

Analysis of Milwaukee Journal Sentinel hit piece

The following is a Johnson staff dissection of errors, exaggerations and mischaracterizations in the June 27, 2021 Milwaukee Journal Sentinel story by reporter John Fauber.

The original text of the story is in italics.

Descriptions of the story's faults are indented throughout the document..

In one of the biggest moments of Ron Johnson's political career, as a pandemic-weary nation looked on, the senior senator from Wisconsin called his star witness, a doctor with a claim that, if true, might be the biggest medical breakthrough of the 21st century.

Wearing a white doctor's coat and gesturing with his hands for emphasis, Pierre Kory made a stunning guarantee before Johnson's U.S. Senate committee in December: An old cheap drug used to treat parasitic worms was a "miracle cure" for COVID-19.

"It basically obliterates transmission of the virus," Kory said. "If you take it, you will not get sick."

*But the truth was far less clear: **While the drug has shown promise, there is little rigorous evidence that it works.***

Even Merck, the company that developed the drug and manufactures it, says there is no meaningful evidence it is effective against COVID-19.

Incomplete.

Fauber did not ask for any support for what Dr. Kory said. If he had, we would have forwarded the studies that Kory provides suggesting the drug does work. Fauber similarly failed to note the evidence that Kory and other front-line physicians have observed in treating covid and that Kory presented in his [testimony](#).

Nor does Fauber identify Kory as anything other than "a pulmonary physician who practiced in Wisconsin and New York." He apparently failed to learn that Kory was the former Chief of the Critical Care Service and Medical Director of the Trauma and Life Support Center at the University of Wisconsin.

Fauber fails to mention a point Kory made, that Merck is developing an anti-viral pill called molnupiravir for which it has a remunerative agreement with the U.S. government. It has by comparison little to gain from the success of ivermectin, which is off-patent.

Finally, at no point in the hearing did Kory use the phrase "miracle cure." The closest he came was: "There is a drug that is proving to be of miraculous impact, and when I say miracle I do not use that term lightly. And I do not want to be sensationalized when I say that, but it is a scientific recommendation based on mountains of data that has emerged in the last three months."

*Kory's claim that a lifesaving treatment was being ignored by the medical establishment is just one example of how Johnson has either embraced **extreme pronouncements** about medicine and science or made such claims himself.*

Embellishment.

Since Kory in his [testimony](#) presented the results of studies and of doctors' observations suggesting that ivermectin is effective and since more such evidence has emerged, calling it an "extreme pronouncement" is hyperbolic embellishment, not fact. Moreover, following Dr. Kory's testimony, the NIH changed their guidelines regarding ivermectin for the treatment of COVID-19 from do not use to a more neutral stance.

*Whether rejecting climate change, questioning the need for vaccines and masks, promoting vaping or backing unproven COVID-19 cures, Johnson has a long history of taking **positions that are at odds with scientific research.***

Mischaracterization.

In each of these areas, the senator has cited researchers' work, meaning he is not taking "positions at odds with scientific research" but, rather, positions at odds with conventional wisdom.

*For decades, various industries have waged propaganda efforts to undermine scientific findings that threatened their profits, such as **tobacco companies fighting evidence that smoking caused cancer**; oil firms distorting the science of climate change; and the National Football League trying to **refute emerging research on concussions.***

Deceptive language.

Johnson has never disputed that tobacco causes cancer or taken a position at all on concussions in football. Their inclusion amounts to a guilt-by-association attack.

Now, some politicians are increasingly willing to ignore or discount mounting scientific research for political gain.

*With Johnson, it began more than a decade ago when the Republican first ran for the Senate and he regularly made fringe comments about climate change, such as that it was due to sunspots. When the pandemic hit, Johnson, then the chair of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs committee, held three hearings on the crisis, and the senator and **his hand-picked witnesses** made claims **unsupported by solid evidence.***

Deceptive language.

All witnesses at Senate hearings other than for nominations are "hand-picked." Here, Fauber uses the phrase to imply some cherry-picking behavior out of the ordinary. The witnesses were selected in exactly the usual way.

Fauber also says the witnesses made claims "unsupported by solid evidence." All the witnesses presented evidence from their own research or medical practice. Fauber has no basis for saying it wasn't "solid."

The claims have been frequent: In just one month, in April, Johnson told a conservative talk radio show that COVID-19 vaccines should have been limited to the vulnerable; said at a state Republican party event that two

drugs, both unproven, and early treatment “could have stopped the pandemic before we even had a vaccine”; and stated in a constituent conference call that he doubted masks work.

And in June at a Milwaukee Press Club event, Johnson criticized the Trump and Biden administrations for “not only ignoring but working against robust research (on) the use of cheap, generic drugs to be repurposed for early treatment of COVID.”

True.

You said these things. And? Fauber presents no evidence that they are not true; he relies on the readers’ presumption that they must somehow be wrong.

That led to a one-week suspension from YouTube after he uploaded video from the event to the website. The company said that violated its policy on medical misinformation.

