CHAPTER 30

United States Congressman

Scott Peters

I will discuss the imperative of addressing the world climate from my perspective as a member of the United States Congress.

You are familiar with the warnings of scientists, including my friend Dr. Ramanathan of Scripps Institution of Oceanography in San Diego, California, which I represent. I need not add to those insights. Instead, I will offer observations on how Washington, DC is dealing with climate change and ways in which I think we can do better.

Climate action used to be bipartisan. In his 2008 campaign for president, Republican Senator John McCain ran advertisements in which he “sounded the alarm on global warming” and said his credentials on climate were stronger than those of his opponent, Barack Obama (“How G.O.P. Leaders Came to View Climate Change as Fake Science,” *New York Times*, June 3, 2017).

Soon after that election, however, there began a well-funded campaign to change this. Many conservative groups, including one called the Cooler Heads Coalition, have waged campaigns to cast doubt on climate science and to intimidate Republican candidates from supporting climate action. According to reports, the Cooler Heads Coalition has received more than \$11 million in donations from oil and gas companies and from foundations controlled by wealthy families, including the Kochs (“A two-decade crusade by conservative charities fueled Trump’s exit from Paris climate accord,” *The Washington Post*, September 5, 2017). The television advertis-

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ing, social media campaigns, and political events across the country raised doubts in the minds of voters and fear in the hearts of politicians. For representatives of coal regions, it became easier to accept alternative facts than it was to accept a climate action policy that would phase out carbon emissions.

About 74,000 Americans work in the production and distribution of coal, and more than 812,000 work in oil and gas (U.S. Department of Energy, 2017, see Table 1, p. 29). (To be fair, that workforce barely exists in California.) If you visit Midland, Texas, as I did, you see an entire community and culture invested in and proud of their oil and gas production. For them, many climate action policies mean rethinking the economic system that has supported them, their families, and their town for decades.

In 2008, anti-climate-change groups began asking Republicans to sign a “No Climate Tax” pledge (Mayer, 2013). In 2009, cap-and-trade legislation died in Congress. The climate denial lobby went after Democrats who had voted for cap and trade, and then they took on Republicans who were sympathetic to green energy or climate action.

Today, according to Republican strategist Whit Ayres, “most Republicans still do not regard climate change as a hoax. But the entire climate change debate has now been caught up in the broader polarization of American politics. A denial of the human contribution to climate change has become yet another litmus test issue that determines whether you’re “a good Republican” (Mayer, 2013).

When I have a beer with my Republican colleagues, they will generally acknowledge that they are aware of climate change and that human activities are driving that change. But they fear losing their elections.

Yet their voters are not necessarily climate deniers. In a study conducted by the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, about 70% of Republicans think that climate change is happening and 53% think it is caused by human activity (“How G.O.P. Leaders Came to View Climate Change as Fake Science,” *New York Times*, June 3, 2017).

So why does America not elect more Republicans who are as open-minded as their Republican voters on climate? Let me illustrate how moderation is penalized by the American electoral process in most places.

In most American Congressional districts, there is no competition between Republicans and Democrats. At least 350 seats are so-called safe seats, where voters will only elect a Democrat, as in San Francisco, New York, or Boston, for instance, or a Republican, as in most of Texas or Alabama or Kansas. In a safe Republican district, there is no chance that a Democrat will ever win the seat. Thus, the real contest is over which Republican will win the Republican Party election and make the run-off against the Democrat, who will certainly lose. This has led to a race to the right—on guns, taxes, the environment, and even science—so that only the most right-wing Republicans can get elected from these safe Republican seats. In this safe seat competition, moderate stances on climate hurt a Republican’s chances.

The remaining few congressional districts are known as swing districts, where the number of Republican and Democratic voters is relatively even, and the seat can

“swing” from Republican to Democrat from election to election. These competitive general elections, between a Democrat and a Republican, can cost tens of millions of dollars. This money comes from private donations and from outside spending by political action groups. I represent a competitive swing district; as an example, my own 2014 reelection was the fifth most expensive race that year. My campaign raised \$4 million from private donors, as did my opponent’s. Outside groups spent about \$4 million trying to reelect me, and other groups spent about \$4 million trying to defeat me. All told, \$16 million was spent on television ads, mail pieces, and staff salaries for one 2-year term in one of 435 Congressional seats. My friend Brad Schneider was defeated that year in suburban Chicago, in a race that cost over \$23 million in all.

In competitive races, candidates need both to energize their base voters and to raise money. For Republicans, the base voters are usually the most conservative. Often, the donors who want to support Republican candidates are similarly conservative. In a swing race, a moderate stance by a Republican on climate may limit the ability to raise campaign money.

