



## **CAPTURED COURTS:**

The National Academies, The Federal  
Judicial Center & Climate Lawfare



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### Executive Summary

For years, the American Energy Institute (AEI) has documented how the Environmental Law Institute’s (ELI) Climate Judiciary Project (CJP) operates as a judicial influence campaign rather than a neutral educational initiative.<sup>1</sup> AEI’s reports<sup>2</sup> have shown that CJP advances plaintiff-aligned legal theories, contested climate attribution concepts, and litigation-oriented narratives to judges presiding over active and anticipated climate cases, while concealing conflicts of interest, funding sources, and participant identities.<sup>3</sup>

This report reveals that the congressionally chartered National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) – once regarded as a neutral scientific organization – has been compromised by its ties to climate activist organizations, leftwing dark money networks, and a politicized leadership.

Through its production of the *Reference Manual on Scientific Evidence, Fourth Edition* in coordination with its co-publisher, the Federal Judicial Center (FJC), the research agency of the federal judiciary, the FJC<sup>4</sup> and NASEM<sup>5</sup> embedded plaintiff-aligned positions on climate causation, attribution, and liability into one of the most authoritative evidentiary resources relied upon by judges nationwide.

The Fourth Edition represents a sharp break from the Manual’s historical role as a neutral guide to scientific methodology. It introduces a new Reference Guide on Climate Science that treats disputed theories central to ongoing climate litigation as settled fact, endorses probabilistic and event-attribution frameworks explicitly developed for courtroom use, and repeatedly frames skepticism of climate claims as bad faith or strategic manipulation. These positions are advanced without meaningful disclosure of the authors’ and cited experts’ direct ties to climate plaintiffs and plaintiff-side law firms.

Most troubling, the Manual repeatedly cites the work of Michael Burger, Executive Director of Columbia Law School’s Sabin Center for Climate Change Law and Of Counsel at Sher Edling LLP, the primary plaintiffs’ firm driving climate nuisance and fraud litigation nationwide. Burger’s work is cited at



footnotes 77, 182, 295, and 308 of the Manual, yet judges are never informed of his role as a practicing plaintiffs' lawyer.<sup>5</sup> By laundering plaintiffs' legal theories through a federally branded judicial reference work, the NASEM through the FJC has allowed one side of active litigation to shape the evidentiary framework before cases are adjudicated. Concerningly, the NASEM receives significant funding from the federal government with over \$200,000,000<sup>6</sup> in funding and grants from federal agencies in 2024, accounting for approximately 74% of the NASEM's external funding that year.

While FJC has since "omitted" the climate science chapter from its Reference Manual, the NASEM, the copyright holder, continues to host the full version with the chapter intact, bearing FJC branding and with no notice of any omission. This raises serious questions of transparency and accountability. The Fourth Edition should be rescinded and investigated by Congress and the federal judiciary.

In January 2026, following AEI's investigative work, the House Judiciary Committee opened a formal inquiry into allegations that ELI and CJP improperly attempted to influence federal judges. Despite this escalation, Congress continues to fund the National Academies and the Federal Judicial Center without conditions or enhanced oversight, even as the FJC's own conduct now sits squarely within the influence architecture under investigation.<sup>7</sup>

The question before Congress is no longer whether ethical concerns exist. That question has been answered by a formal House investigation and a growing public record. The question now is whether appropriators will act to halt the misuse of taxpayer funds, restore neutrality to judicial education, and prevent federal institutions from becoming instruments of climate lawfare.

## **I. From Judicial Education to Judicial Capture**

Judicial education plays an important role in helping judges understand complex technical issues. That role depends entirely on neutrality, transparency, and restraint. When judicial education crosses the line into advocacy, it threatens the legitimacy of the courts and undermines public confidence in the rule of law.

AEI's prior reporting demonstrates that the Climate Judiciary Project was explicitly designed to influence how judges think about climate-related cases before those cases are heard. CJP programming focuses on jurisdictions where climate litigation is pending, advances plaintiff-side theories on causation and remedies, and relies heavily on experts who advise or support climate plaintiffs in active litigation.<sup>12</sup>

The Federal Judicial Center's involvement fundamentally alters the gravity of this issue. The FJC is not an outside nonprofit; it is a congressionally funded agency charged with supporting judicial independence and competence. Its imprimatur signals credibility and neutrality to judges nationwide.

