

September 23, 2014



## **How academics got traction on climate change with Florida politicians**

**Jeff Chanton**

In the year 2000, I watched the Gore-Bush debates with a sense of disbelief. Al Gore was talking about putting social security in a lock-box and not tackling George Bush II on climate issues. What about the CO<sub>2</sub> problem? Climate wasn't mentioned in those debates nor in the campaign. And, over the next decade, Democrats were afraid to bring up the issue, reckoning that everyone who was concerned about the issue would vote for them anyway, and they didn't want to alienate the independents confused by fossil-carbon industry hype. Suddenly, this year, in Florida at least, we've got a Republican governor casting himself in a green light, and a Democratic candidate who wants to air the issue. How did this happen? Maybe the tidewaters in the streets of Miami on clear days had something to do with it? Maybe it was the concern of local governments in the southern low-lying areas of the state? Whatever the cause, we got traction and faculty members drove it—finally.

The specifics of this transition were related to two things. First, Florida Governor Scott had recently amended his position as a climate change denier. He announced that he was not a scientist and was therefore unable have an opinion. Second, the issue was sparked by a power corporation's plan to build a second nuclear plant at the bottom of the Florida peninsula. Taking their best estimates into account, the corporate officers allowed for a 12-inch rise in sea level by 2100. University of Miami Professor Harold Wanless was concerned about this under-estimate, and wrote a letter to Florida senator, Marco Rubio, and Governor, Rick Scott, expressing his concern and suggesting that as policy makers and leaders of a state as vulnerable to climate change as is Florida, they should consider meeting with him and collect information—from a scientist ([click here to view the letter](#)).

Susan Glickman, an activist, and a friend of Professor Wanless then entered the picture. Susan is the Florida Director of the Southern Alliance for Clean Energy and a long time associate of the National Resources Defense Council. Susan organized 9 more climate scientists and faculty members, including me, to sign onto Wanless's letter. I had worked with Susan 7 years earlier in a successful effort to derail the construction of a coal-fired power plant in Perry, Florida, about 50 miles south-east of Tallahassee. If any other non-scientist had called me about this, I might have declined. And I admit at the moment she called I felt somewhat harassed, I was reviewing papers, working on proposals and counseling my students on writing their papers. But, I agreed, even though it felt like a distraction.

Don't misjudge me, I'm a climate advocate. I cover the subject in detail in my undergraduate classes. Living in Florida's capitol, I give talks to government organizations, including the Department of Environmental Protection, and the Florida Wildlife Conservation Commission. I've pounded the beat of local churches, civic groups (the Lions Club), and high schools. Fifteen years ago my wife and I and several neighbors even started a local environmental group that bought climate change educational supplements in the newsletter of our natural food coop. But honestly, of late it was feeling rather fruitless. The fossil carbon industry, like the tobacco industry before it, has kept up a steady stream of misinformation to confuse the public.

Four days later Susan called again and asked me to hand carry the signed letter to the Governor's office. She arranged for a reporter, Mary Ellen Klas, from the Miami Herald and Tampa Bay Times to meet me there. Mary Ellen photographed me handing the letter to the governor's staff and wrote articles and on-line stories about the request of 10 climate scientist to educate our non-scientist governor. It must have been a slow news week because these stories received a lot of attention. Governor Scott, on the campaign trail, was asked about the request in several press conferences. He said that he'd have his staff meet with us.

The next day, I got a call from Scott's Democratic challenger, former Governor Charlie Crist. I met with Gov Crist myself on July 25. My university, Florida State, asked me to do this off campus at the Florida Press Center. The room was full of media folks and Republican demonstrators picketed when Governor Christ arrived. He listened carefully to my 30 minute climate change presentation and asked some good questions. Afterwards he talked to the press, advocated for solar energy, and stated that even though he wasn't a scientist, he had a brain, which he could use and talk to a scientist.

Three days later, I was contacted by the governor's staff to set up a meeting. We set the date far enough out so that other signers of the letter could join. Five of us met at the governor's office on August 19 at 4:30 pm. We got 30 minutes with Governor Scott, roughly half of which was spent on introductions. At the end of the meeting, he thanked us, and quickly left the room. At the end of the meeting the press interviewed the scientists involved. We pointed out that it was puzzling and discouraging that Governor Scott asked no questions because so many of our students do. Further, we noted that he gave no indication of support for or understanding of the issue. However, in subsequent days, he did call for increasing attention to the environment, mentioned sea level rise, surface and ground water clean up, and Everglades restoration, but he did

not speak directly to the issue of climate change. Nonetheless, environmental concerns are being addressed by both candidates in this election, which is, in my book, a huge victory.



*Jeff Chanton explains climate change to Florida Governor Rick Scott.  
Photo by Jennifer Portman.*

My University, Florida State, has been entirely supportive of my activities. I have received supportive emails from the president of the university, my college dean and my department chair. David Hasting, another of my colleagues in this endeavor has become the star of Eckerd College, which is going to host a climate solutions summit in October. From the start, I was careful to inform FSU administrators of my activities and I clearly communicated that I was not conducting lobbying activity. I always made it clear that this work was strictly of an educational nature. I couched it terms that while I regularly presented the science of climate change to young adults, I rarely had the opportunity to educate older adults who directed policy and that this was sorely needed. My administrators agree with this assessment.

*Jeff Chanton is a professor in the Department of Earth, Ocean and Atmospheric Science at Florida State University in Tallahassee.*

*EDITOR'S NOTE; According to Katherine Bagley, a writer for InsideClimate News, (Insert LINK) "In Tight Florida's Governor's Race, Climate Change Is a Central Issue." The subhead of that article summarized: "Voter concern over vanishing beaches and fresh water may force GOP Gov. Rick Scott to run against his party's platform and his record."*

*MAHB-UTS Blogs are a joint venture between the University of Technology Sydney and the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere. Questions should be directed to [joan@mahbonline.org](mailto:joan@mahbonline.org)*

MAHB Blog: <http://mahb.stanford.edu/blog/how-to-get-traction-with-politicians/>