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# 'He gets to decide': Trump escalates his fight against climate science ahead of 2020

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From the earliest days of his administration, President Trump has been at war with his own government over climate change.

He upbraided his first economic adviser by telling him that he didn't care that American executives backed the Paris climate agreement because "my voters don't live on Park Avenue." He has told aides that he thinks the Earth's climate will begin cooling again, so there is no need to act forcefully before then.

And he was enraged by a recent [National Climate Assessment](#) released by more than a dozen federal agencies showing climate impacts are 'intensifying across the country' and that only aggressive action will avoid "substantial damages" in the future. The report spurred the White House to [make plans for an internal working group](#) to counter the scientific consensus that climate change represents a major threat to the United States and the globe.

For a president who has yet to receive an extensive scientific briefing on climate change, the topic amounts to a political litmus test ahead of the 2020 elections. Rather than accept the conclusions espoused by elites and loathed by many of his voters, Trump has opted to question the premise that global warming represents a major problem or, at times, if it even exists at all. And

now through its new working group, his National Security Council is working to muster ammunition for his arguments.

Meade Krosby, a senior scientist at the University of Washington's Climate Impacts Group, said the initiative showed a disconnect with reality. The world has already warmed more than 1 degree Celsius since preindustrial levels, and a recent U.N. scientific report concluded the world will have to cut its carbon output 45 percent by 2030 to avert some of the most catastrophic consequences of climate change.

"The idea that what we really need is to revisit the basic science of climate change when we are already feeling its impacts is absurd," she said. "There is no meaningful scientific disagreement on the facts."

But Steven Milloy, a climate change skeptic who served on Trump's transition team at the Environmental Protection Agency and questioned humans' contribution to climate change, said Trump is simply keeping his promise to millions of voters who backed him in 2016 after he campaigned on the energy policies he is now pursuing.

"I don't have a problem with people having different points of view. It's the president that gets elected," said Milloy, who previously ran a group that received funding from the oil industry. "In the end, it's the president agenda, and he gets to decide."

The White House's push against climate science has exposed a modest rift within the Republican Party, as some are edging toward a more centrist position. And it has provided a potential political opportunity for Democrats, who have been grappling with their own intraparty fight over how ambitious to be when it comes to

cutting carbon.

Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) announced this week that all 47 senators in the Democratic caucus had signed on to a resolution saying that climate change is real, caused by humans and that Congress needs to take immediate action on it.

On Tuesday, former Ohio governor John Kasich (R), who ran against Trump in 2016, said recent federal reports have settled the debate over climate science.

“The government is giving us reports saying this is [a] problem,” Kasich said at a [University of British Columbia lecture](#). “And the Defense Department and America’s preparing for climate change, global warming and the implications of it all. So there are very little questions anymore.”

Trump sees the climate debate as a war of political messaging, according to several current and former administration officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity to talk frankly. Convinced that the scientific literature on climate change is funded and directed by liberals, he has said on repeated occasions that he expects the climate to change back to colder average temperatures. It amounts to an endorsement of the “global cooling” forecast some researchers made in the 1970s.

When Trump and his aides discussed whether to remain in the Paris climate agreement two years ago, he emphasized the impact low-carbon policies could have on average Americans. Under the accord, the United States pledged to cut its greenhouse gas emissions between 26 and 28 percent by 2025.

While Trump occasionally asks aides for their opinions on climate

change, he has been unwavering in his denial that human activity bears the brunt of the blame.

“When you talk to him about it, he’s openly skeptical,” George David Banks, who served as special assistant to the president for international energy and environment during the start of Trump’s term, said in an interview. “The reason he’s skeptical is he sees it as being detrimental to U.S. manufacturing.”

White House officials did not respond to requests for comment.

Deputies who have sought to make the case for climate action to Trump have not fared well. During a meeting just weeks before the president announced the United States would exit the Paris agreement, then-National Economic Council Director Gary Cohn noted that several major chief executives had just published a joint letter urging him to stay within the deal.

