available for a current interview, transcripts of previous interviews were obtained. This yielded four interview transcripts. Organizational membership in the GCC was compiled utilizing membership lists provided by the GCC as part of their Congressional Testimony and press reports on its membership. Where organizations had interruptions of up to two years in reported membership, but there was no evidence that they had resigned from the GCC, membership was inferred.

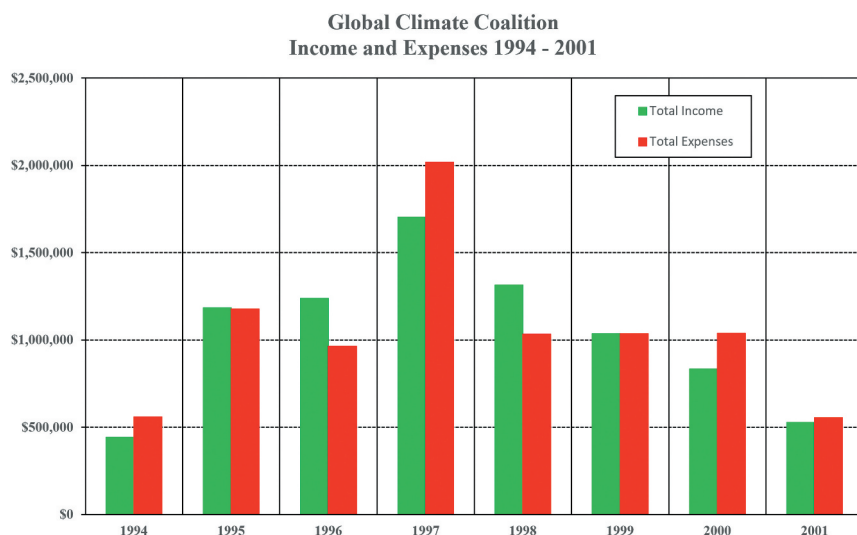
### **Organizational characteristics of the GCC**

From its founding in June 1989 until September 1991, the GCC operated as an informal committee inside of NAM. In October 1991, the Bylaws of the GCC were drafted and the formation of the GCC was announced on 27 November 1991.<sup>4</sup> The organization was structured with a governing Board of Directors with an Executive Committee created to manage the day to day activities. It created the position of Executive Director, assisted by a staff, and a separate Finance Committee to exercise financial oversight. It also authorized the creation of an Operating Committee, which oversaw the functional implementation of GCC activities. The bylaws also specified the creation of seven specialized committees as follows: Communications, Technology Cooperation, Economic Analysis, Industry Initiatives, State and Local, International and Science and Technology Assessment. Little is known about the functions of these various committees.

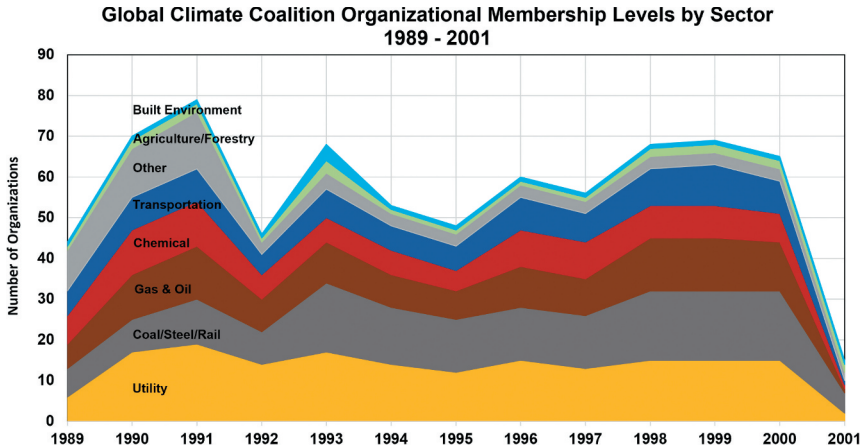
Until 1994, there are no financial records available for the GCC, as it was financially supported by NAM. Starting in 1994 and running until 2001, the GCC filed annual information returns with the Internal Revenue Service. These records indicate that the GCC was funded entirely by membership dues, based on the size of the company or trade association and whether or not the organization was on the Board of Directors. Dues for 1994 ranged between \$2,500 and \$10,000 per company. Overall funding levels for the GCC ranged between just over \$400,000 in 1994 to a peak of \$1.7 million in 1997. Little is known about the budget of the GCC beyond total spending. Expenses ranged from around \$550,000 in 1994 and 2001 to a peak of over \$2 million in 1997. The overall expenditure of funds recorded by the GCC since its inception totaled \$8.3 million (Figure 1).

