

Climate Change Communication
HUUF, March 3rd, 2019
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1. Climate change is in the news more and more recently, reflecting the increases we're seeing in extreme weather; the dire scientific reports issued last fall warning that we are running out of time to avoid catastrophic damage; and the continuing federal cutbacks in regulations and policies aimed at reducing climate change. Polls show that the American public is increasingly worried about the issue, and few feel confident that we'll successfully reduce the threat.
2. We know that people take action in response to a threat like climate change when they recognize that it's real and severe, AND that there are effective actions they're personally capable of taking that will reduce the threat. My guess is that everyone in this room understands the reality & severity of climate change, but in the face of a global crisis, many of us feel there's little we can do & we feel despair—what difference can I make? Even if I walked into the ocean today & eliminated my carbon footprint entirely, the effect on global emissions would be indiscernible.
3. But despair is not a useful emotion & if we all fall into despair, then we're guaranteeing that we won't prevent a climate catastrophe... So we ask ourselves again, what action can I personally take that will make a difference?
4. My hope today is to give you a sense of your own power to make a difference. And my primary suggestion is that the most powerful and useful thing you can do is to *talk to other people about the issue*. Here's why:
5. Social change follows an S-shaped curve over time—slow to get started, then increasing sharply, and then flattening out. This applies to ideas, social norms, behaviors and technology—wherever we see societal change. The first adopters of the change are getting most of their information from the media or experts, but when change really starts to take off, it's interpersonal communication that's driving it. Network analyses of communities over time show that what you say and do influences up to a thousand other people—you can reach the friends of the friends of your friends. Your individual action is amplified through your influence on others, spreading like the rings in a pond when you toss in a stone.
6. So how do you talk about climate change? First off, let me reassure you that you don't need to know a lot about the science to do this effectively—if you do know the science, great, but most of us don't & we don't need to. In fact, it's not really the best way to communicate. It's hard for us rational UUs to accept, but the science doesn't change many minds.

7. So that's not where you start. The way to begin a conversation is to connect through your shared values and concerns, which requires as its starting point *empathic listening*. The cardinal rule in effective communication is that you do not begin with what *you* most want to say, but with what *your audience* is interested in discussing. So the first step is to listen. Ask what the other person believes about climate change & what she's concerned about. These beliefs will tell you a lot about her *values*.
8. Much of the political polarization in this country on climate change (as well as other issues) is rooted in differences in values. There are two of these differences I'd like to share.
9. First, most Americans value both freedom and equality/equity, but conservatives tend to value freedom more than equality, while the reverse is true for liberals. (By freedom I mean freedom from governmental restrictions, as opposed to, say, freedom to marry whoever I like.) So conservatives oppose regulations & laws that protect the environment because they constrain their freedom, while liberals support government intervention to foster equity.
10. It's important to recognize that *we all share both*, so it's a place to connect. But in recognition of this distinction, one way to connect is through a making the other person aware of free market solutions to climate change. E.g., stop giving government subsidies to the fossil fuel industry that give them an advantage over renewables. Conservatives have what we call "solution aversion" regarding climate change: They deny the problem exists because they don't like the solutions liberals have proposed. Hearing conservative solutions has been shown to lead to greater acceptance of the science among conservatives.
11. A second difference in values between liberals and conservatives concerns the values we draw on in making moral judgments. Liberals make most judgments based on considerations of harm and fairness – i.e., that we shouldn't harm others, and that no one should be treated unfairly. These are enshrined in the UU principles of equity in human relations and the inherent worth & dignity of every person, and it's reflected in our recognition of the interdependent web of life.
12. Conservatives make moral judgments based on concerns about harm & fairness as well, but they also draw on several other values that liberals are less likely to hold, and which (in my eyes) influence them to be less likely to generalize the values of harm & fairness to people they regard as outside their group.
13. These values are called "binding values," because they bind a group together – they are group loyalty, respect for authorities, and purity. The psychologist Jonathan Haidt (whose work I'm drawing on here) suggests that these values gave an evolutionary advantage to early human groups because tightly knit groups that supported one another were more likely to survive than those that didn't.

