



American politics

Democracy in America

Language and opinion Framing climate change

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OUR readers are evidently (http://www.economist.com/blogs/democracyinamerica/2011/02/climate_change) fascinated (http://www.economist.com/blogs/democracyinamerica/2011/02/climate_change_0) by American attitudes toward global warming and/or climate change. I say "and/or" because it turns out that opinion on the subject is sensitive to the language one uses to refer to the putative meteorological phenomenon. A new paper (<http://poq.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2011/02/21/poq.nfq073.short?rss=1>) (ungated (http://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&q=cache:XU5ZRfJD4qsJ:sitemaker.umich.edu/jschuldt/files/schuldt_konrath_schwarz_in_press_poq.pdf+%22Global+warming%22+or+%22climate+change%22%3F+Whether+the+planet+is+warming+dependson+question+wording&hl=en&gl=us&pid=bl&srcid=ADGEESgwk-CHtCiyVJeOttEKbqnyPS6FkhMCjIQBwX5OmKnkZycNkw14jYyseKO2TnaOwmduuOqB2ErhzM6m44bh1tG3RloKyrEsig=AHIEtbQl1HxSiTScCi_hqBzl6KbAbXMMwQ)) in the scholarly journal *Public Opinion Quarterly* by Jonathon P. Schuldt, Sara H. Konrath, and Norbert Schwarz examined the websites of conservative and liberal think tanks and found that conservatives are more likely to speak of "global warming" whilst liberals are inclined to speak instead of "climate change". The elite conservative usage seems to be a cause or effect (probably both) of conservative public opinion.

“ Republicans were less likely to endorse that the phenomenon is real when it was referred to as “global warming” (44.0%) rather than “climate change” (60.2%), whereas Democrats were unaffected by question wording (86.9% vs. 86.4%). As a result, the partisan divide on the issue dropped from 42.9 percentage points under a “global warming” frame to 26.2 percentage points under a “climate change” frame. ”

What explains this? "Global warming", the authors note, directly elicits thought of *rising* temperatures, which encourages the anecdotal use of unusually cold or snowy weather as disconfirming evidence, whereas "climate change" puts the emphasis on the systemic transformation of weather patterns, which offers a broader context for the odd cold snap or snowmageddon. Additionally, the authors surmise, "global warming" connotes human causation and culpability somewhat more than "climate change".

But why isn't liberal opinion affected by the choice of semantic "frame"? Schuldt, Konrath, and Schwarz write:

“ First, Democrats tended to endorse high belief ($M_s = 5.94$ on a 7-point scale), raising the possibility of a ceiling effect. Second, Democrats' beliefs about global climate change might be more crystallized and thus more protected from subtle manipulations, consistent with research showing that stronger attitudes are more resistant to change. ”

I take the upshot of the study to be that Americans are less polarised about climate change/global warming than they may appear. Disagreement under the "climate change" frame is really fairly mild. And the fact that conservative opinion is so susceptible to framing effects suggests a relatively low level of confidence about the issue.

I expect ideological disagreement over climate change will decline further as the debate over climate policy takes shape in the public imagination. In my experience, many libertarians and conservatives are motivated to deny global warming because they think admitting a problem amounts to handing government a blank check and a mandate to do whatever it wants to "fix" it. Once it becomes clearer that the best policy response to climate change is a tax on carbon, which

can be entirely offset by cutting taxes elsewhere, those Americans wary of opening the door to enviro-fascism will begin to relax.

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