Thank you for inviting me to discuss the imperative of addressing the world climate from my perspective as a member of the United States Congress.

You are familiar with the warnings of scientists, including my friend Dr. Ramanathan of Scripps Institution of Oceanography in San Diego, California, which I represent. I don’t intend to repeat those insights. Instead, I’ll offer observations on how Washington DC is dealing with climate change and ways in which I think we can do better.

Donald Trump campaigned for president in 2016, railing against climate action, deceptively using unemployed coal miners as his Exhibit A against government regulation. As president, he has remained committed to unwinding all the progress on climate achieved under President Obama.1 The list of those actions is long.

Most significant, he announced his intention for the United States to withdraw from the Paris Agreement. He appointed an oil and gas industry advocate, Scott Pruitt, to be Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency. He tried to revoke rules that limit the emission of methane gas; although fortunately, that effort has been blocked by the Senate and the courts. He has moved to revoke the Clean Power Plan, which was expected to cut CO2 emissions from power generation by 32% by 2030. Citing “resiliency,” the Department of Energy has proposed rules that would require large fuel supplies to be kept on site at power plants, favoring the use of nuclear and coal over renewables and even natural gas. The Environmental Protection Agency announced it would review recently adopted standards for automobile fuel economy; we expect those standards will be rolled back. More federally owned lands will be made available for fossil fuel extraction, and restrictions on off-shore oil drilling will be loosened. And this October’s draft four-year strategic plan for the Environmental Protection Agency omitted the phrase “climate change” altogether.2

Climate action used to be bipartisan. In his 2008 campaign for President, Republican Senator John McCain ran advertisements in which he “sounded the alarm on global warming,” and said his credentials on climate were stronger than those of his opponent, Barack Obama.3

Soon after that election, however, began a well-funded campaign to change this.

Many conservative groups, including one called the “Cooler Heads” Coalition, have waged campaigns to cast doubt on climate science and to intimidate Republican candidates from supporting climate action. According to reports, the Cooler Heads group has received more than $11 million in donations from oil and gas companies and from foundations controlled by wealthy families, including the Kochs.4 The

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1 See “5 Big things Trump is doing to reverse Obama’s climate policies,” Politico, October 10, 2017.
2 “EPA makes ‘climate change’ vanish from four-year plan,” CNN.com, October 11, 2017.
television advertising, social media campaigns and political events across the country raised doubts in the minds of voters and fear in the hearts of politicians. For representatives of coal regions, it became easier to accept alternative facts than it was to accept a climate action policy that would phase out carbon emissions.

About 74 thousand Americans work in production and distribution of coal, and more than 812 thousand in oil and gas.\(^5\) (To be fair, that workforce barely exists in California.) If you visit Midland, Texas, as I did, you see an entire community and culture invested in and proud of their oil and gas production. For these hardworking Americans, many climate action policies mean rethinking the economic system that has supported them, their families, and their town for decades.

In 2008,\(^6\) anti-climate change groups began asking Republicans to sign a “No Climate Tax” pledge. In 2009, cap and trade legislation died in Congress. The climate denial lobby went after Democrats who had voted for cap and trade, and then they took on Republicans who were sympathetic to green energy or climate action.

Yet, even after this long and well-funded disinformation campaign, Republican voters are not necessarily climate deniers. In a study conducted by the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, about 70% of Republicans think that climate change is happening and 53% think it is caused by human activity.\(^7\)

But those aren’t the poll numbers for Republican candidates for office. According to Republican strategist Whit Ayres, “most Republicans still do not regard climate change as a hoax. But the entire climate change debate has now been caught up in the broader polarization of American politics. A denial of the human contribution to climate change has become yet another litmus test issue that determines whether you’re “a good Republican.”\(^8\)

When I have a beer with my Republican colleagues, they will generally acknowledge that they are aware of climate change and that human activities are driving that change. But they fear losing their elections.

So why doesn’t America elect more Republicans who are as open-minded as their Republican voters on climate? Let me illustrate how moderation is penalized by the American electoral process in most places.

In most American Congressional districts, there is no competition between Republicans and Democrats. At least 350 seats are so-called “safe” seats, where voters will only elect a Democrat, as in San Francisco, New York or Boston, for instance, or a Republican, as in most of Texas or Alabama or Kansas. In a safe Republican district, there’s no chance that a Democrat will ever win the seat. Thus, the real contest is over which Republican will win the Republican Party election and make the run off against the Democrat, who will certainly lose. This has led to a race to the right -- on guns, taxes, the environment and even science -- so that only the most right-wing Republicans can get elected from these “safe” Republican seats. In this safe seat competition, moderate stances on climate hurt a Republican’s chances.