14. The points of connection here are that conserving the environment shows loyalty to our communities & to the nation. We're protecting our national inheritance for future generations. And purity can also be invoked, as, for example, when Pope Francis said, "The earth, our home, is looking more and more like an immense pile of filth." I.e., we're violating nature's purity.
15. So... to summarize, ask what the other person believes and what they're concerned about. Think about the values you share – look for points of connection (I'm not suggesting you lie & pretend to care about the same things as the other person). Then you can consider how to move the conversation in a fruitful direction to share information that's most likely to build the other person's issue engagement.
16. That information will vary according to what your audience currently believes. This is a simplification, but in the US there are generally three types of people you may be talking to: people who are alarmed – that's currently about 30% of Americans. Just over half of Americans aren't 100% engaged – most are inclined to believe it's happening, but they tend to view it as a distant threat with little personal relevance. And the third group consists of people who either doubt climate change is real or they're firmly convinced it isn't (just under 20%).
17. If you're talking to someone who is firmly convinced that this is a scientific hoax to get government grants and fleece the public, you may want to simply change the subject. The confirmed conspiracy theorist is not going to change.
18. But for the people who are simply doubtful that cc is real, there's one fact that we know changes minds: *97% of the world's climate scientists agree that climate change is real, harmful, and that we're causing it.* Scientists will tell you that they're *more certain* that we're causing climate change than they are that smoking causes cancer. Many people think there's controversy because the fossil fuel industry has been operating from the same playbook as tobacco companies did several decades ago. Exxon's own scientists knew what was happening going back to the early '70s, yet they've continued to fund disinformation campaigns that confuse the public on the scientific consensus.
19. For the group that is uncertain & doesn't see climate change as having much personal relevance, the consensus message is also important to increase their certainty. But more importantly, we need to bring the issue home. And remember that this is currently over half the US population, so reaching them is crucial. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez recently said that the problem we face now isn't so much climate deniers, but rather climate delayers – that's these folks. But there's no criticism here: I think of the single mom who worries about paying her rent and what her kids are doing when she's not at home.
20. Climate change is so often portrayed as a threat to other species – to polar bears – but not to us, and the single mom doesn't have space in her life for polar bears. Many of us care deeply about the harm to other species and to people in the developing nations who didn't create this problem, but are suffering heavily from it. But we're more likely to

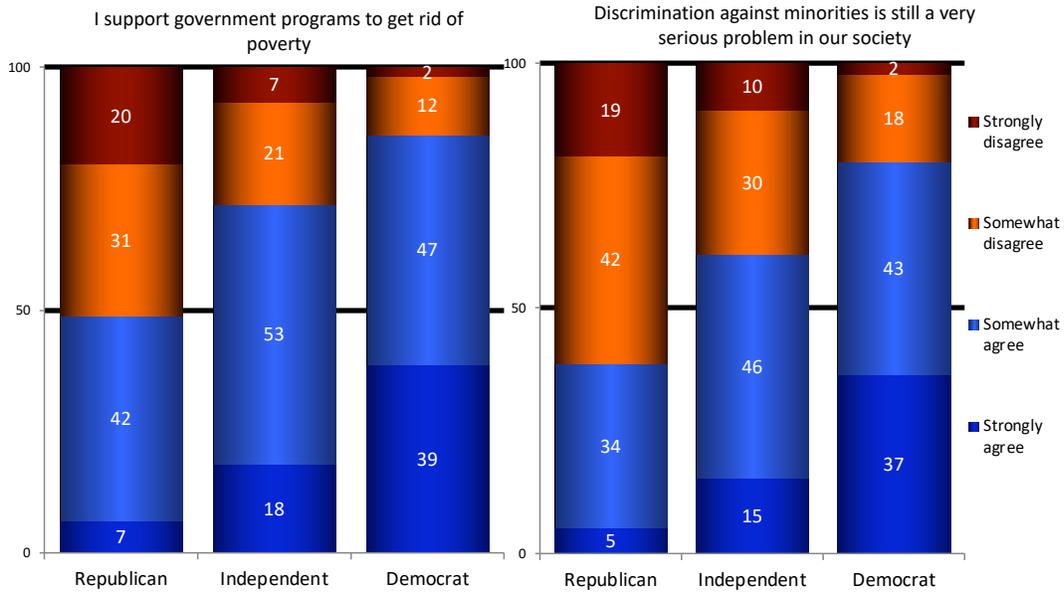
engage those who aren't currently engaged if we talk about the harm to people in our own community, our state, and the nation – harm that's happening here and now. Unfortunately, this is easy to do here in California, given the fires we're witnessing.

