

Heated Debate and a Warming Planet

By : charles schwenk

This essay describes the ways polarizing conflict prevents us from solving urgent problems, especially global warming. It also shows a way out of polarization.

Published on
Booksie

[booksie.com/charles schwenk](http://booksie.com/charles-schwenk)

Copyright © charles schwenk, 2015
Publish your writing on Booksie.com.

Heated Debate and a Warming Planet

HEATED DEBATE AND A WARMING PLANET

In his second inaugural address, President Obama promised to do more to stop global warming, despite the fact that many voters do not believe it exists. Whether and why the Earth is warming is a scientific question like the question of whether the Earth orbits the Sun. It is not decided by the results of an opinion poll or a vote. Unfortunately, public policy to deal with global warming IS determined or at least influenced by the opinions of voters.

In this essay, I want to discuss how polarized political views have influenced the way world leaders have dealt with global warming, which I believe is the most grave long-term threat facing our species. Polarization is an extremely harmful social and political process and it has prevented us from dealing with global warming in the past. If we can overcome it we may be able to deal with the problem while there is still time.

Polarized Views on the Topic

Here are some things that are true despite the fact that many or most voters deny them. First, the earth has warmed in the last century. Second, the CO₂ we humans have produced is the main cause but not the only cause. Third, we can reduce the concentrations of CO₂ in the atmosphere over time by reducing the amount to CO₂ we produce.

Not everyone recognizes these facts and public opinion has shifted significantly over the last decade. I can illustrate this fact by using surveys conducted repeatedly throughout the decade by the Pew Charitable Trust. Back in 2001 their survey showed over 70% of all Americans believed the earth is getting hotter, including nearly two-thirds of Republicans. Over 50% said atmospheric CO₂ is the cause. By 2009, however, only 58% of Americans said they believed the earth is warming and only 36% believe the CO₂ we have put into the air is the cause.

Both Democrats and Republicans changed their views but I want to use the change in opinion about this topic among Republicans to illustrate the process of polarization. Between 2001 and 2009, the percentage of Republicans who believe there is solid evidence of global warming fell from 63% to 38%. However, the results of the Pew poll conducted in 2012 showed that 48% of Republicans now believe the evidence for global warming is solid. Currently 42% of all Americans and 33% of Republicans believe the warming is primarily caused by human activity. The partisan conflict on global warming has been especially intense over the last few years and I think these numbers show the effects of this debate.

Though the most vocal climate change deniers are as strident as ever, the less ideologically committed Republicans are changing their views. Global warming deniers on the right pole of the political spectrum, whom I will call Conservative Polarizers, have apparently been losing their hold on the minds of some Republicans.

2012 was the hottest year on record in the U.S., beating the second hottest year by a full degree. This fact may not have much emotional impact but the droughts, crop failures, hurricanes, and other extreme weather events we have been experiencing are much more vivid and stir very strong feelings of fear and anxiety. The effects of global warming are becoming so obvious that many Republicans who were skeptical are coming to understand that it is real. Recent weather events like Hurricane Sandy have caused a change in Republican attitudes. This change may be temporary or the beginnings of a permanent shift in views as the economic effects of warming become more apparent.

The mirror image of Conservative Polarizers can be found on the Left. I will call these people Progressive Polarizers. They differ with those on the Right in that they do not deny the reality of global warming. They insist that we must reduce CO₂ emissions in order to stop global warming but they believe that we must not use nuclear power and that we must reduce our reliance on hydroelectric power and demolish some dams that generate power. Further, they oppose hydraulic fracturing (fracking) as a means of obtaining more natural gas despite the fact that natural gas generates less than half the CO₂ per unit of energy than does coal. Like their enemies on the Right, these individuals believe that serving their own agendas is more important than

Heated Debate and a Warming Planet

reducing CO2 emissions.

Progressive Polarizers maintain that we must deal with climate change only by increasing our use of renewable sources like solar and wind energy and through conservation. The truth is that we need to do all of these things as well as building more nuclear power plants with safer designs that are currently available. We also need to continue to pursue fracking for natural gas. This will allow us to reduce reliance on coal, the fuel which produces the most CO2 per unit of energy.

Progressive Polarizers have recently lead the German government to adopt the policy of reducing and perhaps eventually abandoning nuclear power. Since Germany requires electrical power, they will build new power generation facilities to replace their nuclear plants and some of the new plants will be powered by coal. Unfortunately, Japan is also importing more coal because they have temporarily shut down some of their nuclear plants and must make up for the lost electricity by increasing the output of coal-fired plants. Because of the increased use of coal by some developed nations, and increased demand from developing economies, the burning of coal is increasing globally.

