

You might have noticed that in this election year, climate change has vanished from the national agenda. There are lots of reasons for that, but in his [superb takedown of Ayn Rand-acolyte and pathological liar Paul Ryan](#), Jonathan Chait may have stumbled on a way out.

Chait observes that Ryan's budget plan does not reduce the deficit and in fact represents a massive redistribution of income from the poor and the middle class to the very wealthy. And yet:

Ryan has managed to sell it as something admirable, and something else entirely: a deficit-reduction plan. This is very clever. The centrist political Establishment, heavily represented among business leaders and the political media, considers it almost self-evident that the budget deficit (and not, say, mass unemployment **or climate change**) represents the singular policy threat of our time, and that bipartisan cooperation offers the sole avenue to address it.

Emphasis added, of course. It is off his topic, but Chait does not address *why* Beltway insiders have decided that the deficit is more important than climate change. One way to think about this is that Very Serious People like deficit reduction because it is unpopular when the specifics are shown; perhaps climate change would be the same thing, because it requires immediate sacrifices in the form of higher fossil fuel prices, either through cap-and-trade schemes or through a carbon tax. (In point of fact, moderate climate change policies, such as a revenue-neutral carbon tax, wouldn't be very unpopular at all, and would probably be unnoticed; many strategies to get the deficit under control would be the same).

Perhaps deficit reduction is more salient than climate change among Very Serious People because the former can be pitched as something that Neither Party Will Grapple With — a charge that cannot be leveled in the climate sphere because the Democrats want to deal with it and Republicans do not. If you are a Very Serious Person, then you must stand above party. That said, Thomas Friedman handles the issue simply by ignoring the partisan facts and insisting that the only way to deal with the nation's pressing issues is to elect Mike Bloomberg. It's certainly not because voters care about the issue: they virtually never list the deficit among their top priorities, and at best they do so only as a proxy for general economic worries (under present conditions, deficit reduction would actually increase unemployment).

So I can't explain it. But it does offer an opportunity. To see why, consider that developing a broad social movement to attack climate change is hard for several reasons, most

importantly: 1) its effects are traced with difficulty (you can't say this hurricane was caused by climate change), and 2) many of the worst impacts lie in the future.

The task, then, is perhaps not to develop a broad social movement, but to try to persuade Very Serious People inside the Beltway — [sometimes referred to as the “Gang of 500”](#) — that this is an important issue. That might be easier. You don't have to run as many TV ads, and most of the persuading can be done at fancy Washington DC restaurants. Then we might see stories about climate change and How Neither Candidate Really Wants To Deal With It all the time. That will be a gross distortion, but at least it will keep climate on the public agenda. That's better than nothing.