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Kyle McElroy is a graduate student at the University of Iowa who has been working with the Science Booster Club program since the summer of 2015. This is a blog post about his recent experiences in Des Moines.

Have you ever heard of [Hawkeye Caucus Day](#) [5]? It's the day when the University of Iowa sends students representing the diversity of programs from the university to the state capitol in Des Moines to meet with legislators and make the case for the impact UI has throughout the state. This year, the NCSE Science Booster Club was one of the programs the university chose to highlight, and I headed to Des Moines with two other graduate students. We were not there to lobby or ask for funds for our projects but to leave a good impression on our elected officials. As a young evolutionary biologist, I likely have a future full of explaining my research's value ahead of me. Hawkeye Caucus Day was going to be a good setting not only to advocate for the Science Booster Club program, but also to practice telling people who make important decisions why evolution and climate change matter.



My goal was to meet with the chairs, vice chairs, and high-ranking members of the Senate and House education committees. In theory, the legislators were quite accessible: fill out a slip of paper with your name and whom you want to meet with, walk up to the chamber and hand it off to someone who checked to see if the representative was available, then wait. I ended up meeting with three senators and three representatives. My experience was, I must say, mixed, and unfortunately I found that party was the main factor affecting the reactions I got, one of which was so strange that I entertained the possibility that I had slipped into an alternative reality.

I met with two Democrats—one asked me a few questions and another brought me into the chamber to talk. She was fun and (only partly) joked about not being afraid of that phrase—climate change—the way some of her colleagues are while offering to point them out for me. She loved what we are doing and especially thought that the evolution camp was great. She asked me to get in touch with her about our plans for it this year.

The first Republican I met with shook my hand and listened to my spiel with no response whatsoever, at which point he asked me if I was looking for funds. I was not. He turned around and disappeared into the Senate chamber. Perhaps my spiel was boring?

My next conversation with a Republican senator proved anything but. Before I could even get to say what a Science Booster Club is or does, the words “climate change” led him to ask me to clarify what I meant. When I explained that I meant global warming driven by the greenhouse effect resulting in a variety of climate changes (including a net increase in temperature), he informed me that my position was political not scientific. He then ran through a series of familiar, and thoroughly debunked, arguments rejecting the conclusions of climate scientists: it used to be global cooling; scientists once even thought that the world was flat, etc. That was bad.

Then it got weird. He told me that if global warming was real it would at least be easy to solve. All we would have to do is detonate a nuclear bomb over the Pacific Ocean with some amount of clay that would

spread across the atmosphere and reduce the global temperatures by five degrees with no repercussions. My alarm at this proposal meant either that I wasn't behind real solutions or didn't trust science. And our conversation was just getting started. He told me that in the '90s the government realized that it could make lots of money by taxing and trading carbon but they needed a reason, so they pumped money into research to prove global warming and climate scientists have been making easy bucks from their grants—\$200,000 to \$300,000 a year was his claim—ever since. Furthermore, he insisted that there is immense fraud in climate change research and that the data doesn't actually support what scientists are saying. This was jarring to say the least. He encouraged me to analyze the data myself, as he claimed to have done. Having studied astrophysics and geophysics in college, he said, he knew what he was talking about on these matters. He called my critical thinking into question and told me that I have been "indoctrinated" in a purely political view because I blindly accept the "supposed" scientific consensus on current climate change instead of digging deep enough to uncover a massive global conspiracy.

Interestingly, despite his rejection of climate science, he told me that he has no doubts about evolution and thought it was an important subject for education. I guess I have to give him credit for that.

Since I've experienced a reaction like this senator's, you might think I'd never want to talk about climate change in public again! Fear of this kind of hostility no doubt prevents a lot of people from even starting a conversation about the topic. The power of NCSE Science Booster Clubs is that they give people the opportunity to have a hands-on, authentic experience with evolution and climate change science without being badgered or condescended to. I admit I was disappointed that my experience was so starkly partisan, but I'm glad that in my own experience, Science Booster Club activities are welcomed warmly even in very conservative parts of Iowa, and most people are more curious and open-minded than this particular senator. If fear of conflict keeps people from learning about the science, his attitude risks standing unchallenged by his constituents. Bringing the topic out into the open and giving people an opportunity to explore the science for themselves will help replace polite avoidance with informed conversation. I'm glad I had the opportunity to meet with legislators and see how important it is to keep bringing great science to as many people as possible.

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