

American Culture and the Climate Change Controversy

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The international relations (IR) theory of Social Constructivism provides valuable understandings of climate change by exploring how personal and social factors condition and shape people's beliefs. To implement effective policy to curb climate change, we must foster discussion and compromise with people who deny climate change or its urgency. Though seemingly difficult, we can use IR theory to understand the driving forces behind the politics of climate change deniers¹ — namely, economic, political, and social factors — to do so. More specifically, the Green New Deal, a congressional resolution that addresses both the rise of greenhouse gases as well as issues relating to poverty and environmental justice, can serve as a guide to combating climate change in the realm of public policy, assist us in beginning a productive dialogue between climate change activists and deniers, and galvanize necessary action in response to climate change.

Introduction

As a society, we consider many topics socially taboo, including sex, religion, political affiliation, and climate change. However, the issue of climate change is unique among these. The response to climate change should (in theory) be a scientific phenomenon. However, the

¹ Though no term is entirely unproblematic, the Journal of Interdisciplinary Public Policy, following the lead of a majority of scholarly and journalistic sources, uses “denial” to describe explicit and implicit unwarranted doubt towards climate change and environmental science policies (National Center for Science Education). The term is not used pejoratively; rather, we embrace the term for sake of brevity, consistency among the larger community, and to follow in the footsteps of a number of the most prominent deniers. Lastly, the article's focus on cultural denial makes the term more accurate than “skeptic” or “contrarian.”

climate change issue has evolved from scientific to cultural, characterized by immobilizing partisanship in the legislature and supranational organizations (Wallach; Scott). Likewise, the issue has divided the populace, with climate change being denied by many while sweeping changes to address it are fiercely advocated for by many more. To understand opposition to climate change policy, we must first understand the socio-cultural factors that drive people's beliefs.

In the 1970s and 1980s, scientists began to discuss evidence of ocean warming and the atmospheric temperature rising, information the public initially considered irrelevant to daily life (Maslin). However, environmental activists and scientists warned these changes would transform life on earth as we know it and require all nations to respond (Maslin). Once this scientific problem became politicized in individual nations, climate change policy became driven less by data and more by social and cultural perspectives. By analyzing and linking such factors to the newly introduced Green New Deal, we propose a way to introduce conversation between climate change deniers and activists. For progressives to move from stalemate toward immediate action, they must recognize deep cultural factors that enable climate change deniers. This essay explores economic, political, and social factors that foster denial of scientific conclusions and uses the lens of social constructivism to better understand these in relation to policy.

I. Economics

Climate change will inevitably bring immense change to the world economy. Globally climate change will bring drought, fires, and extreme temperatures. In turn, these conditions will adversely affect agriculture by changing the crop yields and mixtures, directly affecting farmer's livelihoods and world food supply ("Climate Impacts on Agriculture and Food Supply"). Additionally, climate change will affect productivity and jobs, and inflict physical damage. However, whether people prioritize these risks over the opportunity costs of measures to avoid them is a very individual question. Many oppose climate change action based on potential economic consequences. Claiming "the cure is worse than the disease," deniers support the status quo to protect against financial losses from replacing fossil fuel plants, for example. On the other hand, climate change will most affect low-wage workers, who must decide between putting food on the table and solving climate change. Thus, many of these people must continue environmentally detrimental practices simply to make ends meet (Irwin).

Overall, economics provides an indispensable lens to view how humans weigh the potential dangers of climate change. Some behaviors follow conventional economic logic. For instance, oil companies do not support climate policy, fearing such a policy will limit business for the company (Holden). The economic theory of cost-benefit analysis describes companies'

phenomena of first and foremost optimizing current profits, rewarding short-term thinking that often penalizes future generations. This school of thinking disincentivizes any policies to curb climate change that result in a net loss in the short term.

Culture also has a profound effect on how economics is used in this decision-making process. Due to confirmation bias, we seek evidence that endorses our personal beliefs. Countries often have difficulty quantifying climate change in monetary terms, especially those favorable toward climate change policy (Hulme). As such, people cling to previously held beliefs and focus on present-day concerns over seemingly remote future sustainability concerns. While many extreme climate policy supporters accuse detractors of being ignorant, uninformed, or stupid, it is precisely their human intelligence that allows climate change deniers to employ confirmation bias to avoid criticism of their beliefs.

II. Politics

Politics is deeply embedded in the culture of a society, especially in the United States, where the two-party system has fueled intense animosity and partisanship. Worldwide, key stakeholders in climate change politics include national governments, public employees, political parties, citizens of different economic and demographic strata, and fossil fuel or renewable energy businesses. Each of these macro-level political actors is motivated by unique factors. For example, economics drives lobbying for businesses based upon non-renewable energy sources (Holden).

However, especially in the United States, politicians and their ability to enact policy are dependent upon changing public opinion, which is often more informed by ungrounded theories and emotion rather than science or complex understanding. For example, former President Obama embraced the Paris Agreement in 2016 to limit global warming (Hoffman; Somanader). However, President Trump chose to withdraw from the Paris Climate Accords, claiming “the Paris accord will undermine [the U.S.] economy... [and] puts [the U.S.] at a permanent disadvantage” (“Statement by President Trump on the Paris Climate Accord”). According to the Pew Research Center, only 24% of conservative Republicans believe the U.S. government should do more to combat climate change (Funk and Hefferon). This position largely reflects economic loyalties; conservatives believe climate change policies will hurt the economy and businesses’ profits. Likewise, Republicans who think combating climate change has a net positive or neutral effect on the economy are more likely to support increased government action on climate change (Funk and Hefferon). In contrast, 90% of liberal Democrats consider combating climate change a governmental priority (Funk and Hefferon). Internationally, 54% consider climate change a serious issue (Stokes et al.). Importantly, in other developed countries, as in the U.S., the split between right-wing and left-wing parties’ support

for government action regarding climate change is significant (Stokes et al.).