Olivia Troye, a member of the White House Coronavirus Task Force in the Trump administration, said Johnson’s pandemic hearings were troublesome.

“I felt like (Johnson) was an echo chamber for Trump,” said Troye, a former homeland security aide to Vice President Mike Pence. “I thought to myself, ‘This is so fundamentally dangerous.’”

Incomplete.

While Troye worked with the task force, Fauber fails to mention that she was fired for her performance on the task force, and that she has no background or expertise in epidemiology or medicine – her degrees and background are in political science and counterterrorism.

And as Fauber pointed out a few paragraphs before, the senator criticized the Trump administration for opposing robust research into early treatment. This contradicts Troye’s assertion that he was an “echo chamber.”

False.

Fauber also is wrong to say that Troye was a “member” of the task force. She was not. She was a national security adviser to Vice President Pence who helped organize the task force, but she was not on it, according to [multiple news reports](#).

She said that after Johnson’s first hearing last May there was a conversation among task force members, including Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, and Robert Redfield, the former director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The consensus was that the statements from Johnson and his witnesses were harming health officials’ efforts to curtail the pandemic, said Troye, a Trump critic who left the White House last summer. She is now director of the Republican Accountability Project, a group of anti-Trump Republicans and conservatives that sprang up after the Jan. 6 U.S. Capitol riot.

Policy disagreement, not error.

Troye's secondhand criticism is that the Senate should not hear from experts who come to different conclusions than the CDC. That may be so if one favors an all-of-government propaganda drive, and it would be wrong if one favors giving Americans the facts and trusting to their reason. Neither is factually wrong; it's a policy disagreement.

Regarding climate change, Johnson has said he doesn't think humans have caused the problem or that people can do anything about it.

Misleading.

The senator has repeatedly and publicly said that human activity has an effect on the environment.

He specifically replied to Fauber in this way:

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel: Do you believe human activity is a major cause of climate change?

Senator Johnson: Human activity absolutely affects the environment. Exactly how much it affects climate relative to other factors, like solar cycles, earth's axis wobble, etc., is a legitimate subject for scientific inquiry.

He did not say that people can do nothing about climate change. To the contrary, he repeatedly has said they can adapt to it to prevent harmful effects. He specifically answered Fauber this way:

I have repeatedly referenced and agree with the view of Bjorn Lomborg (who fully believes in man-caused climate change) when he acknowledges that with limited resources, there are far more efficient and effective ways of alleviating human suffering than spending money trying to prevent temperature changes that we should be able to easily adapt to (as long as we don't destroy our economies in a foolish quest to hold back the tides). By the way, in one of the attachments, notice how the sea level has risen about 390 feet over the last 20,000 years. Does anyone think we would have had the capability of preventing that? We will have to adapt to climate change.

But 97% of climate scientists believe that humans are the cause of global warming, according to a 2013 survey. And dozens of prominent science organizations, including NASA, the U.S. National Academy of Sciences and the American Meteorological Society, support that belief.

False.

The “97% of climate scientists” canard has been long since debunked. We sent several articles dismantling it. Fauber could easily have found others by experts writing in prominent outlets both on the [right](#) and the [left](#). That he didn’t means he’s repeating misinformation.

Sea levels have risen 8 inches in the last century, glaciers have retreated around the world, the Antarctic and Greenland ice sheets have decreased, according to NASA. In the U.S., record-high temperatures have increased, lows have decreased, and intense rainfall events are up.

Irrelevant.

The senator has not said otherwise – to the contrary, he has noted that global mean surface temperature has increased over the past century – but none of these have any bearing on whether the degree of human activity’s role in environmental change is no longer a legitimate subject of research or whether there are far more efficient and effective ways of alleviating human suffering than spending money trying to prevent temperature changes that we should be able to easily adapt to.

Some of Johnson’s statements have involved topics in which there has been uncertainty or in which the government has sent mixed messages to the public. For instance, Fauci initially downplayed the effectiveness of masks against the coronavirus.

But for months, scientists and public health officials have agreed that mask use is a major deterrent.

“I think the science is clear,” said Brian Garibaldi, an associate professor of medicine and director of the Biocontainment Unit at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. “We know that masks work.”

Garibaldi, a pulmonary doctor who treats COVID patients, said without masks there would have been more COVID deaths. “I think without a doubt things would have been worse.”

*And while Johnson **has downplayed the importance of everyone getting vaccinated and questioned the safety of the vaccines**, COVID vaccines have been enormously effective and have allowed the nation to move toward normalcy. Today, Johnson held a news conference in Milwaukee with several people who say they were seriously harmed after being vaccinated.*

Misleading.

The senator has not downplayed the importance of vaccination. He has repeatedly praised the speed with which a vaccine was developed and has said he is pleased so many people have been vaccinated. He has said only that he opposed coerced vaccination. While Fauber didn’t ask specifically about compulsory vaccines, the senator replied to another Fauber question in this way:

I was the champion of “Right to Try” legislation. A reasonable corollary to that is the right to choose or not to choose treatment. Regarding Covid vaccines, everyone should have the right to decide for themselves. I believe government’s role (and

therefore my role) is to help ensure transparency so that people have as much information as possible to make an informed decision. I also support health privacy laws and will vigorously oppose any efforts by the government to utilize or impose vaccine passports.

