



CDL Research Report 2026:1: Who's Obstructing Climate Action in the Rhode Island Legislature?

Policy Briefing

The Climate and Development Lab

Institute at Brown for Environment and Society

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About the authors

Trevor Culhane is the research associate in the Climate and Development Lab (CDL) at Brown University. Fama Seck, Chloe Daniel, Evan Tao, and Reina Jo are undergraduate student researchers in the CDL. August DeVore is the Program Manager of the Climate Social Science Network, in association with the CDL. Timmons Roberts is Ittleson Professor of Environmental Studies and Sociology in the Institute at Brown for Environment and Society, and Executive Director of the Climate Social Science Network.

Produced by the Climate and Development Lab

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Climate and Development Lab

Institute at Brown for Environment and Society

135 Waterman Street, Providence RI 02912 USA

Email: CSSN@brown.edu

Bluesky: @ClimateSSN

More publications and information available at
CSSN.org and climatedevlab.brown.edu

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Disclaimer

This report represents an initial phase of research, produced by a small team of staff and undergraduate students in Brown University's Climate and Development Lab. The statements, views, opinions, and information contained in the report are personal to the authors, and do not necessarily reflect those of Brown University.

Summary

After stunning successes in 2021 and 2022, climate action has slowed in Rhode Island. Why have outcomes in the same state been so different? Why do so many climate and clean energy bills die in the legislature? What are the barriers to climate legislation in Rhode Island? Who is obstructing state climate legislation, and what strategies are they using? What approaches are being proposed in the 2025 Climate Action Strategy, and how have neighboring states moved forward on them? We seek to answer those questions in ways that provide actionable information to advocates and insights for political observers.

What's In This Report?

After providing a timeline of major efforts on climate in the state, this report summarizes our systematic analysis of who shows up to testify and lobby against climate bills in the Rhode Island legislature. We do so with systematically scraped and collected information on lobbying actors, clients, and positions, and on statements made in committee hearings. Because many bills are introduced, we focus here on the Environmental Council of Rhode Island (ECRI) and Climate Action Rhode Island (CARI) priority bill lists.

We rank the top ten organizations submitting written testimony against ECRI and CARI's priority climate bills. We highlight a case study of successful legislative action (the Act on Climate). We provide brief profiles of the anti-climate testimony of five major actors: Rhode Island Energy, the National Federation of Independent Businesses, the Rhode Island Business Council, the Public Utilities Commission, and the RI Department of Public Utilities and Carriers. For each, we place their arguments in categories from the "Discourses of Climate Delay" framework. In addition to specific groups and industries that frequently oppose climate bills in the legislature, there are also political barriers--Rhode Island's small size, the strict hierarchy of the legislature, and reliance on a sometimes reluctant executive branch for implementation--that pose challenges to climate policy, as detailed in Part 3. Part 4 dives into four sets of policies that are among those being proposed by Rhode Island's consultants for its 2025 Climate Action Strategy. We looked at what was proposed, who opposed these policies in the past in Rhode Island's legislature, and what they argued. We then examined comparable policy efforts in neighboring states, including Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maryland, Maine, New Jersey and New York. We sought to understand what were the keys to success in those states, and we developed a set of "counter-tactics" that might help with passage of these policies in future legislative or regulatory efforts. The sectors were the building sector, heating policy, electric vehicle policy, public transit, and reduction in vehicle miles traveled. We wrap up with recommendations on next steps.

Six Core Findings:

1. **Rhode Island Energy, owned by Pennsylvania Power and Light (PPL), spent the most on lobbying (in the years it has been active) and was the most active opponent of environmental groups on climate and energy bills in our study period.** Rhode Island Energy used their lobbying budget to frequently oppose environmental groups' priorities. In 2024 alone, Rhode Island Energy spent \$139,000 on lobbying, 12 times as much as the highest-spending environmental group (Conservation Law Foundation), which reported spending \$11,475. Similarly in testimony, Rhode Island Energy was the

most frequent opponent of environmental groups, supporting environmental organization positions in only nine percent of cases. PPL has a long history of opposing climate policies, dating back to its membership in the '90s in the Global Climate Coalition, an industry group that was fundamental to undermining the public's trust in climate science in an effort to kill the Kyoto Protocol.¹ Today, PPL is a member of multiple industry groups, notably the American Gas Association and the Edison Electric Institute, that organize to continue US reliance on natural gas and undermine adoption of renewables like rooftop solar.²

2. **Business coalitions and the RI Public Utilities Commission (PUC) are frequent opponents of climate policies.** Among all testimony analyzed, business associations emerged as some of the most consistent opponents of climate and clean energy legislation (Figures 1,2, and 6). Business associations emphasized overlapping concerns about financial burdens, regulatory feasibility, and Rhode Island's competitive position relative to neighboring states. Their testimony frequently cautioned against the economic ripple effects of new mandates—warning that such policies could slow housing production, drive businesses out of Rhode Island, and increase costs for residents and employers alike. These testimonies often fit into arguments used to obstruct climate policies around the world, described as Discourses of Climate Delay.

The Public Utilities Commission (PUC) also frequently testified against environmentalists on climate and energy bills. The PUC's arguments included three themes: duplication of existing regulatory processes, consumer financial burdens through increasing energy rates, and weakening of the Commission's authority. With these arguments, the PUC urged legislators to rely on existing regulatory tools and evidence-based processes to evaluate new initiatives rather than enact new legislation.

3. **Rhode Island's 2025 Climate Action Strategy proposes interventions that have been introduced in past legislative sessions—and faced resistance.** That opposition has come from the same groups as we uncovered as opposing climate legislation overall (RI Energy, the National Federation of Independent Business, RI Manufacturers Association, etc.). They used similar arguments to those found across climate legislation more broadly: that energy would become less affordable in the state, that requirements of updating equipment such as heat pumps would hurt small businesses, that the state government is not capable of implementing programs fairly and efficiently, etc. Learning from that experience provides an opportunity for the state to adopt counter-measures which have been successful in neighboring states: providing incentives and funding, developing state-specific calculations on costs and benefits of the program, messaging on affordability, and building coalitions with labor and business groups who would benefit from the laws.

¹ Anderson, Dave. 2019. "[Global Climate Coalition documents reveal the electric utility industry's role in notorious climate denial campaign.](#)" *Energy and Policy* (May 1). Brulle, Robert J. 2023. "Advocating inaction: a historical analysis of the Global Climate Coalition." *Environmental Politics* 32, no. 2: 185-206.

² PPL. 2013. "[PPL – Public Policy Engagement and Trade Associations.](#)" PPL (Mar 28).

4. **Rhode Island has key state-level constraints that have posed barriers to climate action.** Rhode Island is a very small state, with about one million people and a struggling economy seeking to find a new economic model.³ State revenues are sharply limited, leading to perennial hiring freezes and cuts in agency personnel and program budgets.⁴ Its legislature is part-time, with single-year sessions beginning in January and running until mid-June. Legislators are paid extremely low salaries, around \$20,000, with some additional pay if they are chosen for leadership roles.^{5, 6} They have tiny staff support, which often leads them to be highly reliant on outside groups for information and legislative analysis and bill drafting.^{7, 8}

The state legislature is extremely hierarchical, with nearly all the power concentrated in two individuals: the Speaker of the House and the President of the Senate.⁹ These are elected each year at the start of the session, and dislodging incumbents is nearly impossible. This is because the Speaker and President choose committee chairships and appointments, and failing to back the winner can result in a legislator being “sent to Siberia,” or being excluded from influence and assigned to marginal roles, indefinitely—often until a new Speaker is elected. Though nominally a “Deep Blue” state (about 90 percent of legislators in both chambers are Democrats), the party is split between a “pro-business” and a “progressive” wing.¹⁰ The legislators (and organizations) who have advanced pro-climate bills have often ended up on the wrong end of these struggles, and find themselves marginalized politically, without power.

5. **Implementation is particularly challenging.** In the context of pro-climate federal administrations, new possibilities open for advancing climate bills. This was the case during the Biden administration and Congress’ Inflation Reduction Act providing massive subsidies to states for programs to incentivize the adoption of solar power, batteries, heat pumps, electric vehicles, and climate mitigation and adaptation planning. Under the current administration, federal rollbacks and active attacks on those initiatives raise powerful obstacles to state action on climate.

In Rhode Island, analyses indicated offshore wind as a key part of efforts to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases and the state began ambitious implementation of that option.¹¹ However the Trump Administration has explicitly and aggressively attacked wind, creating critical uncertainty about the state’s ability to meet its climate targets. Setting those goals is proving far easier than implementing them, as entrenched interests and new anti-renewables groups are attacking what have been broadly popular approaches in the past, like public transit, renewable energy, EVs, and other measures.

³ Seelye, Katharine Q. 2017. “[After Long Economic Slide, Rhode Island Lures New Business.](#)” *NY Times* (Mar 13).

⁴ Gregg, Katherine and Patrick Anderson. 2025. “[What will federal cutbacks and the government shutdown mean for RI? Here's a budget breakdown.](#)” *Providence Journal* (Nov 3).

⁵ Gregg, Katherine. 2025. [RI's state lawmakers just got a raise. Here's why and how much.](#) *Providence Journal* (July 21).

⁶ NCSL. 2021. “[Full- and Part-Time Legislatures.](#)” NCSL (Jul 28).

⁷ Eike, Benjamin. 2021. “[State Legislative Oversight: Rhode Island.](#)” *Levin Center* (nd).

⁸ See Hertel-Fernandez’s excellent book [State Capture](#) on the vulnerabilities of this model.

⁹ Eike, Benjamin. 2021. “[State Legislative Oversight: Rhode Island.](#)” *Levin Center* (nd).

¹⁰ Lavin, Nancy. 2025. “[Conservative and progressive Dems jockey to lead the R.I. Senate.](#)” *Rhode Island Current* (Apr 24).

¹¹ Brattle Group. 2020. “[The Road to 100% Renewable Electricity by 2030 in Rhode Island.](#)” *Brattle Group and State of RI OER* (nd).

6. **Labor-environmental coalitions have advanced state climate policy.** Rhode Island is a national climate leader, among the states with the most ambitious targets for emissions reductions and the adoption of renewable energy. While many legislative sessions see nearly no bills pass on climate, a few have seen remarkable achievements. The most notable are the 2021 Act on Climate bill, which set scientifically-informed and binding targets for emissions reductions, and the 2022 100% Renewable electricity bill.¹² What was new in that moment was the development of a partnership between environmental organizations and organized labor. Climate Jobs Rhode Island brought together leaders of the umbrella organization the Environmental Council of Rhode Island (ECRI) and the labor council AFL-CIO. The surge in development of offshore wind brought together these groups and the hope of state leaders for a new economic model which promised low emissions and quality, high-paying, union jobs.

¹²Veysey, J., et al. 2019. "[Deeper Decarbonization in the Ocean State.](#)" *Stockholm Environment Institute/Brown University* (Sep 12).

