**Headline:** ExxonMobil Claims Shift on Climate but Continues to Fund Climate Science Deniers

**Teaser:** The company’s professed support for a carbon tax is a disingenuous public relations ploy to delay government action.

By Elliott Negin

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**[Article Body:]**

After decades of public denial, ExxonMobil now [acknowledge](https://energyfactor.exxonmobil.com/perspectives/better-approach-climate-change/)s that “the risk of climate change is real” and says it is “committed to being part of the solution,” at least according to the company’s website and statements. To that end, the largest investor-owned oil company in the world claims it [supports a federal carbon tax](https://www.washingtonpost.com/energy-environment/2018/10/09/exxonmobil-gives-million-promote-carbon-tax-and-dividend-plan/) and the [Paris climate agreement](https://corporate.exxonmobil.com/Energy-and-environment/Environmental-protection/Climate-change/Statements-on-Paris-climate-agreement).

But the company’s recently released [grantmaking report](https://corporate.exxonmobil.com/Community-engagement/Worldwide-giving/Worldwide-Giving-Report) shows that it has not ended its two-decades-long campaign to stymie government efforts to address climate change. By ExxonMobil’s own accounting, it gave $690,000 to eight climate science denier groups in 2019, a 10 percent drop from 2018. In addition, it continued to fund federal lawmakers who oppose a carbon tax, despite its supposed longtime support for the idea. Forty percent of the nearly [$1 million](https://www.opensecrets.org/orgs/recipients?id=d000000129) it has contributed so far to congressional incumbent campaigns during the 2019-20 election cycle has gone to 115 of the [150 climate science deniers](https://www.americanprogressaction.org/issues/green/news/2019/01/28/172944/climate-deniers-116th-congress/) still in office.

Sixty percent of ExxonMobil’s 2019 donations to climate obstructionist groups for “public information and policy research” went to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, while another 30 percent was split between the American Enterprise Institute and the Manhattan Institute, which have been receiving annual grants from the company since it began financing climate disinformation 22 years ago. All told, ExxonMobil has spent more than [$37 million](https://ucs-documents.s3.amazonaws.com/global-warming/XOM%2BWorldwide%2BGiving%2B2018.pdf) on climate science denier organizations from 1998 through 2019, more than any individual funder besides Charles Koch and his brother, the late David Koch, billionaire owners of the coal, oil and gas conglomerate Koch Industries. Koch-controlled foundations spent more than [$145 million](https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/global-warming/climate-deniers/koch-industries/) on many of the same groups over roughly the same time period.

Did the three top recipients of ExxonMobil grants for climate science denier groups in 2019 toe the company’s publicly stated line on climate? The short answer is no. If actions speak louder than words, the donations call into question ExxonMobil’s commitment to seriously address the climate crisis and deserve a closer look.

**The U.S. Chamber Still Opposes Carbon Pollution Standards**

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce has been a major player in blocking action on climate change going back to the 1990s, when the business lobby and Exxon were members of the [Global Climate Coalition](https://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php/Global_Climate_Coalition), a consortium of corporations and trade associations opposed to government policies that would cut carbon emissions.

But in 2009—the same year ExxonMobil first [announced](https://www.theguardian.com/business/2009/jan/10/exxon-mobil-carbon-tax) its support for a carbon tax in a cynical attempt to derail cap-and-trade climate legislation—the Chamber’s united front began to crack. A handful of Fortune 500 companies—including Apple, Exelon Corporation and Pacific Gas & Electric—[quit](https://www.npr.org/2009/10/06/113548724/companies-quit-u-s-chamber-over-climate-policy) the Chamber over its opposition to the cap-and-trade bill while two other high-profile companies—Nike and Johnson & Johnson—retained their membership but [rebuked the business lobby](https://www.theguardian.com/business/2009/sep/29/us-chamber-commerce-climate-change#_=_) for the same reason. Since then, [at least a dozen](https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/apr/24/disney-the-gap-and-pepsi-urged-to-quit-us-chamber-of-commerce) Chamber members, including Hewlett-Packard, General Mills, Mars, Nestlé and Unilever, have headed for the exits.

By contrast, ExxonMobil not only retained its Chamber membership, but it also pledged $5 million in annual installments to help pay for the Chamber’s [$250-million renovation](https://www.uschamber.com/series/above-the-fold/washington-post-how-the-us-chamber-adapting-evolving-leading) of its Washington, D.C., headquarters. In 2019, the company donated [$400,000 for the building rehabilitation and another $15,000](https://corporate.exxonmobil.com/-/media/Global/Files/worldwide-giving/2019-Worldwide-Giving-Report.pdf) to the Chamber’s Corporate Citizenship Center, bringing its total contributions since 2014 to $4.8 million.

