

U.S.

# Is It Time for Climate Scientists to Get Political?

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*After the National Review compared him to a convicted child molester, climatologist Michael Mann decided to fight back. He encourages his colleagues to do the same.*



In a still from *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore stands next to a graph projecting climate change. (Lawrence Bender Productions)

Science has never really been the detached, apolitical world we sometimes imagine it to be. Just think of Galileo. But in the era of climate change, the politicization of science has reached an entirely new level.

No one knows that better than Michael Mann, a climatologist who directs the Earth System Science Center at Penn State and helped to create the famous "hockey stick" graph, which shows a dramatic spike in atmospheric carbon dioxide beginning during the Industrial Revolution. In recent years, Mann has become a primary target for those seeking to deny the science of climate change. His work has been investigated (and subsequently upheld) multiple times, his emails hacked (as part of the so-called "Climategate" scandal) and subpoenaed, his life and his family threatened.

This summer, when the Competitive Enterprise Institute and the *National Review* compared him to convicted child molester Jerry Sandusky and accused him of academic fraud, Mann decided to take action. He filed a lawsuit [PDF] against the two organizations and some of their employees, accusing them of defamation.

Mann sees the lawsuit as simply a part of the changing responsibilities of a climate scientist -- in this politically overheated environment, he argues, it's not enough anymore to simply do research. While others discuss ways to make science less partisan, Mann says it's time to recognize that, whether we like it or not, science is now a thoroughly political front.

### **What do you hope to achieve with this lawsuit?**

Ultimately, this is about saying, "enough is enough." For more than a decade, vested interests and those who work for them have been trying to discredit me in a cynical effort to discredit the science of climate change. They want to attack this iconic graph that my coauthors and I published more than a decade ago, and to go about it by going after me personally. I've developed a thick skin. But at a certain point, I think you have a responsibility to your fellow scientists, to the scientific community, to stand up against these sorts of dishonest assaults.

### **Why file a lawsuit instead of using some other tactic or response?**

There is a right to free speech in the United States; I, like all of my colleagues, value that. It's essential -- it's part of what makes this a great country. But, as the law recognizes, there's a limit to free speech. You can't make baseless and reckless accusations of fraud against scientists.

The allegations that have been made against me by climate change deniers--by industry-funded front groups -- for more than a decade have been shown to be baseless. The National Academy of Sciences reviewed our work and affirmed our conclusions; the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has affirmed our conclusions. In response to allegations of misconduct against me and my various colleagues, the inspector general of the National Science Foundation found that they were baseless and dismissed the case. So the highest scientific authority in the land has definitively spoken to this. The allegations of my detractors -- of fraud, of misconduct -- are completely without any foundation, and they're libelous.

**Describe some of the ways these accusations have affected your life.**

I've had prominent fossil fuel industry-funded politicians try to have me fired from my job, to have me investigated by Congress. The Tea Party attorney general from Virginia, Ken Cuccinelli, issued a subpoena for all of my emails with more than 39 different climate scientists around the world. It was rejected by the lower court and then by the state Supreme Court. I and other climate scientists have seen our email addresses and personal information published by prominent right-wing media figures, who directed people towards us to write us threatening letters and emails.

It's been a constant distraction that I've had to deal with for more than a decade while I continue to try to do what it is that I love doing--which is science, and educating and advising the next generation of scientists.

**Was climate science always so politically charged?**

The furthest thing from my mind was ever finding myself in the public sphere participating in some huge societal debate. It's not why I went into math and science. It was only when our research yielded this curve, the hockey stick that I found myself suddenly in the crosshairs of climate change deniers. In my book, *The Hockey Stick and the Climate Wars*, I describe the transition I underwent from a pure science nerd, happiest in the anonymity of my lab, to somebody who recognized that there's a need for scientists to do more than just their research.

**A major part of the scientific process is continued inquiry and uncertainty and peer review -- scrutinizing findings to make sure they're right. Climate change skeptics often say that this is really what they're doing. What's the difference?**

There are so many areas where there is still real uncertainty, where there is legitimate debate that occurs in good faith. That's expressed in the peer-reviewed literature and in the debates that scientists have with each other at scientific meetings. We don't know, precisely, what the sea level rise will be over the next century. We don't know, precisely, what the impacts of climate change will be on extreme weather at regional scales, to the point where we can really inform the process of adaptation to climatic changes that we're already committed to. We could be having a good-faith public discussion about the real uncertainties that exist in the science and what their implications are.

But unfortunately, instead of productive debate, our detractors have chosen a smear effort to discredit climate science. The fact that the House Republicans voted unanimously to overturn the EPA's finding that climate change is a public-health issue--you can't have that good-faith debate if one of the two parties involved simply denies that the threat even exists.

The discussion over climate change has been poisoned. We saw it play out in the presidential debates--the topic of climate change never even came up. I think that's symptomatic of the fact that even those who *do* believe we need to do something about this feel some degree of fear. If they stake out a position, a proactive position with respect to doing something about climate change, they will be attacked with tens of millions of dollars of dark money from the Koch brothers and other dishonest actors.

To me that's what's most disturbing, and it's part of a much larger problem in our societal discourse: the way vested interests can spend tens of millions to influence political campaigns and try to buy our democracy.

### **So what solutions do you hope to see?**

Perhaps it would be malpractice on my part not to stress the importance of voting. We have to hold our policy makers accountable for representing our interests -- and those of our children and our grandchildren, with respect to the type of planet we leave behind for them -- rather than the narrow interest of certain corporate lobbies, like the fossil fuel industry lobby, who don't want to see anything done about this problem.

The only way to ensure that we have that good-faith debate in our politics about what to do about this problem is to make sure that we elect politicians of good faith. There's nothing more important a person can do right now than expressing his or her views at the voting booth. Obviously, citizens can do more than that: They can write letters to the editor, they can try to influence public opinion by expressing their views to others. But right now, the most important thing people can do is to vote in this election.

### **The way to combat the politicization of science is ... more politicization?**

It's not by our own choosing--that's a very important distinction. But when you find yourself in a street fight, you have to defend yourself, you have to fight back.

That's why I think you see austere institutions like the journal *Nature*, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, hundreds of members of the National Academy of Sciences--all of these very conservative institutions have come out with very powerful statements in recent years blasting those who are engaged in dishonest efforts to smear scientists and to try to advance anti-scientific causes through attacks against mainstream science.

The fact is that even some of the most conservative institutions within the scientific community have come out and said, "Enough is enough. This just isn't acceptable. It's not okay to use political tactics in a cynical effort to discredit science that might be inconvenient to powerful vested interests like the fossil fuel industry." The fact that such prominent and conservative scientific institutions have come out with statements to that effect speaks volumes. I think, in part, it's responsible for the fact that you now see a lot more climate scientists speaking out and defending the science against attack.

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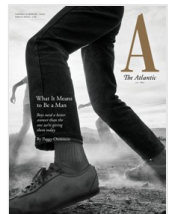
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