

Opinion: Climate-change solutions depend on open dialogue

By Thomas Hayden

Katharine Hayhoe is a busy woman. As an atmospheric scientist at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, she studies the regional impact of climate change. As a Christian, she volunteers, sharing her science with church and public groups. And as the mother of a young child – well, enough said.

So it's not surprising she was frustrated when a chapter about climate science she wrote for an upcoming Newt Gingrich book was casually dumped by the Republican presidential primary candidate in the lead up to the Iowa caucuses. "Nice to hear that Gingrich is tossing my #climate chapter in the trash," she wrote in a message to her Twitter followers on Dec. 30. "100+ unpaid hrs I cd've spent playing w my baby."

What happened? The 2012 Republican primary season happened, that's what. In a year when contenders could be leading in the polls one week and down in single digits the next, the list of policy positions candidates can't afford not to hold has grown. To the traditional litany of taxes (no way), guns (absolutely) and abortion (never), add a new Republican litmus test: climate change (not even if the science says it's so).

Throughout the Great Winnowing, Republican primary candidates have been rushing to distance themselves from the scientific consensus on climate change – that it's happening, it's a problem, and humans are the cause. They're not simply rejecting specific climate policies. Just acknowledging the vast, well-documented evidence that humans are changing the planet's climate has apparently become forbidden.

That has any number of prominent Republicans worrying their party has become antiscience. But it also raises a deeper question: If we can't even agree on observable, verifiable facts, how are we supposed to govern ourselves in a democracy?

Thomas Hayden teaches science communication and environmental sustainability at Stanford University. He is a trained scientist and has worked as a journalist for Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report and other publications.

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