

Viterna's speech on divestment, as published in the *Harvard Magazine* on December 4, 2019.

“The Only Apolitical Way to Move Forward Is to Let the Research Lead”

<https://www.harvardmagazine.com/2019/12/harvard-faculty-motion-on-divestment>

A NEWCOMER to the debate, professor of sociology Jocelyn Viterna, then rose from the floor speak. Taking as her point of departure a critique of divestment made in November by Burbank professor of political economy James H. Stock, based on his experience on the Council of Economic Advisors under President Obama—and the subsequent overturning of decisions made then by President Trump—she drew on her personal experience to reframe divestment as an affirmation of the University's commitment to the search for scientific truth, rather than as a political or partisan act. She began by summarizing the prior FAS discussions:

The pro-divestment side offered three key arguments.

- Climate change is real and devastating. (Charles Conroy)
- Harvard has used its investments to take political positions in past. (Joyce Chaplin)
- There is no clear evidence that divestment from fossil fuels would hurt Harvard financially. (Stephen Marglin)

I found no flaws in the logic or extensive evidence supporting this argumentation, and perhaps more importantly, in the ensuing discussion, none of these points were attacked as either illogical or unsubstantiated.

Indeed, the anti-divestment group actually conceded most of the points of the pro-divestment side. Specifically, the anti-divestment group:

- Conceded that climate change is real and devastating.
- Conceded that Harvard certainly can take a political stance on this issue,
- Interestingly, the anti-divestment group never made any argument about whether and how divestment could affect Harvard's finances negatively. I certainly am in favor of Harvard remaining a financially sound institution, so I think it's surprising we've not heard them made.

After conceding or failing to engage all three of the pro-divestment points, the anti-divestment speakers offered two arguments against divestment.

•First, the anti-divesters suggested that, although Harvard can be “political,” they believe that divestment is the *wrong* political stance to take—divestment was regularly referred to as “symbolic” and the kind of move made by “coastal elites” that actually would cause the majority of people in the U.S.—especially those poor folk who live in Red States and who rely on trucking or the coal industry for a living—to become even more closed off to arguments about climate change. It’s not that Harvard can’t be political, anti-divesters seemed to argue—it’s just that Harvard needs to attack the climate-change issue with more political savviness than divestment would allow. This is a problem governments should solve, so we need to work in strategic ways with governments, and divestment is not strategic.

•Second, even though we shouldn’t divest, there are many things we should do, as individual faculty. We should limit our flights, use public transport, and teach more courses on climate change, and so forth. There was even an example offered about how one of our faculty was invited to give a two-hour lecture on climate change to Harvard M.B.A.s who were very engaged in the topic, and then we were invited to imagine how those individuals, having experienced this lecture, would now go forth and change the world.

So I’ve not been involved in the divestment movement at Harvard in any way, but I’m here today to say I take issue with both of these anti-divestment arguments from the last meeting, because they are anecdotal, illogical, and unsubstantiated with evidence, and therefore, I find them kind of insulting. I find them insulting as a Harvard professor who deserves well-substantiated arguments in a faculty meeting, and I find them insulting as a long-time Red Stater, who doesn’t appreciate the caricature.

First, to the notion that divestment constitutes “coastal elite” politics that will anger Red Staters and harm, rather than forward, the debate:

[Holding up exhibit] This is a picture from the front page of the March 18, 2019, *New York Times*—it depicts a small mountain of ice sitting on the Ruzicka family farm in Verdigre, Nebraska, where it was deposited after extreme flooding which knocked down homes and barns, killed hundreds of head of cattle, and destroyed crops and fields. Five generations of Ruzickas have farmed that land. I know this because five generations of Viternas—my family—have farmed the land near the Ruzickas. My father was actually born on a farm just a few miles away from this Nebraska iceberg. Not only are the descendants of the Bohemian immigrants who settled this land now bankrupted by climate change, but they also didn’t plant crops this year. When your corn and wheat products are significantly more expensive next year, remember this newspaper article. Having been born and raised in rural Nebraska, I personally know many Red State farmers, and I have yet to meet a Red State farmer who does *not* believe in climate change. Farmers know the earth. They get climate change. And climate change not only plunged these farmers into bankruptcy and ruin, but it affected all U.S. families who buy bread, including those miners in Ohio who we heard about at the last meeting.

I was born in a rural agricultural community in Nebraska, went to high school and college in Kansas, attended grad school in Indiana, took my first job at Tulane University in Louisiana, and married someone from a trucking hub in southwest Missouri. Having lived 33 of my 46 years in Red States, I know a bit about Red State people and politics.

Red State people get climate change. They live with the effects of climate change: the flooding and tornadoes in Missouri, the hurricanes in Louisiana, the climate immigrants from Central America arriving in Kansas. Red Staters are not against policies to limit fossil-fuel production. The statistics back me up: 8 of 10 people in the U.S. now believe human activity is fueling climate change. This includes 60 percent of Republicans. To argue that we can't divest because it would make us look like snowflake coastal elites to Red State voters is, quite simply, ridiculous. Climate change is one of the *least* partisan issues on today's political agenda.