Part 1: How We Got Here

On a sunny, cool and crisp April afternoon on a dock in Newport, Rhode Island in 2021, state legislative leaders took turns taking off their COVID masks to speak at the podium, before the new Governor sat down to sign the Act on Climate, one of the most ambitious laws in the nation. The Governor was buttressed by the bill's sponsors, the state Treasurer, the Attorney General, and leaders of both chambers of the legislature. "With four hundred miles of coastline, urban and rural coastal communities, fishing and agricultural industries, the Ocean State is on the frontlines of the climate crisis," said Governor McKee, "The Act on Climate represents a commitment that not only addresses a moral imperative, but also presents a platform to enhance our economy, public health, environmental equity, and natural environment." He finished by saying, "I look forward to working with the General Assembly, the congressional delegation, local communities, small business, labor, advocates, and other stakeholders to ensure those efforts create affordable and sustainable pathways toward a net-zero climate emission future."¹³

The signing, along with a country-leading requirement passed the following year that the state get 100% of its electricity from renewable energy generation by 2033, represented the high-water mark of climate action in Rhode Island.

As advocates know and this report documents, those two years were an anomaly, since dozens of climate bills have been filed year after year and died in committee. During the last three years, no meaningful climate legislation made it out of committee for a discussion or vote on the legislative floor. In the 2025 session alone, 19 of 20 bills prioritized by Climate Action Rhode Island were killed in committee.

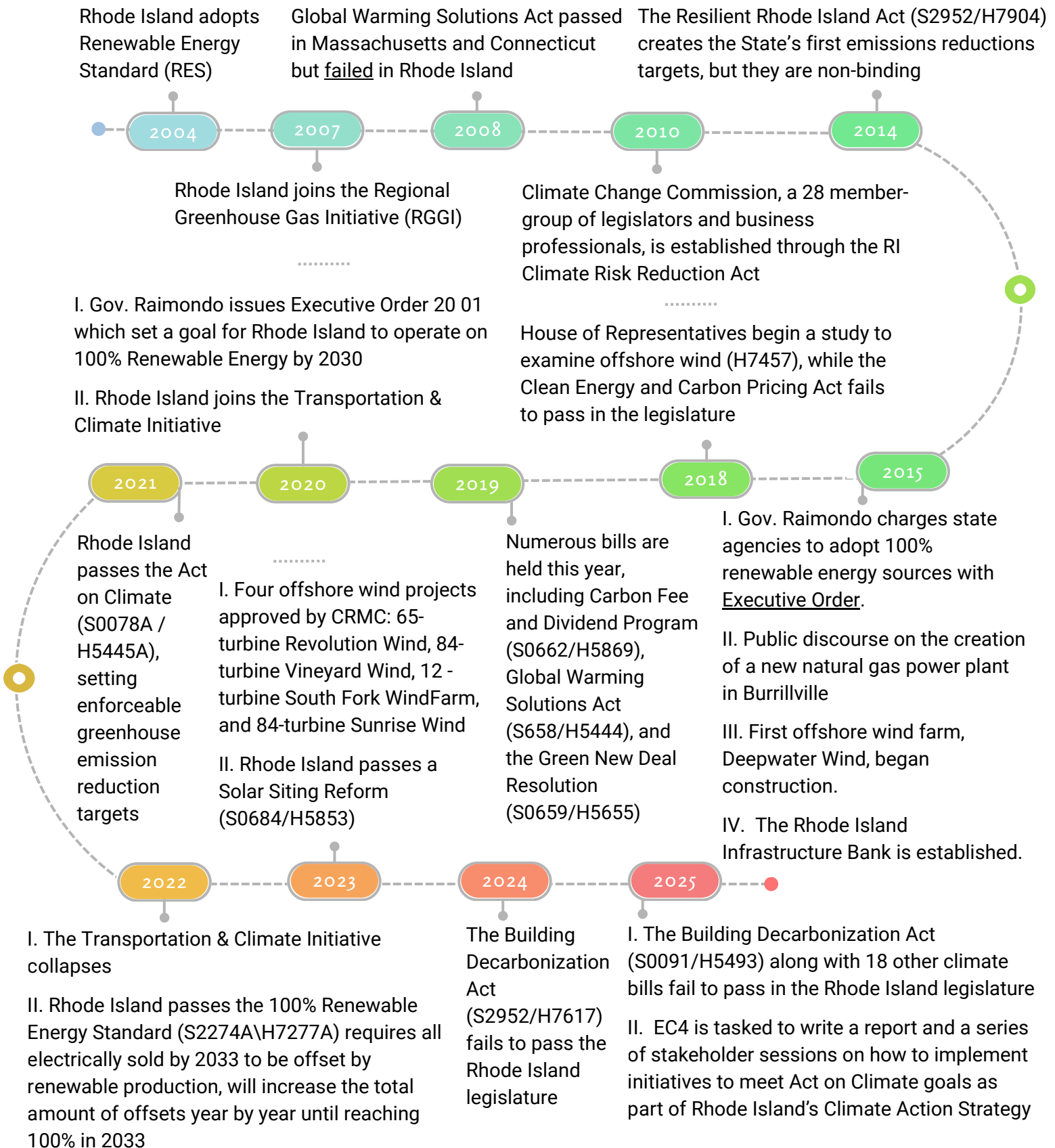
With gridlock on energy emerging in Washington in the 1990s, action on climate change shifted to state capitals.¹⁴ The most significant events in the 2000s in Rhode Island were the passage of the Renewable Energy Standard in 2004, the state joining the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative in 2007 (a cap-and-trade program), and the failure to join Massachusetts and Connecticut in passing a Global Warming Solutions Act in 2008. The RI Climate Risk Reduction Act of 2010 created a study commission on climate vulnerability and adaptation options, which took years to get seated and begin acting. The Resilient Rhode Island Act of 2014 created the first targets for emissions reductions in state history, but they were based on outdated science¹⁵ and were non-binding. The law created the Executive Climate Change Coordinating Council (EC4), consisting of heads of nine relevant state agencies, formalizing what had been created by Governor Lincoln Chafee the year before in his last year in office.

¹³ State of Rhode Island. 2021. "[Governor McKee Signs Act on Climate](#)." *State of Rhode Island, Governor Dan McKee - Press Release* (Apr 14).

¹⁴ Rabe, Barry G. 2004. *Statehouse and Greenhouse: The Emerging Politics of American Climate Change Policy*. Brookings Institution Press.

¹⁵ The Resilient RI Act of 2014 included emissions reduction target of 80% emissions reduction by 2050, based on science from around 1999 which informed the [The New England Governors and Eastern Canadian Premiers \(NEG-ECP\) Climate Change Action Plan 2001](#), a resolution adopted on August 28, 2001, by the New England Governors and the Eastern Canadian Premiers.

Timeline of Rhode Island Climate and Energy Milestones 2004-2025



In 2015, the year of the passage of the Paris Agreement, a large natural gas power plant was proposed for the northwest corner of the state by Illinois-based Invenergy Corporation, announced at a press conference featuring Governor Gina Raimondo, and heads of the Chamber of Commerce and the Laborers Union. The plant would have steeply increased greenhouse gas emissions in the state and it pitted climate activists against union members. After five years of protests and legal battles led by local groups and the Conservation Law Foundation, the plant was officially cancelled in 2020.

On the other hand, in 2015 the state took three substantial steps forward on climate. First, Gov. Raimondo issued Executive Order 15-17 “Lead by Example,” which charged state agencies to match energy usage with 100% renewable sources. Second, the state’s first offshore wind farm, Deepwater Wind off Block Island, received full funding and began construction, becoming the first project offshore in the Western Hemisphere.¹⁶ Third, the [Rhode Island Infrastructure Bank](#) was established to offer a funding and lending program for municipal, commercial and residential energy-efficiency and renewable-energy projects. All these efforts were taken on by the executive branch agencies, not the legislature.

The next five years were bleak. A coalition of advocates unsuccessfully sought to pass the Energize Rhode Island Act, which would have established a fee on carbon emissions, which would then be returned to citizens in dividends paid annually or semi-annually. The bill was killed in committee every year for five years, which we learned was at the behest of business groups. Funding for a study of a carbon fee-and-dividend was finally provided in 2019 with revenues from the Volkswagen diesel fraud case. In 2019, the list of killed bills included Carbon Fee and Dividend (H5869/S0662), Global Warming Solutions Act (H5444/S658), and Green New Deal Resolution (S0659/H5655).

An [October 2020 survey](#) showed that Rhode Islanders ranked the climate crisis as the second most important issue, after the coronavirus pandemic. And three new leaders ascended in early 2021: Joe Biden as President, Dan McKee as Governor, and Joe Shekarchi as Speaker of the House. A strong supporter of climate action, Sen. Dawn Euer, D-Newport was appointed chair of the Senate Committee on Environment and Agriculture, and was a lead sponsor of the Act on Climate (S0078 Substitute A and H5445 Substitute A). The bill set science-based targets for emissions reduction. The bill was advanced by a new coalition, Climate Jobs Rhode Island, which included labor and environmental groups. That same coalition succeeded in 2022 in pushing for the passage of the 100% Renewables bill (H7277A, S2274A), a nation-leading law, even though its target date to get there was pushed back from 2030 to 2033.

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill (in 2021) and the Inflation Reduction Act (in 2022) provided tailwinds for climate action in the states by providing heavy incentives and subsidies for scaling up renewable energy. COVID money was flowing in to prop up the state’s economy. However the regional Transportation Climate Initiative collapsed, a multistate effort that had been the cornerstone of state climate planning on transit emissions. The Green Buildings Act (updated from 2009) (H7278, H7850) would require the Rhode Island Office of Energy Resources (OER) to track energy use and

¹⁶ National Wildlife Federation. 2015. “First U.S. Offshore Wind Turbines Fully Financed for 2015 Construction.” *National Wildlife Federation*.

greenhouse gas emissions in buildings above 20,000 square feet. In 2023, Governor McKee signed Executive Order 23-06 to invest in energy efficiency and renewables in state agencies, and offered

help to interested municipalities, again, with federal support. Four offshore wind projects that year were approved by the state's Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC): 65-turbine Revolution Wind, 84-turbine Vineyard Wind, 12 - turbine South Fork WindFarm, and 84-turbine Sunrise Wind.¹⁹ 2023 also saw a solar siting reform passed, which sought to find a compromise between protecting forests and farmlands and siting large solar facilities.

Looking at the broad sweep of just over twenty years of climate efforts in Rhode Island, we observe a number of trends. First, over the period, the Rhode Island legislature focused increasingly on business interests, and reduced funding for state agencies like the Department of Environmental Management. Second, the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council appeared repeatedly to oppose public spending and encourage focus on business interests. Renewable energy programs and projects were increasingly approved (especially in 2010-2016), and more environmental programs were passed, but they lacked enforcement or accountability for not achieving goals. Plus, there was an increasing lack of state agency coordination, despite the creation of the Executive Climate Change Coordinating Council (EC4) in 2014. Critically, the state became more reliant on natural gas, especially from 2011 - 2015 as oil and coal facilities were shut down, and renewables deployment lagged. But around 2019, the creation of Climate Jobs Rhode Island brought together labor and environmental organizations into a winning coalition for 2021 and 2022 with the passage of the Act on Climate and the 100% Renewables by 2033 bills. Funding from COVID response and the Inflation Reduction Act helped policies happen and programs move forward, but these and the offshore wind projects which advanced under the Biden Administration, all are in rollback under Trump's second administration.

