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## How to persuade Americans to act on climate change

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The climate crisis is worsening at a rate that is becoming harder and harder to ignore.

For more than two decades, scientific reports have made it clear that global warming is real, that humans cause it and that the consequences will be dire. But the scientific community has become increasingly panicked over the past year. The latest assessment from the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change painted a far grimmer picture than its previous analyses, while the long-awaited National Climate Assessment made clear that climate change represents a severe threat to human health as well as our collective national and economic security. Out of this panic came the accord reached this past weekend by world leaders to keep the Paris climate agreement alive by adopting a detailed set of rules for implementation.

Yet many Americans still don't regard the threat as a key priority for our government, and support President Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris treaty. Many factors play into this dismissal of the scientific reality: Campaign contributions from fossil fuel companies have convinced elected officials to look the other way; a concerted and hugely effective disinformation campaign has swayed Americans; and a certain amount of despair has resulted in widespread apathy.

But there is another reason that has been discussed far less openly. While a growing number of people understand that climate change will have significant worldwide consequences, many Americans have an intuitive belief that our nation is more capable than others of adapting to a changed environment. Why? Because we have before.

This historical success, however, resulted from the federal government taking science seriously, and making investments to spur innovation and ingenuity.

In the mid-1930s, the Dust Bowl saw the desertification of 100 million acres in the High Plains, forcing tens of thousands of families to flee the region. Because the U.S. is so large, however, it was relatively easy to relocate this displaced population. Modern irrigation projects, miracle seeds and petrochemical fertilizers eventually allowed agriculture to return, and now nearly one-third of U.S. wheat is grown there — one reason for our impressive food security.

In the early 1940s, as the Nazis threatened to engulf the planet, President Franklin D. Roosevelt essentially took over the national economy and turned it into the most potent military machine in history, leading to the ultimate defeat of the fascists. In the 1960s, in reaction to the Soviet launches of the satellite Sputnik and cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, the Apollo space program proved the United States' superior technological capabilities by putting astronauts on the moon. And finally, in the 1970s, more than a dozen laws were passed to address environmental calamities such as air and water pollution, with tremendously positive results.

But these innovations did not happen by themselves, or simply because of the United States' bountiful resources. They depended on consistent and steadfast advocacy from our leaders about the need to take action when faced with crises. This has been especially true in the environmental realm.

Presidents from both political parties have advanced environmental security policies, in particular Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard M. Nixon and Jimmy Carter. Just as climate science became more robust in the 1980s, however, Americans began to reject environmental policies that they thought threatened their standard of living. This idea came from conservative think tanks, in particular the Heritage Foundation and Cato Institute, and fossil fuel lobbyists who argued economic growth and sustainable development were mutually exclusive. These climate change deniers suggested that efforts to address the crisis would crash the economy, despite mounting evidence that green policies could have large positive effects.

So environmental concerns became politicized. Republicans sided with the climate change deniers, while Democrats came to fear that campaigning for aggressive climate mitigation policies might cost them votes because the public so poorly understood the issue and its solutions. As a result, they failed to offer voters a consistent message that explained the dangers and opportunities presented by global warming. Thus the misguided notion that our comparative resiliency obviated the need to take action was allowed to fester.

President Bill Clinton had a shockingly modest record of advancing climate security, particularly given that his vice president, Al Gore, had been one of the most outspoken environmentalists in Congress. By far Clinton's biggest accomplishment was assigning Gore to participate in the Kyoto Protocol negotiations. Clinton chose, however, to avoid what surely would have been a vicious fight in the Senate to gain ratification of the treaty. While this effort probably would have failed, it would have signaled to the American people how seriously the Democratic Party took climate change. Instead, the party remained frustratingly uncertain about how to position itself on this issue.

President Barack Obama made significant progress toward increasing climate security during his tenure. He approved dramatic increases in the fuel economy of motor vehicles and, more importantly, broke new ground with the Clean Power Plan, which tackled the largest source of carbon pollution in the economy, coal-fired power plants.

The reality, however, was that all of this was done largely outside the public eye through executive power, leaving it vulnerable to court interventions and future reversals. This method also meant Obama largely failed to explain to the public why we needed to begin transitioning to a clean energy economy.

The good news? It might be politically advantageous to once more tackle environmental issues. Age cohorts that are significantly more progressive are replacing older, more conservative generations in the voting pool. These newer voters are more likely to be swayed by positive arguments about the need to tackle global warming. They already understand the threat that the climate crisis poses, in large part because they didn't grow up believing that energy profligacy was a U.S. birthright. They simply don't share the earlier generations' misplaced sense that our capacity for innovation already offers us climate security.

Thus, the time has clearly arrived for progressive candidates to start campaigning on a platform built around the need for a sustainability revolution. Such a plan should include a carbon tax, incentivized urban density, well-funded clean energy research, evolved agricultural policies and smarter intercity transport. Given that Generation X and millennials never bought into the fiction that the United States is immune to the dangers of global warming, the time is ripe to make climate security a crucial government responsibility. Only by doing so can we begin the long-overdue campaign to save the planet.