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Who's Bankrolling the Climate-Change Deniers?

By BRYAN WALSH

Not too long ago, belief in climate science wasn't a political issue. Honestly! As recently as the 2008 U.S. presidential election, both the Democratic and Republican candidates professed belief in the threat of global warming, and each advanced policies designed to curb U.S. carbon emissions. Senator John McCain had even co-sponsored one of the first congressional bills to create a carbon cap-and-trade system. And it wasn't just McCain; Mitt Romney, runner-up for the GOP nomination last time around, supported a regional cap-and-trade program while he was governor of Massachusetts. There was still a wide gap between Democrats and Republicans on the severity of the climate-change threat and on how ambitious carbon-cutting policy should be, but at least there was a general agreement that global warming was a real thing.

Not anymore. With the exception of Jon Huntsman — who barely registers in polls — you can't find a Republican presidential candidate who unequivocally believes in climate science, let alone one who wants to do anything about it. Instead of McCain — who has walked back his own climate-policy realism since the 2008 elections — we have Texas Governor Rick Perry, who told voters in New Hampshire over the weekend that "I don't believe manmade global warming is settled in science enough." And many Republicans agree with him: the percentage of self-identified Republicans or conservatives answering yes to the question of whether the effects of global warming were already being felt fell to 30% or less in 2010, down from 50% in 2007-08. Meanwhile, liberals and Democrats remained around 70% or more. ([See pictures of the effects of global warming.](#))

That's deeply troubling. It's one thing when people disagree on the effectiveness of different approaches to fix a problem; it's worse when they refuse even to believe that a problem exists — despite an overwhelming scientific consensus that says it does. One of America's major political parties has, in effect, adopted denial as policy. How did we get here?

As the sociologists Riley Dunlap of Oklahoma State University and Aaron McCright of Michigan State University suggest, climate denialism exists in part because there has been a long-term, well-financed

effort on the part of conservative groups and corporations to distort global-warming science. That's the conclusion of a chapter the two researchers recently wrote for *The Oxford Handbook of Climate Change and Society*. "Contrarian scientists, fossil-fuel corporations, conservative think tanks and various front groups have assaulted mainstream climate science and scientists for over two decades," Dunlap and McCright write. "The blows have been struck by a well-funded, highly complex and relatively coordinated denial machine."

For those who've followed the seesaw of the climate debate in the U.S., there's not much new in Dunlap and McCright's chapter, but they do lay out just how long and how intensively some conservatives have been fighting mainstream climate science. Fossil-fuel companies like Exxon and Peabody Energy — which obviously have a business interest in slowing any attempt to reduce carbon emissions — have combined with traditionally conservative corporate groups like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and conservative foundations like the Koch brothers' Americans for Prosperity, to raise doubts about the basic validity of what is, essentially, a settled scientific truth. That message gets amplified by conservative think tanks — like the Cato Institute and the American Enterprise Institute — and then picked up by conservative media outlets on the Internet and cable TV. ([See TIME's special report about Copenhagen's climate-change conference.](#))

All of the naysayers seem to be following the playbook written by the tobacco industry in its long, ongoing war against medical findings about the dangers of smoking. For both Big Oil and Big Smoke, that playbook is lethally simple: don't straight-up refute the science, just raise skepticism and insist that the findings are "unsettled" and that "more research" is necessary. Repeat that again and again regardless of the latest research, and you help block the formation of the solid majority needed to create any real political change. That's made all the easier because whether you're quitting smoking or oil, the job is painful — and voters don't like pain.

"It's reasonable to conclude that climate-change-denial campaigns in the U.S. have played a crucial role in blocking domestic legislation and contributing to the U.S. becoming an impediment to international policymaking," write Dunlap and McCright.

It's certainly true that the U.S., even after President Obama's election, remains an international outlier when it comes to belief in climate science, as former President Bill Clinton noted recently. Climate denial makes Americans "look like a joke," Clinton said from the stage of his foundation's annual meeting last month. "If you're an American, the best thing you can do is make it politically unacceptable for people to engage in denial." That was also the main message behind former Vice President Al Gore's recent Climate Reality project, which was broadcast around the world on Sept. 14.

Of course, the fact that the message is coming from two political figures who are — to say the least — highly associated with the Democratic Party is part of the problem. Over time, belief in climate science has become less about the science than about establishing a cultural identity — you're a denier or a believer depending on whether you're a Republican or a Democrat, just like you're a Yankees or a Red

Sox fan depending on whether you're from New York City or Boston. Of course, polarization is harmless in sports — and indeed, it can be essential to the fun. It's insanity as a basis for complex public policy.

So would it make a difference if the conservative denial machine were to collapse tomorrow? Sadly, I'm not sure. Even in places like Western Europe, where belief in climate science tends to be much stronger, it's hard to build support for the actual steps to reduce carbon emissions. Human beings have a hard time dealing not just with pain, but also with long-term problems, especially ones that don't necessarily show immediate effects. Whether it's planning for retirement or losing weight, we find it too easy to disregard very clear science — and disregard our long-term health — in order to satiate our immediate desires. There's no excuse for the sort of half-fictions and outright lies that too often make up the climate-change-denial machine, but it's human psychology — as much as politics — that's preventing us from dealing with one of the greatest threats the species faces. The most powerful denial machine of all may be the one inside our heads.

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