WHAT ROLE SHOULD CONSERVATIVES AND REPUBLICANS PLAY IN ADDRESSING CLIMATE CHANGE?

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What role should conservatives and Republicans play in addressing climate change? On this question, many on the left and right agree: conservatives have nothing to offer on the issue.

For those on the left, climate change is an important issue, but it is one that will require a strong government response beyond what Republicans are likely to accept. Therefore, climate strategies should focus on implementing policies without buy-in from the right. Historically, far too many on the right have implicitly conceded the point that conservative principles have little to offer in response to climate, choosing instead to downplay or even dismiss the problem.

Both of these views are, in my opinion, mistaken. Conservatives do have productive things to add in coming up with climate policy solutions. And that is good, because for climate policy to be successful over the long term, it will have to include policies supported by a substantial number of Republicans and conservatives.

If we look at major policy changes over the last 70 years, they have typically involved a substantial amount of minority party support. For example, when Medicare was enacted in 1965, roughly half of Republicans voted for it.[1] Similarly, the 1986 tax reform was supported by more than two-thirds of Democrats in the House of Representatives and three-quarters of Democrats in the Senate.[2] Without substantial minority party support, reforms remain fragile, and are subject to being undermined or even outright repealed when the then minority party regains majority status, as it always will.

This is particularly important when it comes to climate change, which is a long-term problem. In order to reduce the risks and costs of climate change, it is not enough to reduce emissions in the short term. Emissions must stay down for decades and even centuries. A policy such as a moratorium on oil and gas permitting on federal land, for example, may prevent some production for a few years. But the oil is not going anywhere, and if a future president lifts the ban and demand for oil and gas has not been permanently reduced, the long-term emissions consequences of the original ban could be slight.

The Obama administration's Clean Power Plan provides an example case study of the importance of sustainable climate policy over a "whatever you can get now" strategy. When Barack Obama became president, he sought to pass a cap-and-trade bill, but despite large majorities in both houses of Congress, he was not able to get his plan enacted. He then turned to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to circumvent Congress. The result was the Clean Power Plan, which aimed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from the electric sector.

The Clean Power Plan lived a short, sad life. In early 2016, the Supreme Court-ordered implementation of the rule halted while legal challenges were resolved. After the 2016 election, the new Trump EPA withdrew the rule, ultimately replacing it with a scaled-down version known as the Affordable Clean Energy rule. This rule met a similar fate as the Clean Power Plan;

it was struck down by the D.C. Court of Appeals, never went into effect and will likely be withdrawn by the Biden administration. After 12 years of work, U.S. climate policy stands more or less where it did over a decade ago, and attempts to develop a revised Clean Power Plan 2.0 face the daunting prospect of a 6-3 conservative Supreme Court majority.

It is worth noting that the United States met the emissions targets of the Clean Power Plan despite it never fully going into effect. In fact, the United States met these goals more than a decade ahead of schedule, and before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.[3] While beyond the scope of this essay, the implications of this are worth their own in-depth analysis.

As the saga of the Clean Power Plan shows, a sustainable climate policy needs to be based on something more substantial than an executive action that is reversible with each new administration (and that may take longer than a single administration to implement).

More and more people on the left are recognizing the need for true bipartisanship to deal with climate change. At the same time, Republicans are beginning to realize that a "just say no" approach to the climate issue is no longer workable. In February of 2020, House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy unveiled an initial series of bills dealing with various aspects of climate change.[4] While the subsequent rollout of additional phases was preempted by the COVID-19 pandemic, these efforts will continue and grow in the future.

Given that Republican support is needed for climate policy to succeed, what, if anything, can be done? Contrary to popular belief, there are policies that can both help reduce greenhouse gas emissions and increase the resilience to climate change that could be appealing to conservatives and Republicans.

When considering how to increase right-of-center support for climate policies, it is important to keep in mind a seemingly paradoxical truth: people can support good climate policies even if they do not care about climate change per se. Indeed, the nature of politics is that successful policies often involve coalitions of different groups that support the same policy for fundamentally differently reasons.

