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The sounds of silence

It's as if they all forgot about the record-breaking heat, droughts, floods, wildfires, and other extreme weather events over the last few months. September was the 331st straight month with above-average temperatures world-wide, and the 36th straight September with a global temperature above the 20th century average. Extreme weather has gotten more extreme, and more expensive, with the prominent insurers crediting it as the leading edge of global warming. Arctic sea ice the size of Canada and Texas combined melted away this summer. And scientists are warning that we have reached the tipping point on climate change.

But with all this evidence – not just from scientists, but from the personal experiences of citizens both home and abroad – not one word was uttered in any of the presidential and vice presidential debates on climate change. This was the first time since climate change was identified in the '80s that the debates failed to include discussion of global warming. Even when the moderator in the last debate asked, "What do you believe is the greatest future threat to the national security of this country?" – an obvious opening for a longer, more fulsome response than simply identifying one part of the world or one particular group – neither Gov. Mitt Romney nor President Barack Obama said a word about climate. Instead, the people of the world were treated to silence.

This silence occurred as people in the United States are increasingly saying they believe that global climate change is happening, and that it is caused by our behavior. Over two-thirds of Americans say there is solid evidence that the earth's average temperature has been getting warmer over the past few decades. And only one in five thinks this is happening naturally.

Belief in global warming crosses party lines. Fully 85 percent of Democrats say there is solid evidence that the average temperature has been getting warmer. Nearly half of Republicans (48 percent) agree, as does a majority of independents (65 percent). It's clear that it isn't public opinion that is keeping the candidates from mentioning climate.

But there has been a sea change in the political dialogue in the past four years. What's different? The tea party and the Citizens United Supreme Court decision.

The tea party, whose original organizing funding came from the fossil fuel industry through Americans for Prosper-

ity, has created a reign of terror against any scientist, elected official, or candidate who might speak in favor of taking action to combat global warming. They have led the harassment of climate scientists – online, in the media, and in person. They have shouted down anyone who disagrees with them. And in 2010, they systematically defeated incumbents who believe that we must take action on global warming – particularly Republicans – making support for fossil fuels and opposition to science litmus tests.

Under the 2010 Citizens United decision, corporations are able to invest unlimited and unreported money into political ads. Forming so-called 527 groups (named after the pertinent IRS code), which operate independent of political party organizations, the groups have become major financial players in presidential and congressional campaigns, spending tens of millions of dollars to try to influence directly who wins and who loses. The debate has been framed by many of these groups as a war on coal vs. action on climate change and funding for renewable energy.

All of this has created a chilling effect, and nowhere is it more dramatically seen than in the debates and in the presidential campaign.

Two years ago, Gov. Romney spoke about global warming in his book, "No Apology," saying he believed global warming was real and was at least in part caused by human activity. In the intervening two years, the Romney position has changed to denying climate change is occurring, pushing for more mining and drilling, attacking EPA clean air regulations, and calling for an end to all government investment in renewable energy.

President Obama calls climate change real, and has taken some action to mitigate global warming. Under his watch, EPA has proposed restrictions on air pollution from coal-fired power plants. He has proposed new clean vehicle standards. He is fighting to renew the tax credit American wind companies need to succeed. And he is funding other renewable energy research. But more needs to be done.

In 2012, it is unconscionable that the people running to lead our nation are failing to even discuss one of the most dangerous problems our world is facing, let alone take comprehensive action. As we look back on this year, we'll be stunned by the sounds of silence.

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