

There's an emerging right-wing divide on climate denial. Here's what it means (and doesn't)

By [David Roberts](#), Grist 8 Apr 2015 <http://grist.org/climate-energy/theres-an-emerging-right-wing-divide-on-climate-denial-heres-what-it-means-and-doesnt/>

For as long as climate change has been a public agenda item — let's date it back to 1988, when James Hansen [testified to Congress](#) — there has been a large faction within the public that refuses to accept it, composed primarily (not entirely, but primarily) of [conservative white men](#).

It's difficult to remember these days, but that faction did not always dominate the Republican Party. Establishment Republicans from George H.W. Bush to George W. Bush acknowledged that climate change is a real problem requiring a policy solution. John McCain put forward his own cap-and-trade plan when he ran against Obama in 2008.

But denial was always closer to the conservative heart than acceptance was. When the Tea Party swallowed the GOP in 2010, it eradicated the last shreds of accommodationism on climate. Since then, the party, at least the public face of the party, has been almost entirely dominated by old-school, unapologetic denial. The few remaining “moderates” in the party quickly fell in line and went silent (including courageous “maverick” John McCain).

The somewhat maddening truth is that denial worked for a long time. As long as the public was disengaged on the subject and only elites were pushing it, denial delayed action at effectively no political cost. The public didn't care enough to make a fuss and neither, for the most part, did political journalists.

But climate has continued to worm its way into public consciousness. Business types are starting to worry about the financial risks; military types are worrying about the potential for resource conflicts; outdoor types are worrying about changes in seasons and species; farmers are worrying about shifts in growing conditions; ordinary consumers are getting interested in renewable energy and electric cars. Obama has nudged climate onto the agenda again and again, with [EPA regs](#), the [China climate deal](#), and a whole series of small executive-branch initiatives. Large majorities of the public [favor climate action](#).

Now you have a paragon of Beltway sensibilities like *Washington Post* columnist Dana Milbank writing that “[climate-change deniers are in retreat](#).” A self-styled centrist like Milbank would not be taking a clear stand like this unless Village opinion had shifted.

Now that the public and the media are paying more attention, denial is starting to make the GOP look like, to borrow a [phrase](#) from Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal, the stupid party. Denialism is increasingly seen, not only among elites but in *popular culture*, as atavistic and conspiracy-minded. Climate has become one of those issues where the gulf between the insular far right and the rest of American (to say nothing of Western) culture has become so vast that it is serving like a moat, keeping out the very demographic groups the GOP needs in coming years.

What to do? GOP pols have been [fumbling](#) with this and they've ended up all over the map. It's happening but it's not human caused. It's happening but it's not that bad. The scientists are playing politics. And lately: "I'm not a scientist."

They've been mocked plenty for that last one, but it's the one that reveals what's really going on in right-wing messaging meetings these days, namely a growing pressure to *stop talking about the science at all*.

There is a divide growing in the GOP between the establishment, chafing at being associated with crank conspiracy theories, and the grassroots base, where the war against "climate alarmists" has taken on near-theological overtones.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the [saga of the American Legislative Exchange Council](#) (ALEC), the right-wing group that's working so hard in the states to block clean energy, carbon controls, tax hikes, minimum wage laws, unions, and anything else that might impede the growth and power of the capital class.

Unlike showboats like Ted Cruz, the ALEC guys have to deal with non-ideologues on occasion. And for the past few years, activists have been working (with great success) to publicize [ALEC's denialism on climate](#) and use it to discredit the group in the eyes of its members. And so ALEC has lost Google, Facebook, Microsoft, Yelp, and many, many [more businesses](#) in recent years.

Clearly it's getting to them. Now ALEC is [threatening to sue](#) groups that accuse it of climate denial. That's grossly dishonest, for reasons revealed at that link, but it's quite revealing. More than anything, ALEC wants to do its work behind the scenes. It does not want the spotlight, much less to be tagged as an exemplar of conservative dysfunction. It wants to engage in its fuckery unmolested.

