

The Consensus Trap: How Manufactured Agreement Corrupts Policy

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Abstract

We describe a pattern common to three of the most consequential public policy failures of the past two decades—the 2008 financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic management, and the campaign for rapid decarbonization. While these involve very different sectors, they share a common pathology we call the consensus trap. Each of these failures derives from an alignment of powerful institutions and leaders in manufacturing a consensus not supported by the evidence. We trace each instance of the consensus trap through the same time course: the consensus is asserted, credible dissent is suppressed, the policy fails, and the accountability is lacking. The mechanism underlying the consensus trap in each case is strikingly uniform: rapid acceptance of flawed predictive models, aggressive discrediting of credible challenges to the accepted view, a campaign of media and political amplification, and a regressive impact of the costs of failure. While there are differences among the three cases, the dynamic common to these cases suggests that the consensus trap will spring wherever complex data and high policy stakes coincide. Institutional and societal reforms can make this less likely. Awareness of the consensus trap is particularly important in light of a 2025 revision of the Federal Judicial Center *Reference Manual on Scientific Evidence*, which links “widespread acceptance” to the highest form of scientific certainty. That linkage could institutionalize, in the federal courts, the confusion between a manufactured consensus and one that is earned by critical debate of evidence.

1. Introduction

In April 2026, one of the co-authors of this paper (Koonin) wrote a letter with MIT's Richard Lindzen and Princeton's William Happer to Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts, serving as chair of the Federal Judicial Center. The concern was the Center's *Reference Manual on Scientific Evidence*, a guide for thousands of federal judges who assess scientific evidence in litigation. A key chapter, entitled "How Science Works," treats "widespread acceptance" as a strong indicator of reliability and links it to "the highest level of certainty science has to offer."

But this is precisely not "how science works." Instead, as renowned physicist Richard Feynman famously explained in his 1964 Cornell Messenger Lecture, "If it disagrees with experiment, it's wrong. In that simple statement is the key to science." More than 300 years earlier, Galileo more directly noted the irrelevance of consensus, by writing "the authority of thousands of opinions is not worth as much as one tiny spark of reason in an individual man." Indeed, history is filled with consensus that has been challenged and ultimately proven wrong, from Galileo to Einstein to more recent examples like continental drift and the bacterial theory of ulcers.

Policy should be guided by validated or "earned" consensus, as it is in domains ranging from the safety of magnetic resonance imaging to the design of bridges. But some major domains have relied on a consensus untested by accumulating evidence, declared by powerful institutions, amplified through the media, politics, and academia, and then enforced by delegitimizing challenges and challengers. Policies based on these "manufactured" consensuses have been costly and at times catastrophic.

This article considers three case studies where science was essential to public policy decisions: the financial crisis of 2008, the COVID-19 pandemic policy response, and the climate science motivating rapid decarbonization of energy systems. Superficially, these appear to have little in common—they involve different scientific disciplines, different institutions, different timescales, and different political coalitions. Yet they share a consistent pattern of pathologies. In each case, institutional consensus hardened prematurely around a set of models that were far more uncertain, with more implicit assumptions, than their proponents acknowledged. In each case, dissenting voices, often highly credentialed and ultimately proven correct, were dismissed, marginalized, or aggressively attacked in both academic and public circles. In each case, the harmful outcomes of the failed policy fell far more on people who had no power and little if any voice in forming it. And in each case, accountability for those who manufactured and enforced the consensus has been remarkably thin, with many receiving accolades and honors despite egregious failure.

We call this pattern "the consensus trap." It begins with genuine scientific uncertainty. Although open questions are the fundamental motivator for scientific discovery, they unsettle policymakers by inviting challenge and weakening the case for actions. Yet those actions often carry serious consequences.

The inconvenience of uncertainty to policymaking is managed by obfuscation. Data are cherry-picked and uncertainty ranges compressed or ignored entirely. Sophisticated mathematical models, opaque to those outside the field, are the machinery for transforming uncertainty into indisputable “facts” supporting the manufactured consensus. At the same time, the complexity of the model itself creates an appearance of rigor that intimidates most people and so discourages scrutiny.

Once consensus is deemed “established” by enough credentialed people, the sociology of influential institutions and their leaders takes over from the epistemology of science. Funding flows toward research that supports or even builds upon the consensus, but not to research that challenges it. Peer review becomes a mechanism for excluding heterodox work from journals and conferences.

These institutional pressures translate into individual career incentives that strongly favor the consensus position. Grants and career advancement go to those who align with the consensus, as do the rewards of personal and academic acclaim. In contrast, dissent is viewed as a threat to the manufactured consensus and especially to the leading consensus voices, who are also influential in grant and publication review. That dissent is punished with marginalization, potential loss of funding, reputational attacks within and beyond academic circles, and sometimes loss of licensure or employment.

The public learns of a manufactured consensus through the lay press and politicians, who might have great incentive to amplify it and little incentive or ability to challenge it. This is especially true when the gravity of the issue creates a sense of urgency.

The media, especially in today’s 24/7 news cycle, seeks clarity and, increasingly in our polarized society, eschews nuance. The media gravitates toward the readily available consensus narrative and discredits dissenters. So much the better if dissenters can be portrayed as tied to opposing political views, or as captured by industry or malign foreign influences.

Public-facing politicians have an incentive to invoke “the Science” when it lends legitimacy to a predetermined policy preference. They emphasize “the Science” as though it were a single, definitive concluding voice immune to challenge, rather than a contested, evolving process. During the COVID years, the phrase “follow the Science” proliferated to the point of caricature, but it has analogs in the climate and financial domains. The public has been unaware that once that phrase is invoked to justify a particular policy, the speaker has likely confused a policy preference with a scientifically proven finding. Science is useful to predict the consequences of various policy choices, but it cannot show which choices to prefer, or what risks are acceptable. Such questions are irreducibly political. Dressing them up in scientific language does not change that; it only insulates the consensus from challenge by the general population.

The three policy cases we examine show a common pattern: A manufactured consensus, insulated from challenge, has led to substantial damages, suffered largely by those who had nothing to do with forging the consensus.

The financial consensus of the early 2000s presumed that risk modeling ensured a robust financial system. That was false and contributed directly to the most severe financial crisis since the Great Depression. The subsequent financial bailout transferred the costs from the institutions led by those who had embraced the manufactured consensus to the unwitting taxpayers. The COVID consensus—mandated lockdowns, school closures, social isolation, and specific pharmaceutical and barrier interventions—was presented as scientifically proven, rather than as contested by evidence. Those mandates produced harms that include catastrophic learning losses and severe mental health damages in children, devastation of family businesses, surges in spousal and child abuse, and increased mortality from economic devastation and delayed or skipped medical care. And the climate and decarbonization consensus, although still unfolding, has already driven massive misallocations of capital to “green energy,” even though the resultant emissions reductions have no detectable effect on the global temperature. Instead, it has accelerated the deindustrialization of Europe and North America and imposed energy and transition costs on lower-income households that the consensus architects will largely avoid.

Science and expertise have an important role in informing policy. An earned consensus, backed by legitimate expertise, is most often correct and heterodox positions are not correct simply by virtue of their heterodoxy. But an illegitimate, manufactured consensus has played a central role in some of the most impactful policy failures in recent memory. Science is not determined by consensus; its validity is proven by robustness under challenge and free debate. The relevant question is not whether to take expert knowledge seriously—although we must always scrutinize it—but how to repair the institutional and epistemic conditions under which expert knowledge remains open to self-correction and responsive to legitimate challenge rather than becoming politically self-protective. That capture ultimately comes at great cost to society at large.

It is important to recognize that, despite their shared pattern, the consensus fabricators of the three episodes we examine span America’s ideological spectrum. The financial consensus was embraced by the deregulatory right and technocratic center alike. The COVID consensus was enforced most aggressively by progressive-leaning public health institutions and the leftist media. The climate consensus is mainly a project of the environmental left but is also found within much of the political center. The consensus trap we illustrate is a structural feature of how modern institutions, including policymakers, interact with science, regardless of political orientation. It is a trap that any sufficiently powerful coalition can set for others—or fall into itself.

The three sections that follow are written by researchers with direct experience in each domain. Terrence Keeley, a veteran of international finance and author on sustainable investment, examines the financial crisis. Scott Atlas, a health policy scholar, physician, and medical

scientist who was a special advisor to the president and member of the White House Coronavirus Task Force, examines the COVID policy response. Steven Koonin, a physicist who is a former under secretary for science at the Department of Energy, examines the climate consensus.¹ A subsequent section identifies commonalities and contrasts across the three cases and places them within a conceptual framework. A final section offers a menu of institutional reforms that might reduce the frequency and cost of future consensus failures.

The Federal Judicial Center's *Reference Manual on Scientific Evidence* and the open letter addressed to Chief Justice Roberts concerning it provide a valuable lens through which to read what follows. If "widespread acceptance" truly were the gold standard of scientific knowledge, the judicial system would now be institutionalizing the very epistemology that produced the failures described in these pages. Courts would be instructed to defer to a consensus precisely when it is most in need of careful scrutiny. The stakes are enormous—measured in trillions of dollars and millions of lives—and bear directly on the integrity of the scientific enterprise that underpins modern civilization.

2. The Manufactured Credit Consensus

Between 2007 and 2011, a subprime debt crisis that originated in the United States spread economic and financial misery to nearly every corner of the globe. The successive failures of Bear Stearns and Lehman Brothers, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, AIG, Washington Mutual, Countrywide Financial, and Ambac—and the later bailouts of the entire Icelandic, Irish, and Greek banking systems as well as UBS, Credit Suisse, Northern Rock, and the Royal Bank of Scotland—can all be traced to a single cause: the implosion of the US mortgage market. The Global Financial Crisis (GFC) eviscerated tens of trillions of dollars of private wealth and required tens of trillions more in public bailouts. More than thirty million workers lost their jobs; youth unemployment in Spain, Ireland, and Greece surged above 50 percent; median property values fell 30 percent. Those who paid most dearly were at the bottom of the pyramid. Those in positions of both authority and perpetration largely emerged unscathed.

The cause of the subprime debt crisis was not obscure: It was the extension of trillions of dollars in loans to home borrowers with less than pristine credit records ("sub-prime"). What demands explanation is not the mechanism of failure but how an obvious credit malignancy was allowed to mushroom into the most cataclysmic economic disaster since the Great Depression—and why the institutions whose purpose was to prevent exactly this outcome not only failed to do so but also intentionally suppressed the warnings of those who saw it coming.

¹ Each case study follows a common analytical template: the consensus as it was asserted, the dissent that was suppressed, the failure that resulted, and the accountability that did not follow. This parallel structure is intentional. It is meant to make visible the common mechanism linking episodes that, on the surface, appear entirely distinct.

2.1. The Consensus as It Was Asserted

Three interlocking consensus positions, held and enforced by the world's most authoritative financial institutions, created the conditions for the GFC. Together they constituted a complete and mutually reinforcing architecture of false confidence.

The first was a political consensus, bipartisan and robust, that expanding homeownership to less creditworthy borrowers was sound social policy achievable without systemic risk. As part of its National Homeownership Strategy, the Clinton–Gore administration instructed the nation's two largest mortgage lenders—Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac—as well as the Federal Housing Administration and Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to raise their quotas of loans to borrowers at or below median income from zero to 30–50 percent by the year 2000.

“There is no more crucial building block for a strong community and a promising future than a solid home,” President Clinton declared in 1999. His successor concurred; in 2002 President Bush directed private lenders to add 5.5 million new first-time homebuyers to their books, and in 2004 HUD finalized the rule to increase low-income loan quotas to 55 percent by 2007. When half or more of the mortgages that governmental agencies originate must be made to people below median income levels, underwriting standards axiomatically deteriorate. The political consensus had mandated outcomes that the financial system was then obliged to digest.