21. Finally, if you're talking to someone who is truly alarmed about the issue, don't talk about impacts – it's likely she's already scared. Instead, she needs to know there are many effective actions she can take, especially (to repeat the point), she can talk to others about it. One related action I would highly recommend is becoming a climate activist by joining a group like the climate action committee here at the Fellowship, or the Sierra Club or 350.humboldt. We need collective action to really tackle climate change, and research shows that environmental regulations are more likely to be enacted by government when the public supports a policy and there's political activism to promote it.
22. As for actions she (and you) can take to reduce your own carbon footprints, there are so many things we can each do. None of us can do all of them, and it's virtually impossible to reduce your own footprint to zero (short of walking into the ocean), but of the many options available, we can each consider which ones we are able to do that will have the largest impact. Following the service there will be several groups in the foyer who can discuss this with you, and you can also find heaps of information online, including carbon footprint calculators, and guides to the most effective actions according to the costs involved.
23. To conclude, I'd like to say that it may be easier than you think to persuade others that climate change matters. I have a cousin in Louisiana who, during a snow storm, posted on Facebook, "Does anyone out there still believe in global warming? LOL". I wrote a long post in response, sharing my concerns about climate change, and I also sent him a link to a youtube video of Katherine Hayhoe speaking. Katherine is one of the very best communicators out there for reaching delayers and deniers. She's one of the world's leading climate scientists – a lead author on IPCC reports and the National Climate Assessment. But she's also an evangelical Christian who is married to a pastor and the daughter of a pastor. She lives and teaches in Texas, and she says that her Christian faith is what drove her to start studying climate change because she recognized its impacts on the poor.
24. Ricky watched this video and wrote back to me, "That was great! Can you send me more?" I was so, so pleased. But I also have to note that another cousin who was part of this conversation *unfriended me*... so you win some, you lose some... But despite the risk of failure, I'd like to encourage you to engage with the Rickys in your life. There is still time to reduce the damage that climate change will cause to Earth, but with the 12-year window that we face, we have no time to dally & we need all hands on deck.

