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A conservative looks at climate change

Remarks as prepared for delivery

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My name is Eli Lehrer. I grew up in a home with a Ronald Reagan doormat, a stream of progressive direct mail and a regular parade of leftist dinner guests.

But in my teenage years, I had some hard decisions to make. Coming to terms with my identity.

And I think my parents are still in denial about the choice I made to live the lifestyle I have chosen ... ***as a conservative Republican.***

In the past 20 or so years, I've worked for the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, the Heartland Institute and the Republican Senate majority leader. I'm proud to be a Republican. I *like* the principles my party stands for.

And I care about climate change, in part, because I believe we can solve it *only* through adherence to conservative principles. There are others more qualified than me to talk about the national security implications of climate change and the specific science behind it.

I will say this: the conclusions we can draw from what some call "settled science" are modest. It's certain that climate change is real and human-caused to a significant extent. Science also indicates—but cannot prove—that business as usual with regard to CO₂ will have negative consequences that outweigh positive ones.

That's about it.

We can forecast a lot about what might happen based on this science and determine almost *nothing* about the correct public policy.

There *is* uncertainty...not about climate change itself, but about what we ought to do. Denying this uncertainty about policy is no more helpful than it is to deny the reality of climate change.

If we cannot be certain about the policy, we can be certain of one thing: whatever happens, we will be better off if we, as a society, can create wealth and advance science. As the effects of climate change become clearer, for good or for ill, having more money to deal with them will be good. The free market—not regulation, not crony capitalism, not central planning—is what creates wealth.

Conservatives believe in the future. We believe in ingenuity, creativity and the power of the market to bring people together without central control or planning. Our policies—founded in human experience, informed by prudence and oriented to advance liberty—simply work better than those proffered by those on the left. These are not a matter of “fixed ideology” but rather, as Russell Kirk said, principles that will “will vary with the circumstances and necessities of [the] era.”

The circumstances and necessities of our era, Kirk would agree, require that we say *something* about climate change. In line with my beliefs, I have an agenda for dealing with climate change I’d like to share with you. It has three components and, if you’re a conservative like me, you’ll like them all.

Tax relief. Regulatory relief. Smaller government.

First, dealing with climate change should involve tax relief. We should make deep cuts in income taxes—particularly in our hugely uncompetitive, wage-cutting, job-destroying corporate income taxes—by taxing something we need less of, CO₂, in order to create things we want more of: investment, wages and prosperity. It would be desirable to eliminate the corporate income tax outright and, with a carbon tax, we can.

Dealing with climate change should involve regulatory relief. The huge curriculum of proposed Clean Air Act regulations, state renewable portfolio standards and innovation-choking regulations needs to go. Increased natural-gas production has done more to reduce CO₂ emissions than any other cause. We should allow these processes to continue to expand if we want less CO₂. Despite huge advances in wind and solar power, as well as battery storage, nuclear power remains the only way to generate CO₂-free baseload power. Restrictions and endless environmental reviews on siting alternative energy sources on public lands and building new high-capacity power lines also should give way for more solar and wind development.

Dealing with climate change should shrink government. We don’t need subsidies for alternative fuels or for fossil fuels. We don’t need government paying private-sector product development costs. We need, instead, a limited but assertive agenda focused on basic research and pilot programs, strong national labs and strong research universities that pursue work the private sector won’t. Not giveaways for crony capitalists. Not subsidies to private industry.

Nobody, me included, pursues any policy agenda in a vacuum. I believe that capitalism, democracy, traditional moral values, civil liberties and limited government work better than the alternatives.

If you don’t like this agenda, that’s fine. Let’s have a debate over it. I welcome it. That’s why we have representative institutions.

But there's no reason we can't have a climate change agenda that's acceptable and even popular on the right. We do not need to cede ground to the left. And we don't need to ignore an important issue.

There's no reason that conservatives can't care about climate change. If we want to stay true to our creed of caring about the future, we must. Thank you.