Trump voters in storm-ravaged county confront climate change

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Body

PORT ARTHUR, Texas - The church was empty, except for the piano too heavy for one man to move. It had been 21 days since the greatest storm Wayne Christopher had ever seen dumped a year's worth of rain on his town, drowning this church where he was baptized, met his high school sweetheart and later married her.

He had piled the ruined pews out on the curb, next to water-logged hymnals and molding Sunday school lesson plans and chunks of drywall that used to be a mural of Noah's Ark. Now he tilted his head up to take in the mountain of rubble, and Christopher, an evangelical Christian and a conservative Republican, considered what caused this destruction: that the violent act of nature had been made worse by acts of man.

"I think the Lord put us over the care of his creation, and when we pollute like we do, destroy the land, there's consequences to that," he said. "It might not catch up with us just right now, but it's going to catch up. Like a wound that needs to be healed."

Jefferson County, Texas, is among the low-lying coastal areas of the U.S. that could lose the most as the ice caps melt and the seas warm and rise. At the same time, it is more economically dependent on the petroleum industry and its emissions-spewing refineries than any other place in the U.S. Residents seemed to choose between the two last November, abandoning a four-decade-old pattern of voting Democratic in presidential elections to support Donald Trump.

Then came Hurricane Harvey. Now some conservatives here are newly confronting some of the most polarizing questions in American political discourse: What role do humans play in global warming and the worsening of storms like Harvey? And what should they expect their leaders - including the ***climate***-skeptic president they helped elect - to do about the problem now?

Answers are hard to come by in a place where refineries stand like cityscapes. Nearly 5,000 people work in the petroleum industry. Some have described the chemical stink in the air as "the smell of money" - it means paychecks, paid mortgages and meals.

Christopher, like most people in Jefferson County, believed that global warming was real before the storm hit. Post-Harvey, surrounded by debris stretching for block after block, he thinks the president's outright rejection of the scientific consensus is no longer good enough.

But how do you help the ***climate*** without hurting those who depend on ***climate***-polluting industries?

"It's a Catch-22 kind of thing," he said. "Do you want to build your economy, or do you want to save the world?"

"Steroids for storms" is how Andrew Dessler explains the role global warming plays in extreme weather. ***Climate change*** didn't create Hurricane Harvey or Irma or Maria. But Dessler, a professor of atmospheric sciences at Texas A&M University, and most scientists agree that warming and rising seas likely amplify storms that form naturally, feeding more water and more intensity as they plow toward land.

"It will be 60 inches of rain this time, maybe 80 inches next time," Dessler said of Harvey's record-setting rainfall for any single storm in U.S. history.

As a private citizen and candidate, Trump often referred to ***climate change*** as a hoax, and since taking office he and his administration have worked aggressively to undo policies designed to mitigate the damage. He announced his intention to pull out of the Paris ***climate*** agreement, a global accord of 195 nations to reduce carbon emissions, and his administration has dismantled environmental regulations and erased ***climate change*** data from government websites. This month, his Environmental Protection Agency administrator promised to kill an effort to limit carbon emissions from coal-fired plants.

Anthony Leiserowitz, a Yale University researcher, traces the politicization of the ***climate*** to 1997, when then-Democratic Vice President Al Gore brokered a commitment on the world stage to reduce greenhouse gases. The political parties have cleaved further apart ever since, and ***climate change*** denial reached a fever pitch as the Tea Party remade the GOP during President Barack Obama's first term.

Americans tend to view the issue through their already established red-versus-blue lens, Leiserowitz said, but while there are fractions on each extreme, the majority still fall somewhere along a scale in the middle.

A new Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll finds that 63 percent of Americans think ***climate change*** is happening and that the government should address it, and that two-thirds of Americans disapprove of the way Trump is handling the issue. Most Americans also think weather disasters are getting more severe, and believe global warming is a factor.

As the downpour from Hurricane Harvey stretched into its second day, with no end in sight, Joe Evans watched from the window of his home in the Jefferson County seat of Beaumont, and an unexpected sense of guilt overcame him: "What have we been doing to the planet for all of these years?"

Evans, a Republican, once ran unsuccessfully for local office. He ignored ***climate change***, as he thought Republicans were supposed to do, but Harvey's deluge left him wondering why. When he was young, discussions of the ozone layer were uncontroversial; now they're likely to end in pitched political debate.

"I think it's one of those games that politicians play with us," he said, "to once again make us choose a side."

Evans voted for Trump, but he's frustrated with what he describes as the "conservative echo chamber" that dismisses ***climate change*** instead of trying to find a way to apply conservative principles to simultaneously saving the Earth and the economy. Even today, some Republicans in the county complain about Gore and the hypocrisy they see in elite liberals who jet around the world, carbon emissions trailing behind them, to push ***climate*** policies on blue-collar workers trying to keep refinery jobs so they can feed their families.