After its founding in June 1989 with sixteen organizations, the GCC grew rapidly. By July 1989, when the GCC first testified before Congress, it listed forty-three members. The GCC listed seventy-two members in September of 1990 and reached its peak membership in June of 1991 with seventy-nine members.<sup>5</sup> Membership in the GCC then varied annually between forty-five and seventy members until the GCC reorganized as an association of only trade associations in 2001 (Figure 2).

As noted, GCC's primary membership was composed of companies and trade associations from the utility and coal/steel/rail sectors. This is in line with the findings of McGregor (2009, pp. 119–124). Each sector's membership fluctuated between 15% and 30% of the total, but on average each sector made up approximately 22% of the total membership. Organizations from



**Figure 1.** Global Climate Coalition Income and Expenses 1994-2001.



**Figure 2.** Global Climate Coalition Organizational Membership Levels by Sector 1989-2001.

the gas & oil sector remained fairly steady at between 14% and 18% of the total membership, with an overall average of 15%. Both the chemical and transportation sectors each averaged 12% of the GCC membership (Figure 3).

The GCC was never primarily comprised of organizations from the gas & oil sector. However, all of the major oil companies were represented in the coalition from the very beginning of the GCC by the American Petroleum Institute (API). Throughout the life of the coalition, organizations from the utility and coal/steel/rail sectors provided between 30% and 53% of its membership, with an overall average of 45% of the membership. The actual distribution of power and control within the GCC remains unknown.

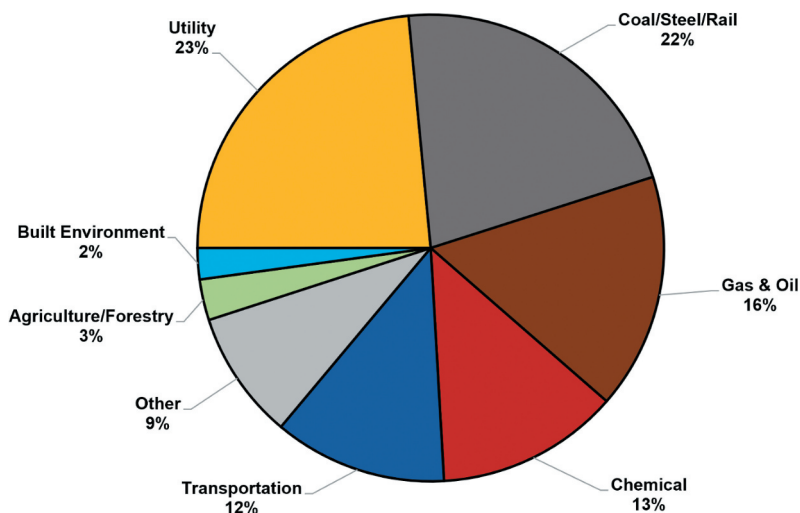
### Historical development of the GCC

The GCC existed from 1989 until 2001. During its existence, it went through four distinct stages, detailed below.

#### *Initial mobilization 1989 to 1991*

The GCC was founded in June 1989 as a project of NAM Air Quality Task Force. It consisted of 16 organizations meeting on a monthly basis (Franz 1998, p. 12). In its first public announcement on 23 June 1989, the GCC stated that it hoped to 'be the focal point for business participation in research and policy questions associated with global climate change'<sup>6</sup> Subsequent research has shown that industry created the GCC in response to what it considered a 'very alarmist presentation' by James Hansen in the

### Global Climate Coalition Cumulative Organizational Membership by Sector 1989 - 2001



**Figure 3.** Global Climate Coalition Cumulative Organizational Membership by Sector 1989-2001

summer of 1988 (Levy and Rothenberg 1999, p. 5). After the petro-chemical industry having been subjected to a mandatory reduction of ozone-depleting substances by the Montreal Protocol, the GCC was designed to take a proactive stance to avoid any mandatory reductions in carbon emissions (McGregor 2008, p. 11).

From 1989 to 1991, the GCC functioned as an informal information exchange between the organizations in its membership. Its initial actions consisted of monitoring the scientific activities of the IPCC, sponsoring economic research on climate change policies, and providing testimony on climate change legislation. On 14 July 1989, the GCC released the first of many economic analyses of the impacts of climate change policies that they commissioned.<sup>7</sup> This report argued that the 20% reduction in carbon emissions by 2000 that had been proposed in climate legislation would raise power costs by 20% for industry and 15% for households, leading to adverse economic impacts. This commissioned report built on the work of economists who had downplayed the adverse economic impacts of climate change (Franta 2021, p. 3). The GCC capitalized on this literature in this first deployment of economics to ‘weaken and delay US and international climate policy’ (Franta 2021, p. 16). This utilization of economics based on the exaggeration of costs and minimization of benefits became a key component of the GCC’s strategy to oppose climate action.