As for vaccine safety, the senator [began his Milwaukee press event](#) on adverse effects June 28 by saying he is “happy to acknowledge that over 300 million doses of the vaccines have been given in the U.S. and for most people, the vast majority of people, the vaccine’s been administered with little or no side effects.” So when Fauber writes, “While Johnson has ... questioned the safety of the vaccines, COVID vaccines have been enormously effective,” he is falsely insinuating that the senator said the vaccines are not effective or safe.

Christine Todd Whitman, the former Republican governor of New Jersey and the head of the Environmental Protection Agency under President George W. Bush, said she thinks Johnson believes the contrarian things he says about public health issues and climate change. “If he doesn’t believe them at all, that is just so wrong,” she said.

Deceptive language.

If Whitman, a politician with no particular background in science – she has a [degree in government](#) – “said she thinks Johnson believes the contrarian things he says,” then it is deceptive to quote her opining as if he did not.

Regarding the witnesses he invited to his panels last year, she said: “You can always find outliers in science. Unfortunately, he is giving them a microphone they don’t deserve.”

Policy disagreement, not error.

Whitman is saying that the Senate should hear from witnesses who express conventional-wisdom views, not experts who dissent and who can explain their reasons for dissenting. The senator believes otherwise. This is a policy disagreement about the purpose of hearings, not conclusive evidence of error on the senator’s part.

Johnson, 66, declined to be interviewed by the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. In a written response to numerous questions, he said it is merely an opinion to call his scientific positions extreme and that scientific consensus “has been proved wrong many times before.”

False.

The senator did not decline to be interviewed. He answered, at length and personally, the questions Fauber asked. That his answers were in written form do not mean it was not an interview.

On COVID-19, he said, “I have repeatedly stated I am not downplaying the severity of the disease or the tragedies caused by it.”

Incomplete.

Here, Fauber uses part of the senator’s answer in a way that makes it sound like a baseless denial. The full reply, which points out how he takes a broader view of the pandemic’s effects, was:

Labeling a position as “extreme” is a matter of opinion, and the scientific consensus has been proved wrong many times before. I would need the exact quote and context you are referencing when you claim I’ve said “deaths from Covid are similar to flu.” I have certainly stated what flu statistics have been [\(I’ve attached the chart I created from CDC data\)](#), and also quoted experts [like Professor John Ioannidis](#) and the [Oxford Center for Evidence Based Medicine](#) regarding their estimates of case fatality rates (CFR) and infection fatality rates (IFR) for Covid. I’ve acknowledged all of these are estimates and there is much we don’t know. But CFR and IFR are only two metrics needed to compare Covid to seasonal flu. Another important metric is contagiousness. In terms of determining the best public policy, we also should consider the human toll of the economic devastation and social dislocation caused by the lockdowns. In using a variety of metrics to put Covid into perspective, I have repeatedly stated I am not downplaying the severity of the disease or the tragedies caused by it.

Responding to YouTube removing his video, Johnson said in a statement at the time that “Big Tech and mainstream media believe they are smarter than medical doctors who have devoted their lives to science and use their skills to save lives.”

True.

The senator said this, and in it, he is right: The videos removed were of testimony by physicians who have actually treated Covid patients, an earned expertise not possessed by YouTube or mainstream media.

Regarding climate change, he told the Journal Sentinel: “I am not a climate change denier, but I also am not a climate change alarmist.”

When asked whether he still believed humans are not causing global warming, he said: “Human activity absolutely affects the environment. Exactly how much it affects climate relative to other factors, like solar cycles, earth’s axis wobble, etc., is a legitimate subject for scientific inquiry.”

He would not say whether “the environment” and climate change were the same thing.

Misleading.

Clearly, given the context of the question and given the second sentence of his answer, which directly addresses climate, the first sentence’s mention of “environment” refers to the climate.

The senator often qualifies his controversial statements with caveats or self-admonishments, such as “I’m not a doctor” or “I got in a little trouble for saying this.” He has compared the infection fatality rate for COVID-19 to the flu “in a bad year.” At one of his Senate hearings in December, Johnson said, “I’m not downplaying COVID,” acknowledging that 5% of people aged 70 and older with COVID-19 die from it “or with it.”

Revealing.

Here, Fauber makes it plain that no amount of caution on the part of the senator will satisfy him. It is clear that Fauber is faulting the senator for doing something other than parroting the conventional wisdom of left-leaning media outlets.

Referring to a United Nations estimate in July that the pandemic could push as many as 130 million people into hunger by the end of 2020, he said COVID-19 was “certainly worse than the flu, but is it that much worse to cause that much economic devastation with that severe a human toll?”

True.

