

Testimony of Kiera O'Brien
Senate Democrats' Special Committee on the Climate Crisis
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Chairman Schatz and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me here to speak with you today about the challenge of climate instability and the path to bipartisan solutions. As neither a typical environmentalist, nor a Democrat, I appreciate the efforts this committee has made to hear from unconventional climate constituencies.

My name is Kiera O'Brien, and I am the Vice President of Students for Carbon Dividends and the former President of the Harvard Republican Club. I am 21 years old, and I will be returning to Harvard for my senior year this fall.

I'd like to begin today by sharing with you why I care about this issue.

I was born and raised in Ketchikan, Alaska, a small island community in the southeastern part of the state. The first 18 years of my life were spent living in the Tongass National Rainforest, the largest National Forest in the country. I grew up in a culture grounded in the appreciation of and reverence for nature as well as in the knowledge that our natural resources are important to our way of life. Much of my childhood was spent outdoors, and many in my community participate in subsistence and personal use fishing or make their living as commercial fishermen.

Growing up in such a self-reliant, rural community, far from the reaches of government, it was almost inevitable that I would grow up to be a Republican. It was also inevitable, living in such an exposed, wild environment, that I would notice the disruption to our climate that is occurring. My home made me who I am, and the thought of harm to or disruption of the Alaskan way of life makes this issue a priority for me. The wide-ranging economic threat of the challenge before us speaks to the bipartisan action that must be cultivated around the issue of climate instability.

The following quote sums up the perspective on climate that my life in Alaska granted me: "Climate change is not just an environmental issue. It is also a social, cultural, and economic issue important to all Alaskans." It's hard to believe today, given the polarization currently surrounding the climate issue, but these are the words of former Alaska Governor and Republican Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin, penned in 2007.

When I moved over 3,000 miles east of my hometown to attend Harvard College, I sought out people who reminded me of home, and what felt like home were the people I met through the Harvard Republican Club and the Institute of Politics. When I became President of the Republican Club during my sophomore year, I was approached by Alexander Posner, then a student at Yale, with what he believed to be the solution to Democratic dominance of the climate

issue: a Republican-led, business-backed climate plan. My club was the first of many student groups to endorse this plan, and six months later, Students for Carbon Dividends was launched.

Students for Carbon Dividends is a student-run nonprofit that aims to elevate a free-market climate solution – specifically Carbon Dividends – into the public spotlight. The launch of our coalition in February of 2018 was the first time a collection of College Republican organizations had ever publicly backed a concrete, national climate solution. By extension, it was also the first time a bipartisan student coalition had done so.

Since our launch, Students for Carbon Dividends' founding coalition has more than tripled to over 100 campus groups across the country, including chapters of the College Republicans, College Democrats, Turning Point USA, Young Americans for Liberty, Federalist Society, campus energy and environmental groups, business organizations, and more. Our mission is to open the door to a bipartisan climate breakthrough through education and advocacy. We believe that to solve this problem – to create a lasting, bipartisan solution – we must check our partisanship at the door to do what's right for our country, the world, and for the generations to come.

This past winter, an additional exciting development for supporters of the Baker-Schultz carbon dividends plan was the “Economists Statement on Carbon Dividends.” The historic statement, which endorsed the carbon dividends solution, was signed by every living former Chair of the Federal Reserve as well as by 27 Nobel Prize winning economists – the largest number to endorse any policy on any topic, ever. It was also signed by 15 former Chairs of the President's Council of Economic Advisers, including every living Republican who served in the role over the last half century.

And if that weren't enough, the statement was signed by over 3,500 economists from across the country – the largest such statement in the history of the profession.

This consensus is overwhelming, and has helped shift the conversation from asking *what* pro-growth, pro-economy climate action we should support to *why* our current representatives have not yet addressed the issue in a serious way.

