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## Why Politicians May Not Ethically Rely on Their Own Uninformed Opinion About Climate Science and 10 Questions That The Press Should Ask Politicians About Climate Science In Light of This Responsibility.

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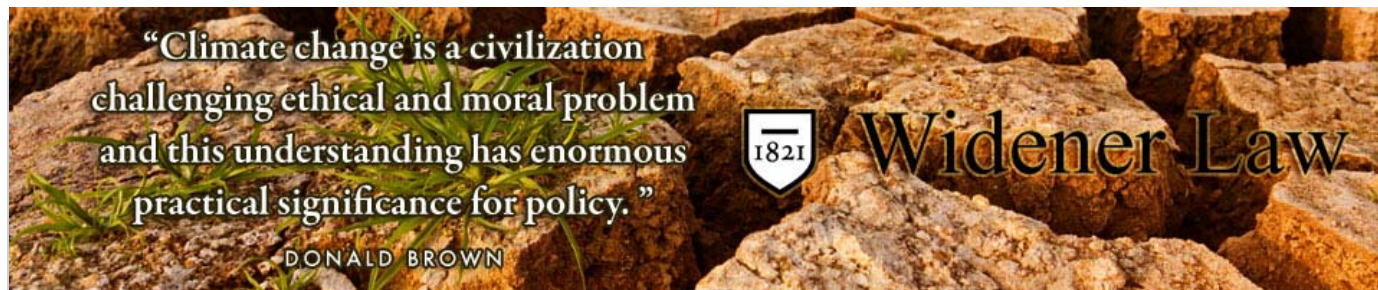
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# Ethics and Climate

Donald Brown



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Why Politicians May Not Ethically Rely on Their Own Uninformed Opinion About Climate Science and 10 Questions That The Press Should Ask Politicians About Climate Science In Light of This Responsibility.



Marco Rubio, a US Senator from Florida, recently said that he was not sure the climate change was human caused. This is one of the reasons why he's unwilling to support US government action to reduce the threat of climate change. Many other US politicians have also recently said they

will not support legislation to reduce US greenhouse gas emissions because they are not convinced that climate change happening or is human-caused. In fact, 7 out of 8 Republican candidates for the US presidency proclaimed they didn't believe that climate change was a problem. ([Skeptical Science](#)) When these politicians are asked about the basis for their positions on climate change, they almost always respond by saying such things as they "have heard that there is a disagreement among scientists" or similar responses that strongly suggest they have informed an opinion on climate change science without any understanding of the depth of the scientific evidence on which the scientific consensus view of climate change has been based. For instance, US politicians frequently assert that it is an open question whether humans are causing the undeniable warming that the Earth is experiencing, thus exposing ignorance of dozens of lines of independent robust evidence of human causation including attribution studies, finger print analyses, strong evidence that correlates fossil fuel use to rising atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases, and other physical and chemical evidence.

Although ordinary individuals may have no duty to go beyond their own personal opinion about the science of climate change, government officials who have the power to enact policies that could present catastrophic harm to millions of people around the world may not as a matter of ethics justify their refusal to support policies to reduce the threat of climate change on the basis of their uninformed opinions on climate science. This is so because government officials, unlike ordinary citizens, have the power to prevent or minimize great harms to millions of people around the world that mainstream scientists have concluded that their constituents or governments that they represent are causing or contributing to. That is, a government officials have more responsibility than the average citizen to understand the state of climate change science because the government official can uniquely

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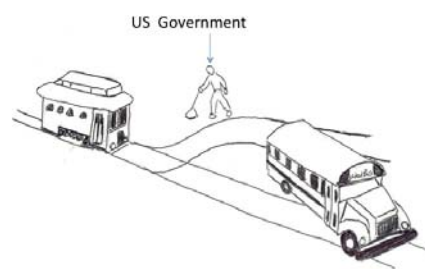
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prevent harm that their constituents or governments are causing. And so, when government officials with the power to enact climate change policies are on notice that respectable scientific evidence supports the conclusion that their constituents or governments are likely causing great harm, they may not appeal to their uninformed opinion on climate science as justification for not taking action.



