RESEARCH BRIEF

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Understanding and Countering the Motivations of Climate Change Denial

Psychology offers insights into the causes of climate change contrarianism and reluctance to engage with solutions while also providing potential avenues for increasing climate acceptance and engagement.

Background

The body of scientific research on climate change and its drivers from human activity are extensive and now well understood within academic literature. Recent polls also suggest that a slight majority of Americans now accept that climate change is happening, understand its anthropogenic causes and are worried about it. Despite this, individual and collective political action is minimal and almost certainly inadequate for avoiding the worst climate change scenarios predicted by the end of this century.

In the United States, climate change is a partisan issue that has starkly polarized Americans along political lines. Powerful voices refuting climate science consensus have continued to gain momentum and the current administration plays a prominent role in this movement. As a result, vast scientific evidence that the climate is changing has failed to translate into action.

POINTS FOR POLICY MAKERS

▶ **Reframing issues can encourage a different response from flat out climate denial.** For example, responses to climate change could be reframed as consistent with upholding the social system and working toward its stability and longevity instead of posing an existential threat.

▶ **Climate change tends to be discussed in terms of values that liberals and Democrats respond to such as harm and care.** Reframing communications on the topic in terms of purity can be more engaging and consistent for conservatives and may help to decrease the ideological divide.

▶ **Communication with those one trusts or identifies with is a powerful tool for change.** Children who engaged their parents in discussions of climate change are known to be effective in shifting the adults' opinions, especially in the case of male and conservative parents.

▶ **Encouraging people to voice their values and beliefs explicitly before engaging with climate information can foster greater openness and decrease disengagement.** For example, allowing those who remain unconvinced by evidence of climate change to first voice their climate beliefs before responding to science-based information about sea level rise led them to respond in the same way as people who accept that climate change is occurring and humans are largely responsible for it. Similarly, offering a self-affirmation task helped reduce climate skepticism and encourage personal connections to climate change as well as intentions to increase recycling behavior among identified "low recyclers."

Recent Stanford research has sought to investigate climate change denial from a psychological perspective to better understand how psychology and ideology undermine and impede climate solutions and to offer insights into how this might be reversed. The study focused on motivated denial - knowing or having access to the facts, but nevertheless denying them. Four forms of motivated climate responses were identified and their implications for fostering action on climate science-based evidence are of note:

- **System-sanctioned change:** The need to protect and uphold existing socioeconomic systems and institutions is a powerful driver for individuals to hold skeptical opinions about climate change. It satisfies the needs for safety, security, stability, meaning and relatedness. Many climate mitigation solutions have economic consequences and require adjustments that also elicit resistance; some people respond to this threat by simply denying the reality of climate change.

- **Identity:** Climate change has become highly polarized along political party lines with Democrats and liberal identities acknowledging consensus of climate science and supporting action and Republicans and conservative identities not acknowledging scientific consensus and resisting actions to solve it. Liberals tend to respond more strongly to moral values of care and fairness, while conservatives are driven by values of loyalty, authority, and purity.

- **Social norms:** One of the most powerful means of influencing perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors is social norms, as people tend to adjust and align their behavior toward the norm to avoid social judgements or marginalization. Second-order beliefs (perceptions about what is commonly believed) are more easily changed than first-order (personal) beliefs, especially when information is delivered by a group perceived as neutral, such as experts. This is important because people frequently misperceive descriptive norms that are not discussed. For example, many don't realize the extent to which other people are concerned about climate change and as a result self-silence around the issue. Correcting such misperceptions increases willingness to engage in discussion.

- **Self-affirmation:** People are motivated to maintain a positive view of themselves. Acknowledging climate change requires individuals to critically examine their contribution to the problem, potentially calling into question their integrity.

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