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PROPOSALS FOR US CLIMATE LEADERSHIP AND MANAGING BUILT
ENVIRONMENT RISKS AND COSTS

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PROCEEDINGS

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews.

In December, Brookings launched the Blueprints for American Renewal and Prosperity Project to offer federal policy recommendations in five challenge areas. These are racial justice and working mobility, economic growth and dynamism, international security, governance—both domestic and international—and climate and resilience.

On the sixth and final episode from the Blueprints Project to Brookings, experts discuss their blueprints for climate and resilience. Nathan Hultman is a nonresident senior fellow in Global Economy and Development at Brookings and also the director of the Center for Global Sustainability, and an associate professor at the University of Maryland School of Public Policy. He is the coauthor with Samantha Gross of "How the United States Can Return to Credible Climate Leadership." Joseph Kane is a senior research associate and associate fellow in the Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings and is coauthor with Jenny Schuetz, Shalini Vajjhala, and Adie Tomer of "How a federal climate planning unit can manage built environment risks and costs." You can find these and now all the Blueprints at [Brookings.edu/blueprints](https://www.brookings.edu/blueprints).

Also in this episode, Alan Berube, senior fellow and deputy director of the Metropolitan Policy Program, shares some insights from the new Metro Monitor, an annual assessment of growth, prosperity, and inclusion in nearly 200 metro areas around the country. In this Metro Lens segment, Berube highlights the progress some places have made in shrinking significant racial economic gaps over the last decade, but also says that despite some progress, the path to racial equity in America will be long and complicated.

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First up, here's Alan Berube with another Metro lens.

BERUBE: Hi, this is Alan Berube, senior fellow and deputy director at the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program. Two of the most important events 2020, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the outpouring of grief and anger in the wake of George Floyd's murder, have fueled renewed focus on the need for greater racial equity in America. Major U.S. corporations have announced billions of dollars of new investments in workers and communities of color. On Inauguration Day, President Biden issued an executive order committing his new administration to the goal of racial equity. At the most basic level, the concept of racial equity connotes a society in which one's economic, social, health, and other characteristics are not determined by one's race. America, of course, remains a long way from that vision.

So how will we get there? To help answer that question, it's worth looking at what's happening beneath the national surface in our individual metropolitan areas. These urban and suburban hubs bring together unique collections of business, talent and infrastructure that together drive competitiveness and prosperity. And these are the places whose economic conditions we track in the Metro Monitor, our annual assessment on the state of growth, prosperity, and inclusion in nearly 200 metro areas around the country.

One critical dimension of inclusive economic growth we track in the Monitor is racial inclusion. We define racial inclusion as the successful narrowing over time of longstanding gaps in employment, income, and poverty between white workers and workers of color. Those gaps are often quite significant here in the Washington, D.C., region. For instance, the typical white worker earned 60 percent more than the typical worker of color in 2019. And

that was before the pandemic, which we know displaced Latino and Black residents for jobs at higher than average rates. Nevertheless, the Metro Monitor shows that some places made progress in shrinking racial economic gaps over the past decade. Take Chattanooga, Tennessee, about three quarters of its six hundred thousand residents are white and one quarter of people of color predominantly Black and Latino. In 2009, its workers of color were compared to white workers, nine percentage points less likely to be employed, earning about twelve thousand dollars less annually, and 13 percentage points more likely to experience poverty. By 2019, however, those gaps had shrunk across the board. They hadn't disappeared, but on these specific economic dimensions, Chattanooga was a more racially equitable region than it had been a decade before.

And Chattanooga wasn't alone. The Metro Monitor finds that many other metro areas made strong progress on racial inclusion in the 2010s, such as South Bend, Indiana, Grand Rapids, Michigan, and El Paso, Texas. What accounts for their progress? Well, when we look across regions, those that specialize in the manufacturing and health care sectors tend to perform better on racial inclusion. To some degree, that progress might reflect the bounce back of manufacturing workers of color in that industry from the depths of the Great Recession in 2009. But manufacturing and health care are also industries that provide larger numbers of middle paying jobs and chances for advancement than either high paying professional services or lower paying hospitality fields. And to be clear, significant progress on racial inclusion was the exception in the 2010s, not the rule in many metro areas, particularly tech capitals like Boston, the Bay Area, Raleigh, Washington, D.C.