The second consensus was technical, centered on the credit rating agencies Moody's, S&P, and Fitch: that the risk of large pools of geographically diversified subprime mortgages could be reliably quantified by models derived from historical default data—and that the outputs of those models warranted investment-grade ratings. The theoretical logic of securitization was sound in principle: By rechanneling all loan repayment proceeds into sequential tranches, with the highest-rated tranches to receive cash flows before lower-rated tranches, risks could be segmented by investor appetite. Those in the highest-rated tranches could, should, and almost certainly would be insulated from losses in any normally distributed default environment—or so the prevailing consensus believed. The models further predicted that geographically diverse mortgage pools posed minimal correlated risk because housing markets across the United States had never previously fallen in unison. What those models could not see was that the historical data on which they were built had never included large-scale subprime exposure. Tail risks fatten over prolonged periods of stability, as economist Hyman Minsky observed, but this forward-looking insight found no purchase in the agencies' rating frameworks. The resulting AAA ratings for the most senior tranches of trillions of dollars of pooled subprime loans therefore were not marginal miscalibrations; they were structural errors that systematically misrepresented the risk of the entire subprime loan edifice.

The third consensus was regulatory, embodied in the Basel II international banking framework: that national and global financial regulators possessed both the tools and the frameworks to identify and contain systemic risk. Basel II, which governed global banking from 1999 to 2009, enshrined the rating agencies' assessments as the basis for bank capital requirements, assigning

AAA-rated collateralized debt obligations (CDOs) the same risk-weighted capital charge as AAA-rated sovereign debt. This meant that banks could replace lower-yielding but genuinely safe government bonds in their core capital holdings with higher-yielding, AAA-rated tranches of subprime CDOs. They could also do so confidently as this substitution was explicitly endorsed by the global regulatory framework designed to prevent systemic failure. Basel II also permitted large banks to use their own proprietary risk models to calculate capital requirements, allowing the regulated to set the terms of their own regulation. The entire global banking system thereby converged on a single family of risk models that shared the assumption of normally distributed returns and low cross-asset correlation. This was not a series of independent errors in judgment; it was a single shared structural assumption replicated across nearly every significant financial institution in the world—because the experts were saying “trust us.”

Beneath these three formal consensuses ran a fourth, a more diffuse but equally important weltanschauung: the “clean, not lean” doctrine of Federal Reserve Chair Alan Greenspan, which held that the Fed should not attempt to deflate asset bubbles as they formed but rather should stand ready to provide liquidity after they burst. “The notion that a well-timed incremental tightening could have been calibrated to prevent the late 1990s bubble is almost surely illusion,” Greenspan argued in 2002. This view, which amounted to institutional permission for the risk accumulation already underway, was treated as settled monetary policy wisdom within the Fed and across the financial establishment.

US subprime mortgage debt stood at a mere \$35 billion in 1994. By 2007, subprime and other high-risk nontraditional mortgage lending had grown more than a hundredfold, to \$4.5 trillion—more than 30 percent of nominal GDP. This growth took place in plain sight, with the active support of politicians, regulators, and the world’s most authoritative financial institutions, all operating under a consensus that there was little-to-no reason to consider whether the system was heading toward catastrophe.

2.2. The Dissent That Was Suppressed

Dissent emerged—specific, credentialed, and prescient—and was met with the characteristic response that the consensus trap produces: not refutation but dismissal.

The most consequential act of suppression took place at the Federal Reserve’s annual symposium in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, in August 2005. Raghuram Rajan—then-chief economist of the International Monetary Fund, subsequently governor of the Reserve Bank of India, and today a professor at the University of Chicago—delivered a paper titled “Has Financial Development Made the World Riskier?” His argument was direct: Complex new financial innovations and distorted incentive structures were accumulating fragilities in the global financial system that would eventually materialize as a serious crisis.

On the specific doctrine that dominated Fed thinking, he was pointed:

Some argue it is better to pick up the pieces after [a bubble has burst] through a liquidity infusion by monetary authorities, than attempt to second-guess the market and prevent risk buildup. There seems to be a presumption in this argument that liquidity infusion is costless. It is not.

His conclusion was cautious and specifically addressed to the assembled central bankers and economists: “I would argue that given the potential costs of the concerns I raise, if we can find low-cost ways of nudging excessive risk taking down . . . we should use them.”

The response to Rajan’s paper was not engagement but demolition. Lawrence Summers—then-president of Harvard University and one of the world’s most prominent economists, recently departed as Treasury secretary—took the floor to characterize the paper as “largely misguided” and to describe Rajan’s concerns about modern finance as “slightly Luddite.” Summers’s dismissal was not considered rebuttal; it was a social act, performed in front of the most powerful gathering of financial policymakers in the world, designed to establish the limits of acceptable expert opinion. It succeeded. Rajan’s warnings fell on deaf ears—not because they were answered but because they had been delegitimized.

Within the Federal Reserve itself, dissent followed a similar pattern. Fed Governor Edward Gramlich had, over several years, repeatedly flagged the deterioration of mortgage underwriting standards and urged his colleagues to act. His concern was specific and operational: that the Fed’s supervisory authority over bank holding companies gave it the tools to address the problem before it became systemic. Greenspan declined to use those tools, and Gramlich’s warnings went unheeded within the institution. The noble lie dynamic was visible in the Federal Open Market Committee transcripts of 2006 and 2007, in which individual governors voiced private reservations about housing market valuations and credit quality that were not translated into policy action or public communication. The consensus was maintained not by unanimous private conviction but by collective institutional restraint.

Those outside the official institutions who identified the problem were treated not as dissenters to be engaged but as eccentrics to be ignored. The investors profiled in Michael Lewis’s The Big Short—who read the same loan tapes and rating agency models that the consensus defenders read, reached opposite conclusions, and acted on them—were regarded, until the crisis vindicated them, as outliers operating on idiosyncratic hunches. Their heterodoxy was not suppressed in the professional sense; there were no career penalties for short selling CDOs. But the information they had assembled, which pointed unambiguously to the fraudulent nature of the rating agencies’ assessments, had no credible channel through which it could garner sufficient authority that regulators and policymakers might have acted on it.

Summers did not retract his characterization of Rajan’s work until 2009, by which point the global economy was already in free fall. “Few are dismissing his ideas anymore,” he acknowledged. Rajan received a more formal vindication in 2011 when the documentary Inside Job, in which he appeared extensively, won the Academy Award for Best Documentary. As the

theologian Allan Bevere has observed, “Prophets are rarely recognized in their own time, because they violate the unspoken agreements that hold a society together.” Questioning the clean-not-lean doctrine and the authority of “The Maestro”—as Greenspan was known—was tantamount to challenging the core financial precepts that appeared to hold the global economy together. In fact, it was those same precepts that ultimately brought it down.

2.3. The Failure That Resulted

When the subprime market began to unravel in 2007, the structural consequences of the consensus became visible with brutal speed. The model assumption that had underwritten the entire edifice—that geographically diverse mortgage pools were immune to correlated default—proved catastrophically wrong. Housing prices fell simultaneously across US markets; default rates surged above 30 percent in subprime portfolios, in contrast to historical peaks of 10 percent, and nearly five million families lost their homes between 2005 and 2009.

Many of the securities that the rating agencies had certified as carrying negligible risk ultimately proved worthless. By 2010, 73 percent of the securities Moody’s had rated AAA in 2006 had been downgraded to junk. The AAA designations assigned to the highest-rated tranches did not turn out to be somewhat optimistic; they were structurally flawed, products of models that had mistaken the absence of historical precedent for the absence of risk.

The consequences cascaded globally precisely because the Basel II framework had exported the American consensus to hundreds of systemically important financial institutions around the world. The convergence of the global banking system on a single family of risk models meant that when the shared assumption failed, it failed everywhere simultaneously. This is the model monoculture dynamic in its most consequential form: The GFC was not the aggregate of many independent errors, each of which might have been contained locally. It was a systemic failure rooted in a single set of structural assumptions that had been elevated to regulatory orthodoxy and spread across the entire global financial system. The failure of non-bank institutions—AIG, Lehman Brothers, Bear Stearns, Ambac—metastasized into the banking system that the Basel framework had been designed to protect, because the shadow banking system’s exposure to the same bad assumptions had never been adequately modeled or regulated.

The scale of the damage was staggering. Tens of trillions of dollars of private wealth were destroyed. Public bailouts of comparable magnitude were required. More than thirty million workers lost their jobs worldwide. Youth unemployment in the worst-affected European countries exceeded 50 percent. The US median home value fell 30 percent. Moody’s and S&P eventually paid more than \$2.2 billion in civil fines to the Department of Justice and twenty-one state attorneys general for their role in inflating the ratings—a sum that was, in proportion to the damage their consensus had enabled, a rounding error. Bertrand Russell’s observation had been vindicated in the most expensive way imaginable: Even when all the experts agree, they may well be mistaken.

2.4. The Accountability That Did Not Follow

The disproportion between the scale of the failure and the accountability that followed it is one of the most striking features of the GFC—and one of the most important for understanding why the consensus trap recurs.

The institutions that had manufactured and enforced the consensus were largely protected from its consequences. The Federal Reserve and Treasury’s rescue operations—the Troubled Asset Relief Program, the conservatorship of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, the bailout of AIG, and the broader liquidity facilities extended to the financial system—were explicitly designed to prevent the failure of many of the institutions that had proactively created the crisis. They succeeded. Most of the large banks, rating agencies, and regulatory bodies that had produced the false consensus survived. The \$2.2 billion in rating agency fines was a civil settlement, not a criminal prosecution; no top executive of a major Wall Street bank went to prison for conduct related to the crisis. The Fed governors whose “clean, not lean” doctrine had licensed the risk accumulation that produced the crisis largely retained their professional reputations. Greenspan publicly acknowledged his error—describing his “shocked disbelief” at the failure of his risk model framework—but even this admission came without severe professional consequence.

The costs disproportionately fell instead on those who had played no role in manufacturing the consensus: the homeowners whose properties lost value or who faced foreclosure; the workers whose jobs disappeared in the recession; the taxpayers who funded the bailouts; and the small businesses, hospitals, and schools that could not access the credit that the financial system’s near collapse had frozen. The asymmetry was stark and structural: The consensus had been generated by institutions whose members were largely insulated from downside risk, and when the downside materialized, the institutional architecture of the rescue reproduced that insulation. This is not a coincidence but a feature of how financial regulation is designed—by and for the institutions it regulates—and it mirrors the regressive distribution of costs found in the two other case studies that follow.

The regulatory reforms that ensued—the Dodd–Frank Act, with its Financial Stability Oversight Council and Volcker Rule, and Basel III, with its liquidity coverage ratios and stress testing requirements—were genuine attempts to address the structural failures the GFC had revealed. Whether they are adequate to prevent the next crisis, or whether they are calibrated primarily to prevent the *last* one, remains an open question. The growth of new financial products—cryptocurrencies, special purpose acquisition companies, private credit markets—has created new domains of risk that the post-GFC regulatory framework was not designed to capture. The institutional incentives that produced the credit consensus—the convergence of political interests, model-based authority, regulatory endorsement, and professional penalties for dissent—remain structurally intact.

3. The Manufactured COVID Consensus

The COVID-19 pandemic consensus trap was one of the clearest and most tragic examples of the phenomenon in modern history. Those in powerful and influential positions very quickly joined a declared consensus.² That included groups ranging from public health officials to academic scientists to the media to famous cultural figures. The set of policies were unprecedented. They included broad lockdowns that overtly overrode freedoms explicitly guaranteed in the Constitution—shutdowns of businesses and churches, prolonged school closures, travel blockages, stay-at-home restrictions, and even closure of outdoor parks and beaches. Beyond lockdowns, broad mandates and requirements were imposed if one wanted to enter society at all: use facial masks, stay a specific minimum distance apart, and once vaccines were available, inject experimental drugs with little testing beforehand. Such coercion failed the most essential requirement of ethical medicine—informed consent—but that was not even considered. All these policies were repeatedly justified by those in power with one constant insistence that “we are following the science”³ despite violating fundamental biological science, disregarding well-understood harms of lockdowns, and ignoring a flow of evidence showing these maneuvers were neither stopping the spread nor preventing death. Even worse, early data became readily available showing the lockdowns were severely harming people who were at low risk for serious consequence from the infection itself. The public was convinced of the need for these policies by a combination of fear and the media’s echo of the enforced consensus with censorship of alternatives, but also by delegitimization of dissenting experts as dangerous. The resulting policy failures produced enormous collateral harms, disproportionately borne by children and low-income families, while eroding public trust in institutions and science itself.