The remaining few congressional districts are “swing” districts, where the number of Republican and Democratic voters is relatively even, and the seat can “swing” from Republican to Democrat from

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\(^8\) Id.
election to election. These competitive general elections, between a Democrat and a Republican, can cost tens of millions of dollars. This money comes from private donations and from outside spending by political action groups. I represent a competitive swing district; as an example, my own 2014 reelection was the fifth most expensive race that year. My campaign raised $4 million from private donors, as did my opponent’s. Outside groups spent about $4 million trying to reelect me, and other groups spent about $4 million trying to defeat me. All told, $16 million was spent on television ads, mail pieces and staff salaries for one two-year term in one of 435 Congressional seats. My friend Brad Schneider was defeated that year in suburban Chicago, in a race that cost over $23 million all together.

In competitive seats, candidates need both to energize their base voters and to raise money. For Republicans, the base voters are usually the most conservative. Often, the donors who want to support Republican candidates are similarly conservative. In a swing seat, a moderate stance by a Republican on climate may limit the ability to raise campaign money.

So, there is a lot of pressure on Republicans office holders -- who must fend off other Republican challengers -- not to stray from the most conservative positions. A case in point recently was Representative Eric Cantor, the number 2 Republican in Congress, who offered a mildly conciliatory position on immigration. He was defeated by a more rabidly anti-immigrant Republican in central Virginia’s 7th congressional district. Every Republican congress member took note, and most of them took cover.

Thus, despite the overwhelming science and public interest, the road to climate action for a Republican office holder is a precarious one.

Washington Republicans are no longer denying that the climate is changing. Water is rising from the ground in Florida; hurricane after hurricane is bashing Texas, and the deep red Republican South. When Miami streets are wet on sunny days and when “500-year storms” are happening every three years, people take notice. As of October 2017, 60 members of the House of Representatives have joined a bipartisan Climate Solutions Caucus, with an equal number of Democrats and Republicans, “to educate members on economically viable options to reduce climate risk and to explore bipartisan policy options that address the impacts, causes, and challenges of our changing climate.” The Department of Defense continues to warn that climate can be a driver of instability. In fact, the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review identified climate change as a significant security risk, “aggravate[ing] stressors abroad such as poverty, environmental degradation, political instability, and social tensions – conditions that can enable terrorist activity and other forms of violence.”

That’s why in this year’s defense spending bill, adopted by a vote of 344-81, the House of Representatives declared that climate change is a “direct threat to national security.” The bill also calls for a report on how climate change affects the military, including identifying the 10 bases most susceptible to flooding from sea level rise.

Last month, Energy Secretary Rick Perry (who is from oil-producing Texas) testified to my Energy Subcommittee of the Energy and Commerce Committee and agreed that the climate is changing and

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warming. That’s a start, although he also asserted that there was insufficient evidence to support the case that humans were the cause of climate change.

This all gives us some hope that the U.S. can agree on some steps toward climate adaptation. If we acknowledge that seas are rising, temperatures are warming, storms are more frequent and violent and fires more often and brutal, we at least agree on a common set of facts that can help us prepare. We may consider new building standards that defend better against flood or fire, or zoning laws that will keep buildings from expanding flood zones. Our Navy can adjust its strategy to reflect melting ice. We can reform government flood and fire insurance programs to incentivize investments in resiliency and discourage bad decisions.

It’s great that the undeniable fact of climate change is no longer denied. However, the refusal by Secretary Perry, the Trump administration and the vast majority of elected Republicans to acknowledge the basic scientific consensus that this change is human-driven remains an obstacle to the steps we need to take now.

What voices can move America to act on climate – not just to gird ourselves as the planet dies — but move us to save the planet? Who are the trusted voices that can turn the American public and our government to action?

First, scientists.

Americans rely on science every day, whether they are taking medications prescribed by a doctor or following a recipe for baking a cake. It must be discouraging for scientists to encounter the current irrationality, but rigorous climate science is still the most important input for our policymakers.

Second, our state and local governments.

Many of our states, cities, counties and ports continue to demonstrate to Washington D.C. that the choice between a prosperous economy and a healthy environment is a false choice. More likely, we can’t have one without the other.

Third, the United States Armed Forces.

While the United States military may be affected by domestic politics, it remains on mission. We are fortunate our military leaders are patriotic, brilliant and honorable. It is within the Department of Defense that climate policy has been the least politicized, and where our federal government has made the most progress.