Workers of color made economic progress over the decade, but white workers made much more, and racial gaps continue to widen. The Metro Monitor makes clear that the path to racial equity in America, even across a small number of key economic indicators, will be a long and complicated one. But it also shows that progress is possible. And that's why

researchers and policymakers should examine what's happening on the ground in our cities and regions that can provide models for more concerted national efforts to ensure that the next economic recovery is a truly equitable one.

DEWS: You can listen to more Metro Lens pieces on our SoundCloud channel. And now here's my interview with Joseph Kane and Nathan Hultman.

Nate and Joe, I want to welcome you both back to the Brookings cafeteria, it's been a few years.

KANE: Thanks, Fred.

HULTMAN: Happy to be here in the virtual cafe.

DEWS: Excellent. So this is the sixth and final of the podcasts for the Blueprint for American Renewal and Prosperity project. And the topic today is climate and resilience. You are both coauthors of a paper or papers, in your case, Joe, in this series of papers that's now available on our website, [Brooking.edu/Blueprints](https://www.brookings.edu/blueprints). The way I've started all of these interviews is to ask the authors to give listeners a very high level view of the basic idea of your paper. So listeners can kind of keep that in mind as we go through it. Nate, could we start with you on that?

HULTMAN: Yeah, so 2021 is shaping up to be a potentially very big and transformational year for climate. A lot of the pieces have been moving forward in different paces and different ways over the recent years in different countries and in the global community. And a lot of those streams are now coming together, particularly with the U.S. having recently selected leadership that is more ambitious on the climate side. That remains in many ways the kind of final piece of the puzzle to make 2021 a success. And so the paper that I've written with a couple of coauthors underscores the importance of the U.S. working with the international community to capitalize on this critical 2021 opportunity.

DEWS: Joe, how about you? And you're the author of two papers. We'll focus on one of them in this discussion. But go ahead and talk about at a high level both of the papers you're coauthor of.

KANE: Yeah, Fred, so as Nate was just saying, I mean, 2021 is, I think, going to be a momentous year for climate action, not just U.S. in a global context, but just within the U.S. in a domestic context. So the two papers that I did with several colleagues focused not just on getting a bunch of projects done per se, but helping more people and more places.

The first, which I coauthored with Christina Kwauk, focused on climate education and training. So we asked ourselves, how do our underlying behaviors and actions and existing systems of economic and environmental inequity limit our climate solutions? We know there is a technical gap when it comes to emissions and mitigation and so on. But there is also an education gap, a lack of knowledge and awareness of these climate issues, a training gap, a lack of consistent talent pipeline to prepare workers for green careers, which leads to an inequality gap in disinvestment and marginalization of many communities. And so that first paper focuses on green learning agenda to help equip and inform that new generation of leaders that are going to be taking on many of these issues.

The second paper focuses very much on the governance of these different issues, particularly around the built environment. So not just our energy infrastructure per se, but also our transportation, land use and water systems. And so with my coauthors Adie Tomer, Jenny Schuetz and Shalini Vajjhala, we asked ourselves, how can the federal government, alongside state and local governments, actually address these issues moving forward, given the need for mitigation, but also adaptation that we're dealing with this extreme climate right now?

DEWS: Well, thank you both for that, and it's now time to take a deep dive into your papers, and I wanted to start with you, Nate, on your paper. As you just said in the intro, you

write that 2021 has the potential to be a year of rapid advancement on climate change. So why this year in particular?

HULTMAN: Well, I think there are two elements of this. Like, first of all, the fact is that in the international cycle that was set up under the Paris Agreement in 2015, 2020 and frankly now because of COVID a little bit into 2021 is actually part of the calendar. And the idea of the Paris Agreement, there's multiple goals in the Paris Agreement, but one of the key and the critical dimensions of Paris is that it sets up a cycle every five years for countries to reassess where they are, think about what they can do more and then communicate that set of ideas and activities to the international community. So we can think about it as a coordinating mechanism with a five year cycle.

And so one of the drivers of this year is that we are coming to this five year cycle. We did a first round of this prior to and up to the Paris Agreement in 2015 as a global community. We're now also as a global community doing that process again, where countries are evaluating what they can do, sharing ideas with each other as part of these climate target setting exercises under Paris, and then convening later this year.

