Conservative critics of taxing carbon launched a campaign yesterday to discredit Republican voices that describe the climate policy as a winning solution for the party and the economy.

In related maneuvering, Republican energy lobbyists are urging House leaders to vote on a resolution that denounces a carbon tax before the August recess. That move, which supporters describe as gaining ground, stands to complicate budding efforts to convince GOP lawmakers that the tax is a conservative alternative to EPA rules on greenhouse gases.

The Institute for Energy Research organized a panel of policy experts yesterday in an effort to sap momentum from a small but well-publicized campaign to increase Republican awareness and support of taxing carbon.

It took aim at the R Street Institute, a conservative group that broke away from the Heartland Institute last year, and the Energy and Enterprise Initiative overseen by former Rep. Bob Inglis (R-S.C.). Both groups are promoting a revenue-neutral carbon tax that could reduce rates on income and corporations while pre-empting upcoming EPA regulations on power plants.

Thomas Pyle, president of the Institute for Energy Research and its political arm, the American Energy Alliance, expressed frustration at the amount of attention that R Street and Inglis' group has received.

"I feel like they've been given an exorbitant amount of weight in terms of their voice in the conservative movement by the media," Pyle said after the event. "So there's this perception that there's a groundswell of conservative support for a carbon tax, and it's just not true."

"It's the same couple, few people that keep popping up in the same articles," he added.

**GOP has 'no plan'**

The panel yesterday, featuring economists and policy analysts who are well-known for their criticism of climate policies, described a carbon tax as an economically damaging measure that would raise electricity prices and have little impact on greenhouse gas emissions.

"The ideal carbon tax has a life expectancy of probably a few years before environmentalists say, 'Well, that was nice,' and then ask for additional policies, like cap and trade, tougher vehicle economy standards or a higher social cost of carbon," said Kenneth Green of the Fraser Institute in Canada.

"In fact, in a post-carbon tax world, environmentalists would say, 'This tax is three times too low,'" he added. "And if you don't go along with it, they're gonna
say, 'Look, you're a denier. You're a science denier.'"

The panel marked the launch of a broader campaign by the Institute for Energy Research, which unveiled a poll Tuesday showing that half of all voters would be less likely to vote for a politician who supports taxing carbon. The group also announced plans to buy advertising in the districts of five House lawmakers who it suspects are soft on the issue of carbon taxes. The media effort, which could cost up to $150,000, targets five Democrats and one Republican.

The conservative arm-wrestling over a carbon tax has been amplified by the Obama administration's push to develop greenhouse gas standards for new and existing power plants. Officials with R Street and the Energy and Enterprise Initiative have zeroed in on those regulations as the epitome of bad policy and the reason that conservatives should engage on climate change before they're introduced.

Republicans have been satisfied, largely, with an electoral strategy on climate policies -- by fighting legislation and executive measures in Washington, D.C., and then campaigning against higher energy prices in elections.

A 'trap' for conservatives?

Andrew Moylan, the outreach director at R Street, describes a different strategy, in which Republicans take the initiative on climate change by fighting President Obama's EPA regulations with a carbon tax that pre-empts them while lowering other taxes.

"We're of the opinion that just kind of yelling 'no' about everything isn't that effective," Moylan said. "And it will end up in a place that we don't like very much, which is an expensive and opaque regulatory regime."

Alex Bozmoski, director of strategy and operations at Inglis' Energy and Enterprise Initiative, said many conservatives "have no plan" to deal with a climate issue that has been defined by Democrats.

"Their plan is just to fight having a plan," he said of those conservatives. "Honestly, that's not where conservative Americans stand. Washington will catch up to the silent majority. I think there will be a courageous batch of conservative leaders who are remembered as the ones that positioned American free enterprise to deliver an answer to climate change."

Critics, though, describe the climate-policy Republicans as naive ambassadors for a big government future in which carbon taxes are steered toward special-interest giveaways and growing debt.

When asked if a carbon tax was preferable to EPA regulations on greenhouse gases, David Kreutzer, a research fellow with the Heritage Foundation who sat on yesterday's panel, described the question as a trap.

"It's like asking me what's the most humane way to execute innocent people," he said, suggesting that a conservative carbon tax looks much different than one envisioned by Democrats.

"When conservatives talk about a carbon tax ... the headline says, 'Conservative supports carbon tax,'" he added. "So I'm not going to be drawn into this fantasy world where we speculate on what might happen when we know it won't, when it gives people ammo to misrepresent what I said."

"So no," a carbon tax is not preferable to EPA regulations, finished Kreutzer.

Will the House vote on a carbon tax?
As policy wonks argued against taxing carbon yesterday in a Washington hotel, energy lobbyists are doing it in the Capitol.

In the past few days, an effort to attach an anti-carbon tax resolution to energy legislation has gained traction, according to two Republican lobbyists. One of them described a renewed commitment by House leaders to bring the resolution to the floor, though it's dependent on having a legislative vehicle.

"Everybody wants to do it, but it's a question of whether it can get done," said the lobbyist, who believes there is a 90 percent chance for a vote. The resolution was introduced by Rep. Steve Scalise (R-La.), chairman of the Republican Study Committee.

Another lobbyist said lawmakers and aides are trying to "structure a vote" on the resolution, which has almost 150 co-sponsors.

If the resolution is voted on, it could complicate the efforts by carbon tax supporters to encourage Republican adoption of the issue. Moylan said some Republicans openly discuss the idea in private but won't advertise those thoughts publicly.

If they were faced with casting a vote against a new tax, they probably would, perhaps making it more difficult in the future to revisit the carbon idea, he said.

"It's awfully difficult for most Republicans, probably, to vote against something like that, even if they sort of felt in their hearts of hearts that a properly designed carbon tax might be something they could support," Moylan said.