He is quoted here as saying Covid is worse than influenza. This is true. Fauber is faulting him for weighing the costs of lockdowns, insinuating that it’s wrong to weigh those costs. That is a policy disagreement, not error.

Minutes later, two of his own witnesses, including the doctor who promoted a worm medication as a miracle cure, said COVID-19 was worse than the flu.

Misleading.

Fauber here refers to ivermectin as “a worm medication.” It is an antiparasitic, but that it also has antiviral properties has long been established in the literature. [See](#), for instance.

“This is not the flu,” Kory said, adding that the New York health care system he worked for last year went from 95 intensive care unit beds to 350 in just two and a half weeks.

“We have ICUs dedicated to COVID patients on ventilators,” he said. “That’s not what happens with the flu. Gastroenterologists are taking care of dying patients on ventilators. We don’t do that with the flu.”

Misleading.

Fauber quotes Kory extensively as saying Covid has been worse than the flu, using the quotes as if they were a refutation of the senator. The senator, however, had said exactly that Covid is “certainly worse than the flu.” Moreover, Dr. Kory’s point was that early outpatient treatment will help prevent strain on hospital systems from COVID patients. That Fauber is unable to connect these dots is revealing.

Little in Johnson's background reveals how he would someday become a U.S. senator frequently at odds with science.

At Edina (Minn.) High School in the early 1970s, Johnson could be a little abrasive in class, recalled Jay Halvorson, who took Latin with him. But he was not the kind of person who seemed to harbor extreme views, he said.

Begging the question.

When Fauber writes that in high school, Johnson “was not the kind of person who seemed to harbor extreme views,” he is implying that Johnson now does. That is the point he has tried, and failed, to prove.

“He was kind of a smart-alecky kind of guy, cocky,” Halvorson said.

He said he has been surprised by Johnson's statements about science in the Senate. In high school, Halvorson said, Johnson seemed to fit in with the kind of moderate Republicanism that was typical in their hometown of Edina.

Johnson graduated from the University of Minnesota with a degree in business and accounting. In 1979, he and his wife, Jane, moved to Oshkosh to start a plastics business with Jane's brother. Johnson sold his ownership stake in the business last year.

When Wisconsin voters swept Johnson into office as part of the Tea Party wave in 2010, he vowed to fight the national debt and Obamacare. Former Florida Republican Congressman David Jolly said Johnson has gone through a “fascinating evolution” from when he was first recruited to run for the Senate as a “Chamber of Commerce, sensible conservative.” Now, he said, Johnson is embracing an anti-science wing of the Republican Party.

Mark Becker, the former chairman of the Brown County Republican Party, said he doubts whether Johnson believes some of his statements.

“He's a contrarian,” he said, “but he's also an actor.”

Becker recalled a conversation he said he had with Johnson in which the senator acknowledged that Joe Biden had legitimately won the presidential election. Then Becker would see Johnson on TV expressing doubts about Biden winning.

Misinformation.

Fauber's insinuation that there is contradiction between what the senator said privately and what he said in public is baseless.

In early December, the senator said in reaction to Becker's claims:

“I have been very consistent in both public and private statements that I believe there are way too many irregularities and suspect issues that need to be fully investigated and publicly vetted before a final result is determined and a peaceful transition of power takes place. The article should be viewed as the political hit piece it is, and simply ignored.”

And in reply to Fauber's question, he replied this way:

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel: Mark Becker, the former chairman of Republican Party in Brown County, said he had a conversation and text exchanges with you regarding what you said publicly and in private about whether Joe Biden had legitimately won the election. In the last text he got from you, you said he was a low-life weasel. Any response? Did Biden legitimately and fairly win the election?

Senator Johnson: Mark Becker called me under false pretenses. I was kind enough to engage in a lengthy conversation with him that I had every expectation would remain private. Months later, he went public with what he claims the conversation was about and what I had said. Anyone who would do that is a low-life weasel, and nothing they say should be given any credence. I acknowledged Biden was president-elect as soon as the Electoral College had voted. On a number of occasions before Jan. 6, I also acknowledged that I saw no scenario in which any of Biden's electors would be disallowed. I also acknowledged that there were a number of election irregularities that need to be addressed to restore confidence in future elections.

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel: Becker also said that while you may be a contrarian, you also are an actor and that he doesn't think you actually believe all the things you say. Any response to that?

Senator Johnson: Same answers as above

Though Johnson ultimately voted against efforts to reject Electoral College votes in Arizona and Pennsylvania, he has said that voter fraud should be investigated and that a large percentage of the population didn't view the election as legitimate.

Becker texted Johnson on Jan. 3, telling him to stop advancing lies about the election, according to the texts, which Becker shared with the Journal Sentinel.

Four days later, Johnson texted Becker back: "Mark, It is my sincere hope to never have to see or speak to a low-life weasel like yourself again."

True.

This is a moderate and reasonable reaction to someone who shares a confidential conversation with the intent of harming another, and it is consistent with Becker's acknowledged support of the senator's opponent in 2016.