3.1. The Consensus as It Was Asserted

Several features of the COVID-19 threat are genuine and not in dispute. That it was highly lethal to the elderly, particularly those harboring multiple risk factors, and that a serious public health response was warranted are not contested here. What is contested is the assertion of specific claims with a confidence that the evidence could not support, the speed with which an enforced consensus hardened, and the systematic exclusion of evidence-based alternatives that might have reduced the collateral damage substantially. As evidence later confirmed during congressional investigation, this was not merely a case of premature scientific closure; the consensus was in significant part actively manufactured by the officials who commandeered it.

From the initial months of 2020, leading public health institutions asserted a series of core claims with high confidence based on premature assessment of emerging data. SARS-CoV-2 was portrayed as possessing a fatality rate orders of magnitude higher than seasonal influenza, placing virtually the entire population at significant risk of severe illness or death. The virus was

² See [Appendix A](#) for a list of sources documenting the 2020–21 COVID consensus.

³ See Appendix B for a list of “follow the science” declarations in 2020–21.

characterized as entirely novel, with no meaningful prior immunological protection available to anyone; standard immunological protection after infection against serious harms was also denied.

Nonpharmaceutical interventions, above all widespread lockdowns—including the closure of schools and nonessential businesses, confinement of healthy individuals to their homes, suspension of important non-COVID medical care, and severe travel restrictions—were promoted as critical and effective tools to “stop the spread” and “flatten the curve,” terms announced at the White House Coronavirus Task Force press briefing on March 16, 2020. These recommendations were contrary to long-standing experience with viral pandemic management, which had concluded that such broad measures were neither effective in meaningfully reducing transmission nor worth their profound societal costs. Community-wide masking and strict six-foot social distancing were declared, without adequate supporting evidence, to be scientifically proven critical methods to protect and limit transmission.

By late 2020 and into 2021, experimental vaccines were heralded not merely as protective for high-risk groups but as agents capable of stopping transmission entirely, despite never having been tested as such. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky stated publicly that “vaccinated people do not carry the virus, don’t get sick” (March 29, 2021), and Dr. Anthony Fauci said that the vaccinated “become a dead end to the virus” (May 16, 2021). These claims were later contradicted when cases continued to spread and transmission among the vaccinated became evident. Yet those false claims about the vaccine had already served, and continued to serve, as the basis for mandates extending to healthy children and adolescents who were at negligible personal risk for serious consequences from the disease.

These assertions were operationalized through authoritative guidance from the CDC, the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the Food and Drug Administration, and the World Health Organization (WHO) and frequently translated into binding state and institutional mandates. Prominent officials, including Dr. Deborah Birx (White House Coronavirus Task Force coordinator, who wrote all official federal guidance to the states), Fauci (director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases [NIAID]), and Dr. Robert Redfield (director of the CDC), shaped the US national framework.

Although normally confined to esoteric scientific circles, complex statistical models became highly visible to the public and were immediately deemed accurate and reliable. Despite those claims, the most prominently cited pandemic models, such as those from the Imperial College in the United Kingdom and the University of Washington’s Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, were inherently flawed, because they relied on numerous assumptions about the impact of imposed policies and the spread of infection, while disregarding long-standing principles about acquired biological protection after initial infection. Regardless, the mathematical complexity and quantitative nature of the models provided an aura of unquestionable fact to both policymakers and the media.

Policies were designed as if the risk to children and young adults was high, including mandated masks for infants and toddlers, prolonged school closures, and social isolation. This ignored early evidence from nearly the beginning of the pandemic, and then consistently published in spring and summer 2020, that young, healthy populations had miniscule risk for serious illness or death—even lower than what we accept every year from influenza—and that children, even with open schools, were not sources of spread to the elderly or the community at large. These policies also ignored data accumulating early on that isolating children and young adults was generating serious psychological harms and substantial learning losses. Vaccine mandates for low-risk healthy children disregarded widely published, age-stratified risks and robust evidence of immunologic protection from several countries following infection. The professed framework, much of which was contrary to long-standing principles of viral respiratory disease, also elevated narrow virological and epidemiological inputs above the broader complexities of health policy, which must integrate economic, social, behavioral, ethical, and developmental considerations of the policy itself to understand the true impact of such interventions.

Public health guidance was frequently operationalized as binding mandates, with personal and career consequences attached to expressing dissent from the accepted narrative. The policy dictates, therefore, intimidated most physicians and ultimately overrode physician autonomy for the vast majority of doctors. The fundamental role of doctors and the assumption of patients who have given them their positions of trust is first and foremost to administer their best guidance, based on consideration of each individual patient and the evidence. There is also an ethical imperative of all physicians, centered around informed consent, the cornerstone of medical ethics. This was undermined by government mandates, pressure from medical societies and licensing agencies, and media suppression of alternative viewpoints. The WHO, recognized as the world's authoritative public health organization, further advocated the decreed consensus globally, with Director-General Tedros backing China's lockdowns despite its clear harms, stating "the Chinese government is to be congratulated for the extraordinary measures it has taken to contain the outbreak" as it essentially imprisoned its citizens. Meanwhile, the organization altered foundational definitions, such as "herd immunity," to align with policy preferences and media acceptance rather than maintaining scientific objectivity.

3.2. The Dissent That Was Suppressed

Credible dissent emerged early, grounded firmly in prepandemic scientific literature and rapidly accumulating real-world data. As early as March 2020, experts including John Ioannidis, David Katz, and Scott Atlas—one of the present authors—questioned the early data analysis and advocated a strategy of targeted protection: intensive efforts to shield the highest-risk individuals (primarily the elderly and those with several serious comorbidities) while promptly reopening schools, businesses, and society for the low-risk majority, thereby minimizing collateral harms. The empirical basis for this stratification was overwhelming: In a CDC study of 540,667 adults hospitalized with COVID-19 between March 2020 and March 2021, nearly two-thirds (64.2 percent) of the deaths occurred among the subset of patients with six or more underlying medical

conditions, and the adjusted risk of death rose steadily with the number of comorbidities. Targeted protection without lockdowns was fully consistent with Henderson’s classic 2006 review on pandemic planning, which had documented both the ineffectiveness and the profound societal harms of broad lockdowns for respiratory virus outbreaks. These points were supported by extensive data repeatedly cited in multiple 2020 publications and public statements advocating risk-stratified approaches, school and college reopenings, and targeted protection. Several months later in October 2020, Martin Kulldorff, Sunetra Gupta, and Jay Bhattacharya formalized these principles in the Great Barrington Declaration.

Within the White House Coronavirus Task Force meetings from August to November 2020, targeted protection was advanced internally by the adviser to the president on the pandemic. However, this perspective was consistently disregarded in those meetings despite documented evidence of the mortality and harm inflicted by the policies being enacted, and it was ultimately rejected in favor of the dominant Birx–Fauci lockdown strategy.

Suppression of dissenting views was swift, systematic, and multifaceted. Technology platforms led the charge. In April 2020, YouTube publicized its “aggressive policies against misinformation,” and by August 2020, Facebook had taken down seven million pandemic-related posts. Interviews given by Atlas, the dissenting presidential adviser at the time, were removed from YouTube on September 11, 2020, and the account was blocked on Twitter on October 18, 2020, preventing the public from knowing information that was being offered to the president.

The 2026 release of Dr. Fauci’s diary and related records by the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee provided primary source documentation of the media coordination underlying this suppression. Diary entries and emails showed Fauci maintaining ongoing personal relationships with prominent journalists, relationships that critics argued explained why major media coverage was consistently favorable to lockdowns and strongly critical of dissenting opinion by other experts. Related records showed that NIH employees actively coordinated Fauci’s award nominations and prize receipts during the pandemic and indicated that staff were directed to communicate through private channels to avoid Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) disclosure.

Measures discouraging or punishing dissent took several forms. Approximately a million physicians were placed under an explicit, published threat to their medical licenses by the FSMB, the licensing authority for every US physician; several thousand doctors who expressed different medical views were complained about or investigated by medical boards; an estimated thousand lost or were threatened with losing hospital privileges, employment, or academic position; and somewhere between fifty and one hundred fifty were formally disciplined, including, for one of the present authors, a singularly rare university faculty senate censure, coordinated campaigns of vilification, and dozens of death threats requiring police protection. Meanwhile, hundreds of physicians and scientists, including some inside the NIH, indicated privately that they agreed

with the dissenting analysis but feared professional consequences for saying so. The aim of such censorship was not merely to silence individuals but to convince the public and lay policymakers that a single “consensus” existed.

Physician judgment was frequently subordinated to government dictates during the COVID-19 pandemic. Rigid, top-down messaging clashed with individualized clinical decision-making. Deferring medical judgment to physicians and their patients was sidelined. This included off-label prescribing, which accounts for half or more of prescriptions in the United States; pharmacists refused to fill physician-ordered medications. Informed consent was eroded, and patients were pressured by their doctors to obey edicts on lockdowns, masks, and vaccines. Censorship extended beyond digital platforms to medical journals, professional societies, and universities, often under direct or indirect governmental influence, as later exposed in litigation such as *Murthy v. Missouri*. The persistent straw man that opposition to lockdowns equated to a “herd immunity strategy” of “letting it rip”—a position never advocated in White House discussions—served to delegitimize alternatives to the declared consensus without substantive engagement.

3.3. The Failure That Resulted

The collateral damage from consensus-driven policies was substantial and well documented. The policies did not achieve their stated objectives. Rigorous analyses, including those of Herby, Bendavid, Bjørnskov, Pizzato, and Ioannidis, demonstrate that lockdowns did not meaningfully stop the spread of the virus or reduce overall mortality. A comprehensive 2023 literature review and meta-analysis by Herby, Jonung, and Hanke finds that stringency index studies show the average lockdown in Europe and the United States in the spring of 2020 reduced COVID-19 mortality by only 3.2 percent (approximately 6,000 avoided deaths in Europe and 4,000 in the United States), shelter-in-place orders reduced mortality by 2.0 percent, and specific nonpharmaceutical interventions reduced mortality by 10.7 percent. Even disregarding the collateral damage, these figures are negligible compared to annual flu deaths and consistent with the idea that voluntary behavioral changes played the primary role in harm prevention. Sweden rejected stringent lockdowns and kept schools open. They experienced one of the smallest increases in excess deaths among all developed nations, a finding consistent with several other analyses showing that less restrictive approaches were associated with better health outcomes.

School closures contradicted known data on low risk to children, including in schools that stayed open, and very limited school-based transmission. The World Bank’s *State of Global Learning Poverty: 2022 Update* documents that learning losses were concentrated among students in poor and low-income families and were most severe where closures lasted longest. CDC data from June 2020 showed that 25.5 percent of college-aged adults had seriously considered suicide in the prior month; FAIR Health insurance claims document significant increases in self-harm, overdose, and mental health visits during the lockdowns compared to the previous year. More than half of young adults in Gen Z reported unwanted weight gain during the 2020 lockdowns;

that weight gain averaged twenty-eight pounds. Sweden's open-school policy provided a clear contrast—it was associated with substantially lower harm to youth mental health, underscoring the avoidability of these harmful outcomes.

Colleges and universities demonstrated the same pattern of failure. Despite a steep age gradient in COVID-19 risk, already evident by March 2020 with a 99.997 percent survival rate for those under twenty, nearly all of America's 4,000 colleges and universities shut down in-person classes, imposed universal masking with rigid testing and isolation policies, and later mandated experimental vaccines for healthy, low-risk students, inflicting direct harm on many young people.

Universal masking and social distancing mandates for viral respiratory infections lacked robust supporting evidence and ignored decades of prior data, yet they were enforced even on young children, impairing language development, communication, and education. A 2020 CDC-published systematic review in *Emerging Infectious Diseases* concludes that “we did not find evidence that surgical-type face masks are effective in reducing laboratory-confirmed influenza transmission” in household or community settings, whether worn by infected persons for source control or by uninfected persons for wearer protection. The 2023 Cochrane review by Jefferson et al. confirms this finding for COVID-era masking, concluding that “RCTs [randomized controlled trials] did not show a clear reduction in respiratory viral infection with the use of medical/surgical masks.” Vaccine mandates for healthy, lowest-risk children and adolescents disregarded clear risk-benefit stratification and evidence of natural immunity, further eroding institutional trust: Confidence in physicians and hospitals dropped from 72 percent in 2019 to 40 percent in 2024. Broader societal costs included excess non-COVID mortality from delayed medical care (estimated at 97,000 excess deaths per year or 171,000 excess deaths cumulative through 2021 by Mulligan and Arnott), devastating effects on small businesses, increases in spousal and child abuse, and long-term losses in human capital.

