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New Congress, Old Climate Rhetoric?

ROBERT E. GROPP

Last month, members of the 112th Congress were sworn into office, making the composition of the new Congress very different from that of the 111th. Although the election is over, it remains unclear whether members of the new Congress will refrain from the vitriolic attacks of the 2010 campaign season long enough to legislate, or if the next two years, as many policy watchers inside the Beltway are speculating, will be dedicated instead to testing arguments for the 2012 elections. Early signals suggest the latter, replete with antisience rhetoric, may be the case.

The 112th Congress has at least 95 new members in the House of Representatives and 16 in the Senate. A number of these legislators won elections in part by championing ideas that will set some policy discussions back years. According to an assessment by the progressive group Think Progress, 35 of 46 Republicans in the Senate and 125 of 240 Republicans in the House have publicly questioned the science of global climate change.

The newly elected legislators will not be the only roadblock to action, according to some advocates for issues ranging from federal investment in science to adoption of climate change policy. Some of the returning members of Congress have built long and storied careers on questioning science. Senator James Inhofe (R-OK) was recently profiled in the newspaper *Roll Call*. Reporter John Stanton wrote of Inhofe: "He boasted of his role at international climate change talks last year in Copenhagen, in which he was vilified by virtually the entire world. 'It was really quite enjoyable,' Inhofe

said, recalling when he caused a commotion by announcing to attendees that the United States would never ratify a climate change deal. 'I always remember with all those people in the room, hundreds of them, and all the cameras. And they all had one thing in common: They all hated me.'"

Not all Republicans share Inhofe's beliefs or amusements. Yet with each passing year it appears that there are fewer Republican members of Congress willing to embrace or act upon scientific knowledge, particularly when it relates to issues such as climate change.

Two Republican members of the House of Representatives who have publically challenged their colleagues on climate change are not members of the 112th Congress; Representative Vernon Ehlers (R-MI) retired, and Representative Bob Inglis (R-SC) was defeated in a primary election by a tea party candidate. Inglis has warned his colleagues that a focus on criticizing climate science and scientists is unproductive, particularly when the nation's competitors are working to develop next-generation energy sources.

At a climate change hearing last November, however, the then-presumptive new chairman of the House Committee on Science and Technology, Texas Republican Ralph Hall, argued that reasonable people still disagree about the science.

The challenges facing advocates for action on the issue of climate change are great. Representative John Shimkus (R-IL) has used religion to argue against government action on climate change. "The Earth will end

only when God declares it's time to be over," Shimkus said during a 2009 congressional hearing. "Man will not destroy this Earth. This Earth will not be destroyed by a flood."

Meanwhile, Inglis asserted that many in South Carolina perceived his newly held position—that climate change is real—as a slip to "Satan's side," as he told Evan Lehmann of the *New York Times/ClimateWire*. Inglis further explained to Lehmann that his position that atmospheric warming is a scientific certainty was one of three "blasphemies" he committed. Failure to support President Bush's troop surge in Iraq and support for President Bush's Troubled Asset Relief Program were the other two.

"For many conservatives, [supporting climate change] became the marker that you had crossed to Satan's side—that you had left God and gone to Satan's side on climate change... because many evangelical Christians in our district would say that it's up to God to determine the length of Earth, and therefore, you are invading the province of God," Inglis told Lehmann.

In this newly divided government, in which the leaders of one chamber owe their political fortune to freshly minted conservatives seemingly at odds with some in their own party, only time will tell whether and how the issues of the day will be addressed.

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