

Environmental activist Tom Steyer: Pope's climate message may be "most important" — ever

By Carla
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Billionaire environmental activist **Tom Steyer** says that Thursday's much-anticipated encyclical from **Pope Francis** on climate change could be the single "most important" and impactful statement made on the issue — ever.

"I view him as an absolutely inspirational world leader ... someone who has done an incredible job of staking out moral leadership," said Steyer, the founder of the advocacy group NextGen Climate, in an interview with The Chronicle this week. "And I think this could be the most important (statement) in the history of confronting climate change."

"He is somebody who has won over more people in the world than anybody ... and what he has to say on this could have an absolutely dramatic impact on how this issue is viewed," Steyer said.



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Pope Francis waves to faithful in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican. (AP/Riccardo De Luca)

The Vatican said that the pope's encyclical on climate change is set to be unveiled Thursday, [though the Italian publication L'Espresso earlier this week had reported it obtained a leaked draft copy.](#)

The release of the rare papal encyclical had been set as a prelude to the Pontiff's visit to the United States, where he's likely to address the issue in a schedule that includes a speech to the United Nations and an address to a joint session of Congress.

According to the draft, Pope Francis will warn that climate change poses the danger of "unprecedented destruction of the ecosystem" by the end of the 21st century and will say that unless key changes are made in lifestyle and environmental protections, there will be "grave consequences for all of us."

Steyer dismisses criticism about Pope Francis' move by Republicans such as presidential candidate [Rick Santorum](#), who suggested the Pontiff may want to "stick to science."

Steyer, the San Francisco Democratic activist who has given millions to back candidates in support of climate change issues, noted that [the pope was educated as a chemical technician prior to joining the clergy](#).

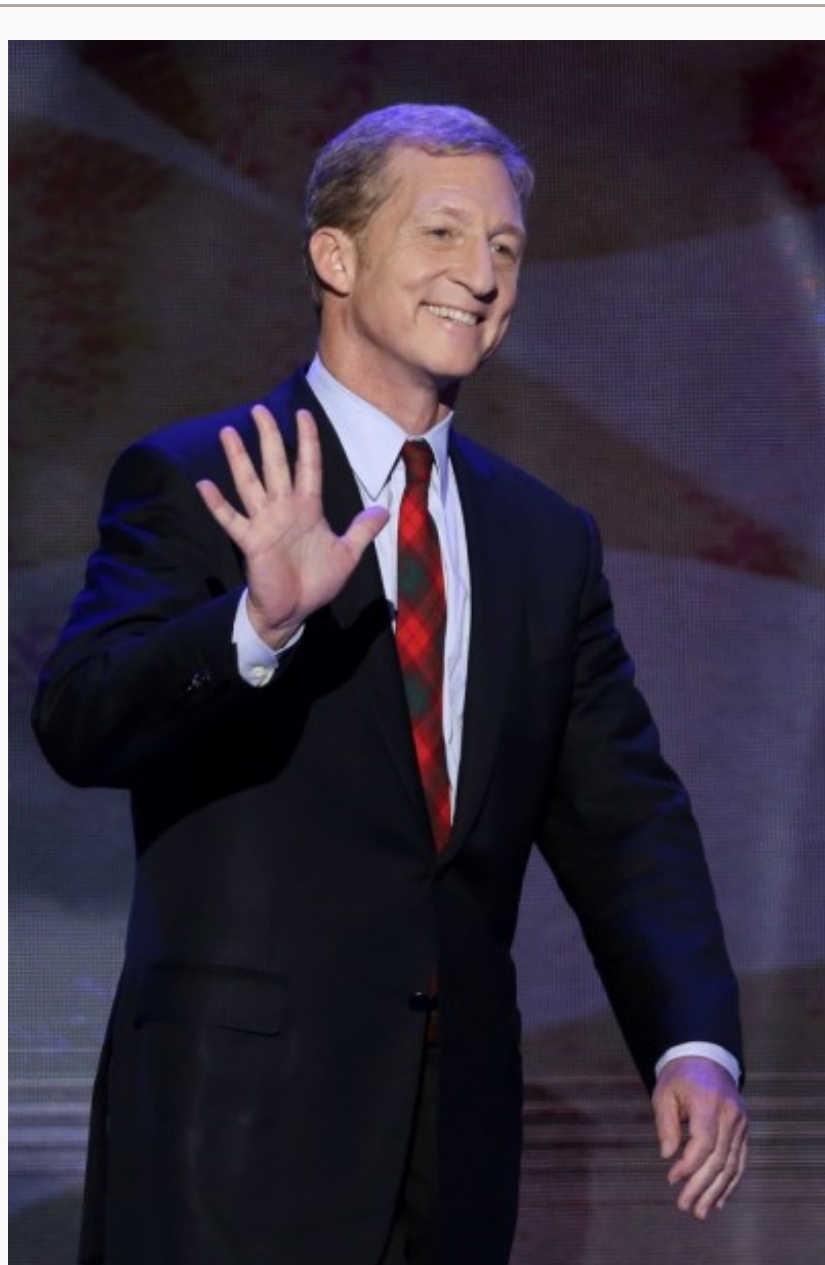
"If it came down to taking a science course, I think he would take them to the cleaners," said Steyer of the pope and the GOP field.

"We certainly haven't seen any well thought-out policy plans from any Republican on climate change," he said. Though it appears that "as a group, they are trying to get away from the absolute loser positions they've staked out in the past — and we encourage them to do so."

Sabrina Lockhart, spokeswoman for Californians for Energy Independence — a group that has repeatedly challenged Steyer's activism in Democratic politics and on climate change — said the Farallon Capital founder's words smack of hypocrisy. "What would Pope Francis say about Steyer's history of investing in dirty energy?," she said. "What would he say about Farallon Capital's continued investments in dirty energy?"

But Steyer said: "I am not surprised that people who have been trying to deny the truth are scared to death that someone who is thoughtful" — and whose influence extends far beyond the world's 1 billion Catholics — "is going to step up."

"They should be terrified."



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