The GCC testified before Congress at hearings on climate change on 27 July 1989.<sup>8</sup> The central points of the testimony were that first, the scientific evidence of the adverse impacts of climate change were inconclusive, possibly exaggerated, and did not merit action at this point in time; second, unilateral action by the U.S. would be inappropriate and counterproductive; and third, any scientific research on climate change should involve the participation of industry scientists and representatives. In the following year, the GCC again testified before Congress on 13 September 1990 opposing legislation mandating reductions in carbon emissions.<sup>9</sup> Their opposition was based on alleged scientific uncertainty and adverse economic impacts. It also noted the need for international equity in climate action and argued for inclusion of developing countries in any global warming agreement. These three arguments: scientific uncertainty, adverse economic consequences, and international responsibility became the core of the GCC's arguments against climate action. Reporting to the NAM Board of Directors that year, the GCC maintained that they had become 'the key coalition representing industry on this issue.'<sup>10</sup>

In 1991, the GCC testified before Congress on two occasions regarding the development of a national energy strategy.<sup>11</sup> In both appearances, the GCC continued its rhetorical strategy, repeating its three key arguments against climate action. The GCC claimed success, maintained that it had shifted energy legislation to require any climate responses to 'be thoroughly evaluated for their economic, competitive, energy and technical impacts.'<sup>12</sup> Additionally, since participation in the upcoming 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) was open only to recognized nonprofit organizations, the GCC became a formal organization, separate from NAM in October 1991 (Franz 1998, p. 12).

In its initial years of operation, the GCC had established itself as a prominent voice of industry on the issue of climate change. It had grown from an initial sixteen organizations to a group of seventy-nine organizations. It initiated a series of activities, including testifying to and lobbying Congress regarding climate change policy, monitoring, and participating in the development of scientific research into climate change, and commissioning and promulgating economic analyses on climate change. It also established itself as a participant in international climate change negotiations. These initial formative years thus set up an institutional practice and focus that would continue throughout the existence of this coalition.

### ***UNFCCC negotiations and opposing the Clinton administration 1992–1994***

Throughout 1992, the primary focus of the GCC was participation in the negotiations leading up to the signing of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Negotiations on the treaty

started in February 1991.<sup>13</sup> At this negotiating session, the GCC advocated for a voluntary approach centering on technology development and emphasized the high costs of climate action.<sup>14</sup> The GCC maintained that projected reductions of up to 2.4% of GNP and no net economic benefits from taking action to control climate change (Franta 2021, p. 5). The GCC also continued to emphasize the uncertainty of climate science.<sup>15</sup> The day before the IPCC was to present the findings of its 1992 Science Assessment, the GCC organized a press conference featuring Dr. Michaels and Dr. Singer, two well-known critics of climate science, who argued that there was ‘essentially no scientific evidence for global warming’ (Leggett 2001, p. 82). The GCC also testified to three separate congressional committees in the spring of 1992.<sup>16</sup> It continued its advocacy for a voluntary approach, focus on technological innovation, and strong opposition to mandatory reductions in carbon emissions based on its now familiar rhetorical approach focused on scientific uncertainty, economic costs, and international concerns.

At the UNCED conference in Rio de Janeiro in May 1992, the GCC was a prominent actor advocating against any binding reductions in carbon emissions. It distributed a video ‘The Greening of Planet Earth’<sup>17</sup> that maintained that ‘increased levels of carbon dioxide will increase crop production and help to feed the hungry people of the world’ (Beder 2002, p. 238). At a press conference, the GCC emphasized the need for developing countries to engage in carbon emission reductions at the same time as the industrialized countries reduced their emissions. This was ‘a concession that developing countries would not make’ (Leggett 2001, pp. 96–97) and was designed by the GCC to be foreclose the possibility of any binding emissions reductions in the treaty. Giving into U.S. demands, the UNFCCC treaty that emerged contained no binding carbon emissions reduction. Based on this result, the GCC urged Senate approval of the treaty.<sup>18</sup> The UNFCCC was ratified by the U.S. Senate by voice vote on 7 October 1992. Reviewing their efforts for 1992, the GCC maintained that it had maintained ‘a strong and effective presence’ and celebrated the fact that the treaty did not mandate carbon emissions reductions.<sup>19</sup>

Following the election of Bill Clinton as President in November 1992, the GCC shifted its focus to preventing any domestic carbon emission limits. The UNFCCC required each country to prepare a National Action Plan (NAP) specifying the specific steps they would take to address global warming. Throughout 1993, there was a political struggle over the shape of the NAP between the imposition of mandatory limitations on carbon emissions vs. a voluntary program based in technology innovation advocated by the GCC. The GCC expanded its efforts by hiring E. Bruce Harrison Inc. (EBH) to conduct a comprehensive PR campaign to support the GCC’s position. The objective of this campaign was to shift the climate debate and would thus

involve communications efforts to promote uncertainty about climate science, attract support for the GCC's position on climate change, and to foster third-party experts to validate what the GCC was saying.<sup>20</sup>

