Young Republicans push for GOP action on climate change

Kiera O'Brien, a 19-year-old government student at Harvard and president of the Harvard Republican Club, grew up in Ketchikan, Alaska, where she spent lots of time outdoors, hiking and fishing. "I have always had a deep respect for nature and have really cared about climate and wilderness and the preservation of both," she says.

So the fact that her own party — the GOP — has had a track record of ignoring climate change, or even denying that it's caused by human activity, has been frustrating to her. "To see national Republicans failing to have a coherent strategy and policy surrounding this issue has been difficult," O'Brien tells *The Verge*.

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That's why O'Brien and hundreds of other college students across the country — including 23 college Republican clubs — have joined a bipartisan coalition to urge Congress, and Republicans in particular, to act on climate change. The group, called Students for Carbon Dividends, also includes Democratic students and environmental groups from ivy leagues like Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. And it supports one specific climate change policy that calls for taxing carbon emissions.

It's the first time that college Republican groups have publicly endorsed a policy to tackle climate change. But the coalition — announced yesterday — is also part of a burgeoning Republican grassroots movement that's trying to sway the GOP to act on climate. These conservative constituents care about

the environment and take global warming seriously — and they want the GOP to take notice.

“The fact that conservative students are getting involved is heartening,” says Maria Belenky, director of policy and research at Climate Advisers, in an email to *The Verge*. “We need more conservative voters to speak up and show support for climate action.”

Specifically, Students for Carbon Dividends support the so-called Baker-Shultz plan, which was released in February 2017 by a group of Republican elder statesmen, including former secretaries of state James Baker III and George Shultz. The plan calls for a tax on carbon emissions produced by burning fossil fuels, with revenues going back to Americans. A $40 tax on every ton of carbon would give a family of four $2,000 a year, in the form of checks, or deposits to bank or retirement accounts, according to the plan. Because the tax is expected to reduce carbon emissions by 28 percent by 2025, according to *Science*, the plan also promises a rollback of environmental regulation. “Many, though not all, of the Obama-era carbon dioxide regulations could be safely phased out, including an outright repeal of the Clean Power Plan,” the plan says.

The plan was met with some excitement when it was announced, mostly because it indicated that influential Republicans are in favor of climate change legislation. But a year in, “it’s honestly hard to say how seriously it’s being taken,” Belenky tells *The Verge*. “Because there’s no real policy debate on the issue in Washington, most people are holding their cards close to the table.” Though some Republicans have said that they back the plan, many haven’t done so publicly, Belenky says. And whether Democrats will ever support a policy plan that rolls back government regulations is hard to say. “This latter point will be a real hurdle that the Baker-Shultz plan will have to clear,” Belenky says.

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needle."

But at least on college campuses, the plan seems to draw some attention — from both conservative and liberal students. "We think it represents the basis for a true bipartisan breakthrough on climate," says Alex Posner, a 22-year-old American history student at Yale University, and the founding president of the student coalition. "At this point, young people are hungry for something that will move the needle."

Last summer, Posner interned with the Climate Leadership Council, the group behind the Baker-Shultz plan, after he had read news articles about the carbon tax proposal. When he came back to campus in the fall, he connected with his good friend and "partner in crime" George Gemelas, also a student at Yale, and together with others, they co-founded Students for Carbon Dividends. The group has members from universities all across the US, and it plans to recruit even more students through a coordinated social media campaign, Gemelas says. "We want to be in Maine and we want to be in California, and everywhere in between," he tells *The Verge*.

The group's plan is to convince Republican lawmakers to back the Baker-Shultz plan by showing them that young voters are worried about climate change and are demanding action on it. Older Americans might not put climate change at the top of their priorities, but young people do, Posner says. "We care about this issue more than any other generation, perhaps because we have the greatest stakes in addressing it," he tells *The Verge*. And millennials "are quickly becoming the largest voting block."

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Creating a vocal, conservative grassroots movement to demand action is a strategy used by other conservative groups like republicEN. "The eco-right mission needs all the help it can get," says republicEN managing director Alex Bozmoski. "God bless these student leaders for not waiting for the answer from 'adults' that can't get anything done and just going

forth themselves.”

Whether Republicans will listen to their constituents remains to be seen. Big donors play a big role in controlling lawmakers’ priorities, and the fossil fuel industry is known to overwhelmingly give campaign donations to Republicans rather than Democrats. “Part of me, the less optimistic part, feels that until large GOP donors come out in favor of carbon pricing, lawmakers will continue to feel uncomfortable backing it,” Belenky says.

But Posner is unfazed, and is ready to fight the climate change fight. “We’ve not had that much say over the political positions of the past or even the present, but we intend to have a say over those of the future,” he says.

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