



## *Environmentalists Shouldn't Fear a GOP President*

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The remaining GOP presidential contenders are a mixed group in a lot of ways. On climate change, however, their views converge just as you might expect: they don't buy it.

All four candidates have voiced skepticism during the primary race and said they will reduce environmental regulations. Naturally, a number of high-profile environmental groups are [crying foul](#) this week in response. But the Republicans' skepticism is justified for one reason: The primary solution to climate change isn't federal or international regulations, but economic growth. And economic growth is undeniably the result of capitalism.

That may sound outrageous to many people, but here are a few things to consider before passing judgment. Poor societies have neither the means nor desire to clean up the environment; their citizens are too busy trying to survive to be bothered with such problems. But as these societies become wealthier, they acquire both the resources and desire to invest in conservation. Interestingly, this is precisely what a lot of economic research demonstrates. As the Cato Institute's Jerry Taylor [explains](#), "There are dozens of studies showing that, as per capita income initially rises from subsistence levels, air and water pollution increases correspondingly. But once per

capita income hits between \$3,500 and \$15,000 (dependent upon the pollutant), the ambient concentration of pollutants begins to decline just as rapidly as it had previously increased. This relationship is found for virtually every significant pollutant in every single region of the planet. It is an iron law." This relationship is known as the [Environmental Kuznets Curve](#) (EKC).

A number of factors contribute to rising living standards, but there's one that deserves more credit than any other: capitalism. That's a controversial assertion as well, but it, too, is supported by the evidence. The wealthiest countries around the world — and thus those with the best environmental conditions — are also the [freest](#). Their governments are relatively small, and they generally place a lot of emphasis on private property rights.

Critics may counter that many of these nations also have strong environmental regulations in place. But that objection is problematic because the regulatory efforts designed to reduce pollution tend to follow the reduction itself. This is precisely what happened in America's case, according to Taylor. We were already on the way to a cleaner environment before the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was created. Still, assuming that the criticism is valid, and it is in part, it only illustrates the point: wealthy nations are the ones with the resources and desire to clean up the environment. Economic growth has to come before any attempt to regulate pollution.

But all that was in the past. We're still emitting a lot of [carbon dioxide](#) today, and many economists don't believe that the EKC ultimately explains how we will reduce our CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. So if a Republican president guts the EPA next year, can we avoid the disastrous effects of climate change? Yes. As climatologist Roy Spencer [points out](#), if the market is allowed to work, the price of oil will continue to rise as it becomes scarcer, and that will create an incentive to develop alternative energy sources.

Environmentalists may complain that Roy Spencer is a conservative climate change "[denier](#)," and his work should be doubted as a result. But former Vice President Al Gore said essentially the same [thing](#) several years ago: "Free market capitalist economics is arguably the most powerful tool ever used by civilization. As the world's leading exemplar of free market economics, the U.S. has a special obligation to discover effective ways of using the power of market forces to help save the environment."

Not only is there ample evidence to support this alternative approach to climate change, but legislating the problem out of existence has so far failed. [Seventeen](#) attempts later, we've yet to enact a viable international climate treaty, and the billions of dollars so far spent on green energy have done little to get us away from fossil fuels.

So when critics call this year's lineup of Republican candidates "regressive" on the environment, they're being disingenuous. Addressing climate change doesn't come down to enacting heavy handed regulations or doing nothing and hoping for the best. Incentives to deal with the problem already exist in the marketplace. And if we end up with a Republican president who sticks to his pledge to promote economic growth, as all four contenders have, the chances of ensuring a stable climate are pretty good.