So there is a lot of pressure on Republican office holders—who must fend off other Republican challengers—not to stray from the most conservative positions. A case in point recently was Representative Eric Cantor, the number 2 Republican in Congress, who offered a mildly conciliatory position on immigration. He was defeated by a more rabidly anti-immigrant Republican in central Virginia’s 7th Congressional District. Every Republican Congress member took note, and most of them took cover.

Thus, despite the overwhelming science and public interest, the road to climate action for a Republican office holder is a precarious one.

Washington Republicans are finally acknowledging that climate is changing. Water is rising from the ground in Florida; hurricane after hurricane is bashing Texas, and the deep red Republican South. When Miami streets are wet on sunny days and when “500-year storms” are happening every 3 years, people take notice. As of October 2017, 60 members of the House of Representatives have joined a bipartisan Climate Solutions Caucus, with an equal number of Democrats and Republicans, “to educate members on economically-viable options to reduce climate risk and to explore bipartisan policy options that address the impacts, causes, and challenges of our changing climate” (Derby, 2017). Secretary of Defense James Mattis continues to warn that climate can be a driver of instability. That is why in this year’s defense spending bill, adopted by a vote of 344–81, the House of Representatives declared that climate change is a “direct threat to national security.” The bill also calls for a report on how climate change affects the military, including identifying the 10 bases most susceptible to flooding from sea level rise (Lardner, 2017).

Last month, Energy Secretary Rick Perry (who is from oil-producing Texas) testified to my Energy Subcommittee of the Energy and Commerce Committee and asserted that there was insufficient evidence to support the case that humans were the cause of climate change. However, he did state that he agrees the climate is warming. That is a start.

These events together at least offer some hope that the USA can agree on some steps toward climate adaptation. If we acknowledge that seas are rising, temperatures are warming, storms are more frequent and violent, and fires are happening more often and are brutal, we at least agree on a common set of facts that can help us prepare. We may consider new building standards that defend better against flood or fire or zoning laws that will keep buildings from expanding flood zones. Our Navy can adjust its strategy to reflect melting ice. We can reform government flood and fire insurance programs to incentivize investments in resiliency and discourage bad decisions.

It is great that the effects of climate change are sinking in. However, the refusal by Secretary Perry, the administration, and the vast majority of elected Republicans to acknowledge the basic scientific consensus that this change is human-driven remains an obstacle to the steps we need to take now.

What voices can move America to act on climate—not just to gird ourselves as the planet dies—but move us to save the planet?

Who Are the Trusted Voices That Can Turn the American Public and Our Government to Action?

First, Scientists

Americans rely on science every day, whether they are taking medications prescribed by a doctor or following a recipe for baking a cake. It must be discouraging for scientists to encounter the current irrationality, but rigorous climate science is still the most important input for our policymakers.

Second, Our State and Local Governments

They continue to demonstrate to Washington, DC, that the choice between a prosperous economy and a healthy environment is a false choice. More likely, we cannot have one without the other.

Third, the United States Armed Forces

While the United States military may be affected by domestic politics, it remains on mission. We are fortunate to have military leaders who are patriotic, brilliant, and honorable. It is within the Department of Defense where climate policy has been the least politicized and where our federal government has made the most progress.

In fact, the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review identified climate change as a significant security risk:

As greenhouse gas emissions increase, sea levels are rising, average global temperatures are increasing and severe weather patterns are accelerating. Climate change may exacerbate water scarcity and lead to sharp increases in food costs. The pressures caused by climate change will influence resource competition while placing additional burdens on economies, societies, and governance institutions around the world. These effects are threat multipliers that will aggravate stressors abroad such as poverty, environmental degradation, political instability, and social tensions – conditions that can enable terrorist activity and other forms of violence (Department of Defense, 2014, Chapter 1, Future Security Environment, p. 8).

The Department of Defense is one of the largest fossil-fuel users on earth, and the United States Navy has always been an innovator in energy—from sails to coal, from coal to oil, to nuclear, and now to alternative energy. In 2009, Navy Secretary Ray Mabus set a goal that by 2020, 50% of Navy energy consumption would come from alternative sources, and 50% of Navy and Marine Corps installations would be net zero. Since then, the Navy has launched the “Great Green Fleet,” powered in part by advanced biofuels derived from beef fat, purchased at a competitive price even when oil prices were low. And they have secured contracts for 1.1 GW of renewable energy. And, in partnership with the State of California, the Navy acquired 400 electric vehicles for its bases in California.

Even changing to LED light bulbs is saving the Navy 20,000 gallons of fuel per year in its destroyers, with longer lives, better light, and reduced maintenance costs.

