

The Politics of Denial: From Climate to COVID-19



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From the start of the coronavirus' scourge, a set of conservatives and conspiracy theorists have questioned the realities of COVID-19, even as 100,000 Americans lost their lives, more than 1 million got sick, and 40 million lost their jobs.

We've sadly seen a preview of this show. In some cases, the same people who cast doubt on climate change for a living are now pushing false information about the pandemic and its impact. Regrettably, just as much of the GOP has turned an all-but-blind eye to climate change, many Republicans have started pretending the pandemic is over. It's the horrific reality of our politics that even life-and-death situations like the severity of a pandemic or, before that, the impacts of climate change have become hyper-partisan. Yet, here we are.

President Donald Trump, with his own history of retweeting conspiracies, has only encouraged this misinformation campaign. Since the outset, he has been actively downplaying the severity of the crisis and using it to score political points ahead of November.

In past crises, experts emerged above the fray and informed policymaking from the start. It saved lives, the economy, and people's faith in institutions and our country. But this time is different. Trump refuses to acknowledge any mistakes in his coronavirus response and has decided to pin his reelection hopes on denying that COVID-19 is a crisis or admitting he got it wrong. Instead of unifying the country, he's derided scientists and blamed Democrats. Meanwhile, Congressional Republicans have been largely standing by Trump, whether because of shared beliefs or out of fear of his vengeful tweets if they disagree.

Concerted misinformation campaigns about the severity of the virus endangers the health and safety of the American public. People are receiving conflicting guidance from federal scientists, the president, friends and family, and the media sources they trust, all at a time when clarity has never been more important.

Movement conservatives and the climate deniers in their ranks wrote the book on how to cast doubt on modern science to the continual detriment of public and environmental health. They're at it again with COVID-19. But research shows that Americans overall want science to prevail, and the November election is our opportunity to make sure that happens.

Climate and COVID Denial Overlap

Reporters and transparency groups have exposed the close links between the fossil fuel industry and its funders, climate denialists. We are seeing a similar network emerge between the conservative funders and strategists encouraging premature reopenings and the organized protests against shutdowns. The goal of both campaigns is the same: undermine the authority of experts in order to protect their own power, whether it's fossil fuel companies and their allies fearful about a loss of market share in the shift to clean energy, or conservative politicians and pundits worried that the short-term economic impact of a proper pandemic response will hurt their re-election chances in November. Both are horribly cynical and unnecessarily risk lives and livelihoods.

The stark danger of willful inaction in the face of a preponderance of scientific evidence during a pandemic is already becoming clear: Columbia University scientists estimate that there would have been about 36,000 fewer COVID-19 deaths if the United States took action to require social distancing one week earlier. Meanwhile, climate change has made storms, floods, and droughts increasingly deadly and disruptive to the country, with weather and climate disasters regularly breaking the bank and breaking records.

It was clear by late March that right-wing and libertarian websites aligned with Trump and his policies were downplaying coronavirus' severity and that climate skeptics were using well-honed tactics to cast doubt on COVID-19. As the Niskanen Center's Jerry Taylor observed, "it's the exact same wine in a slightly new and refreshed bottle."

Just as with climate skepticism, groups are casting doubt on COVID-19 modeling, for example, by cherry-picking information and using worst-case scenarios that don't come to pass to suggest that all modeling has irremediable flaws.

The Heartland Institute, a climate denial group of head-scratching billboard notoriety, called out climate change and COVID-19 projections for relying on “runaway computer models” without going to the trouble of contextualizing its own critiques.

Chris Horner of the Competitive Enterprise Institute warned COVID-19 will be used as an excuse for permanently restraining economic growth to address climate change. (For an indication of CEI's objectives, look no further than its recent lawsuit against the Trump administration for not rolling back fuel economy standards far enough.)

Other notable climate skeptics who have weighed in on COVID-19 include the Hoover Institution's Richard Epstein, CO2 Coalition Chairman Patrick Moore, and blogger Steve Milloy.

For Trump's part, he's accrued quite a compendium of lies about the coronavirus, and he oversees a Council of Economic Advisers who seemed to suggest COVID-19 deaths could fall to zero by mid-May (they didn't).

The Numbers

Thankfully, good science might be winning out where it counts, with 85% of Americans very or moderately confident, for instance, that social distancing saves lives.

But trust in science is becoming a party issue: Pew Research Center has found a 20-point split between Democrats and Republicans over whether social distancing is helping slow coronavirus' spread. And there's an uptick from last year in the confidence US adults place in medical scientists to act in the public's best interests, but most of that elevated trust is coming from Democrats.

As one Gallup consultant said, “consensus on the basic facts crumbles when scientific knowledge is politicized.” Pollsters find a partisan split over the perceived severity of the COVID-19 death rate, for example: half of Republicans now think the official US death toll from the coronavirus is overstated, while 72% of Democrats think it's understated. Just 43% of Republican or Republican-leaning respondents told Pew that scientists should take an active role in public policy debates about scientific issues, compared to 75% of Democratic and Democratic-leaning adults.

Out of Mayhem, Opportunity

Climate and coronavirus skeptics are endangering lives for political gain. This kind of misinformation will only expand as long as one political party not only tolerates it but actively encourages it in many cases.

What are Americans gaining from the national Republican Party's peddling of misinformation? They certainly aren't getting any of the moral leadership they can rightfully expect from their president. Instead, they've gotten a shameful abdication of responsibility and characteristic self-centered response to the pandemic, which has officially claimed the lives of at least 100,000 people. It's not a surprise that more than half of Americans disapprove of the way Trump has handled the outbreak.

Americans increasingly trust scientists and their recommendations, and many want experts to take the lead in policy conversations. The health, economy, and success of our country is contingent upon our leaders heeding the science. We've already witnessed the effects of ignoring the advice of experts: tens of thousands of avoidable deaths from the coronavirus and costs to life and property from climate change. We can no longer afford to let good science go unheeded.

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