Bret Stephens, the New York Times’ new columnist, got the climate change world into an outrage with his first column last week, which compared climate science to Hillary Clinton’s pre-election polling and argued for restraint from climate advocates.

In his follow up column yesterday, he took a more measured tone, noting that he believes the Earth is warming but that we’re not being careful on the solutions:

> A decade ago we were plowing money into ethanol subsidies as one response to climate change. But that turned out to be not just environmentally destructive but was also arguably responsible for the spike in food prices that soon followed, as farmers turned away from cultivating corn for human consumption to cultivating it for ethanol production.
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> Another example: The New York Times recently reported on the massive increase in smog over London. The cause? Let me quote from the story:
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> “The British government provided financial incentives to encourage a shift to diesel engines because laboratory tests suggested that would cut harmful emissions and combat climate change. Yet, it turned out that diesel cars emit on average five times as much emissions in real-world driving conditions as in the tests, according to a British Department for Transport study.”
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> In other words, to say we want to take out insurance for climate change is perfectly sensible. But whether we know we’re buying the right insurance, at the right price, is less clear, and it behooves us to look closely at the fine print before we sign on.

As someone who works day in and day out on climate mitigation policies, I can tell you that Stephens is cherry-picking from a handful of bad examples.

Take his reference to the ethanol subsidies, which resulted from the federal renewable fuel standard, established during the second Bush administration. Yes, the standard did spur more Midwestern corn production to be used for biofuel.

But the policy was never really a climate mitigation measure. It was primarily meant

to boost domestic fuel sources, with greenhouse gas reduction as an added selling point but no strict carbon screen on the fuels. If there was a strong carbon screen on the kind of fuel that could qualify, very little of that high-carbon Midwestern corn-based ethanol would have qualified (hence the opposition to the standard even from some environmentalists).

For a true climate policy model on biofuels, just look to California. The state’s low carbon fuel standard (which encourages biofuel production like the renewable fuel standard but with a strong low-carbon requirement) disfavors land-intensive corn for true low-carbon biofuel, like in-state used cooking oil (surprisingly a growing percentage of the state’s biofuel).

Stephens’ reference to the British diesel problem is also unfortunate. Most climate policy experts will tell you that the best way to reduce emissions from transportation is through battery electric vehicles, as long as the electricity doesn’t come exclusively from coal-fired power plants (in which case hybrid vehicles yield more carbon reductions). Other fuels that can work include low-carbon biofuels and possibly hydrogen, depending on the energy source used to produce it. Diesel isn’t on the list, at least in places like California, unless it’s biodiesel.

On that subject, biodiesel does emit conventional pollutants, an issue we’re grappling with in California, as evidenced by the POET lawsuit against the California Air Resources Board’s low carbon fuel standard. Biodiesel is great at reducing carbon emissions but also emits nitrogen oxide (NOx) — a subject we covered in Berkeley/UCLA Law’s 2015 Planting Fuels report.

Resolving this conflict among pollutants will take a policy balancing act, but it ultimately shouldn’t obscure the significant economic and environmental benefits from switching transportation fuels from petroleum to electricity and low-carbon biofuels. Stephens simply ignores this tried-and-true approach, which is resulting in swift advancements in electric vehicle adoption in places like California, Europe, and even China.

To be sure, care is needed when it comes to developing climate policies, and I’d agree with Stephens on that front. But the main concern is around managing the economic impacts of transitioning the grid and transportation fuels to cleaner sources. We have to go slow to avoid price shocks and bring the costs of these new technologies down.

California is doing just that, with a measured, careful plan to bring down the emissions curve steeply over the coming decades. Our economy is now less carbon intensive than it was in the 1990s and has been growing rapidly, too — which is at least an indication that climate policies aren’t getting in the way, if not actually serving as a boost.

There’s no reason that the country as a whole can’t follow suit, except that we have national writers like Stephens who cherrypick their way into sounding like reasonable skeptics — when they’re really just misleading people.