Evans isn't sure if the disastrous run of weather will cause ***climate change*** to become a bigger priority for residents here, or if as memories fade talk of this issue will, too.

"I haven't put so much thought into it that I want to go mobilize a bunch of people and march on Washington," he said. "But it made me think enough about it that I won't actively take part in denying it. We can't do that anymore."

Most in Texas didn't believe ***climate change*** existed when Katharine Hayhoe, a ***climate*** scientist at Texas Tech University, began evangelizing about the issue years ago. Now studies estimate that 69 percent of Texans believe that the ***climate*** is ***changing***, and 52 percent believe that has been caused by human activity. Most resistance she hears now is not with the science itself but over proposed solutions that mean government intrusion and regulation.

Jefferson County's refineries produce 10 percent of the gasoline in the United States, 20 percent of diesel and half of the fuel used to fly commercial planes, said County Judge Jeff Branick, a Democrat who voted for Trump and then switched his party affiliation to Republican, in part because of his disagreement with the Democratic Party's ***climate*** policies.

Branick doesn't deny that ***climate change*** exists, but he calls himself a cheerleader for the petroleum industry and believes environmental policies are "job killers."

John Sterman, a professor at MIT Sloan School of Management, said addressing ***climate change*** will invariably lead to gradual job losses in the fossil fuels industry. But communities have lost a dominant industry before, and those able to diversify can prosper. Jefferson County could look to the renewable energy industry, with jobs that require many of the skills refinery workers have, he said. Texas already produces more wind power than any other state.

Angela Lopez's husband works in a refinery, so she understands the worry of the economic cost of addressing global warming. But her county is nicknamed "cancer alley" for its high levels of disease that residents have long attributed to living in the shadow of one of the largest concentrations of refineries in the world.

"It's our livelihood, but it's killing us," Lopez said, standing in what used to be her dining room. Now her house in Beaumont is down to the studs. As Harvey's floodwater rose, she tried to save what she could. It did no good. The water didn't stop until it reached the eaves, and the Lopezes lost everything they owned.

Just about all of her relatives are conservatives, and indeed the political divides in the county run deep: Even as most of the communities along the Gulf Coast turned red years ago, Jefferson County clung to its Democratic roots. The county is ethnically diverse -41 percent white, 34 percent black and 20 percent Hispanic - with a historically strong union workforce. Trump won Jefferson by just 419 votes.

"To come up with real solutions, you have to be honest with yourself about what causes something to happen," Lopez said. "It's not just because some storm came, it was bad and unprecedented. It was unprecedented for a reason, so we have to acknowledge that and start working toward being better. And part of that conversation should be ***climate change***."

On a porch outside another ruined house nearby, two neighbors who both lost everything to Harvey started having that conversation.

Gene Jones, a truck driver who didn't vote, asked Wilton Johnson, a Trump supporter, if he thought ***climate change*** intensified the storm.

"I don't think so, no," Johnson said.

Graphic

Wayne Christopher walks by a pile of debris outside the church he'd attended his whole life damaged from Hurricane Harvey in Port Arthur, Texas, Monday, Sept. 25, 2017. He and his wife had come here every Sunday and every Wednesday for more than four decades. This church is where he was baptized, where he met his high school sweetheart, then married her 46 years ago. "We have a lot of memories here. This is my home. I've been here all my life," said Christopher. (AP Photo/David Goldman) Wayne Christopher stands for a portrait in Port Arthur, Texas, Monday, Sept. 25, 2017, as a stained glass window is reflected in his glasses in the damaged sanctuary of the Memorial Baptist Church he'd attended his whole life. After the previous month's Hurricane Harvey, he said, "I think the Lord put us over the care of his creation, and when we pollute like we do, destroy the land, there's consequences to that," he said. "And it might not catch up with us just right now, but it's gonna catch up. Like a wound that needs to be healed." (AP Photo/David Goldman) Wayne Christopher plays the keys on a piano put out

