

How One Online Global Warming Poll Could Influence US Policy

by [Brian Merchant, Brooklyn, New York](#) on 11.19.10

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Sure, everyone gets a kick out of online polls: They're fun, simple, interactive. The votes get tallied up right before your eyes, a digital snapshot of community opinion. But you'd be hard-pressed to think of anything less scientific -- and certainly anything less worthy of basing *actual policy* recommendations upon. Yet just two days ago, the results of an online poll were submitted as actual testimony in a Congressional hearing on climate change, by a so-called expert seeking to discredit climate science. This is the story of how this absurd occurrence came to pass.

The tale begins around a month ago, when the well-known pop science publication Scientific American [launched an online poll](#) asking its readership various questions about climate change and related policy issues. As so often happens when well-known publications publish online polls on controversial topics, less-known ones took the opportunity to skew the results.

Two climate skeptic blogs, [WattsUpWithThat](#) and [smalldeadanimals](#), directed their readers to vote in the polls. As a result, the poll's findings for questions like "What is causing climate change?" were hijacked -- the majority of respondents deemed the answer to that one to be "natural causes." To the query "The Intergovernmental Panel on

Climate Change [the nonpartisan international group that helps synthesize climate science] is ..." the majority of respondents said it's "A corrupt organization, prone to groupthink, with a political agenda."

4. The IPCC, or Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is:		
	Response Percent	Response Count
an effective group of government representatives, scientists and other experts.	15.8%	1,065
a corrupt organization, prone to groupthink, with a political agenda.	83.6%	5,652
something to do with Internet protocols.	0.6%	42
answered question		6,759
skipped question		2

And remember, these results allegedly reveal the thinking of a readership that is highly scientifically literate. Of course, the skewing by outside sources was later revealed -- analytics from SciAm showed that just those two blogs sent a majority of the traffic to the poll. By its end, the results of the poll were absolutely ridiculous -- it registered 80% of respondents as denying climate change, and 84% as outraged at an innocuous intergovernmental body charged with synthesizing research.

Okay, so an online poll got hijacked. Big deal, end of story. Not quite: Because of Scientific American's good reputation in the science and publishing community, climate skeptics began to [use the poll as evidence](#) that even the scientific community was turning against climate change. First, the evidence was used in an opinion piece in the Wall Street Journal that argued that [80% of SciAm readers deny global warming](#). The Scientific American swiftly debunked this claim, but the message got out.

Which brings us to the [Congressional hearing](#) on Wednesday. [Patrick Michaels](#), a leading climate skeptic and member of the libertarian think tank the Cato Institute, presented testimony. Among the evidence for his recommendation that Congress ignore the threat of climate change? Not one, but two of the results from the Scientific American poll. His (unbelievably flimsy) argument is that the IPCC has corrupted the scientific process itself, and that its findings can't be trusted. As proof, he submits, yes, online poll results. From his [Congressional testimony](#):

"Visitors to the website of Scientific American have been invited to participate in an ongoing survey on global warming. This survey finds--despite the general environmentalist bent of its readership--that only a tiny minority (16%) agree that the IPCC is —an effective group of government representatives, scientists, and other experts. 84% agree, however, that it is —a corrupt organization, prone to groupthink, with a

political agenda || [pictured above] ... [the] ongoing survey by Scientific American reveals profound distrust of scientific institutions such as the IPCC"

Despite the "general environmentalist bent" my a\$\$\$. If anything, it's the anti-environmentalist bent of the climate skeptic blogs' readers that produced that figure. And Michaels probably knows it. But he saw a window to essentially exploit an exploited poll, in order to make scientists look bad -- and he used it. And that, my friends, is the story of how a poorly-worded, thoroughly unscientific, and slapdash *online poll* just might have influenced US climate policy. Bravo.