Former U.S. Sen. Al Franken, who spent seven years in the Senate with Johnson, said his former colleague doesn't do his homework on scientific issues. He mentioned Johnson's claim that Greenland got its name because it once was warm enough to be green.

“That’s a climate-denier trope that he heard somewhere,” Franken said. “Instead of saying, ‘Hmm, let me check that out.’ He has a very vaunted view of himself that is somewhat unwarranted.”

Franken resigned from the Senate in 2017 after several women accused him of sexual misconduct, mostly in incidents before he came to the Senate in 2009.

In his written responses to the Journal Sentinel, Johnson said, “Al Franken is uninformed and should have done his homework before falsely and ignorantly criticizing me.”

He said no one knows “for certain how Greenland officially got its name, but it has been documented that Eric the Red urged his fellow Icelanders to venture with him to a ‘green land.’ It’s certainly plausible he saw green shores.”

Except for coastal areas, Greenland was covered with ice 1,000 years ago, just as it is today, said Yarrow Axford, a Northwestern University associate professor who has researched Greenland’s climate.

“It would have looked very similar when the Norse arrived as it does today,” she said.

Misleading.

Fauber presents a small part of the senator’s answer in a way that makes it appear he is simply opining based on legends about etymology. The senator’s full reply included links to authoritative sources, including articles describing recent research, discussing the somewhat more temperate climate on parts of Greenland’s shore during the time that the Norse built a thriving settlement there. His full answer was:

Senator Johnson: How does Al Franken know how much homework I do on any issue? He doesn’t, and his claim is simply wrong. Regarding [Greenland](#), see the attachments. No one knows for certain how Greenland officially got its name, but it has been documented that Eric the Red urged his fellow Icelanders to venture with him to a “green land,” and as the [National Geographic points out](#), it’s certainly plausible he saw green shores. Regardless of the naming history — and it is ridiculous for anyone to focus on such an insignificant and tangential issue — my main point, and what is clear, is that there was [a warming period during the Middle Ages](#) that [brought a more temperate climate to Greenland’s coastlines](#) for settlement (which is exactly what people like Eric the Red did). On these points, Al Franken is uninformed and should have done his homework before falsely and ignorantly criticizing me.

As Tea Party flags flapped in the wind in Madison on the morning of April 15, 2010, an organizer for Americans for Prosperity introduced Johnson to the crowd.

The advocacy group, funded by the industrialist Koch brothers, not only was behind the rally that helped launch Johnson’s career, but it and other Koch-affiliated groups would back him in the years to come.

Koch Industries is heavily involved in the oil and gas business, and Johnson often has ridiculed the science of human-caused climate change.

In 2010, Johnson said global warming was likely caused by sunspots. That same year, speaking in Wisconsin to a group of constitutional conservatives called the Rock River Patriots, he said he did not believe humans were causing global warming. Over the course of geologic time, he said, “we’ve had huge cycles in climate.”

“I got in a little trouble for saying this, but I’ll say it again anyway,” he said. “If it weren’t for climate changes, we’re sitting here in Wisconsin, and we’d be sitting in, what, a 200-foot-thick glacier? I’ve got to figure out what the real thickness was. Somebody told me it was a mile.”

False.

Johnson did not say “global warming was likely caused by sunspots.” [He told the Journal Sentinel’s editorial board](#), “No, I absolutely do not believe that, you know, the science of man-caused climate change is proven, not by any stretch of the imagination. I think it’s far more likely that it’s just sunspot activity or something just in the geologic eons of time where we have changes in the climate.”

Fauber treats this mention of sunspot activity as one possible contributor to climate change as if Johnson were definitively saying it was the exclusive cause. He did not. Fauber treats it as if it were a baseless assertion. It was not. The IPCC’s 2007 assessment report, for example, cited research results that “strengthened the evidence for solar forcing of climate change,” focusing on “solar variability, including during the solar cycle” as the mechanism.

Misleading.

Fauber treats it as wrong for Johnson to have said, “If it weren’t for climate changes, we’re sitting here in Wisconsin, and we’d be sitting in, what, a 200-foot-thick glacier? I’ve got to figure out what the real thickness was. Somebody told me it was a mile.” Johnson, however, is correct: The Green Bay lobe of the most recent glaciation was about a mile thick over what is now Oshkosh before the earth’s climate warmed and the continental glaciers retreated.

In 2016, he said the climate had not warmed in “quite a few years. That is proven scientifically.” That comment was judged to be false by Politifact. And 2016 would prove to be the warmest year on record, at the time, surpassing 2014 and 2015, which also set records.

Misleading but difficult.

The senator was incorrect to say in 2016 that the climate had not warmed in quite a few years. He would have been right to have said that the year before, the last year in a multiyear “pause” in warming that was the subject of a great deal of media coverage. The pause ended with new numbers that came out in 2016, and figures for 2014 and 2015 were adjusted upward then as well. The senator was basing his comment on data that were one year out of date.