The government official is like the railroad official who has been told by employees who are in a position to know the location of the company's trains that there is a runaway train hurtling toward a bus full of children that is stuck on the track,

when the official has the ability to divert the train onto a track on which no humans will be harmed.

### 97 out of 100 climate experts agree humans are causing global warming



Doran et al 2009; Arnsperg et al 2010

http://naa.scribd.com

In the case of climate change, government officials should know that 97 of every 100 scientists that actually do peer-reviewed climate science research and in the United States by the most prestigious scientific organizations including the US National Academy of Sciences that greenhouse gases coming from his constituents threaten catastrophic harm not only to his

constituents but to millions of people around the world, most of whom have done little to cause climate change.



In the case of climate change, the US politician not only has the power, working with colleagues, to prevent great harm caused by his or her constituents, he or she has the responsibility to prevent his or her constituents from harming others outside United States. This responsibility was expressly agreed to by the United States when it ratified the United Nations Convention on Climate Change which contains the following acknowledgment of the US governments responsibility to prevent harm to those outside the United States in the convention's Preamble:

*Recalling also that States have, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and the principles of international law, the sovereign right to exploit their own resources pursuant to their own environmental and developmental policies, and **the responsibility to ensure that activities within their jurisdiction or control do not cause damage to the environment of other States or of areas beyond the limits of national jurisdiction.** (UNFCCC Preamble)*

In the case of climate change, the people that will be harmed (those in our

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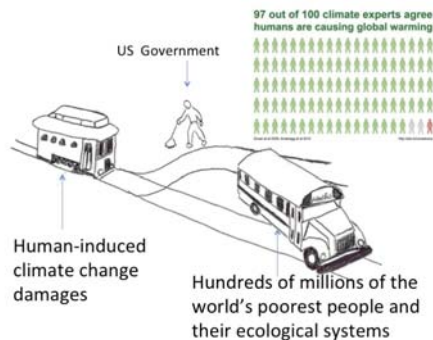
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metaphorical bus) are not only the constituents of the politician but hundreds of millions of people around the world that have done little or nothing to cause climate change.

The vast majority of climate scientists and over 100 scientific organizations whose members have climate science expertise have concluded that humans are causing climate change and human-induced climate change creates catastrophic threats for the human race and particularly for hundreds of millions of poor people around the world who are most vulnerable to climate change impacts. Although there are some differences among some mainstream scientists about some of the details of the consensus view, an open letter from the American Association for the Advancement of Science's which was endorsed by 18 of the most prestigious scientific organizations in the United States summed up the nature of the scientific consensus as follows:



As you consider climate change legislation, we, as leaders of scientific organizations, write to state the consensus scientific view. Observations throughout the world make it clear that climate change is occurring, and rigorous scientific research demonstrates that the greenhouse gases emitted by human activities are the primary driver. These conclusions are based on multiple independent lines of evidence, and contrary assertions are inconsistent with an objective assessment of the vast body of peer-reviewed science. (AAAS 2009)

Though scientific consensus must always be open to responsible skepticism given: (a) the strength of the consensus on this topic, (b) the enormity of the harms predicted by the consensus view, (c) an approximately 30 year delay in taking action that has transpired since a serious climate change debate began in the United States in the early 1980s, (d) a delay that has made the problem worse while making it more difficult to achieve ghg emissions reductions necessary to prevent dangerous climate change because of the steepness of reductions now needed, no politician can ethically justify his or her refusal to support action on climate change based upon a personal opinion that is not supported by strong scientific evidence that has been reviewed by scientific organizations with a wide breadth of interdisciplinary scientific expertise. Because any further delay will make the climate change threat worse, US politicians have a duty to support policies that will reduce the threat of climate unless they can produce strong scientific evidence that has been fully vetted by respectable scientific institutions that climate change is not the threat entailed by the scientific consensus view.

In this situation the government official has a strong duty to go beyond his or her own uninformed opinion about whether humans are causing dangerous climate change. They must justify their refusal to act on strong, peer-reviewed scientific evidence that is accepted by mainstream scientific institutions that have the breadth of expertise to consider one study in the context of thousands of other studies in climate change science. And so, government officials may not justify their refusal to act simply on the basis of their personal opinion.

