**Moral Leadership, Special Interest Groups, and Climate Change**

*Senator* [*Sheldon Whitehouse*](https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/people/sheldon-whitehouse) *(D-RI) is a vocal advocate for environmental causes. In his June 2016 talk “*[*Time to Wake Up*](https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/studio/multimedia/20160617-time-to-wake-up)*” hosted by Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, Whitehouse discussed how he believes special interest group money has stopped meaningful legislation from being passed.* ***The following excerpt has been modified for the classroom.***

The one thing that I would want to emphasize here is that this [issue of climate change] is not a true partisan divide. There are somewhere between 12 and 20 Republican senators who would happily work on a good climate bill. It isn't that Republicans believe one thing and Democrats believe another. That's not true in the public. Even Republicans usually accept the reality of climate change. There's a Tea Party cohort that, for a whole variety of reasons, doesn't. But if you take the Tea Party out, there are even majorities on the Republican side.

What's happened is a very simple piece of political mechanics. That is that [*Citizens United*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citizens_United_v._FEC), that god-awful Supreme Court decision, allowed special interests to spend unlimited amounts of money in politics….The group that lives off of Congress more than any other is the fossil fuel industry. They were the quickest to adapt, and they went right to work. So you have groups like [Americans for Prosperity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Americans_for_Prosperity), the [Koch](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Koch) [brothers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Koch)' front group, saying, "We're going to spend $750 million in this election"—and it's a credible threat; they're already through $450 million [as of June 2016] and climbing—"And, by the way, if you cross us on climate change"—these are their words—"you're going to be severely disadvantaged and in political peril."

…So what's frustrating for me is hearing from those 12 to 20 Republican senators: "Sheldon, I want to be with you. Sheldon, you're doing the right thing. Sheldon, hang in on the climate fee bill; I'll find a way. Sheldon, as soon as I'm through my primary. Sheldon—."—you know, all of that, but not actually willing to take the step.

So really, the story of our failure on climate change is a story of our failure to understand the truly manipulative and evil effects of money in politics. It's being deployed right now. You undo *Citizens United* and you disable those big gun decks of the artillery industry and we will have a bill in a month.

**Scaffolding Question:**

1. Why is the *Citizens United* case considered to be controversial?

**Application Questions:**

1. Using the "Contribution Trends, 1990-2018" chart on Open Secrets "[Oil and Gas](https://www.opensecrets.org/industries/indus.php?ind=E01)" page, what trends do you see happening as a result of the McCain-Feingold Act (2002) and *Citizens United* case (2010). *\*note that Open Secrets classifies “soft/outside” groups as party organizations, Super PACs, and dark money groups.*
2. Compare the statistics from the Open Secrets "Oil and Gas" page to the "[Environment](https://www.opensecrets.org/industries/indus.php?cycle=2018&ind=Q11)" page.
   1. Can the influence of environmental groups compete with that of the oil and gas industry? Explain.
   2. Did environmental advocacy groups also benefit from the McCain-Feingold Act (2002) and *Citizens United* case (2010)? Explain.
3. Given what we know about the influence of special interest groups, is there anything that a "moral leader(s)" can do in favor of environmental protection and climate change mitigation? Explain.