The second big dimension of this, of course, is the change in the U.S. orientation toward climate as a result of the election of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. And so the U.S. is obviously a huge part of the overall global solution on climate change. We are the world's second largest emitter, the world's largest economy, and clearly have a big leadership role to play in, both leading by example from our own domestic actions and also working with the international community. Those two things have now come together and are actually setting us up then for a potentially very valuable engagement over the next six months or so to get to some new and more ambitious global strategy to deal with climate.

DEWS: Your paper focuses on reestablishing U.S. leadership and the context there, of course, is that in 2017, the Trump administration withdrew the United States from the Paris

Climate Agreement and the new Biden-Harris administration has rejoined the Paris Climate Agreement. But what effect did that move by the Trump administration have on reestablishing U.S. leadership today? I mean, did that set back the United States' ability to lead on climate change?

HULTMAN: Well, it's unequivocal that that Trump decision was a setback for us all in dealing with climate globally. What we actually learned, though, over the past few years is that there were a couple of ways that the U.S. and the global community continued to move forward. And I think that actually has placed us in a pretty good position this year to achieve a bigger outcome. So the two dimensions there is that, first of all, the withdrawal from the U.S. did not, in fact, completely deflate the global community's interest in moving forward on climate change. In fact, that's probably the wrong way to frame it. Countries actually came together quite quickly after the U.S. announcement and said, we're going to keep doing it, we're going to continue moving forward. I think that there was certainly a hope that the U.S. would rejoin whenever we got our domestic politics resorted on climate. And so there was a determination from the international community to continue moving even without the U.S. at the federal level being engaged.

The second element of that was also that, domestically speaking in the U.S., we saw a tremendous groundswell of subnational action stepping up and driving forward on climate change action in different states, cities, businesses, other kinds of communities, and organizations. All of those represents something like 70 percent of the U.S. economy by some work that I've been involved in. And also that's equivalent to the world's second largest economy just with that set of actors. And so even without the federal leadership, the domestic basis these actors have actually created over recent years, a stepped up basis for more federal action today from the U.S.

And so even though there was a setback from the federal side, from the national leadership in the U.S., action continued forward and makes it possible for us to have this moment of global re-engagement on climate to drive it to a successful conclusion.

DEWS: That also raises the question for me, which is why U.S. leadership? Why not European leadership or why not Germany leading or even China? And the space that the U.S. vacated over the last four years seems to have possibly opened the door to another nation or another bloc to take the lead on global climate action.

HULTMAN: I think that's a fair question is who's leading on global climate. And I think that the best way to think about this is that it cannot be one single country, but it also must include some of the key players. And I think that I'm not going to list all of them here. You listed a few. The U.S. is a critical part of this issue. We are a big emitter. We're the second largest emitter or the biggest economy. So just on a chunk of emissions calculation, you've got to have the U.S. really acting very vigorously on this topic to have any chance of global success. But I think that your question gets to something deeper, which is not just is the United States making our own domestic reductions? But is the United States setting an example, helping lead the world, showing the way of rapid decarbonization with broadly shared benefits for our people? Those are the questions that you're asking about. And I do think that the U.S. remains a critical piece of this. There is no other country that is as well-placed as we are to show how action across a country with this all-in strategy we've been developing over the past arguably seven or eight years in the United States can actually drive and deliver a very robust economy, better health for our citizens, and a good domestic outcome in terms of emissions.

But clearly, the U.S. remains an important leader in the international community, and it is always going to be critical for us to be out there leading both in front of the cameras but

also behind the scenes, encouraging and communicating with all of our allies and partners around the world about what we can, as a global community do more to address the problem.

DEWS: I'm thinking of a great tie in with Joe's paper here on federal action on climate change, the federal government as an actor, I want to get to that in a minute. But the structure of these papers is always to identify the challenge, but also identify policy solutions in the great Brookings tradition. So, Nate, can you walk us through what your policy recommendations are for the new administration in Washington?

HULTMAN: Yeah, so one thing I would note is that the administration's already put out a very good philosophy about how to deal with climate change, and I think that that is always got to be the kind of starting point for any thinking about policy recommendations. And that is essentially a multipart process but thinking about climate is not a niche issue that's over in one corner of an administration. It's an issue that actually pervades all other policy elements. Right? It's about economic policy. It's about justice. It's about technology and innovation. It's about different sectors and about the private sector's involvement in those. And this administration has, in my view, correctly framed up the climate issue is something that cuts across all of government and that means all of the federal government, but it also means all levels of government. Right? Not just the national the sort of federal level, but states, cities and these other actors we've mentioned. And they've very deliberately framed it up as an opportunity for us to be working together as a whole country on this kind of comprehensive strategy that cuts across.