What does ExxonMobil get for its money? Among other things, the [business lobby](https://blog.ucsusa.org/kathy-mulvey/trade-groups-must-be-challenged-for-their-harmful-climate-deception) goes to bat for it in court by [filing lawsuits](https://www.citizen.org/wp-content/uploads/chamber_litigation_report_part_1.pdf) against the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and in the court of public opinion by funding misleading, climate-related reports. A prime example is the Chamber’s [widely](https://talkingpointsmemo.com/news/donald-trump-climate-accord-fact-check) debunked 2017 [report](https://tinyurl.com/y68ty5g7) that grossly [exaggerated the cost](https://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2017/jun/01/fact-checking-donald-trumps-statement-withdrawing-/) to the U.S. economy of complying with the Paris climate agreement. President Trump cited that report as his [primary rationale](https://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2017/jun/01/fact-checking-donald-trumps-statement-withdrawing-/) for ignoring the U.S. commitment to the accord, and he has vowed to officially pull the United States out in early November.

However, in 2019, the Chamber seemed to take a 180-degree turn, [declaring](https://www.uschamber.com/addressing-climate-change) on its website: “Our climate is changing and humans are contributing to these changes. Inaction is simply not an option.” Although one could quibble with the assertion that human activity is merely *contributing* to climate change when in fact burning fossil fuels is the main cause, it was a far cry from when the organization [maintained](https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2009/10/more-chamber-commerces-climate-denial/) in comments submitted to the EPA in 2009 that “a warming of even 3 [degrees] C in the next 100 years would, on balance, be beneficial to humans….”

But the Chamber’s turnabout was not complete. Although it now concedes the reality of human-caused climate change, it is still pushing private sector innovation as the solution for climate crisis rather than much-needed government regulation, which historically has driven technological advances. So, while the Chamber supports government funding for [research and development](https://www.uschamber.com/addressing-climate-change) of advanced nuclear reactors, utility-scale batteries, and carbon capture and storage technology, it backed the Trump administration’s [rollbacks](https://www.epa.gov/energy-independence) of the Obama administration’s 2015 Clean Power Plan, which would have reduced power plant carbon emissions, and its 2015 “Waters of the United States” rule, which would have protected small streams, wetlands and groundwater from toxic chemicals. More recently, the Chamber supported the Trump administration’s weakening of the 50-year-old National Environmental Policy Act by limiting public input in the infrastructure project approval process and rescinding a requirement that federal agencies consider a proposed project’s impact on the climate.

Unlike ExxonMobil’s professed support for a carbon tax, the Chamber has [no official position](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-chamber-climatechange/after-skepticism-u-s-chamber-of-commerce-forms-climate-change-task-force-idUSKBN1W92WH), but if carbon tax legislation ever made it to the Senate or House floor, it presumably would oppose it given its dim view of government regulation. Likewise, the Chamber’s avowed support for U.S. compliance with the Paris climate accord includes a major caveat. Dan Byers, vice president for policy at the Chamber’s Global Energy Institute, [told](https://www.politico.com/story/2019/08/22/climate-change-global-translations-1675710) Politico in August 2019 that it is “absolutely important for the U.S. to remain in the Paris climate agreement,” but added that the “Obama administration’s pledge was unrealistic, [and] was going to have a negative impact on our economy. And so we’d like to see that revisited.” In other words, the Chamber would like the United States to remain a party to the agreement so that it could lobby to weaken the U.S. commitment to it.

**American Enterprise Institute Still Downplays the Climate Threat**

In 2019, ExxonMobil gave the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) [$110,000](https://corporate.exxonmobil.com/-/media/Global/Files/worldwide-giving/2019-Worldwide-Giving-Report.pdf), bringing its total since 1998 to $4.76 million—more than any other of its climate science denier grantees. The 82-year-old, free-market think tank also receives generous funding from other climate disinformation network supporters, including the [Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation](https://documented.net/2019/12/bradley-foundations-pour-millions-into-network-of-climate-denial-and-anti-labor-organization-tax-filings-show/) and the [Charles Koch Foundation](https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/480918408).

What does ExxonMobil get for its money from AEI? A cheerleader for fossil fuels, economist Benjamin Zycher, who—contrary to the company’s professed climate positions—[argues](https://www.aei.org/articles/the-carbon-tax-is-not-just-political-its-ineffective-too/) that a carbon tax would be “ineffective” and has [called](https://www.aei.org/articles/the-absurdity-that-is-the-paris-climate-agreement/) the Paris agreement an “absurdity.”