Whatever our political leanings, we should all be able to support taking action to improve the economy and reduce carbon emissions. Instead of a government-heavy regulatory approach, the Baker-Shultz carbon dividends framework would harness the power of the free market to tackle the emissions problem head on. The plan would reduce emissions and shrink the size of government while simultaneously ensuring that most Americans end up financially ahead. While many organizations on the left rally around the problem, Students for Carbon Dividends rallies around the solution.

Climate has always been an issue near to my heart; but until I learned about this plan, I had never been exposed to policy I felt I could support. As the climate changes, our way of life is forced to change with it, and rural communities are on the front lines of that adaptation. When I was first approached about supporting carbon dividends, “climate policy”, in my mind, was synonymous with regulation.

But after delving into the details, it became clear that this policy framework was not like any climate policy I had seen. Authored by two of the GOP’s most distinguished elder statesmen, James A. Baker III and George P. Schultz, the carbon dividends proposal embodies the core principles of free markets and limited government. It would also achieve significantly greater emissions reductions than all current and prior climate regulations combined, and exceed the Paris climate target, underscoring the inherent wisdom and effectiveness of a free-market solution.

For the past year and a half I have had countless conversations about my work on the climate issue with peers, professors, and role models. The reactions have been resoundingly positive, both on the merits of the carbon dividends policy, and in acknowledgement of the necessity that we take action. From mentors, I have received words of support for my organization and our partners’ leadership on this policy challenge, often accompanied by the acknowledgement that their generation has failed us. From my peers, bipartisan action has become counterculture in many ways. But like me, so many of my peers on both sides of the aisle are exhausted by the partisan bickering, the divisive entrenchment, and staunch unwillingness to compromise. The climate does not care who has scored the latest partisan shot. Neither does the economy, nor do the people whose lives have been and will be upended by climate uncertainty and instability.

Among Republicans concerned about the climate, the prevailing dialogue is one of action versus inaction. There are those who believe the problem can and should be solved. Others believe action is futile. Still others believe that the potential consequences of climate instability are not worth the expense of meaningful climate action. We have not yet managed to achieve a balance between acknowledging climate instability and resolving how to address it. However, as my fellow panelist Mr. Luntz has shown, climate instability is an issue of great concern for young conservatives. Acting on climate is therefore not only good policy. It is also good politics.

Given the American public’s growing demands for a climate solution, there are three policy tools at our disposal – regulation, subsidization, or taxation. Regulation and subsidies – which distort the market – are not part of the solution set my organization and I advocate for. While the purpose of this session is not for me to speak about specific policy details, as a Republican and a fiscal conservative, I do not support just any carbon pricing policy. A market based approach that

does not grow the size of government is key, which is why I support carbon dividends directly back to the American people.

Many Republicans have opposed modern climate plans because they worry they would undercut American capitalism. The plan we support does not harm capitalism or free enterprise; it instead leverages the power of the market to achieve emissions reductions. Capitalism is *essential* for attacking this challenge. With this plan, we, as Republicans and as Americans, no longer need to choose between party orthodoxy and the mounting risks facing the planet.

This is an issue of personal responsibility and concern for the inheritance of generations to come. The Republican Party has a long and proud legacy of leadership on environmental issues, from President Teddy Roosevelt and the National Parks, to President Richard Nixon's founding of the EPA, to President Ronald Reagan's leadership on protecting the ozone layer, to President George H.W. Bush's decisive action on market-based solutions to acid rain. It is time for us to reclaim this legacy.

As more Republicans come to the table to discuss meaningful solutions, so to must Democrats meet them with a willingness to work together to find compromise. Durable policy must have bipartisan backing. Concessions will have to be made on all sides. We cannot hope to create lasting change on a single-party basis. I implore all members of Congress to place the best interests of the country over partisan politics when considering climate legislation. There are some issues so pivotal that they transcend partisan lines, state lines, and generations. Climate is one of them.

I will close on a positive note. While I am young, I am not naive when it comes to this issue. I am aware that there are many sides to the climate issue and many challenges to be faced. But I am hopeful for the future of bipartisan climate action. My generation has displayed a willingness to come together urgently to confront this challenge. We are now asking that our elected officials do the same.