



Climate change ‘converts’ reveal what changed their minds

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SALT LAKE CITY — In what feels like a former life, Jerry Taylor, 56, was a full-throated climate change skeptic. He penned op-eds, appeared on cable news networks and worked the “entire orbit of right-wing media,” arguing climate change was not a real problem.

“The policy was climate denialism 24-7,” said Taylor, who was the director of energy and environmental policy at the Cato institute at the time.

In Taylor’s eyes, climate change was a hoax, propagated by the exaggerated claims of alarmist liberal commentators. Time and time again, he told the American public there was no need to change the country’s energy strategy, no need to reduce carbon emissions and no need to fear. He believed — to his core — he was telling the truth.

Then, he says, his reality started to unravel.

“It didn’t all happen at once,” Taylor said. First, he began to have serious doubts about the credibility of the scientific counterarguments he was citing. Then he shifted his focus, professing that even if climate change is real, the level of action required to address it would impose staggering costs that would harm the economy more than climate change itself. Eventually, he began to lose faith in that argument as well.

Today, as founder of the [Niskanen Center](#), a Washington, D.C.-based think tank that promotes carbon taxation, Taylor is one of a growing number of climate change “converts.” Conservatives like him are contributing to a transformation of the Republican Party, which once stood fiercely opposed to action on the issue. Now, House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., is encouraging Republicans to come up with climate change legislation to counter Democrats’ Green New Deal, saying, “Let’s have that debate instead of everybody saying we’re just deniers,” as reported by the [Washington Examiner](#).

McCarthy’s comments signal “a tipping point” for the Republican party, said Alex Flint, executive director of Alliance for Market Solutions, an organization focused on “conservative, pro-growth solutions to reduce carbon pollution.”

On Tuesday, the United Nations released a [new report](#) that projects a “bleak” future involving more intense droughts, widespread food insecurity and rising sea levels. To avoid serious effects, worldwide carbon emissions must be cut drastically — by 7.6 percent a year — between now and 2030, the report said.

Forty-three percent of Republican voters are more concerned about climate change now than they were one year ago, according to a 2019 poll commissioned by the Climate Leadership

Council, and more than half want the government to take action to limit carbon emissions. For Republican voters under the age of 40, 58% say their concern has increased.

But there remains a stark divide between Republicans and Democrats on whether climate change is a “major threat” and whether it should be a “top priority for the president and Congress,” according to [Pew Research Center](#).

Taylor’s family is representative of that great American divide. His younger brother, James Taylor, 52, is one of the country’s most prominent voices arguing that humans are not causing an imminent climate “crisis” or “emergency.” In fact, global warming might be good for humanity, he says, because warmer weather could increase crop production in some regions, and fewer people die in the summer compared to [cold winter months](#).

Even skeptics can’t deny the scientific consensus that the climate has become warmer and that greenhouse gas produced by human activity has contributed to the temperature increase, said James Taylor, director of climate and environmental Policy at The Heartland Institute, a conservative think tank based in Illinois. However, the projected effects of a warmer climate are highly variable.

He points to uncertainty regarding the link between [global warming and hurricanes](#) or other tropical storms, for example. The [U.N.’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report](#) from last year says there is “low confidence regarding changes in global tropical cyclone numbers under global warming over the last four decades” and “low confidence in the conclusion that the number of very intense cyclones is increasing globally.”

However, the same report, which was produced by scientists from around the world who reviewed more than 6,000 studies, shows with “high confidence” that “human-induced global warming has already caused multiple observed changes in the climate system,” including rising ocean temperatures and more frequent heatwaves on land. The report states, with “medium confidence,” that human-induced global warming has led to more heavy precipitation events around the world and increased drought in some regions.

It also predicts that if global warming continues at the current rate, temperatures will reach 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels [as soon as 2030](#), which could contribute to food shortages, heavy precipitation in some areas and drought in others, species extinction (including the die-off of coral reefs) and damage to coastal communities.

The predictions don’t worry James Taylor, who says the selection process for IPCC scientists is biased. “People can look at scientific evidence and draw different conclusions,” he said.

To preserve family civility, the brothers don’t talk about their disagreements when they spend time together.