The Department of Defense is one of the largest fossil-fuel users on earth, and the United States Navy has always been an innovator in energy - from sails to coal, from coal to oil, to nuclear and now to alternative energy. In 2009, Navy Secretary Ray Mabus set a goal that by 2020, 50% of Navy energy consumption would come from alternative sources, and 50% of Navy and Marine Corps installations would be net zero. Since then, the Navy has launched the “Great Green Fleet,” powered in part by advanced biofuels derived from beef fat purchased at a competitive price even when oil prices were low. And they have secured contracts for 1.1 gigawatts of renewable energy. And, in partnership with the State of California, the Navy acquired 400 electric vehicles for its bases in California.

Even changing to LED lightbulbs is saving the Navy 20,000 gallons of fuel per year in its destroyers, with longer lives, better light and reduced maintenance costs.

Of course, as Secretary Mabus himself said, “The goals I set were not about making us ‘greener,’ though that is an added benefit – they were and remain about making us better warfighters. Optimizing our energy use is a force multiplier, increasing our capabilities, our impact and our endurance across
platforms and disciplines.” 12 The military shows us the business case for renewable energy, and their credibility is above politics.

Fourth, American Businesses.

Business is not waiting for Congress to say it’s ok to compete in the renewable economy. For instance, now that China has called for one out of every five cars sold there to run on alternative fuel within eight years,13 every worldwide automaker will have to compete in that space. American politicians will see that it’s not just Tesla, but all U.S. carmakers, and all their voting employees, who are part of the climate revolution.

Shareholders in American companies are themselves demanding climate responsiveness. This May, ExxonMobil shareholders, with a vote of 62% of its shares, instructed the company to analyze and report on how the company would respond to global efforts to achieve the 2-degree-Celsius target.14 The two largest shareholders in ExxonMobil are BlackRock and Vanguard, major Wall Street investment firms.

Fifth, Respected Republicans.

Republican leaders who are no longer in office are important advocates for climate action. This year, the Climate Leadership Council15 called for a tax on carbon, labelling it the “Conservative Case for Carbon Dividends.” The plan would impose a gradually increasing tax on carbon, fully refunded to American taxpayers, combined with the repeal of regulations like the Clean Power Plan that would be redundant and less efficient at encouraging renewables than the carbon tax itself. The proposal is not novel, but the identity of its authors is. The Council is led by James A. Baker III, George P. Schultz, Henry M. Paulson, Martin Feldstein, all former members of the Reagan and Bush administrations, and respected conservative economists and businessmen.16

Sixth, The News Media.

A free press is a foundation of American democracy, and we need its help on climate. Our news media must be more honest about the severity of the climate crisis and the real facts. The media seems more concerned about being “balanced” than being accurate. This has led to needless confusion about the validity of undisputed science. And our media tend to focus on the issues, tweets and scandals of today to the detriment of the long-term challenges, and even existential threats like climate change.

Finally, The Church.

The church can show the moral imperative of action on climate. The Vatican’s leadership is critical as we try to change minds and turn hearts in the United States. It’s even more significant as we try to influence policy in the United States Congress. Here’s why:


15 www.clcouncil.org

16 The Climate Leadership Council is sponsored by formidable businesses, including BP, ExxonMobil, General Motors, Johnson & Johnson, Proctor & Gamble, PepsiCo, Santander, Schneider Electric, Shell, Total and Unilever.
According to the Pew Research Center, while the number of adults in the U.S. “who describe themselves as Christian has been declining for decades, the U.S. Congress is as Christian today as it was in the early 1960s.” Ninety-one percent of the Congress identifies as Christian, and one third of the Christians in Congress (34%) identify as Catholic. And while the number of Christians in Congress has been virtually unchanged in the past 50 years, the number of Catholics in Congress has increased dramatically – from 19% to 31%.\(^\text{17}\)

So nearly one-third of Congress has a direct connection to this church, which is why Pope Francis’s commitment to making environmental stewardship a priority of his papacy has such potential to affect U.S. climate policy.

Something else is happening, too. Evangelical Christians, who typically align with conservative Republicans, are weighing in on the need for climate action. Like this Pope, who is named for the Saint from Assisi who considered all living things his brothers and sisters, many leading evangelical Christians are taking up the cause of climate, because they, too, believe we have a moral imperative to save the planet given to us by God.

I want to thank the Vatican and Pope Francis for your moral clarity and commitment to climate action, and for including me in this historic event. I’m very grateful to have been selected to represent the United States Congress here today.

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