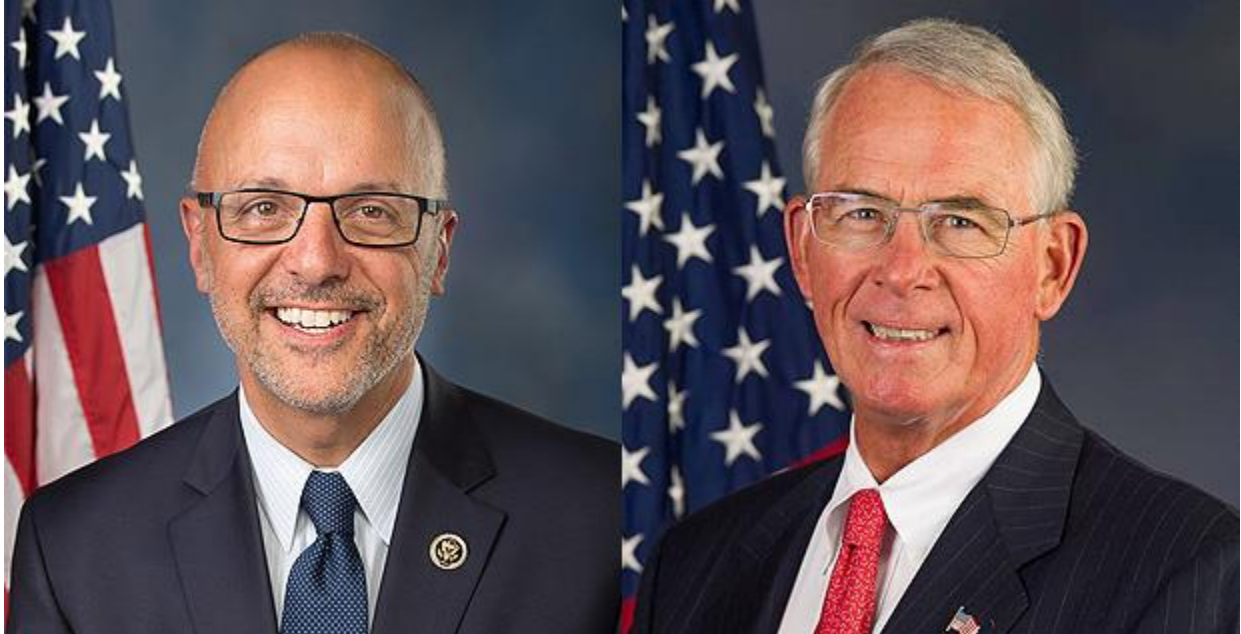


E&E News

Solutions Caucus meets — but only 4 members show up

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(Left to right) Florida Reps. Ted Deutch (D) and Francis Rooney (R) relaunched the Climate Solutions Caucus today. House/Wikipedia

The Climate Solutions Caucus met this afternoon to formally launch for the 116th Congress, but only four lawmakers showed up to the meeting.

After losing a third of its Republican members in the 2018 midterms, including former co-Chairman Carlos Curbelo of Florida, the caucus has been slow to launch in the new year.

The caucus accumulated nearly 100 members last year — half Republican and half Democratic — and served as a forum for GOP lawmakers to talk about climate change. But environmentalists largely saw it as a way for Republicans to green their credentials for the midterms.

The lackluster attendance at the half-hour meeting today underscores its struggle to maintain relevance, with Democrats using the committees to force Republicans to talk about climate change.

But the new Florida GOP co-chairman, Rep. Francis Rooney, noted that the House floor schedule is jam-packed with appropriations work this week, so some members were simply too busy. Rooney himself was hustling to the floor to debate an offshore drilling measure as he emerged from the meeting.

"We had a lot of expressions of interest. They just all had conflicts," Rooney told reporters, adding that he is going to "try to rev up some more enthusiasm" to meet on another day.

The other attendees were co-Chairman Ted Deutch (D-Fla.) and Reps. Salud Carbajal (D-Calif.) and Brian Fitzpatrick (R-Pa.).

New members

The caucus did grab two new Republican members for this Congress: Reps. Rob Woodall of Georgia and David Schweikert of Arizona.

That means it has 22 GOP **members**, compared with more than 40 last year. Unlike last year when there was an even split between the parties, the revamped caucus has more Democrats than Republicans.

Rooney and Deutch have been talking for months about instituting standards for membership, in part to ward off concerns that it had been admitting members with historically anti-environmental voting records.

But given the attendance today, Rooney said they weren't able to work that out.

"I think it'd be nice if we could get a commitment to at least seriously consider a pro-environment bill from each person that's on the caucus," Rooney said, though he added that it's not clear how they will define that.

As one example of something the caucus could vote together on, Rooney cited the anti-carbon-tax resolution that House Minority Whip Steve Scalise (R-La.) introduces each Congress, or similar anti-climate appropriations amendments up for votes this week. Rooney was one of six Republicans to oppose the Scalise resolution when it came up for a vote last year.

'Diverse group'

The caucus is still taking shape, but it's emerging in a different environment than when Republicans controlled the House.

For one thing, while its backers see it as safe space for Republicans to discuss climate change and show support for solutions, Democrats have made the committees into their own climate forums in the new Congress.

Where the issue was rarely discussed in hearing rooms for eight years, there is generally a climate-related hearing every week with Democrats controlling the House, meaning the GOP is forced to talk about the issue anyway.

Still, its backers struck an optimistic tone. Citizens' Climate Lobby, the group that helped launch the caucus, noted that most of the members who remain in Congress have returned.

Deutch, in a statement, added that the caucus has a "diverse group of Democrats and Republicans covering many different parts of the country."

"The caucus serves as a judgment-free zone where members of both parties can come together and have a productive dialogue about reducing the risk of climate change," CCL Executive Director Mark Reynolds said in a statement. "It has the potential to be an incubator for bipartisan solutions that stand a good chance of passage."

Rooney also said he's encouraged by Republicans speaking up about climate change in recent months, even if he has been unable to convert them to believers in policies such as the carbon fee and dividend bill he sponsored with Deutch.

"We might not all agree about all the different ramifications of that," he said. "But people speaking up that it exists, that man's had a role in it, people talking about sea-level rise and stronger storms, I think those are pretty positive, actually."