Successful Case Study: The Act on Climate

The Act on Climate in Rhode Island was a groundbreaking initiative which mandates the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) to net zero by 2050. After over a decade of failures to institute binding targets on climate in the state, a renamed and re-drafted Act on Climate began to move in 2021.¹⁷ One of the most notable reasons for its success was the collaboration between environmentalists and the labor movement. This was a sharp departure from the divide between environmental groups and labor unions over the proposed Burrillville gas plant. As past research shows, labor-environment coalitions signal to legislators that key compromises have been worked out and that a bill will be broadly popular.¹⁸

Language was drafted by lead sponsors Dawn Euer and Lauren Carson in consultation with staff at the Conservation Law Foundation. The AFL-CIO used its attention to lobbying and attending campaign fundraisers, a key place the work of the legislature gets done. Meanwhile, Climate Action Rhode Island campaigned hard with "outside" tactics like packing committee rooms and holding vigils and protests outside the Municipal Auditorium, where legislative sessions were held during the COVID epidemic. The prospects of a boom in clean energy in the state suggested the state could be a leader in decarbonization and renewable energy development, especially offshore wind. In spite of an eleventh-hour effort to gut the bill led by the lobbyist for the Northern Rhode Island Chamber of Commerce, the labor and environmental coalition was able to shepherd the bill through to passage.

¹⁷ Faulkner, Tim. 2019. "[R.I. Environmentalists Seek Action, Want Accountability on Cutting Carbon Emissions.](#)" *EcoRI News* (Mar 1). Accessed Dec. 1, 2025.

¹⁸ Trachtman, Samuel, et al. 2025. "[Building winning climate coalitions: Evidence from U.S. states.](#)" *Energy Policy* (Aug: 203). Accessed Dec. 1, 2025.

¹⁹ U.S. Department of the Interior. 2023. "[Biden-Harris Administration Approves Fourth Major Offshore Wind Project.](#)" *U.S. Department of the Interior - Press Release* (Aug 22).

Part 2: Who Are the Main Actors Blocking Climate Action in RI?

This section takes advantage of our systematic analysis of all lobbying records and testimony for the past eight years of legislative sessions in Rhode Island. We combine these overall data with specific findings about the state’s main actors, such as its gas and electric utility, business associations, and public utility commissions, to understand the most active groups that oppose climate policy in the state.

Gas and Electric Utilities

Pennsylvania Power & Light (Rhode Island Energy)

Rhode Island Energy, the state’s monopoly electric and gas utility, was the most active opponent of environmentalists on climate and energy bills of any organization, in both testimony and lobbying. Rhode Island Energy also spent more on lobbying than other organizations that lobbied on relevant climate and energy bills during the years it has been owned by Pennsylvania Power & Light, spending \$139,000 on lobbying compensation in 2024 alone.

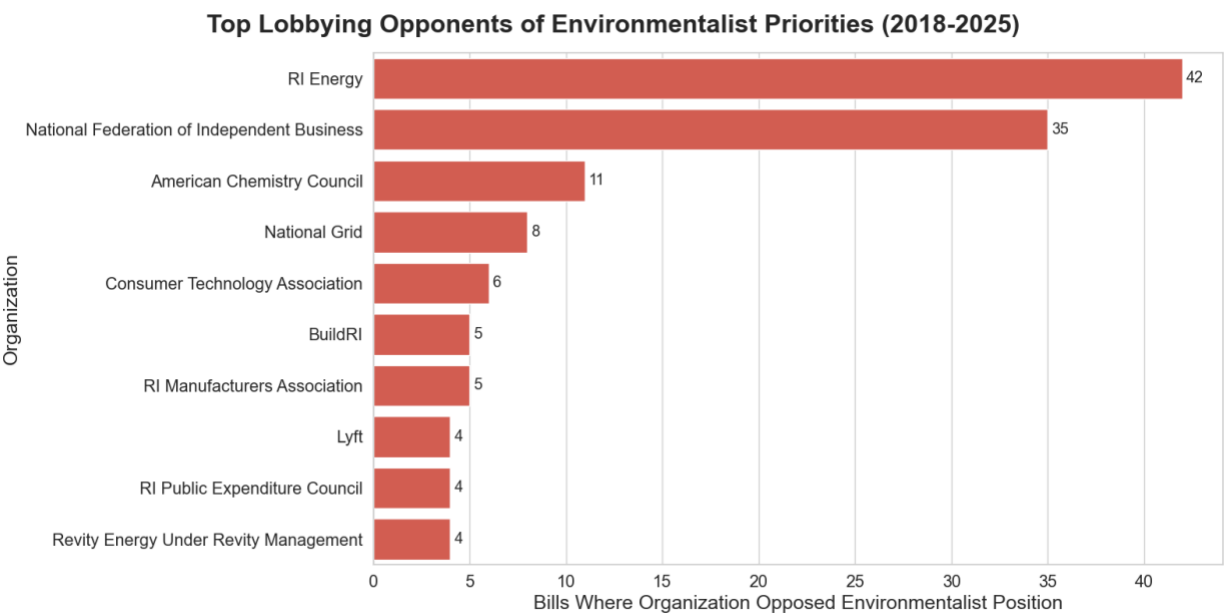


Figure 1: *Lobbying Activity on Environmentalists’ Climate Priority Bills (2018-2025).* These are the groups that most actively lobbied against the Environmental Council of Rhode Island and Climate Action Rhode Island on energy and climate legislation from 2018 to 2025. Only positions taken on ECRI and CARI’s priority bill lists are included. Data comes from the [Rhode Island Secretary of State’s Office](#).

In 2021, Pennsylvania Power & Light (PPL) - a distributor of electricity and natural gas - sold its U.K. utility business to National Grid in order to purchase the Narragansett Electric Company,²⁰ which they later renamed to Rhode Island Energy. The sale occurred in spite of pushback from multiple environmental advocacy groups and the Rhode Island Attorney General.^{21, 22, 23}

PPL was a member of the Global Climate Coalition (GCC) at some point between 1989 and 2002, with confirmed membership in 1991 and 1994.²⁴ The Global Climate Coalition (GCC) was one of the most influential industry lobbying groups that sowed doubt about climate science: they monitored and contested climate science, supported studies to back their claims, created mistrust in climate science through PR campaigns, and aggressively lobbied in their interests.²⁵ Robert Brulle, expert on climate obstructionism, states: "[GCC created] a really skillfully executed public relations and influence campaign that ran a good 12 years, and it achieved enormous success."²⁶

Today, PPL is a member of various trade associations, and "through June 30, 2024, PPL reported \$359,082 in lobbying-related dues."²⁷ Edison Electric Institute (EEI), for whom "PPL publicly promotes its [climate] position,"²⁸ sued the EPA over greenhouse gas regulations,²⁹ was outspoken against President Biden's commitment to a nationally determined contribution (NDC) in line with the Paris Agreement,³⁰ and has repeatedly published studies that put climate change into question.³¹ The American Gas Association (AGA) is another lobbying association for which PPL's alignment is "consistent," and for which PPL stated that it "publicly promotes its [AGA's] position".³² AGA has attracted attention as a known climate obstructor,³³ as they have a commitment to maintaining natural gas as a primary energy source. AGA Chair Lloyd Yates claims that "The versatility and accessibility of natural gas safeguards it as an essential, reliable and safe energy source for the demands of today and for generations to come," and their website

²⁰ PPL Corporation. 2021. "[PPL Corporation to sell U.K. utility business to National Grid and acquire.](#)" *PPL* (Mar 18). Accessed Dec. 1, 2025.

²¹ Schuler, Rory. 2022. "[AG objects to Narragansett Electric sale to PPL.](#)" *Warwick Beacon* (Mar 3).

²² Kuffner, Alex. 2022. "['Clear error of law': RI AG challenges sale of Narragansett Electric Co. to PA company.](#)" *The Providence Journal* (Feb 24). Accessed Dec. 1, 2025.

²³ Vaz, Julia. 2022. "[RI Attorney General files emergency appeal against sale of Narragansett Electric Company.](#)" *Brown Daily Herald* (Apr 12). Accessed Dec. 1, 2025.

²⁴ Anderson, Dave. 2019. "[Global Climate Coalition documents reveal the electric utility industry's role in notorious climate denial campaign.](#)" *Energy & Policy Institute* (May 1). Accessed Dec. 1, 2025.

²⁵ Brulle, Robert. 2022. "[Advocating inaction: a historical analysis of the Global Climate Coalition.](#)" *Environmental Politics* (Apr 11).

²⁶ Yoder, Kate. 2022. "[They derailed climate action for a decade. And bragged about it.](#)" *Grist* (Apr 30).

²⁷ PPL Corporation. 2024. [Trade Associations](#). *PPL* (Jun 30). Accessed Dec. 1, 2025.

²⁸ PPL Corporation. 2023. "[PPL – Public Policy Engagement and Trade Associations.](#)" *PPL* (Mar 28). Accessed Dec. 1, 2025.

²⁹ Howland, Ethan. 2024. "[EEI joins AEP, Duke, other utilities in suing EPA over power plant greenhouse gas rule.](#)" *Utility Dive* (May 23). Accessed Dec. 1, 2025.

³⁰ Reil, Brian. 2021. "[EEI Responds to President Biden's NDC Announcement. Reinforces Commitment To Be Part of Climate Solution.](#)" *Edison Electric Institute* (Apr 22). Accessed Dec. 1, 2025.

³¹ Michaels, Patrick J. 1993. "[Global warming.](#)" *Electric Perspectives* (Jan/Feb). Contributed by Dave Anderson, et al. 2017. "[Utilities Knew.](#)" *Energy and Policy Institute* (Jul nd).

³² PPL Corporation. 2023. "[PPL – Public Policy Engagement and Trade Associations.](#)" *PPL* (Mar 28). Accessed Dec. 1, 2025.

³³ Earth Justice. 2023. "[Climate and Health Organizations Call on PG&E to Leave American Gas Association over its Climate Obstruction.](#)" *Earth Justice* (Aug 24). Accessed Dec. 1, 2025.

maintains that “innovation...infrastructure, and advanced technologies” is their response to reducing carbon emissions.^{34 35}

