

# Follow the Science' Leads to Ruin

Climate policy needs to take into account the costs of draconian measures, which are enormous.



ILLUSTRATION: MARTIN KOZLOWSKI

More than one million people die in traffic accidents globally each year. Overnight, governments could solve this entirely man-made problem by reducing speed limits everywhere to 3 miles an hour, but we'd laugh any politician who suggested it out of office. It would be absurd to focus solely on lives saved if the cost would be economic and societal destruction. Yet politicians widely employ the same one-sided reasoning in the name of fighting climate change. It's simply a matter, they say, of "following the science."

That assertion lets politicians obscure—and avoid responsibility for—lopsided climate-policy trade-offs. Lawmakers contend that because climate change is real and man-made, it is only scientifically logical that the world end fossil-fuel use. Any downsides are a mathematical inevitability rather than something politicians chose to inflict on constituents.

The Biden administration has set the goal of achieving a net-zero emissions economy by no later than 2050. President Biden has pushed [costly yet ineffective](#) programs such as the Inflation Reduction Act to reduce U.S. emissions. If you ask the president's outgoing climate envoy, John Kerry, there is no alternative. He claimed [only a couple of weeks](#) ago that "nothing that we are doing, nothing that President Biden has sought to do, has any political motivation or ideological rationale. It's entirely a reaction to science, to the mathematics and physics that explain what is happening."

This way of thinking conflates climate science and climate policy. Man-made climate change exists, but what societies do in response is still a matter of choice. When politicians tell us we must "follow the science" toward extreme climate policies, they are really trying to shut down the discussion of enormous, unsustainable costs. We shouldn't let them.

Climate change is a real problem but isn't the imminent existential crisis of which the media and activist politicians breathlessly warn. They run headlines and give speeches about extreme weather events, though the United Nations' panel of climate scientists hasn't been able to document evidence of most of them worsening. [The data show that climate-related deaths from droughts, storms, floods and fires have declined by more than 97% over the last century, from nearly 500,000 annually to fewer than 15,000 in the 2020s. That's a real human cost but far from cataclysmic. More people die in traffic accidents in an average week.](#)

Yet pervasive environmental fear-mongering has encouraged anxious protesters across the world's wealthiest nations to proclaim that we "[just stop oil](#)," along with coal and gas. That's as ludicrous as trying to end traffic deaths by setting speed limits to near zero worldwide. Their demands would prevent some deaths but also destroy life as we know it.

Over the past two centuries, global life quality has dramatically improved, to a large extent because of an incredible increase in energy, mostly from the harnessing of fossil fuels. That has made agriculture, industry and transportation vastly more productive. Average life spans have more than doubled, hunger has dramatically declined, and real income has increased tenfold. We risk all that progress if we just stop using fossil fuels.

[The world still gets four-fifths of its energy from fossil fuels, because renewable sources rarely provide good alternatives. Half the world's population entirely depends on food grown with synthetic fertilizer produced almost entirely by natural gas. If we rapidly ceased using fossil fuels, four billion people would suddenly be without food. Add the billions of people dependent on fossil-fuel heating in the winter, along with our dependence on fossil fuels for steel, cement, plastics and transportation, and it is no wonder that \[one recent estimate\]\(#\) by economist Neil Record showed an abrupt end to fossil fuel use would cause six billion deaths in less than a year.](#)

Few politicians advocate solutions this extreme, but many use activist paranoia about global extinction to justify proposals with only marginally more sensible timelines. Rather than knocking speed limits down to zero in one blow, they plan to force them to a crawl across several decades. It's still a destructive idea. Politicians suppress discussion by

grandstanding about the existential threat climate change poses. Weigh the actual costs of the proposals, and it becomes obvious that they're preposterous.

A new peer-reviewed [study](#) of all the scientific estimates of climate-change effects shows the most likely cost of global warming averaged across the century will be about 1% of global gross domestic product, reaching 2% by the end of the century. This is a very long way from global extinction.

Draconian net-zero climate policies, on the other hand, will be prohibitively costly. The [latest peer-reviewed](#) climate-economic [research](#) shows the total cost will average \$27 trillion each year across the century, reaching \$60 trillion a year in 2100. Net zero is more than seven times as costly as the climate problem it tries to address.

Our goal in forming climate policy should be the same we bring to traffic laws and any other political question: achieve more benefits than costs to society. A richer world is much more resilient against weather extremes. In the short term, therefore, policymakers should focus on lifting the billions of people still in poverty out of it, both because it will make them more resilient against extreme weather and because it will do so much good in a myriad of other ways. For the longer term, governments and companies should invest in green-energy research and development to drive down the costs and increase the reliability of fossil-fuel alternatives.

Careful science can inform us about the problem of climate change, but it can't tell us how to solve it. Sensible public debate requires all the facts, including about the costs of our choices. Some of the most popular climate policies will have costs far greater than climate change itself. When politicians try to shut down discussion with claims that they're "following the science," don't let them.