

## TACKLING CLIMATE CHANGE:

# The Debate Is Over! (Or Is It?)

*Unless people recognize that human greenhouse gas emissions cause global warming, we can't fix it.*

By CHUCK KUTSCHER



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Several years ago, magazines and newspapers began declaring that the climate change debate is over. But is it really? While most Americans now apparently believe that our planet is warming, a surprising number of us believe it is a natural variation. Why is this? And does it matter?

When I talk to people about climate change, I come away with one consistent impression: Whether a person believes we are responsible for warming the planet is strongly correlated to a person's political orientation. To say that climate change has been politicized is an understatement. When it comes to the politicization of scientific issues, climate change should be in *Guinness World Records*. It is said that all of us tend to get our information from sources that reinforce our points of view. And there is no denying that one end of the media spectrum touts the message that climate, like the weather, is simply going through a natural cycle.

TV personalities John Stossel, Glenn Beck, the commentators and guests on Fox News and others spread this gospel. So do the *Wall Street Journal* and many radio talk show hosts. Google "global warming" or "climate change" and you will find plenty of environmental-sounding web sites that promote this message. Check the shelves in your local book store and you will find titles like *Global Warming and Other Eco-Myths*. Some people seem to love reading that global warming is a left-wing hoax aimed at destroying our economy. It didn't help that the excellent Oscar-winning film on global warming, *An Inconvenient Truth*, was the work of a prominent Democrat.

According to a 68-page report published in 2007 by the Union of Concerned Scientists ([ucsusa.org/assets/documents/global\\_warming/exxon\\_report.pdf](http://ucsusa.org/assets/documents/global_warming/exxon_report.pdf)), Exxon-Mobil distributed \$16 million among 43 different organizations to cast doubt about global warming. By issuing reports and appearing on numerous talk shows, the "skeptics" have given the impression that there is another side to the overwhelming evidence for human-caused climate change described in the peer-reviewed scientific journals. Following the earlier tactics of the tobacco industry, these people know that most journalists would rather show two sides of a story than take on

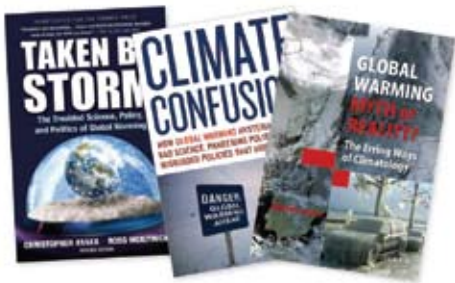
the harder job of digging up the truth.

When I attended the 2007 annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the skeptics were nowhere to be found. Instead the scientists were holding forums on how to convince Americans that climate change is a true manmade crisis. These scientists generally don't like to appear on television and debate the skeptics. In part, this is due to a concern that by appearing in a debate they will reinforce the misperception that there is a scientific debate. I also suspect they fear that in a public forum, emotional arguments and debating tactics will trump scientific evidence.

Tackling climate change successfully will require a bipartisan effort.

**But does it matter that many people believe we are not responsible for climate change?** After all, in spite of the misinformation, we have seen considerable progress at the state and local levels with renewable electricity standards, regional carbon cap-and-trade agreements and efficiency incentives. And with the rapid melting of ice we are now witnessing at both poles, we clearly can't wait to convince everyone before we act. But when we measure our progress by the only yardstick that matters — atmospheric carbon dioxide — we are failing miserably. For the past three years, the rate of increase of atmospheric carbon dioxide has exceeded the worst-case scenario set forth by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) back in 2000.

**Unless people recognize that human greenhouse gas emissions cause the problem, we can't fix it.** When people ask me exactly how much of the warming we are responsible for, I tell them that the latest IPCC report concluded that human activities account for over 90 percent of climate warming since preindustrial times, with changes in solar output making up the rest. (See [www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar4/wg1/ar4-wg1-](http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar4/wg1/ar4-wg1-)



Dozens of books and videos, and hundreds of TV news programs, have used nonscientific arguments to challenge solid climate science.

faqs.pdf.) And detailed solar measurements show that for the past 20 years no warming trend can be attributed to the sun, meaning that in the past two decades our greenhouse gas emissions have caused *all* of the warming.

**Climate change is a creeping crisis**, with no Pearl Harbor to unite us. Yet successfully tackling it will require a bipartisan effort. So it is essential

that we do a much better job of clearly communicating to others what the science, not the politics, tells us. While we mustn't allow ourselves to get caught up in a false debate, we should understand the flaws in the skeptical arguments and know how to respond to them. To that end, I recommend reading "How to Talk to a Climate Skeptic" at [gristmill.grist.org/skeptics](http://gristmill.grist.org/skeptics). For those more interested in scientific details, I highly recommend the website run by climate scientists, [realclimate.org](http://realclimate.org).

We should also understand the underlying reasons why many people accept the notion that climate change

is a hoax. People don't want to hear that they need to change their lifestyles, so we need to better explain that efficiency and renewable energy technologies really do not require much in the way of compromise. And while conservation has admittedly fallen out of vogue in recent years, I sense that the pendulum is finally swinging back to our more traditional American values that abhor not just wasteful spending but waste of any kind.

Many Americans also fear that reducing carbon emissions will damage the U.S. economy and require increased government regulations. But many studies have shown that energy efficiency and renewable energy will create millions of more jobs than fossil fuel industries can provide — jobs that can't be shipped overseas. And if the recent economic collapse has taught us anything, it is that reasonable government regulation can play a vital role in the marketplace. We should also point to the many studies showing that the costs our children will bear in repairing the worst damage from climate change will be many times greater than what it will cost us now to prevent it. We owe it to them to act.

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