

Republicans and Global Warming: Getting Beyond the Climate of Denial

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Good Morning.

Republicans for Environmental Protection may sound like an oxymoron, but it is not. Our organization, as its name suggests, is dedicated to improving the environmental performance of the Republican Party and of Republican elected officials. Obviously there is quite a bit of work to be done.

When it comes to the issue of climate change, we still have far too many Republicans unwilling to face the problem. Some refuse to even acknowledge that there is a problem, while others are in denial about man's culpability and the role played by the burning of fossil fuels.

Prudence and taking responsibility are core conservative values. Edmund Burke — he is universally accepted as the father of modern conservatism — regarded prudence as "the first of all virtues." In addition to careful deliberation, prudence means making provision for the future and judging a measure by its long term consequences.

Republican conservatives, if they were true to their conservative creed, would not only want to fully understand climate change and its impacts, they would be eager to find effective solutions and address the problem early on — before the severity of the problem requires a more drastic and costly response.

We are hoping that the 2006 election results, which have put our party in more of a self-reflective mode, will help us change attitudes on this and other environmental issues. Beyond that there are other reasons to be optimistic.

First, history is on our side. The Republican Party has undergone many transformations, and historically, has been pretty good at safeguarding the environment. It has a long and storied conservation tradition that began with the vision and leadership of President Theodore Roosevelt. Republicans in Congress, such as Rep. John Saylor, were instrumental in passage of the Wilderness Act and the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

President Nixon, for all of his faults, created the Environmental Protection Agency and signed into law the Clean Air Act, the Endangered Species Act and the National Environmental Policy Act.

President Reagan, not known for his environmental credentials, signed 43 wilderness bills into law and was instrumental in U.S. ratification of the Montreal Protocol - which dramatically reduced emissions of ozone depleting gases.

Secondly, polls indicate that Republican voters favor environmental protection much more strongly than is represented by many of their GOP leaders in Congress and the White House.

Nowhere is this more evident than with the global warming issue. A survey conducted in January of likely Republican primary voters in South Carolina found that 56% believe global warming is happening, 53 percent support a cap and trade plan to reduce carbon emissions, and a whopping 81 percent think the United States should take action to reduce carbon dioxide from cars, factories and power plants.

So how do we explain the climate of denial that exists among many Republican leaders?

I see two primary factors that have created this problem.

First, is the party's susceptibility to the business lobby. Somehow the notion has been loosed within GOP circles that supporting capitalism and economic growth requires an almost blind allegiance to the parochial agendas of business and industry.

The Bush Administration's reluctance to address global warming epitomizes this view.

When conservatives allow the business community's resistance to change and corporate concerns about near-term profitability to dominate their thinking, they become myopic, losing perspective on what is in the best interest of the nation and society as a whole.

Then there is the matter of political polarization and the notion that environmental protection is a liberal cause. Partisans from both ends of the ideological spectrum have contributed to the polarization of environmental issues. Probably the most insidious and irresponsible of these partisans are the radical self-professed "conservatives" that dominate our radio airwaves.

Personalities like Rush Limbaugh ridicule conservation and parrot the business lobby's talking points. Last week I heard one of these talk show radicals, Andrew Wilkow, who was filling in on the Mark Levin show, argue that global warming is nothing but a grand UN inspired liberal conspiracy to destroy our capitalist economy and our American way of life.

I assume that conspiracy would now have to include the CEO's of Alcoa, Duke Energy, DuPont, Ford Motor Company, Caterpillar, Lehman Brothers and Pacific Gas & Electric.

If we are to generate support among conservatives and break down resistance from the Republican establishment, we must aggressively counter the idea that addressing climate change is anti-business and anti-conservative. We must work to marginalize the radical voices that conservatives listen to, and we need more *traditional conservatives* engaging conservative audiences about this issue in an intellectual and non-threatening way.

What most people don't realize is that the Rush Limbaughs and Ann Coulters of the world are not real conservatives. They don't derive their viewpoints from true conservative principles, but from a twisted idolatry of extreme capitalism that focuses almost exclusively on short-term profitability and personal gratification.

In many ways it is the same kind of "if it feels good do it" attitude that was prevalent in the counter-cultural movement of the 1960s. Hardly conservative.

The founding fathers of modern conservative thought such as Edmund Burke, Russell Kirk and Richard Weaver – were they alive today – would be appalled at the notions currently being advanced in the name of conservatism.

Burke saw human society as an eternal contract between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are yet to be born. He pointed out that people living today are the earth's "temporary possessors" and that they must not be "unmindful...of what is due posterity."

Burke believed that governing with a focus on narrow interests and short-term gratification is immoral. He warned of its effect on the "continuity of the commonwealth" predicting "No one generation could link with another. Men would become little better than the flies of a summer."

Kirk warned against those "conservatives" who "assure us that great corporations can do no wrong" and who would govern by "placating certain powerful interests." He concluded that such people "cannot govern well."

He echoed Burke's views of social responsibility in a way that clearly instructs on an issue like global warming. He wrote, "Nature is not simply the sensation of the passing moment; it is eternal, though we evanescent men experience only a fragment of it. We have no right to imperil the happiness of posterity by impudently tinkering with the heritage of humanity."

Each of these great conservative thinkers represent a much more authoritative voice on what is and isn't conservative than Limbaugh and similar present day radicals.

It is difficult to imagine a problem that is more in need of traditional conservative leadership than global climate change. After all, conservatism's greatest strength is the moral obligation it demands of present generations to restrain their physical appetites, treat the world with reverence and protect the inheritance of future generations.

Even those who are ideologically in the furthest reaches of the free market libertarian camp should oppose policies that allow pollution-intensive industries to externalize costs that will ultimately be borne by other businesses.

In fact, the business community is no longer united against carbon caps, and the energy security issue is playing a larger role in how conservatives view renewable energy. I believe that we have an unprecedented opportunity to change the minds of conservatives on the need to address climate change.

Another key to cultivating conservatives is preventing liberal partisans from using the climate change issue in a way that further polarizes the issue and makes it harder to reach a broad national consensus or coalesce around effective solutions.

With a Democrat majority in both chambers of Congress, it will be tempting for many in the environmental community to ignore Republicans and to inadvertently become pawns in the partisan objectives of Democrats. That would be a big mistake. Slowing and reversing global warming will require consistent progress over many decades and political fortunes can turn on a dime. We simply cannot afford to have progress on such a critical issue held hostage to ever shifting political winds. Addressing climate change must become a truly bi-partisan issue.

I'll leave you with one last Kirk quote:

"The issue of environmental quality is one which transcends traditional political boundaries. It is a cause which can attract, and very sincerely, liberals, conservatives, radicals, reactionaries, freaks, and middle-class straights."

It's up to us to make sure it does.