In March, Zycher published a [report](https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/A-Critique-of-the-House-Republican-Climate-Policy-Proposals.pdf) arguing that “any plausible policy” to curb carbon emissions “would yield trivial effects while imposing large costs.” Instead, he recommended the federal government adopt a policy of “watchful waiting, adaptation over time, and ongoing investment in resilience against the future effects of climactic [sic] changes.”

How could Zycher recommend “watchful waiting” given the large costs climate change is already imposing right now? Granted, he published his report before this summer, when heat waves and wildfires burned up the West Coast and hurricanes slammed the Southeast. But last summer was not that different, and climate change-related disasters have been racking up considerable damage over the last few years. From 2017 through 2019, there were [44](https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/billions/summary-stats/2017-2019) unique extreme weather and climate events across the country causing damages of $1 billion or more, collectively costing more than [$460 billion](https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/billions/summary-stats/2017-2019).

Nevertheless, Zycher insists fossil fuels are [indispensable](https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/A-Critique-of-the-House-Republican-Climate-Policy-Proposals.pdf). “Opposition to fossil fuels implies a reduction in policies—education, training, health care, and the like—that add to human capital and so increase incomes and the demand for conventional energy,” he wrote. “Therefore, opposition to fossil fuels is fundamentally antihuman.”

Zycher made the [same argument](https://www.ft.com/content/9e832c8a-8961-11ea-a109-483c62d17528?accessToken=zwAAAXHw604IkdOegyyKiWER6tOhCUg8YtF1KA.MEUCIDY7KDYiwqK-47nca5CvfTduy65DHi-WnvyA_OKhjK-rAiEAzEyNEOIfmNiwv0eFa3Gz-WdX9hcXmrnSpY3ZakOEvhI&sharetype=gift?token=37bb3af1-7e79-4831-834e-fb6bc4fc4845) in a May 7 column in the Financial Times, ranting that environmentalists who aim to deprive the world of fossil fuels “hate humanity, and the planet too.”

Putting aside Zycher’s ad hominem attack on the “environmental left,” he deliberately confuses the societal benefits of energy with how it is generated. At several junctures in history, humans switched from wood to coal to natural gas to warm their homes. Likewise, they switched from whale oil to kerosene to incandescents to LEDs to illuminate their homes. Opposition to coal and kerosene in the past or fossil fuels today is not “fundamentally antihuman” when there are better, cleaner alternatives. And it turns out the alternatives—solar and wind, specifically—are now the [cheapest sources of electricity](https://www.lazard.com/perspective/lcoe2019), and they could have been more widely available years ago if ExxonMobil and other fossil fuel companies had not stood in the way.

**The Manhattan Institute Is Still in Love With Fossil Fuels**

The Manhattan Institute, a New York City-based libertarian think tank, received [$90,000](https://corporate.exxonmobil.com/-/media/Global/Files/worldwide-giving/2019-Worldwide-Giving-Report.pdf) from ExxonMobil in 2019. Since 1998, the company has given the organization more than $1.4 million.

For the last decade, the institute’s go-to energy expert has been Robert Bryce, who, like AEI’s Zycher, is [no fan of a carbon tax](https://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/three-major-problems-carbon-tax), ExxonMobil’s supposed pet climate solution. Before he left the think tank at the end of 2019, Bryce spent much of his time bashing renewable energy and extolling fossil fuels in reports and in the pages of the [National Review](https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/11/renewable-mandates-and-carbon-taxes-lost-big-on-tuesday/), [New York Post](https://nypost.com/2020/03/07/angry-us-landowners-are-killing-off-renewable-energy-projects/), [Wall Street Journal](https://www.wsj.com/articles/robert-bryce-dreaming-the-impossible-green-dream-1402527502) and other publications.

Bryce routinely disparages renewables without providing context. In an August 2019 column on the conservative website RealClearEnergy, for example, he [maintained](https://www.realclearenergy.org/articles/2019/08/16/big_winds_big_headwinds_110467.html) that the wind industry is “facing increasing opposition” at least partly because of what he insists is the major threat it poses to eagles and other birds, an assertion he has been making ad nauseum for years. In fact, the [top human-caused threats](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/wind-energy-threat-to-bir_b_4321113) to birds are [climate change](https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/2019/10/climate-change-threatens-bird-species/), [buildings](https://truthout.org/articles/buildings-are-hazardous-to-migratory-birds-but-there-are-solutions/), power lines, misapplied pesticides, communications towers, and oil and gas industry fluid waste pits—not wind turbines.