In its collaboration with the National Academies on the Fourth Edition of the Reference Manual on Scientific Evidence, the FJC and NASEM embedded contested, litigation-driven climate theories into a reference work that judges routinely rely upon when evaluating evidence and expert testimony.<sup>4</sup>



In particular, AEI’s investigative work reveals that the National Academies, a non-profit organization supported heavily by tax-payer dollars, likely played a key role in embedding the biased climate material into the Manual.

## **II. The National Academies: Taxpayer Funded Activism**

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (NASEM), also known as the “National Academies,” operate under a congressional charter signed by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863. The National Academy of Sciences (NAS) is the oldest of the three academies, and acts as the legal body for the collective National Academies group. The organization is a private, nonprofit institution with a membership elected to its three Academies, and work conducted through its major program centers and offices.

Despite the Federal Judicial Center’s removal of the biased chapter on “Climate Science,” the National Academies continues to host the Manual in its original form, without disclaimer of its co-publisher's omission. Instead, the NASEM has publicly stated it stands by the tainted chapter. In a recent WSJ Letter<sup>5</sup> titled “The National Academy of Sciences Isn’t Biased,” NAS President Marcia McNutt responded to criticism of the Reference Manual’s bias, declaring “the chapter on climate science remains available on our website.” As copyright holder of the Reference Manual, the NASEM can continue to print and distribute the Manual with inclusion of the activist-influenced climate materials and contested theories.

One of those climate theories, “attribution science,” has been widely used by climate plaintiffs in attempt to pin blame on companies for their alleged contributions to specific weather events. The National Academies is actively working on a study<sup>6</sup> to examine this theory and the “current scientific understanding of attribution of extreme weather events and their impacts to climate change, and consider user needs and opportunities to improve attribution science capabilities.”

On its website, the National Academies’ “Climate Change Collection” section<sup>7</sup> of research is prefaced by a disclaimer claiming “[c]limate change is occurring, is caused largely by human activities, and poses significant risks for a broad range of human and natural systems.”

### **A. Propped Up by Taxpayer Dollars**

The NAS receives significant funding from the federal government. In 2024, the NAS reported receiving over \$277,000,000 in gifts, grants, and contributions.<sup>9</sup> Of that, more than \$205,000,000 came from U.S. government agencies – approximately 74% of the organization’s overall grants and contributions for the year. The NAS receives funding from more than thirty federal agencies and sub-agencies.<sup>10</sup> In 2024, significant federal funding sources included:

- Department of Transportation (DOT), \$84,292,000
- Department of Defense (DoD), \$32,996,000
- Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), \$23,113,000
- Department of Energy (DOE), \$7,155,000
- Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), \$4,538,000



- Department of Commerce (DOC), \$4,270,000
- Department of the Interior (DOI), \$3,362,000
- Department of State (DOS), \$2,511,000
- Department of Agriculture (USDA), \$2,260,000
- Department of Homeland Security (DHS), \$1,639,000
- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), \$1,565,000
- Department of Justice (DOJ), \$1,461,000

## **B. Dark Money & Climate Activist Connections**

The NASEM's connections to left-wing climate advocacy groups, its support for Democrats and leftwing policies, as well as its dark-moneyed funding sources offers a window into how a neutral judicial reference guide became tainted with climate activist aligned messaging.