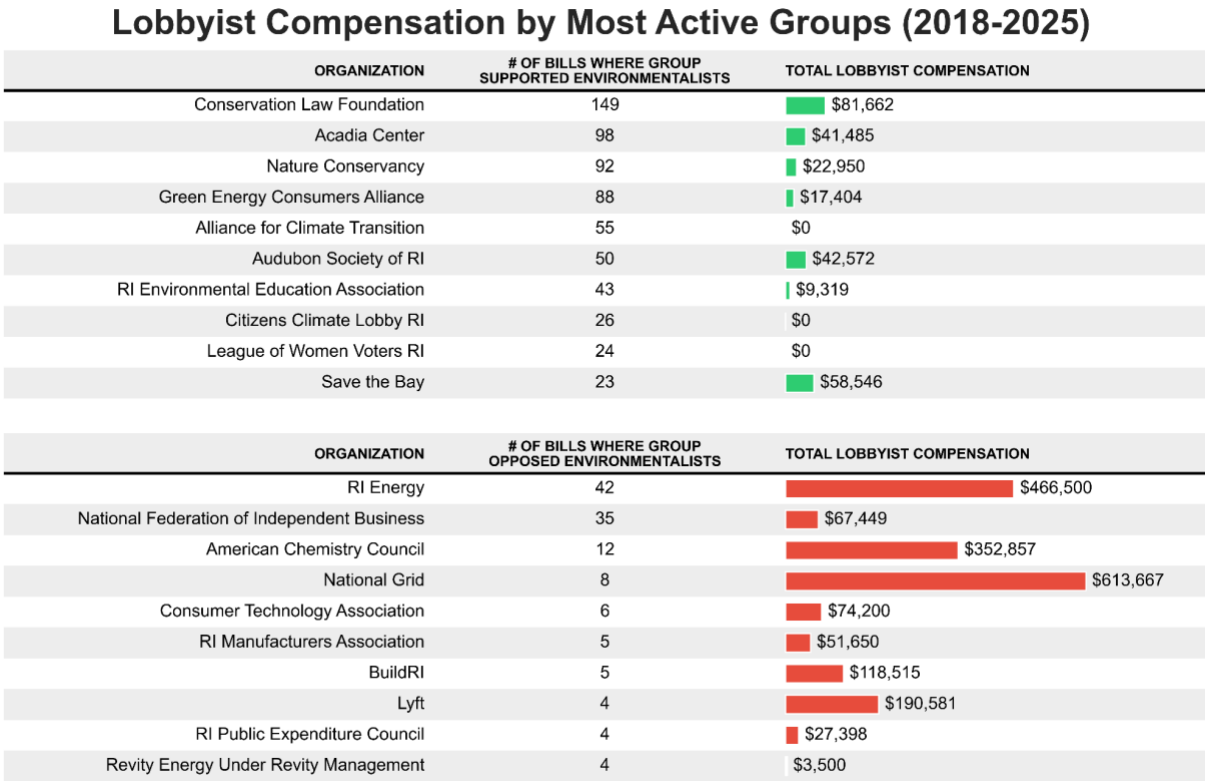


Figure 2: Total lobbyist compensation by the top environmental proponents and opponents from 2018-2025. Support/opposition is in comparison to Environmental Council of Rhode Island and Climate Action Rhode Island positions on their priority climate and energy bills.

Based on submitted lobbying reports, the gas and electric utilities (National Grid and PPL/RI Energy) combined spent over \$1 million on lobbyist compensation from 2018-2025 in Rhode Island, far more than any other organization that took positions on climate and energy bills (Figure 2). Together, the electric utilities spent over 13 times as much on lobbying as the top-spending environmental group, Conservation Law Foundation, which spent \$81,662 from 2018-2025. Annually the difference is similarly stark: in 2024, Rhode Island Energy spent \$139,000 on lobbyist compensation, while Conservation Law Foundation, the highest-spending environmental group, spent \$11,475. Substantial lobbying spending can translate into gaining access to key people in the legislature throughout the legislative session, as shown by Rhode Island Energy hiring the head of the top state agency, the Office of Energy Research (OER). That top official was frequently the signer of written testimony from the utility in opposition to top ECRI and CARI priority bills. Electric and gas utilities are a government-regulated monopoly - it is striking that they are the top spenders on lobbying, arguably regulating the rules for themselves.³⁶

³⁴ Yates, Lloyd. 2025. [American Gas Association](#) - Homepage. AGA. Accessed Dec. 1, 2025.

³⁵ 2025. [American Gas Association - Innovation](#). Accessed Dec. 1, 2025.

³⁶ Green, Shelby. 2025. [“Tracking State Legislation to Get Politics Out of Utility Bills.”](#) *Energy and Policy Institute* (May 30). RI introduced a bill on this.

Discourses of Climate Delay

Arguments from testifiers frequently fall under “Discourses of Climate Delay”, a framework for recognizing arguments that seek to delay climate action (see Fig 3). Common arguments from all oppositional groups were:

- The “Free Rider” Excuse – framing emissions reduction as economically self-defeating because “others have no real intention of reducing theirs, and will take advantage of us.”
- Policy Perfectionism – asserting that policies should be delayed until all possible downsides can be identified and addressed.
- Appeal to Well-Being – arguing that a rapid transition from fossil fuels will “condemn” consumers and businesses to higher costs, a position frequently paired with concerns over Rhode Island’s already high energy prices.
- No Sticks, Just Carrots – contending that “restrictive measures will fail and should be abandoned,” calling instead for voluntary or incentive-based programs.

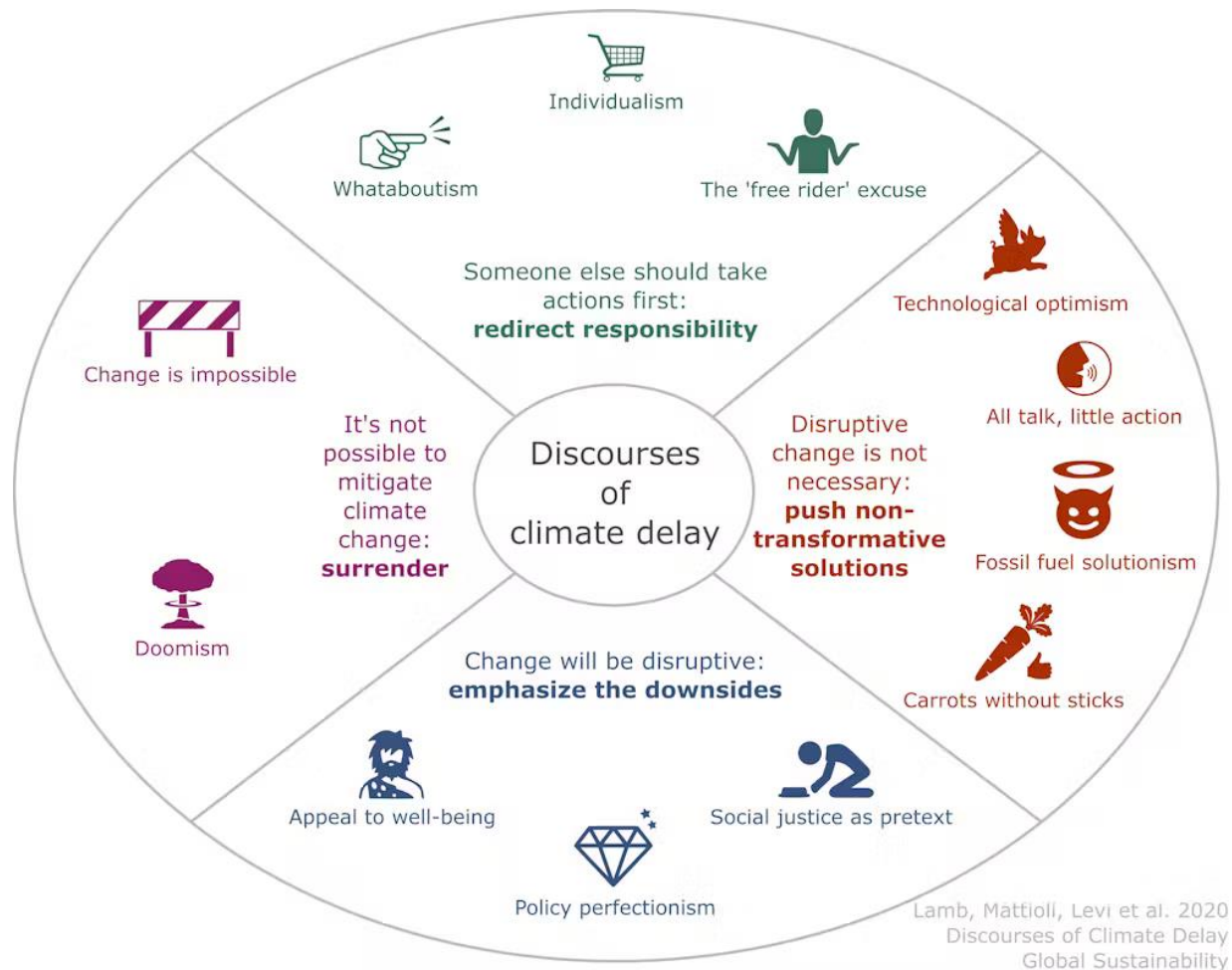


Figure 3: *The Discourses of Climate Delay framework from Lamb et al. (2020).*

Similarly, Rhode Island Energy frequently testified on proposed legislation, opposing environmental groups on roughly two-thirds of testified bills. In terms of quantity, RI Energy submitted the most individual pieces of testimony in opposition to climate legislation. While expressing support for the goals of the Act on Climate, the company resisted measures it viewed as disruptive to utility operations, financially burdensome for ratepayers, or conflicting with the Public Utilities Commission’s (PUC) authority. In testimony on the 2024 and 2025 versions of the Utility Thermal Energy and Network and Jobs Act (H7285 and H5576, respectively), Rhode Island Energy urged lawmakers to review ongoing pilot programs in other jurisdictions, stating “Rhode Island stands to benefit from being a ‘fast follower’” ([testimony](#), H7285), warning against “misaligned regulatory timelines” ([testimony](#), H5576) and inadequate consideration of infrastructure needs. This reflected a pattern of Policy Perfectionism, advocating delay until more evidence or PUC guidance, such as from the *Future of Gas Docket*, was available. Appeal to Well-Being, framed through economic concerns, was another dominant theme: in opposing the net-metering expansion (H5491, H5853), Rhode Island Energy cautioned that “expansion of the state’s net metering program without significant reform to address rapidly escalating program costs is unsustainable for local ratepayers” ([testimony](#), H5491). Across testimonies, Rhode Island Energy emphasized protecting PUC authority, warning that bills such as those addressing utility rate recovery and rate-setting limits, including H5818 (2025) and H5106 (2025), could undermine or duplicate its powers. Overall, Rhode Island Energy’s testimony acknowledged climate goals while opposing many of the policies that would enable Rhode Island to achieve those goals, citing data-driven policymaking, protection of PUC authority, and mitigation of economic burdens on ratepayers as reasons why given climate and energy bills should not move forward.

| Candidate Name | Position | Amount received from Rhode Island Energy PAC |
|-------------------------|----------------------------|--|
| Dan McKee | Governor | \$4,000 |
| Joe Shekarchi | Speaker of the House | \$3,000 |
| Dominick Ruggerio | Senate President (former) | \$2,000 |
| Val Lawson | Senate President (current) | \$1,250 |
| Christopher Blazejewski | House Majority Leader | \$1,250 |
| Brett Smiley | Mayor of Providence | \$1,000 |

Table 1: Contributions from Rhode Island Energy PAC to political candidates, 2024 - 2025.
Only contributions of \$1,000 or more are included in the table.

In addition to lobbying and testifying at legislative committee hearings, Rhode Island Energy also contributed campaign contributions to legislative leaders in the state (Table 1). These contributions, concentrated on key decision-makers, provide another avenue whereby Rhode Island Energy can influence policy.

National Grid

While National Grid spent heavily on lobbying, cumulatively more than any other organization who lobbied on relevant climate and energy bills from 2018-2025, they did not report lobbying on any bills from 2018-2021, only reporting lobbying on bills in 2022 in the few months before the utility was transferred to Rhode Island Energy. However, National Grid submitted written testimony on bills prior to 2022. In written testimony, while the utility acknowledged climate efforts, they opposed legislation due to misalignment with the Public Utility Commission (PUC) principles and financial burdens. The utility was opposed to net-metering expansion (H5327, 2021), claiming “costs for all customers will increase” as a result—aligning with the Appeal to Well-Being argument—opting to expand or modify the “renewable energy growth (REG) program versus expanding community net metering” ([testimony](#), H5327).