The suppression of debate blocked visibility of safer, evidence-based strategies that would have reduced mortality. Ioannidis, Zonta, and Levitt estimated that the United States would have had 1.60 million fewer deaths from 2020 through July 2023 had it matched Sweden's response. Bianchi, Bianchi, and Song projected that the unemployment shock alone from the lockdowns, separate from the virus, would cause approximately one million additional US deaths over the following fifteen years. In May 2020, when lockdowns had been in force for only a few months, a published analysis had already quantified the substantial years of life that had been lost to lockdown-induced unemployment and forgone medical care. This was among the earliest warnings in national media that the policies themselves carried a significant mortality cost, beyond lockdown harms that had been repeatedly minimized in the media as economic damage alone. Bardosh's review documented non-COVID-related excess mortality of 20 percent overall and 70 percent for those under age 45 in North America, alongside additional child deaths in low-income countries, canceled cancer surgeries and critical medical care, and food insecurity for the poor. The World Bank characterized the period as producing “the largest global economic

crisis in more than a century,” a collapse driven by the policy response rather than the virus itself.

3.4. The Accountability That Did Not Follow

The accountability for the lockdown policies that followed was nearly absent and even opposite to what might be expected after such consequential failures. Those who promoted or led the failed policies typically occupied positions of power and prestige, along with media support that insulated them from professional consequences, while those who bore the costs of those policies had no power from which to demand accountability.

Among federal public health officials, the record is consistent. Fauci, the NIAID director who was the primary public face of lockdown advocacy, received dozens of awards and honors, including the National Medal of Science; multiple honorary doctorates, including from Harvard and Yale; invitations to speak at commencement at elite universities and medical schools; and the 2024 Inamori Ethics Prize from Case Western Reserve University’s Inamori International Center for Ethics and Excellence. These came alongside a Presidential Commendation from the outgoing vice president of the very administration whose dissenters he had worked to marginalize. NIH Director Dr. Francis Collins, who provided institutional backing for the consensus policies and championed the sweeping mandates documented throughout this section, subsequently served as science adviser to President Biden, delivered the commencement address at Yale School of Medicine in 2024, and received the National Academy of Sciences’ 2026 Public Welfare Medal—that institution’s highest honor—awarded in part for his leadership “guiding responses to critical public health challenges, including . . . the COVID-19 pandemic.” CDC Director Walensky, who defended school closures and publicly declared that vaccinated people “do not carry the virus,” departed that office and took up a position at the Harvard School of Public Health. A prominent public advocate for lockdown policies, Dr. Peter Hotez, received the American Medical Association’s Scientific Achievement Award in 2022 and an American Association for the Advancement of Science award for Scientific Freedom and Responsibility in 2023.

The modelers whose projections provided the quantitative illusion of credibility for lockdown policy not only faced no professional consequences for what were proven to be gross inaccuracies of their projections, but they even received honors and accolades. The Imperial College London team whose March 2020 model predicted catastrophic mortality if immediate lockdowns were not imposed—projections that drove destructive policy decisions across multiple countries—retained and even gained institutional prominence; its director subsequently received the Weldon Memorial Prize from Oxford University for contributions to mathematical biology applied to public health. The accountability deficit here is especially significant, because the model’s assumptions were shown to disregard long-established biologic principles and to generate projections that proved systematically inaccurate.

Political leaders who implemented the most restrictive policies faced no electoral accountability commensurate with the harms imposed. Governor of Michigan Gretchen Whitmer, whose executive orders imposed some of the nation's most stringent stay-at-home requirements and school closures while at the same time readmitting COVID patients to nursing homes (including requiring⁴ nursing home patients to be readmitted to their high-risk facilities, even if they tested positive for the virus⁵), received a John F. Kennedy Library Foundation's Profile in COVID Courage Award in May 2021, while the documented harms to children and low-income households were still accumulating. More broadly, a systematic analysis of the worst-performing states on COVID-19 policy management found that in November 2022, nearly all incumbent governors running for reelection in those states were returned to office. The governors of Illinois, California, New York, and Connecticut were each reelected, Nevada's Democratic incumbent retained office, and in only one case did an incumbent party lose.

The leadership of the nation's largest teachers' union, whose documented coordination with the CDC in early 2021 and later confirmed through congressional testimony, influenced the agency's guidance around school reopening in ways that delayed the return of millions of children to in-person learning. They faced no sanctions and maintained their positions and status.

Prestigious academic medical societies that had endorsed lockdowns, school closures, and masking of children included the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Medical Association, the American College of Physicians, the American Academy of Family Physicians, the Pediatric Infectious Diseases Society, the Infectious Diseases Society of America, the American Public Health Association, and the Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine. None of these societies faced any repercussions or demand for explanation, and none incurred any institutional accountability for the harms to healthy children and adults that followed.

The pattern was of absence of accountability despite significant destruction from the failed consensus policies seen worldwide. In Australia, state premiers who imposed some of the

⁴ [Executive Order No. 2020-50: Enhanced protections for residents and staff of long-term care facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic](#): "A long-term care facility must not prohibit admission or readmission of a resident based on COVID-19 testing requirements or results in a manner that is inconsistent with relevant guidance issued by the Department of Health and Human Services ('DHHS')."

⁵ The single most lethal documented policy decision at the state level was the nursing home mandate—and five governors issued versions of it. On March 18, 2020, Pennsylvania's Governor Tom Wolf issued guidance requiring nursing facilities to accept COVID-positive patients from hospitals. On March 25, New York's Governor Andrew Cuomo issued his now-infamous order that "no resident shall be denied re-admission or admission to a nursing home solely based on a confirmed or suspected diagnosis of COVID-19" and explicitly prohibited facilities from requiring a COVID-negative test before admission. On March 30, California's Governor Gavin Newsom issued a similar order. On March 31, New Jersey's Governor Phil Murphy followed. On April 15, Michigan's Governor Gretchen Whitmer did the same. All five orders came after the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services had issued guidance on March 13 specifying that nursing homes should admit COVID-19 patients only if the facility could follow CDC quarantine guidelines—a standard that, as every administrator knew, most facilities could not meet. The governors defied that guidance.

world's most extreme and prolonged lockdowns subsequently received Companions of the Order of Australia in recognition of their service to “public health.” More broadly, across the United Kingdom, Canada, and Europe, those who had designed and promoted the most restrictive policies generally retained their prestigious advisory roles, institutional positions of power, and public platforms confirming their retained credibility without any negative professional consequence.

Admissions of error remain rare, so public understanding of the pandemic policies and their failure remains limited. In July 2026, Senator Rand Paul released more than 1,100 pages of diary entries kept by Fauci on government computers during the pandemic years (2019–22) and convened a Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee hearing at which Fauci invoked the Fifth Amendment more than one hundred times rather than answer questions. Dr. Fauci's diary provides primary source documentation of a clear gap between his private assessments and his public statements supporting the consensus. Included among many important revelations and admissions are the following: Fauci personally persuaded several government officials to close schools and businesses, despite denying he had been responsible; he knew within days that Atlas's position had never been to “let the virus rip,” yet this mischaracterization remained central to his public campaign to delegitimize targeted protection as an alternative to lockdowns; he directly worked behind the scenes with the press to prevent criticisms of his policies, leveraging personal friendships with prominent members of the media; and he knew by October 2020 that Atlas was right in stating that opening schools did not cause cases to spread, yet that information was never emphasized publicly, allowing school closures and their widespread harms to continue for a year and more. Where admissions of error have occurred, they have typically been framed as failures of communication rather than failures of policy or to “new data emerging.” Narratives have frequently inverted accountability entirely, attributing the harms of the failed policies to those who questioned them rather than to those who imposed them. And most recently, in response to damaging disclosures in the Fauci diaries and accumulated evidence of lockdown harms, we have been told to believe that the lockdown recommendations were never implemented. The journal *Science*, a standard-bearer for academic science, has posted a friendly interview in which Fauci stated, “We didn't lock anything down.” This pattern of failed accountability with lack of transparency to the public is one of the defining features of the consensus trap, and it is the key feature that ensures recurrence.

4. The Manufactured Climate Consensus

The campaign to rapidly reduce greenhouse gas emissions is arguably the most consequential and longest running of the three policy programs we consider. It is also the costliest, having redirected trillions of dollars of capital toward the wholesale reengineering of energy systems across the world. The campaign is motivated by an alleged consensus about the dangers of

human influence on the climate and a belief that the implied energy transition would be both feasible and beneficial.⁶

4.1. The Consensus as It Was Asserted

Carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases retard outgoing infrared radiation and so warm the lower atmosphere. Human activities, predominantly the burning of fossil fuels, have raised CO₂ levels in the atmosphere from roughly 280 parts per million (ppm) at the onset of industrialization to almost 430 ppm today. The planet has warmed approximately 1.1°C–1.2°C since the late nineteenth century, with human emissions contributing to that warming. These findings are well-established science.

The consensus trap, built upon this foundation, involves consequential claims about how much warming will occur as human influences grow, the impacts of that warming on ecosystems and societies, and what should be done about it, all asserted with a confidence that isn't supported by the underlying science and energy techno-economics.

There are actually two layered consensuses. The first, concerning climate science, is that allegedly deteriorating weather shows we've already "broken" the earth's climate and catastrophic consequences are inevitable absent drastic action. The second consensus concerns how society should respond: that reducing emissions rapidly will be essentially painless, with modest transition costs and large cobenefits that will be realized broadly. Both are overconfident beyond what the evidence supports. They have been enforced by the same institutional mechanisms and have produced failures whose costs are only beginning to be reckoned.

"Climate action" has long been plagued by a tension between confidence and evidence. In an October 1989 interview with *Discover* magazine, as the modern climate campaign was taking shape, Stanford climatologist Stephen Schneider described the dilemma facing scientists who sought public action: Capturing the public's imagination required media coverage, and getting it meant scientists would "offer up scary scenarios, make simplified, dramatic statements" while making little mention of their doubts. He called this a double ethical bind, saying that each scientist had to strike their own balance between being effective and being honest. Although Schneider hoped the two could coincide, in the decades that followed, the institutions of climate assessment resolved the double bind decisively in one direction—and built an enforcement apparatus to keep it there.

Over the past three decades, the climate consensus has been defined, promulgated, and enforced by an elaborate institutional architecture comprising interlocking scientific assessment bodies, governments, intergovernmental organizations, professional societies, media, and advocacy networks. The primary authority is the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC),

⁶ For descriptions of the climate consensus more detailed than space here allows, see Judith Curry's [Climate Uncertainty and Risk \(2023\)](#), especially chapter 2, and Richard Lindzen's 1995 essay comparing the climate consensus to the twentieth-century eugenics movement, "[Science and Politics: Global Warming and Eugenics](#)."

whose Sixth Assessment Report (AR6, 2021–23) is the current authoritative statement. In the United States, the parallel authority is the National Climate Assessment, most recently published in 2023 (NCA5).

The consensus these institutions have manufactured has layers of increasing uncertainty. It is well established that human emissions exert a warming influence on the planet. But the manufactured consensus begins with highly uncertain claims about how much warming a given level of CO₂ will produce, how rapidly, with what regional distribution, and what consequences.

The equilibrium climate sensitivity (ECS) gives a sense of just how uncertain things are. That is the globally averaged warming that would result from a sustained doubling of atmospheric CO₂. AR6 says ECS is “likely” between 2.5°C and 4.0°C, with a best estimate of 3.0°C. But the full range spanned by the world’s models is roughly 1.8°C to 5.6°C. In other words, even if future emissions were known, which they are not, the temperature rise varies among credible models by a factor of three; uncertainties in regional warming are even larger. A further complication is that estimates of ECS derived from the instrumental temperature record and paleoclimate proxies consistently cluster below the model-derived values. There are qualitative differences between an ECS of 2°C and one of 4°C that would require qualitatively different policy responses. That nuance essentially disappears in public and political discourse.

