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# CSSN Briefing

## **CSSN Primer 2021:1**

# **The Structure of Obstruction: Understanding Opposition to Climate Change Action in the United States**

Scholars are just beginning to unearth the complex and highly-developed network of organizations built to block action on the life-threatening issue of climate change. This brief primer points out the history of climate opposition, ten key players, their playbook, and how they interact to influence the media and political agenda to get their way on public policy.

### **History of Climate Obstruction**

Growing from fear of major regulation in response to a rising scientific concern about the issue, the campaign to sow uncertainty about climate change has been facilitated by [decades of promotion of free-market ideology and outright attacks on government](#), and more recently by assaults on institutions and experts of all types – especially government officials, scientists, educators, and the mainstream media. The consequence is that anti-intellectualism (long a feature of American life) has become widespread, creating a major decline in trust in government and many other institutions. This has helped generate what some have called a ‘post-truth society,’ highly receptive to various sources of misinformation, such as that ‘climate change has no scientific basis’.

### **Climate Obstruction Today: Ten Key Players**

Today, a [climate change countermovement](#) opposes scientists’, policy makers’, and activists’ concern about climate change and the need to reduce carbon emissions. The countermovement’s primary strategy is the creation and dissemination of misinformation regarding climate science and climate policy more generally.

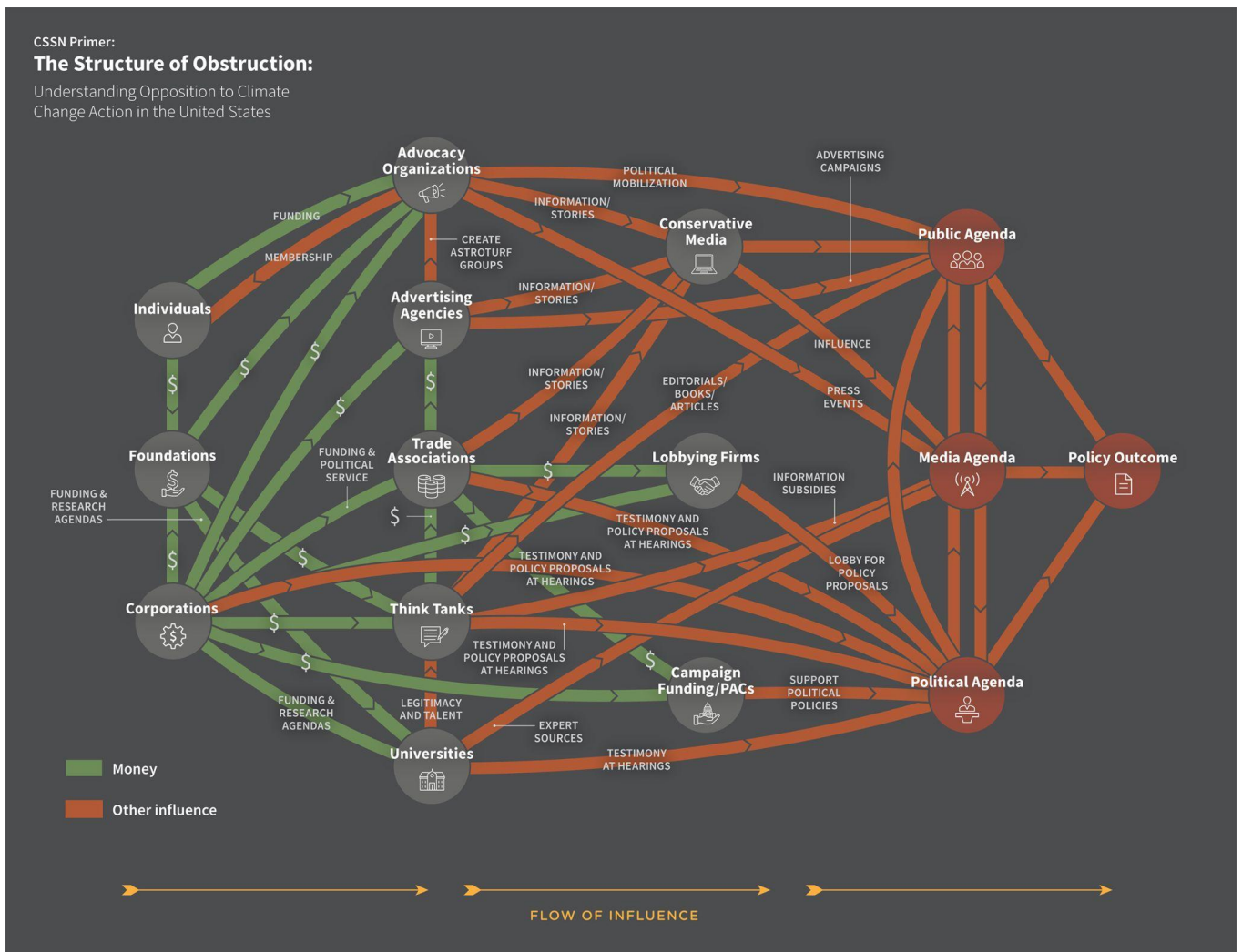
Broadly speaking, key opponents to climate action are motivated by private interest in the continuation of the fossil-fuel based economy, justified by a staunch commitment to a neo-liberal, libertarian ideology that abhors governmental regulations and interventions in the economy. Climate change was one issue on which these ideas were brought from the fringe to the mainstream.