The GCC lobbied heavily for voluntary limits and testified four times before Congressional Committees in 1993.<sup>21</sup> These testimonies focused on the adequacy of existing federal laws to regulate carbon emissions, the need for a voluntary approach, along with pointed references to the economic damages and the continued uncertainty of climate science. The GCC's efforts were rewarded when the Clinton administration released its NAP in October 1993 that relied entirely on voluntary efforts. In its report to NAM, the GCC maintained it 'played a pivotal role in ensuring that the final climate action plan relied on voluntary measures to achieve its objectives.'<sup>22</sup> In March of 1994, the UNFCCC entered into force. This agreement obligated the signatory countries to submit their NAP and to initiate further discussions and planning for further actions at the first annual Conference of the Parties (COP).

### ***Stopping mandatory international limits on carbon emissions 1995–1999***

With the U.S. domestic climate plan firmly established under voluntary standards, the primary focus of the GCC's efforts to stop climate action shifted back to the international arena. The UNFCCC had gone into effect, and with it came the renewed prospect for mandatory restrictions. Thus the negotiation to be held at the first meeting of the UNFCCC COP in Berlin would be critical. During 1994, it became increasingly clear to the Clinton Administration that voluntary efforts were inadequate to address climate change and the administration began preparing to support mandatory limits at the COP 1 in Berlin scheduled for 1995.<sup>23</sup>

The GCC sought to maintain voluntary limits.<sup>24</sup> Following its long-established playbook of casting doubt on climate science, the GCC sponsored and disseminated a report by Accu Weather just prior to the COP meeting in April 1995 that maintained that there had been no increase in severe weather events and that there was no link between severe weather and climate change.<sup>25</sup> This report was widely dismissed as inaccurate by climate scientists, who noted that a report by the National Climatic Data Center contradicted its findings (Gelbspan 1997, p. 38).

In April 1995, the first COP convened in Berlin. The GCC attended this meeting in force, with an official delegation of twenty-five individuals.<sup>26</sup> Throughout this meeting, the GCC lobbied for no mandatory emissions requirements. However, the global political momentum for mandatory action was strong, and in the end, the 'Berlin Mandate' was adopted. This

specified that future UNFCCC actions need to require ‘quantified limitations and reduction objectives within specific time frames’ along with mandatory reporting, and penalties for non-compliance.

This outcome was viewed as a disaster by the GCC and led it to redouble its efforts to oppose international climate action. In July of 1995, EBH provided the GCC with a comprehensive review of the program’s accomplishments and plans for the remainder of 1995 (E. B. Harrison Inc 1995). It notes its communications accomplishments from October 1994 to May 1995 in obtaining print, radio, and television coverage for the GCC, providing briefings and materials to the press, and publishing op-eds and letters to the editor. The memo then defines a strategy focused on influencing key members of Congress centered on three key messages that had long been the litany of the GCC: scientific uncertainty, economic costs of carbon restrictions, and loss of U.S. sovereignty. The campaign would focus on specific Congressional districts, recruiting local business leaders to advocate for the GCC’s position, and work to obtain local media coverage. Additionally, at the national level, the campaign would work to obtain expanded national media coverage, conduct speaking forums and press briefings, and recruit a third-party economist who would work to advocate for the GCC’s position in the media. GCC was now engaged in a sophisticated public relations campaign to influence elite opinion on climate policy.

In December of 1995, the IPCC released its Second Assessment Report. This report resolved many key scientific issues that were uncertain in the First Assessment Report. Most importantly, it came to the conclusion that “the balance of evidence ... suggests a discernible human influence on global climate.”<sup>27</sup> This was an incredibly important conclusion. It refuted the GCC’s constant argument that climate science was too uncertain to show that humans were changing the climate. In addition, that same month, the GCC received an internal memorandum from its own scientists showing that virtually all of the ‘science’ arguments advanced by contrarian climate scientists were false, and that human driven climate change was an established fact.<sup>28</sup>

In spite of its own internal report and widespread knowledge about climate change by member corporations (Franta 2021), the GCC pressed on with maintaining that the science of climate change was still too uncertain to require mandatory emissions reductions. The critical portion of the IPCC report that supported the determination of a ‘discernible influence’ was Chapter 8, ‘Detection of Climate Change and Attribution of Causes,’ whose lead author was Dr. Ben Santer. In order to discredit this IPCC finding, the GCC participated in a full-scale attack on Dr. Santer and the integrity of the IPCC. Santer was accused of politically motivated elimination of references to scientific uncertainty and skirting the peer review process. This effort included a public attack on Dr. Santer at an IPCC presentation, stories and advertisements in Washington Times and Energy Daily

(Gelbspan 1997, pp. 78–80), and an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal by a well-known climate contrarian, Dr. Seitz (van den Hove and Bettignies 2002, p. 13).

