

Trump Calls Global Warming a 'Hoax.' This Converted Skeptic Could Change That

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President Donald Trump was skeptical of global warming long before he announced on June 1 he was withdrawing the United States from the Paris climate accord. The researchers at Berkeley Earth, a nonprofit, were skeptical too, until they conducted their own studies and became converts. Now one of those researchers believes he can change Trump's mind, and given that the organization receives funding from Robert and Rebekah Mercer, the megadonors behind Trump, he just might get the chance.

Richard Muller, a professor emeritus of physics at the University of California, Berkeley, founded the Mercer-backed Berkeley Earth with his daughter in 2010. They sought to verify claims about global warming that others were making. The team conducted its own research and determined that the claims were accurate. "We've gone full circle," Muller told *Newsweek* last November. "We had doubts about global warming," he said, "and the conclusion we reached was that global warming was real and caused by humans." Now Muller wants to help Trump reach that conclusion too, and he says it will take him under two hours to convert the president.

Berkeley Earth operates on money from the Mercer Family Foundation, run by the family of Robert Mercer, an influential Republican party donor and co-CEO of the investment management company Renaissance Technologies. Leading up to the 2016 presidential election, Mercer gave \$15.5 million to Make America Number 1, a political action committee that backed Trump. Rebekah Mercer, his daughter, led that committee and later served on Trump's presidential transition team. She is widely said to have convinced Trump to hire Steve Bannon as his chief strategist and Kellyanne Conway as a counselor.

Through the family foundation, the Mercers have also given millions to conservative-leaning think tanks and nonprofits. Several supported the president's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, which 174 countries and the European Union had signed in 2016 promising to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions. The Heritage Foundation, which received \$500,000 from the Mercers in 2014, the most recent year for which the nonprofit tracker GuideStar has published tax forms for the Mercer foundation, and whose board includes Rebekah Mercer, called the Paris agreement an "open door for egregious regulation, cronyism and government spending that would have been...disastrous for the American economy." The science director of the Cato Institute, to which the Mercers gave \$300,000 in 2014, said in a statement that the Paris Agreement is "climatically insignificant." The Heartland Institute, a recipient of \$885,000

Mercer dollars in 2014, called the Paris departure a “victory.” At a conference in May, the Heartland Institute presented an award to Myron Ebell, a Trump transition team leader and an official at the Competitive Enterprise Institute, an organization that reportedly influenced Trump’s decision to leave the agreement. The Mercers attended that conference.

Berkeley Earth, which received \$250,000 from the Mercers in 2014, is an outlier among the Mercer-backed nonprofits, which tend to oppose measures that seek to mitigate global warming. The Berkeley team took no position on the Paris Agreement, but it believes human-caused global warming is indisputable. Muller says he opposed the agreement but believes changes in energy and international policy are necessary.

Muller and his colleagues have published “a skeptic’s guide to climate change,” which says human emissions are responsible for an increase in carbon dioxide, which can lead to a warmer planet. “We believe that now it is our responsibility to communicate our findings, in particular with prominent stakeholders familiar with the reasons for global warming skepticism that Berkeley Earth addressed,” the group says on its website.

Trump is one of those skeptics. The president has repeatedly voiced doubts about global warming and climate change, terms he has used interchangeably. “The entire country is FREEZING—we desperately need a heavy dose of global warming, and fast!” he wrote in one characteristic tweet. He has called global warming “an expensive hoax,” a concept “created by and for the Chinese” to hurt U.S. manufacturing, “a total con job” and “bullshit.”

Given his connection to the Mercers, Muller is in a position to try to convince Trump that global warming is real, and he’s willing to do so. Speaking with *Newsweek* in November 2016, he said, “I certainly think I could change Trump if I ever had the chance to make a presentation to him. I’m very good at converting skeptics.”

Days after the withdrawal from the Paris agreement, Muller says he stands by the offer. If he sits down with Trump, Muller says, he’ll tell the president that “on most issues having to do with climate change, he’s absolutely right.” But when it comes to global warming, “he’s incorrect.... I can demonstrate to him that it’s real, and I can show him that it’s caused by humans.” Muller adds that it typically takes him an hour and a half to convert a skeptic.

Muller has written a book, addressed to presidents, on energy subjects, including global warming. “When you become president, can’t you simply let your secretary of energy or your science adviser handle the energy issues? If only it could be that simple!” he wrote in 2012’s *Energy for Future Presidents: The Science Behind the Headlines*. “You can’t govern by simply knowing the kind of economic, political, diplomatic and military information that the presidents of old could use to get by. You need to know and understand energy.” He has also written a book for presidents about physics.

The Berkeley professor emeritus has criticized Trump in online postings, once saying before the election that he “is so far removed from being an acceptable president” and that he “would be very harmful to United States interests in that office.” But when it comes to environmental policy, Muller says Trump might be better than President Barack Obama. That’s because the

Obama administration did not do enough to support the development of alternative energy sources such as nuclear power or shale gas and oil, according to Muller. The Trump administration has said it will “embrace the shale oil and gas revolution,” and it has proposed a budget that increases spending related to nuclear energy (while cutting \$900 million from the Department of Energy’s Office of Science).

“Even though President Trump has proclaimed publicly that he doesn’t believe in global warming,” Muller says, “his pro-nuclear and pro-natural-gas stands, particularly if they serve as examples for the developing world, will likely do far more to reduce future growth in global warming than anything in the Paris treaty.”

Muller is no Al Gore. His nonprofit seems to downplay the responsibility of the U.S. in fighting global warming and says on its website that existing initiatives “ignore the dominant role that China, India, and the rest of the developing world will play in future emissions.” His group states in a publication that global warming “may have some positive aspects.” Asked to elaborate, Muller cites physicist William Happer’s claims that an increase in carbon dioxide can benefit agriculture. (At least two federal reports disagree.) Muller also remains skeptical about more general climate change arguments, such as claims by many in the scientific community that it can cause extreme weather.

But Trump could find Muller’s partial skepticism appealing. Muller compares his position to that of a former alcoholic running an Alcoholics Anonymous group. “I understand and respect most of the skeptics, and I understand why they’re upset and they feel they’ve been lied to,” he says. “Like the ex-alcoholic, I was once on that side.”