Business Associations

Among all testimony analyzed, business associations emerged as some of the most consistent opponents of environmental legislation (figure 1). In written testimony, they frequently warned of the economic ripple effects of new mandates, arguing that proposed policies could slow housing production ([testimony](#), H5600), drive businesses out of Rhode Island ([testimony](#), H5549), and raise costs for residents and employers alike. As the National Federation of Independent Businesses (NFIB) wrote, “the cost will no doubt be passed along to the businesses and individuals that they serve [...] In the end it will be Rhode Island residents, already experiencing higher priced goods and services, that will pay more” ([testimony](#), H7653). While business associations commented on a wide range of proposals—from electric-vehicle adoption to beverage-industry regulations—their most unified opposition targeted building electrification bills, including H5159 (Parking Facilities and Privileges, 2023), H5425 (Green Buildings Act, 2023), H5450 (All-Electric Building Act, 2025), and H5493/S0091 (Building Decarbonization Act of 2025).

Across this suite of bills, the core arguments remained consistent. NFIB—a national anti-regulatory lobby with ties to the conservative Koch foundation³⁷—framed mandates such as the Green Buildings Act as “needlessly meddlesome” and a financial burden for small businesses ([testimony](#), H5425). The Rhode Island Business Coalition (RIBC) emphasized the lack of available studies and limited analytical capacity within state agencies to accurately estimate costs ([testimony](#), H5425), while the Northern Rhode Island Chamber highlighted administrative and financial burdens severe enough that “for many businesses, it will result in closure” ([testimony](#), H5425). Together, these organizations' arguments primarily aligned with the Policy Perfectionism argument, repeatedly urging legislators to wait for updated analyses from ISO New England, the Public Utilities Commission, and other agencies before advancing legislation. This caution was paired with broader economic arguments centered on market competitiveness, energy affordability, and alignment with regional practices. Ultimately, business associations appealed to legislators “on behalf of Rhode Island small businesses already struggling with highest-in-the-nation energy prices,” urging committees “to reject these bills” ([testimony](#), H5167) in order to protect economic feasibility and prevent unintended consequences. Below we take a deeper dive into these business associations.

³⁷ According to DeSmog’s [Climate Disinformation Database for Freedom Partners](#), [past tax records revealed](#) that in 2011 and 2012, NFIB received most of its funding from the Freedom Partners Chamber, a Koch industries group. We reviewed [ProPublica](#)’s database of IRS 990 filings for NFIB, and despite claiming to be nonpartisan, NFIB has financially supported Republican groups from 2013 through 2024.

Rhode Island Business Coalition (RIBC)

The Rhode Island Business Coalition (RIBC) consistently framed its opposition to environmental legislation around economic impacts, expressing support for the state's renewable energy transition in principle while warning against what they viewed as premature or overly burdensome mandates. Across multiple bills (All Electric Building Act—H7374, The Green Buildings Act—H5450, Building Decarbonization Act of 2025—H5493/S0091), they requested further evaluation of implementation feasibility and cost implications, and repeatedly warned that layering new mandates without proper data risked producing minimal environmental benefits while imposing significant costs on small businesses and consumers.

RIBC often made comparisons to other states and Rhode Island's limited impact, invoking Whataboutism through framing Rhode Island's emissions as insignificant in the broader global context. They questioned whether "legislation would have any significant impact on climate change, which is a global phenomenon to which Rhode Island makes comparatively little contribution ([testimony](#), H7278, H7611, H7787, H7859, H7851). The Coalition urged lawmakers to consider "whether potential and limited environmental gains are worth the costs to Rhode Island's residents, businesses, economy, and state budget." ([testimony](#), H7278, H7611, H7787, H7859, H7851).

National Federation of Independent Business (NFIB)

LobbyMap, an independent think tank out of the UK, reports that the National Federation of Independent Business (NFIB) has consistently taken political action to block climate policy.³⁸ NFIB called to "stop issuing unnecessary, burdensome regulations,"³⁹ specifically referring to companies' reporting of carbon emissions, similar to language used by RIBC. NFIB also emphasized that mandates on building electrification, clean energy adoption, and electric vehicles would impose additional costs, require significant administrative attention, and "could very well grind to a halt and will diminish the desire for new projects" ([testimony](#), H7617). Across multiple bills, testimony often repeated arguments verbatim, reinforcing the recurring message that Rhode Island is already an expensive and difficult place for businesses to operate, emphasizing that these policies would only leave "Rhode Island businesses at a competitive disadvantage" ([testimony](#), H5425). Nationally, NFIB has filed amicus briefs for major carbon-related cases such as in the *Juliana v. United States* and the landmark Supreme Court case *West Virginia v. EPA*.^{40 41 42 43} In addition to regulations, NFIB also has strong opposition to carbon trading and taxes. This includes the Climate Superfund, local Cap-and-Trade initiatives, energy transition, and more. In a quote from their website's blog, NFIB stated that: "The Climate Superfund has so far proven to be yet another costly and half-baked mechanism for financing projects to address the impact of climate change on the state."⁴⁴

³⁸ LobbyMap. [National Federation of Independent Business](#). LobbyMap (nd). Accessed Dec. 1, 2025.

³⁹ NFIB. 2024. [Top 10 Small Business Policy Priorities in 2024](#). NFIB (Mar 6). Accessed Dec. 1, 2025.

⁴⁰ Columbia Law School. 2025. [Juliana v. United States](#). Sabin Center for Climate Change Law (2025).

⁴¹ LobbyMap. 2023. ["National Federation of Independent Business - Q11 : D4."](#) Direct Consultation with Governments (Apr 28). Accessed Dec. 1, 2025.

⁴² NFIB. 2022. ["Small Businesses Call for Court of Appeals to Set Aside NHTSA Fuel Standards."](#) NFIB (Dec 9). Accessed Dec. 1, 2025.

⁴³ NFIB. 2025. ["NFIB Files Amicus Brief Regarding Challenges to Agency Regulations."](#) NFIB (Feb 4). Accessed Dec. 1, 2025.

⁴⁴ NFIB. 2025. ["Another Vermont Climate Law Ends Up in Court."](#) NFIB (May 19).

Northern Rhode Island Chamber of Commerce

The Northern Rhode Island Chamber of Commerce commonly framed its opposition to climate legislation in terms of economic impact, feasibility, and the need for further study before the legislature imposes mandates. Their testimony emphasized that Rhode Island faces unique challenges in competing with other states due to high electricity costs and limited infrastructure, and that premature legislative action could impose significant burdens on businesses and residents. From the Northern RI Chamber's perspective, many proposed bills (e.g., The Act of Climate—H5445, Parking Facilities and Privileges—H5159, Electric Transportation Act—H7653, and The Green Buildings Act—H5425) risked creating costly mandates without sufficient analysis of electricity capacity, implementation feasibility, or economic consequences. Consistent with NFIB and RIBC, the Northern RI Chamber emphasized the need for agency collaboration and legislative caution, urging committees “to hear from ISO New England and the Public Utilities Commission” ([testimony](#), H7374) before advancing proposals.

Environmental Groups' Economic Arguments for Climate Policy

In legislative testimony submitted in support of climate policies, environmental groups have not successfully refuted common arguments from opponents, nor effectively messaged on financial feasibility or positive economic impacts to small businesses. When they have focused on economics, their most prevalent arguments include:

- Public Health: The American Lung Association has testified ([testimony](#), H5198) that zero-emission transportation would improve public health, leading to quantifiable economic savings on health costs and missed workdays.
- Creating jobs: Several testimonies emphasize that the clean energy transition in the building sector will create job opportunities for skilled workers. Climate Jobs Rhode Island, for example, highlights ([testimony](#), H5493) that the Building Decarbonization Act would allow for critical investments in energy efficiency, HVAC upgrades, electrical work, and building operations, expanding opportunities for jobs in these fields. Similarly, the Northeast Regional Council of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail, Transportation encourages ([testimony](#), H5493) the passage of the bill due to its support for long-term workforce growth in the trades. The Rhode Island AFL-CIO ([testimony](#), H5493) and Build Rhode Island ([testimony](#), H5493) also express support for the legislation's role in creating job opportunities for skilled union tradespeople.
- Utilizing federal funding: During the period of 2021-2023, some [testimonies](#) (H7112) mentioned that passage of state-level decarbonization bills would position the state to utilize funding from the American Rescue Plan Act and Inflation Reduction Act.
- Attract business: The Rhode Island chapter of Citizens Climate Lobby testified ([testimony](#), H5493) that developing a low-carbon building sector appeals to business goals in various aspects. First, the state will attract more businesses by offering lower building operating costs. Companies with emissions reduction targets will also seek out these buildings to help advance their missions. Lastly, corporations will be able to brand themselves more effectively and strengthen consumer satisfaction.
- Adjusting to increased electricity demand: In support of the Building Decarbonization Act of 2025, [The Alliance for Climate Transition](#) expressed that the new regulations would support the nation in

adjusting to increased pressures on energy demand. They cite that energy demand is projected to double by 2050, and in adopting more advanced efficiency measures due to this policy, the energy grid will become more adept in adapting to changing energy needs. Understanding that electrification policies will actually support the inevitable advancement of the energy grid alleviates concerns that the energy grid will not have the capacity for building decarbonization policies.

Public Utilities Commission (PUC)

Two linked units of state government are tasked with regulating the delivery of basic public services: the Public Utilities Commission (PUC) - a board of three commissioners appointed by the Governor, and the Division of Public Utilities (DPUC) - full-time staff who develop advisory material to support the PUC in its decisionmaking.

Top Opponents of Enviro Positions

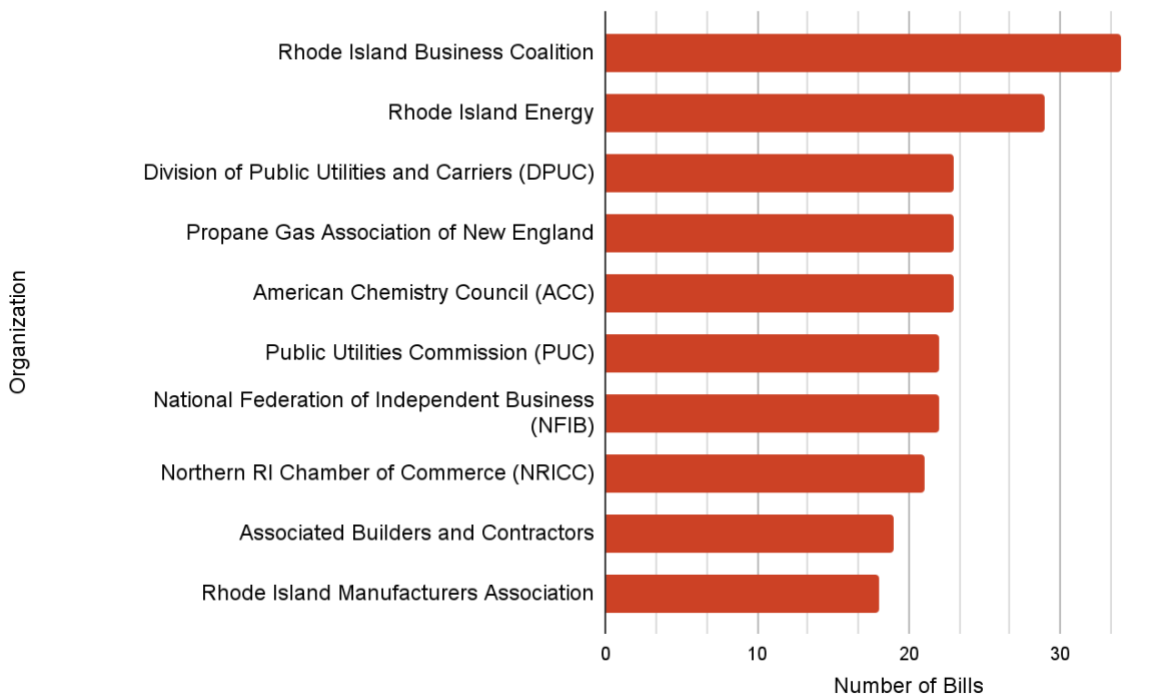


Figure 6: Written testimony opposing environmental groups on priority climate and energy bills from organizations. (2020-2025)

In written testimony submitted to legislative committees from 2020-2025, the PUC opposed environmental groups on over 20 bills. The PUC consistently framed its arguments on these bills around themes of consumer financial protection, jurisdictional concerns, and implementation efficiency. Much of their testimony claimed that Rhode Island already possessed sufficient tools and programs to process and evaluate energy initiatives. The PUC argued that bills proposing new methods for energy storage (H5573, 2023), net metering (H6662, 2025), or performance incentives (H5815, 2025) were unnecessary due to current programs. They cautioned against enacting provisions that would destabilize existing ratemaking frameworks, as such disruptions may inadvertently increase costs for all ratepayers.