**Navigating The Perfect Moral Storm: Climate Change Ethics**  
 A New Book By Donald A. Brown That Explains How To Make Ethics Influential In Climate Policy Making  
 Order at:  
<http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415625722/> For 20 % Discount and Free Shipping Insert Discount Code

Because politicians have an affirmative duty to initially rely upon mainstream scientific views in regard to human activities that could cause great harm, the press has a journalistic duty to help citizens understand any politician's views that oppose action on climate change policies on

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Donald A. Brown on A video: Why Politicians May Not Rely On Their Own Uninformed Opinion On Climate Change Science.



scientific grounds. The US press has almost always failed to probe the justifications of those opposing action on climate change on scientific grounds. For this reason, journalists should ask politicians that claim there is not sufficient scientific support for government action climate change the following questions:

1. What specific scientific references and sources do you rely upon to conclude that there is a reasonable scientific dispute about whether human actions are causing dangerous climate change?
2. Are you aware that the United States Academy of Sciences and almost all respected scientific organizations whose membership includes scientists with expertise relevant to climate change science support the scientific consensus view that holds that the planet is warming, that the warming is mostly human caused, and that harsh impacts from warming are very likely under business-as-usual?
3. On what basis do you disregard the conclusions that humans are causing dangerous climate change held by the United States Academy of Sciences, over a hundred scientific organizations whose membership includes experts with expertise relevant to the science of climate change, and 97 percent of scientists who actually do peer-reviewed research on climate change?
4. When you claim that the United States need not adopt climate change policies because adverse climate change impacts have not yet been proven, are you claiming that climate change skeptics have proven that human-induced climate change will not create adverse impacts on human health and the ecological systems of others on which their life often depends and if so what is that proof?
5. When you claim that the United States should not adopt climate change policies because there is scientific uncertainty about adverse climate change impacts, are you arguing that no action of climate change should be taken until all scientific uncertainties are resolved given that waiting to resolve all scientific uncertainties before action is taken will very likely make it too late to prevent dangerous human-induced climate change harms according to the consensus view?
6. Do you deny that those who argue that they should be allowed to continue to emit greenhouse gases at levels that may be dangerous should assume the burden of proof that their actions are safe given the strength of the consensus view on climate change science?
7. Do you deny that those who are most vulnerable to climate change's harshest potential impacts have a right to participate in a decision about whether to act to reduce the threat of climate change in the face of scientific uncertainty?
8. Given that in ratifying the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) the United States in 1992 agreed to the following under Article 3, do you believe the United States is now free to ignore this promise by refusing to take action on climate change on the basis of scientific uncertainty?

*The Parties should take precautionary measures to anticipate, prevent or minimize the causes of climate change and mitigate its adverse effects. Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing such measures, taking into account that policies and measures to deal with climate change should be cost-effective so as to ensure global benefits at the lowest possible cost.*

(UNFCCC, Art 3)

9. If you claim that the climate change impacts predicted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) have not reached a level of scientific certainty that warrants action, do you agree that climate change impacts predicted by IPCC could be wrong in both directions, potentially leading to even harsher adverse impacts

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than those predicted?

10. Given that for over 20 years since international climate change negotiations began, the United States has refused to commit to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions based upon the justification that there is too much scientific uncertainty to warrant action, if it turns out that human-induced climate change actually greatly harms the health and ecological systems on which life depends of others, should the United States be responsible for the harms that could have been avoided if preventative action had been taken earlier?

**By:**

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Widener University School of Law

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February 12, 2013 at 4:27 am

2 comments

Donald A. Brown

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## 2 Responses



*richard pauli* says:

Thank you so much for these clear questions.

Denial is a passive action, but avoidance takes real effort. Indeed, now it takes more and more work for politicians to avoid these questions.

These used to be that unspoken questions could be avoided. No more. It is too obvious – and now that it is spelled out – the questions are more compelling. Thank you.

February 13, 2013 at 4:27 am

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*Donald A. Brown* says:

Yes, I think we should find a way to make every politician who is denying the urgency of the problem to go on record with their answers to these questions and publish their answers widely.

Don Brown

February 13, 2013 at 4:46 am

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