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Bill Nye, the white guy: Political activists start to take over March for Science

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An early indication that next week's March for Science may be more about politics than the periodic table is the brouhaha over Bill Nye, the Science Guy.

Mr. Nye's selection as honorary co-chairman raised hackles not because he is arguably not a scientist — he holds a bachelor of science degree in engineering — but because he is a white male, igniting a protracted, furious debate on race, gender and “privilege.”

March for Science organizers ultimately named three co-chairs, Mr. Nye and two women — pediatrician Mona Hanna-Attisha and biologist Lydia Villa-Komaroff — while dropping any pretense that the April 22 protest targeting the Trump administration is politically neutral.

That argument was proving to be a tough sell, anyway, given that the event's partners include NextGen Climate, funded by top Democratic Party donor Tom Steyer, as well as a host of climate change groups and labor unions.

“It was a mistake to ever imply that the March for Science is apolitical — while this march is explicitly nonpartisan, it is political,” said the march's statement on diversity and inclusion.

That clear tilt to the left has other scientists as well as science boosters worried that the march will drag legitimate scientific inquiry into the political mud in an effort to “use the mantle of science to gain authority for one point of view,” said Wesley J. Smith, senior fellow at the Discovery Institute.

“This manta ‘science,’ I mean, who's against the scientific method? I don't know anybody who's against the scientific method. I don't know anybody who doesn't believe in science or who isn't pro-science,” said Mr. Smith.

In this case, he said, “you're really not marching for science; you're marching for a political agenda.”

The march, which coincides with Earth Day, will hold its flagship event in Washington as well as 400 coordinated events worldwide, drawing comparisons to the Jan. 21 Women's March against President Trump, which drew millions worldwide.

Caroline Weinberg, national co-chairwoman, warned Monday that "evidence-based policies are under attack."

"Policymakers threaten our present and future by ignoring scientific evidence when crafting policy, threatening scientific advancement through budget cuts and limiting the public's knowledge by silencing scientists," she said in a statement.

While the march has drawn the endorsement of groups such as the American Geophysical Union and Entomological Society of America, it's the more explicitly political groups that have some scientists worried.

Among the march's partners are the Center for Biological Diversity, whose agenda includes fighting genetically modified organisms, and the Union of Concerned Scientists, which opposes GMOs and nuclear power, prompting the Mad Virologist's Alma G. Laney to say he would not participate.

"It's incredibly sad to see a group that purports to be standing up for all science to willingly partner with groups that are anti-science or hold anti-science positions," said Mr. Laney, a plant biologist.

"Although there are many other partners that actively promote all science and I do believe that it's important for scientists to speak, I don't want to add credibility to anti-science rhetoric because, let's face it, they are going to use partnering with the march to amplify their own anti-science messages. I just can't be a party to that," he said.

Also staying home is Patrick J. Michaels, a climate scientist and director of the Center for the Study of Science at the Cato Institute.

The march has focused on the Trump administration's reported plans to cut the budgets of federal health and science agencies as well as research grants to universities, but Mr. Michaels said the scientific community has other serious problems, namely research that cannot be replicated.

"In order to produce a desired result, there is now an epidemic of studies that cannot be replicated and poor experimental design," said Mr. Michaels. "The current administration will come and go, but the problems plaguing science will remain unless scientists demand changes that will right the currently foundering ship of science."

The focus on diversity drew alarm from William Briggs, an adjunct statistics professor at Cornell University, who said, "It seems organizers believe scientific results are less important than who is producing them. Diversity trumps science."

“They insist on diversity. That means rigorous, mandatory and monitored balance between people from favored groups,” Mr. Briggs said in the Stream. “This is not a scientific concept. It is pure politics. And anti-scientific politics, at that.”

Zuleyka Zevallos, a sociologist and adjunct research fellow with Swinburne University in Melbourne, Australia, chronicled the march’s heated back-and-forth over diversity, which included four rewritten diversity statements as organizers reacted to criticism from both sides.

In a Jan. 28 tweet, the March for Science posted a tweet saying “colonization, racism, immigration, native rights, sexism, ableism, queer-, trans-, intersex-phobia, & econ justice are scientific issues,” but later removed it, Ms. Zevallos reported.

Among those who criticized the post was Harvard professor Steven Pinker, who accused organizers of compromising its goals with “anti-science PC/identity politics/hard-left rhetoric.”

“The constant flip-flops on its diversity stance suggest that, at best, the organizers are undecided or lack the skills on how to manage inclusion issues,” Ms. Zevallos said in a March 14 post on Latino Rebels. “At worst, it gives the unfortunate impression that they have a wavering commitment to diversity, one which bends to the shifts of public pressure.”

At the heart of the debate is that organizers are conflating science, which is a method, with a host of public policy issues, said Mr. Smith.

“The problem now is that many who claim to be about science are really about social policy and ideology,” he said, “which are not the same things at all.”