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What Oregon's 11 Runaway Senators Tell Us About Leaders' Climate Obligations



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Leadership Strategy



In the week since 11 Oregon State Senators fled from voting on a bill aimed to reduce carbon ... [+] ASSOCIATED PRESS

Update: Republican Senators returned to the Oregon state house at the 11th hour on Saturday morning, in time to pass a group of bills waiting for a vote, yet still neglecting to pass a proposal on climate change policy

Just days before the close of the Oregon legislative session on June 30, the clock is ticking for the 11 Republican state senators who [fled](#) last week to avoid voting on a cap and trade [bill](#) that would restrict carbon emissions. Rather than casting a vote on the legislation — either a yes or a no could end up being [politically costly](#) — the senators left their colleagues two legislators short of a quorum, thus stalling a number of bills up for vote.

In the view of State Senate Republican leader Herman Baertschiger Jr., the legislators' absence is precisely the right thing. "Protesting cap and trade by walking out today represents our constituency and exactly how we should be doing our job," Baertschiger said in a statement.

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The goal of the 11 Oregon senators is to halt the climate legislation, [believed](#) to be on the road to passage given the state's Democratic supermajority. Some see the move as a dereliction of duty. "It's egregious and there are multiple violations of human ethics, legislative ethics and environmental ethics," says John Baird Callicott, an environment ethicist and co-editor-in-chief of the *Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy*. Callicott notes that politicians have an obligation to fulfill the duties of the elected offices. "They are putting power and party loyalty and their own re-electability ahead of their own office," said Callicott.

Oregon State Representative Alissa Keny-Guyer notes that when she and her statehouse colleagues take the oath of office, it includes a responsibility to ensure public safety. "It also means environmental protections, from toxins and from the climate crisis that's upon us," she says.



Alongside pro-climate protestors, a militia of the escaped senators' supporters has gathered, ... [+] ASSOCIATED PRESS

But the problem encompasses more than simply environmental issues, says Keny-Guyot. Her fellow senators “are holding government hostage right now. A symbolic walkout is one thing, but shutting down the government is another. It’s a disturbing trend.”

What is surprising about the Oregon lawmakers’ walkout is the Republican senators’ vehement opposition to an approach that has often been favored by conservatives, including the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush. “It is a Republican response because it harnesses market forces” as a way of addressing emissions, notes Robert Stavins, director of Harvard’s Environmental Economics Program “It’s a very practical and pragmatic approach to the problem, and it’s a cost-effective way of doing the job.”

Indeed, the Oregon bill has received support from those who believe in free-market approaches to addressing climate problems; a group called Oregon Business for Climate supports the bill.

“I’m not sure where we go from here, but we will keep working on it because we have to keep working on this. There is no way we are going to turn around and forget this,” said Keny-Guyer.



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