Opinion
Guest Voices



Rows of solar panels on a solar farm (Unsplash/Creative Commons/Mariana Proença)



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After reading my last column, "Global warming is here and getting worse," my brother, who is president of a Jesuit high school, responded, "Great article, but you just describe the problems. I'd never let you out of my office until you gave me a solution."

The good news is there are ways to reduce and eliminate the growth in global warming; the bad news is I am not sure we will implement them fast enough.

As I mentioned in my column, human-caused climate change threatens life as we know it on the planet. Sadly, too many people deny the science or don't make it a priority. As a result, some politicians are not willing to make the tough decisions to deal with climate change.

First, the good news. What can we do to deal with global warming?

Related: Global warming is here and it is getting worse

Economists are almost unanimous in saying the best way to slow down global warming is through a tax on carbon emissions. This is basic economic theory. If you tax something, you make it more expensive and people will use less of it. This approach uses the power of the marketplace rather than government regulations to influence people's decisions.

A tax on carbon emissions would make energy from fossil fuels more expensive, which makes alternative sources of energy more attractive. Customers will demand cheaper alternatives and more energy-efficient devices, and investors will be willing to put their money toward responding to these demands knowing there is a market for it.

Theoretically, this reduces the need for government regulations and investment since the market would encourage thousands of entrepreneurs to try various approaches until some succeed. This is why the auto industry preferred raising gasoline taxes to government efficiency standards.

The problem with taxing carbon is political. Voters don't like taxes and politicians are afraid to enact them.

The Biden administration flips this idea on its head by enacting tax credits for alternative sources of energy. In other words, instead of making fossil fuels more expensive, the administration is making alternative energy cheaper. On top of this is direct government spending to foster alternative sources of energy by installing charging stations and by purchasing electric cars and trucks for government agencies.

Tax credits are politically more acceptable than taxes or government spending. Voters love tax credits, even though tax reformers hate them. Politicians find them easy to vote for and hard to criticize.

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Now that the credits are in the law, Republicans are going to find it hard to repeal them. Individual and corporate taxpayers will get mad at anyone trying to repeal what they now consider their right. Republicans will be accused of trying to raise taxes, something they always accuse Democrats of doing.

Another advantage of tax credits is that, although more energy-efficient equipment is cheaper in the long run, it tends to be more expensive in the short term. A rational consumer should be willing to pay more for a refrigerator, air conditioner or car if in the long run it is cheaper. But most consumers are not rational, or they don't have the money to afford energy-efficient purchases. Most people look at the sticker price, not the cost over a five-year period.

In response, government regulations can set energy standards for equipment or simply ban the sale of inefficient products, like incandescent lightbulbs. It can also give a tax credit for the purchase of energy-efficient equipment, which brings down the original sticker price. The Biden administration has done both.

The good news is that government and private research and investments have brought down the cost of alternative energy more dramatically than the experts expected. The cost of wind and solar energy is now cheaper than oil, gas or nuclear.

"The world has produced nearly three billion solar panels at this point, and every one of those has been an opportunity for people to try to improve the process," Gregory Nemet, a solar power expert at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, told The New York Times. "And all of those incremental improvements add up to something very dramatic."

Europe is now getting more energy from wind and solar than from fossil fuels, thanks in part to Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine. China, because of government investment, is still outperforming Europe and the United States, but the growth of solar and wind energy is expected to be dramatic in the coming years. Biden's Inflation Reduction Act, with its subsidies for domestic investment in alternative energy, has forced European countries to come up with their own programs to compete.

A tsunami of investment in alternative energy is coming, and much of it is occurring in red states and rural areas that traditionally vote Republican.

Flat rural areas like the Midwest and Texas have the steady wind needed for energy production. Southern states have the sun. Green jobs in red states are going to eventually impact American politics surrounding global warming. Republicans are going to have to change their position on global warming or they are going to begin losing elections in their backyards.

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The biggest obstacles to alternative energy are no longer technical or economic. They are political. First, there are campaign donations, phony science and propaganda funded by fossil fuel interests.

Second, there is NIMBY-ism, "not in my backyard."

Liberal states in the Northeast have beach towns that don't want their ocean views "desecrated" by wind turbines. And to make full use of wind and solar power, the electric grid needs to be upgraded, and no one wants transmission lines near their homes. Even environmentalists object to wind farms over concerns birds and bats will be killed by the turbines.

Environmental and local-control laws favored by liberals in recent decades are now making it difficult to deal with global warming. But we cannot afford to delay our response. We have ways to deal with global warming and they are improving every day. The question is, still, do we have the will to save God's creation?