

# A toxic belief in the non-existence of climate change

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Early in June, [Donald Trump](#) formally withdrew the [United States](#) from the [Paris Accord](#), a key international agreement that aims to limit global warming. While not unexpected, the US president's action dismayed scientists, environmentalists and concerned citizens worldwide. Indeed, the withdrawal of the world's leading economic power from the accord represents a significant step backwards in international efforts to curb the emission of greenhouse gas emissions linked to climate change.

Many right-wing news outlets worldwide described Trump's move in terms of the faithful delivery of a campaign promise. While true, the development may have serious consequences. As one of the world's largest emitters of greenhouse gases (and the largest per capita), for the US to walk away from its commitments threatens lasting damage to an international agreement to mitigate climate change, not least because of the danger of other major nations following suit.

## **Mandate to ignore threat**

How did we end up in a scenario when the democratically elected leader of the world's only superpower has a mandate to ignore a threat clearly identified by scientists? Commentators may despair at Trump's crude populism and general ignorance of world affairs, but it must be acknowledged that, on this issue at least, his approach reflects that of a great many US Republican politicians and voters. Indeed, it is an uncomfortable truth that almost any contemporary Republican president would probably have withdrawn the US from the Paris Accord.

In that case, how did we end up in a scenario where roughly half the population of the US reject the findings of modern science? Many answers to this question have been suggested, but I find the simplest the most convincing: namely, that people tend to believe something if they are told it often enough. Thus the constant attempts, for many years now, of right-wing newspapers and television stations around the world to downplay and undermine the findings of climate scientists have had a clear effect, particularly in the US.

It has become almost an article of faith among a great many conservative voters that the effect of greenhouse gas emissions on global climate is a myth, perpetrated by gullible liberals. Indeed, such "climate scepticism" is not limited to the US, but is common among political conservatives throughout the English-speaking world.

## **Climate scepticism**

Probing deeper, one might ask why climate scepticism has become such an article of faith among conservative opinion-makers. Is it a question of short-term capitalist greed or a question of deep-rooted political conviction? According to Harvard historian [Naomi Oreskes](#), both likely play a role. Certainly, a core principle of political conservatism is the minimisation of state interference in the business of commerce, and in the wrong hands, this can become a dangerous ideology.

Thus, sensible legislation to safeguard drinking water standards can be recast as job-killing interference, and legislation to curb greenhouse gas emissions can be portrayed as an assault on the fossil fuel industry. In addition, some corporations have extremely deep pockets that can finance entire news outlets and buy political influence at the highest levels, with devastating results.

Thus, Trump's attitude to the Paris Accord can be seen as a symptom of a much wider malaise: the rise of a firm rejection of expert opinion by vested interests. This trend is most obvious when one considers the personnel appointed by the Trump administration to executive positions of major US environmental organisations, where political allegiance has triumphed over expertise in every case. The result has been a drastic cut in the funding of important research in key areas such as climate science.

## **Price to be paid**

All in all, one suspects a price may have to be paid for Trump's action. In the short term, we can expect America, once a world leader in innovative technologies, to fall behind in the burgeoning industry of renewable energies. In the longer term, any failure to address greenhouse gas emissions threatens an increase in drought in the hottest countries in the world and increased flooding in low-lying nations, raising the prospect of many regions becoming uninhabitable. It is a tragic irony that those who resist action on climate change tend to resist immigration with the same ferocity, unaware that inaction on climate risks a human migration on an unprecedented scale.

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