

I often have conversations about climate change with those who believe that the crux of the problem lies with the individual. To put it somewhat differently, these individualists believe that we can't solve the climate problem without individual change and that the possibilities for such change are all around us. People should use less electricity, take more public transportation, consume less, live more simply and so on and we'll be on our way to dramatically reduced emissions.

I always respond with cynicism. And then I feel badly. Most of us overconsume, drive too much, waste energy and could benefit from a simpler life. So the message seems right.

But I'm a cynic because I don't believe, at heart, that most people will engage in dramatic behavioral change unless forced. Here's just a tiny bit of evidence from [a recent L.A. Times article](#) in support of my view:



HYBRID SALES

As the Times reports, hybrid sales have dropped off at a far faster pace than sales of non-hybrid vehicles as gasoline prices have fallen from \$4.00 gallon to less than \$2.00.

Undoubtedly part of the reason for the dramatic fall is that money is tight and hybrids sell for a premium compared with conventional engine alternatives. But surely there's more going on. If driving is cheap, gas mileage doesn't much matter to most people even with news of climate change, even in the face of calls for energy conservation, and even with the memory of high fuel prices just behind us. Behavioral change with respect to consumer car purchases won't occur, in other words, out of the goodness of our hearts. Instead, for most of us, convenience and price will far outstrip any conservationist motives unless conservation pays or requires little sacrifice on our parts. We'll buy a fuel efficient car if fuel is expensive. We'll recycle in droves if given containers we can place at curbside and in even greater droves if we don't have to separate our cans from our papers from our plastic. If we have to drive to a recycling center, by contrast, only the most intense and ardent believers among us will make the effort on a regular basis.

And so, while I applaud environmentally sustainable behavior and wish that more of us engaged in it, I think our salvation relies not on the good will of individuals. Instead, governments and markets need to take steps to make us pay for the full costs of the behaviors in which we engage (a carbon price on energy usage is a good start); they need to make environmentally benign alternatives easier for us to choose (convenient public transportation rather than exhortations to carpool or bike); they need to limit our infrastructure choices to energy efficient ones (fuel economy standards, energy efficient

building materials, smart growth patterns). In other words, we need to be saved from ourselves.