“Gary, my voters don’t live on Park Avenue,” Trump responded, according to one participant who requested anonymity to discuss a private meeting. “They don’t care about the same things you care about.”

Since Trump announced a withdrawal from the Paris deal in 2017, climate change has rarely come up as a priority inside the White House, according to current and former officials. “He knows his voters see it as bunk,” a White House official said.

Trump’s views have been largely consistent for the better part of a decade, as he has railed against renewable energy and claimed that environmentalism puts U.S. industry at a disadvantage.

Trump’s rejection of climate science stretches back to at least 2010. Shortly after signing a letter calling for U.S. action to combat

climate change, Trump changed course and began calling the whole concept “a con,” voicing many of the same arguments he uses today.

In a February 2010 interview on Fox News, Trump noted the “freezing” temperatures at the time, and claimed that the United States was “scrubbing” its coal while China, Japan and India pursued dirtier energy, putting American companies “at a competitive disadvantage.”

“It’s probably getting a little bit warmer,” Trump said. “And then, in a number of years or decades, it will get a little bit cooler.”

In 2012, he tweeted that “the concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese to make U.S. manufacturing noncompetitive.” And in the years leading up to his 2016 presidential campaign, Trump continued to opine about global warming, seizing on cold snaps to argue that the science showing rising temperatures and sea levels amounted to a “hoax.”

The anti-science views espoused by Trump allow him to cast aside inconvenient facts and shape an argument that aligns with his political goals and his other long-held views, said Tim O’Brien, author of “TrumpNation: The Art of Being the Donald.”

“It’s performance art,” he said. “I don’t think he authentically believes climate change was authored in Beijing. He just knows that it dovetails neatly with his anti-China, anti-free-trade, anti-climate-change mantra. And he can put that to political use.”

Trump has already begun targeting his potential 2020 opponents over their environmental positions. The president also [touted January’s frigid temperatures](#) in much of the United States but

ignored his government's announcement two weeks later that [2018 was the fourth-warmest year on record](#).

"Amy Klobuchar announced that she is running for President, talking proudly of fighting global warming while standing in a virtual blizzard of snow, ice and freezing temperatures," Trump tweeted after the Democratic senator from Minnesota [made her presidential announcement in a snowstorm](#).

Some federal officials in top scientific posts offer a more nuanced view on climate change, but they choose their words carefully.

"Certainly, the climate is changing; it has been changing. It's a combination of natural variability and human influence," Kelvin Droegemeier, head of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, said in an interview last week. "Over the past 70 years or so, human influence has played a significant role."

In 2013, the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change issued a report saying global warming is "unequivocal" and that it is "extremely likely" that humans are the "dominant" cause of climate change over the past century.

Trump own military leaders and intelligence heads have said in public reports that climate change poses a national security threat to the United States.

But as president, Trump's views on environmental science have drifted further from the mainstream even as he has had access to the world's greatest scientists and data.

In a November [interview](#) with The Washington Post, Trump claimed that dirty air from Asia "blows over" toward the United States. He also rejected calls for climate action by claiming that

U.S. air and water is already “record clean.” He has claimed that California’s record wildfires in 2018 were caused because of the state’s improper “raking” of its forests.

Democrats are convinced that Trump’s position on climate change could prove a liability for congressional Republicans, most of whom have raised questions about climate science and worked to reverse Obama-era regulations aimed at curbing carbon emissions. Earlier this month, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) said he would force a vote on House Democrats’ Green New Deal, a sweeping measure that would spend trillions to wean the U.S. off fossil fuels.


The NSC is pressing ahead with its plan to convene federal researchers to decide how the White House might reassess the government’s climate findings, and it has asked agencies to find outside experts who endorse the idea.

Kasich, who called on lawmakers Tuesday to impose either a tax on carbon or a nationwide cap on emissions, said that eventually voters would pressure his party to act.

“Do you know why politicians will finally get off the dime?” Kasich said. “Because they’ll have no choice.”


*Josh Dawsey and Tony Romm contributed to this report.*

## Juliet Eilperin

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