He also said in a 2016 radio interview that “civilization thrives” in warmer weather and that people will adapt. “How many people are moving up toward the Antarctica or the Arctic?” he asked. “Most people move down to Texas and Florida, where it’s a little bit warmer.”

True.

Yes, he said this. Yes, it is generally true.

In another 2016 interview, he told the Journal Sentinel, “I don’t think we can do anything about controlling what the climate is.”

Asked what he thought carbon dioxide does in the atmosphere, he said, “I think it gets sucked down by trees and helps trees grow.” But carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases also trap heat that otherwise would be emitted into space.

Perspective disagreement, not error.

Fauber is not saying outright that the senator is wrong to note that carbon dioxide is necessary for plant respiration and photosynthesis. He is insinuating that it is wrong to notice that.

In 2019, Johnson told the College Republicans in Madison that the climate has always been changing, and they should not be concerned about fraction-degree increases, according to a story in the Badger Herald, a University of Wisconsin’s student newspaper.

The planet’s average surface temperature has warmed by about 2 degrees Fahrenheit since the late 19th century.

True.

The climate is always changing. Fauber is insinuating that it’s out-of-bounds to notice that.

The senator has frequently, for years, noted that the global mean surface temperature has increased about 1.9 degrees Fahrenheit over the past century. Fauber’s use of that datum here is meant to insinuate that the senator has said otherwise; he has not. As he replied to Fauber, “Regarding climate change, I am not a climate change denier, but I also am not a climate change alarmist. Climate is not static. It has always changed and always will change. I do not share Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s view that the ‘world is going to end in 12 years if we don’t address climate change.’”

Since 2010, Johnson has received more than \$590,000 in individual contributions from people employed by or associated with the fossil fuel industry, according to data from Open Secrets, a federal campaign finance tracking website run by the nonprofit Center for Responsive Politics. During that time, Johnson has also accepted more than \$1.2 million from Club for Growth, a conservative organization and political action committee with anti-climate change views.

In addition to Americans for Prosperity’s involvement in the 2010 Tea Party rally that helped launch Johnson’s career, news accounts said that another Koch-affiliated group was spending \$1 million on ads to bolster his 2016 re-election campaign.

In his responses to the Journal Sentinel, Johnson said his position on climate change has not been shaped by campaign contributions from the fossil fuel industry, Koch-related entities or PACs.

“I also personally don’t keep track of, or pay any attention to, how much anyone gives to me,” he said. “Raising money to run campaigns is a necessary part of politics.”

In 2016, Johnson became a champion of the e-cigarette industry after reading a Wall Street Journal opinion piece that year by physician Michael Siegel of the Boston University School of Public Health.

Incomplete.

Fauber fails to include the senator's answer to the question of why he became interested in this issue. That answer:

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel: You have become somewhat a champion of the vaping industry. Why is it that you picked vaping as an industry to get so involved in?

Senator Johnson: I personally knew, and have now come to know many more, adults who say that vaping is the only way they were able to quit a far more dangerous habit — cigarette smoking.

Siegel wrote that the FDA's new regulations on e-cigarettes would force manufacturers to show that their products were beneficial to the public's health and safer than regular cigarettes. Because of the high cost of doing that, thousands of small businesses would be destroyed, he said.

Twelve days later, on May 17, 2016, Johnson wrote the first of two letters to the FDA, citing Siegel's opinion piece and questioning the regulations, saying they could drive consumers to resort to traditional cigarettes.

The FDA responded by saying there could also be harm to public health by not regulating the booming e-cigarette industry. And emerging research showed that chemicals that could be damaging to the lungs were being used in vaping and electronic cigarette products.

The agency told Johnson there had been a 900% increase in youth e-cigarette use between 2011 and 2015 and that 3 million high school and middle school students were using the products.

"E-cigarettes could benefit public health if they encourage people who would otherwise not quit smoking to stop smoking altogether, while not encouraging youth or others to start use of tobacco products or encouraging former users to relapse back to tobacco use," an FDA official wrote to Johnson. "On the other hand, e-cigarettes could be a detriment to public health if they re-normalize smoking, encourage youth to initiate smoking, or prompt users to continue to escalate cigarette use — in effect, reversing the meaningful progress tobacco control initiatives have achieved to date."

Johnson continued his efforts to curtail FDA regulation of the industry.

In December 2016, he and then-Rep. Duncan Hunter, a Republican from California, wrote to then-Vice President-elect Pence asking that the FDA rules be repealed. (Hunter was later convicted on election corruption charges, then pardoned by Trump.)

Guilt by association.

Fauber adds wholly irrelevant information in parentheses about someone else's legal troubles that have nothing to do with vaping. Does it serve any purpose other than to try making Johnson's reputation collateral damage? Additionally, the concerns cited by the FDA official regarding a re-normalization of smoking have not come to fruition. Smoking rates have continued to decline as the use of e-cigarettes has increased. Unfortunately, the FDA continues to cite false narratives like the gateway effect as a means to increase its regulatory authority over the private sector and a harm reduction product.