The third layer of the consensus is the projection of future impacts of warming on ecosystems and societies. That requires specifying future emissions and the community has defined a set of scenarios that span the range of plausible futures. The most extreme scenario used by the IPCC, Representative Concentration Pathway (RCP) 8.5, has coal consumption quintupling by 2100 with essentially no deployment of low-carbon energy technologies. This implausible scenario is the one that appears most often in both the research literature and public portrayals. Most of the alarming projections shaping public perception (including extreme sea level rise and intensification of storms and heat waves) stem from model runs driven by the RCP 8.5 scenario, a detail generally buried in technical appendices inaccessible to policymakers and journalists. Only very recently have the most extreme emissions scenarios been officially deprecated.

The fourth layer of the consensus is the most distant from physical science and so adds even greater uncertainty. It involves integrated assessment models (IAMs), which combine simplified climate models with economic models to estimate the “social cost of carbon” and optimal policy pathways. The damage functions at the heart of the IAMs (i.e., how detrimental is a given temperature increase) are, in the candid assessment of economists who work in this area, only loosely based on observations. IAM results are also very sensitive to the discount rate, which is a judgment about the weight to give future welfare relative to the present. Plausible choices can change the estimated optimal carbon price by an order of magnitude.

These four layers of consensus—warming physics, climate sensitivity, impact projections, and damage estimates—have increasing levels of uncertainty. Yet the IPCC Summary for Policymakers reports, media coverage, and political proclamations collapse these uncertainties

into a seemingly authoritative claim of imminent catastrophe. The report of Working Group I of AR6 was released on August 9, 2021, with headline findings couched in the IPCC's calibrated likelihood language. Yet the Secretary-General of the United Nations announced it to the world as a "code red for humanity." That phrase was the secretary-general's; it appears nowhere in the report, yet it led coverage in nearly every major media outlet. Such deceptions are the product of institutional, media, and political incentives that systematically favor alarm over accuracy.

A related manufactured consensus concerns the societal response required to counter the threat of climate change. In some respects, it is even more overconfident than the science it claims to respect. This consensus holds that rapidly replacing fossil fuels with renewable energy technologies is technically straightforward. It is also economically beneficial, with the modest costs quickly recouped through fuel savings, health cobenefits, and green job creation. In that way, the "energy transition" is framed as an opportunity rather than a sacrifice.

The promise of a beneficial and virtually painless energy transition has been made concretely by many officials, and it has been shown to be false more often than not. For example, Germany's environment minister Jürgen Trittin assured households in 2004 that a consumer surcharge supporting renewable energy would cost them "only around one euro per month, the price of a scoop of ice cream." His successor Norbert Röttgen declared in 2012, on the basis of a government feasibility study, that the transformation of Germany's energy system was not only achievable but also would pay for itself. Equivalent assurances, from equivalently senior officials, have accompanied transition commitments across the developed world.

Solar and wind generation costs have in fact fallen dramatically. But those are the costs of generating electricity only when the sun shines and the wind blows. They ignore the costs of integrating renewables into a system that must deliver electricity with high reliability. The costs of backing up renewables, which grow dramatically as intermittent generation becomes dominant, are ignored in most policy rhetoric.

Overly optimistic technology assumptions also sustain the transition consensus. Battery costs have fallen substantially, but the seasonal problem—the mismatch between renewable generation profiles and electricity demand across seasons—requires storage at a scale and cost well beyond credible forecasts. The Paris Agreement's 1.5°C target is unachievable without large-scale carbon dioxide removal technologies that do not yet exist on a relevant cost or scale. That target has functioned in practice as a political commitment sustained by the assumption of future technological rescue rather than an operational goal grounded in available means.

Media and nongovernmental organizations that uncritically amplify both the climate and transition consensus by blurring the distinction between established science and technology and contested projection. Climate coverage tends toward apocalyptic language such as "climate emergency" or "existential threat" that portrays the alarming end of uncertainty ranges as the most likely outcome. The two consensus reinforce each other: After all, if the danger is

existential and the solution painless, anyone questioning either is by implication acting in bad faith.

4.2. The Dissent That Was Suppressed

Climate science has been a high-stakes political battleground long enough that dissent suppression is unusually well documented in, for example, institutional correspondence and congressional testimony. Scientists who lived through it have also written personal accounts.

The most consequential documented episode is “Climategate”: the 2009 release of emails among leading scientists at the Climatic Research Unit of the University of East Anglia. The discussions about handling FOIA requests indicate awareness that something embarrassing, if not improper, was underway. In fact, there was talk of preventing heterodox papers from appearing in IPCC reports and pressuring journal editors who published inconvenient findings. One exchange proposed to “redefine what the peer-review literature is” to exclude unwelcome publications, while another discussed efforts to ensure a particular scientist’s work “never gets published.” The scientists in the email collection were ultimately cleared of research misconduct. But the investigations addressed only the narrow question of data fabrication and ignored the broader questions the emails raised. Whether there was a concerted effort to manage scientific discourse. And was targeting dissenters’ reputations within the norms of open scientific inquiry.

In fact, such suppression continues to operate brazenly. For example, a 2022 peer-reviewed paper published in *The European Physical Journal Plus* concluded that “the climate crisis . . . is not evident yet.” It supported this finding with a straightforward analysis of officially recognized datasets. Although that conclusion comports with multiple statements in the IPCC’s most recent assessment, the paper was retracted under pressure from consensus enforcers.⁷

Suppression is also baked into the formal IPCC process. The Summary for Policymakers reports—the documents driving media coverage and political speech—are negotiated line by line by government representatives who have strong interests in the policy implications of the adjectives and adverbs. The Summaries are then systematically more alarming than the underlying working group reports. Richard Tol, a prominent environmental economist and AR5 lead author, withdrew from the report-writing process and publicly documented what he described as systematic pressure toward alarmism.

Four individual cases illustrate the pattern.

Richard Lindzen is an MIT emeritus professor of atmospheric sciences who has made several seminal contributions to atmospheric dynamics. Lindzen has long argued that climate models are overly sensitive because they misrepresent cloud and water vapor feedbacks. His public communications about climate overconfidence cost him the institutional standing merited by his scientific achievements. A 2017 letter signed by more than twenty MIT earth science colleagues

⁷ Roger Pielke Jr. gives a good [summary](#) of the episode.

attempted to distance the university from his views. But the letter contains no engagement on substance, instead invoking consensus.

Judith Curry is the former chair of the School of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences at Georgia Tech and a fellow of the American Meteorological Society. She was aligned with the consensus until she began engaging publicly with what she regarded as systematic overconfidence in IPCC projections. Curry's refusal to misrepresent her confidence in the science drew organized professional hostility, which characterized her as a "serial misinformer." Curry left academic science in 2017, citing the field's "total focus on the IPCC consensus" and the "career suicide" facing any researcher who questioned it.

John Christy of the University of Alabama in Huntsville has, with Roy Spencer, maintained the most important independent satellite-based record of global atmospheric temperatures since 1979. That dataset has consistently shown that the tropical middle troposphere warms significantly more slowly than model projections. This is precisely the kind of systematic mismatch between prediction and observation that Feynman identified as the decisive test of a theory. The consensus community's response has been to challenge the inconvenient satellite record rather than revisiting the models.

Roger Pielke Jr. has documented that normalized economic losses from extreme weather show no clear upward trend attributable to climate change and, separately, that the heavy reliance on the RCP 8.5 distorts projected impacts of climate change. Pielke Jr.'s findings were met with scientific dispute and, incredibly, a formal complaint to the Office of Scientific Integrity orchestrated by consensus defenders. In 2015, a member of Congress demanded that Pielke Jr.'s university investigate his "misrepresentation" of science.⁸

4.3. The Failure That Resulted

Because both climate and energy systems unfold over decades, the climate consensus is not failing suddenly, unlike either the credit or COVID cases. Nevertheless, more than a few problems are already evident.

A significant and testable prediction of the consensus climate models is the warming pattern in the tropical troposphere, which is a structural feature of the greenhouse warming mechanism. Unfortunately, the observed warming rate over four decades of satellite and radiosonde measurements is significantly (and stubbornly) smaller than the model results.

Trends in extreme weather are far more mixed than might be expected from the media or political discussions. Pielke Jr. and others have found no long-term upward trend in normalized economic losses from hurricanes, floods, and other extremes. And although attribution science,

⁸ Pielke Jr.'s travails have been [documented](#) in greater detail.

which purports to assign human-caused probability shifts to specific extreme events, regularly produces press releases with confident causal claims, the methodology is not up to the task.

The uncertainties associated with emissions scenarios are evident in sea level rise projections. Although the rate of rise in the past few decades shows nothing unusual, the IPCC's AR6 report projects a rise to 2100 that ranges from less than half a meter under aggressive mitigation scenarios to more than a meter under high-emissions scenarios. Public communications misrepresent the state of the science by systematically emphasizing the high-end figures without disclosing their dependence on RCP 8.5.

The gap between the emissions reductions achieved and any effect on the climate is perhaps the greatest failure of the climate consensus. Emissions reductions can be measured and several developed economies, including the US and the UK have seen declines over the past several decades. But these have only slowed the rise of atmospheric CO₂, which continues to set record levels every year. The climate consequences of that modest slowing are undetectable, far too small to be distinguished from natural variability. The consensus trades on this confusion, presenting the achieved emissions reductions as doing anything to change the climate.

It took only a decade to disprove the consensus of a rapid and painless energy transition. The German renewable-energy consumer surcharge that Trittin had compared to a monthly scoop of ice cream rose more than tenfold from 2004 before it was finally shifted from household bills to the federal budget. By 2013, environment minister Peter Altmaier was warning publicly that transition costs could total a trillion euros by the end of the 2030s. In fact, the outcome of the German Energiewende program was almost exactly the opposite of what was intended. Retail electricity prices are among the highest of any comparable economy and coal remains an important source of German energy. Meanwhile, France, whose generation is dominated by nuclear power, saw a greater reduction in carbon intensity at substantially lower cost.

Real grid events have shown the reliability risks of renewable generation. California's own root-cause investigation traced the state's rotating blackouts during August 2020 to resource planning that hadn't kept pace with solar's steep evening decline. This is the same challenge that NERC had already flagged that summer. Two years later, a near-record September 2022 heat wave pushed the state to the brink of blackouts again. A repeat was avoided through emergency conservation alerts, more than 3,000 megawatts of battery storage built in the interim, and natural gas plants dispatching roughly twice the output of all renewable sources combined during the peak hours. European systems experienced comparable strain in 2021–22. These were predictable consequences of known system design flaws. But the consensus narrative discouraged power system engineers from communicating publicly.

The maldistribution of transition cost burdens has also been documented across multiple economies. Increased energy prices have the greatest impact on lower-income households and fuel poverty became a significant public health issue in the United Kingdom. High energy prices

continue to contribute to the deindustrialization of Europe, with unemployment consequences concentrated in working-class communities.

4.4. The Accountability That Did Not Follow

Because climate and energy systems change slowly, the most consequential claims of the climate consensus can't be tested in policy-relevant time, unlike either the credit or COVID cases. The architects and promoters of the climate consensus can always defer accountability for decades.

The "Himalayan blunder" is one of the rare occasions when a consensus claim has been falsified. The IPCC's Fourth Assessment Report of 2007 asserted that the likelihood of Himalayan glaciers "disappearing by the year 2035 and perhaps sooner is very high." That claim traced to an advocacy group's report recycling a speculative magazine interview, not to the peer-reviewed literature. IPCC Chair Rajendra Pachauri dismissed an authoritative 2009 review contradicting that claim as "voodoo science." Yet within weeks, the IPCC retracted the statement and expressed regret that its review procedures had failed. The retraction carried no personal or institutional consequence. Pachauri remained in office for another five years, and the review process was reformed marginally.

The little climate accountability that has occurred has been distributed perversely. Those who confidently communicated exaggerated claims have faced no institutional consequence, while those who instead communicated honest uncertainty have borne career costs. That's an inversion of scientific norms.