“We don’t talk about it because I’m not gonna change his mind, apparently, and I know that,” said Jerry Taylor, the older brother.

Jerry Taylor, who once shared the same views as his brother James, knows that climate skepticism runs deep. Political and personal identity, aversion to the solutions being proposed and a miscalculation of risk are some of the factors he says kept him from accepting that there is need to act and reduce carbon emissions.

Even if there's a small chance that the catastrophic risks scientists have predicted come true, Jerry Taylor said, the conservative response would be to take precautions.

Politics

James Taylor was raised by a single mother in housing projects in Newington, Connecticut. After Ronald Reagan was elected president, his family's welfare benefits were slashed, but his mother's take-home pay increased, and he saw his family rise out of poverty. The experience instilled in him a firm belief that personal and economic freedom is the best way to develop a strong economy and provide opportunities for people to succeed. Jerry Taylor spent the majority of his youth in Sioux City, Iowa, living with his dad, "a hardcore conservative." Both brothers say beliefs about climate change usually split along political lines because people tend to look for evidence that supports their worldview.

"Climate denialism is now threatening to become one of those sorts of things that are a fundamental matter of conservative political identity," said Jerry Taylor. "It's now approaching the holy grails of abortion and gun control and taxes."

James Taylor said he likes to focus on the facts and the evidence, not politics. For him to believe a crisis is occurring, he would have to see the global temperature rising more rapidly and more evidence that extreme weather events are increasing. He said people who are not inclined to oppose tax increases or giving authority to international bodies are less likely to think critically about climate change claims.

"For me, if someone is proposing restrictions on individual freedom, I want to look under the hood," he said.

Bob Inglis, a former congressman from South Carolina who once doubted the science of climate change, points to Al Gore's appearance in the 2006 documentary, "An Inconvenient Truth," as the reason he thought climate change was a liberal idea that would inevitably lead to bigger government and more regulation.

"All I knew was that Al Gore was for it, so I was against it," Inglis said. "I thought the U.N. was going to get with our EPA and regulate our very breath."

Inglis credits his son and a "spiritual awakening" after a 2008 U.S. House Science Committee trip to see the languishing Great Barrier Reef for his conversion to climate change activism. But that conversion also meant the end of his political career. In 2000, Inglis ran for a seventh term and decidedly lost the Republican primary.

"My most enduring heresy was saying climate change was real," Inglis said. "In those dark days of the great recession, people thought I had marched to the other side, that I was marching with the Democrats, not the party."

Instead of shying away from the topic of climate after his campaign failure, Inglis went on to become the executive director of RepublicEN, a nonprofit devoted to convincing politicians to support climate change solutions. He is putting his faith in young conservatives, like Nick Huey, 27, to change the culture of the Republican party.

Huey, a father who lives in Murray, Utah and works in advertising, volunteers as a spokesperson for RepublicEN and recently testified before the senate. He said he became obsessed with

finding an answer to climate change when he was a student at Brigham Young University. But he was turned off by leftist environmentalist groups that he thought pointed fingers and alienated conservatives with rhetoric and proposed solutions that made industry the enemy.

“Whatever the solution is, I want something that will preserve my freedoms and that of my family,” Huey said. For Huey, carbon taxation is the “clear path forward” because it puts a price on the harm caused by carbon emissions and is based in free market principles. Huey is working on a campaign with the Citizen’s Climate Lobby to show that Republicans and Democrats can team up on this solution.

“In my generation, they get it. They understand this is something we should be on board with,” Huey said. “But most people I talk to say, ‘I believe it, I have no idea what to do, so I ignore it.’”

Solution aversion

The biggest source of conservative skepticism on climate change is fear of what the solution might be, said Josiah Neeley, senior fellow in energy policy at the R Street Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based public policy research organization focused on free enterprise. The phenomenon of denying problems when the solutions are undesirable is called solution aversion.

“There is a suspicion that if they embrace the idea that climate is a problem, they are going to be pushed into some liberal or big government response to the whole thing,” said Neeley, who used to doubt there was anything that could reasonably be done to combat climate change.