This attack on Santer and the IPCC was immediately answered by the IPCC's chair, Bert Bolin. He fully explained Santer's actions and defended the integrity of the IPCC process. The charges in the attack were largely seen to be fallacious and without merit by delegates to the COP. In the Second COP held in July 1996 in Geneva Switzerland, the UNFCCC parties fully endorsed the Second Assessment Report. One IPCC official characterized the GCC's effort as 'totally ineffective'.<sup>29</sup> The failure of the attempt to discredit the IPCC was a major setback for the GCC. It could no longer plausibly argue that climate science was uncertain. Additionally, cracks began to appear in the GCC after it so forcefully advocated an increasingly credulous position that anthropogenic climate change was not occurring. In October of 1996, BP quit the GCC (Leggett 2001, p. 252).

After COP 2, the Clinton Administration changed its negotiating position and advocated for mandatory reductions in carbon emissions.<sup>30</sup> This change in position led the GCC to engage in a major lobbying effort in the U.S. Senate, testifying in opposition to the treaty in July 1997.<sup>31</sup> Also, according to the then CEO of the GCC, William O'Keefe, the GCC had weekly meetings with members of Congress. They also worked with Senator Robert Byrd and Senator Chuck Hagel to round up support for an amendment to set strict criteria for any international climate accord. This effort contributed to the passage of the Byrd-Hagel Amendment in July 1997 by a vote of 95–0. This amendment required that any climate accord would have to include reductions by developing countries and could not result in serious harm to the U.S. economy. These provisions damaged the credibility of the U.S. because it showed a lack of consensus among the different branches of government about an international climate accord (van den Hove and Bettignies 2002, p. 13).

Following the Byrd-Hagel Amendment vote, the GCC, in cooperation with a number of trade associations, formed the Global Climate Information Project (GCIP) in September 1997. The GCIP launched a \$13 million PR campaign, produced by Goddard Claussen/First Tuesday. This campaign centered on the argument that the international accord would raise gasoline prices and harm the economy. The core theme was that 'It's not global and it won't work.' According to O'Keefe, this campaign was very successful in mobilizing public opinion against the Kyoto Protocol (van den Hove and Bettignies 2002, p. 13). Additionally, the GCC lobbied vigorously at the COP 3 meeting in Kyoto and leveraged its members to lobby against the Kyoto Protocol.<sup>32</sup> The GCC's core arguments against the Kyoto Protocol were based in the economic harms they projected this accord would cause (van den Hove and Bettignies 2002, p. 13).

Despite the campaign, the U.S. signed the Kyoto Protocol in December 1997. The accord required developed countries to reduce their carbon emissions to 5% below their 1990 levels by 2012. It exempted developing countries and set up a process of reviewing each country's progress toward its carbon emissions reductions and set up a program of greenhouse gas emissions trading. The signing of the Kyoto Protocol set off a firestorm of opposition. William O'Keefe, the GCC CEO, called the treaty 'a terrible deal' and vowed to 'campaign hard and we will defeat it'.<sup>33</sup> Senator Trent Lott, Republican Senate Majority Leader maintained that "the Senate will not ratify a flawed climate change treaty."<sup>34</sup>

After the Kyoto Accord was signed, the GCC and the GCIP expanded their efforts to ensure that the Senate did not ratify the treaty. The GCIP, with the help of the PR firm Shandwick PA, again partnered with the GCC, assisted by the PR firm Ruder Finn, to develop a PR campaign to 'let the media know about the glaring holes in the Kyoto treaty, such as exempting developing nations from strict emission standards'.<sup>35</sup> According to one GCC official, the GCIP and GCC tried to raise funds for the campaign. However, because most member companies thought the existing Byrd-Hagel amendment and Republican control of the Senate served as an effective barrier to ratification of the treaty, 'the appetite just wasn't there for it'.<sup>36</sup> There is no evidence that there was a significant public relations campaign by either organization in 1998. In June 1998, the GCC circulated a study it commissioned by Wharton Economic Forecasting Associates (WEFA) that estimated the direct impact on a family of four at \$2,700.<sup>37</sup> In August, an article in the *Electricity Daily*, citing an economic study sponsored by the GCC, maintained that the 'Clinton Climate Plan Would Kill Coal',<sup>38</sup> citing massive economic dislocations of up to \$120 Billion. That same article noted that the White House estimates of the costs were between \$7 billion and \$12 billion. This campaign was followed up with Congressional testimony of the lead author of the WEFA study mentioned above on 4 October 1998, which emphasized the adverse economic consequences of ratification of the Kyoto Protocol.<sup>39</sup>

Given the strong Senate objections to the treaty, the Clinton Administration tried to negotiate a cap-and-trade system at COP 4 in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in November 1998. The hope was that developing countries would participate in this process, and thus the requirements of the Byrd-Hagel amendment would be met. However, this effort failed and the Kyoto Protocol remained unacceptable to Senate Republicans. Drained of political capital by the Lewinsky scandal, the administration never did submit the Kyoto Protocol to the Senate for ratification. The incoming Bush Administration formally withdrew from the Kyoto Protocol in March 2001.

