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Virginia AG brings 'climategate' witch hunt mentality to the US

By [Jay Hodgkins](#)

When "climategate" erupted in the United Kingdom over hacked e-mails casting doubt on the conclusions of an important climate study supporting the theory of global warming, there was never really any doubt that the scandal would make great political fodder for opponents of climate change legislation and weaken public opinion about climate change science.

What was entirely unexpected, however, was an attack on climate research in general that could fundamentally change the way researchers attempt to solve difficult scientific questions.

Virginia Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli swears his office is not investigating the academic work of former University of Virginia professor and climate scientist Michael Mann, that it has only [demanded](#) that the university produce a treasure chest of data, research, materials, e-mails and other correspondence related to five research grants he received to investigate Mann's "expenditure of dollars," according to a [May 9 report](#) in *The Washington Post*.

The problem is no one in the scientific community seems to believe Cuccinelli.

He has said his outspoken skepticism of climate change and Mann's conclusions supporting climate change theories are not driving the investigation, which he said is being made to determine whether Mann defrauded taxpayers as he sought the grants.

Clearly, a fraud investigation would indicate that Cuccinelli's aim is to do what critics thought had been accomplished with the "climategate" e-mails — catch a climate scientist red-handed attempting to fudge his findings to support the theory of global warming.

But, unlike the "climategate" scandal that emerged when the e-mails were hacked and made public, Cuccinelli's investigation looks like a Republican government-sponsored witch hunt.

Consider that Mann was tangentially tied to the "climategate" scandal as the *Post* reported that an e-mail from Mann discussing a statistical "trick" he used in his research was one of those leaked, but the U.K. government already conducted a monthslong investigation into the scandal and found no evidence that the e-mails resulted in any bias in the University of East Anglia's climate change findings. Cuccinelli decided that the U.K. investigation did not put Mann under enough of a microscope and is instead following a path that could cripple scientists' ability to research difficult topics.

Patricia Wiberg, chair of the University of Virginia's Environmental Sciences Department, told the *Post* that a finding that Mann defrauded taxpayers would "change the whole game" of doing research in areas where there are disagreements within the scientific community. Translated: Scientists may be intimidated away from doing some research and coming to politically unpopular conclusions for fear of the political backlash.

The University of Virginia has said it is considering its options regarding Cuccinelli's investigation in the face of intense lobbying by the scientific and academic communities, civil liberties groups, and Virginia Democrats to resist the demand, but the school has said it believes it has no choice but to comply. The university has until May 14 to file in court to have the demand set aside, the *Post* [reported](#) in its Virginia Politics blog.

No scientist should be allowed to skew research and present false conclusions, but Cuccinelli's decision to launch an investigation clearly ignored the fact that the scientific community is highly adept at policing itself and certainly superior at that task, compared to a team of lawyers with no background in science or research. It is not in scientists' greater interest to accept fake research, considering that science is nothing more than a practice in determining truths.

Elected officials, on the other hand, do not typically deal in the blacks and whites of science, and Cuccinelli's whole investigation smells a bit of Galileo's persecution by the Catholic Church for observing that the sun might be at the center of the solar system. Of course, implicit disdain for science might not be that surprising from a man who opted to distribute lapel pins to his staff with an [altered version](#) of the official seal of the Commonwealth of Virginia that did not include the exposed left breast of Virtus in order to make her a little bit more [virtuous](#).

If historical art used in a state seal is enough to make Cuccinelli blush, keeping an open mind to the natural progression of the scientific process through failures, successes and ultimately well-vetted conclusions is probably too much to ask.

However, polls show that Americans no longer believe in climate change as strongly as they did in the past few years and no longer have as much interest in the government addressing climate change. The political mood in the country has unquestionably shifted right, as most experts expect the upcoming 2010 election to prove. In such an atmosphere, Cuccinelli can much more freely extend the law to dig into a climate scientist's work and, if he is lucky, pull out something to wave in front of the media and further the opposition to taking reasonable action to limit greenhouse gases through bills such as the [freshly unveiled](#) American Power Act introduced by Sens. John Kerry, D-Mass., and Joseph Lieberman, I-Conn.