([testimony](#), H5850). They often stressed their agency's limited resources, sometimes comparing Rhode Island's capacity to that of larger states. In testimony on the Utility Thermal Energy Network and Jobs Act (2024), the PUC noted New York's experience, stating that "even with their vast staffing, their schedule has fallen behind" ([testimony](#), H7285). They argued that additional investigative initiatives would weaken the agency's overall effectiveness.

The Division of Public Utilities and Carriers (DPUC)

While the Division of Public Utilities and Carriers' (DPUC) arguments were similar to those of the PUC, they were often framed more around ratepayer impacts and equity concerns across different socio-economic groups. In their testimony, the Division consistently warned against new mandates that they thought may put affordability at risk and would potentially "undermine support for electrification of heating and transportation sectors" ([testimony](#), H6662), both of which are mentioned in Rhode Island's Act on Climate ([testimony](#), H5445A). The Division often criticized expansion of community remote net metering ([testimony](#), H6662) which may hurt low-income residents to "benefit a relatively small portion of customers," ([testimony](#), H6662). On the Percentage of Income Payment Plan (PIPP), the Division positioned itself as an amplifier for stakeholder expertise and existing regulatory processes, urging legislators to defer to ongoing industry and regulatory proceedings rather than pursuing independent statutory mandates ([testimony](#), H5245).

Individual Testimony

Of the opposition testimony, 52% came from individuals not representing an organization primarily across three bills: H5033 and S0506 (Net Metering, 2023), which prohibit utility companies from limiting net-metering eligibility based on prior consumption and require that excess unconsumed energy be credited to consumers; H5549 and S0467 (Zero-Emission Lawn Care Devices, 2023), which mandates that by January 1, 2025, all lawn care devices sold in the state must be zero-emission, and by January 1, 2028, all devices used must meet the same standard; and H5446 (Residential Landlord and Tenant Act, 2025), which allows tenants, at their own expense, to implement energy-conservation measures, such as installing removable weather-stripping around doors and windows, within their dwellings. Opposition centered on safety, feasibility, and affordability. On the Residential Landlord and Tenant Act, landlords cautioned that "allowing tenants to do work without approval of the owner or manager raises a number of problems" ([testimony](#), H5446). Alternatively on Zero-Emission Lawn Care Devices, landscaping companies largely opposed increased expense of electric products and reduced efficiency, claiming that "If there was a reliable, efficient, powerful replacement for gas powered equipment, this bill would not be necessary. We would gladly adopt the use of electric equipment to help the environment if they worked properly and efficiently but unfortunately the technology is not there yet" ([testimony](#), H5549/S0467).

Climate Proponents

Top Supporters of Enviro Positions

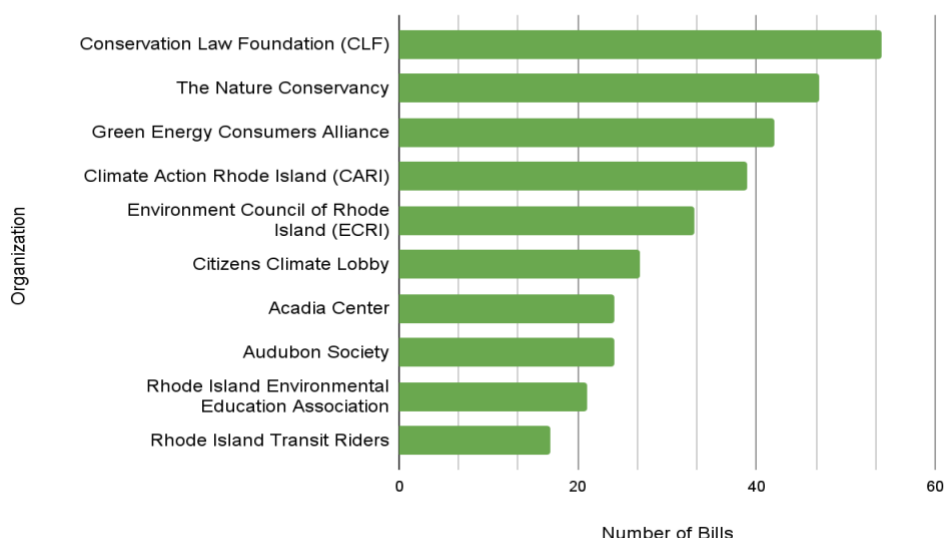


Figure 4: Written testimony supporting environmental groups on priority climate and energy bills, (2020-2025).

Nine out of the top ten most active lobbyists supporting climate and energy bills were environmental groups, the most active of which was Conservation Law Foundation, which lobbied on 153 of the bills.

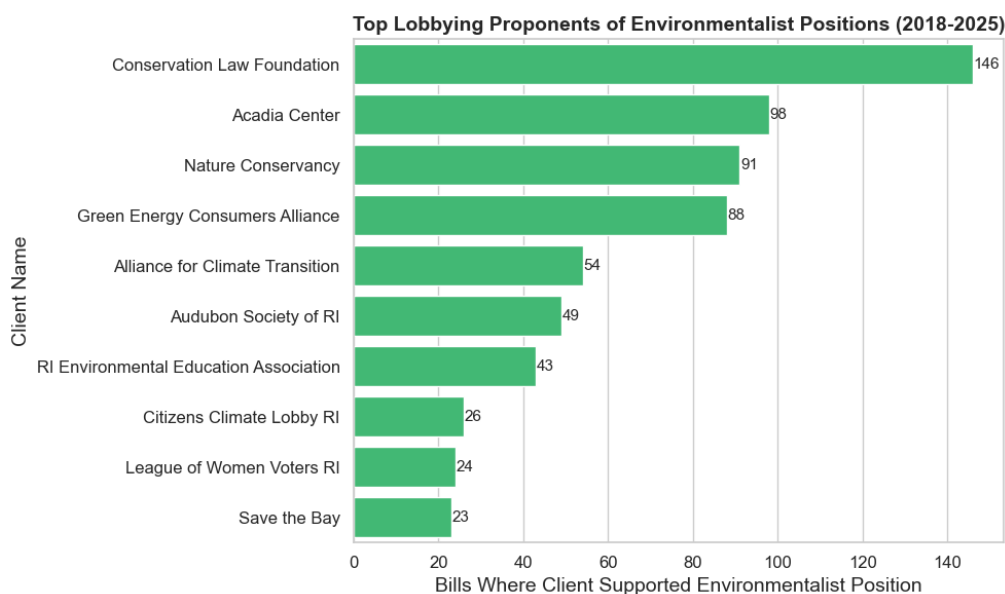


Figure 5: Lobbying Activity on Environmentalists' Climate Priority Bills (2018-2025).

Top 10 proponents of Environmental Council of Rhode Island and Climate Action Rhode Island's priority climate and energy bills.

Part 3: What Rhode Island political dynamics pose challenges to climate legislation?

Despite Rhode Island's reputation for being a progressive state, it faces political challenges for passing meaningful climate legislation. Throughout our interviews with various policy experts, advocates, and public officials, broader themes emerged as the drivers of political inefficacy towards addressing climate change. In this section, we will explore how Rhode Island's political landscape – shaped by its small size, limited governmental capacity, and historic hierarchical governance structure – has impacted the passing of lasting climate solutions, particularly after the success of the Act on Climate.

Structural Barriers

The Smallest State in the Union: Rhode Island is a small state with few resources. One political official noted that municipalities are massively understaffed: 'They struggle to do the basics, and most of their money goes to their core staff (police, fire, or schools), even in the capital city of Providence'.⁴⁵ To compound this issue of limited resources, Rhode Island has a six-month legislative session (compared to Massachusetts' 2 year session), and the legislatures work part-time.⁴⁶ The truncated session means that many bills are introduced per day – there were 2600 bills introduced in 2025 – and it is difficult to elevate priority bills.⁴⁷ The lack of staff support for legislators is acute.

We spoke to a handful of elected officials, government employees, and environmentalists. They gave us insight into the bill-creation process. For example, to account for the size and the lack of funding, many of the climate and clean energy bills that are introduced to the floor are adapted from Massachusetts or New York legislation. In order for legislators to become knowledgeable on these topics to vote, they rely on leadership, lobbyists, their lived experience, colleagues, and advocates. In other words, organizers and politicians need to be self-motivated in order to move any bills forward. Of the groups who *are* knowledgeable on topics introduced, only a limited number of them have the access to influence leadership.

Legislative structure: Until the passing of the 2004 Separation of Powers amendment, Rhode Island's legislature had more power than the Governor. Since 2004, Rhode Island granted more gubernatorial power, but the state still has a constitutionally weak governor, mainly due to their lack of line-item veto, meaning the legislature can overturn any veto with a 3/5ths majority.⁴⁸

As described above, the Speaker of the House remains the most important person in the state deciding which bills get to be voted on, the appointments of all committee chairs, whether to suspend House Rules,

⁴⁵ U.S. Chamber of Commerce. 2024. "[Understanding America's Labor Shortage: The Most Impacted States.](#)" U.S. Chamber of Commerce (Dec 13).

⁴⁶ Thompson, Lyke and Marjorie Sarbaugh-Thompson. 2019. "[Checks and Balances in Action: Legislative Oversight across the States.](#)" *Levin Center* (nd).

⁴⁷ Shuster, Amelia. 2025. "[2025 State Legislative Session Takeaways: Rhode Island.](#)" *Stateside* (Aug 1).