### ***Post Kyoto dissolution 2000–2001***

After the COP meeting in Buenos Aires in 1998, the GCC faded in importance. Its primary issue, the Kyoto Protocol, appeared to be politically unviable. It testified before Congress three further times, twice regarding the Kyoto Protocol,<sup>40</sup> and once in opposition to Senate Bill 566, the Clean Power Act of 2002.<sup>41</sup> However, with the Kyoto Protocol effectively dead, the reason for the GCCs continued existence seemed to be in question. It had already suffered a string of highly public defections, starting in 1996, when BP left the coalition. Pushed by a number of shareholder resolutions (McGregor 2009, p. 122) and a campaign by Ozone Action, over the following years, most of the major oil companies and automobile companies also quit. As one GCC official put it, ‘After Kyoto, many US firms thought that the treaty would never be ratified, so they turned their attention elsewhere.’<sup>42</sup>

In March 2000, the GCC reorganized itself as an association made up only of trade associations. It kept this form until it went defunct in the summer of 2001, after the Bush Administration had withdrawn from the Kyoto protocol. In one final compliment, the GCC’s effectiveness was acknowledged in a meeting with White House staff on 21 June 2001. The talking points for that meeting<sup>43</sup> noted that ‘POTUS rejected Kyoto, in part, based on input from you.’ The GCC announced that it disbanded on 29 January 2002.<sup>44</sup>

### **Discussion**

In its opposition to climate action, the GCC followed four practices that have been identified by scholars in studies of environmental politics.

#### ***Undermining climate science***

First, it is clear that the GCC engaged in an extensive effort to undermine climate science through both disputing scientific findings and attacking the credibility and character of climate scientists. As noted in the GCC Communications Plan (E. B. Harrison Inc 1995), one of the key objectives of the coalition was to focus on the ‘continued uncertainty of the science’. Throughout their publications and press releases, the GCC consistently cited contrarian scientists and promoted their work. It is unclear whether the GCC funded contrarian scientists to either produce reports or to sign off on editorials as ‘disinterested’ third-party spokespersons. However, the Climate Investigations Center has discovered an application for funding to engage in efforts to undermine climate science by Dr. Singer,<sup>45</sup> lending credibility to the existence of a financial link between the GCC and contrarian climate scientists.



The practice of attacking and undermining scientific findings to avert environmental or safety regulations is well-established as part of the public relations industry's product-defense strategy. The purpose of such efforts is to manage the scientific process and thus 'manipulate research in ways that would promote their [industry's] products or create doubt about the deleterious health effects of their products and manufacturing processes – thereby enhancing their credibility and profits and shielding them against unwanted regulation or legal liability' (White and Bero 2010, pp. 105–106). This practice originated with the efforts to conceal the adverse health effects of lead in 1918 (Markowitz and Rosner 2002, pp. 36–53) and further developed by the oil (Conley 2006, p. 23) and tobacco industries (Michaels 2008, pp. 45–59). Given the historical precedent of the use of PR product defense strategies, and its employment of E. Bruce Harrison, the leading environmental PR professional that developed the attack on Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (Aronczyk and Espinoza 2021), the GCC's adoption of this practice would be expected.

### *Highlighting the costs of climate action*

A major component the GCC's effort to stop climate action was to conduct and promulgate economic studies that highlighted the high economic costs of any mandatory carbon emissions reductions. The GCC's Communication Plan (E. B. Harrison Inc 1995) stressed that their message would focus on the 'loss of jobs, higher energy costs, diminished competitiveness' that would result if carbon emissions were regulated. The GCC sponsored a series of economic analyses<sup>46</sup> that exaggerated the costs of mitigating carbon emissions and minimized the economic damages of climate change. In fact, one of the major authors of these studies for the GCC, Paul Bernstein stated that they intentionally neglected to fully examine the costs of failing to take climate action and thus did not tell the whole story (Franta 2021, p. 12).

The use of economic analysis in opposing environmental action was pioneered by E. Bruce Harrison (Aronczyk and Espinoza 2021, pp. 96–126). In order to counter environmental concerns, Harrison developed the concept of the three Es: Environment, Energy, and Economy. This messaging strategy coupled environmental quality with abundant energy and economic growth forming the triad that defined the 'good life.' The task for policy then was to provide a 'balance' between the competing components of this triad. This opened the door for analysis of government environmental policy to consider the economic costs of environmental action and its impact on the availability of energy resources. Throughout the 1980s, this framing of environmental policy became dominant in the U.S. and when the issue of climate change emerged, it became enmeshed with economic considerations



and the impact on energy supply. When Harrison's firm took over the communications for the GCC, it is thus not at all surprising that this framing was applied to shift the debate on climate policy.