on the curb in Port Arthur, Texas, Monday, Sept. 25, 2017, next to pews from the Memorial Baptist Church which he'd attended his whole life. The damage was caused by Hurricane Harvey a month earlier. "He's not too up on global warming, and that's a shame," Christopher said of the president he supported in November, and supports still. He also believes in the consensus among scientists that ***climate change*** is real and that this disastrous run of weather, from droughts in the west to wildfires to catastrophic hurricanes along the coasts, is a preview of the future if the country doesn't begin to take the problem seriously. (AP Photo/David Goldman) Debris sits outside the Memorial Baptist Church in Port Arthur, Texas, Monday, Sept. 25, 2017. It was damaged by Hurricane Harvey floodwaters. Church member Wayne Christopher said, "You know what it said up there? We were so busy working we didn't notice. Then one day we looked up and it said, 'you've got problems, we have the solution,'" Christopher's wife Polly remembers. "We said, 'we might need to ***change*** the sign.'" Because she's not sure that they have solutions for this. Now their sign reads: Praying for our Community." (AP Photo/David Goldman) A residential neighborhood sits next to an oil refinery in Port Arthur, Texas, Thursday, Sept. 28, 2017. The region's economy is tied to the petroleum industry more than in any other place in America: the concentration of people here employed by refineries is 81 times higher than the rest of the country. Though research suggests most in Jefferson County believe that humans have contributed to the warming of the globe, many struggle still to know what to expect their leaders to do about it without at the same time crippling their own economy. (AP Photo/David Goldman) People stand in a line for water, food and supplies at a distribution point in Port Arthur, Texas, Monday, Sept. 25, 2017. Jefferson County was drowned by more than 60 inches of rain during Hurricane Harvey, the most rainfall ever recorded in a single storm in the nation's history, according to preliminary data from the National Weather Service. (AP Photo/David Goldman) A man walks past debris from homes on his street damaged in flooding from Hurricane Harvey as an oil refinery stands in the background in Port Arthur, Texas, Thursday, Sept. 28, 2017. This historically Democratic county, home to a quarter-million people, is among the low-lying coastal areas that stand the most to lose as the ice caps melt and the seas warm and rise. Yet in November, voters flipped to vote for President Donald Trump, the first Republican they chose in 44 years, who has dismissed the concept of ***climate change*** as a hoax perpetrated by China. (AP Photo/David Goldman) Hilton Kelley tosses his petition clipboard in frustration as he's turned away from a renter who was told by her landlord not to get involved in Kelley's attempt to shutdown the dump across the street piled with flood damaged debris in Port Arthur, Texas, Wednesday, Sept. 27, 2017. "This is an outrage. This is appalling. There's no way this should have happened," said Kelly of the dump's proximity to people's homes. He worried about mold and other contaminants from the garbage getting into the low-income African American neighborhood. These are the neighborhoods, he said, that often pay the price for environmental pollution. Many of these neighborhoods also flooded. (AP Photo/David Goldman) Hilton Kelley walks by as a truck unloads flood damaged debris at a makeshift dump across the street from a residential neighborhood in Port Arthur, Texas, Wednesday, Sept. 27, 2017. Kelley is fighting to get the dump shut down for fear of nearby residents breathing in mold. Kelley says many people in Port Arthur understand the impact local industry has on ***climate change*** and pollution. But he says they're often hesitant to speak out. "When you have people living at or below the poverty line, many people are hopeful of getting jobs at those refineries or chemical plants." (AP Photo/David Goldman) Wilton Johnson stands in the gutted home in Beaumont, Texas, Monday, Sept. 25, 2017, that he shares with his parents. It was damaged by Hurricane Harvey. "We need to be responsible human beings to the earth. But at the same time we shouldn't sacrifice the financial freedoms, the free market and free enterprise in a capitalistic society," said Johnson, who supports Trump's environmental agenda. (AP Photo/David Goldman) A box of emergency ration meals sits on what used to be the kitchen floor as Wilton Johnson works in his gutted home in Beaumont, Texas, Monday, Sept. 25, 2017, damaged by Hurricane Harvey. (AP Photo/David Goldman) Jo Vick, 74, recovers her husband's shotgun and pistol as she searches the boat they had lived on in Beaumont, Texas, Wednesday, Sept. 27, 2017, looking for anything salvageable after it was submerged by Hurricane Harvey. The Vicks made their home on the boat for the past seven years and had no insurance to replace it. "It's time to move on," said Vick about whether she would try to find a new home on another boat. "I just feel like there's a reason I shouldn't be there." (AP Photo/David Goldman) Arthur Shields, left, and a fellow evacuee walk through a temporary shelter encampment in Port Arthur, Texas, Wednesday, Sept. 27, 2017, where they've been living for nearly a month since hurricane Harvey damaged their homes. Jefferson County was drowned by more than 60 inches of rain during Hurricane Harvey, the most rainfall ever recorded in a single storm in the nation's history, according to preliminary data from the National Weather Service. (AP Photo/David Goldman) Angela Lopez stands on the back porch of her home in Beaumont, Texas, Tuesday, Sept. 26, 2017. It was flooded from Hurricane Harvey a month earlier. "In a town like this, talking about ***climate change*** is not very popular," Lopez said. As the flood poured in