⁴⁸ Rhode Island [Const.](#) art. IX, § 14

and has outsized influence over the state's budget.^{49 50 51 52} Based on our 15 years of participation in the legislative process and discussions with many participants, this structure creates a culture of conformity; legislators need to follow the interests of the Speaker if they want to advance bills they care about, and to advance in their career.⁵³ Several interviewees reflected that when leadership is in transition, supporting the losing candidate can be a ticket to irrelevance.^{54 55}

The Building Decarbonization bill in the 2024 session, offers an example of how these relationships play out. This past year, the extended illness of state Senate President, Dominic Ruggerio, paralyzed the chamber for almost two sessions. His death and the change in leadership opened divisions between environmental leaders and labor unions, who endorsed different candidates.^{56 57} That relationship had been key to passing meaningful legislation like the Act on Climate and 100% Renewables bills in 2021 and 2022. Now, the future of environmental action at the state level is uncertain.

Political Barriers: Rhode Island is a reliably Blue state, with a democratic trifecta and a long history of liberal leadership.⁵⁸ While the Governor may not have as much influence in Rhode Island as in other states, they oversee most of the state's departments and agencies. The current governor, Gov. Daniel McKee, is often said to have a mixed record in terms of climate action. He made history when signing the Act on Climate in 2021 and the 100% RES bill in 2022, but immediately raised concerns about enforcement, and environmental organizations expressed frustration on implementation.⁵⁹

After its passage in 2021, the implementation of the Act on Climate fell to the Governor's agencies. Lobbyist groups like the NFIB, Northern RI Chamber, and the RI Business Council repeated claims of high electricity prices driving away businesses and manufacturing jobs, which was reflected in the hesitance of the executive branch and its Office of Energy Resources (OER) in advancing building electrification mandates and bans on natural gas in new construction ([testimony](#), H5167). These are key elements of the state's 2025 Climate Action Strategy currently in its final stages. A point brought up in more than one interview was that the Governor's family has a home heating oil delivery business.⁶⁰ A final issue is with transparency: while the state lobbying and testimony reporting have improved markedly in the past five years (in part due to COVID), the state's web portal is still difficult to navigate and there seem to be major gaps in reporting.

⁴⁹ McGowan, Dan. 2020. "[Is Rhode Island's Speaker of the House too powerful?](#)" *The Boston Globe* (Nov 6).

⁵⁰ Lavin, Nancy. 2025. "[A massive budget deficit means fewer hands out to R.I. lawmakers as 2025 begins.](#)" *Rhode Island Current* (Jan 2).

⁵¹ Gregg, Katherine. 2025. "[From House speaker to committee chairs: The main players in RI's legislature.](#)" *The Providence Journal* (May 7).

⁵² House Resolution ([2021 - H 5007](#))

⁵³ Gordon, Leo and Peder Schaefer. 2020. "[The Power Move.](#)" *The College Hill Independent* (Nov 13).

⁵⁴ See also *Interview after losing the Speakership, Rep. Michael Marcello expresses frustration at the process.* Rep. Michael Marcello. 2014. "[Mattiello elected RI House speaker, replacing Fox.](#)" *WPRI* (Mar 25).

⁵⁵ Fitzpatrick, Edward. 2026. "[R.I. Senate president will replace chairwomen who opposed him, senators say.](#)" *The Boston Globe* (Jan 3).

⁵⁶ Donnis, Ian. 2025. "[Lawson wins R.I. Senate presidency while retaining prominent union role.](#)" *Rhode Island PBS* (Apr 29).

⁵⁷ Lavin, Nancy. 2025. "[R.I. Senate plays musical chairs after divided caucus vote for Ruggerio.](#)" *Rhode Island Current* (Jan 7).

⁵⁸ Ballotpedia. 2025. "[Party control of Rhode Island state government.](#)" *Ballotpedia* (nd). Accessed Dec 2.

⁵⁹ Stevens, Matthew. 2021. "[Gov. McKee raises concern with Act on Climate bill.](#)" *WJAR* (Mar 31).

⁶⁰ Anderson, Patrick. 2021. "[From forgotten man to head of the state: Who is Dan McKee?](#)" *The Providence Journal* (Jan 8).

Part 4: Anticipating Resistance to RI's 2025 Climate Action Strategy

Four sets of policies are among those being proposed by RI's consultants for its 2025 Climate Action Strategy. We looked at what was proposed, who opposed these policies in the past in Rhode Island's legislature, and what they argued. We then examined comparable policy efforts in neighboring states, including Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maryland, Maine, New Jersey and New York. We sought to understand what were the keys to success in those states, and we developed a set of "counter-tactics" that might help with passage of these policies in future legislative or regulatory efforts. The sectors were the building sector, heating policy, electric vehicle policy, public transit, and reduction in vehicle miles traveled.

Building Sector

Buildings encompass more than a third of Rhode Island's overall greenhouse gas emissions. Building decarbonization is the process of making buildings more efficient and switching to electrical appliances and heat, in an attempt to lower their carbon emissions. Strategies like requiring building performance standards, all-electric new construction, and additional building envelope upgrade incentives are essential to reducing or eliminating the sector's greenhouse gas emissions. However, despite strong support for such policies among climate advocates, these initiatives have failed to pass due to persistent opposition by businesses and industry groups.

The City of Providence passed its first decarbonization ordinance in 2023 (ORD-2023-35). It requires first benchmarking emissions of larger buildings, then extends to smaller buildings. While the city has been moving forward, efforts to pass building decarbonization at the state level have faced significant backlash. The [Building Decarbonization Act](#), for example, was introduced in both 2024 and 2025 as the culmination of several similar efforts in recent years. This legislation acted as successor to the failed [All-Electric New Buildings Act in 2022](#) and the [Green Buildings Act](#), which was successfully passed in 2009 and has been reintroduced in recent years to establish stricter building codes. The Building Decarbonization Act in its introduced language would have required all-electric new construction and implemented specific standards to address emissions in existing buildings. However, all building sector policies have faced intense pushback, most notably from the National Federation of Independent Businesses (NFIB), Rhode Island Energy, and Rhode Island Manufacturers Association. Central themes to their arguments involve cost strain, unreliability, and the devaluation of consumer choice. The Rhode Island Business Coalition, for example, submitted [testimony for the Green Buildings Act of 2023](#), stating "we are aware of no studies to determine possible costs associated with retrofitting commercial and multi-family buildings to meet green buildings standards... businesses that cannot afford to retrofit buildings may allow those buildings to go empty... we urge the Committee to seek for cost analyses to be conducted by the Office of Energy Resources."

Several neighboring states have had more success in pursuing green building policies than Rhode Island. New York offers a model, as the only state to have state-wide all-electric new construction mandates. In 2023, [Governor Kathy Hochul's Executive Budget proposal](#) included a policy that would prevent the installation of fossil fuel equipment into new and existing homes and buildings in New York City. More recently, in 2025, New York State's Fire and Building Code Council voted to officially require all-electric new buildings as stated in the state-wide building code. Transparency between the administration and the public was a clear throughline: by inviting [public comments and proactively addressing concerns](#) with strong evidence for the net benefits of the building code, New York was able to make a compelling case for all-electric new buildings. A [report by RMI](#) dispelled false information about all-electric new construction costs and supported the passage of the All-Electric New Buildings Act. Later, the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority made public a [one-page energy analysis summary](#) highlighting and effectively communicating the considerable statewide savings from the 2024 Energy Conservation Construction Code. These studies documented how the new energy code would substantially lower homeowner and renters' energy bills, countering the oppositions' claims concerning financial strain on owners from upfront costs.

Rhode Island can also look to Maryland for its success in passing the [Climate Solutions Now Act of 2022](#), which placed energy efficiency and emissions reductions requirements on certain buildings. This bill experienced intensive advocacy from both sides, including 48 pieces of testimony from the opposition and 79 from organizations in support. The opposition included individual counties, a myriad of energy and utility companies, realtors, and building industry actors. Their arguments included claims about housing costs, costs on utility ratepayers, eliminating consumer choice, putting the reliability of the electric grid at risk, and eliminating jobs. However, the sheer number of groups from clean energy, county governments, green voter societies, and social responsibility coalitions in active support of the bill far surpassed the turnout seen in Rhode Island for similar bills. By pursuing a more aggressive policy initially, even after making compromises and drawing back on restrictions, the Climate Solutions Now Act in 2022 allowed for substantial emissions reductions.

Heating Policy (mid-stream heat pump accelerator program):

Rhode Island's current strategy for decarbonization in the residential heating sector is through a mid-stream heat pump accelerator program. The Duties Of Utilities And Carriers Act (RI [H6293/S0856](#)), passed in 2023, created infrastructure for the state to be able to fund clean heat technology subsidies and [Clean Heat RI](#). The Northeast Clean Energy Council and Conservation Law Foundation lobbied in favor of the bill, with no reported lobbying opposition.

The mid-stream heat pump accelerator program seeks to provide homeowners with heat pump technology and installations at affordable rates, granting distributors the ability to do the work of providing incentives and reduced costs. Clean Heat RI, headed by the RI Office of Energy Resources, offers incentives for low to moderate-income households in the state, with 60% of the system's costs covered. Financial incentives are supported by the state by granting residents up to \$11,500 for installation costs. Limitations to the program include a requirement of "[sufficient weatherization](#)" of the home and the bandwidth of heat pump rebates that can be provided.

In recent years, bills relating to a clean heat standard including [H7782](#) and [S0407](#), which would "ensure all customers have an equitable opportunity to participate in, and benefit from, clean heat measures regardless of heating fuel used, income level, geographic location, or homeownership status," have been

proposed in the legislature. [H7782](#) and [S0407](#), both of which died, pushed noncompliance payments to provide middle and lower-income homes with technologies that include heat pumps. Lobbying support for these bills came from clean energy coalitions such as the Green Energy Consumers Alliance and climate advocate groups. Opposition to the rebate program and clean heat credit programs has come from the Energy Marketers Association of Rhode Island, Rhode Island Energy, and Rhode Island's Manufacturers Association. Build RI served as a neutral/watching party for S0407.

Massachusetts has successfully hosted a mid-stream heat pump program through collaboration with various distributors and incentives throughout the state. The [MASS Save](#) program is a collaboration of electric and gas utility companies in MA that supports residents in updating heat pumps and energy systems in residential homes, with a focus on accessibility in low-income areas through community education grants. A supporting factor in the program is MA [S2967](#), passed in 2024. The bill aimed to prime a clean energy grid while protecting consumers and ensuring equitable access to clean energy. Supporters of the bill consisted of green energy organizations and sympathetic energy companies. There was also support from research institutions and marine life organizations. Groups submitting positions of "neutral/watching" included independent business associations, energy and utility companies, and manufacturers' associations. Opposition groups testified that MA S2967 would cost companies and small businesses more money and create higher costs for homeowners.

Maine's [heat pump rebate program](#), sponsored by the Home Electrification and Appliances Rebates (HEAR) program, is targeted towards lower-income households and new builds. Maine's Department of Energy (DOE) was able to fund home energy rebates through the Inflation Reduction Act. [Title 35-A](#), passed in 2025, allowed for third-party heat pump installers or sellers who participate in the Efficiency Maine program to qualify for rebates. This created an incentive for distributor participation and allowed for a larger network of providers to be created, increasing consumer choice. Maine found similar opposition groups as Massachusetts and Rhode Island, energy and utilities companies, and independent business associations. In certain cases, there was support from utility companies that held existing clean energy programs and green energy associations.