- Since 2018, the National Academy of Sciences has received \$575,300<sup>11</sup> from Arabella Advisors' liberal dark-money group,<sup>12</sup> the New Venture Fund. The New Venture Fund and its parent organization, Arabella Advisors, has come under significant scrutiny for funneling money to left-wing causes, such as climate litigation.
- The National Academy of Sciences has received over \$1.5 million from the ClimateWorks Foundation, a left-wing climate advocacy group.<sup>13</sup> ClimateWorks is key funder<sup>14</sup> of Energy Foundation China, a group which has been the subject of congressional investigations for allegedly operating<sup>15</sup> in the U.S. on behalf of the Chinese Communist Party.
- The organization has also received contributions from large philanthropies like the Hewlett Foundation<sup>16</sup> and Moore Foundation<sup>17</sup> which are tied to climate change litigation. Hewlett Foundation financially backs<sup>18</sup> the Collective Action Fund (CAF), the umbrella group behind the spate of climate lawsuits filed against big oil by Democrat attorneys general. The Moore Foundation is another CAF<sup>19</sup> donor and source of funding for controversial climate litigation content. Recent contributions<sup>20</sup> to the National Academy of Sciences specifically mention sustainability and the environment as topic areas it was supporting.
- The National Academy of Engineering received \$50,000<sup>21</sup> in funding from the Tides Foundation in 2023. The Tides Foundation is a George Soros-backed dark money group that has supported left-wing causes such the Black Lives Matters<sup>22</sup> and defund the police movement.<sup>23</sup>
- The National Academy of Sciences has received funding from both the Rockefeller Family Fund<sup>24</sup> (RFF) and Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors<sup>25</sup> (RPA) in recent years. RFF has been deemed<sup>26</sup> a "Puppet Master for Leftist Front Groups" by the Capital Research Center and has helped fund past climate litigation efforts.<sup>27</sup>
- The Silicon Valley Community Foundation have granted over \$4 million to the National Academy of Sciences since 2022,<sup>28</sup> including \$2.2 million for "sciences" in 2024. Silicon Valley Community Foundation is a known source<sup>29</sup> of left-wing and climate-focused dark money, seeded by tech leaders like Mark Zuckerberg, Reed Hastings, and Jack Dorsey.

## **C. Support for Leftwing Climate Groups**

The National Academy of Sciences has given extensively to climate change advocacy groups and causes:



- Since 2018,<sup>30 31 32 33 34 35 36</sup> the National Academy of Sciences has given Environmental Defense Fund \$2,396,568. The Environmental Defense Fund has come under scrutiny for its ties to Arabella Advisors and China.<sup>37</sup>
- In 2022, the National Academy of Sciences gave National Wildlife Federation<sup>34</sup> \$399,020. Swiss billionaire Hansjörg Wyss has also funded<sup>38</sup> the National Wildlife Federation and its efforts to promote global warming awareness.
- Since 2020<sup>32</sup>, the National Academy of Sciences has given \$723,903 Nature Conservancy, which has been touted as a dark-money<sup>39</sup> environmentalist group with ties to Obama Administration officials and the Natural Resources Defense Council.
- The National Academy Of Sciences gave Citizens For A Sustainable Future<sup>34</sup> \$245,889 in 2024, a nonprofit that focuses on environmental justice in black communities.
- It also has an environmental focus centered on the Louisiana gulf coasts, with groups<sup>34</sup> like Louisiana Environmental Action Network (LEAN), Healthy Gulf, Franklin’s Promise Coalition, and the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana.
  - LEAN is an environmental advocacy organization focused on addressing pollution and environmental issues in Louisiana.
  - Healthy Gulf’s programs focus on a “just transition” that moves away from “extractive systems of energy production, consumption, and political oppression” and towards “resilient, regenerative and equitable economies.”
  - Franklin’s Promise Coalition was selected by The Nature Conservancy to be a part of the Gulf Restoration Initiative in 2014.
  - The Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana works at all levels to “ensure that restoring and protecting coastal Louisiana are top priorities for our state and the nation,” with a network that includes Environmental Defense Fund, National Wildlife Federation, and more.

#### **D. One-Sided Political Contributions**

Several high-ranking NASEM officials, some of whom receive seven-figure salaries, exclusively donate to Democratic politicians and candidates:

- According to ProPublica,<sup>40</sup> National Academy of Sciences President Marcia McNutt, National Academy of Medicine President Victor Dzau, and National Academy of Engineering President Emeritus John Anderson each received an annual salary exceeding \$1,000,000.
- NAS President Marcia McNutt has exclusively donated<sup>41</sup> to Democrats, including former President Biden, Sen. Tim Kaine (D-VA), Sen. Mark Kelly (D-AZ), and others.
- NAM President Victor Dzau has also exclusively donated<sup>42</sup> to Democrats, including Hillary Clinton, the Democratic National Committee, and former President Obama, among others.
- Monica Feit, Executive Officer of the National Academy of Sciences, has likewise donated<sup>43</sup> exclusively to Democrats, including Sen. Fetterman (D-PA), Sen. Alsobrooks (D-MD), and Tim Ryan (D-OH).

#### **E. Other Departures from Settled Science**



The National Academies' diversion from neutral, fact-oriented science to leftwing policies extends beyond contested climate change theories. In 2023, the NASEM released a brief of its workshop titled, “Supporting the Health and Well-Being of Transgender and Gender Diverse Youth.”<sup>44</sup> The brief echoed statements in support of so-called “gender-affirming” care for children, from organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics.