An integrated network of organizational relationships (sometimes termed the “denial machine”) now exists to influence the public, media, and political arenas, with a goal to slow or stop ambitious action on climate. This countermovement is highly sophisticated, operates in multiple institutional arenas, and pursues a wide variety of coordinated tactics. [Key players in the denial machine](#) include:

1. **Corporations and Trade Associations:** Since the 1990s, individual companies, such as ExxonMobil, Peabody Coal, Dow Chemical, Dupont, Ford, and General Motors have sown doubt on climate change, in addition to highly influential business associations representing these sectors.
2. **Opposition Coalitions and Front Groups:** Many of these same corporations have led the formation of upbeat -named coalitions to coordinate their lobbying and public persuasion efforts to stop or slow regulatory action on climate change. Examples include the Global Climate Coalition and the Alliance for Energy & Economic Growth, the Coalition for Vehicle Choice, and the Coalition for Affordable and Reliable Energy. Corporations have long sought to hide their anti-environmental actions from the media and the public, and a crucial strategy is to form front groups to do their ‘dirty work’.
3. **PR Firms:** With the rise in concern over global climate change, Public Relations firms have been hired by fossil fuel interests to develop comprehensive campaigns to promote a positive public image for these interests and to oppose climate change mitigation. These firms have been central actors in obstructing climate action.
4. **Astroturf Groups/Advocacy Organizations:** Astroturf groups are created by other actors (especially corporations and front groups for short-term campaigns, designed with guidance from PR firms), to appear as popular ‘grassroots’ protests by workers and citizens opposed to specific climate change mitigation policies and proposals while hiding their corporate sponsors. Examples include Koch Brothers-sponsored 2008 ‘Hot Air Tours’ and 2009 ‘Energy Citizens’ rallies.
5. **Conservative Philanthropists and Foundations:** Family foundations of political conservatives and business interests support long-term efforts such as funding think tanks, promoting conservatism in academia, and using PR campaigns to promote free-market ideology and a positive image of corporations. Medium-term efforts, such as translating ideas from academia, such as justifications for corporate tax cuts, pay for themselves by stimulating policy proposals. Short-term efforts include funding lobbying against regulation, and organizing astroturf groups that give the appearance of widespread citizen opposition.
6. **Conservative Think Tanks:** A network of conservative think tanks are leading creators and a major amplifier of climate change denial and obstruction. Examples include the Heritage Foundation, Heartland Institute, and the Competitive Enterprise Institute.
7. **Contrarian Scientists:** A small number of contrarian scientists aid denial efforts by promoting uncertainty over climate change, and receive disproportionate representation in mainstream and especially right-wing media.

8. **Conservative Media:** This echo chamber has become the largest amplifier of climate change denial and obstruction, including talk radio, FoxNews, and conservative newspapers and widely circulated columnists.
9. **Republican Politicians:** The Republican party's long-term embrace of anti-government ideology has led to opposition to any effort to take ameliorative action such as reducing carbon emissions. This posture preceded the rise of Donald Trump.
10. **Denial Bloggers:** The growth of the blogosphere in the 2000s opened new opportunities to create and disseminate climate change misinformation, and numerous 'sceptic' (as they call themselves) blogs and other websites began to appear. Sceptic blogs are supplemented by a variety of social media and online outlets in the diffusion of climate change denial, such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and user comment sections of online news services.

