

Testimony of Benjamin Backer

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House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy, and the Environment

and the House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis

"Voices Leading the Next Generation on the Global Climate Crisis."

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Good morning, my name is Benji Backer, President and Founder of the American Conservation Coalition. I would like to thank Chairman Keating, Ranking Member Kinzinger, Chairwoman Castor, and Ranking Member Graves for holding this important hearing. I very much appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today on one of the greatest challenges facing humanity—global climate change.

Addressing an issue as daunting as climate change will take a bold, multidimensional, inventive approach at all levels of government. I look forward to providing a fresh perspective on this issue as a young conservative. During today's hearing, I will cover the importance of American leadership on climate change, as well as:

- Pragmatic solutions to lower emissions
- Privilege and equity
- A limited-government, market-based approach
- A call-to-action to important stakeholders

I'm a 21 year-old senior at the University of Washington in Seattle and a resident of Appleton, Wisconsin. I'm a lifelong conservative activist. Like most in my generation, regardless of political affiliation, I believe climate change is real. I believe humans are making an impact. Most importantly, I believe the United States leadership plays a vital role in helping solve this problem.

The American Conservation Coalition is a nonprofit organization focused on bolstering conservative voices in environmental discussions, ranging from conservation to climate change. We work on 180 college campuses nationwide. This summer, we were the first conservative organization to bring over 50 students to Washington, D.C. to advocate for common-sense action on climate change.

I'm honored to share this panel with such distinguished witnesses. Greta Thunberg, Vic Barrett, and Jamie Margolin have each played important roles in generating worldwide awareness around climate change. In the coming decades, our generation will be the ones tasked with finding solutions, and I'm grateful to be surrounded by young leaders who are transforming this conversation.

With global carbon emissions rising 1.7% last year, an important American election on the horizon, and more youth demanding action than ever before, we're at a crossroads in history.¹ Without bipartisan solutions on climate change, nothing can be accomplished. Most importantly, our conversations related to climate change should focus on cutting global greenhouse gas emissions, not pandering to a political base or scoring political points. This conversation needs to be about the most efficient and comprehensive ways to cut global emissions. My generation doesn't care about the politics around climate change. We just want productive discussions, realistic answers, and sound policy solutions. I urge every elected official listening to put partisan politics aside and collaborate on this pivotal issue. It is my belief that history will look kindly on those who worked across the aisle to find solutions.

That being said, there is no simple answer. There is no single plan that will solve the challenges we face. Fighting climate change will require many policies, diverse approaches, and efforts from governments, companies, and individuals working together. Just as citizens in Greenland and Louisiana feel the effects of climate change differently, we need diverse policies that are tailored to different nations' capabilities and challenges. Most importantly, we need innovative technologies that not only zero out emissions, but do so in a way that is affordable for all nations.

So, what does a serious approach to climate change look like?

First, the United States must continue to lead by example. Between 2005 and 2017, we led the world in emissions reductions—more than the next twelve countries combined.² While our contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions is declining, we still contribute nearly 15% of global emissions.³ To put this into perspective, that 15% means we are the second highest-emitting country in the world. The United States has long served as an inspiration to people and nations around the globe. Our nation has an opportunity to inspire global action in the same way on climate change.

However, some Americans have been told that one-size-fits-all approaches, such as the Green New Deal or cap and trade, are the only solution. Such policies advocate for an economic transformation that will increase government control, spending, and regulation. These inhibit innovation—and are not the most effective way to reduce emissions on a global scale. More critically, developing nations are unwilling and unable to afford to implement policies like the Green New Deal. Adopting a policy that hampers the growth and global deployment of green technologies would be detrimental to the environment.

Importantly, we must also understand the privilege we, as Americans, bring to this conversation. Across the globe, those who can adapt to climate change most easily are wealthy and live in

¹ <https://www.iea.org/geco/emissions/>

² <https://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/energy-economics/statistical-review-of-world-energy.html>

³ <https://www.earth-syst-sci-data.net/10/2141/2018/>

first-world countries. That is true in regards to adaptation to extreme weather, but also in terms of affording a “green” lifestyle and technologies. It’s unfair to ask someone to make choices based on sustainability when they are struggling to survive. Many proposed climate policies would have a disproportionate effect on low-income individuals and families, who are worried about putting food on the table and powering their homes.

We need to balance affordable energy access and climate mitigation goals. There are still over 1 billion people without electricity worldwide.⁴ Even in the United States, millions of Americans are acutely sensitive to changes in energy prices. As we work to transition to a cleaner energy landscape in the United States and abroad, we need to consider the most vulnerable in our communities. It’s our responsibility to lower the cost of clean energy and improve grid reliability so that developing countries can adopt them. American climate policy needs to lift up the rest of the world economically, be measured through emissions reduction (not just feel-good rhetoric), and focus on exporting cleaner, more efficient technologies.

If we’re serious about curbing climate change before 2050, we must work to make each energy source cleaner and more affordable for all. Transitioning to clean energy will happen, and must happen, but it won’t happen overnight. The reality is that most nations across the globe rely on fossil fuels to power their homes and businesses. Because countries will resist keeping their energy wealth in the ground, we need to focus on decarbonizing fossil fuels. That conversation will be far more productive than pushing a complete phase out of fossil fuels.

