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Trump pulled out the oil industry playbook and players for Paris

The fossil fuel industry used the same arguments, and even the same people, to block climate policies in the 1990s. We must not let this happen again.

By Benjamin Franta
The Guardian
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Since President Trump announced on June 1 that the U.S. would cease implementation of the Paris Agreement, pundits have argued about whether the American pullout will truly affect greenhouse gas pollution one way or another, since, after all, the Paris Agreement was not legally binding to begin with.

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What arguments did President Trump use to justify leaving the Paris Agreement? First: it would devastate the U.S. economy. Second: it was unfair to the U.S. Third: it wouldn't actually help reduce global warming. And fourth: it would prevent the alleviation of poverty.

These, it turns out, are exactly the same arguments used by the oil and gas industry in the 1990s to block implementation of the Kyoto Protocol in the U.S.

After the Kyoto Protocol was adopted at the third U.N. Conference of Parties in 1997, the American Petroleum Institute - the biggest trade association for the oil and gas industry in the U.S. - commissioned a [report](#) from Paul Bernstein and David Montgomery; economists who [claimed](#) that implementing the treaty would cost ten times more than what government economists had calculated. And the industry claimed that the Kyoto Protocol would be uniquely harmful to the U.S., with the executive vice president of the American Petroleum Institute [calling](#) it "unilateral economic disarmament."

Additionally, in the run-up to the Kyoto meeting, a coalition of oil companies and others created an ad campaign called the Global Climate Information Project, which [insisted](#), among other things, that the Kyoto Protocol wouldn't actually reduce global warming. And Lee Raymond, then CEO of Exxon and chairman of the American Petroleum Institute, [asserted](#) that reducing carbon dioxide emissions would prevent the alleviation of poverty, "deny[ing] people the opportunity to improve their way in life."

These arguments - that climate policies would devastate the U.S. economy, would be uniquely unfair to the U.S., wouldn't reduce global warming anyway, and would prevent the alleviation of poverty - were the standard talking points of the oil and gas industry as it blocked climate policies in the 1990s. And those talking points worked: Americans eventually elected a president, George W. Bush, who bought the industry's claims and pulled the U.S. out of the Kyoto Protocol.

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It's not just the talking points that are back - it's the people, too. President Trump, in claiming high costs for the Paris climate agreement, [cited a report](#) published in March by [NERA Economic Consulting](#). Its first two authors are Paul Bernstein and David Montgomery - the very same economists the oil and gas industry used to fight the Kyoto Protocol.

Bernstein and Montgomery didn't just work to stop the Kyoto Protocol; they were the go-to economists for the oil and gas industry throughout the 1990s. Whenever the threat of climate policy arose, the American Petroleum Institute hired one or both of these economists to pen a report claiming high costs and recommending policy delay. This strategy was used in [1991](#) against carbon dioxide control, in [1993](#) against the Clinton Administration's proposed BTU tax, in [1996](#) against the goals of the U.N. Conference of Parties in Geneva, in [1997](#) against the goals of the U.N. Conference of Parties in Kyoto, and in [1998](#) against the Kyoto Protocol's implementation.

The industry portrayed the reports it commissioned from Bernstein and Montgomery as factual and independent, manufacturing

economic fears and a false image of economic debate. In the run-up to the 1997 meeting in Kyoto, for example, Mobil oil company claimed in the New York Times that “[t]he cost of limiting emissions could range from \$200 to \$580 per ton of carbon” based on “[a] study just issued by Charles River Associates.” Mobil didn’t name who authored the report (Bernstein and Montgomery were the first two authors) or who funded it (the American Petroleum Institute).

It’s clear that Bernstein and Montgomery had a conflict of interest, but was their analysis truly flawed? Consider this: they ignored the costs of climate change, and they assumed that clean energy wouldn’t decline in cost but would remain many times more expensive than fossil fuels for decades into the future. In a sense, they simply assumed the result that they claimed to show.

To write their latest report - which was cited by President Trump in his Paris pullout speech - Bernstein and Montgomery were hired by American Council for Capital Formation, a Washington think tank and lobbying group with a history of commissioning deeply flawed reports used to block climate policy. A classic example is a 1995 report by Stanford economist Alan Manne that simply asserted, without evidence, that “global temperatures are not likely to rise significantly during the next several decades, [so] aggressive CO2 abatement is unwarranted for the near term.”

Manne also assumed - again without evidence - that it was 95% likely that “global catastrophe” wouldn’t occur until global warming had reached a whopping 10 degrees Celsius. The take-home message was clear: no need to rush to confront climate change. Industry spokespeople used studies like this one - which looked scientific but was, in fact, scientifically baseless - to tell the public that “scientists” had found that waiting decades longer to control greenhouse gas emissions presented “very little danger.” It was a simple strategy for making falsehoods look scientific, and it worked.

It’s not the ‘90s anymore, but the same arguments and people are back. If history rhymes, here’s what we might expect in coming months: industry-linked op-eds, economic studies, think tank reports, and front groups posing as grassroots organizations. These are core elements of the time-tested strategic package used by the oil and gas industry to block climate policies in the past.

What can we do to prevent a repeat of history? Recognize the strategies used to block climate policy. Follow the money behind scientific-looking reports that recommend delay. Do not let the industry succeed in co-opting scholars and creating a false image of debate. In short: don’t be fooled.

As the Trump Administration pulls out of the Paris climate agreement, remember that the very same arguments and people were used by the fossil fuel industry to block climate policies in the past. They were successful then. We must not, for the sake of humanity, let them succeed again.

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