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Scott Pruitt denies basic climate science. But most of the outrage is missing the point.

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Scott Pruitt, the newly confirmed administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, got himself in **hot water** this week when he questioned whether human beings are behind climate change.

On Thursday, when asked on the CNBC show Squawk Box whether human carbon emissions are driving global warming, Pruitt **responded**: "I think that measuring with precision human activity on the climate is something very challenging to do and there's tremendous disagreement about the degree of impact, so no, I would not agree that it's a primary contributor to the global warming that we see."

(Just to get it out of the way quickly: This is false. Scientists are *extremely* confident that human CO2 emissions are the primary driver of recent warming. For all intents and purposes, we are certain of it — as certain as scientists get about anything. If you're interested the details, start **here** and follow the links.)

Pruitt's remarks sparked a news cycle that is, to this 10-year veteran of the climate beat, extremely and tediously familiar. I could have scripted the whole thing in advance. As always, it seems to me that people are missing the point in two key ways.

It's not about Pruitt, it's about the Republican Party

My inbox is groaning with statements from previous EPA administrators, scientists, nonprofits, members of Congress, and assorted others, condemning Pruitt's ignorance in florid terms.

But they are all about what Pruitt believes. And in the end, who cares what he believes? He is a functionary, chosen in part to dismantle EPA regulations on greenhouse gases. If it weren't him, it would be some other functionary.

The GOP's goal is to block or reverse any policy that would negatively affect its donors and supporters, who are drawn disproportionately from carbon-intensive industries and regions. That is the North Star — to protect those constituencies. That means, effectively, blocking any efficacious climate policy (which, almost by definition, will diminish fossil fuels).

They can't just say that, though, so they have to retrofit a set of beliefs that justify inaction on climate change. Those beliefs shift around depending on context and can be maddeningly difficult to pin down. Among friendly audiences, Republicans are prone to dismiss climate change as a hoax. In public settings like Congressional hearings, they are more likely to adopt "lukewarmism," accepting that climate change is happening (thus dodging the awkward "denier" label), waving their hands vaguely in the direction of action, but always emphasizing the uncertainties in the science and the grave economic dangers of any proposed policy solution.

That's the strategy Secretary of State Rex Tillerson adopted in his confirmation hearing. And it's the same strategy Pruitt adopted. He told Sen. Bernie Sanders, "I believe that the [EPA] administrator has a very important role to perform in regulating CO2." He told Sen. Jeff Merkley that the EPA's endangerment finding on carbon dioxide — its official determination that CO2 is a threat to human health — is "the law of the land" and emphasized that "there is nothing that I know that will cause a review at this point."

These statements were carefully calibrated to give the impression that Pruitt accepts the role of CO2 in climate change and the need to regulate it. What he said on CNBC sounded very different. Thus the outrage.

But the reason GOP beliefs on climate are so difficult to pin down is that the beliefs are not the point. The party's institutional opposition to action is the point. The beliefs are retrofit, on an opportunistic and sometimes case-by-case basis, to support the conclusion, which is: do nothing.

Pruitt is an avowed opponent of EPA who has spent his professional life suing it to stop it from regulating greenhouse gases. He was chosen to stop action on climate change. What he believes, or claims to believe, while doing so is ultimately not that important.

Alone among major parties in the developed world, the GOP rejects the need to act on climate change. That's the outrage. Pruitt is an epiphenomenon.

What Scott Pruitt's confirmation means for the EPA

It's not about facts, it's about institutions

Predictably, Pruitt's comments were met with an outpouring of sciencesplaining. [Article](#) after [article](#) after [article](#) patiently walked through the evidence that, #actually, climate change is real and caused by human beings.

I suppose there might be some readers out there who have never been exposed to that evidence, though it has been available for decades and is always an easy Google search away. But there is zero chance *Pruitt* hasn't been exposed to it. Clearly the facts have not swayed him.

Indeed, the climate fight has long since moved past the stage when it was about the facts.

Allow me an analogy. Imagine you're playing a basketball game. A member of the other team travels. The referee calls the travel, but the opposing player just shrugs and says, "I don't care." He refuses to surrender the ball and just keeps going. Then his team starts putting extra players on the court, fouling at will, and pelting your team with refuse. The referee continues calling violations, but the other team simply disregards him. They start appealing to their own referees, friends of theirs in the stands. "Bob says there was no foul."

At that point, the dispute is no longer about what happened in this play or that play. The facts are not at issue. The dispute is over *the authority of the referee*. The question is whether both teams will honor the referee's calls, and if not, how the game can be played at all and what "winning" means under the circumstances.

If it's not obvious, the referee in this analogy is science.

When we say we "know" human beings are causing climate change, virtually none of us mean we know that in any direct way. Most of us don't possess the skills to analyze primary data or construct climate models. What we mean is, "that's what the scientists say." We are implicitly appealing to the authority of scientists — of science itself.

We naive types like to think that this is how a modern society runs. We set up **scientific institutions, governed by certain guild rules and norms regarding objectivity, reproducibility of results, peer review, etc. Those institutions gather and analyze knowledge and we collectively agree to grant them authority, to accept their results.**

That is how we establish a common foundation of facts and understanding, without which it is virtually impossible to have coherent political debates.

Such knowledge-producing institutions — not only science, but also academia and journalism — are not immune to criticism, of course. And they are never entirely free of biases or error. Their procedures and results are always open to democratic dispute.

But absent some compelling reason to believe that those institutions have been corrupted or systematically distorted, we accept their results. Otherwise, epistemological chaos ensues, persuasion becomes impossible, and politics devolves into a raw contest of power.

Conservatives have never established any serious corruption or wrongdoing in the institutions and norms of climate science. All they have are wild conspiracy theories about hoaxes and grant money. All they have are appeals to counter-authorities, members of the conservative establishment largely operating outside mainstream scientific institutions. Like the basketball team ignoring the referee, they have simply chosen not to accept the results of climate science.

Restating, underscoring, or even strengthening those scientific results won't solve that problem. The results already come from multiple fields, are reinforced by **multiple lines of evidence**, and have been vetted (*extremely* vetted, you might say) by several extended, multi-layered review processes. Collectively, we don't know how to "know" anything more confidently than we know this stuff.

If someone chooses to simply reject those scientific institutions, procedures, and results, then piling on more facts is beside the point. It's not about facts any more, it's about the authority of the institutions.

Climate denialism is the least of it

Climate denial has had, and will continue to have, dire results, producing real suffering for real people. **But in a sense, climate denial is just the tip of the (melting) iceberg. The right's refusal to accept the authority of climate science is of a piece with its rejection of mainstream media, academia, and government, the shared institutions and norms that bind us together and contain our political disputes.**

Pruitt's comments point to something deeper and more corrosive than mere misinformation or misunderstanding. Explaining the basic facts of climate science (again) is utterly futile if the intended audience rejects the authority of climate scientists and scientific institutions.

We're eventually going to have to grapple with this crisis of authority. Until then, more facts and periodic outbursts of outrage are futile.