As he did more research, Neeley’s view began to evolve. Now he says a revenue neutral carbon tax, deregulation of clean energy sources like nuclear and hydropower plants and cutting back of government subsidies for fossil fuel generation and the cost of living in disaster-prone areas could have a significant impact without hurting the economy. As a general principle, he believes reducing regulation to allow for more innovation will assist the natural proliferation of more efficient, cheaper clean energy solutions around the world.

“The message of fearmongering, that the sky is falling turns off a lot of Americans,” said Ted Halstead, founder of the Climate Leadership Council, a coalition of business, opinion and environmental leaders working on a carbon taxation plan they hope will garner broad bipartisan support. “The Green New Deal is so radical, vast and expensive, it turns off Republicans unanimously.”

Some climate science disputers have used cases where the risks of climate change have been exaggerated — like claims that climate change will lead to the total extinction of the human race — to dismiss the idea altogether, said Neeley.

“Most likely, we will be fine. Climate change will have a real but manageable cost,” Neeley said. “But there’s a small chance that the cost could be much, much more severe.”

The worst case scenario involves societal breakdown and social instability in parts of the world that are unable to deal with extreme weather, large sea level rise and permanent drought conditions, Neeley said.

“From a risk management perspective, we should do what can to try and minimize that risk,” said Neeley.

It was this way of thinking about risk that was the “final nail in the coffin” for Jerry Taylor’s move from climate denialism to activism. Near the end of his time at Cato, Jerry Taylor met with a top risk management expert from Goldman Sachs who convinced him that he needed to look at all potential outcomes.

“There is a great deal of uncertainty when it comes to climate change because it’s a one-off experiment we have never undertaken before,” Jerry Taylor said. “But if you look at the full distribution of possible outcomes and weigh them appropriately, some of those outcomes are truly apocalyptic. And if you price them to any extent whatsoever in your analysis that just absolutely compels government risk edging.”

Both Neeley and Jerry Taylor compared the appropriate risk management approach to the way Americans think about North Korea. The most likely outcome of North Korea developing nuclear warheads is that they never use them, but that is not the only scenario.

“We don’t base policy around best guesses when there’s a high degree of uncertainty,” Jerry Taylor said. “This is something that ought to resonate with conservatives.”

Dialogue

Climate converts agree that it doesn’t help when environmental advocates demonize or try to battle with those who are skeptical.

Barry Bickmore, a professor of geology at Brigham Young University, is another climate “convert” who refrains from calling people “climate deniers” or “liars” because he knows the majority have genuine doubts, which are typically based in truth. Instead, he prefers the term “truth-challenged.”

Bickmore used to disregard climate predictions because he knows how climate modeling works and how imperfect it is. He has also seen environmentalists exaggerate or even make up problems. So when he first started hearing about climate change, his knee-jerk reaction was to think, “It’s probably not as bad as they say it is.”

However, reading about the cover-up of environmental abuses associated with the Hanford nuclear production site in Benton County, Washington and the number of people in the surrounding area who got sick as a result, softened Bickmore to environmentalist causes.

Then he looked more closely at climate science. He realized that scientists have already accounted for the uncertainty of their models as they’ve drawn conclusions.

“Most people don’t have the expertise to look at it in-depth at the science, so they will make a snap decision,” Bickmore said. “We all have a mental block against changing our minds.”

When Huey encounters friends or family members who disagree with his views on climate change, he says the first thing he tries to do is listen.

“I try to go a step further than respecting their opinion. I try to actually learn something from them that will help me,” Huey said. “It really seems to open them up and create a safe space. I always make a sincere connection and we both come away with some new insights.”

James and Jerry Taylor's family gatherings may look different than most. James Taylor said the brothers don't talk about work. Instead, when they are together they keep the conversation focused on their families. Jerry Taylor said it's the best way to maintain good family relations.

"I know my brother's a very intelligent person and if he's reached a different conclusion, it's not because he's an idiot. There are different interpretations," said James Taylor.

"If people want to believe something, they are quite likely to hold on to that belief no matter what you say at Thanksgiving," said Jerry Taylor. "So the best approach would be a nonthreatening conversational approach which does more listening than talking ... people will change their minds or their feelings about something when they are ready to do so."