In 2017, shortly after Trump took office, Johnson wrote to Tom Price, the new secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, complaining of the FDA's "overreach."

In November 2019, Johnson urged Trump not to move forward on flavor restrictions for vaping products. Less than four months later, Trump angered public health groups by announcing scaled-back limits on flavored e-cigarettes.

In his written response for this story, Johnson said: "I believe it helps improve the health of those who use vaping to quit smoking. I certainly don't recommend that anyone who doesn't smoke should take up vaping, and we should do everything we can to prevent minors from obtaining and using vaping products."

On numerous occasions, Johnson, a nonsmoker, has been a guest on the show of conservative talk radio host Vicki McKenna, a heavy smoker who switched to e-cigarettes.

In one of his own podcasts in 2016, titled "Keep Vapin, Vicki," Johnson had McKenna on as his guest. Johnson said on the podcast, "So I'm really glad that you quit smoking. I want to make sure these products are available to you and other people who've quit smoking."

On the podcast, McKenna speculated that the FDA wanted to ban e-cigarette products because the government would lose sales tax revenue from tobacco products.

"I share your cynicism," Johnson said.

While vaping was a major public health issue at the start of 2020, it faded to the background when the pandemic hit. Johnson also pivoted, commenting on everything from COVID-19 treatments, mask use and, eventually, vaccines.

Manipulative language.

Fauber writes that "Johnson also pivoted," using a verb often used to describe a shift in position for the sake of political expedience. But if vaping "faded to the background" as an issue, wouldn't it be normal to comment less on it? Fauber is insinuating baselessly that the change wasn't normal but was suspect.

Johnson tested positive for COVID-19 in October. At his November Senate hearing, he said he considered using hydroxychloroquine, an anti-malaria drug.

"My cardiologist," he said, "talked me out of using hydroxychloroquine," explaining that he had an irregular heartbeat known as atrial fibrillation. Hydroxychloroquine is known to increase the risk of potentially fatal heart rhythms, though such cases are uncommon.

Inconsistency.

Fauber earlier faults the senator for publicly discussing people suffering severe side effects of the vaccination, which are rare and that he characterizes as insufficient reason for anyone to refuse the vaccine. Here, he cites rare side effects of a generally safe and widely used drug as sufficient reason to refuse its use.

Instead of taking the drug, Johnson said he took vitamins C and D, zinc, and the over-the-counter supplement quercetin, none of which are proven to be of any benefit in treating COVID-19.

“I never developed symptoms,” he told the doctors who had testified at his hearing. “I will tell you one thing though: Had I developed symptoms, I would have found a doctor. I might have called one of you. And I would have tried hydroxychloroquine.”

Five months earlier the FDA had revoked its emergency use authorization of hydroxychloroquine in hospitalized patients, citing its potential for causing serious cardiac adverse events.

*On a talk radio program in March, Johnson said he wasn't a doctor but told listeners that if they get COVID-19 they should talk to their physicians about early treatment with cocktails of repurposed drugs, such as hydroxychloroquine and **the anti-parasite drug ivermectin, neither of which are proven to work against the virus.***

False.

Fauber asserts that ivermectin has not been “proven” to work against the virus. An accumulating number of studies, many of them observational, suggest that it does. His use of “proven” as meaning only something like having efficacy proved in large-scale double-blind studies is at the least misleading; his failure to mention the growing evidence that it has some effect is deception. Fauber even concedes later that research is finding some benefit, but he does that only later after a baseless insinuation here.

Then, speaking at a state Republican Party event in April, he said, “Ivermectin, hydroxychloroquine, just early treatment. That could have stopped the pandemic before we even had a vaccine.” He also told the audience that “health agencies” had vilified the doctors he brought before his committee who talked about early treatments.

Deceptive language.

Fauber puts quote marks around “health agencies,” as if the phrase were being used in an out-of-the-ordinary way to refer to federal and state agencies having to do with public health. It's meant to cast doubt on a perfectly normal use of the phrase.

Three doctors at Johnson's hearings promoted ivermectin, including Kory, a pulmonary physician who practiced in Wisconsin and New York and who called the drug a miracle cure.

At a May hearing last year, Kory also argued that steroids should be used to treat COVID-19 patients. At the time, steroids were not recommended, but a month later he was proven correct when a large British study showed that the common steroid dexamethasone cut the risk of death by one-third in patients on ventilators and by 20% in those getting supplemental oxygen.

But while the dexamethasone finding came as the result of a randomized, 6,400-person clinical trial, there has been a lack of such trials showing life-saving benefit for ivermectin, though some less rigorous research suggests a possible benefit.

The National Institutes of Health says there is insufficient data to recommend for or against the drug. Drugmaker Merck says there is no meaningful evidence it works against COVID-19.

Several other major health organizations say it should not be used outside the context of a clinical trial; in June, University of Oxford researchers said they were starting a large-scale trial.

In an interview, Kory said Merck has a financial motive in claiming there is no evidence to support ivermectin. He said Merck is developing a COVID-19 drug with another company. While that drug is in early testing, if ivermectin were approved for COVID-19, it would “completely demolish” the market for Merck’s other drug, Kory said.

