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Senate should pass the American Clean Energy and Security Act

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The House of Representatives has just passed – barely – a major climate change bill, the American Clean Energy and Security Act (ACES). The bill is now off to the Senate, where it will face a tough battle. ACES is imperfect, loaded down with many political favors. It is also incomplete, neglecting important aspects of our response to energy and climate issues. Nonetheless, ACES is an important step forward. Americans should urge their Senators to support this imperfect but important legislation.

First and foremost, we must recognize what's at stake with our energy policy. Burning fossil fuels is the main cause of climate change, which threatens natural and human systems worldwide with droughts, floods, disease, and other massive harms. In worst-case scenarios that cannot be ruled out, climate change threatens the very existence of human civilization. Meanwhile, fossil fuels cannot power us forever, and remaining reserves are concentrated in geopolitically-sensitive places like the Middle East and Russia. The world is thus beginning the long, difficult transition away from fossil fuels, a fact that no automobile industry bailout can change.

ACES is designed to address these challenges with a mix of initiatives. To reduce fossil fuel dependence and climate change, a cap is placed on U.S. emissions. Emissions permits are created, distributed, and traded (hence "cap-and-trade") so that emissions are reduced at lower monetary costs. ACES also requires some shifts away from fossil fuel use in electricity production, building design, and household appliances. Finally, ACES invests about \$200 billion over 15 years in various research and development projects aimed to facilitate all these efforts.

ACES is certainly not perfect. Instead of auctioning off emissions permits to those who want them most, 85% of initial permits would be given away as political favors. Also, given the urgency of climate change, one can easily argue that the emissions cap allowance is set too high. Indeed, Greenpeace and several Representatives opposed ACES because it doesn't do enough. But energy policy cannot ignore political reality. A more perfect policy that doesn't pass achieves nothing. Thus while we should encourage Congress to strengthen ACES, we should also not reject milder versions.

ACES is also incomplete in two important ways. First, ACES is only a U.S. policy, even though energy and climate change are global issues. Without global cooperation, no U.S. policy will do enough. But this is a feature of ACES, not a flaw. The reason is that global climate policy negotiations – mainly to replace the failed Kyoto Protocol – are ongoing and awaiting U.S. participation. We erred by negotiating Kyoto without prior Senate support, so the Senate rejected it 95-0. If ACES passes Congress this summer prior to December's international negotiations, then American negotiators will know what's acceptable back home. They will also have some leverage for urging global cooperation. The second reason ACES is incomplete is that it is a national policy, while many of the relevant energy decisions are ultimately local in nature. ACES provides incentives for us to improve our ways, but we still have to do it. Much of what we should do would be worthwhile even without climate change. Healthier lifestyles include eating less meat and animal products and walking and biking and less driving. All of these also happen to significantly lower emissions. And energy efficiency improvements save us money and, yes, create green jobs. The hard part is not the resulting lifestyles but the habit-breaking transition towards it. ACES may provide us some helpful carrots and sticks.

We thus must recognize that ACES is not the silver bullet solution to our energy and climate problems. Even if it passes, we still have much work to do both locally and internationally. But ACES plays an important role, and deserves our support. It is now off to the Senate. I will definitely contact my senators, Pennsylvania's Casey and Specter, who may be key swing votes. We should all encourage our senators to pass ACES or, better still, an even stronger version of ACES than came out of the House.

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