Additional Resources

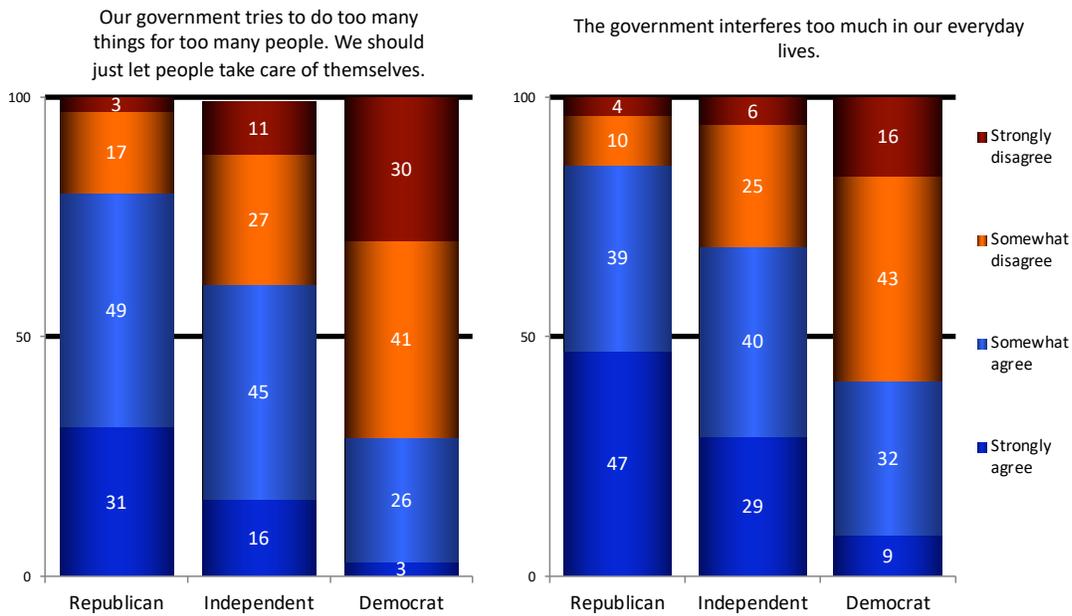
- A. **Values:** To learn more about the differences in values between conservatives and liberals:
1. Moral Foundations Theory:
 - a. Haidt, J. (2012). *The righteous mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion*. Vintage. (This is a great book!)
 - b. <https://moralfoundations.org/> (You can find a questionnaire that assesses moral foundations here.)
 2. **Egalitarianism vs. Individualism:**
 - a. These values are closely associated with risk assessment – if the values one holds dear are threatened, the individual becomes very concerned. This means that for the egalitarians, pictures of polar bears on shrinking ice flows and flood victims in Southeast Asia can be highly effective messaging, but are less likely to speak to individualists. They, in contrast hear messages about the need to reduce our emissions, change our use of energy, drive less, etc., as a threat to their freedom. More government regulation, more government reaching into their wallets, less freedom. This predisposes them to reject climate science and to accept the idea that scientists disagree on the issue or are engaged in a hoax to bilk the government.
 - b. **Measures of Individualism:**
 - i. If the government spent less time trying to fix everyone's problems, we'd all be a lot better off.
 - ii. Our government tries to do too many things for too many people. We should just let people take care of themselves.
 - iii. The government interferes too much in our everyday lives.
 - iv. Government regulation of business usually does more harm than good.
 - c. **Measures of Egalitarianism:**
 - i. The world would be a more peaceful place if its wealth were divided more equally among nations.
 - ii. In my ideal society, all basic needs (food, housing, health care, education) would be guaranteed by the government for everyone.
 - iii. I support government programs to get rid of poverty.
 - iv. Discrimination against minorities is still a very serious problem in our society.
 - d. Figures on the next page show agreement/disagreement with some of these measures by political party. (I use these figures in talks.)

