Thursday, June 20, 2024 / It’s not easy being a green conservative

[BILLBOARD]

NOEL KING (host): If you were to envision a climate activist or an environmentalist, you probably wouldn’t imagine someone with conservative politics.

NOEL: Your imagination is not off-base.

NOEL: Republicans are more skeptical about climate change. Days before the heat dome descended on the east coast leading Republican Donald Trump talked dismissively and incoherently about climate change —>

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.msnbc.com/the-reidout/reidout-blog/trump-climate-change-fox-interview-sea-levels-rcna155297)*> FORMER PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: “When they say the seas will rise over the next 400 years an eighth of an inch, you know, which means basically you have more beachfront property. Okay? Laughter.”*

NOEL: But WHY is this: asks a young CONSERVATIVE environmentalist? The environmental movement used to be bipartisan. And this Wisconsin-raised activist believes it CAN be again.

*<CLIP> BENJI BACKER: People in Wisconsin are really hardworking people.they spend every extra dollar that they've earned to be in the lakes in northern Wisconsin and to go hunting or fishing or spend time birding ~~.~~And that's what protecting the environment and nature meant to me. It meant to us. It wasn't about polar bears and ice caps. It was about the local nature that we loved so dearly.*

NOEL: Coming up on Today, Explained.

[THEME]

NOEL: It’s *Today, Explained*. I’m Noel King. Benji Backer is the 26-year-old author of a new book - The Conservative Environmentalist. He’s founder and chairman of the American Conservation Coalition - the biggest right of center environmental organization. And what kind of conservative is he?

BENJI BACKER (author, founder of the American Conservation Coalition): I grew up thinking of myself as a John McCain, Mitt Romney Republican. My first campaigns were for John McCain for president in 2008. And then I was the state chair for Young Americans for Romney in 2012 in Wisconsin. That's kind of the politics I grew up around. And the reason why those people inspired me at the time was because they were focused on fiscal conservatism. I, on social issues, am very complex. Like most people, I am pro-gay marriage. I, I don't see eye to eye with a lot of the people in the party on abortion and those sorts of things, but I, I believe that limited government, fiscal responsibility, American ingenuity, entrepreneurship, you know, the marketplace can solve a lot of the problems, not all of the problems, but a lot of the problems that our world faces. I believe in capitalism, and I believe in, you know, America being the best country in the world. I do believe in American exceptionalism. I do believe that we have areas to improve. Those are the sorts of values that I have as a conservative. And of course, the party doesn't always see eye to eye with that.

NOEL: How unusual, in your experience, is it to be a conservative who's really concerned about climate change, who's really pro-environment?

BENJI: A lot of the time it's felt like I'm alone in terms of feeling like I'm a conservative who's incredibly worried about climate change. But I'm definitely not alone in being very worried about environmental issues.

NOEL: Hm.

BENJI: And I think that that's where the breakdown is that we can help solve. And that's what I'm dedicated to solving, because I know that there are so many people who actually want the same things that I do who maybe are more skeptical of climate change itself. And what I mean by that is that most conservatives want to protect the environment, but they are scared of the topic of climate change because they don't like the solutions they feel like they've been exposed to, and so instead they've run the other way. But what we could do is show them that fighting climate change can create jobs. It can clean up our air. It can clean up our water. It can help protect our natural environment that’s local to us. And that's where I see the opportunity to bring those conservatives to the table so that I feel less alone, and that my generation, which doesn't see this as a partisan issue, also feels less alone.

NOEL: Do you first, though, have to convince conservatives that climate change is real?

BENJI: Well, I think conservatives are increasingly believing that climate change is real. There's going to always be a portion of conservatives that don't believe in climate change. There's always going to be a portion of people who don't believe in whatever we want them to believe. That's just how it works. But I think that there are a lot of conservatives who need to understand that fighting climate change doesn't go against their values. And then with my generation, there's really nobody who believes climate change isn't real.

NOEL: What generation are you?

BENJI: I'm Gen Z.

NOEL: You're Gen Z. Okay, so I have read, I imagine the same data that you have, which says Gen Z is actually deeply concerned about climate change…

BENJI: Yeah.

NOEL: …regardless of their politics. Gen Z famously not so much in Congress…

BENJI: Mm hm.

NOEL: …at the moment, maybe politicians at the state level. But I think we've got Maxwell Frost, and I'm not sure there's another Gen Z…

BENJI: No.

NOEL: … up on Capitol Hill. So we're seeing a shift among young people, regular young people. Are we seeing a shift, though, among any conservative politicians at all? The people who make the rules, the regulations?