On the energy side, the architects and proponents of Germany's Energiewende, of nuclear foreclosure decisions across the developed world, and of the overly optimistic cost projections that underwrote those decisions have faced no serious accountability for deleterious outcomes that were predictable (and predicted) from engineering first principles. The populations who lost manufacturing employment or who could not afford energy bills have borne the costs.

The paucity of accountability in climate matters can be seen in the problems with the Federal Judicial Center's *Reference Manual on Scientific Evidence* noted in the Introduction. More than a thousand climate-related cases are pending in state and federal courts. Plaintiffs seek to hold fossil fuel companies liable for climate damages, justified by what "the Science" establishes. The Center removed its Reference Guide on Climate Science from the new Manual in early 2026 after a [letter](#) from state attorneys general, but the chapter that undergirded it remains.

The prevailing Daubert standard asks, among other factors, whether a theory has been tested, whether it has been peer reviewed, what its error rate is, and whether it is generally accepted in the relevant scientific community. When it is applied to the specific quantitative claims in those cases, including IAM damage estimates and attribution findings for specific events, significant uncertainty becomes apparent. The Manual's new chapter does not purport to replace that framework; it says consensus "is not a requirement for admissibility." But because it links widespread acceptance to "the highest level of certainty science has to offer," a judge could end

up giving the output of the consensus machinery as much weight as the underlying physics. That risks institutionalizing the confusion between manufactured consensus and earned consensus that has driven the failures documented here across all three cases. Better science and institutional structures could avoid that trap by making honesty professionally viable rather than professionally fatal.

5. Commonalities and Contrasts

A valid scientific consensus results from evidence that has been tested, validated by other research, and has withstood challenge and debate of further accumulating evidence. It emerges naturally from a healthy process and does not need to be declared. Agreement that the Earth orbits the Sun, that DNA carries genetic information, and that cigarettes cause lung cancer are all of this type. These are “earned,” because they evolved from theories compared with natural observation that proved robust across different methods, investigations, and scientists. While the gold standard of science is the specific experiment that confirms or disproves a given prediction, the earned consensus is legitimate as a useful summary of the evidence to date.

A manufactured consensus is very different; it is declared rather than derived from a convergence of repeated confirmation. The manufactured consensus is necessarily maintained by social mechanisms and public repetition, not empirical validation. This sort of consensus is proclaimed by powerful institutions with the authority to enforce it and sustained by secondary interests. It can appear when there are strong political and public policy stakes that depend upon scientific findings, and in domains with high complexity and inadequate experimental or observational data.

A manufactured consensus differs from an earned consensus by its relationship and reaction to dissent. An earned consensus is strengthened by challenges and ultimately decided by evidence countering those challenges, while a manufactured consensus treats challenge as illegitimate—even as a threat to the authority of those declaring it—and is sustained by the power to delegitimize and suppress that challenge. As Galileo observed, “In the sciences, the authority of thousands of opinions is not worth as much as one tiny spark of reason in an individual man.”

Each of the three case studies in this article involves a manufactured consensus. They are in different scientific domains and evolve with different timescales. And despite today’s political polarization, they span the ideological spectrum. The credit consensus was generated mainly by the deregulation-focused right and the technocratic center; the COVID consensus was pushed most aggressively by progressive-leaning public health bureaucracies and leftist media; the climate consensus is a passion of the environmental left with a broad centrist component. But the consensus trap appears in all three. The manufactured consensus is a structural feature of how modern institutions interact with science when complex conditions with high stakes require public policy solutions. Identifying what the three cases herein share requires an account that is

simultaneously epistemological, about the nature of the knowledge claims, and sociological, about how institutions produce and police them.

The distinction between earned and manufactured consensus matters enormously for policy. When genuine scientific consensus informs policy, as when public health authorities recommend against cigarette smoking or obesity or when engineers apply well-tested materials science to bridge construction, the deference of policymakers to expert knowledge about that technical data, as one input among several, is appropriate and necessary, since policymakers are not typically trained in those fields and cannot be expected to generate or even appropriately critique conflicting scientific claims. But when manufactured consensus informs policy, that same deference can insulate contested empirical and normative choices from democratic scrutiny. The difficulty is that “earned” and “manufactured” can be hard to distinguish from the outside, particularly when the institutions generating the latter are held in high public esteem and have strong incentives to make their product resemble the former.

5.1. Distinguishing Earned from Manufactured Consensus

If complexity alone justified suspicion of a consensus, then heliocentrism would have been exactly the kind of claim this article teaches readers to doubt. Distinguishing earned from manufactured consensus relies on first having a healthy degree of skepticism about any claimed consensus and then recognizing a cluster of features that can be checked when the consensus is claimed. That distinction is not merely visible in hindsight after a failure is apparent.

Structured skepticism is critical during policy formation since the adherents to a manufactured consensus rarely perceive it as such. Those who were actively proclaiming the consensus presumably believed sincerely that their conclusion was earned rather than manufactured. We do not doubt the sincerity of the economists who judged leaning against asset bubbles a fool’s errand. Likewise, in the pandemic, epidemiologists who insisted on a single permissible pandemic response and the climate scientists who insist that science is settled are sincere. The seven tests we propose below work in concert to assess whether a consensus is manufactured. They turn on the structure of the evidence and the institutional apparatus and behavior surrounding it, independent of how confident or sincere its proponents are. None fully exclude the consensus trap, but they reduce the likelihood of its occurrence.

1. Do truly independent methods converge on the conclusion? Tobacco’s carcinogenicity was established by multiple independent routes, including epidemiologic analysis, animal studies, and identified carcinogens in tar. The consensus trap, by contrast, is characteristically a monoculture—one family of models sharing substantial structural assumptions. It is far more scientifically significant that several, genuinely independent methods support the conclusion than if most experts agree. While that concurrence does not ensure a scientific truth, it is a simple test of a conclusion.

2. Is there a record of successful prediction without retroactive adjustment? Earned consensus typically will predict something that is subsequently verified by experiment or observation.⁹ For example, Einstein’s general relativity prediction of the bending of starlight occurred several years before Eddington’s 1919 confirmation. On the other hand, manufactured consensus tends to be revised retroactively as new data are available and then declare its own accuracy. During the COVID pandemic, epidemiologic models were repeatedly recalibrated to fit a spreading disease they had already claimed to accurately describe. Failed predictions are accommodated differently in climate science, where only successful models (out of dozens) are emphasized. Predictions must be confirmed or rejected based on what’s predicted in advance.

3. Is there ideological and institutional diversity among those aligned with the consensus? Historical examples of earned consensus originated from researchers with very different alignments to the status quo. Kepler, a Lutheran with no ecclesiastical office, and Newton, an Anglican with no stake in the Catholic-Protestant dimension of the dispute, independently confirmed heliocentric orbits through entirely different methods. The link between lung cancer and smoking was confirmed by researchers working inside institutions with strong incentives to dispute that link, including internal tobacco-industry studies that reached the same conclusion but were suppressed. But the manufactured consensus cases in this article show the opposite pattern. In each case, their agreement clusters almost entirely within a single ideological coalition, while those opposing the declared consensus are almost entirely aligned in reverse. A consensus is more legitimate when agreement is surprising to others, directly because that agreement is across parties with opposing self-interests. That sort of agreement is more difficult to manufacture than one among individuals or groups with aligned interests.

4. Does the claim run against the interests of those who assert it? While veracity is not necessarily higher among contrarian scientists, it is costly to put forth evidence-based conclusions that contradict the establishment. Heliocentrism ran against ecclesiastical authority, and consequences ensued. Researchers who proved and proclaimed the link between lung cancer and smoking suffered for decades because that finding ran against a powerful industry and the public health orthodoxy that had long treated smoking as benign. In each of our three cases, the manufactured consensus ran *with* the funding, and the authority of the institutions asserting it. The false consensus was rewarded rather than punished: more research funding, more regulatory power, more public financing, and more prominence for those who asserted it. A claim that costs its proponents something to hold is doing different epistemic work than one that pays them.

5. Is there clear caution about the precision and import of data? Earned consensus claims only what the evidence supports. For example, “Smoking causes lung cancer,” but no claim about any one smoker’s cancer. Likewise, data generating genuine scientific consensus come with uncertainties or ranges, rather than exaggerating precision and import. Manufactured consensus, on the other hand, characteristically miscalibrates its data in both ways. First, the

⁹ Per Popper, that prediction must be “risky”—i.e., have a possibility of being wrong.

import of the overall data is overstated or incompletely explained to mask uncertainty. For instance, data are quoted without confidence intervals, or a climate record is truncated to mask natural variability and so highlight a recent trend. At the individual level, it overstates general applicability for single observations. A single flood or heat wave is attributed to anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions. Both types of errors can be checked promptly when the claim is first made; there is no need to wait until later, after the claim fails. And both errors lead to scientific overreach: A single draw from a distribution does not confirm or refute the distribution, whether it's a cold snap cited against the climate consensus or a hurricane cited for it.

6. Has the window for falsification elapsed, or has it been conveniently deferred or accepted without serious scientific challenge? Heliocentrism, DNA's genetic role, and the smoking-cancer link each had decades of opportunity to fail and did not. A claim that either cannot be tested within the relevant window or has not been tested—decades-long periods of climate sensitivity or assessing long-term financial damage functions—has not earned scientific deference that comes from surviving a real test. Science without adequate testing is not different from an unproven hypothesis; it has either endured only in the absence of challenge or has ignored or suppressed any contradictory evidence.

7. Is the consensus repeatedly asserted, or is it simply put forth for independent verification and debate? The fact that DNA carries genetic information did not need formal proclamations to be issued by prestigious institutions, because the evidence sat in the literature for anyone to verify or invalidate. In science, no valid consensus should require an institutional campaign to declare it, because the data itself and its subsequent ability to withstand challenge are persuasive. Manufactured consensus is always announced and repeated with high-profile official statements. Much of this messaging is coordinated and, if the policy stakes are high, it involves the media. A significant part of the manufactured consensus is the appeal to authority, such as “the science is settled,” because the proclaimed consensus cannot rely on the evidence alone to validate its legitimacy. This test, like the others, does not necessarily imply that those who are doing the asserting are insincere in their beliefs.

Openness to challenge is a defining characteristic of an earned consensus; it is resilient because of the data itself. Of course, the claim of welcoming challenge is not sufficient, since those who manufacture a consensus claim to welcome challenge until challenge is actually attempted. Furthermore, a claimed consensus that punishes dissent should not be trusted, regardless of the criteria above.

Taken together, the features of evidence that we have described explain why the three cases of declared consensus ultimately failed. Application of these tests would reduce the possibility of getting caught in future consensus traps.

5.2. The Shared Mechanism

We recognize four elements that occur across all three cases; these are the operational machinery of the consensus trap.

Premature closure around flawed but complex models. Technical input to policy increasingly involves quantitative models. While a model might be based upon direct experiment or observation, it is a simplified mathematical representation of reality and so necessarily involves assumptions that can strongly influence its predictions. In some simple situations like the trajectories of spacecraft, assumptions are few and there have been stringent tests of predictions against observations. But in other cases, like economics, or virus transmissions, or the climate, many more assumptions are necessary, are often in dispute among practitioners, and may not even be testable. Model output is then highly uncertain, at best notional.

The consensus trap arises because nonexperts easily mistake the complexity of a model for accuracy. Any model having dozens of parameters running on supercomputers and producing outputs with statistical tests like confidence intervals can seem authoritative regardless of its actual validity. The media and policymakers are particularly prone to this confusion, as mathematical formulas and unfamiliar jargon can be intimidating. They then find it difficult to question any of the assumptions driving predictions; the model then becomes a “black box” beyond challenge.

In all three cases, this “complexity-equals-authority” illusion encouraged acceptance of projections. In the credit crisis, the models that gave banks false confidence about risk before 2008 were elaborate statistical constructs whose sophistication obscured their vulnerability to correlated risk. In the pandemic, the early epidemiological models that created panic and drove lockdown policy were large-scale simulations that relied on hypotheticals separate from known data, and those outputs were presented publicly with an unjustified certainty. And the integrated assessment models underlying climate damage projections are among the most complex used in policy analysis. In all three instances, that complexity is precisely why their assumptions about correlated risks, projected fatalities, and technological trajectories have drawn so little scrutiny. Unbeknownst to policymakers and the media who presented those models as “the science,” the scientific method itself had been transformed—build a highly complex model with implicit but obscure assumptions, run the model with several scenarios allegedly spanning possible futures, and then declare the matter settled.