To actually reduce global emissions, America must work to enhance the technology around carbon capture for fossil fuel emissions, increase the amount of nuclear and hydropower in the world’s energy portfolio, continue to develop and implement solar and wind, and encourage research and development for other clean energy technologies. It is easier and more productive to export new innovative technologies than burdensome regulations, such as the Green New Deal, especially to rapidly developing nations.

We must take quick, effective action on climate change, but we cannot regulate our way out of this problem. That’s why we need to utilize innovation, technology, and markets to move forward. From innovation in the oil and natural gas space that reduced both emissions and energy costs, to improvements in wind and solar technology, and breakthrough products from companies like Tesla, the United States has led the world in emissions reductions. The private sector is often in a better position to make these changes. Many American companies, including 194 of the world’s largest, have voluntarily pledged to shift to 100% clean energy. Innovation, technology, and market competition are non-partisan, and have reduced emissions regardless of whether a Republican or Democrat has sat in the White House. Countries leading in emissions reductions have some of the most free economic markets in the world. In contrast,

⁴ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/06/1-billion-people-lack-electricity-solution-mini-grid-iea/>

countries with highly-restrictive and government-controlled economic systems, like Venezuela, have disastrous environmental records.⁵ We can't ignore this reality.

The discussion of climate change is often dominated by voices spreading hopelessness and despair. While the gravity of climate change is clear, studies show that the “gloom and doom” approach has turned away a large number of people from the discussion, which, in turn, has limited engagement on this issue. I urge those of us who care about climate change to improve the conversation by showing our optimism. In reality, the challenge of climate change provides a beneficial opportunity to improve human health, save lives, support people who need it the most, and stimulate our economy through the creation of new jobs and technologies. Fortunately, there are promising signs on the horizon. Many bipartisan bills have been introduced—and passed—in the last two years. We're reducing emissions and creating remarkable new technologies every day. More Republicans are speaking up than ever before. Despite the mainstream narrative, we're making strides in the right direction—but we must do more.

Each of us play a crucial role in tackling climate change:

- To my fellow conservatives: The climate is changing. To whatever degree humans have impacted the changes we're seeing, we can chart a better course for the future. It's time to claim our seat at the table and develop smart, limited-government policies that establish American leadership on this issue. Climate change policies have become unappealing for conservatives because we've refused to lend our voice in the discussions. There is a reasonable, conservative response to climate change that we should embrace.
- To those on the left: Without your leadership, this issue would not be receiving the attention it deserves. But now, it's time for solutions. Politicizing climate change has deepened the partisan divide and delayed real action. Climate change should not be a wedge issue; rather, it should be one that is free of party labels. If you truly want to address climate change, work with conservatives who are ready to fight alongside you on implementing evidence-based policies.
- To the private sector: Sustainability and profit are no longer at odds. Young people like myself are supporting companies that share our values. Legislation moves slowly. You, however, have the power to make swift and meaningful changes to vastly reduce emissions. Take the opportunity to show that businesses are responsible members of the global community. The time to lead is now.

⁵<https://www.heritage.org/international-economies/report/how-economic-freedom-promotes-better-health-care-education-and>

- To Congress: On climate change, it's not about Republicans or Democrats, it's about those who are taking effective action, and those who are not. Ronald Reagan once said: "The person who agrees with you 80 percent of the time is a friend and an ally – not a 20 percent traitor." Your party labels won't matter if this challenge goes unanswered. Neither side will get everything they want in legislation that tackles climate change, but the issue is more important than that. Make your mark and show the rest of the nation—and the world—what true leadership looks like.
- To President Trump: Climate science is real...it's not a hoax. It's not only liberal activists who are pushing the science. It is accepted that humans are having a negative impact on our climate. As a proud American, as a lifelong conservative, and as a young person, I urge you to accept climate change for the reality it is and to respond accordingly. If you care about our national security, the health of our economy, our natural environment, or the future of the Republican Party—act now. We have an opportunity to show our nation's strength by leading on this issue. Americans are feeling the impacts of climate change today and your leadership on this would be a monumental step forward.
- To our partners around the world: we cannot address this problem alone. Fighting climate change is a global challenge and every nation has a stake in it. Each country will need to tackle this issue differently—and we must respect that. At the same time, we must unite across borders around meaningful responses.
- To young people: You have remarkable, unparalleled power. The four of us testifying here today are all under the age of 22. There has never been an easier time to make a difference as a young person than right now. The world is listening, with open ears and hearts, to young voices just like yours. Stand up for what you believe in, uplift the world, and don't back down. Become educated and make a difference on a local, state, national, and/or global scale. You're never too young to make your mark on this world. Climate change is about your future and people need to hear you.

In conclusion, a truly effective climate plan will capitalize on America's strengths: technological advancement, empowered consumers, entrepreneurial businesses, limited, but effective government, bold global leadership—and measure its success from emissions reductions.

I grew up on the shores of Lake Minocqua, a tranquil lake in northern Wisconsin, where I connected with the outdoors early in life. Nature is where I find the most peace and calm within myself. That's why I founded the American Conservation Coalition—to fight for wild places and to stop climate change from destroying them. The health of the environment affects all of us, regardless of where we live, our background, or political affiliation. It will take all of us to find solutions to climate change and protect our planet for generations to come.

Thank you.