

CLIMATE POLICY—
FROM RIO TO KYOTO
*A Political Issue for 2000—
and Beyond*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Within the United States, global warming and related policy issues are becoming increasingly contentious, surfacing in the presidential contests of the year 2000 and beyond. They enter into controversies involving international trade agreements, questions of national sovereignty versus global governance, and ideological debates about the nature of future economic growth and development. On a more detailed level, determined efforts are under way by environmental groups and their sympathizers in foundations and in the federal government to restrict and phase out the use of fossil fuels (and even nuclear reactors) as sources of energy. Such measures would reduce greenhouse-gas emissions into the atmosphere but also effectively deindustrialize the United States.

International climate policy is based on the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which calls on industrialized nations to carry out, within one decade, drastic cuts in the emission of greenhouse gases (GHG) that stem mainly from the burning of fossil fuels. The Protocol is ultimately based on the 1996 Scientific Assessment Report issued by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a U.N. advisory body. The IPCC's main conclusion, featured in its Summary for Policymakers (SPM), states that "the balance of evidence suggests a discernible human influence on global climate." This widely quoted, innocuous-sounding but ambiguous phrase has been misinterpreted by many to mean that climate disasters will befall the world unless strong action is taken immediately to cut GHG emissions.

This essay documents the inadequate science underlying the IPCC conclusions, traces how these conclusions were misinterpreted in 1996, and how this led to the Kyoto Protocol. I also discuss some fatal shortcomings of the Protocol and the political and ideological forces driving it.

The IPCC conclusion is in many ways a truism. There certainly must be a human influence on some features of the climate, locally if

not globally. The important question—the focus of scientific debate—is whether the available evidence supports the results of calculations from the current General Circulation Models (GCMs). Unless validated by the climate record, the predictions of future warming based on theoretical models cannot be relied on. As demonstrated in this essay, GCMs are not able to account for observed climate variations, which are presumably of natural origin, for the following reasons:

1. To begin with, GCMs assume that the atmospheric level of carbon dioxide will continue its increase (at a greater rate than is actually observed) and will more than double in the next century. Many experts doubt that this will ever happen, as the world proceeds on a path of ever-greater energy efficiency and as low-cost fossil fuels become depleted and therefore more costly.
2. Next, one must assume that global temperatures will really rise to the extent calculated by the conventional theoretical climate models used by the IPCC. Observations suggest that any warming will be minute, will occur mainly at night and in winter, and will therefore be inconsequential. The failure of the present climate models is likely due to their inadequate treatment of atmospheric processes, such as cloud formation and the distribution of water vapor (which is the most important greenhouse gas in the atmosphere).
3. The putative warming has been labeled as greater and more rapid than anything experienced in human history. But a variety of historical data contradicts this apocalyptic statement. As recently as 1,000 years ago, during the “Medieval climate optimum,” Vikings were able to settle Greenland. Even higher temperatures were experienced about 7,000 years ago during the much-studied “climate optimum.”

The IPCC's Summary for Policymakers tries hard to minimize the inadequacy of the GCMs to model atmospheric processes and reproduce the observed climate variations. For example, the SPM does not reveal the fact that weather satellite data, the only truly global data we have, do not show the expected atmospheric warming trend; the existence of satellites is not even mentioned.

The scientific evidence for a presumed “human influence” is spurious and based mostly on the selective use of data and choice of particular time periods. Phrases that stress the uncertainties of identifying human influences were edited out of the approved final draft before the IPCC report was printed in May 1996.

A further misrepresentation occurred in July 1996 when politicians, intent on establishing a Kyoto-like regime of mandatory emission controls, took the deceptively worded phrase about “discernible human influence” and linked it to a catastrophic future warming—something the IPCC report itself specifically denies. The IPCC presents no evidence to support a substantial warming such as calculated from theoretical climate models.

The essay also demonstrates that global warming (GW), if it were to take place, is generally beneficial for the following reasons:

1. One of the most feared consequences of global warming is a rise in sea level that could flood low-lying areas and damage the economy of coastal nations. But actual evidence suggests just the opposite: a modest warming will reduce somewhat the steady rise of sea level, which has been ongoing since the end of the last Ice Age—and will continue no matter what we do as long as the millennia-old melting of Antarctic ice continues.
2. A detailed reevaluation of the impact of climate warming on the national economy was published in 1999 by a prestigious group of specialists, led by a Yale University resource economist. They conclude that agriculture and timber resources would

benefit greatly from a warmer climate and higher levels of carbon dioxide and would not be negatively affected as had previously been thought. Contrary to the general wisdom expressed in the IPCC report, higher CO₂ levels and temperatures would increase the GNP of the United States and put more money in the pockets of the average family.

But even if the consequences of a GW were harmful, there is little that can be done to stop it. “No-regrets” policies of conservation and adaptation to change are the most effective measures available. Despite its huge cost to the economy and consumers, the emission cuts envisioned by the Kyoto Protocol would be quite ineffective. Even if it were observed punctiliously, its impact on future temperatures would be negligible, only 0.05°C by 2050 according to IPCC data. It is generally agreed that achieving a stable level of GHGs would require much more drastic emission reductions, including also by developing nations. To stabilize at the 1990 level, the IPCC report calls for a 60 to 80 percent reduction—about twelve Kyotos on a *worldwide* basis!

Finally, the essay attempts to trace the various motivations that led to the Kyoto Protocol. It concludes that U.S. domestic politics rather than science or economics will decide the fate of the Protocol; in particular, the presidential elections of 2000 will determine whether the United States ultimately ratifies the Protocol, which would be essential for its global enactment. Conversely, informed debate about the Protocol can influence the outcome of the elections.