

Care About the Economy? Fix the Climate.

Addressing climate change will improve many “more important” issues, including the economy, immigration, health, national security...



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Assomeone who thinks a lot about climate change, I’m always surprised that my fellow Americans don’t seem to think it’s a very big deal.

Don’t get me wrong — Americans have changed their views about the climate over the years. Significant majorities of Americans — even in overwhelmingly Republican states — now acknowledge that [global warming is happening](#). Smaller, but still bipartisan, majorities tell pollsters that climate change is caused by humans and that government should do something about it. There’s broad support for an array of solutions, from using public land to produce green energy to giving tax rebates for carbon-free purchases. We’ve come a long way from the days when only [40% of Americans](#) thought climate change was a major threat — and those days were only a decade ago.

Now, the main problem for those of us who care about climate change is not to get people to accept the science of climate change, it’s to get them to *do something* about it. Because while most Americans acknowledge climate change, climate solutions don’t rank very high on their priority lists. A recent [Gallup poll](#) of voters found that climate was the 14th most important issue for voters. Respondents [ranked climate change 18th](#) when Pew asked a similar question. Many polls find that only [2–3% of voters](#) consider climate their top issue.

What issues do voters think are more important than climate change? Well, you'd probably not be surprised to find the economy at the top of all of these lists. Then come issues like immigration, crime, national security, poverty, and healthcare.

Guess what? If you care about these issues, you'd better care about climate action, too.

I suspect that most American voters still think of climate change as an environmental problem, something that will affect plants and animals and maybe put a little extra strain on their air conditioners in the summer. But the fact of the matter is that its tendrils will reach into almost every part of life. I wonder if voters understand that solving a lot of the problems they list as more important than climate change can be addressed with smart climate policy.

The economy is always the #1 issue for Americans, and it's not even close. When voting, people seem to be focused primarily on their own wallets. They want good jobs, low prices, and improving conditions year over year. OK, fine. We can work with that.

People often think of environmental solutions as an enemy of economic growth, believing that we can have a thriving planet or a thriving economy, but not both. This view is sadly mistaken; it ignores the fact that a healthy economy relies on a healthy environment. If we can't grow food, if we're paying to care for people sickened by pollution, and if our cities are repeatedly flooded by rising sea levels, our economy won't be very strong.

How important is climate change to the economy?

Agriculture will certainly suffer, as crop yields will [decline](#) by 5–15% for each degree of warming. [Large-scale disasters](#) like heat waves, hurricanes, and flooding — many of which were made more likely or intense by climate change — cost the United States \$93 billion (and almost 500 lives) in 2023. Climate-related stresses like extreme heat and flooding will [stress our infrastructure](#) more than in the past, requiring more costly construction projects. Tourism may also decline as areas that rely on snow lose their incomes and other parts of the United States become very unpleasant to visit in the summer months. Companies will be forced to change their behavior as natural resources become more scarce and their facilities come under threat from climate-related disasters.

Overall, the problems associated with climate change are likely to be much more expensive than simply arresting warming in the first place. One [study](#) found that we can expect to lose 1% of our GDP for each degree of warming (meaning that, if the world warms by 2–3 degrees, as is likely, the American economy will likely stop growing). Another [study](#) predicted that the global economy could lose as much as 19% of its income per capita by 2050 — a loss of \$36 trillion (with a T!). The study's authors found that the costs of failing to address climate change outweighed the costs of climate-friendly policies by 6 to 1.

Care about immigration? Fix the climate.

OK, let's say that you're not one of the people whose primary concern is dollars and cents. What if you're one of the 20% of Americans most concerned about immigration? If you're worried about the number of people trying to migrate to America now, you really won't like what will happen if we don't do enough to address climate change.

Some Americans aren't all that worried about climate change because they understand that wealthy countries like the U.S. won't suffer as much as people who live in less prosperous places. But, when disaster and hardship strike those less-fortunate places, people are likely to want to move to countries like the U.S.

Each year, over 21 million people are [forced](#) to flee their homes because of natural disasters. This number is likely to rise as some people suffer disasters like landslides and hurricanes, while others experience the degradation of their local economies due to climate change. Some proportion of these people — perhaps over [100 million](#) by 2050 — will try to improve their lives by moving somewhere else.

Climate migration will put intense pressure on border security regimes and immigration policies, while intensifying the political and cultural divides that debates over immigration often bring. It would be much easier to simply prevent climate change (and a lot of that migration) in the first place.

Care about health? Fix the climate.

Maybe you're more concerned with healthcare. Whether you are motivated by making sure that you and your loved ones live as long as possible, or you're worried by the growing cost of healthcare, you could do worse than to focus on climate change.

The worse climate change becomes, the more people it's going to hurt or kill, and the more money that's going to cost. Climate change will hurt people in all sorts of ways:

- Heat waves will endanger people's lives;
- Disasters like drought, hurricanes, and flooding will hurt people directly and indirectly (by, for example, disrupting food supplies);
- People will suffer from [respiratory distress](#) due to increased pollution, mold, and allergens; and
- New diseases will emerge and existing diseases will find new habitats in which to thrive.

And if you're worried about the cost of health insurance, Medicaid, and Medicare, a 2021 [report](#) estimated the healthcare costs associated with climate change at \$820 billion. Those of us lucky enough to avoid the health effects of floodwaters or wildfire smoke will have to pay increased insurance premiums and Medicare taxes.

Care about safety? Fix the climate.

A lot of Americans are concerned with their safety — both from external threats and from crime in their cities and towns. It turns out that tackling climate can help make the national security landscape safer and reduce crime at home.

The Department of Defense has referred to climate change as a "[threat multiplier](#)" that exacerbates many of the security problems that the United States faces. Whether it's damage to military bases from rising waters, the need for National Guard troops to constantly help

with disaster recovery, or disruption of supply chains, climate change will absorb a lot of our nation's defense spending, leaving the military with fewer resources to defend the country.

On top of this, climate change threatens to destabilize many regions around the globe through economic disruption, competition for resources, and large-scale migration. There could be [conflicts](#) over water between drought-stricken countries, competition over the resources and shipping routes in the Arctic as the ice caps recede, or battles between countries with differing perspectives on geoengineering. People in desperate straits may turn to religious or racial extremism and adopt tactics like terrorism. A warmer world will likely be a more dangerous and chaotic one.

Those of you who are concerned about domestic crime should also be concerned about global warming. Sociologists have long understood that warmer weather causes more crime. It makes sense — in hot weather, people are outside and more likely to mingle, which means that there's more opportunity for mischief.

But there's more to it than that. [Jane Gilbert](#), Miami's Chief Heat Officer, says that heat is bad for mental health: "Extreme heat can make people more depressed or irritable, it can bring on psychotic outbreaks, and people on certain psychiatric medications are more sensitive to heat."

Scholars have also [found](#) that it's not just heat but changes in the weather that prompt crime waves — sudden spikes in temperature, even in the winter, can cause more crime. And if climate change gets worse, we'll see more unpredictable weather patterns.

The sooner Americans come to realize that climate change is an [everything problem](#) rather than just an environmental one, the more likely they will be to head off some of the worst effects of global warming. We should understand that, rather than being one of many issues in our list of priorities, climate change is woven into many of the things we care about "more" than the environment. It's incumbent on the small percentage of us who do prioritize climate change to help spread the word: whatever issue you care about, you'll probably impact it by addressing climate change.