

Ideology trumps ecology for many climate change doubters

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As the U.S. Senate gears up to consider the Waxman-Markey climate protection bill this fall, we should expect to hear heightened denials about the reality of human-induced global warming. New research suggests, however, that the global warming debate is much less about science than it is about ideology.

The Center for Climate Change Communications at George Mason University recently joined former Eugene resident Tony Leiserowitz, now director of the Yale University Project on Climate Change, to produce a study describing where Americans stand on global warming. It found that the public can be grouped into six audiences, each of which responds to the issue in its own unique way.

The first group, which the researchers call the Alarmed, constitutes 18 percent of Americans. Members of this group are convinced of the reality and seriousness of global warming and are addressing the problem through their personal, purchasing and political activities.

Among their many traits, the Alarmed tend to be moderate to liberal Democrats who are active in their communities. They are likely to be well-educated college women in their 50s and 60s with relatively strong egalitarian values. They also value environmental protection over economic growth.

Of all six groups, the Alarmed are the least likely to attend religious services or to describe themselves as “born again” or evangelical Christians.

The second group, called the Concerned, is the largest, representing 33 percent of all Americans. They also are convinced that human-caused global warming is happening and is a serious problem, but they are not engaged in the issue personally.

The Concerned represent all genders, ages, incomes, educational levels and ethnicities. In general, however, they are likely to be moderate Democrats or independents, favor egalitarian values, and prioritize environmental protection over economic growth. Relatively few regularly attend religious services or describe themselves as evangelical.

In essence, the researchers found that half the American public is convinced global warming is happening and see it as a serious problem, although only 20 percent are actively engaged in the issue.

The George Mason/Yale study found that three other groups of Americans could be considered in the middle of the spectrum regarding their understanding and concern about global warming.

The Cautious, representing 19 percent of Americans, believe that global warming is a problem, although they are less certain than the first two groups and don’t feel an urgent need to address it. This group is evenly divided between moderate Democrats and Republicans. Members are only modestly involved in civic issues and have traditional religious beliefs.

The researchers call the 11 percent of Americans who haven’t thought about and don’t know much about global warming the Disengaged.

The Doubtful, a group that also makes up 11 percent of the population, include many who are not sure global warming is happening, but if it is they believe the causes are natural and won’t be a big problem. The issue should therefore be a low priority.

This group tends to be male, older, better-educated, higher income, Republican and white. They also are more likely than average to say they are “born again” or evangelical Christians and to prefer economic growth over environmental protection.

The last group, which the authors call the Dismissives, makes up 7 percent of Americans. They are the only group that is certain global warming is not happening. This segment is very likely to be high income, well-educated, white, male, conservative and Republican. They are civically active, hold strongly traditional religious beliefs, and are the segment most likely to be evangelical Christian.

The researchers found that Dismissives tend to oppose any form of government intervention, are anti-egalitarian and almost universally prefer economic growth over environmental protection. These are the folks that are the most vocal opponents of government involvement in climate protection.

Past research suggests that Oregonians may not match the segments described in the George Mason/Yale study as precisely as do people in other parts of the country. The key trends identified in the research, however, undoubtedly do apply locally.

For example, the groups form a V shape. Both the degree of pro and con certainty and concern, and the level of engagement in global warming issues, is greatest at the opposite ends of the spectrum, while the segments in between are much less confident or involved.

But the most significant finding is the degree to which the global warming debate is influenced by religious beliefs and political ideology.

The people most convinced and concerned about the issue tend to be Democrats or independents who are the least likely to regularly attend religious services. Those with the least concern or who reject the authenticity of global warming are more likely to be conservative Republicans, regular churchgoers and evangelicals.

Ideological positions can help determine the most effective policy instrument to use when solving a problem. Religious beliefs and political dogma, however, don't seem to be a good basis for analyzing the reality, causes or consequences of adverse changes to the Earth's climate.

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