International political actions reflect these national changes. By withdrawing from the Paris Climate Accords, the U.S. set an international precedent validating climate change inaction, severing ties with allies — a move likely to have severe consequences. In the past, the U.S. served as an international model and leader after World War II (Lander). Many countries now focus domestically versus participating in the international community, leaving countries most affected by climate change in grave danger and limiting global action (Dobson). Isolationist action cannot solve this crisis, as environmental issues do not know international borders; they are by definition global. The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, has caused a domino effect of isolationism and go-it-alone nationalist thinking.

III. Culture

The climate change debate also has strong cultural underpinnings, driven mainly by social alignment with political parties. Although environmentalists drive climate activism, politicians who act based on voters' opinions determine real change—a senator from a coal mining town may oppose environmentally favorable actions to maintain economically minded constituents' support. Young people are also mobilizing worldwide, as highlighted by Greta Thunberg's Global Climate Strike movement, which had 7.6 million participants ("7.6 Million People..."). Their activism has grown from the need to raise awareness and voice anger against problems caused by previous generations, an effect seen prominently in recent data collected by the Pew Research Center. Regardless of party affiliation, younger people are more likely to support more government action on climate change. More than half of Millennial Republicans and 46% of Republican women support increased government action. The Republican party finds itself in a deciding moment—mostly dependent on social factors. Conservative Republicans, in the majority, are strongly influenced by misinformation spread by utility companies marshaling against renewable energy. Thus, they are currently evenly split on the issue of prioritizing renewable energy or fossil fuels (Funk and Hefferon). This split is emblematic of the potential for change, should we understand factors at play behind this decision making (Republican Leaders).

Some aspects of climate change touch on human rights. For example, there remains ongoing international debate about the scope of migration fueled by climate refugees, a term which many countries reject, denying the physical, cultural, and economic effects of climate change ("Human Rights, Climate Change and Migration"). The United Nations, in Resolution 35/20, reported that research and preparation are underway to address "human rights protection gaps in the context of migration and displacement of persons across international borders resulting from the sudden-onset and slow-onset adverse effects of climate change"

("Human Rights, Climate Change and Migration"). Despite this recognition, peoples of developed countries have not yet felt fully the devastating physical and cultural impact of climate change and due to confirmation bias, often do not recognize the effect on the welfare of global peoples (Hoffman). For example, people in Latin America and Africa are more than twice as likely to think that climate change will affect them personally as people in the U.S. or Europe (Stokes et al.).

Conclusion

Climate change refers to atmospheric warming of the earth's temperature, a scientific concept. However, the international relations theory of social constructivism provides insight into political, economic, and social pressures that inform climate change as a cultural issue characterized by partisan viewpoints. Social constructivism focuses on culture, social norms, and societal ideas rather than the acquisition of power or individual actions (McGlinchey). It considers how knowledge of rules, concepts, and categories shapes individual world views. Ergo, on a personal level, this theory aligns with the idea of confirmation bias.

Applied to climate change, its polarization and partisanship across the globe can be explained by cultural identities and personal priorities. For example, coal miners in the United States prioritize security and jobs over reversing climate change, and their Senators represent those values in Congress. Additionally, social constructivism provides a useful way to examine behaviors around climate change action by explaining *motivated reasoning*—the idea that people will arrive at conclusions at which they want to arrive and construct outwardly rational evidence to reach these conclusions ("Motivated Reasoning"). Social constructivism can be confirmed in climate change policy through the fact that social factors, including political party, religion, geography, and views on controversial issues such as abortion, almost always reveal a person's views on climate change (Hoffman). Therefore, climate change has become a cultural issue distinguished by opinion and personal identity through deliberate manipulation of facts and avoidance of truth (Mooney).

Therefore, we must treat it as such. To effectively pass popular, enduring climate change policies, we must hold an understanding of opposition as being socially constructed as a starting point for dialogue. People's views on climate change stem directly from their communities, culture, and experiences. To change deniers' mindset, first, we must understand economic, social, and political factors leading to political inaction. Then we must craft policy that is equitable and supports each of those identities. Continuing to neglect social factors that create deniers and ignoring motivating reasoning will doom climate change policies to failure.

The Green New Deal, proposed by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY)

and Senator Edward Markey (D-MA), argues for immediate greenhouse gas reduction to save money and combat social issues, including poverty, and racial and economic inequality (Friedman). While this policy potentially benefits both parties, its Democratic introduction led to widespread Republican backlash. Despite this conflict, from a policy perspective, the Green New Deal provides a robust framework for dialogue. Addressing both scientific consequences such as the rise of greenhouse gases and social issues like economic inequality, this policy is key to reaching deniers and combating climate change (Friedman). In particular, the Green New Deal promises “millions of good, high wage jobs” (Ocasio-Cortez). *Scientific American* estimates that between 2030 and 2050, 4.2 million new jobs in clean energy will be created resulting from the Green New Deal policies (Brown). The climate change debate cannot be solved, understood, nor resolved without understanding the vast cultural implications that determine public opinion and therefore, governmental policy.

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