
Foreword

Many economic historians and other social scientists have observed the climate change debate with dismay for its lack of attention to past experience and the diversity in the historical record. Climate change can be sudden, intense, and geographically focused, as in the Dust Bowl days of the 1930s, or gradual, irregular, and widespread as in the cooling of the Little Ice Age. Knowledge of the mechanisms of global climate change is far from complete, and forecasts of average temperature for the coming decades, much less centuries, are always hedged into alternative scenarios and wide confidence intervals. The place of regional climate change within the global system is heavily laden with complexity and seldom addressed by climate models.

If climate change over the decades is very difficult, if not impossible, to predict at the geographic level where national or regional policy is made, it is prudent to investigate how the economy and the political system have responded to climate change in the past when even less was known about the physical system that determines temperature, precipitation, and the like. We, therefore, welcomed the interest of the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) in a project that views the past as a laboratory for understanding future scenarios when the economy must adapt to climate change. In this regard, we are grateful for the leadership and advice of James Poterba, president of the NBER, and Claudia Goldin, director of the program on Development of the American Economy, in support of this project. We also acknowledge the valuable organizational support of the Conference Department at the NBER.

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Gary Libecap
Richard H. Steckel
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