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So what does this emerging tension in the GOP mean? Lots of enviro types see it as great news, as a kind of breakthrough. Paul Gilding writes (in a great post worth reading in full) that the "[dam of denial](#)" is breaking and what comes next is a "flood."

I agree with the first part, but I'm not so sure about the second. Because the argument to which establishment Republicans are pivoting — or at least trying to pivot, given their tenuous control over the crazies — is likely to be *more effective* than denial in achieving

their real goal, which is to block government action. It was always the savvier argument, the one they should have switched to years ago.

[Here's](#) oleaginous dirty-energy lobbyist Scott Segal, pretending he's describing a narrative but actually trying to propagate one:

"The science issue just isn't as salient as it once was," said Scott Segal, who represents energy interests at Bracewell & Giuliani. Debate over climate science was "all the rage" in the past, he said. "But today, the key issue is whether proposed regulations cost too much, weaken reliability or are illegal."

By "salient," Segal means "effective." Science denial isn't working any more.

What can work — what have worked, historically — are apocalyptic warnings about the high cost of government action. That is the GOP's native territory. It's a story everyone involved in the right-wing coalition understands instinctively. It is core to their identity.

And the "regulations kill the economy" story isn't under the same threat science denialism is. Economics differs from the physical sciences in several important ways.

There are clear markers of authority in science: degrees, academic and research positions, and above all work published in peer-reviewed journals. It's hard to fake that stuff, which is why the collection of actual scientists in the denialist camp is small, motley, and more or less unchanged for a decade. ([Roy Spencer](#) is still going strong.)

There are no broadly accepted markers of authority in economics. There are economists with degrees and journal publications, yes, and there are economists with better and worse predictive records, as Paul Krugman keeps [saying](#). But there are also popular authors, think-tank types, columnists, bloggers, and Fox News "analysts," all of whom are out in the public sphere arguing economics.

The result: There is strong and unambiguous consensus behind the basics of anthropogenic climate change among physical scientists, while there is strong and unambiguous consensus among economists about ... nothing. There are economists to be found on "both sides" of *any* economic question, especially pertaining to policy.

This doesn't mean there's no better or worse economics. There are ways to distinguish the wheat from the chaff. The maximalist *laissez-faire* economics common among conservatives today (in rhetoric if not in actual practice) has a terrible record of predictive failure. Of the clean-air regulations implemented in the past 50 years, conservatives and polluting businesses have argued that roughly *all* of them "cost too much, weaken reliability or are illegal." In the overwhelming majority of cases, history [proved them wrong](#). Economic growth has continued, robust, as the air got cleaner and fewer people got sick.

But that record of error seems to carry no weight at all. With every regulation it's as though we're having the argument for the first time. As long as conservatives and polluting businesses have an interest in blocking all regulation, they will be able to find or fund economists willing to argue the apocalyptic perspective. The argument will never be settled, certainly not in the same way the fundamentals of climate science have been settled. And so it's he-said she-said for all eternity.

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Conservatives are relatively safe on this anti-regulatory ground; it unites their entire coalition. It's ground that *no* reporter will portray as false or ridiculous, as they might denialism. "Small government" is taken seriously in a way "scientific hoax" never will be.

Conservatives don't need to deny that the healthcare system sucks to fight all healthcare solutions; they don't need to deny that the immigration system sucks to fight all immigration solutions. Why should they need to deny climate change to fight all climate solutions?

They don't. Denialism has just become an unnecessary distraction, one that's hurting them culturally. They are better off just opposing any bill or regulation that comes up on the usual grounds: big government, overreach, economic misery, blackouts, blah blah. That kind of thing has worked for decades and there's no reason it couldn't work against climate solutions too.

So that's why ALEC and Scott Segal are signaling to other conservatives to shut the heck up about climate science — not because any flood of solutions is forthcoming, but because the science fight has become a distraction from the real work, the important work, which is *blocking* solutions and protecting the interests of the wealthy.

It will be interesting to see, in coming years, if the establishment can persuade the base to do this. Based on the behavior of the base in the past five or six years, I'm going to guess no. But it will be fun to watch them try.