### ***Shifting the cultural understanding of climate change to oppose carbon emissions reductions***

The third major practice of the GCC was to engage in a vigorous and well-planned public relations campaign to widely promulgate their rationale for opposing carbon emissions reductions. It is clear that the GCC paid individuals to serve as credible 'third party' spokespersons to promulgate the GCC's positions in editorials (E. B. Harrison Inc 1995). It also engaged in several paid media campaigns, culminating in its cooperative effort with the GCIP to design and run a major PR campaign to defeat the Kyoto Protocol. Finally, the GCC conducted extensive outreach efforts to newspaper editors and reporters to foster favorable earned media coverage. These activities are in line with the emerging literature on the important role played by PR firms in climate change politics (Brulle and Werthman 2021).

### ***Conducted aggressive lobbying of political elites to stop meaningful climate action***

The final major activity of the GCC was to conduct extensive lobbying efforts focused on international climate change negotiations, Executive Branch decision making, and Congress. The GCC actively lobbied international climate negotiations starting with the Rio Treaty process and the subsequent COP meetings to ensure that there were no binding emissions reductions. The GCC also conducted extensive lobbying efforts within the Executive Branch regarding the Climate Action Plan, and also sought to shift congressional legislative efforts. This lobbying effort culminated in the successful passage of the Byrd – Hagel Amendment, which effectively put an end to the Kyoto Protocol. These activities are entirely in line with an extensive literature regarding the important influence of political lobbying on the nature of policy action on climate change (Brulle 2018).

### ***The role of coalitions in obstructing climate action***

The analysis of the GCC's activities shows that this coalition engaged in four key practices to influence the political process. None of these activities are unusual or surprising. Rather, they reflect a comprehensive political operation that was designed and executed by leading political operatives and PR professionals. Additionally, the GCC served as an effective means for a number of different corporations and trade associations from multiple

sectors to develop a collective political position and to pool resources to advance their preferred policies. This confirms much of the established literature on the important role of coalitions in political and cultural conflicts. The GCC, as the first and largest U.S. domestic coalition organized to oppose climate action, established a repertoire of actions that have served as a playbook for other coalitions to emulate in their efforts to stop or slow climate action. These subsequent efforts by coalitions such as the American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity and the Alliance for Energy and Economic Growth to obstruct climate action have followed the playbook developed by the GCC (Brulle 2021). Pioneered by the GCC, a range of activities including efforts to cast doubt on climate science, the use of economic analyses to exaggerate the costs and minimize the benefits of climate mitigation efforts, engaging in vigorous lobbying, and utilizing public relations techniques have all become standard parts of the efforts to oppose climate action. This framework can serve as a template to examine further efforts and how the effort to obstruct climate action has changed over time.

This study has some significant limitations. It is based on the analysis of a single coalition. Several other coalitions also opposed action on climate change (Brulle 2021). A comparative analysis of these different coalitions would add to our understanding of the role of coalitions in the political conflict over climate change policy. Additionally, this study does not examine the linkages between the GCC and conservative think-tanks (CTT). The interactions between the GCC, other coalitions, and CTTs is an important area where more research is needed. Finally, there is a great deal of information regarding the GCC's activities that remains unknown. Further information on the GCC derived from either broader archival research or legal discovery procedures will be critical for compiling this information.

So what was the impact of the GCC? There were many influences on climate policy, including multiple industry coalitions that opposed climate action, large corporations, CTTs, and other factors. However, the fact remains that during the period the GCC existed, there was no successful government action to limit U.S. carbon emissions. In his case history of the GCC, E. Bruce Harrison celebrated the success of his efforts for the coalition, noting that the 'GCC has successfully turned the tide on press coverage of global climate change science, effectively countering the ecocatastrophe message and asserting the lack of scientific consensus on global warming' and that the 'GCC's efforts to raise awareness of the science and economics of climate change influenced the administration's decision to rely on voluntary (rather than mandatory) measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in its

Climate Change Action Plan.’<sup>47</sup> Additionally, as previously discussed, the Bush Administration congratulated the GCC on its effectiveness, noting that ‘POTUS rejected Kyoto, in part, based on input from you’.

As scholars seek to understand the historical development of U.S. climate policy, the analysis of the actions of coalitions such as the GCC can make a major contribution to this task. The GCC was one of several organizations that successfully worked to stop climate action. Understanding its operation can provide a guide on how to overcome this obstacle to addressing climate change.

