



# Can a conservative push Republicans from 'scientific denialism' to a carbon tax?

Evan Lehmann

May 13, 2015

Jerry Taylor considers himself a convert on climate change. But others might wonder whether climate change converted his conservatism.

White-bearded and slim, Taylor is the newest conservative outlier to promote aggressive action on greenhouse gas emissions. He left his post as vice president at the libertarian Cato Institute last year to make the case for what might be one of the least-liked policies in Republican circles: a new tax. His tax would be on carbon dioxide.

Taylor, now president of his own policy shop, the Niskanen Center, says Republicans are losing the fight over climate change. They look "alien" and "odd" to the public by rejecting atmospheric science and other areas, like gay marriage, he said. He also dismisses conservative arguments about a warming hiatus and warns that Democrats are primed to establish tough emissions policies, largely because Republicans refuse to talk lucidly about climbing temperatures.

All of this Taylor says in a snappy, matter-of-fact tone, like he has the cure for an illness that the Republican Party doesn't know it has.

"The Republican Party, I think, has a branding problem," Taylor said in a recent interview. "Increasingly, they look odd to the American people on a number of different fronts. And climate is one of them. You don't find this kind of vigorous scientific denialism outside of certain bastions in the right in the GOP."

Taylor, 51, is known as a hard-nosed debater who enjoys taking positions that others disagree with. Count his brother among them.

James Taylor is a few years younger and, according to multiple sources, is being groomed to oversee the Heartland Institute when Joe Bast, the current president, steps down. Heartland's work focuses on challenging the science behind climate change, and James Taylor's rise could establish him as a counterweight to his brother's promotion of a carbon tax.

Neither James Taylor nor Bast responded to requests for comment. And although one source said that James Taylor recently described his older sibling as an "apostate brother," other people who know them say the brothers talk in lighthearted terms about their differences.

## Reaganite becomes libertarian

Jerry Taylor's aggressive style is admired by his supporters, who say his efforts on carbon taxes could benefit the Republican Party by highlighting an uncomfortable topic that conservatives have avoided for years. Opponents describe Taylor as a glory-seeker who enjoys making waves just to see the boat rock.

"He'll push it," said one opponent to carbon taxes. "It seems to me the impetus is he always wants to prove that he's not only smarter than you are, he's smarter than all the people in the room put together. He likes that kind of confrontation."

It wasn't always this way for Taylor. He once shared the same doubts about global warming. In his early 20s, he would occasionally leave the University of Iowa to work on Republican political campaigns, having felt the GOP revival under President Reagan. He considered himself a Republican in the mold of William Buckley, the articulate founder of the *National Review*.

He also caroused. A lifestyle with drinking and flirting hurt his grades, and he left school for good in the late 1980s, eventually landing an internship with the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC). It turned into a permanent job. By day, he would work on energy and natural resources issues. At night, he would often hash over the competency of government with Michael Tanner, an ALEC co-worker who would also land at Cato and help sell the idea of establishing private savings accounts to replace Social Security.

These were good times for conservatives. George H.W. Bush had just won the presidency, making it the first time that Republicans held the White House for three consecutive terms since the 1930s. But Taylor pulled away. He became a libertarian like his friend Tanner. Elected conservatives didn't meet his expectations.

"I thought I was going to dedicate my life to electing these people," Taylor said. "And the more I got to know them, the less I cared about them."

Then Ed Crane called. It was 1991, and Crane's silhouette rose above the heads of most libertarians. He founded Cato 14 years earlier with the financial help of Charles Koch and, in 1980, served as a senior adviser to the presidential election campaign of Ed Clark and his running mate, David Koch. He wanted Taylor on board.

At Cato, Taylor became a specialist in energy and environmental issues. His views of global warming were symbolized in a 1998 speech, which offered many of the arguments that he now debunks. He said then that humans might contribute to warming, but that their influence is too small to worry about. He urged patience, saying action could "wait a couple decades."

"There is no compelling need to act now," Taylor said then.

## **What if Republicans are wrong?**

Turns out, Taylor only waited 16 years before changing his mind. Now, his call to action is based on a revenue-neutral approach: the idea that the cash collected from a carbon tax, amounting to perhaps trillions over a number of years, wouldn't result in higher overall tax payments because rates on corporate or personal income would be lowered.

But the libertarian touchstone in Taylor's plan would result in the termination of U.S. EPA's Clean Power Plan, to be revealed this summer. That idea reminds Tanner of those hazy nights 25 years ago spent talking about reducing the role of government. An economy-wide carbon tax would interfere less than EPA regulations, Tanner said.

"It would essentially put a tax on it and get out," he said. "I understand the case for it."

But does Tanner support it?

He couldn't say, because he doesn't know enough about it. That's one of the challenges that Taylor faces. Almost no one in the libertarian and Republican donor classes or policy shops talk openly about endorsing a carbon tax. The few exceptions include the R Street Institute, former Rep. Bob Inglis (R-S.C.), and some conservative economists in academia and at the American Enterprise Institute.

Robert Levy, chairman of the board at Cato, said that's why Taylor should press it into the public discussion.

"I happen to share his willingness to question the standard negative position on carbon taxes and the usual conservative line that we shouldn't have any climate regulation because the most likely outcome is that all of this is a lot of nonsense," Levy said of climate change.

That doesn't mean that Levy supports a carbon tax. But he would like to hear more discussion about it from the conservative perspective, "and you're not getting that from most folks on the right."

You won't hear Taylor talk about polar bears. His views on climate change are shaped by probabilities and consequences. To him, they equal risk. Indeed, it was that type of argument that helped persuade him to support a carbon tax.

He saw that most Republicans assume that the most likely outcome is maybe a little warming that causes a blip in damage. Well, what if they're wrong? What if their partisan views are obscuring a rational response to the small chance that warming could cripple future economic growth?

It's the idea that no one -- not scientists and not politicians -- can confidently predict how today's emissions will affect the future that persuaded Taylor that a hedge against a black swan outcome is a practical idea.

And maybe he's also drawn to the idea that not many people in Washington, D.C., agree with him.

"You can find reluctant agreement, but whole-hearted gunfire into the sky is a much different thing," Taylor said. "No, I haven't gotten gunfire in the sky."