Electric Vehicle Policy

Transportation is the top source of Rhode Island's emissions, so transitioning from internal combustion engines to electric vehicles (EVs) has been a key policy priority in recent years. The state's current transition plan is threatened now that the Advanced Clean Cars II and Trucks regulations adopted from California are currently under [legal challenge](#) from the federal government. It is uncertain whether these requirements of EV sales will remain enforceable. Rhode Island's own pro-EV policies are limited: the state has modest rebate programs for purchases of EVs ([DRIVE-EV](#)) and charging stations ([Power Up RI](#) for households and [Electrify RI](#) for businesses). These have been passed through state agencies, not the statehouse.

In the last ten years, industry lobbyists have opposed bills that would set binding targets for EVs or charging stations. No EV-related bill has passed in Rhode Island when against industry opposition. The [Electric Transportation Act of 2022](#) (S2448/H7653) sought to require all new light duty cars sold in the state to be EVs by 2030. This bill was killed by industry lobbying groups, including the New England Convenience Stores and Energy Marketers Association (gas stations) and NFIB. The [Parking Facilities and Privileges Act](#) (H5159/S988) of February 2023 sought to require EV charging stations in new parking lots. It was met with opposition from many business associations in Rhode Island, including the Chamber of

Commerce, the Rhode Island Business Coalition, and NFIB. An amended version of the bill passed four months later with one major provision tacked on at the end: its restrictions would only apply to projects that receive public funding, leaving the private sector exempt. This bill received no opposition.

This is a form of policy dilution: the business interest groups were successful in sharply reducing the scope of the policy. Opposition groups have claimed that while they generally support transitioning to EVs, the mandates impose an unfair cost burden on businesses and that the EV transition is not happening fast enough to justify mandates. As one gas station lobbyist put it, the state's approach should not be "'if we build them, they will come,' rather we believe it should be 'let's build them as they come.'"⁶¹ Implicit in this argument is the neoliberal principle that the government should not pick winners and losers in the market. Meanwhile, other state legislatures in the Northeast have been able to pass more ambitious EV policies. New Jersey has been quite successful in rolling out EV charging stations. The state passed a slew of narrow requirements, like [requiring](#) developers to offer EV charging stations as an option in new home constructions and [requiring](#) new condo and apartment buildings to have EV charging stations. New Jersey has also [reduced](#) red tape for new charging stations by exempting them from land use board review and variance relief. Most of these policies have enjoyed broad lobbying support from green organizations, EV and charging station manufacturers (ChargePoint, ChargeVC, Tesla, Greenlots, etc.) as well as industry associations, including electric utilities and automotive retailers. Massachusetts has also received support from these groups. In contrast, pro-EV industry lobbyists have rarely been active in Rhode Island. Inviting lobbying support from these industries could help blunt arguments from oppositional industries and win over more pro-business lawmakers.

Public Transit and Vehicle-miles Traveled Reduction Strategies

Rhode Island plans to reduce its emissions from the transportation sector by promoting "mode shifts", through investments in biking and walking infrastructure as alternatives to car transport. Current initiatives to install bike lanes throughout the state are handled on a city-by-city basis. [Resolution 43874](#), passed in 2024, aimed to reduce pedestrian and biking injuries and deaths by investing in safer road features, including bike-safe roads. Through this came the [Providence Great Streets Plan](#), which outlines specific changes that have already begun to be executed. The resolution was passed through the efforts of bike advocate groups, including the Providence Streets Coalition. Bike lanes have been a topic of controversy in Providence— supported by the general public but opposed by some small businesses.⁶²

Rhode Island also hopes to reduce vehicle-miles traveled through higher use of public transit. The state-wide bus system, RIPTA, faced cuts that affected 45 of the 67 lines in August 2025. In 2017, RI [H5241/S0115](#) passed, granting RIPTA \$5 million each fiscal year and 5% of the RI highway maintenance account for the purpose of funding a free ridership program for low-income seniors and people with

⁶¹ Mora, Brian. 2021. "[RE: HB 6253 – AN ACT RELATING TO MOTOR AND OTHER VEHICLES - PARKING FACILITIES AND PRIVILEGES](#)" Testimony on behalf of NECSMA to RI Legislature. April 26, 2021.

⁶² For example in 2021, a bike lane on South Main St. faced heavy opposition when removing a traffic lane was proposed. Businesses on and around South Main St. sent out a [letter](#) to Steven Pristawa, RIDOT's Traffic Safety Engineer, to oppose the installation, citing worries of lost business due to high traffic. The bike lane was still installed, but has faced constant threat of removal due to businesses continuing to urge for its reversal. Efforts to remove bike lanes have also been supported by government officials in the city of Providence, citing budget limitations.

disabilities.⁶³ Supporters of pro-RIPTA bills include social and transit justice groups, including Grow Smart RI, environmental groups such as the Conservation Law Foundation and the Rhode Island Environmental Education Association, and the general public. [H7774/H6020/S0342](#) in 2024 and 2025 sought to allocate \$32.6 million to RIPTA to address the budget deficit, but died in committee in the face of concerns from lawmakers about ridership numbers and costs to run routes. There were no opposing lobbyists to H7774, suggesting that the opposition that led to the death of the bill came from lawmakers, the Governor's office or agency officials, or interest groups speaking off the record. Successful bills that have passed to increase resources for RIPTA have included efforts to make public transit more accessible for marginalized groups.

In Massachusetts, the [Cambridge Climate Action Plan](#) targets mode shift as one of its tactics to reach its decarbonization goal. In 2019 Cambridge passed the [Cycling Safety Ordinance](#) (CSO) into the city's municipal code, which encompassed a [five-year sidewalk and reconstruction plan](#) that promised to create a "Permanent Separated Bicycle Lane system." It served as an update for a 2015 bike plan created by the city. The ordinance was passed with support from bike safety advocates, such as Cambridge Bicycle Safety, Boston Cyclist Union, and Green Streets Initiative. Testimony against the ordinance worried about the removal of parking facilities and the costs of construction; [opposition to the CSO](#) has been led by Cambridge Streets for All, a coalition of residents and business owners, who put forward testimony supporting the delay in CSO's completion. Due to the act, Cambridge was able to install [14.22 miles](#) of bike lane infrastructure between 2020 and 2025. As of 2024, the CSO has pushed the 5-year deadline back to November 2027. Public transportation and mode shift infrastructure requires a wide coalition of public support to be successful alongside government representatives that are willing to put money towards investing in reliable and safe transit.

⁶³ In 2022, efforts to reinstate bus routes to the beach that had been discontinued due to low ridership and high operating costs were successful. [Public transit advocates](#) in Rhode Island played a significant role in its reinstatement.

Part 5: What Can Be Done? Four Recommendations

Our review of opposition faced by past climate strategies led us to four recommendations for future legislative action in support of meeting emissions reduction targets under the state's ambitious Act on Climate law.

1. **COMMUNICATE PRIVATE INFLUENCE:** First, we found significant overlap in the groups who were opposing key policies like electric vehicle incentives, heating and building efficiency policies, and efforts to support alternatives to driving. Three organizations are common opponents to climate policies: the National Federation of Independent Businesses (NFIB), Rhode Island Energy, and Rhode Island Manufacturers Association. That is, a small group of special interests are holding up the energy transition in the state. These special interest lobbyists sent in negative testimony, and some show up regularly at the Statehouse; meanwhile representatives of manufacturers of renewable energy products often don't have the capacity to testify or lobby in this small state. Our recommendation is that **opposition be named, and their interests pointed out**. Where these are national groups, the outside influence and lack of local connection and input should be emphasized.
2. **BUILD CAPACITY:** Second, without the massive federal funding expected from the Inflation Reduction Act, the **state needs to pivot to tools it can actually control**: standard-setting and support for actors to meet those expectations. We need to move from an expensive model to an efficient one, with limited state funds targeted at those users who will struggle to meet the new expectations. Instead of "pay and hope," we need to shift to "require and support." These should include a diverse portfolio of "common-sense" decarbonization strategies; with low capacity the legislature needs professional help sorting out good ideas and crafting good legislation.
3. **EMPHASIZE AFFORDABILITY:** Relatedly, to address the often false claims that decarbonizing the Rhode Island economy will be prohibitively expensive, we need **state-specific estimates of costs (and benefits)** of proposed legislation and programs. Energy efficiency and many electrification efforts can save people significant amounts of money over the medium and longer term. Affordability and savings need to be tallied and communicated, along with honest portrayals of costs. This does not mean yet more consultants and studies--RI specific numbers need to be surfaced and disseminated.
4. **BUILD THE COALITION:** Fourth, those seeking to advance climate solutions for Rhode Island--whether state legislators, agency personnel, or NGOs--need to **recruit allies**--such as potentially supportive businesses and labor unions. The point has been made before, but our research on nearby states who have succeeded showed that **building a coalition** of affected stakeholders and constituents is crucial to legislative victory and sustainable rollout of climate-friendly programs. Legislators look to diverse coalitions as a signal that differences have been sorted out, and that they will gain support in the next election cycle.

Appendix: Methods

The methodology used in this report builds substantially off of methods used in previous Climate and Development Lab studies (our two peer-reviewed articles and seven state-level policy briefings are available at climatedevlab.brown.edu/statelevellobbying). In order to focus our research, we collected lists of priority legislation from two key environmental organizations: the Environment Council of Rhode Island (a coalition of environmental organizations across the state) and Climate Action Rhode Island (a climate focused organization, affiliated with 350.org). Of the bills these groups prioritized, we selected those bills that were related to climate and energy. In total, we ended up with 329 bills from ECRI and 139 bills from CARI from 2018-2025, for a combined total of 362 bills across both organizations.

We used publicly available lobbying and testimony records to understand who was interested in these bills. For lobbying records, we collected all available lobbying records from the Rhode Island Secretary of State website, which provides legally-required reports submitted by lobbyists. These reports detail which bills each lobbyist took a position on, who they were representing when they took that position, and how much was spent on lobbying. Lobbying records span from January 2018 through June 2025, when data collection was completed.

For testimony records, we collected all available written testimony on relevant bills from the House and Senate websites, which publish written testimony online by committee. Using Gemini (with substantial human supervision) and human categorizing, we identified what position each individual or group took on each of the relevant bills. For both lobbying and testimony records, we used a combination of automated and manual methods to clean up organization names.

To understand the arguments used, we categorized discourses using two approaches. The first was an inductive approach, where, by reading and rereading written testimony that opposed environmentalists on climate legislation, we pulled out common themes and trends across industries and issue areas. The second approach used the Discourses of Climate Delay framework⁶⁴, which details how arguments used to oppose policy to address climate change frequently accept the existence of climate change while justifying why no action or insufficient action should be taken. Arguments were single-coded, by hand.

In addition to analysis of public records, we also reviewed key media and background documents to deepen our understanding of climate policy and politics in Rhode Island. We conducted a systematic review of media articles covering climate and energy issues in the Rhode Island legislature. From this, we built a timeline of key events in the history of climate and energy policy over the last two decades. We conducted background analysis on key organizations that frequently opposed climate policy, as identified in the lobbying and testimony analyses. To supplement the systematic analyses of written testimony, lobbying records, and media/background materials, we conducted interviews with various policy experts, advocates, and public officials to better understand the context surrounding energy and climate politics in Rhode Island.

⁶⁴ Lamb WF, Mattioli G, Levi S, et al. "Discourses of climate delay." *Global Sustainability*. 2020;3:e17. doi.org/10.1017/sus.2020.13