



The surprisingly smart solution to climate change — coming from conservatives

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When it comes to climate change, most of us think we know where the battle lines are drawn: On one side, progressives believe a warming planet is a global emergency and advocate sweeping “Green New Deal” policies to address it. On the other, conservatives — led by our coal-loving president — not only fight against such policies, but deny that climate change is even happening.

The reality isn’t so simple. Growing numbers of conservatives are concerned about climate change, and they’re developing policies to fight it. Does that mean Republicans are ready to join Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and other progressives in supporting expensive Green New Deal proposals? Far from it.

These green conservatives don’t believe climate remedies should require overhauling “the entire economy,” as an AOC adviser has said. Instead, they hope to harness the power of free markets to mitigate the carbon emissions scientists say promote warming.

In a recent interview, House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy said his party needs to show leadership on climate issues. Rather than relying on heavy-handed regulation, the California congressman said, government should boost green technologies. “I think we can have a great economy and at the same time use new technology to make our environment better for the next generation,” he said.

Green Republicans have a long way to go before they win over their party’s mainstream. A recent Pew poll found that only 39 percent of Republicans want the government to do more about climate change. (Among Democrats, the figure is 90 percent.) But the movement has attracted some of the party’s elder statesmen, as well as many of its rising young activists.

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Republican icons James Baker and George Shultz — who filled multiple Cabinet posts under Reagan and other presidents — have joined forces to promote what they call “a conservative climate solution.” Their plan would scrap many regulations on the energy sector and replace them with a gradually rising tax on carbon-based energy sources like coal, gas and oil. That would mean somewhat higher prices for gasoline, air travel, and other energy-intensive products and services.

As a result, people would be disincentivized from using heavily-taxed carbon-based energy and encouraged to seek out cleaner products, while businesses would be encouraged to create green energy alternatives free from the levy. What’s more, the revenue from the tax wouldn’t disappear

into government coffers. Under the Baker-Shultz plan it would go into a special fund, and then be divided into equal shares that would be distributed to all Americans every three months. Backers call this the “carbon dividend.”

The average family of four would initially receive about \$2,000 a year, they estimate. Economists calculate that about 70 percent of Americans would receive more in dividends than they would spend in higher energy costs.

A study by the US Department of the Treasury concludes that middle- and low-income families would make out particularly well under this plan. Most high earners — whose lifestyles typically use much more energy — would pay extra.

Supporters of the proposal think this is only fair: “Average Americans are not the people flying around in private jets,” says Kiera O’Brien, founder of the group Young Conservatives for Carbon Dividends.

The Carbon Dividend plan is backed by the Climate Leadership Council, a bipartisan group whose members include a who’s-who of business leaders and many old-school Republicans. Some 3,500 economists, including 27 Nobel laureates, have endorsed the idea.

The Baker-Shultz plan is just one of several proposals to raise the price of carbon-based energy. But supporters all agree that the key is harnessing the law of supply and demand: Higher prices on products made using fossil fuels will boost demand for cleaner alternatives, they say, while also driving technological innovation.

The Republican Party’s growing willingness to discuss climate change doesn’t just reflect evolving attitudes. It also reveals a new political reality.

The influential Republican pollster Frank Luntz, who once advised his party to reject climate fears, now admits “I was wrong.” In a recent memo, he urged Republicans to embrace the Carbon Dividend plan, not just for the future of the planet, but for their own political survival.

“Fifty-five percent of GOP voters under 40 are ‘very or extremely’ concerned about their party’s position on climate change,” the memo said.

Alex Posner, a recent Yale graduate who helped found Students for Carbon Dividends, couldn’t agree more.

“The natural divide on climate is not between right and left but between old and young,” says Posner, whose group is one of several millennial-led organizations promoting conservative solutions to climate change. “Younger voters aren’t going to support a party that walks away from this issue.”

Will Conte, who leads a Princeton University student group dedicated to saving rainforests, has grown frustrated with the GOP’s lack of support.

“The fact that far-left Democrats have been able to monopolize the issue of climate change is a huge problem,” he says. “And the fault is 100 percent on the Republican Party leaders.”