And so that's the key starting point of I think any successful climate policy, frankly, for any country is to think about it as this integrated strategy across all sectors and all dimensions. And so that part's there.

The other element that's also critically important that this administration has also been leaning into is the important linkage between the domestic and the international angles. And

ultimately, climate is a global problem, global challenge. No one country, including the U.S. for all its size, can solve the problem on its own. But at the same time, because we are a global community, we all have to do a part and our part and hopefully more on what we can deliver for the global community's benefit for climate. It turns out because of all these changes in the economy over the last five or 10 years with decreasing technology costs, a lot of what we can do domestically in the U.S. and other countries is aligned with what we would want to do anyway. But ultimately, the U.S. has to kind of link this domestic and international strategy.

So that's then where the question comes in on the international side, what can the U.S. do? Well, first of all, actually is get our own house in order. That's always got to be the root of all successful climate actions. Get our own house in order. In other words, make sure we build on that momentum from the past few years from the subnationals. Add in a vigorous and comprehensive federal strategy from the executive and Congress, and then make sure that we are on a track toward ambitious emissions reductions by 2030 and then continuing that on to something like a net zero 2050, which is what the Biden team has put forward. So, ultimately, getting our own house in order is the critical piece for making sure we have credibility to do international leadership. And so that's always got to be there.

The second thing, of course, is, though, how to then build on what we already have in the global international community and then also use that domestic action to encourage additional countries to act. And that's where, again, the U.S. has strengths in this area. We've done a lot of this before. We can work with our partners, work with allies to think about what the new opportunities might be. We can also work with that international community through the Framework Convention on Climate Change to make sure that this year's climate conference in Glasgow later this year will be a success.

DEWS: Well, thanks for all that, and I just want to highlight again for listeners that this is all explicated in the paper on the Blueprints portion of our website, this and many other policy recommendations. And I just do want to highlight for listeners the way you phrase the very first policy recommendation in the paper is to embed climate action into U.S. society. That really struck me, embed climate action in the U.S. society. Can you just expand briefly on that again?

HULTMAN: Absolutely, when we think about what we need to do for climate change, just from what the science is telling us and what then has been taken from the science and embedded in global goals about limiting warming to 2 degrees or 1.5 degrees, ideally.

What we know we have to do is a rapid and thoroughgoing economic transition in the course of roughly the next decade or so. Right? Where we're rapidly transitioning from a certain kind of way of doing things to a cleaner, greener, and hopefully more broadly shared way of supporting our economy, providing our energy, working in our lands. All these dimensions come into play. That transition is absolutely feasible. And it's a transition that will actually yield, by multiple studies, yield a lot of benefits for the U.S. economy, for the global economy, for that matter, but for the U.S. economy and for the people who live here in terms of health and other outcomes. So there's lots to be gained by this transition.

At the same time, that transition is rapid and thoroughgoing, as I've said. Now, we're familiar with rapid transitions in technology and sort of more narrow ways, like most of us didn't have smartphones about 10 or 12 years ago, but now it's pervasive. Right? And so what we have to think about that is happening across lots of different kinds of technologies in lots of different ways. And so we can't be thinking about this as something that somehow the U.S. federal government will just run. Right? It's not going to work like that. It has to be something that's owned by everybody, that's supported by everybody, that people are excited about doing because they see the future as kind of a positive one with doing this. And that

involves also all parts of our society. It involves yes, absolutely, our government has to be part of the discussion here and frankly, will be part of the near term sort of organizer and driver of how we think about this problem. But obviously, the private sector, in terms of technology innovation, deployment, market transformation is huge. All of the other actors that sort of have been stepping up in the past few years. But it's not just cities, but cities are important. It's not just states, but states are important. Lots of energy there, but also other ones like communities of faith, universities, cultural institutions. All of these other actors are critical in terms of doing what they can do in their own organizational contexts, but also working across the U.S. as a country to make this happen.