Abandoning Polarization in Favor of Honest Inquiry

I have been trying to explore the research on this topic and make up my own mind about the causal relationship between CO2 and global temperature for some time. I have been constantly frustrated by the partisanship, polarized debate, misinterpretation of scientific research, and propaganda I have read in many discussions of this topic. We really cannot trust combatants in the polarized global warming debate to give us the truth. We have to ferret it out for ourselves. We must each try to understand a what is really happening to the Earth's climate and why. We can't allow ourselves to be intimidated by the complexity of the topic or the urgent, angry voices of partisans in the debate who tell us that they understand the evidence and that they KNOW what we should or should not do about global warming.

By far the most valuable source I have found is the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Their periodic summaries of research are comprehensive and written as clearly and simply as possible on this very complex topic.

I must confess that the complexity of the research results confuses and perplexes me. Let me give you just one example of a piece of information that is relevant to the question of how much our planet may warm in the future. This piece of information has to do with how and why has the planet warmed and cooled in the past. Scientist have long been aware that over the last 800,000 years temperatures and CO2 levels have changed in three major cycles linked to changes in the earth's rotation and orbit around the sun called Milankovitch Cycles. Changes in both CO2 and temperature are highly correlated. However, changes in CO2 generally did not precede but followed changes in temperature. Therefore, changes in CO2 levels can't be the driving force behind temperature changes.

In 2006, after Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* won an Oscar and Mr. Gore himself won the Nobel Peace Prize, he was attacked by climate change deniers like Congressmen James Inhoff and Joe Barton because he claimed that over the last 800,000 years CO2 change drove the process of temperature change. His opponents claimed that the correlation between temperature and CO2 was coincidental, not causal. In response, Gore reiterated his claim. The debates were acrimonious and sad.

Remember that when two sides disagree as vehemently as this, they cannot both be right, but they can both be WRONG. In fact, in most polarized debates including the debate between Gore, Inhoff and Barton, both sides ARE wrong because everyone is oversimplifying the truth to fit with their preconceived notions and to score debaters' points. However, when we face crucial decisions, we must not act like debaters but like scientists. We must look at the facts straight on and try to come up with a new understanding of what they mean.

In attempting to behave like scientists, we can look for inspiration to climate scientists themselves. Some have spent their working lives investigating the ambiguities in earlier research and trying to get to the truth. Instead of taking rigid and simplistic positions like politicians, they have conducted further analyses of the complex relationship between temperature and CO2 over the last 800,000 years in an attempt to understand it more clearly.

Here is what they have come up with. Changes in CO2 levels in the distant past did not drive the changes in temperature but appear to have played a crucial role. When orbital changes caused the earth to cool, a large

Heated Debate and a Warming Planet

amount of carbon dioxide entered the ocean, reducing the heat-trapping properties of the atmosphere and thus amplifying the cooling. This is because colder liquids can absorb more CO₂.

Conversely, when the shifts in sunlight led to initial warming, carbon dioxide emerged from the ocean and helped speed the end of the previous ice age. This is because as liquids warm they give off CO₂, which is why carbonated drinks go flat when they sit in a warm room.

Here then is an explanation that makes sense of a very complex set of facts. Changes in CO₂ do not drive temperature changes but they magnify them. The earth heats and cools faster because of the release of CO₂ from warm oceans and the absorption of CO₂ by cold oceans.

The facts about global warming can sometimes be perplexing. The approach these scientists have taken is fundamentally different from the approach partisans take in dealing with perplexing information. They embrace inquiry rather than defensiveness. We must all try to do this because we must encourage our leaders to develop effective policy to slow global warming and intelligent public policy must rest on a real appreciation of the complexity and ambiguity in the information on the topic.

In response to perplexity, some partisans misread the data in an attempt to make the information seem more certain and consistent than it is. This starts a very destructive pattern of behavior. As partisans on either side think about their beliefs and discuss them with like-minded people, their own views become more deeply rooted and inflexible and their ability to understand the views of their opponents diminishes.

One job of the media is to help people understand complex information that challenges their own beliefs and think more critically about it but the media itself is so polarized that it is not doing its job. To the owners and managers of news organizations who are Conservative Polarizers, human-induced global warming is a myth. To those who are Progressive Polarizers it is a simple certainty. As these organizations give politically distorted information to listeners who share their political views, they exacerbate polarizing conflict further. They treat this topic as a contest and express more interest in the winners and losers than in the truth.

Conclusion

Polarized conflict leads partisans to oversimplify information and news reports magnify this effect by oversimplifying and emphasizing winners and losers rather than rational decisions in public policy questions. This is especially unfortunate in a complex problem like global warming. Those who really want to understand this problem cannot simply rely on news summaries. It requires a lot of effort for each individual to ferret out objective information and separate the truth from half-truths, but I don't see any alternative. Looking closely and critically at the data on current and past temperatures and CO₂ levels seems like a good first step in developing this understanding.

Polarization produces poor public policy. Only by ignoring polarized views and seeking out the truth can individual citizens decide what sort of public policy they want to urge their elected representatives to pursue.

Heated Debate and a Warming Planet

Heated Debate and a Warming Planet

Created from Booksie.com

Generated: 2015-11-28 03:06:02