Social, rather than scientific, dismissal of credible dissent. Each of our cases had its well-credentialed dissenters, including Rajan and Gramlich in credit; Ioannidis, Atlas, Kulldorff, Giesecke, and Gill in COVID; Lindzen, Curry, Christy, and Pielke Jr. in climate. In each of these cases, those promulgating the consensus sought to delegitimize the dissenters by attacking credentials and motives, while branding the dissent as “dangerous.” Summers dismissed Rajan as “slightly Luddite” before the assembled central bankers at Jackson Hole. Atlas was censured by the Stanford University Faculty Senate and Fauci and Collins attacked the Great Barrington

Declaration authors as “fringe epidemiologists” pursuing a “dangerous” strategy.¹⁰ Curry was labeled a “serial misinformer,” and she, together with Lindzen, Christy, and Pielke Jr. were among the targets of a 2015 congressional investigation.

While the pattern of discrediting the dissenter, rather than engaging and debating the evidence, is recognizable in all three cases, more direct censorship ensures that the manufactured consensus dominates. By suppressing the visibility of dissent itself, the public and policymakers remain unaware of credible, evidence-based alternatives.

The combination of public discreditation and direct censorship discourages any broader group from expressing dissent. Alexis de Tocqueville, nearly two centuries ago in *Democracy in America*, said that the gravest threat to a free society is not the tyrant but the quiet, self-imposed silence of those who hold unpopular views contrary to the majority. This “raises formidable barriers around the liberty of opinion; within these barriers an author may write what he pleases, but woe to him if he goes beyond them.”

Media and political amplification of alarm. In each case, the media conveyed a consensus narrative that, when combined with the political incentive to invoke scientific authority, transformed uncertain and contested predictions into policy mandates. Modern journalism operates under its own structural pressures and incentives in an era of polarizing social media and heightened competition for attention. These trends reward simplicity and provocative language, neither suited to conveying genuine uncertainty nor policy trade-offs. A story in which even highly credentialed experts disagree about model assumptions and ambiguous data is harder to explain; no one likes uncertainty, especially about a crisis. But a more dramatic story reporting that “scientists say” or “experts agree” automatically casts dissenters either as irrelevant “fringe” or as acting in bad faith with ulterior motives. Politicians, for their part, find a consensus almost irresistible. A proclamation like “The science says we must,” which elevates a policy choice to an imperative and neuters any challenge, was present in all three episodes.

Costs from policy failure are distributed regressively. In each case we describe, the consensus was manufactured and promulgated by those who were little impacted later by the harms of the policies that resulted. In the 2008 banking bailout, the commercial banks and investment banks, the very institutions whose consensus on risk produced the crisis, were insulated from the downstream harms. Meanwhile, individual mortgage holders and small business owners bore the brunt of the consequences. Likewise, the severe harms of COVID lockdowns and school closures generally spared the well-off. Instead, costs fell heavily on low-income workers who could not work remotely, on poor children with serious, long-lasting learning losses, on small business owners who lost their life savings, on single-parent homes dependent on child daycare and after-school programs, and on other highly vulnerable groups. The energy transition shows the same

¹⁰ In the more than 1,000-page diary disclosure released by the Senate Homeland Security Committee in July 2026, Fauci is seen working to suppress criticism, cultivating personal relationships with prominent journalists to delegitimize dissenting views.

pattern, because rising energy costs and broad deindustrialization impose their heaviest burdens on lower-income and working-class communities; the affluent have a far larger economic cushion. This asymmetry between those who impose a consensus underpinning policy and those who are impacted once it fails is a cardinal feature of manufactured consensus, and it is both ethically problematic and a structural feature corrupting the consensus itself. The insulation of consensus manufacturers from direct harm reduces their own stake in policies, which might otherwise prompt more critical analysis of the consensus itself.

These four elements form a characteristic pattern and reinforce each other in a characteristic sequence. The initial uncertainty is an inconvenient obstacle to the desired narrative. It is therefore managed, whether consciously or not, by showing data without its ranges and caveats, while models indecipherable to the public present numerical estimates as if they are specific and definitive, justified as simplification for the public and policymakers. The sociology of the profession then takes over from the epistemology of science with rewards and punishments that reinforce the consensus. This is done by ensuring that research funding flows toward work that refines and validates the consensus, while the peer-review process led by the same group prevents publication of dissenting work.¹¹ All the career incentives in the field perpetuate the cycle, so that agreement is rewarded and dissent is marginalized. This is especially effective on those depending on publications and grants for their own promotion or tenure. Media and politicians then amplify the result—the manufactured consensus—and punish the dissent that would impede predetermined policies. And the ultimate costs land on those least able to push back.

5.3. Why Institutions Suppress Uncertainty

The sociological component of the consensus trap deserves closer examination, because it is what converts ordinary, healthy scientific disagreement into manufactured consensus. Three kinds of institutional dynamics do most of the work.

The cost of dissent to careers. Science is a profession, and like all professions, it rewards conformity to established norms and punishes deviation. Finance at its best creates value—and at its worst exploits information advantages. Some degree of consensus is necessary for science to be cumulative. Some degree of information exclusivity is needed for markets to function. But when consensus hardens prematurely and/or opportunities to mint profits from asymmetric insights emerge, the career penalties for dissent will suppress legitimate challenge. Financial whistleblowers are usually shunned like police officers who break “the blue wall of silence,” and often terminated. Scientific dissenters risk losing grant funding, facing hostile peer review, and

¹¹ The [mechanism is not always subtle](#). In 2022, four scientists reviewed an addendum meant to save a paper questioning claims of a climate emergency; three, including one of us (Koonin), recommended acceptance, finding its treatment of the data consistent with the IPCC’s own AR6 assessment. The fifth-party adjudicator brought in to break the tie was shown only two of the four reviews—not the two favorable ones—and recommended retraction. The original paper was pulled shortly after, over the continued objection of its authors.

exclusion from conferences and collaborations. Perhaps most damaging, they risk being publicly associated with “denial” or acting in bad faith.

These career risks are not hypothetical, as demonstrated by the careers of Curry, Pielke Jr., and others. The aggregate result, across many individuals making rational calculations, is what the economist Timur Kuran called preference falsification: Private doubt coexists with public agreement to create an illusion of unanimity that overstates the true degree of expert conviction.

Peer-review lock-in. A consensus becomes institutionally embedded when funding agencies, editorial boards, and advisory committees are populated by scientists who built their careers on that consensus framework. Decisions on funding and publication can then become self-reinforcing in a straightforward way: Research aligned with the consensus is fundable and publishable, while research that could challenge the consensus is not. The result is a systematic bias against paradigm-challenging work, a modern variant of the paradigm-maintenance dynamic Thomas Kuhn identified more than sixty years ago.

The “noble lie.” Scientific institutions have interests beyond those of a healthy scientific enterprise. There are reputations to protect, budgets to justify, political relationships to maintain, and, increasingly, public policies to promote. When the evidence becomes inconvenient to these interests, the temptation is to manage communication, emphasizing findings that support the institutional position while minimizing those that complicate it and discouraging public expressions of uncertainty.¹²

The noble lie rationalizes this behavior—because the public cannot be trusted to respond appropriately to true uncertainty, the science must be portrayed with unwarranted confidence. The ethical hazard and potential for immediate harms are obvious. But there is also a practical risk: when noble lies unravel, the damage to institutional credibility can exceed what honest uncertainty would have cost. The collapse of public trust in pandemic-era public health institutions is the most vivid recent illustration. And it is incipient for climate-related institutions.

5.4. Science in the Service of Predetermined Policy

In each case we have considered, science was recruited to serve policy conclusions that institutions and authorities had already reached for other reasons—political, ideological, institutional, or financial. When the Clinton and Bush administrations wanted to expand homeownership, the financial system manufactured the “sciency” apparatus—ratings, risk models, capital frameworks—that made the resulting credit explosion appear safe. When public health authorities wanted a mandate for sweeping intervention by central authority, the epidemiological models and the asymmetric framing of risk supplied the scientific justification.

¹² Former senator Tim Wirth [put this candidly](#): “We’ve got to ride the global-warming issue. Even if the theory of global warming is wrong, we will be doing the right thing—in terms of economic policy and environmental policy.”

When climate advocates want a mandate for rapid decarbonization, the worst-case scenarios and the alarming Summary for Policymakers language supply the warrant.

In each case, policy conclusion preceded the scientific evidence even as the public presentation insisted on the reverse. “The science says we must act this way” was, in each instance, a post hoc rationalization of a conclusion reached in advance of, or even without regard for, the data. Science was being deployed as a social technology for closing off debate rather than as a method for resolving it.

5.5. The Accountability Vacuum

There has not been much accountability in the three cases we’ve considered. Greenspan acknowledged his “shocked disbelief” at the failure of his worldview yet retained his reputation intact. The architects of COVID lockdown policy were well rewarded. For example, after retiring from his government post without consequence, Fauci was appointed a Distinguished University Professor at Georgetown and saw his memoir hit #1 on the *New York Times* bestseller list. IPCC authors who produced overly alarming summaries of their own reports have faced no institutional consequence; instead, they retain their 2007 Nobel Peace Prize.

But what accountability there is varies across the three cases. In the financial case, there were monetary consequences: Shareholders were wiped out when institutions failed and the rating agencies paid billions in civil fines. In the case of COVID, there is some accountability through ongoing congressional investigations and the gradual vindication of early dissenters. But in the case of climate, accountability is almost entirely deferred. There is no acute crisis to force a reckoning, only the accumulation of evidence on decadal timescales that projections are too alarming and policies too costly.

5.6. Differences Among the Three Cases

A comparison that flattened these three episodes into a single undifferentiated indictment would be intellectually dishonest and would allow an easy refutation. The cases differ in at least three consequential ways, and the differences matter as much as the similarities.

The variable robustness of the underlying science. This is the most important difference. The financial risk consensus rested on models with no serious scientific foundation; the assumption of uncorrelated normally distributed returns was known to be false well before the crisis. The early COVID consensus on infection fatality rates, universal susceptibility, and lockdown efficacy was built on sparse emergency data, and failed to incorporate well-established infectious disease biology and prior knowledge about the limits and harms of lockdowns. The core climate science stands on very different ground: that the climate is changing and that human influence on the climate is growing is beyond serious dispute. The legitimate critique of the climate consensus concerns poorly quantified natural variability, uncertain feedbacks, the negative (and positive) impacts of warming on ecosystems and society, and above all the leap from established physics to specific quantitative projections and policy prescriptions. Conflating that robust core with the

uncertain periphery is a rhetorical move, not a scientific argument, and our analysis depends on never making it.

The timescale of falsification. The financial consensus failed within months. The COVID consensus began unraveling within a year, although it still has plenty of holdouts, as Swedish outcomes, school-reopening data, and the accumulating vindication of early dissenters became impossible to ignore. The climate consensus operates on multi-decadal timescales that make decisive falsification genuinely hard. This is not a license for overconfidence; it is, if anything, an argument for greater humility, since the models cannot be tested against observation within the policy-relevant window. But it explains why the climate consensus is so much more entrenched—the social mechanisms that maintain it face no acute empirical reckoning.

The character and degree of dissent suppression. COVID saw the most active and organized suppression: social media deplatforming, direct government coordination with platforms on content moderation, formal institutional censure of named scientists, and threats to professional licensure. In the case of COVID, suppression was not only more organized but was in part directly orchestrated by the very official who was simultaneously defining the consensus, a dimension documented by his own writings. The Climategate emails reveal organized management of the scientific discourse, but the suppression in the climate case has been more diffuse, operating chiefly through funding and publication gatekeeping than through outright censorship. The financial case involved the least suppression of all: Rajan was mocked rather than silenced, and the heterodox investors who saw the crisis coming faced only market skepticism, not professional sanctions.

5.7. What This Analysis Does Not Claim

The thesis we have developed invites a predictable misreading, especially by the institutions and individuals who have been caught in a consensus trap. It's therefore important to be explicit about what our analysis is *not* claiming.