Of course, as Secretary Mabus himself said, “The goals I set were not about making us ‘greener,’ though that is an added benefit – they were and remain about making us better warfighters. Optimizing our energy use is a force multiplier, increasing our capabilities, our impact and our endurance across platforms and disciplines.”¹

Fourth, American Businesses

Business is not waiting for Congress to say it is okay to compete in the renewable economy. For instance, now that China has called for one out of every five cars sold there to run on alternative fuel within 8 years (“China Hastens a Global Move to Electric Cars,” *New York Times*, October 10, 2017), every worldwide automaker will have to compete in that space. American politicians will see that it is not just Tesla, but all US carmakers, and all their voting employees, who are part of the climate revolution.

Shareholders in American companies are themselves demanding climate responsiveness. This May, ExxonMobil shareholders, with a vote of 62% of its shares,

¹“Biofuel blend powers Navy’s Great Green Fleet deployment,” Governors’ Biofuels Coalition, January 21, 2016.

instructed the company to analyze and report on how the company would respond to global efforts to achieve the 2 °C target (“Financial firms lead shareholder rebellion against ExxonMobil climate change policies,” *Washington Post*, May 31, 2017). The two largest shareholders in ExxonMobil are BlackRock and Vanguard, major Wall Street investment firms.

Fifth, Respected Republicans

Republican leaders who are no longer in office are important advocates for climate action. This year, the Climate Leadership Council (www.clcouncil.org) called for a tax on carbon, labeling it the “Conservative Case for Carbon Dividends.” The plan would impose a gradually increasing tax on carbon, fully refunded to American taxpayers, combined with the repeal of regulations like the Clean Power Plan that would be redundant and less efficient at encouraging renewables than the carbon tax itself. The proposal is not novel, but the identity of its authors is. The council is led by James A. Baker III, George P. Schultz, Henry M. Paulson, Martin Feldstein, all former members of the Reagan and Bush administrations, and respected conservative economists and businessmen.²

Former US Representative Bob Inglis has formed RepublicEn.org, an effort to educate the country about free-enterprise solutions to climate change. His EnCourage Tour 2017, a series of town hall style meetings across the country, engaged voters across America in discussions of the “conservative case” for climate action.

Sixth, the News Media

A free press is a foundation of American democracy, and we need its help on climate. Our news media must be more honest about the severity of the climate crisis and the real facts. The media seems more concerned about being “balanced” than being accurate. This has led to needless confusion about the validity of undisputed science. And our media tend to focus on the issues, tweets, and scandals of today to the detriment of the long-term challenges, even existential threats like climate change.

²The Climate Leadership Council is sponsored by formidable businesses, including BP, ExxonMobil, General Motors, Johnson & Johnson, Procter & Gamble, PepsiCo, Santander, Schneider Electric, Shell, Total, and Unilever.

Finally, The Church

The church can show the moral imperative of action on climate. The Vatican's leadership is critical as we try to change minds and turn hearts in the USA. It is even more significant as we try to influence policy in the United States Congress. Here's why:

According to the Pew Research Center, while the number of adults in the USA "who describe themselves as Christian has been declining for decades, the U.S. Congress is as Christian today as it was in the early 1960s." Ninety-one percent of the Congress identifies as Christian, and one-third of the Christians in Congress identify as Catholic. And while the number of Christians in Congress has been virtually unchanged in the past 50 years, the number of Catholics in Congress has increased dramatically—from 19 to 31%.³

So nearly one-third of Congress has a direct connection to this church, which is why Pope Francis's commitment to making environmental stewardship a priority of his papacy has such potential to affect US climate policy.

Something else is happening, too. Evangelical Christians, who typically align with conservative Republicans, are weighing in on the need for climate action. If we understand the impact these voters have on the American electorate, we see that this is potentially transformative. As Rev. Mitch Hescox explains in his companion chapter:

The religious landscape is changing in the United States. Today, only 43% of Americans identify as white and Christian compared to 81% in 1976. Yet even amid these shifting demographics, white evangelicals still comprise 35% of the Republican party (Cox and Jones, 2017). Together, evangelicals and Catholics represent approximately 28% of the American populace, yet they consistently vote in disproportionately high numbers. Over 80% of white evangelicals voted for Mr. Trump in 2016, representing 28% of actual voters. More broadly, the last three United States Presidential elections saw pro-life voters average 45% of the electorate (evangelicals, 26%, Catholics, 19%) and for many of these voters, their anti-abortion (pro-life) stance overrode all other electoral considerations.

Like this pope, who is named for the saint from Assisi who considered all living things his brothers and sisters, many leading evangelical Christians are taking up the cause of climate because they, too, believe we have a moral imperative to save the planet given to us by God and to preserve His creation for our children.

I want to thank the Vatican and Pope Francis for your moral clarity and commitment to climate action and for including me in this historic event. I am very grateful to have been selected to represent the United States Congress in this book.

³Pew Research Center. Jan. 3, 2017, "Faith on the Hill".

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