That same year, the NASEM hosted a workshop<sup>45</sup> during which participants claimed, “many gender diverse youth also face racism, heterosexism, ableism, classism, and nativism.” The workshop included participation from parents of transgender children and two transgender children. Participants claimed “an easy way for gender diverse youth to feel respected in their classrooms” was to mandate “affirming pronouns.”

### **III. A Corrupted Judicial Reference Guide**

The Fourth Edition of the Reference Manual on Scientific Evidence represents a fundamental departure from prior editions in both tone and purpose. Rather than serving as a neutral guide to scientific methodology, the Manual now functions as an advocacy-laden evidentiary primer on contested issues at the center of active climate litigation. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Manual’s undisclosed reliance on plaintiffs’ counsel and plaintiff-aligned legal strategists, whose work is cited repeatedly and approvingly throughout the climate chapters.

#### **A. The Manual’s Climate Guide Prejudges Disputed Litigation Issues**

The newly added *Reference Guide on Climate Science* signals to judges that attribution science has advanced to a stage where legal responsibility for alleged climate harms can be assigned in court. Rather than confining itself to explaining scientific methods, the Guide presents conclusions that bear directly on causation and liability, issues that remain sharply contested in active climate litigation.

The Guide was authored by Jessica Wentz and Radley Horton, both of whom have publicly promoted the use of climate science in litigation. Wentz is a fellow at Columbia Law School’s Sabin Center for Climate Change Law, whose stated “core mission ... is to develop and promulgate legal techniques to combat the climate crisis and advance climate justice.”

Against that backdrop, the Manual asserts:

“Researchers can draw fairly robust conclusions about the general causal connection between climate change and many types of impacts, and in some cases, it is possible to quantify the contribution of anthropogenic forcing to specific damages, harms, and economic and noneconomic losses.” (p. 1609)

It further instructs judges that:

“Attribution studies aimed at linking corporate emissions to specific climate impacts ... rely on well-established attribution techniques and climate models.” (pp. 1622–23)



These are not neutral descriptions of scientific uncertainty or methodological debate. They are affirmative statements about causation and quantification that mirror the core allegations advanced by plaintiffs in climate nuisance, consumer fraud, and failure-to-warn cases. Presented as settled science, they invite judges to treat disputed factual predicates as resolved while those same questions are being litigated.

## **B. The Guide Repeatedly Uses Plaintiff Experts Without Disclosure**

The Manual's lack of neutrality is compounded by its repeated reliance on plaintiff-aligned experts, without disclosure of their litigation roles or affiliations.

Most notably, the Manual cites the work of Michael Burger, Executive Director of Columbia Law School's Sabin Center for Climate Change Law and Of Counsel at Sher Edling LLP, the primary plaintiffs' firm driving climate litigation nationwide. Burger's work appears at footnotes 77, 182, 295, and 308 of the Manual. These citations are not peripheral. They occur in sections addressing:

- climate litigation frameworks,
- attribution of responsibility,
- judicial treatment of climate science, and
- the role of courts in addressing alleged climate harms.

At no point does the Manual inform judges that Burger:

- is an active plaintiffs' lawyer,
- is affiliated with Sher Edling LLP,
- has appeared in or advised on ongoing climate cases including *Honolulu v. Sunoco*, *City of New York v. Exxon Mobil*, *Delaware v. BP America*, and *Baltimore v. BP*, or
- directs an academic center whose mission is explicitly oriented toward advancing climate litigation.

The same pattern repeats throughout the Guide. It praises Richard Heede's "Carbon Majors" study as "foundational" (p. 1622), despite Heede's close collaboration with plaintiffs' counsel, including Vic Sher of Sher Edling LLP, and the central role his work plays in climate complaints.

The Guide describes Myles Allen, a frequent expert for climate plaintiffs, as having "pioneer[ed]" a methodology that provides "a potential basis for liability for climate damages," further assuring judges that the approach is "relatively well established, understood, and accepted by the scientific community," and produces probabilistic findings suitable for courts (pp. 1601–02).

It promotes Friederike Otto (pp. 1602–03, 1615, 1621–22), Allen's protégé and founder of World Weather Attribution, even though she has acknowledged that event attribution work was "originally suggested with the courts in mind." World Weather Attribution itself advertises that its studies are "paving the way for new sustainability litigation."