Egalitarianism



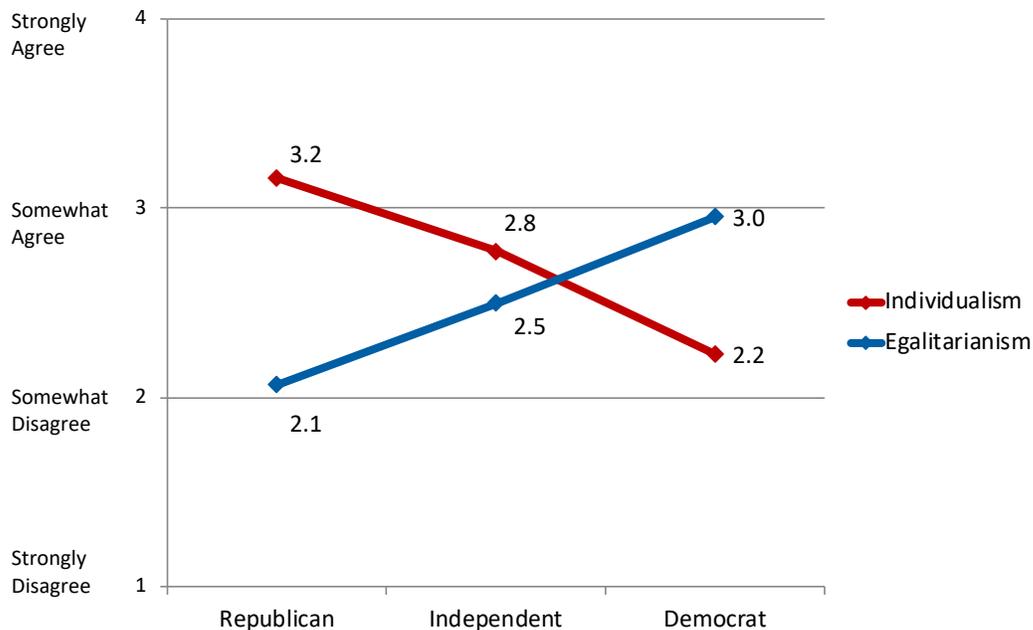
Sept. 2012; N=249

Individualism



Sept. 2012; N=249

Mean Individualism & Egalitarianism by Party Identification



Sept. 2012; N=249

These are the average scores to all eight measures, by political party.

B. Social Influence:

- Rogers, E. M. (2010). *Diffusion of innovations*. Simon and Schuster. (This is the definitive source for understanding the S-shaped diffusion curve, but you probably don't need this much information.)
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diffusion_of_innovations (Wikipedia is a much more concise source on this topic)
- <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/13/magazine/13contagion-t.html> (This is a GREAT article – I assign it whenever I teach. It summarizes the research on network analyses of social influence.)
- A TED talk of Nicholas Christakis speaking about social influence in networks: https://www.ted.com/talks/nicholas_christakis_the_hidden_influence_of_social_networks/footnotes?utm_source=l.facebook.com&utm_campaign=&utm_content=awesm-publisher&utm_medium=on.ted.com-facebook-share&awesm=on.ted.com_pw3u
- A very short video showing smoking cessation moving through a social network: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pv-PQa0p2FM>

C. Evidence of the Effectiveness of the Scientific Consensus Message:

- a. https://www.climatechangecommunication.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Consensus_Handbook-1.pdf
- D. **Evidence that Activism & Public Support Amplify Each Other & Lead to Environmental Legislation** (This is a journal article – sorry – so mostly appropriate for gluttons for punishment. The abstract is clear, however, so you could simply read that.):
- a. http://priceofoil.org/content/uploads/2007/10/agnone_sf2007.pdf
- E. **Katharine Hayhoe**, climate change communicator extraordinaire:
- a. Speaking about climate change communication:
https://www.ted.com/talks/katharine_hayhoe_the_most_important_thing_you_can_do_to_fight_climate_change_talk_about_it?utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=tedsread&fbclid=IwAR35aOag-oFgYb8JID2r3jiLn4lLbwR2MhmRbbNzR-W-vJ0qtEI7PQSCnWA
 - b. Speaking about her faith and climate change:
 - i. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eRbPHpc5Xhc>
 - c. Her youtube channel, “Global Weirding,” with many videos:
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCi6RkdaEqgRVKi3AzidF4ow/videos>
 - d. Interviewed on CBS in Feb. 2019: <http://climatecommunication.yale.edu/> (You’ll find that she’s saying many of the same things that I said, but she says them SO WELL! At about 5 minutes in she talks about how her research is rooted in her faith.)
- F. **Individual Actions** (There are dozens & dozens of these – I’ve just listed a few here):
- a. <https://publichealthonline.gwu.edu/how-to-reduce-climate-change/>
 - b. <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/how-you-can-stop-global-warming>
 - c. <https://www.curbed.com/2017/6/7/15749900/how-to-stop-climate-change-actions>
- G. **Carbon Calculator:**
- a. <https://www.nature.org/en-us/get-involved/how-to-help/consider-your-impact/carbon-calculator/>
- H. **Resources for Activists:**
- a. The Climate Advocacy Lab is an online community of activists & social scientists, in which strategies for engaging the public are shared. This is a GREAT resource – I highly recommend it: <https://climateadvocacylab.org/>
 - b. At the Climate Advocacy Lab you’ll find the Yale Climate Opinion Maps. You can use these maps to find out what people here in Humboldt County think about climate change – another great resource.
 - c. Finally, there are the websites from the two sister climate change communication programs at George Mason & Yale. All our resources & publications are available here:
 - i. Mason: <https://www.climatechangecommunication.org/>
 - ii. Yale: <http://climatecommunication.yale.edu/>