and they fled, she tried to save what she could. She piled the dresser drawers on the bed and perched the leather couch up on the coffee table. But it did no good. The water didn't stop until it reached the eaves, and they lost everything they own. (AP Photo/David Goldman) Angela Lopez, watches as her grandson, Carter Gale, 2, cleans dirt off his chair in Beaumont, Texas, Tuesday, Sept. 26, 2017. He found it in the backyard, carried by water from inside their home during Hurricane Harvey flooding. Most of her family, including her husband, are conservatives, and have followed Trump's lead and dismiss the threat of ***climate change***. Lopez worries this will keep happening until the nation is able to have a frank conversation about it. (AP Photo/David Goldman) Crystal Stringer, second from left, inflates an air mattress with her children, from left, Makalla, 5; Cesar, 12; and Eduardo, 10, as they prepare for bed after a month living in a church in Port Arthur, Texas, Wednesday, Sept. 27, 2017. Their home is still uninhabitable because of damage from August's Hurricane Harvey. (AP Photo/David Goldman) Joe Evans, a Jefferson County Republican, shows on Tuesday, Sept. 26, 2017 how a month earlier he watched from the window as Hurricane Harvey's downpour stretched into its second day in Beaumont, Texas. As his street flooded, an unexpected sense of guilt overcame him. "What have been doing to the planet for all of these years?" he was surprised to find himself thinking. (AP Photo/David Goldman) Joe Evans, a Jefferson County Republican, left, irons his shirt in the home he shares with his daughter Denver, 11, and two other daughters, not pictured, in Beaumont, Texas, Tuesday, Sept. 26, 2017. Evans voted for Trump, but he's frustrated with what he describes at the "conservative echo chamber" that calls ***climate change*** a hoax instead of trying to find a way to apply conservative principles to simultaneously saving the earth and the economy. "I haven't put so much thought into it that I want to go mobilize a bunch of people and march on Washington," he said. "But it made me think enough about it that I won't actively take part in denying it. I won't actively take part in calling it a hoax. We can't do that anymore." (AP Photo/David Goldman) Alice Green, 57, right, sits in the room she shares with her daughter Michelle, 36, center, and grandson Caleb 16, in Port Arthur, Texas, Monday, Sept. 25, 2017. For the past month, they have been living in a church after their home was damaged by Hurricane Harvey. (AP Photo/David Goldman) Wilton Johnson stands in Beaumont, Texas, Monday, Sept. 25, 2017, outside the gutted home he shares with his parents that was damaged by Hurricane Harvey. "What good is a great environment if we're poor and living like cavemen? And vice versa, I understand the other side of that: what's great about living in luxury when you can't go outside? I just don't think we should look at two storms and say 'We're ruining the earth! Shut the plants down," said Johnson, who supports Trump's environmental agenda. (AP Photo/David Goldman) Greg Gunner, left, kisses his grandmother Mabel Bishop, 99, on Tuesday, Sept. 26, 2017 in Port Arthur, Texas, in their home that was damaged by Hurricane Harvey. Gunner carried his grandmother, stricken with Alzheimer's disease, out of the house as the floodwaters rose, telling her they were going fishing to try to keep her calm. He voted for Hillary Clinton in November, and says the country's political divides have left him with little faith in the government's ability to get things done. But he believes the storm that wrecked his town is a preview of what global warming will bring if the nation's divided political sides don't find common ground to address it. "The intensity of the destruction taking place these days, there's something going on. I think it's a wake-up call, to say, hey, what's important? What's really important?" he said. "Are you going to work together, or are you going to pull each other apart?" (AP Photo/David Goldman) A boat is submerged in a Hurricane Harvey-damaged marina in Beaumont, Texas, Wednesday, Sept. 27, 2017. The marina's waters rose so high that several boats crashed through the high tin roofs above their slips. Jefferson County was drowned by more than 60 inches of rain during Hurricane Harvey, the most rainfall ever recorded in a single storm in the nation's history, according to preliminary data from the National Weather Service. (AP Photo/David Goldman) Wayne Christopher walks through the Hurricane Harvey-damaged sanctuary of the Memorial Baptist Church in Port Arthur, Texas, Monday, Sept. 25, 2017. He had attended the church for his whole life. In the weeks since Hurricane Harvey devastated Jefferson County, Texas, and as other monstrous storms pummeled Florida and Puerto Rico, some here found themselves in quiet moments pondering what has become some of the most polarizing questions in American political discourse: have human beings altered the earth so profoundly it is making bad storms more brutal? And what should we do about it now? (AP Photo/David Goldman) An oil refinery stands in the background as children play on a basketball court in Port Arthur, Texas, Wednesday, Sept. 27, 2017. The region's economy is tied to the petroleum industry more than in any other place in America: the concentration of people here employed by refineries is 81 times higher than the rest of the country. (AP Photo/David Goldman)

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