As for wind energy’s specific threat to eagles, Dan Ashe, a former director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, debunked Bryce’s fallacious claim in a December 2016 HuffPost column. “Public attention on eagle loss in recent years has focused almost exclusively on wind energy,” Ashe [wrote](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/a-better-way-to-conserve-eagles_b_5851536de4b0320ed05a9a09). “In truth, wind turbine collisions comprise a fraction of human-caused eagle losses. Most result from intentional and accidental poisoning and purposeful shooting. The majority of non-intentional loss occurs when eagles collide with cars or ingest lead shot or bullet fragments in remains and gut piles left by hunters. Others collide with or are electrocuted on power lines. Disproportionately and solely focusing on wind energy distorts public perceptions at a time when we desperately need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.”

Cutting carbon pollution is hardly a goal that Bryce or any of his Manhattan Institute colleagues would ever publicly endorse. Doing so would certainly not please their other climate science denier benefactors, which include the [Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation](https://documented.net/2019/12/bradley-foundations-pour-millions-into-network-of-climate-denial-and-anti-labor-organization-tax-filings-show/), [Charles Koch Foundation](https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/480918408), hedge fund billionaire Robert Mercer’s [Mercer Family Foundation](https://maplight.org/story/tax-return-shows-mercer-family-fueled-climate-skeptics-last-year-with-more-than-4-million/), and Mercer’s daughter, Rebekah, a [Manhattan Institute trustee](https://www.manhattan-institute.org/board-of-trustees). All have donated considerably more money to the think tank than ExxonMobil in recent years and, unlike the oil company, do not pretend to care about the climate crisis.

**Maintaining the Status Quo in Congress**

The New York Times recently ran a [story](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/21/business/energy-environment/oil-climate-change-us-europe.html) pointing out that European and U.S. oil companies are heading in very different directions when it comes to climate change. While BP, Royal Dutch Shell and other European-based companies are beginning to sell their oil fields and invest in renewable energy, their U.S. counterparts [Chevron](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-08-13/chevron-keeps-drilling-for-oil-as-its-rivals-embrace-renewables?sref=ZMY9rmLQ) and [ExxonMobil](https://blog.ucsusa.org/kathy-mulvey/three-reasons-investors-should-give-exxonmobils-2020-climate-report-the-thumbs-down) are betting that oil and gas will continue to make up at least 50 percent of the energy market for at least the next 20 years.

Instead of transitioning to solar and wind, the two U.S. oil giants are spending [relatively trivial amounts](https://www.iea.org/reports/the-oil-and-gas-industry-in-energy-transitions) on unproven technologies, such as [modular fusion nuclear reactors (Chevron)](https://www.chevron.com/stories/chevron-invests-in-nuclear-fusion-start-up), [algae-based biofuel (ExxonMobil)](https://corporate.exxonmobil.com/-/media/Global/Files/energy-and-carbon-summary/Energy-and-carbon-summary.pdf), and carbon capture and storage schemes (both), which so far have been [costly failures](https://theenergymix.com/2020/08/05/carbon-capture-failure-in-texas-bodes-badly-for-similar-projects-elsewhere-ieefa-warns/). If those pipe dreams were ever demonstrated to work at the necessary scale, it would still take decades to commercialize them.

The main reason European oil and gas companies are taking baby steps to embrace renewables? Government pressure. The European Union has [set a goal](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-climate-change-eu-target/european-commission-to-propose-more-ambitious-2030-climate-goal-document-idINKBN262160) of net-zero carbon emissions by 2050, and [seven EU countries](https://theclimatecenter.org/actions-by-countries-phase-out-gas/) plan to phase out vehicles powered by gasoline and diesel over the next few decades. Austria, with the most aggressive timetable, will ban internal-combustion-engine [vehicle sales after 2020](https://www.erneuerbareenergien.de/archiv/austria-could-ban-new-gas-and-diesel-cars-by-2020-150-437-94794.html).

Although California [recently announced](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/23/climate/california-ban-gas-cars.html) it would ban the sale of new gasoline-powered cars by 2035 and most diesel-powered trucks by 2045, the Trump administration has taken the [opposite tack](https://www.brookings.edu/policy2020/votervital/what-is-the-trump-administrations-track-record-on-the-environment/), gutting landmark Obama-era rules curbing vehicle and power plant carbon emissions, rolling back methane emission and coal ash storage regulations, and lifting bans on oil and gas drilling on public land. Congress, meanwhile, has declined to consider [climate bills](https://www.c2es.org/document/carbon-pricing-proposals-in-the-116th-congress/) that have been introduced since the beginning of the 2019-20 session.

