



More talk, more action [Editorial]

Our view: Climate change protesters and policymakers must overcome the 'know-nothing, do-nothing' politics of skeptics

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Monocles are off to the New Yorker for the best headline we've seen yet regarding climate change, this week's United Nations summit in New York and the large-scale demonstrations that have accompanied it: "Largest Climate-Change March in History Unlikely to Convince Idiots." It's harsh but fair.

For the record, man-made climate change is undeniable and serious. There is remarkably little division in the scientific community about that finding. That's not to suggest there doesn't continue to be legitimate debate on such specifics as the timetable for how quickly that change is taking place or the best approach to remediation. But the unequivocal existence of rising atmospheric temperatures, the role that burning fossil fuels has played or the adverse consequences such as sea level rise? Consensus exists — at least as much as it can on any scientific frontier.

Yet the general public's perception of climate change is an oddity all by itself. First, polls show Americans are much less concerned about climate change than people living almost anywhere else in the world. A poll conducted last year for the Pew Research Center of people living in 39 countries found only that 40 percent of Americans saw climate change as a major threat and ranked it behind nuclear threats from Iran and North Korea, financial instability and Islamic extremism. The world saw it differently with 54 percent ranking climate change as a serious threat, making it the most serious threat on the horizon.

Imagine that. Even in the Middle East where there's a certain economic incentive in burning oil, a slightly higher percentage of people were alarmed by global warming than U.S. residents in the Pew poll. The rest of our continent disagreed with us, too, with 54 percent of Canadians and 65 of Latin Americans viewing climate change as a major threat.

Are we idiots? Perhaps the problem is the manner in which a matter of science has fallen victim to the nation's worsening partisan divisions. Polls have also shown that while the vast majority of Democrats and independents fret about global warming, many Republicans — especially those who identify as members of the tea party wing —

don't see it as a major threat. And it's a view that has been steadily reinforced by much of the GOP leadership and more partisan media outlets.

Yet even that view may be changing. Opinion research, including a poll produced last year by the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication, shows a slight majority of Republican voters and Republican-leaning independent voters are concerned about climate change, too. Thus, the more common refrain from the GOP these days is that the matter deserves to be investigated, a ham-handed way of delaying and deferring controversial actions such as the EPA's choice to put tougher emissions limits on coal-burning power plants. Even spokesmen for the Koch brothers have taken to calling climate change an issue that deserves a non-partisan debate. It's a case of "know-nothing" politics evolving into "do-nothing" policies.

Given those realities it's not clear what does the cause greater good, world leaders sitting down to discuss remedies beginning Tuesday or demonstrators marching in New York and elsewhere to raise awareness about climate change and the threat it poses. Given the lack of progress on the international stage, we are inclined to believe the latter. People still need to learn more about what is happening to the climate and the high cost of inaction. That, in turn, may ultimately put sufficient pressure on world leaders to craft meaningful solutions.

The challenge of climate change is serious, but the remedies are not as painful as opponents often claim. Conserving energy and switching to renewable forms of power yields tremendous benefits not only to the environment but to human health and to energy independence. What's painful is to envision a future if action isn't taken — coastal communities flooded; increasingly severe weather events such as drought and storms; loss of arable farmland and freshwater supplies; increased disease; more political conflicts worldwide as people battle over scarcer resources; and loss of biodiversity and ecosystems.

The message from the marchers is relatively simple — just act in your own self-interest and save your children's future. Politics should be set aside in favor of pragmatism. A terrorist who kills dozens may be frightening, but a threat of far greater catastrophic, albeit not necessarily immediate, effect ought to be even more so. Surely, that's something upon which everyone can agree.

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