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A. DOWSETT, HEALTH PROTECTION AGENCY/SCIENCE PHOTO LIBRARY

MORE bad news for Mitt Romney: the Republican party’s scepticism about climate change seems likely to play badly with voters who haven’t yet decided who to back in November’s US presidential election.

A new poll, run by Yale University and George Mason University in Virginia, has found that, when it comes to their views on climate change, “undecideds” look remarkably similar to supporters of Barack Obama.

Of the 1061 people polled, about three-quarters were judged likely to vote, based on their registration, stated intentions and past turnout. Among them, just 27 per cent of Romney backers believed global warming was human-caused, compared to 65 per cent of the Obama supporters.

Of the 87 undecideds who were likely voters in the sample, 65 per cent believed global warming was human-caused, and 61 per cent said the issue would help guide their vote. “We’d have expected them to be somewhere in the middle,” says Anthony Leiserowitz, who heads the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication. “But we find they’re very similar to likely Obama voters.”

Leiserowitz doesn’t expect climate change to be a key issue in the election, but with the polls slipping away from Romney the Republican candidate will need every vote he can get.

OLGA ZELENINA, a chemist at the Penza Scientific Research Institute of Agriculture in Russia, has been released from the Moscow jail in which she had been held, alongside a member of the punk band Pussy Riot, since mid-August. Her crime? Apparently “doing her job”.

Zelenina had been asked, as an independent expert witness, to analyse imported poppy seeds as part of a drug-smuggling case against a Russian businessman. The prosecution claimed that the seeds, ostensibly imported for food uses, were actually intended for the illegal narcotics market.

But her analysis, commissioned by defence lawyers in the case, found negligible traces of illegal substances. She was arrested and imprisoned, charged with aiding and abetting a smuggling ring.

Despite Zelenina’s release this week after a hearing on Tuesday, she will still face a court case. “No one should charge scientists simply for giving their scientific opinions,” says Natalia Andreeva, Zelenina’s lawyer. “It’s terrible.”

A VIRUS never before seen in humans has caused severe illness in two people in the Middle East, killing one. It belongs to the same family as SARS (pictured, left), which killed nearly 800 people.

It is not clear if this virus is a new SARS, as there is no evidence that it can spread readily among people. “But we need to keep an eye on it,” says Ab Osterhaus of Erasmus Medical Center in Rotterdam, the Netherlands.
Genetic sequencing revealed that coronaviruses virtually identical to each other caused severe pneumonia and kidney failure in a man in Saudi Arabia in July, and another in Qatar in September. People who came into contact with the men show no sign of infection, but pneumonia cases in the region are being tested to check for the spread of the virus.

The virus is from a subfamily of coronaviruses common in bats, as is SARS. “It could be spreading, but mostly causing mild disease we don’t see,” says Osterhaus. “Or it could be only occasionally spilling over into people from bats.”

Maize in disgrace
THOSE who hoped the study would go away will be disappointed. Claims that eating genetically modified maize gives rats tumours have provoked a storm in Europe.

The maize, made by Monsanto and modified to resist the herbicide Round-Up, is imported as animal feed to Europe but cannot be grown there due to continuing hostility to GM crops.

Meanwhile, the European Food Safety Authority is asking Gilles-Eric Seralini and colleagues at the University of Caen, who did the research, for detailed data not presented in the publication so it can evaluate the finding.

“The French government will suspend imports of the maize if its food agency finds the results valid”

Whether the request is met remains to be seen, as Seralini has said the EFSA cannot evaluate the study due to a conflict of interest, having declared the maize safe.

Space law race
PRIVATE cargo-carrying spacecraft? No problem, but put people on commercial flights and things get messy. Just as NASA set the date for SpaceX's first official trip to the International Space Station, the firm's home state of California passed a law reducing company responsibility for any future passengers' safety.

No private space firm yet sends crewed flights to space, but that is the plan. The new law treats spaceflight rather like sky-diving, requiring future travellers to give “informed consent”. They agree not to sue the company they fly with if they are injured or killed in the process.

California is the last of the states hosting major contenders in the commercial space race to pass such a law.

Such laws make a state more attractive to space businesses, says Diane Howard of McGill University in Canada. But without statistics on the safety of commercial flights, travellers blindly sign away their right to sue, she says. “What exactly are you informing them of? You don’t know how dangerous it is.”

Emissions cuts would be cheaper

Einstein's brain on iPad
According to the Climate Vulnerability Monitor – a report by Spanish non-profit organisation DARA – in 2010 climate change shaved 1.6 per cent off global gross domestic product. The figure was calculated by adding the harmful effects of climate change to the problems of the carbon-based economy, such as air pollution.

Previous studies, such as the 2006 Stern Review, concluded that climate change would not become a net cost for decades. But they had not considered climate's impact on productivity. As the temperature increases, people work less well. "It has been assumed that a hotter living and working environment is nothing to worry about," says Tord Kjellström of Umeå University in Sweden. "But the 5 billion people living in the hot parts of this planet are already constrained by heat."

Climate change now costs more than the emissions cuts that are needed to tackle global warming. Such cuts would cost 0.5 per cent of global GDP, whereas the cost of climate change will be 3.2 per cent of global GDP by 2030. If the claims stand up, it boosts the case for urgent action, says Cameron Hepburn of the London School of Economics. "Caps on emissions should be much tighter, and carbon prices much higher, than they are now.”

Climate harms today's economy
NEVER mind what's going to happen in 2100: climate change is already shrinking the global economy.

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60 SECONDS
Wasted effort
Talk about burying the past. The US plans to dump an unused stash of uranium-233 – created in the 1960s and 70s – at an underground facility in Nevada. A report by the Institute for Policy Studies estimates the government spent about $5.5 billion to make 1.5 tonnes of the isotope, but it turned out to be more expensive and less useful than natural uranium.

Safety is skin deep
It's not just snakes that shed their skins. African spiny mice do it too, to escape predators. They are the first mammals known to do so. The mouse's skin tears off in chunks, which could distract hungry predators. The wounds heal rapidly (Nature, DOI:10.1038/nature11499).

Einstein's brain on iPad
Wish you could peer inside the mind of a genius? Now you can, with a new iPad app developed by the National Museum of Health and Medicine Chicago. It lets users examine digitised versions of nearly 350 slides made from slices of Albert Einstein's brain following his death in 1955.

Language losers
Siri and Google Translate have a lot to answer for. Most European languages won't survive the digital age because of a lack of technological support, according to a pan-European study by more than 200 language researchers. A lack of support in automatic translation, spell-checkers and satnav voices for languages such as Icelandic and Greek means that these and other lesser-spoken languages will struggle in the future, the group warns.