Why is everyone except me wrong about climate change policy?

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This article aims to stimulate debate around publicly expressed, opposed opinions, on climate change and to briefly explore the reasons that could drive these contrary views.

The strong association between an individual’s concern about the threat of climate change, and whether they more generally lie on the right or left of the political spectrum, has been extensively evidenced in the academic literature; see, for example, McCright, Dunlap and Marquart-Pyattcan (2016) and the references therein. Results from a 2017 Gallup survey indicate that this partisan divide between Republicans and Democrats is growing ever wider.[[1]](#footnote-1) Compared to a decade earlier, there has been a rise of over ten percentage points in Democrats who worry a great deal about climate change (66% from 55%), while this percentage for Republicans has fallen by six percentage points from an already much lower base (18% from 24%). This helps explain the Trump administration’s position on the Paris Agreement.

In the highly heated exchanges in online forums, those on the political left often assign the unwillingness of `climate deniers’ to accept the urgency to act on reducing greenhouse gas emissions as evidence of narrow vested interests, stubbornness and general scientific stupidity. Similarly, those who make the strongest case for climate change action are disparaged as `watermelons’ (Delingpole, 2012) – green on the outside and red on the inside, where environmentalism is used as a stealth mechanism to action a socialist agenda via the back door.

While there is no doubt some truth in both these sets of accusations for a minority of people, they do not strike me as being helpful for a meaningful discussion on how to move forward the policy agenda. As Sun Tzu noted, “If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat”. Ridiculing those who disagree with us cannot fully equate to understanding as, even amongst the expert community. Pindyck (2016) has documented large disagreements over how much should be spent to reduce CO2 emissions. I therefore briefly propose a framework that combines Moral Foundation Theory, rational learning, and differences in individual ethical preferences that I think will allow for improved discourse.

Moral Foundation Theory is beautifully explained in Haidt (2013). Its essence is that we have five moral taste buds that are rooted deep within ourselves. These relate to caring, fairness, loyalty to the group, respect & authority, and sanctity. There is a clear association between the way we individually weight the importance of each of these issues, our political affiliations and our personality traits. In particular, the political left place very strong emphasis on caring and fairness at the expense of the last three, while the political right weight them more evenly. Because of the innate nature of our moral taste buds, our genetic makeup is strongly associated not only with our personality but also our political beliefs (e.g., Hatimi and McDermott, 2012; Verhulst, Eaves and Hatemi, 2012). Within this framework, we do not form political arguments for our own benefit – our unconscious selves have broadly decided on the right answer to a political question long before our rational minds are awakened – but instead for the persuasion of others. Given the issues of caring and fairness both to poorer societies and future generations that are entailed in the climate change debate, it is unsurprising that the left/right divide on this matter has been linked to Moral Foundation Theory (e.g. Markowitz and Shariff, 2012). While this may come as something of a shock to the rationalists, the chances are that you had, to a significant degree, determined your policy position on climate change long before you seriously assessed any evidence on the subject.

Of course, individuals should move from their initial stance as they update their views based on increasingly detailed scientific information. But the evidence on this is sketchy. For example, Kahan et al. (2012) finds no evidence that scientific illiteracy is greater amongst climate change sceptics, but instead that knowledge increases polarisation. Bolsen and Druckman (2016) also find increased polarisation, but no evidence that any group is willing to pay more to prevent climate change, as they become more scientifically informed (see also Deryugina & Shurchkov, 2016). In a recent paper, I argue that this might be the consequence of purely rational behaviour (Freeman, 2017). As climate skeptics receive more information, their mean estimate of future climate change becomes greater, but they also become less concerned about potentially catastrophic outcomes. Greater knowledge reduces uncertainty, lowering the insurance premium that they are prepared to pay.[[2]](#footnote-2) Scientific communication alone does not, therefore, result in harmonisation of policy positions. On the basis of this evidence, I conjecture that, however much research you have done on this topic, your policy views will have remained largely unchanged over time. It is rare indeed to find a climate skeptic who becomes a policy advocate, or vice versa, and we do not need explanations based on vested interests, stupidity or political stealth to explain this phenomenon.

Finally, we all take different ethical positions on a number of key issues that are relevant for the climate change debate; I highlight two here. First, the more impatient we are, the less prepared we will be to act to prevent damages to future generations – this would involve giving up consumption now for benefits in the far future that we are not readily prepared to wait for. More formally, “impatience” refers to a higher utility discount rate. If this parameter value is high, then anticipated future utility gains from climate change mitigation are heavily discounted when calculating welfare. As a consequence, the present values of projects that reduce greenhouse gas emissions are low.

Yet our impatience depends on a large number of features; not least our age (Read and Read, 2004) and gender (Dittrich and Leipold, 2014) and indeed can even be manipulated even for a given individual (Lempert and Phelps, 2016). In a recent survey, my co-authors and I found significant disagreement amongst discounting experts on how impatient a social planner should be when addressing long-term problems (Drupp et al., 2015). Second, the value that individuals place on the environment itself varies enormously. For example, McCauley (2006, p.27) presents the opinion that “the aggregate value of a chunk of nature – its aesthetic beauty, cultural importance and evolutionary significance – is infinite”, while others place much greater value on current human life. Given that many of these ethical differences are irreducible (Freeman and Groom, 2015), we cannot expect people to come to similar policy conclusions on this matter however much we debate with them. A further issue for discussion is the range of estimates of the effectiveness of different climate change preventative measures.

Given (i) the strong influence our genetics and personality have on our political views and the strong correlation this has with the climate change debate, (ii) the apparent inability of scientific communication to bridge this policy divide, and (iii) irreducible differences over ethical matters concerning time and the value of the environment, disagreement over climate change policy is fundamentally inevitable. This leads me to the view that we should try to understand each other’s positions better and engage in less name-calling before concluding that, in the end, I am the one who is right after all.

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1. <http://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/211682/public-opinion-trump-decision-paris-agreement.aspx?g_source=CATEGORY_CLIMATE_CHANGE&g_medium=topic&g_campaign=tiles>. Accessed 2nd October 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. More formally, Bayesian posterior distributions are more precise than their corresponding priors. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)