In the same way, there are many policies that will help either to reduce greenhouse gas emissions or adapt to the effects of climate change that conservatives might support for reasons that have nothing to do with climate change. For instance, conservatives are more likely to support climate policies if they involve: eliminating government subsidies and regulations; increasing market competition; or lessening the burden of taxation.

In medicine, though not explicitly stated, a bedrock principle of the Hippocratic Oath is "first, do no harm."[5] This is also a good principle for climate policy. While a lot of discussion on climate focuses on how government can promote clean energy, the fact is that many government regulations are simultaneously hampering the development and deployment of clean energy. For example, long and complicated approval processes currently discourage a major source of clean energy: hydropower. The average time needed to approve a hydropower project is as much as 15 years.[6] Delays also plague approval for supplementary hydropower capacity to existing dams, despite the fact that this would not create additional environmental impacts.

Second, both climate mitigation and adaptation can be aided by increased use of markets and competition. Over the course of the coming century, climate change is expected to exacerbate already severe water shortages throughout the western United States. Yet the trading of water rights is an incredibly slow and bureaucratic process. Water rights in western states are limited to a particular use, such as agriculture, municipal or industrial. To change the use of a water right requires a time-consuming and costly process. As a result, water rights for certain uses—such as agriculture—trade for pennies on the dollar compared to the cost of water rights for other uses. This can lead to perverse situations where large quantities of water are used in California to grow products like almonds while cities face severe water restrictions. Allowing water to flow to its more valued use would greatly help the climate adaptation process.

Similarly, competition in the electric sector is important for increasing the amount of clean energy on the electric grid. Clean energy has increased rapidly in recent years due to falling costs and increased demand for green energy. But in many states, utilities have been slow to provide green energy options or have geared such products to a small number of customers. Allowing all customers to purchase clean energy from the open market would speed the transition to a low emissions grid.

Finally, a word on taxes: Conservatives have long sought to shift the burden of taxation away from wages and income, and toward consumption. A carbon tax swap could be a vehicle to make this idea a reality. A swap would put a price on carbon and use the revenue generated to offset cuts to other, more burdensome taxes.

Right and left may not see eye to eye on many issues. But achieving progress on climate change need not wait until the unlikely day that these differences are resolved. To form a sustainable climate policy, both right and left will need to bring their own perspectives to develop the best policies that can last over the long term.

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[1] See "To Agree to Conference Report on H.R. 6675, The Social Security Amendments of 1965," available at https://www.govtrack.us/congress/votes/89-1965/s174; "To Agree to Conference Report on H.R. 6675, A Bill to Provide a Hospital Insurance Program, available at https://www.govtrack.us/congress/votes/89-1965/h97.

[2] "To Accept the Conference Report on HR 3838, A Bill to Reform the Internal Revenue Laws of the United States, Clearing the Measure for Senate Action," available at https://www.govtrack.us/congress/votes/99-1986/h818; "To Agree to the Conference Report on HR 3838, The Tax Reform Act of 1986," available at https://www.govtrack.us/congress/votes/99-1986/s677.

[3] Philip Rossetti, "Don't expect regulations to be a viable climate policy," *R Street Blog*, Dec. 3, 2020. https://www.rstreet.org/2020/12/03/dont-expect-regulations-to-be-a-viable-climate-strategy/.

[4] Melanie Zanona et al., "Kevin McCarthy faces uneasy right flank over climate push," *Politico*, Feb. 13, 2020. https://www.politico.com/news/2020/02/13/gop-climate-change-kevin-mccarthy-115025.

[5] National Library of Medicine, "Greek Medicine," National Institutes of Health, Feb. 7, 2012. https://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/greek/greek_oath.html.

[6] Devin Hartman and Tom Russo, "Ebbing the Flow of Hydropower Red Tape," *R Street Policy Study*, No. 105, August 2017. https://www.rstreet.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/105-1.pdf.