Johnson has also cast doubt on whether masks helped prevent the spread of COVID-19, saying there would be fewer infections and deaths if they worked.

“I think as more evidence comes in, it’s becoming harder and harder to support that masks actually work,” he said in a constituent conference call in April, adding that he still supported wearing masks.

Johnson was questioned about his mask comment at a Milwaukee Press Club event in June. He said that early in the pandemic, Fauci reported that coronavirus particles were too small for masks to be effective.

But Fauci’s position on masks changed a short time later when more information became available. Since then, Fauci has said that people should wear masks when they can’t socially distance.

Misleading.

Fauci [has admitted](#) to the media that his initial advice against widespread masking was not based on science but was a means of manipulating the public so as to preserve the mask supply for medical users. He didn’t change his position when more information became available but when more masks became available.

If Fauber asserts that Fauci’s position on masks changed for a more legitimate reason, he should lay out what that “more information” was.

One of Johnson’s witnesses at his pandemic hearings argued that masks don’t work.

Ramin Oskoui, a Washington, D.C.-area cardiologist, testified that one reason masks are not effective against the coronavirus is because the “predominant mechanism of spread” for the disease is oral-fecal transmission, much like the stomach flu and polio. Oral-fecal refers to a virus being shed in stool and then infecting someone else through the mouth, such as through contaminated water.

William Haseltine, a former professor of virology at Harvard University, said that while the virus can spread by the oral-fecal route, by far the main mode of transmission is through aerosols and tiny particles in the air.

Oskoui declined to comment for this story.

In a brief March 10 interview with a Milwaukee TV reporter, Johnson said he would not get a COVID-19 vaccine.

“No. I had COVID,” he said. “I think that probably provides me the best immunity possible, actually having had the disease. I don’t feel pressure that I need to get a vaccine. I’d rather let other people who want to get the vaccine get it before I do.”

True.

When Johnson gave the interview March 10, Wisconsin still was not able to supply vaccines to all who wanted them and was restricting vaccination to those with the greatest medical necessity. Johnson's deference to such patients was in keeping with the state's situation at the time.

But that runs contrary to CDC recommendations. While immunity can last a year and possibly much longer, people can be reinfected, though it is uncommon. Reinfection is an increasing concern as more variants of the virus develop and become dominant.

Misleading.

Fauber fails to mention that emerging research – [see this](#), for instance – shows natural immunity as similar to that from vaccines. He also fails to mention that the senator [in May announced](#) he had a serology test showing that his level of antibodies was equal to that of a fully vaccinated person.

Fauber also fails to show any information on the frequency of reinfection, making this an unsupported assertion.

Even Trump, who was hospitalized with severe COVID-19 at about the same time Johnson was infected, and Trump's wife, Melania, who also got the disease, later were vaccinated.

And a study in March in the Lancet found that reinfection was more common in people aged 65 and older compared with younger people. The younger group in the study had an estimated 80% protection against reinfection versus 47% for the older people.

Public health officials say there are important reasons to vaccinate as much of the population as possible and why people should care if those around them are not vaccinated.

"Because they are going to propagate the disease," said Harvard's Haseltine. "If they are not vaccinated, we are never going to get rid of it."

Misleading.

If Johnson [in fact](#) has a level of antibodies was equal to that of a fully vaccinated person, Haseltine should have been asked whether he could still propagate the disease any more than a vaccinated person would. That Fauber did not ask makes his inclusion of Haseltine's quote deceptive.

On McKenna's radio show in April, Johnson said COVID-19 vaccine distribution should have been limited to the vulnerable.

"The science tells us that vaccines are 95% effective," Johnson said. "So, if you have a vaccine, quite honestly, what do you care if your neighbor has one or not?"

In a written statement, Johnson said: “It is a legitimate question as to whether people at very low risk of suffering serious illness from COVID, particularly the young and healthy, should be encouraged to take a vaccine that is being administered under an Emergency Use Authorization — in other words, before it has been fully tested and fully approved.”

True.

It is true that the vaccines are being administered under an emergency use authorization. It is true that people who are young adults and healthy, are at very low risk of suffering serious consequences from Covid. So it is true that it is legitimate to question whether such people should be encouraged or compelled to take the vaccine. Fauber seems to be insinuating that it is illegitimate to ask the question.

He said everyone should have the right to decide for themselves. Johnson also said he will vigorously oppose any government effort to impose vaccine passports. Johnson also has said he supported the Operation Warp Speed program to develop the vaccine as quickly as possible and said he considers the vaccines safe.

COVID-19 vaccines and the trustworthiness of federal health agencies was the topic of conversation when Johnson was a guest on McKenna’s show March 16. He also warned that the “liberal, progressive, radical” Democratic playbook aims to “keep the population in a state of fear. Whether it is climate change and now the pandemic, the more people fear, the more they are going to be looking to (Democrats) to alleviate that fear.”

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