Moreover, in my—rather extensive—experience, the primary reason that Red state folks find progressive coastal elites distasteful is because they think we are hypocrites.

So if I were to imagine what Red State folks would say about the conversations that unfolded in our last faculty meeting, it would be something like this: “Isn't that just like the coastal elite—they complain vociferously about climate change to the audience in front, while taking money from fossil fuel companies for their own research—and their own aggrandizement—with the hand behind their back. Hypocrites.”

Everyone in this room knows that academia as an institution is under attack—we have all heard the arguments about “liberal academic bias” destroying our system of higher education. And it is very true that the percentage of faculty identifying as Democrats today is significantly higher than it was 50 years ago.

But how do we explain the increasing political polarization on U.S. campuses? One possible hypothesis, put forth by the far right, is that we academics police our journals and our hiring decisions so that we freeze out really good scholars who are doing high quality research that supports the politics of the right, and only allow research that supports policies of the left.

I personally haven't seen much evidence that this is true.

Let me offer another hypothesis: over the past 30 years, the Republican party has increasingly moved to an anti-science, anti-evidence position. And naturally, academics—who by definition are individuals who place great value in science and evidence and logic—are increasingly moving away from the party that defines itself as anti-science. Now *that* is a hypothesis for which I see great support.

I actually agree 100 percent that universities should *not* be political in that universities should *not* be partisan.

But if we want to establish the place of universities in the world as the non-partisan, apolitical, evidence-driven entities who should be asked to weigh in on policies because we've actually done the research, and we actually have important, evidence-based findings to guide policy, then the last thing we should be doing is acting like we're playing a political game. We should *not* be saying, “Hey, I know we're mostly Democrats but see, we can adopt Republican policies sometimes too!”

The answer to establishing the importance of using non-partisan, apolitical, evidence-based university studies to guide federal policy is to powerfully reiterate every chance we get that our positions are not guided by our politics, but by our *research*. And *if we as scientists and scholars actually believe the science behind climate change, then we should walk the talk and act upon that science*.

So here's the rub: Once you define divestment as political, then not divesting becomes a political stance as well. Perhaps the only apolitical way to move forward is actually to let the research lead.

Parenting books don't agree on much, but the one thing they all agree on is this: What you do has far more influence on your children than what you say.

I can't imagine it is any different for Harvard students. How can we teach our students about the apocalyptic trajectory of fossil-fuel usage in the U.S. (something we all agree upon), but yet continue to invest in fossil fuels? What exactly are these Harvard M.B.A.s going to do with their two-hour lecture on climate change, when they go out and become consultants for Goldman Sachs? I think they'll have learned from Harvard that it's fine to just talk about the horrors of climate change while continuing to work for a company that invests in fossil fuels. We will have taught our students that it's enough to simply be outraged without seeking any changes. Is that the legacy Harvard wants to leave?

Finally, the last point that the anti-divestment speakers made was that we could all do our own individual part. To that end, I do hereby solemnly swear that I walk to work every day, I have limited my flying, I have made a concerted effort to stop buying plastic, and when my kids complain that the house is too cold I tell them to put on a sweater instead of turning up the heat. I will not be teaching a class on climate change because as a sociologist of sexuality and violence, I don't think I'm qualified to teach climate change, and I frankly think there is a lot of work to be done on sexual violence, too.

But as a sociologist, I can tell you this:

Systemic-level problems demand systemic-level solutions, not individual-level solutions. My walking to campus every day is not going to save the Viterna family farm in Verdigre, Nebraska.

But my advocating for divestment from Harvard could make a difference—and not because it is a politically “symbolic” move.

It could make a difference because divestment from fossil is an investment in the importance of *science*. It's an investment in the importance of *scholarship*. And it's an investment in the importance of *universities*.

Divestment says *we are scholars first. And we are confident in our scholarship—so we are going to put our money where our science is. We believe in our research, and we are going to operate as an institution that actually values research! And we are going to do this not because it's*

political, not because it is partisan. Not because it's moral. But because it is evidence-based. And that is *exactly* what we as a university are supposed to do. We are supposed to value the evidence, and let the evidence guide our work, *and* our institution.

Okay, so we all know the real reason that Harvard doesn't want to divest. The real reason is that they don't want faculty and students thinking that if they just protest long enough and hard enough they can get their way. If they let the faculty "win" on climate change divestment, then those faculty are just going to be back the next year with another demand, and that's not behavior that they want to encourage. (Harvard administration and the Corporation read the parenting books, too).

So maybe the solution is for the administration to not to see this as bowing to faculty demands, but rather as building on faculty research. Because the reality is, you all pay us a lot of money to do this research. You should value it. And act on it.

Because if Harvard refuses to value scientific research in the making of its policies, then Harvard is becoming its own worst enemy. We shouldn't wonder why scientific research is increasingly devalued in today's world, and in today's politics, if our own institution—our own administration—devalues this same research in the very policies guiding our university.