

# The IPCC in a worsening political climate

Blog post by Practice Lead Matthew Duhan, 10 October 2018

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On Monday, the International Panel on Climate Change released its most important report in recent years: the prosaically titled [Summary for Policymakers of the Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C](#). The good news is that the report's authors conclude that limiting warming to 1.5°C is still technically possible. Otherwise, the news is mostly bad. The report outlines both how urgently and how radically policymakers would need to act to meet the 1.5°C target. Time is running out, so why is climate change struggling to get a hearing? There is a plethora of reasons, but an age of populism is arguably bringing three to the fore: problems of association, communication and prescription.

The first, is a problem of association. In key political markets, populist leaders have succeeded in making support for tackling climate change - and on the other hand resistance against it - part of a wider question of political identity, rather than one of technical policy. America's most prominent climate advocates include figures such as Al Gore, Leonardo DiCaprio and California's Democratic Governor Jerry Brown; paragons of a liberal metropolitanism against which Trump has defined his political identity. In Europe the situation is more complex, but parties running on anti-establishment platforms such as Alternativ für Deutschland, the Swedish Democrats and Poland's ruling Law and Justice party have all expressed or flirted with scepticism towards climate action.

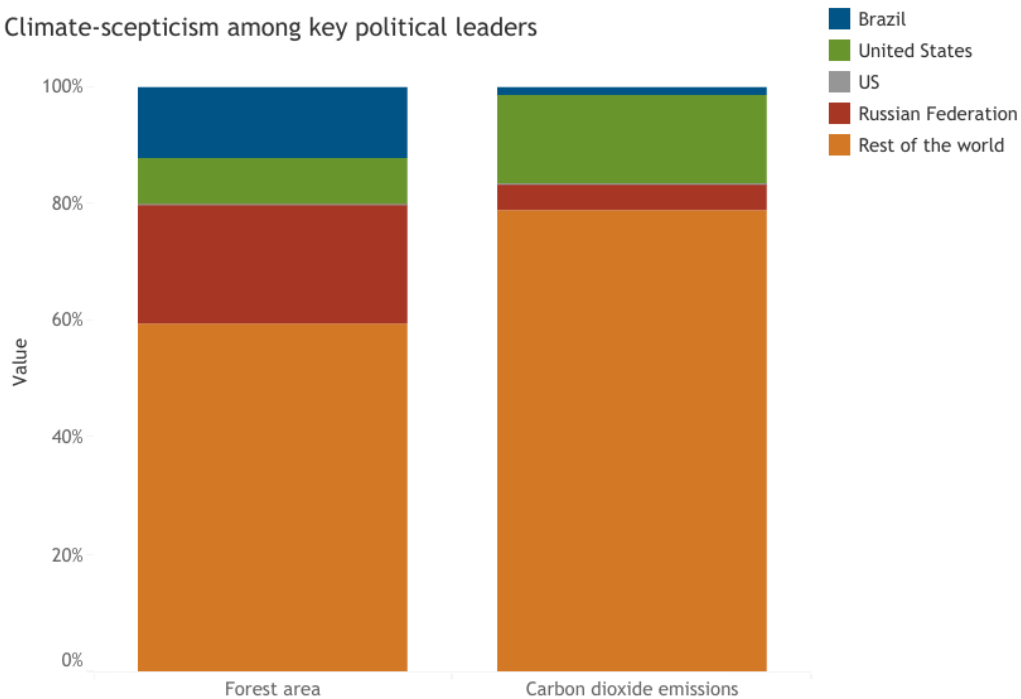
In part, climate advocates are victims of their own success. Years of campaigning to influence political, economic and cultural elites have succeeded in moving climate into a political mainstream that political insurgents are now seeking to reject. Polling suggests that Brexit supporters in the UK are more likely to reject statements that climate change is caused by human activity than Brexit's opponents. Alienation from the mainstream political consensus is working against efforts to build a broad climate coalition.

Second, is the problem of communication. The qualifications and cautions of science inevitably struggle against political messages delivered via absolutes and hyperboles. Every conclusion in Monday's IPCC report is accompanied by a set of parentheses rating its level of confidence. This circumspection is, of course, a vital part of the scientific process. But opponents have had success in using climate science's qualifiers against it, while making their own case free from the same restraints. This is likely to remain a key problem (*high confidence*).

Last, is a problem of prescription. Fundamentally, the policy proposals of climate activists struggle against the easy answers offered by populist politicians. In the immediate term, nothing is cheaper or easier than doing nothing. This is a tough obstacle to decarbonisation which poses immediate, concentrated costs - such as closing the local coal plant - against future, diffused gains - a small contribution to global efforts to reduce climate change. And at the international level, climate change is a classic collective action problem, with any solution requiring the sort of international coordination and problem-solving that is anathema to the 'America First' worldview and its

derivatives across the globe.

Climate-scepticism among key political leaders



Source: BP Statistical Review, FAO

Among world leaders, belief that climate change is not real, not man-made, or not a problem will remain a minority worldview. But as Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin look set to be joined by Brazilian presidential candidate Jair Bolsonaro, it is worth reflecting that these three alone would bring climate-sceptic leadership to countries together responsible for 20% of global emissions. And as the IPCC report makes clear, the challenge is not simply to defend the climate policy status quo, but to accelerate dramatically. The IPCC's document is a reminder that in an age of populist politics, climate action is a tough sell.