BENJI: The shift is nowhere near fast enough. But Now there are over 150 members of the Senate and the House on the Republican side who not only acknowledge that it's real, but have co-sponsored, introduced, or even passed pro-climate legislation. It's still not a majority of the members of Congress on the right, but it is a quickly growing number that is about to become the majority, despite Trump's, disregard for climate, despite…

NOEL: Hm.

BENJI: Fox News's, you know, inability to kind of bring this in as a top issue, despite it not being part of the narrative of the Republican Party. Most of the credit should go to young people for proving that this issue is not partisan in their eyes.

NOEL: The Washington Post reported THAT in April Donald Trump sat with the country's top oil executives, and he told them, if you donate $1 billion to my campaign, I will reverse dozens of President Biden's environmental rules. I'll make your jobs and your lives easier. So he is the candidate of the party that you support. What does this mean to the movement you're trying to build here?

BENJI: I would say it makes our movement even more important because the reality is we can't wait till Trump's gone or till the Trump era of the GOP is over to take climate action. In fact, you know, I'm talking with people from the Trump team all the time to try to help them on this issue, because I don't really care… I don't care if it's Joe Biden or Donald Trump. I don't care if it's AOC or Ted Cruz. I want to work with anybody who's willing to come to the table, and I'm willing to help change people's minds. But you cannot solve climate change without both sides of the aisle.

SCORING IN <Beatnik 60 - APM>

BENJI: In the 1970s and 1980s and 1990s, you had Republican presidents. You had Richard Nixon…

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qd4LJcSz8Vk)*> FORMER PRESIDENT RICHARD NIXON: We can make 1972 the best year ever for environmental progress.*

BENJI: Ronald Reagan…

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qd4LJcSz8Vk)*> FORMER PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN: Preservation of our environment is not a partisan challenge; it's common sense.*

BENJI: George H.W. Bush…

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-tLEJi8hyM)*> FORMER PRESIDENT GEORGE H.W. BUSH: Too many Americans continue to breathe dirty air and political paralysis has plagued further progress against air pollution.*

BENJI: …prioritizing the environment, from the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act, the Montreal Protocol, the ozone work that Ronald Reagan did. I mean, there's so much history of Republicans leading on this issue. And I'm not saying, oh, Republicans deserve all the credit. It was Democrats that worked with Republicans. I mean, it was a total American effort to solve environmental challenges. I believe that we can get back to that because unlike other issues, we share the brunt of environmental problems pretty equally across party ideologies.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: Give us a couple of examples of really specific policies that would qualify as both conservative and also pro-environment.

BENJI: A great example is actually a bill that passed in the Senate, President Biden signed it into law, but it was introduced under President Trump. 92 senators voted yes on this piece of legislation. So over 40 Republicans and 40 Democrats. It was a piece of legislation that helped farmers basically create an incentive for lowering carbon emissions on their property and equipping them with basically an extra income stream if they could sequester carbon or be more efficient in their practices.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C-pbOvKiHto)*> SEN. DEBBIE STABENOW (D-MI): More than 175 advocates, organizations and companies support this bill. They see it as a win-win for agriculture and the environment. That coalition is mirrored in the broad support we have here in the United States Senate.*

BENJI: And so you married the priorities of both kind of ideologies at the same time. And you're seeing that happen in the state legislatures across the country as well, where you're finding coal plants that are closing due to the market not liking coal energy as much as they did, you know, decades ago, and turning those facilities into renewable facilities or into nuclear facilities or even natural gas.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJMInjPQuIw')*> WTHR REPORTER: Indianapolis Power and Light will convert an aging coal-fired power plant the environmental groups have long criticized to natural gas.*

BENJI: That is what you could do to really bring both sides to the table.

NOEL: When you talk to climate activists on the left, you know that you will hear the word capitalism and you know that it will be…

BENJI: Yeah.

NOEL: …in a sort of dismissive or disdainful tone.

BENJI: Of course.

NOEL: You don't blame capitalism for warming the planet even though there is, let's be honest, lots of evidence that kind of rampant capitalism has done some bad things to the environment. It just simply has.

BENJI: Sure.

NOEL: Why do you think capitalism now at this point offers us a solution?

BENJI: Well, I'll say two controversial things. I do blame capitalism for warming the planet, but I also think capitalism is what gets us out of this. We have a negative externality that needs to be solved. It's very serious, but the way to solve it is not to, like, shut down the world. The way to solve it is to create more technologies and more innovations to mitigate that problem. I talk to hundreds of entrepreneurs every single year who are working on such cool initiatives around this idea. And if the government was telling them what they could or couldn't do, then that actually wouldn't happen. So yes, capitalism is part of the problem, but it is the solution. And we cannot rely on government to solve this problem, especially when people are struggling to make ends meet here and in other countries. And putting more burdens on that is the last thing we should be doing.