DEWS: Thanks for that, Nate. And let's turn to you now, Joe, you've been nodding your head a lot, a lot of the things Nate has said, and it makes sense because there are a lot of connections between your proposal and Nate's, especially in the terms of federal action on climate. But it's also interesting, Joe, that you're a member of the Metropolitan Policy Program, which focuses on what we would call subnational actors and a lot of arenas in U.S. policy. I also just want to remind listeners that you're also coauthor with Christina Kwauk, as you mentioned, of a paper on climate education and training, which listeners can find on our website, [Brooking.edu/blueprints](https://www.brookings.edu/blueprints). But we're going to focus on your other paper. So can you talk about what you mean in the paper, what you and your coauthors mean, by focusing on the built environment? What is the built environment and how does it relate to federal climate change mitigation strategies?

KANE: Sure. And to build off what Nate was just talking about, the reality is we are in a transition, right. And it's not even just a transition of choice. I would argue it's we're already in it. Whether we like to admit it or not. We've had trillions of dollars in costs that are hitting us from extreme storms, but also chronic climate issues. And it's not just a national and an international issue, but it goes all the way down to individual cities, individual

neighborhoods, individual households, where the risks, the impacts, the cost of all of this are highly uneven. And that's why I think to give the Biden administration some credit, why there has been such an emphasis on not just climate action, but on climate justice. Right? And ensuring that in this transition to hopefully a cleaner, more resilient economy, we are also internalizing and better understanding what are the effects that are happening to people all over the place.

So, when we're talking about the built environment, all legislative action matters. But federal leaders also need to seize short term wins in the next two to four years that show measurable progress, build support for larger scale, longer term investments. We think of our infrastructure in particular, which has been a big talking point in Washington over the last few weeks, will be a big talking point in certainly the months to come. The built environment is part of that. It is not just the transition to cleaner energy systems—and when we think of generation transmission, distribution and manufacturing and so on. But it's also the fact of our transportation systems, that how we get around transportation is now the leading GHG emissions source, according to EPA, nationally. And so how we actually consider air pollution, fossil fuel consumption, unsustainable roadway design, that has to be part of our built environment.

Second is our real estate and our buildings that we are continuing to devour land sprawling ever outward—that certainly has a climate dimension to it. Impervious surface cover certainly leads to the challenges that we saw in Houston with Hurricane Harvey a few years ago, that water had nowhere to go to penetrate, which led to flood concerns. Additional energy and water consumption. And then a lot of our invisible infrastructure systems, particularly water systems, when we think of runoff, water scarcity concerns, especially out West with drought issues. And so the built environment is, as I like to say, infrastructure policy is climate policy. They're not separated from each other. And so as we talk about our

transportation needs, our water needs and our broader land use needs, we are talking about climate needs as well.

DEWS: I know why we would want to center a lot of this action in the federal government, because it's the place that sets laws and regulations. But you also write about the federal government as an entity that controls a lot of that built environment. Can you expand on that?

KANE: Right, well, I mean, the reality is, when it comes to our transportation and our water infrastructure in particular, states and localities are our primary owners and operators. They are the ones, as Nate was saying, haven't slowed down. They haven't had a choice, really. They've had to make the investments. They've had to deal with this uncertainty and these risks.

But I think it's the scale of our climate challenge, the lack of consistency, both in measuring this and paying for it and ultimately coordinating, collaborating around it. How do we create the economies of scale to address what's an incredibly fragmented and localized issue in many regions? That is where the federal government can play an important role as a convener, as a collaborator, as a capacity builder to help places that are already dealing with these challenges. And so that goes beyond any particular type of infrastructure, that goes beyond any particular agency. We need to have a whole federal government approach, which the Biden administration, again, to give credit, hasn't just been nested in the Department of Transportation, hasn't just been in the EPA. It's actually also in Treasury, as we've seen with Secretary Yellen recently, of saying climate is important there, too.

So it's a whole government approach where we can get past these siloed perspectives, where we can get out of this model of just relief, disaster relief, and actually look towards resilience. How can we more proactively invest in these systems? That is certainly central here. But then how we actually coordinate action; that was really the emphasis in our report

was the creation of what we call a new Climate Planning Unit within the White House that can serve as that way to have coordinated, imaginative federal leadership that can proactively address these challenges and, quite frankly, take some pilots, some risks, some experiments with trying new things that our infrastructure shouldn't just be holding us back. But it can be a foundation for new solutions and new opportunities moving forward.