## Notes

1. In this paper, I build on my previous research on the role of countermovement coalitions in the development of organized efforts to oppose climate action. As such, I draw extensively from Brulle (2021) in the theoretical framing of this paper.
2. See Climate Files: <https://www.climatefiles.com/bp/brulle-paper-references-advocating-inaction-environmental-politics-april-2022>.
3. These interviews were conducted under conditions of anonymity and the transcripts of the interviews cannot be made public.
4. GCC Memorandum from John Cohen, NAM, 11/27/1991.
5. Statement of Jerry Jasnowski before the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, 9/13/1990.
6. Industrial Energy Bulletin. GCC Forms to Give Business a Role in Debate. 6/23/1989.
7. Center for Strategic and International Studies 1989. *Implications of Global Climate Policies: A Report for the GCC*, Washington DC.
8. Testimony of W. Ross Stevens III, E.I. du Pont de Nemours & Company on H. R. 2984 on behalf of the GCC before the House Subcommittees on Natural Resources, Agricultural Research and Environment and International Scientific Cooperation of the Committee on Science, Space and Technology, 7/27/1989.
9. Statement of Jerry Jasnowski before the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, 9/13/1990.
10. NAM *Business Activity Report February 10–20 October 1990*, page 9.
11. Statement of the GCC before Congress on 6/19/1991 and 7/30/1991.
12. NAM *Business Activity Report 11 February 1991–19 October 1991*, page 9.
13. UN 1991. Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee for a Framework Convention on Climate Change: List of Participants, 12 February 1991.
14. GCC joints industry groups urging INC (International Negotiating Committee) to look for flexibility and cost effective technology solutions to global climate change issue. PR Newswire, 2/25/1992.
15. Need for more science and data when assessing effects of climate change, says former Washington governor. PR Newswire, 2/19/1991.

16. Testimony of Michael Barody to the House Energy and Commerce Committee, 3/3/1992, testimony of Richard Briggs to the House Energy and Commerce Committee on 3/19/1992, and the testimony of Michael Barody to the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee on 5/12/1992.
17. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ep5ptrPN6ns>.
18. Testimony of Michael Barody to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on 9/18/1992.
19. NAM 1992. Business Activity Report, January 31–24 October 1992, page 15.
20. Climate Change Debate Needs to be Shifted by Industry, *Coal News*, 12/14/1992, page 3.
21. Testimony of Michael Barody before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, 3/1/1993, Written statement of the GCC submitted to the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, 3/10/1993, Testimony of Jerry Jasinski before the House Energy and Commerce Committee, 11/16/1993, and Written statement of the GCC submitted to the House Committee on Science, Space and Technology, 11/16/1993.
22. National Association of Manufacturers Business Activity Report, 10 October 1993–5 February 1994.
23. Debate on global warming, *Oil & Gas Journal*, 8/22/1994.
24. Testimony of Jerry Jasinski to the House Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, 5/10/1994.
25. Accu Weather report available in Climate Files.
26. United Nations Conference of the Parties, First Session Berlin, Organizational Matters: Admission of Organizations as Observers.
27. IPCC Second Assessment Report, Climate Change 1995 Summary for Policymakers, Page 5, paragraph 2.4.
28. Bernstein, L. 1995 Predicting Future Climate Change: A Primer, draft report, GCC.
29. Interview Four with former IPCC Official.
30. In shift, U.S. will seek binding world pact to combat global warming. *New York Times*, 7/17/1996, A6.
31. Testimony of William O'Keefe before the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, 7/17/1997, 1997.
32. 'GCC Astroturfing: Kochs, ExxonMobil, and Others Support Kyoto Opposition.' Climate Files.
33. Marathon Talks Produce Climate Treaty, *Platts Oilgram News*, 12/11/1997, Vol. 75, No. 240, page 1.
34. Senate set to scuttle global climate treaty, *Journal of Commerce*, 12/11/1997.
35. Big Biz slates PR blitz to kill global warming treaty, O'Dwyer's PR Services Report, February 1998.
36. Interview Three with former GCC official, page 6.
37. Studies Find Costs of Kyoto Compliance High, *The Electricity Daily*, 6/15/1998.
38. Clinton Climate Plan Would Kill Coal, *The Electricity Daily*, 8/4/1998.
39. Testimony of Mary Novak before the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, 10/4/1998.

40. Testimony of Constance Holmes to the House Committee on Science, 2/4/1998 and the Testimony of Glen Kelly to the House Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, 9/21/2000.
41. Written statement of the GCC submitted to the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works on 7/26/2001.
42. Interview Two with GCC official.
43. Memorandum from Ken Brill to Under Secretary of State Dobriansky, 6/20/2001.
44. Leading US Anti-Kyoto Association Disbands. Platts Oilgram News, 1/29/2002.
45. Proposal available in Climate Files.
46. This included studies by Charles River Associates, WEFA Group, NERA Economics Consulting, EOP Group, DRI, and H. Zinder and Associates.
47. E.B Harrison Inc. Promotional Material, no date.

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## ORCID

Robert J. Brulle  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3852-3379>

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