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Scientists For Trump

Some are skipping the protest and sticking by the president, ‘alternative facts’ and all

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William Happer is a Princeton University physicist, an immigrant, and a registered Democrat. But last year, he voted for Donald Trump, and now he’s in the running to be Trump’s science advisor.

“We had eight years of one direction for the country,” Happer told me recently, “and it was turning into the wrong direction. I was willing to try a change.”

Which direction *should* we be headed in, Dr. Happer?

“I don’t agree with all the hysteria about climate change,” he said, “so the fact that Mr. Trump had an open mind on it, and the other party was very dogmatic, that was enough for me.”

Ah.

When the opposition “March for Science” was announced, I was struck by the expansiveness of the title, as though scientists must, by definition, be against President Trump. Surely there are some, I thought, who support him.

It turns out there are, though the ranks of outspoken Trump-supporting scientists seem nearly as thin as the evidence that vaccines cause autism. On this, at least, we can all agree. The seven Trump-supporting scientists I did manage to track down over the past few days attribute their rarity to the fact that the federal government supports most science research, or to the chilly disdain some in the Republican party show for the ivory tower, or to the possibility that secretly conservative scientists are just trying to fit in with their socialist-adjacent colleagues.

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Trump and his cabinet picks have aired many views that swerve away from the general agreement among scientists on various issues. (His nominee to lead the Office of Management and Budget once questioned the need for government-funded research at all.) I was curious to learn what some scientists still see in Trump, despite all that.

Many of the Trump-friendly scientists I spoke with diverge from the scientific consensus on climate change, arguing instead that climate change is either not driven primarily by human activity or is not as dangerous as it's made out to be. These "climate-skeptic" scientists have been pushed to the margins of their field, and some are sensing a rare moment of empowerment with Trump.

Others, though, simply found him to be the lesser of two evils, like so many other voters did. "His manner is quite unpleasant," said Dan Kleitman, a retired Massachusetts Institute of Technology mathematics professor. "I felt I could hardly listen to him for more than a minute at a time."

However, "I found that his opponent, I couldn't listen to for more than 30 seconds at a time." Kleitman finds Republicans' proposals on poverty, education, and foreign policy more persuasive.

But ... but ... okay, for example, Trump said that global warming is a Chinese hoax. How could a person with a Ph.D. stand by someone who thinks that?

The "Chinese Hoax" line has been widely misinterpreted, says Judith Curry, the former chair of the School of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences at the Georgia Institute of Technology. She's politically independent, but she did once testify before Congress that "efforts to link dangerous impacts of extreme weather events to human-caused warming are misleading and unsupported by evidence."

In the broader context, she argues, "Trump was not making a statement about the 'science' of global warming; rather he was discussing the economic consequences of climate-change policies."

Those economic consequences were important to James Enstrom, an epidemiologist who departed the University of California, Los Angeles in 2012 after what he said was a politicized controversy over his research on air pollution, some of which was industry-funded. "The prior president didn't mind shoving down the entire state of West Virginia with no consideration of the socioeconomic impact," he told me, referring to the Obama administration's coal-mining regulations.

Some of them just don't find Trump's policies as egregious as many liberals do. Richard Lindzen, a former meteorology professor at MIT, said Trump's statements are being exaggerated. "I have the feeling that there is Trump derangement syndrome," he said. "People are reacting to anything he does and going on a rampage."

Lindzen said political correctness had reached stifling levels; he welcomes some relief. “I don’t think your generation appreciates it, how oppressive that has been for many people, especially at universities,” he said. “Trump was attacked for being anti-Semitic, that was an incredible accusation. As someone whose family was killed in the Holocaust, comparing him to Hitler seemed bizarre.”

Others, though, see parallels between Trump’s and Obama’s stances that moderates and liberals say just aren’t there. Robert Mather, a professor of experimental psychology at the University of Central Oklahoma, pointed out that Trump’s recent refugee and immigration order was “in line with the previous administration’s policies” to restrict travel from certain countries. (Politifact disputes that the two policies are similar.)

“Directly related to the executive order is the infamous proposed wall along the southern border of the U.S.,” he said. “When the wall was called a fence [as the Secure Fence Act of 2006], it had bipartisan support, including from Chuck Schumer and Dianne Feinstein.” (That one is true: The fence wasn’t as big as the wall proposal, but Democrats supported it.)

They didn’t share Trump’s affinity for the anti-vax community. (One, Pat Michaels, director of the Center for the Study of Science at the Cato Institute, even said we are going down a “dangerous road” with regard to weakening herd immunity.) To a one, though, they said the scientists’ march was a bad idea, arguing it politicizes science. “I have seen a lot of whining and hysteria coming from scientists about Trump’s election,” Curry said. “They need to get over it, their side lost.”

The march could even spur backlash, Happer warns, since tenured scientists have pretty nice lives, far removed from that of say, the average out-of-work coal miner. “You get a good salary, you’re working in something that you like,” he said. “Scientists are viewed as pretty privileged already, so to have people out there who are already so well-provided for, out there protesting, it can leave a sour taste in the mouths of many fellow citizens.”

Still, Trump and his surrogates seem to worry little about misstating the facts—just ask Jake Tapper. Politifact has rated 70 percent of Trump’s statements as ranging from “Mostly False” to “Pants on Fire.” Scientists, by contrast, have spent years in the fact-trenches, digging through research data in search of The Truth. Does it irk them that their candidate—now president—shows so little love for empiricism?

There emerged several strains of thought on this. The first was that all politicians lie; Trump just does it more bombastically than others. “If we are going to accuse the current president of shading science, we’re going to have to include the previous one, and the president of the U.S. from 1992 to 2000,” Michaels said. (Like Curry, Michaels said he doesn’t publicly support any politicians. We discussed Trump’s policies instead.)

Others, like Happer, think it’s because Trump isn’t a professional politician that he sometimes sounds off like us regular joes. “His reactions are those of a common person who’s not used to weighing their words,” he said. It doesn’t mean the falsehoods will translate to official U.S. policy, he added.

Overall, these right-leaning researchers don't get the same anti-science vibe from Trump that many liberals do. "We talked about science," Happer said of his meeting with Trump. "He asked how science is doing in the U.S. He said, 'how are we doing compared to Russia?' and I said we're holding our own. He said, 'my uncle was a physicist, so I'm partial to science.'"

Mather, the Oklahoma psychologist, sounded a similarly optimistic note: "I hope that President Trump will surround himself with strong critical thinkers who have access to good data," he said, "and that President Trump will have the wisdom and humility to accept the facts as presented by reliable, trustworthy sources."

To be sure, "humility" and Trump have not always gone hand in hand. But I suppose a scientist should be open to all possible outcomes.