The Guide also relies on Michael Mann (p. 1600), a prominent climate activist who was recently sanctioned for "bad faith trial misconduct" after presenting erroneous evidence and false representations to a jury. Naomi Oreskes is likewise cited (p. 1603), despite her role recruiting plaintiffs, advising Sher



Edling LLP, filing amicus briefs in support of climate litigation, and being excluded as an expert by the D.C. Superior Court for failing to employ reliable methodologies.

By omitting these affiliations and litigation roles, the Manual obscures material context from judges and effectively launders plaintiffs' legal strategies through the appearance of neutral judicial guidance.

### **C. The Manual Explicitly Seeks to Persuade Skeptical Judges**

The Fourth Edition's advocacy orientation is confirmed by statements made during its development. At a National Academies workshop convened to inform the Manual, participants openly discussed the challenge of persuading judges who might otherwise be skeptical of climate litigation claims.

Judge David Tatel of the D.C. Circuit stated:

“Many of these cases are going to come before judges who are skeptical, and ... our challenge is to figure out how to present this evidence in a way that is credible.”

He further emphasized that the Manual needed to “open their minds” and “have an impact on judges.”

These remarks reflect a deliberate effort to shape judicial receptivity to contested claims, not merely to explain scientific concepts. That objective is incompatible with the traditional role of judicial education, which is to inform without steering outcomes.

### **D. Implications for Judicial Neutrality and Congressional Oversight**

Judges rely on the *Reference Manual on Scientific Evidence* precisely because it is presumed to be neutral, balanced, and free from advocacy. Embedding plaintiff-aligned narratives and undisclosed conflicts into that Manual undermines that presumption and jeopardizes the integrity of evidentiary decision-making across the federal judiciary.

For Congress, the implications are immediate and serious. Taxpayer funds have supported a reference work that:

- prejudices contested issues,
- conceals conflicts of interest, and
- aligns judicial education with the objectives of active litigants.

Absent corrective action, Congress risks continuing to finance an evidentiary framework that tilts the scales of justice before cases are ever heard.

## **IV. Congressional Oversight and Appropriations Risk**

Congress now faces a direct oversight and appropriations challenge. The House Judiciary Committee has opened a formal investigation into ELI and the CJP for improper judicial influence. At the same time, appropriations continue to flow to the Federal Judicial Center without safeguards addressing these concerns. ! Wrong number



Appropriators are no longer dealing with speculative risks. They are confronted with evidence that taxpayer funds have supported the creation and dissemination of materials that predispose judges toward one side of active litigation. Absent corrective action, Congress risks becoming complicit in judicial capture.<sup>1</sup> Number is wrong

## V. Policy Recommendations/Conclusion

Congress should act immediately to restore neutrality and public confidence in judicial education. As an initial corrective step, the Federal Judicial Center and the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine should immediately rescind the Fourth Edition of the Reference Manual on Scientific Evidence, including the Reference Guide on Climate Science, pending a full congressional and independent review. A judicial reference work that embeds plaintiff-aligned theories, conceals conflicts of interest, and prejudges contested issues in active litigation cannot be allowed to continue shaping evidentiary decisions while its development and content are under investigation.

The National Academies has not followed the Federal Judicial Center's correct decision to remove the Fourth Edition's climate science chapter. Instead, the National Academies' online version still contains the original chapter and the organization has improperly stood by the chapter. The National Academies' refusal to update its version of the Reference Manual to reflect the FJC's version or at the very least to include a disclosure of the FJC's retraction is even more egregious given the organization is chiefly funded by the federal government. Like the FJC, the National Academies must immediately remove the climate science chapter from all available versions of the Fourth Edition to avoid further engendering confusion among federal courts.

In addition, Congress should condition appropriations to the Federal Judicial Center and the National Academies on strict neutrality requirements, mandate full transparency regarding external collaborations and contributors, require clear disclosure of litigation affiliations and conflicts of interest in all judicial education materials, and commission an independent review of the Fourth Edition's development, authorship, and use of plaintiff-affiliated sources.

Congress should further clarify through appropriations report language that federal judicial education resources may not be used to advance contested theories, advocacy-driven narratives, or litigation strategies designed to influence outcomes in active or reasonably anticipated cases.

## Footnotes

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