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## Disillusioned Environmentalists Turn on Obama as Compromiser

By [LESLIE KAUFMAN](#)

For environmental activists like Jessica Miller, 31, the passage of a major climate bill by the House last month should have been cause for euphoria. Instead she felt cheated.

Ms. Miller, an activist with [Greenpeace](#), had worked hard on her own time to elect [Barack Obama](#) because he directly and urgently addressed the issue nearest her heart: [climate change](#).

But over the last few months, as the ambitious climate legislation was watered down in the House without criticism from the president, Ms. Miller became disillusioned. She worried that the bill had been rendered meaningless — or had even undermined some goals Greenpeace had fought for. And she felt that the man she had thought of as her champion seemed oddly prone to compromise.

“I voted for the president, I canvassed for him, but we just haven’t seen leadership from him,” said Ms. Miller, who rappelled down Mount Rushmore on Wednesday with colleagues to unfurl a banner protesting what they called [President Obama](#)’s acquiescence to the compromises. (They were arrested and charged with trespassing.)

While most environmental groups formally supported the House bill, the road to passage proved unsettling for the movement. Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace and [Public Citizen](#) opposed the bill; members of some other groups privately berated their leaders for going along with it. And some, like Ms. Miller, have shifted to open protest.

Few politicians make the transition from campaign trail to White House without sacrificing a few starry-eyed supporters along the way, of course.

And Mr. Obama’s early record on environmental issues suggests that he is more aggressive than any of his predecessors in supporting causes like combating global warming and shifting to renewable energy sources.

In an interview last month, Mr. Obama defended the House bill as “a good start.”

Referring to European leaders and others who said the bill was not strong enough, Mr. Obama said, “We don’t want to make the best the enemy of the good.”

He went on: “By putting a framework in place that is realistic, that is commonsensical, that protects consumers from huge spikes in electricity costs while setting real, meaningful targets — what we are doing is changing the political conversation and the incentive structures for businesses in this country.”

Still, the compromises that were made to win House approval by a 219-to-212 vote have left the president's "green" base in some disarray.

For some environmental groups and individuals, the bill's perceived shortcomings — like generous pollution allowances to [coal](#) utilities and the usurping of the federal [Environmental Protection Agency's](#) regulatory authority over carbon emissions — were more than mere setbacks.

"This bill was worse than what we were expecting, even knowing we wouldn't get the best bill," said Nick Berning, a spokesman for the group Friends of the Earth.

The overriding of the E.P.A.'s regulatory authority over carbon emissions was particularly startling, Mr. Berning said.

The president clearly shares the blame, he said, adding, "He is not engaged enough."

On the campaign trail, Mr. Obama used forceful and direct language on climate change, calling carbon emissions from human activity an "immediate threat" to the climate. His environmental critics say they miss that urgent tone.

"He was far too quiet during the House debate," said Jessy Tolkan, the executive director of the [Energy Action Coalition](#), a youth group in Washington that campaigns for clean energy. "He needs to live up to the promises he made to us when we poured our heart and soul into electing him."

Ms. Tolkan said that her organization was hoping to take that point home to the [Democratic Party](#) before the midterm elections. "Those who played a leadership role in weakening this bill will feel the wrath of youth political power across the country," she said. "2010 is not that far away."

Democratic lawmakers have also drawn fire. Jill Stein, co-founder of the [Massachusetts Coalition for Healthy Communities](#), which usually lobbies on local environmental issues, said she felt "betrayed" by the Democratic-controlled House. "If this is a political reality, we have to change our political leaders," Ms. Stein said.

In a statement, Representative [Henry A. Waxman](#), Democrat of California and an architect of the bill, defended the legislation. "We worked hard to craft legislation that would achieve our environmental goals while addressing the regional concerns of members of Congress," he said. Politicians are not the only targets of dejected environmentalists.

[The Clean](#), a collaborative grass-roots groups that encourages the use of renewable fuels, posted a critique of the climate bill on its Web site that asked at one point: "Why has this energy legislation become so bad?"

It blames "corporate polluters" for spending tens of millions of dollars on lobbying, but environmental groups, too.

"Several of the national 'green' groups decided to cooperate with industry and members of Congress in getting a bill through," the Web site reads. "N.R.D.C., the [Environmental Defense Fund](#) and Pew all sat at the table and, whether or not it was their intent to do so, provided 'cover' for these bad policies."

Daniel A. Lashof, director of the climate center for the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#), an advocacy group in Washington, said that if his group had not come to the table, there might not have been any climate-change legislation at all. And he pointed out that Congressional support for environmental action was at a record high.

“We are not saying this is perfect,” Mr. Lashof said, “but we cannot hope for stronger environmental champions in Congress. If not now, when?”

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