DEWS: Yeah, it sounds like the White House maybe has taken some kind of step toward the idea that you are proposing with the Climate Planning Unit. And I'm not saying it's the same thing, but it seems like they're definitely doing what you suggested to embed climate action thinking across all areas of the federal government. We have Gina McCarthy as a national climate adviser. John Kerry was appointed as a special presidential envoy for climate, I guess that's on the international side. But it does sound like in the same way that the Biden administration is making global national security issues also part of domestic policy discussions, they're going to do the same with climate. So how does your Climate Planning Unit fit in with that context that we've already seen established in the White House?

KANE: I think the reality is we're still early days and a lot of this. Right? There's still uncertainty, I think, in how the federal government mobilizes around some of these issues. I think some of the right players are coming into the right positions around the table. I think a lot of the right talking points are happening. But as is often the case with built environment and infrastructure concerns, you can pay a lot of lip service, everyone can agree that this is something we should do, but to actually do something, it gets a lot harder politically, but even organizationally.

And so the idea of a Climate Planning Unit—and that would be specifically within the Office of Management and Budget, or OMB—should be complementary to these efforts. Right? It shouldn't be duplicative. We shouldn't be just creating new bodies for the sake of creating new bodies. Right. But we need to have greater coordination, both intra agency and

inter agency around these issues. This is something that the Government Accountability Office has called for in the past in their analyses. And I think the major point with a Climate Planning Unit is how can we reduce the federal fiscal impacts of climate change by developing these strategic priorities?

So, the idea of establishing a fiscal agenda for climate risk reduction to identify those quick wins and opportunities that can allow us to pursue structural change within and between federal agencies.

Two: drawing on the expertise of internal and external climate project managers to provide technical and operational leadership. As Nate was saying, that is not just a public sector issue, it's a private sector issue. How do we get that expertise embedded in our federal leadership is crucial.

Third, creating a stable, self-sustaining funding structure to drive cost recovery. Right? So, if the Biden administration is gone in a few years, what is going to be the model that's durable that allows all federal agencies and all regions to keep addressing these issues more consistently over time?

And the last is improving accountability and long term evaluation. Right? That it can't just be doing something now out of political expediency and as much as the climate moment demands it. But how are we actually doing that in ways that we can evaluate, measure and gauge our progress against these big goals in years to come?

DEWS: That fiscal piece that you mentioned was really fascinating to me. I mean, largely because it's accompanied by an interesting chart in which you've demonstrated some of the current and future expenses that the federal government will have to incur to respond to climate induced events like wildfires and hurricanes. I mean, it's happening now and we can predict the rising costs of mitigating that. So, in that fiscal piece, are you suggesting that I mean, there's a way that this kind of planning inside OMB, inside the federal government,

can start to reduce those future costs, the current costs, but also the exponentially rising future costs?

KANE: Yeah, and I would emphasize, too, Fred, it's not just costs, but it's benefits. How can we amplify the benefits of taking these actions? I think there are certain cost savings, right? that we can avoid. It's always this big, hairy problem that's sticky that we need to avoid. But there are benefits here, especially as we go back and think of environmental justice issues. If you are making these investments, right, proactively targeted in regions that are most vulnerable to these impacts, that's helping people perhaps fill jobs, that's perhaps helping provide benefits in terms of greater land values. It's investing in communities that for so long, structurally speaking, have seen legacies of disinvestment. And so in addition to the cost reductions and the cost savings of ... it could be as simple as the Post Office, right, switching to electric vehicles, it doesn't have to be huge, just one big project that's going to solve this. It could be distributed projects all across the federal government and also at a state and local level.

But I'm also especially interested in, as my colleagues are as well, in what are the benefits here, too. How can we actually provide proof of concept that if we do this right and the federal government can provide that capacity for states and localities to do this, what are some of the benefits that we could realize in years to come? Which we really don't have up to this point because we have been just so decentralized, have lacked those metrics, and have lacked any sense of real coordinated programmatic priorities around these issues.

DEWS: I'm glad you brought up the environmental justice issue again, because I wanted to come back to it by way of asking about that question of opportunities, because a lot of the research that's come from Brookings scholars over the past six to nine months has been in the context, obviously, of the COVID-19 pandemic that very sadly has caused the deaths of over half a million Americans, many more around the world. And we mourn those deaths

and all the illness and the economic wreckage. But on the other side, this past year has presented what I think a lot of people say is a unique opportunity to not only address the current crisis, but to do things differently, to do things better as we move forward. And it sounds like in both of your papers, this could be the opportunity to do that. Could you both kind of address that opportunity side? Joe, you have a bit. Nate maybe you could as well.