For older conservatives, the embrace of climate science has been a slow journey. Bob Inglis, founder of the conservative environmental group RepublicEN, says he started as a confirmed

climate skeptic. Like many on the right, he was put off by the apocalyptic rhetoric he heard from Vice President Al Gore and others.

“All I knew was that if Al Gore was for it, I was against it,” the former South Carolina congressman says.

But after meeting with researchers and traveling to Antarctica, Inglis changed his mind about the science. And, as a committed Christian, he believes being a “good steward” of the planet is a moral responsibility.

During his years at the influential Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, analyst Jerry Taylor called himself a “lukewarmist.” That is, he believed that, while human activity might be contributing to modest temperature increases, the problem was manageable.

“I was not doing the due diligence I should have been doing,” he says today. The scientific case for climate change turned out to be stronger than he believed at the time, he says. And while some on the left hyped the issue, many on the right were “cherry picking the data” to make the problem seem less severe.

Taylor now heads the Niskanen Center, a policy group promoting bipartisan approaches to environmental and other issues. His group supports a carbon tax as a “hedge” against climate risk.

Many climate skeptics believe that, since climate models might be uncertain, there’s no need to take immediate action. Taylor argues the opposite: “Risk management is about looking at the full range of scenarios and then hedging against the worst outcomes,” he says.

But even as some conservatives acknowledge climate risks, most remain horrified by the climate proposals coming from the progressive left.

“The Green New Deal isn’t a serious plan to fix the climate,” says Kiera O’Brien founder of the group Young Conservatives for Carbon Dividends. “It’s just a label they want to use to remake the whole economy on a more left-wing model.”

Pro-climate conservatives believe the Green New Deal — with its massive costs and punishing regulations — would devastate the US economy. At the same time, they say, it wouldn’t do enough to address climate change. For one thing, it would impose huge burdens on the United States, without demanding much of other nations, especially China, the world’s top carbon emitter.

Any plan that makes it too expensive to produce goods in the US risks pushing manufacturing to countries with looser environmental rules. To fix that problem, the Baker-Shultz plan includes a “border adjustment.” This would be a tariff on imported goods based on the amount of carbon used in their production. Countries that impose their own tax at home would be exempt from the tariff, however. That means all countries would have a big incentive to mimic the US policy.

While the carbon tax appeals to economists and policy wonks, it’s hardly popular with the Republican Party base. Inglis lost a primary battle partly over his support for the idea. And, in 2018, House Republicans passed a mostly symbolic resolution stating their opposition to carbon taxes.

“It can be a difficult conversation at first,” Posner admits. “It’s got that ‘T’ word in it.”

Still, even Republicans who don't endorse the tax plan are showing a new willingness to talk about other approaches to climate change.

Upstate New York Congresswoman Rep. Elise Stefanik is a member of the bipartisan Climate Solutions Caucus in the House. Along with 19 other House Republicans, she has introduced a resolution supporting "conservative environmental stewardship."

Instead of carbon taxes, pro-climate Republicans like Stefanik focus on what they call an "all of the above" strategy. This includes incentives for renewable energy, research into ways to scrub carbon from smokestack emissions, and backing for safe new nuclear technologies. They believe that with some well-targeted research grants, tax breaks — and streamlined regulations — we can jump-start new green industries.

"It's not that Republicans don't care about the environment," says Danielle Butcher, a founder of the American Conservation Coalition, an advocacy group started by college students. "But they often haven't known how to talk about these issues."

Inglis, who has spent years trying to win over wary conservatives, agrees. "Standard environmental language isn't understood in red ZIP codes," he says.

"You have to use the language of abundance."

Instead of talking about the things people need to give up, conservatives should stress the opportunities that will come with developing green technology. "We can sell this tech around the world," he says. "We're going to have more energy, more mobility, more freedom."

Green conservatives tend to sigh a bit when asked whether their message will ever penetrate the Trump White House. "For now, we have two chambers of Congress to worry about," O'Brien says. "That's where I put my focus."

But at a recent NATO summit, Trump did volunteer that, "climate change is very important to me." He followed that with some vague comments about "very crystal clear, clean water and clean air." But green conservatives were cheered that he at least mentioned the issue.

"Republican support is rising," Inglis believes. "I'm optimistic we're going to get there."