Why I’m marching for science: 'The alternative, doing nothing, is unthinkable'

Anyone who supports scientific research, evidence-based policies and equality should take a stand too, writes Dr Joseph Roche.

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ON SATURDAY APRIL 22, scientists from all over Ireland will be gathering at Grand Canal Square before marching to Government Buildings. They will be marching to celebrate their passion for science and as a call to support and safeguard the scientific community and evidence-based policy. It will be one of more than 400 marches taking place around the world on April 22. Fittingly, it also marks “Earth Day” — an annual event that promotes environmental protection and changing human behaviour.

The main march will be in Washington DC and is a reaction to the growing concern among the scientific community that irreparable damage could be done by a US administration that does not seem to value scientific research or evidence-based policies.

A controversial movement borne out of problematic policy changes

The initial idea to march for science can be traced back to the social news aggregation website Reddit. In response to the removal of references to climate change on the White House website in late January, a Reddit user suggested marching for science.

The idea quickly took root and a global movement was born. As well as its rapid growth, another defining aspect of the March for Science is how it became a contentious issue among scientists.

Some feel that science has always been political and will become even more so over the years ahead. While many feel that there is no choice but to stand up for science and defend its future, others argue that a mass public
demonstration by scientists might speed up the politicisation of science and ultimately do more harm than good.

Marching for diversity, inclusivity and choice

Although the scientific community is largely nonpartisan, it recognises that its core strengths are its diversity and inclusivity.

Any threats to those values are threats to scientific progress. In a letter published in the Journal of Science Communication recently, I asked if scientists in Ireland should be more politically active.

While scientists in the US have been protesting against laws that remove nondiscrimination protections as well as the proposed travel bans barring immigration from Muslim-majority countries, Ireland has its own laws that violate human rights.

The March for Science represents an ideal opportunity to have our voices heard. Like our colleagues in the US, we could use our academic positions as platforms to advocate for equality as well as for science itself.

The March for Science in Ireland

In an ideal world scientists could remain apolitical, but in the current climate that is becoming increasingly difficult.

We are lucky that in Ireland the march is being spearheaded by Dr Shaun O’Boyle, a scientist and science communicator, whose experience and diplomacy has ensured that March for Science in Ireland has not been affected by some of the issues that have plagued the wider movement.

Together with his dedicated team, Dr O’Boyle has managed to navigate the political quagmire by making people and communities the focus of the event.

March with us

Ultimately, scientists will be joined by science advocates and concerned citizens to march on April 22nd because the alternative — doing nothing — is unthinkable.

The time might have come for us to not only stand up for science, but to stand up for the values that are critical to scientific progress. We invite anyone who supports scientific research, evidence-based policies and equality to take a stand and be counted with us.

Dr Joseph Roche is an Astrophysicist and Assistant Professor in Science Education at Trinity College Dublin. He coordinates the Master in Science Education programme at Trinity College and tweets as @joeboating. To hear more about the March for Science in Ireland you can follow @ScienceMarchIE.
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