NOEL: The Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 jumpstarted clean energy investments. It was one of the biggest, if not the biggest, sort of clean energy initiative that the United States had ever undertaken, and not a single Republican voted for it. And so I think what it makes people wonder is, are Republicans actually worthwhile allies…

BENJI: Mm.

NOEL: …if they're not willing to vote for things that the science says, hey, we're going to invest these billions of dollars and this could really work out for us?

BENJI: Well, I'm really glad you brought that up, because I think the Inflation Reduction Act is actually a perfect example of the opportunity and the problem with this issue as it stands in 2024. What I mean by that is, 80% of the bills that were part of the Inflation Reduction Act were introduced by Republicans with Democrats, then why did no Republicans vote for the whole thing? The main two reasons are one, the more you add on to something, the more people are going to disagree with it. But I think the bigger reason is they didn't want to give President Biden a win, in the same way that people don't want to give President Trump a win when he was president.

NOEL: Hm.  
  
BENJI: We live in this really horrible tribal time when it's not okay to work with the other side for some reason. I hope in ten years I can look back and say, I helped make environmental issues nonpartisan again. In fact, I'm going to launch a campaign with some of my Democrat allies called Nature is Nonpartisan. We're on the precipice of making these issues nonpartisan again. And I'm dedicated to making sure that that happens before moving on to the next thing.

SCORING IN <After These Messages - BMC>

NOEL: Benji Backer. “The Conservative Environmentalist: Common Sense Solutions for a Sustainable Future.” Try an e-book.

NOEL: After the break, an argument that capitalism can help fix climate change.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

AKSHAT RATHI (reporter, Bloomberg News): My name is Akshat Rathi and I'm a senior climate reporter for Bloomberg News.

NOEL: Akshat’ book is called Climate Capitalism: stories from around the world about climate solutions that are starting to scale. Other countries have business interests and corporate interests. Other countries have progressive AND conservative citizens. So I asked Akshat whether other countries have the same FIGHTS about climate change as Americans.

AKSHAT: Nowhere as divided as in America.

SCORING IN <Frogs Not Hopping - BMC>

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aMphCZRU4IE)*> FORMER PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA: The American Republican party is the only major party that I can think of in the advanced world that effectively denies climate change. I mean, it's an outlier.*

AKSHAT: There is a phenomenon in the Anglosphere, so in countries like the UK, in Australia, and there is a phenomenon in countries where there are a lot of fossil fuels to be exported, where you do get a division in politics over climate. But America is exceptional in its division between the two parties and how opposed one party is and how for action the other party is. For example in the UK, which is going to have an election very soon, the party in power is the Conservative Party. And when it came to power in 2010, it did so by campaigning on more climate action.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xQK45_WLfxY)*> FORMER UK PRIME MINISTER DAVID CAMERON: I want us to be the greenest government ever. A very simple ambition, and one that I’m absolutely committed to achieving.*

AKSHAT: So the Labor Party in the opposition had to match the ambition that the Conservative Party had on climate to try and win votes.

NOEL: And they did.

AKSHAT: Yes. And the conservatives did. They came into power and they've been in power for 14 years. And during that time they've passed the net zero target, which the UK is now legally bound to reach by 2050.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9uzqgdOZv_E)*> FORMER UK PRIME MINISTER THERESA MAY: Well, I believe that we have a moral duty to leave this world in a better condition than we inherited, and that's why today we're announcing that we will be ending our contribution to climate change by 2050 and legislating for a net zero emissions target.*

SCORING OUT

NOEL: You wrote a book called Climate Capitalism, and those are two words like conservative and environmentalist, like Benji Backer’s book that they don't typically go together, we don't think of them as going together. A lot of people might casually blame capitalism for getting us into the mess we're in with climate. What role do you argue capitalism can play in getting us out of this?

AKSHAT: You know, it's a provocation. They do seem to be terms that are opposite to each other. And the facts say so. Right. Capitalism, as it's been run over the past 200 years, has certainly contributed to making the problem worse, because we are not counting in the impacts that pollution cause in financial damages. And so companies are able to make profits without having to bear the cost of the pollution they produce. The case I make in the book is that all around the world there are different forms of capitalism, but they are now being forced to change, to start to include either very explicitly the price of pollution or from other forms to try and reduce pollution and use the tools that capitalism has which can do good, which can provide innovation, which can provide businesses that provide services that society wants. But it has to be defined by governments what type of services need to be provided in a warming world.