The objective of these efforts is to drive the policy decision making process to favor actions that delay action on climate change. Specifically, these institutions act to: 1) Maintain or transform the public agenda so that the desired framing is accepted as the common sense in that particular area, and assure that public opinion does not support climate action; 2) Shape the media agenda to promote particular perspectives that cast doubt on actions to address climate change; and 3) Influence the political process to select policies that do not support climate action.



## The Playbook



Climate opposition efforts usually follow [three distinct time frames](#): long term, intermediate term, and short term.

- **Long Term:** The first set of activities focus on long-term efforts that range from five years to decades in duration. Their goal is to build and maintain a cultural and intellectual infrastructure of organizations that support the development of ideas and policies favorable to conservative or industry viewpoints. One aspect of this effort is creating and maintaining academic programs at institutions of higher education, endowing academic chairs, and providing educational support for students in these programs.

Another set of activities corporations and affiliated trade associations engage in is the development and enactment of corporate or industry-sector philanthropy or corporate promotion campaigns, to enhance their cultural legitimacy and thus diffuse demands for regulation. These campaigns include the sponsorship of cultural events, forums and community organizations. Additionally, corporations engage in extended corporate promotional advertising campaigns. To establish and enhance their legitimacy, companies attempt to promote themselves as representing norms of rationality, progress, and appropriate conduct.

- **Medium Term:** The second set of activities focuses on the intermediate time horizon of one to five years. This stage involves the translation and promulgation of academic ideas into concrete policy proposals. The major institutional actors in this time frame are think tanks, advocacy organizations and public relations firms, which recruit credible third-party spokespersons to boost the legitimacy of these policy arguments.
- **Short Term:** The third set of activities focuses on short-term political outcomes such as elections or pending issue legislation. Considerable effort is put into influencing public opinion around climate change. One style of public opinion management is to promote positive perceptions of fossil fuel corporations through the extensive use of advertising campaigns. A second tactic, involves citizen mobilization and/or the creation of front groups to demonstrate popular support for a political position. A third approach involves campaign finance and lobbying activities, either directly (by corporations or trade associations), or indirectly (through employing public affairs firms to influence legislative outcomes).

## Organized Efforts Opposed to Climate Action

Time Frame	Objectives	Activities	Conservative Movement Institutions Involved	Corporate Institutions Involved	Example
<b>Long Term</b> 5 Years to 20 Years 	<b>Develop/Promulgate Specific Worldview</b>  <b>Steering of Academic Activities</b>	Provision of Elementary/Secondary School Curriculum	Foundations Think Tanks	Corporations Trade Associations Public Relations Firms	Heartland Institute Publication Circulation
		Creation/Funding of Academic Curriculum and Research Programs	Foundations	Corporations Corporate Foundations	Building of neoliberal academic programs
		Corporate & Industry Image Promotion		Corporate Public Relations Department Public Relations Firms	API "Fueling it Forward" Campaign
<b>Intermediate Term</b> 1 Year to 5 Years 	<b>Circulate Proposals &amp; Specific Worldviews in Media</b>  <b>Foster Desired Government Actions</b>	Develop/Promote Specific Worldview & Policy Actions	Think Tanks Advocacy Organizations	Corporate Public Relations Department	ExxonMobil proposed carbon tax
		Delegitimize Opposing Worldviews and Policy Proposals	Think Tanks Advocacy Organizations		Climategate Effort
<b>Short Term</b> 6 Months to 1 Year	<b>Carry Out Political Action to Influence Government</b> - Elections - Legislation	Lobbying		Lobbying Firms Corporations Trade Associations	\$8.6 Million ExxonMobil Spent on Lobbying 2018
		Legislative Issue Advertising		Trade Associations Public Relations Firms	ACCCE "Cold in the Dark" Campaign
		Citizen Mobilization	Conservative Political Groups	Public Relations Firms Front Groups	Americans for Prosperity
		Campaign Contributions	Political Action Committees	Political Action Committees	Freedom Partners Action Fund

### Additional Information

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### About CSSN

This report is being released through the Climate Social Science Network ([CSSN.org](https://cssn.org)), a global network of scholars headquartered at the [Institute at Brown for Environment and Society](https://www.brown.edu/research/institute-at-brown-for-environment-and-society/). CSSN seeks to coordinate, conduct and support peer-reviewed research into the institutional and cultural dynamics of the political conflict over climate change, and assist scholars in outreach to policymakers and the public.