We are not arguing that expertise is unimportant, that scientific institutions are generally corrupt, or that heterodox positions automatically deserve credence. The scientific enterprise, for all the pathologies we have described, remains the most reliable method for generating cumulative, self-correcting knowledge. The reforms proposed in the next section are meant to strengthen that enterprise, not to weaken it.

We are not arguing for reflexive contrarianism. That consensus has sometimes been catastrophically wrong does not mean it is usually wrong or that dissent is usually right. The appropriate response to the consensus trap is not to replace deference to consensus with deference to its critics. Rather, it is to build institutions that keep genuine challenge alive, reward honest quantification of uncertainty, and hold consensus-makers accountable when their confidence proves unwarranted. We embrace Popper's point that the growth of knowledge

depends on disagreement because the freedom to be wrong in public is an important way that science improves.

Our point is narrower and, we believe, more defensible: that in domains marked by high complexity, limited observations or experimental control, and high policy stakes, institutional dynamics and personal incentives generate strong and predictable pressures toward premature closure and the suppression of dissent; that these pressures operated visibly and consequentially in all three episodes; and that the resulting costs—financial ruin, foregone learning, damaged health, misdirected investment—fell disproportionately on those with the least power to challenge the consensus, while the public accountability that might deter a repetition was almost entirely absent.

The Federal Judicial Center’s linking of widespread acceptance to “the highest level of certainty science has to offer,” in this light, risks building into the guidance given to federal judges the very epistemology that produced these three failures: a confusion between social agreement and empirical warrant. The preceding sections have shown how that confusion comes about and its costs. How it might be mitigated or avoided entirely is the subject of the next section.

6. A Menu of Reforms

We believe that scientists are, in the main, talented and sincere; policymakers are generally trying to serve the public interest; journalists are not in the business of deliberate misinformation. So the consensus trap is not a failure of intelligence or integrity. Rather, it is structural: the incentives for each group are misaligned with the honest communication of self-correcting knowledge. And the misalignment is greatest when stakes are highest. Crisis places a premium on appearing decisive and so recasts dissent from a consensus as a danger when the cost of error is greatest.

Policymakers and the public face a related problem: most don’t have the background to evaluate competing claims about model assumptions or confidence intervals, and policymakers especially find it convenient to blur the distinction between a scientific finding and a policy prescription. For that reason, society grants experts a special epistemic authority on the assumption that their domains are genuinely beyond lay evaluation. That deference is appropriate when earned, but dangerous when the difficulty of the subject becomes a shield against scrutiny. And that deference extends only to scientific matters. As Dwight D. Eisenhower warned in his 1961 farewell address, public policy should not become “the captive of a scientific-technological elite”; he wanted scientific input weighed as one factor among many in a democratic process, not treated as a substitute for elected judgment. In a free society, questioning expert claims is a civic responsibility. Where citizens abdicate, institutions expand to fill the space and entrench the unaccountable manufacture of consensus.

For these reasons, the reform proposals below have the common goal of ensuring that claims presented as scientific carry their evidence with them and that the space for scientific challenge of a consensus—even one that later proves correct—remains institutionally protected.

6.1. Reforming Scientific Institutions

Funding. Centralized government funding of research contributes to the consensus trap pathology. When scientists and their institutions depend on a single large agency for research support, dissent from that agency's priorities becomes intolerable. The silencing of COVID-era dissenters was not merely social but also economic. The private sector demonstrates the alternative: Foundations representing hundreds of billions in endowed capital fund rigorous, independent, high-risk science without the political capture that government monopoly produces, and the majority of US biomedical research and development is already funded through nongovernmental sources.

But decentralization should not be oversold as a route to neutrality: Private and philanthropic funding can carry its own directional biases. This is most evident in climate science, where green-aligned foundations dominate while industry funding has been treated as disqualifying.

The case for decentralization is that it replaces a single point of capture with plural, competing biases whose errors are more likely to offset each other than to harden into an enforced orthodoxy. Reform should move toward decentralization: reducing the share of funding flowing through any single body, requiring cost sharing with private sources, and requiring every funder, public or private, to bear the full cost of the research it sponsors. In this way, no institution becomes dependent on maximizing grant volume to cover its fixed costs.

Journals and peer review. Peer review should be reformed to reduce its systematic bias against paradigm-challenging work. This means instituting expanded double-blind review, explicit pathways for null results and dissenting analyses, and editorial boards that include heterodox reviewers. Journals should avoid conflating empirical findings and policy prescriptions; that practice, endemic in high-profile COVID, climate, and financial publications, is politics, not science.¹³ Journals should also sponsor attributed and moderated online forums for post-publication discussion of contested papers so that challenges become part of the scientific record rather than being relegated to social media or suppressed entirely.

Professional societies. Societies can use credentialing or membership to suppress dissent, thereby becoming consensus enforcers rather than venues for open scientific exchange. They should adopt codes of conduct prohibiting these practices and establish procedures to adjudicate complaints that such mechanisms have been weaponized.

¹³ Recent [work](#) suggests that science journals, particularly environmental papers, are using more subjective language. An investigation into 180,000 peer-reviewed articles reveals that papers increasingly include personal feelings, unclear metrics, and policy prescriptions.

Two further disciplines would help societies resist becoming consensus enforcers. First, any policy statement issued in the society's name should either be put to a vote of the membership or carry an explicit notice that it was not, thus ending the common practice in which the position of a leadership committee is presented as the settled view of an entire field. Second, societies should audit their own policy statements to ensure that they distinguish neutral scientific analyses from policy advocacy.

6.2. Reforming Academia and Higher Education

The COVID and climate cases have seen breaches in guarantees of academic freedom. Universities should be required, as a condition of federal research funding, to demonstrate that their protections are real and enforced. They must protect the right to publish heterodox conclusions without professional penalty. Faculty bodies that censure colleagues for their scientific views should face consequences in their governance authority and eligibility for federal funding.

Scientists should also be trained in the social aspects of their own discipline. A researcher who understands the history of scientific revolutions and the sociology of consensus formation will be better equipped to resist pressures toward conformity. Likewise, structured training in the scientist's role in policymaking, including the distinction between analysis and advocacy, should become a standard component of doctoral education and professional development in policy-relevant fields.

6.3. Reforming the Science-Policy Interface

Several steps could sharpen the boundary between scientific assessment and policy prescription, which was blurred in all three cases we considered.

Advisory bodies should present findings and policy recommendations in separate documents, with uncertainties quantified and the assumptions linking the two made explicit. That a financial model estimates a probability of systemic failure, that a pathogen carries a certain fatality rate, or that CO₂ is rising at a certain pace are scientific claims; the responses that follow—bailouts, school closures, energy transition mandates—are not.

To better differentiate assessments from prescriptions, any major rule with a scientific basis should be supported by a written finding from the relevant advisory body. Further, any agency ruling departing from that finding should be justified in a public document, which would make explicit the overriding of technical advice.

The scope of agencies whose assessments inform major policy should be legislatively specified and subject to periodic review, with mission expansion by executive action alone prohibited. All three of our case studies saw vague agency authority captured by successive administrations and redirected toward political priorities that displace the agency's scientific function.

Advisory body membership should be restructured to resist capture. Rotating fixed terms, mandatory disclosure of conflicts of interest, explicit inclusion of qualified heterodox members, and a bar on any chair serving more than one consecutive full term are all measures toward that end. Advisory bodies should be required to assess the overall impact of their recommendations, including not only the risks mitigated but also the costs incurred.

Finally, accountability should be institutionalized. A formal “lessons learned” process publicly evaluating the accuracy of major consensus-based projections, similar to the after-action reviews used in the military, would begin to impose reputational cost on systematic overconfidence.

6.4. Reforming Media Coverage of Science

Media reform is harder than institutional reform because journalism operates in a competitive market that discourages nuance, and heavy-handed government intervention in media content would be worse than the problem it would claim to solve. Within those limits, science journalism should be recognized as a distinct specialization with training standards that include uncertainty communication, the distinction between assessments and prescriptions, and the appropriate treatment of credible dissent. The endemic pattern of a contested finding reported as settled, dissenters cast as bad-faith actors, and the policy prescription presented as the inevitable corollary is the media amplification of manufactured consensus. Bodies like the Society of Professional Journalists should recognize it as a failure rather than a norm. News organizations should structurally distinguish reporting on empirical findings, on scientific disputes, and on policy implications. These are three different kinds of stories requiring different standards of sourcing and framing.

6.5. The Role of Artificial Intelligence

One development bearing on the consensus trap would have seemed implausible a decade ago: the expansion of access to scientific information and analytical capability through artificial intelligence (AI). It cuts both ways. The threatening direction is already visible—governments and universities deploying AI to detect and suppress whatever is defined as misinformation. When the institutions that manufacture consensus also define and police misinformation, AI amplifies the consensus trap pathology rather than correcting it.

A subtler version of the same risk requires no institutional deployment at all: AI models trained predominantly on institutional and mainstream-consensus text will reproduce “the science says X” framing by default, under-weighting dissenting analyses simply because they are less represented in the training corpus. The peer-review lock-in described in V.3 can thus operate automatically, mediated by what a model has learned to treat as authoritative rather than by any human editor’s decision.

The promising direction is more fundamental, provided AI is used to retrieve and compare primary literature directly rather than to solicit a synthesized narrative, which inherits exactly the consensus bias described above. The special authority of experts has always rested in part on

asymmetric access. The expert could say, “the model says X,” and the citizen had no practical means of interrogating the model’s assumptions. That asymmetry is eroding. AI tools now let educated nonspecialists probe complex research literature and surface dissenting analyses at a depth that previously required specialized training.

The case for unreflective deference has always depended upon inaccessibility, the assumption that the science is too complex for the nonexpert to evaluate. As that premise weakens, so does the justification for deference without scrutiny. A public that can interrogate competing claims, even imperfectly, is harder to mislead through manufactured consensus and better positioned to hold scientists and policymakers accountable.

6.6. Reforming Policymakers and Policymaking

Policymakers are generalists operating with incomplete information under time pressure and political constraints. They cannot be expected to adjudicate disputes in epidemiology, financial mathematics, or atmospheric physics. But they can recognize the pathologies described here and probe not only what the consensus says but its strength: Who dissents and on what grounds? What are the model’s key assumptions? And what is missing in the gap between finding and prescription?

Doing that requires independent analytical capacity—staff with the expertise and mandate to ask hard questions of the advisors whose consensus they are asked to adopt. The current model, in which policymakers depend on the same institutions that produce the consensus to evaluate it, is compromised in the same way that letting rating agencies grade the securities of the banks paying them was compromised before 2008.

Legislatures should invest in scientific advisory capacity independent of the executive agencies whose recommendations they evaluate. At the federal level, this should be a restored, modernized policy analysis capability serving Congress directly: either a reconstituted Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) with an updated statutory mandate or a formal expansion of the Government Accountability Office’s Science, Technology Assessment, and Analytics team into a chartered, OTA-like function. Whatever form it takes, the mandate would be to produce genuine policy options analyses, not retrospective program evaluations or literature reviews. These should be delivered shortly after a congressional request, as they would have no effect if delivered after the legislative window had closed.

6.7. The Indispensable Personal Dimension

These institutional reforms are necessary but not sufficient. They create conditions under which honest science and honest policy are more likely, but do not guarantee either. In the end, the consensus trap is sustained by individual choices—to stay silent when speaking carries a cost, to defer when questioning would be inconvenient, to go along when the penalties for dissent appear too high. The three episodes were aggregates of such choices: scientists who doubted but calculated that silence was safer, journalists who sensed the story was more complicated than the

version they filed, and policymakers who found the cover of expert authority too convenient to relinquish.

What shapes those choices is culture: the shared expectation—in laboratories, newsrooms, and legislatures—that speaking honestly about uncertainty is a professional obligation rather than a risk, that dissent is a contribution to science rather than an attack on it, and that the suppression of credentialed dissent is itself a form of misconduct. Formal rules protecting dissent are only as effective as the willingness to honor the norms beneath them; cultures that genuinely value honest challenge produce the same behavior without compulsion. Whether democratic societies can sustain that disposition under the concentrated pressures of crisis is, ultimately, the question on which the entire reform agenda depends.

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