SCORING IN - <Ladybug (BMC)>

AKSHAT: So the biggest example that we have in front of us that has happened in most listener's lifetime is how China built an entire industry to make electric cars and lithium ion batteries from scratch within the past two decades, and did it so well that it is now the largest maker of electric cars. It is now trying to export cheaper EVs to Europe and even to America, if America would have them, and is causing a real headache for the US government, for European leaders, to figure out how their own auto industries can actually match up to what the Chinese have done.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sCHQ9a4AvOM)*> CNBC, PHIL LEBEAU: When you drive a Chinese vehicle today, it's far different than ten years ago. They are better built, and the quality overall is much more competitive with what you would see from a U.S. automaker or from a European brand.*

AKSHAT: Now, when you think about China, you think about state-driven policies because it's a communist country. It's led by a leader. However, what happened in China is very much climate capitalism, because for all the rules that the government put out in subsidies it provided for its companies, those investments were matched by private investors, including investors like Warren Buffett, who invested in a company, little known at the time, called BYD, which is now the world's largest maker of electric cars, beating Tesla.

NOEL: And to really hammer the point, because, as our listeners know, I love talking about capitalism. China did not build this industry to lose money. China didn't say, hey, let's do this thing and take a loss for the next generation. China did it because China knew there's money to be made here.

AKSHAT: Totally. I mean, the motivation for China to do it were multifold. They weren't just about trying to reduce emissions. In fact, its primary motivation was to reduce air pollution in cities, which was terrible at the time to reduce their oil import bill, because China doesn't have that much oil. And then finally, to build an industry that could make money, that could turn what is a badge of shame for the Chinese, an auto industry that did not produce good cars to one that would become the envy of the world. You do have to look at what electric cars look like in China, to realize how far behind the rest of the auto industry is now.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: You know that Americans often see business and government as working in opposition. You either as an American, you either, you like big business or you like big government. In the U.S. this is an existential challenge, right? No exaggeration. Are business and government working together in any interesting ways, the way you pointed out they are in China?

AKSHAT: So one place you can see it in the US is what's happening with the electric vehicle charging network. So for the past decade, the best charging network belonged to a company called Tesla. And Tesla did that because it saw the potential for its cars to sell faster if it also provided a charging network. But as other automakers started to make electric cars, they used a different plug. And that meant that those cars could not use the Tesla network. And recently, the US government has now worked with Tesla to figure out how Tesla can open up its charging network to all other cars.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufllaqvJ8x4)*> NBC REPORTER: The White House is working with automakers. Today, Tesla committed to opening 7,500 chargers to cars made by other companies, and General Motors and Ford have also made similar promises.*

AKSHAT: In the process, Tesla is going to get subsidies from the US government, but everybody wins as a result.

NOEL: What are the stakes? I mean, listen, we can talk existentially about the stakes if we don't get this right, you know, then everything goes to hell. And that does appear to be likely. But I think we could ask more specifically, why is it important to get this right, to balance government and private enterprise, to make sure that that actually does something instead of doing nothing?

AKSHAT: So it's easy to say capitalism got us into this mess and thus it can never get us out of it. But that actually undermines some of the positive things that businesses have enabled for our everyday lives. You know, we take things for granted these days, like the internet or mobile phones or drugs that save lives. These are all innovations that happened through a capitalist system that were initially supported by governments. So it's certainly something that we can do for clean energy technologies. And we know that that's happening in countries like China or even in Europe, and now through the Inflation Reduction Act in the US. So there's no shortage of examples of how governments and businesses can work together to build the solutions we need. The difficulty is that the longer we wait to make it happen, the harder the problem becomes.

SCORING IN <Take A Soma Holiday - BMC>

AKSHAT: I'm not optimistic. I'm more realistic. We live in a world that is run by a particular economic system, and that economic system is not going to go away over the next three decades when we have to get to net zero. And so how can we use the system and tweak it to actually make it work? So I would say I'm more a possibilist. We know that there are all these possibilities right in front of us. And these examples where they are working. What we now need to do is learn from them and deploy them everywhere in the world.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: Akshat Rathi, Bloomberg News, author of Climate Capitalism.

NOEL: Today’s show was produced by Avishay Artsy and edited by Matthew Collette and Amina al-Sadi. Our fact checker is Laura! Bullard. Our engineers were Rob Byers and Andrea Kristinsdottir.

The rest of the team includes Peter Balonon-Rosen, Patrick Boyd, Miles Bryan, Victoria Chamberlin, Denise Guerra, Amanda Lewellyn, Hady Mawajdeh, Haleema Shah, and Sean Rameswaram.

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We use music by Breakmaster Cylinder.

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I’m Noel King.