HULTMAN: Yeah, I'm happy to kick things off, Fred, I mean, this idea of build back better right is certainly a phrase that was in the campaign, and it has now entered the policy arena in Washington and elsewhere and certainly even in a global context which Nate can probably comment on as well. But I would say that building back better doesn't mean just building more. We often think it's building more or new. Sometimes it means building differently. Sometimes it means building less. Sometimes it may mean actually taking down things that we've built that are creating structural barriers to opportunity and climate injustice in places. We're seeing this with our aging highways. Right? That literally were designed to cut through often lower income communities and communities of color to disconnect them from opportunity. Oh, and by the way, now puts them in harm's way with our climate extremes as well.

And so as we think of building back better at a federal level, but also going down and probably starting with states and localities that are dealing with these issues head on, we need to ask ourselves, it's not just what more we can do, what more we can create here, which there definitely is a need for more investment, I think, in infrastructure and in certainly some of these climate resilient designs and technologies. But also, we need to ask ourselves, what are the mistakes that we've made in the past. Right? That are setting us up for greater vulnerability, for greater costs, for greater risks. And unfortunately, as we've realized during COVID and even just a few weeks ago in Texas as well with the freeze, it's often those same households and same communities that keep getting hit by these issues. At a point. It's no

accident, right? It's structural. It's because of intentional policy decisions in the past of how we've installed these things and how we've maintained them. And we're now at a juncture where we can openly question, is this what we should be doing or should we be building in different ways, considering new strategies?

DEWS: Nate, is this a build back better moment in terms of restoring U.S. leadership on climate change?

HULTMAN: Absolutely, I have to say, I think Joe made the point very eloquently about thinking about not just build more, but build better, and what does that mean in different ways, right? So to interrogate what it really means and to be deliberate about how we're understanding things that have gone wrong and the problems that we now have. And I think as was mentioned a few minutes ago, right now we have a number of linked crises. It's not just climate change, which is bringing us together for this conversation today. But that's linked fundamentally, and you're hearing it in this conversation, to economic hardship and challenges in our country. But even globally. It's also linked to COVID and how we've been suffering in our country and globally with COVID. And it's, of course, critically linked across all three to racial justice and equity questions.

And so those four things are not separate crises. They're not separated. There are elements of them that you can talk about some things in isolation, but there are also elements in which they are fundamentally linked. And I think that both in the U.S. context, but also globally, as we're thinking about our approach to climate, it really, again, let's always remember, it's just like we were talking about with the U.S. all-government approach, all-society approach. The approach to climate is really solving a number of problems, of which climate is one. And it turns out that a lot of the solutions that we can imagine that are also beneficial to climate may well be, if we can structure everything correctly, beneficial to a lot of other problems that we're actually grappling with right now. And I think that the justice

and equity one is a fundamental one. Joe, again, said it very well—if we think about how all of these sort of big picture policy things, but actually manifest real communities around the world, including in our country, how does that actually change the lived experience of our people? And we have to make sure that we're always cognizant of building that in.

And I actually do think, now, back to your point, Fred, the build back better philosophy is something that can contain this idea in a way. Right? Which is that we're thinking differently about our rapid economic and energy transition to achieve a climate friendly future. But as we're doing that, it throws off lots of other potential benefits. And the way we succeed in this, if we're looking back from 2040 or 2050 and saying how did we succeed, how did we do this? And I hope we are looking back and saying we did it. If we're looking back, we look back and say we did it because we did it across the entire society, that we did pay attention to improving the outcomes in the ways that Joe was talking about, to making sure we address those sort of deeply rooted racial and other equity structural problems that are existing in our country specifically and around the world. If we can root those things out, make sure we restructure it, build that back better, I think that that's how we tell the story. That's how we will make the story of success in our country and globally. And I think other countries will have a different take on that. But those equity and racial elements exist in all places in some way. And so all of us will be having to grapple with it, thinking through what are the specific strategies we can do to undertake this transition, but also embed, approach the other dimensions as well.

DEWS: Nate, thanks for that. And also I want to thank you for your time and expertise. Joe, thank you for sharing your time and expertise today on these very important issues. I appreciate it.

KANE: Thanks, Fred.

HULTMAN: Thank you.

DEWS: You can find their papers and all the other papers in the Blueprints for American Renewal and Prosperity on our website at Brookings.edu/blueprints.

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Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.