Talk is growing about a March for Science on Washington, similar to the Women’s March the day after President Trump’s inauguration. It is a terrible idea.

Among scientists, understandably, there is growing fear that fact-based decision making is losing its seat at the policy-making table. There’s also overwhelming frustration with the politicization of science by climate change skeptics and others who see it as threatening to their interests or beliefs.

But trying to recreate the pointedly political Women’s March will serve only to reinforce the narrative from skeptical conservatives that scientists are an interest group and politicize their data, research and findings for their own ends.

I am a coastal geologist. I direct a center where our mission is to conduct scientific research and then communicate that science to elected officials, regulators, even private entities and the public. There is no question that the proposed March for Science will make my job more difficult and increase polarization.

Please understand, I don’t shy away from openly presenting the facts about the changing climate and rising seas. But I’ve learned that doing so is not without risk.
In 2010, I was a co-author of a report for North Carolina’s Coastal Resources Commission that said sea levels along the state’s coastline could rise by as much as 39 inches by the end of the century. That conclusion was based on the best peer-reviewed science and was intended to help policy makers plan for the future.

But it alarmed real estate and other economic development interests, which quickly attacked the report. The coastal commission ignored it. The authors, myself included, were widely slandered. And the Legislature passed a law that barred state and local agencies from developing regulations or planning documents anticipating a rise in sea level. “I think this is a brilliant solution,” the comedian Stephen Colbert said at the time. “If your science gives you a result that you don’t like, pass a law saying the result is illegal. Problem solved.”

You might think that the lesson I learned from that experience was to distrust the political establishment. No. What I learned was that most of those attacking our sea-level-rise projections had never met me, nor my co-authors. Not only that, most of the public had never met anyone they considered a scientist. They didn’t understand the careful, painstaking process we followed to reach our peer-reviewed conclusions. We were unknowns, “scientists” delivering bad news. We were easy marks for those who felt threatened by our findings.

A march by scientists, while well intentioned, will serve only to trivialize and politicize the science we care so much about, turn scientists into another group caught up in the culture wars and further drive the wedge between scientists and a certain segment of the American electorate.

Rather than marching on Washington and in other locations around the country, I suggest that my fellow scientists march into local civic groups, churches, schools, county fairs and, privately, into the offices of elected officials. Make contact with that part of America that doesn’t know any scientists. Put a face on the debate. Help them understand what we do, and how we do it. Give them your email, or better yet, your phone number.

Al Gore, bless his heart (as we say in the South), was well intentioned when he made “An Inconvenient Truth” in 2006. But he did us no favors. So many of the conservative Southerners whom I speak to about climate change see it as a partisan
issue largely because of that high-profile salvo fired by the former vice president.

Scientists marching in opposition to a newly elected Republican president will only cement the divide. The solution here is not mass spectacle, but an increased effort to communicate directly with those who do not understand the degree to which the changing climate is already affecting their lives. We need storytellers, not marchers.

Believe me, I understand the desire to impart to everyone how important science is to every sector of our economy, the health of our planet and the future of our families. But I don’t see how a march accomplishes any of that. If tens of thousands of us show up, it will simply increase the size of the echo chamber.

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