

Copenhagen: A Climate of Suspicion

By [Christopher Caldwell](#)

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#), [Science and Medicine](#)

In-depth Report: [Climate Change](#)

The publication last week of excerpts from 3,000 e-mails stolen from the Climate Research Unit at the University of East Anglia comes as [a blow to global-warming activists](#) on the very eve of the [Copenhagen climate summit](#). The e-mails concern a handful of US and UK scientists affiliated with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The IPCC has used a graph nicknamed the “hockey stick”, which shows a spike in temperatures in the past century. It is a centrepiece of the [assessment of global warming](#) that will be the basis of talks in Copenhagen.

But it has its detractors. In a [paper published in 2005](#), the Canadian economist Ross McKittrick attacked the IPCC’s work as statistically flawed and warned that “group efforts are always at risk of self-selection and groupthink.” Citing the importance of the IPCC to policymakers, he urged an independent panel be appointed to assure, first, that “the data are publicly available” and, second, that “the statistical methods were fully described”.

The [e-mails](#) appear to bear out Mr McKittrick’s worries. One, allegedly written by Phil Jones of East Anglia, asks that “Mike” (Michael Mann of the University of Pennsylvania) and another scientist (“Gene”) delete certain of their e-mails regarding a 2007 IPCC study. The author of the e-mail volunteers that another scientist (“Keith”) would delete his own, and that “Caspar” would do the same. At least two letters describe ways the scientists should use their influence to pressure and delegitimise a peer-reviewed journal that had published a hostile paper. At least two describe manoeuvres to avoid Freedom of Information requests. The e-mails do not in themselves undermine the IPCC’s science. But they are evidence of groupthink. The author of the incriminating “Phil” e-mail appears hopeful, at least, that five distinguished scientists would be willing to destroy their own correspondence to defend their work not against error but against scrutiny. Mr Jones said this week that the e-mails were written out of frustration and that none have been deleted.

Even before the e-mails became public, American public opinion on climate change had undergone a shift towards scepticism. A [Washington Post poll published this week found](#) that only 72 per cent of Americans believe global warming “has probably been happening”, as against 80 per cent last year. Since 2006, the percentage of Americans who think there is no such thing as global warming has doubled, to 26 per cent.

These findings are in line with a [more detailed study done in October](#) by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. The percentage of Americans who see global warming as a “very serious problem” has fallen since last year, to 35 per cent from 44 per cent. This decline is occurring in all regions and all political parties. It is sharpest among independents, 79 per cent of whom were seriously worried about global warming in 2008 and barely half of whom (53 per cent) are now. Democrats are more likely to see global warming as a “serious

problem”, but only a minority of them (49 per cent) do. And although Americans marginally favour President Barack Obama’s cap-and-trade plans for reducing carbon emissions, those who follow the issue closely oppose them by two-to-one. A Senate bill that would have strengthened the president’s negotiating hand in Copenhagen has stalled out and will not be revisited until the end of the year.

Democratic consultant Mark Mellman reacted to the waning faith in climate change by telling the Post: “It’s a sad state of affairs when science becomes subject to partisan politics.” But it is worth stressing that Copenhagen is a political, not a scientific, summit. World leaders are not going to Copenhagen to discuss whether and how [climate change](#) is happening – they are trying to hammer out solutions. So perhaps the poll data reflect the folk wisdom that if there is no solution, there is no problem. Even if solutions are not scientifically impossible, they may be politically impossible.

Taxpayers in the developed countries have reason to worry that they will be taken to the cleaners at Copenhagen. If rich countries get tight targets for carbon emissions and poor ones get technology transfers and subsidies (through sellable carbon-offset credits) to “green their industrialisation”, then it looks less like a cleanup and more like a redistribution of productive capacity. Many programmes that appear reasonable in academic or political conclaves will prove explosive when exposed to the oxygen of democracy.

Paying poor countries is easier said than done. If you give money directly to farmers or “rainforest communities”, it will be inefficiently spent. To purchase land, say, or to develop alternative industry, you need concentrations of capital. That means giving the money either to governments (which introduces the certitude of corruption) or big companies (which introduces the possibility money will simply be transferred from western wage-earners to western moguls of “green industry”, who already receive large US subsidies and are prone to confuse their own interests with the developing world’s).

Democratic publics are not science faculties. Most of those who urge teaching creationism, instead of evolution, in high-school biology classes, for instance, could not explain Darwin’s theory to you. But neither could most of those who consider creationism an embarrassing superstition. When the public debates scientific questions, it is not attitudes towards science that divide them but attitudes towards authority. The stolen e-mails will not necessarily settle any scientific arguments. But they may settle some political ones.

The writer is a senior editor at The Weekly Standard

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