The September 21 New York Times [story](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/21/business/energy-environment/oil-climate-change-us-europe.html) cited unnamed energy analysts who excused Chevron and ExxonMobil for not changing their business models. “U.S. lawmakers,” the analysts told the Times, “have simply not given them enough incentives to make a radical break.”

A major reason Congress has not given the U.S. oil industry enough incentives to change course is because oil and gas companies have been giving a critical mass of U.S. lawmakers enough incentives to do nothing. As mentioned above, $401,198 of the $991,329 ExxonMobil has spent so far on congressional incumbent campaigns during the current election cycle has gone to 115 of the 150 climate science deniers on Capitol Hill. Likewise, Chevron has spent [$936,489](https://www.opensecrets.org/orgs/chevron/recipients?id=D000000015&) on incumbent campaigns so far. A little more than $433,000—46 percent—has gone to 82 climate science deniers.

Besides making campaign contributions, oil companies spend a lot of money to keep tabs on their friends in Washington. So far, the top [three oil and gas lobbyists](https://www.opensecrets.org/federal-lobbying/industries/summary?cycle=2020&id=e01) during the 2019-20 cycle are Koch Industries, which has spent $30.72 million; Chevron, which has spent $28.54 million; and ExxonMobil, which has spent $28.36 million.

Why does ExxonMobil still support so many climate science deniers in Congress while contending to be so keen on a carbon tax? After all, just two years ago the company announced it would [donate $1 million](https://www.washingtonpost.com/energy-environment/2018/10/09/exxonmobil-gives-million-promote-carbon-tax-and-dividend-plan/) over two years to [Americans for Carbon Dividends](https://www.afcd.org/), a political action group created to promote a revenue-neutral carbon tax.

Some lawmakers are bullish on a carbon tax, but ExxonMobil largely ignores them. Since January 2019, [eight representatives](https://www.c2es.org/document/carbon-pricing-proposals-in-the-116th-congress/)—two Republicans and six Democrats—and [nine senators](https://www.c2es.org/document/carbon-pricing-proposals-in-the-116th-congress/)—all Democrats—have introduced [10 carbon tax bills and one cap-and-trade bill](https://www.c2es.org/document/carbon-pricing-proposals-in-the-116th-congress/). But only one of the eight representatives and four of the nine senators received a campaign contribution from ExxonMobil during this election cycle. The total amount the company donated to the five lawmakers was $15,000—a measly 4 percent of what it gave climate science deniers.

To be sure, ExxonMobil’s spending on climate disinformation has shrunk dramatically in recent years. The company’s 2019 outlay was less than [half](https://blog.ucsusa.org/elliott-negin/exxonmobil-still-funding-climate-science-denier-groups) of what it [spent in 2017](https://blog.ucsusa.org/elliott-negin/exxonmobil-still-funding-climate-science-denier-groups) and the lowest amount since 1999, when Exxon was going through its merger with Mobil. Likewise, its campaign contributions to climate science deniers in Congress dropped from [$1.1 million](https://blog.ucsusa.org/elliott-negin/exxonmobil-still-bankrolling-climate-deniers) during the 2017-18 election cycle to only $400,000, this cycle. But the fact remains that, while the company is saying all the right things publicly about the need to address climate change, it is continuing to fund think tanks and lawmakers who dispute the science and oppose government action. That suggests that its professed support for a carbon tax is no more than a disingenuous public relations ploy to delay government action. The tobacco industry used the very same tactic to hold off regulations for decades, and it worked well until it didn’t, when the industry lost in court and agreed to pay [$246 billion](https://www.npr.org/2013/10/13/233449505/15-years-later-where-did-all-the-cigarette-money-go) in fines to states over 25 years.

*Author’s note: Besides the U.S. Chamber of Commerce ($415,000), American Enterprise Institute ($110,000) and Manhattan Institute ($90,000), ExxonMobil* [*gave grants in 2019*](https://corporate.exxonmobil.com/Community-engagement/Worldwide-giving/Worldwide-Giving-Report) *to five other climate science denier groups: Center for American and International Law ($5,000), Federalist Society ($10,000), Hoover Institution ($15,000), Mountain States Legal Foundation ($5,000) and the Washington Legal Foundation ($40,000).*