

Survey reveals fault lines in views on climate change

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Climate change is a hotly debated issue among many scientists, but a new study published by a University of Alberta researcher notes that geoscientists and engineers also become embroiled in the issue—and for some, it can get surprisingly personal.

Lianne Lefsrud, a PhD student in the Alberta School of Business, surveyed the membership of the Association of Professional Engineers and [Geoscientists](#) of Alberta regarding their beliefs on [climate change](#) and its causes, and on where responsibility for change rests. The responses reflected the rational, logical debates that would be expected of their professions. But when it came to being able to expand on their beliefs, the tone changed quite unexpectedly.

"Our findings show over 99 per cent agree that the climate is changing. They're pretty much split on the cause," she said. "But what was most interesting was the emotion, the [metaphor](#), the very colourful language that they used in the open-ended responses."

Lefsrud says despite the disagreement on what causes climate change and the intensity of the discord, there were recurrent themes that offered the potential of finding common areas of interest that would allow for collaboration.

Keepers of fact: defining/establishing expertise at the expense of others

Lefsrud noted that many of the personal responses positioned the issue in terms of "us versus them." She said the [respondents](#) seemed to claim a certain superiority of knowledge over the general populace on the subject, while at the same time denigrating the experiences, knowledge or ethics of colleagues in their profession who had a different opinion.

"It's very much a construction of their own expertise and legitimization tactics they use and the delegitimization of others, of their 'enemies,'" she said.

Statistical points of view

The findings, published in the journal *Organizational Studies*, identify five distinct beliefs on climate change, ranging from evolutionary to economic. There were also some interesting distinctions in who believed what about the subject. Younger, female engineers employed in government seemed to support the Kyoto Protocol, whereas their older, male counterparts—largely employed by oil and gas companies—tended to take a fatalistic response to climate change, labelling nature as the culprit. However, one group gave cause for hope that consensus could be achieved, even among such diametrically opposed opinions.

"They were the smallest yet most active group," said Lefsrud. "They were quite senior and quite knowledgeable, so they saw how they could work the angles to make a 'discourse coalition.'"

Divided by cause, united by effect

Lefsrud noted that while the survey data could lead some to believe that the level of [disagreement](#) would prohibit any sort of decision-making or conscious action, she says there were many common points of interest that could be pulled together to establish unity and effect change. She

said all the respondents seemed to agree that there was a risk and that there needed to be some sort of action to try to mitigate it.

"It was interesting to see how a coalition could be built and work together to kind of patch up these factions and say, 'OK, so what. Let's set this aside. We all agree it's a risk. We all agree to do something, so let's do something,'" said Lefsrud. "That was quite a hopeful message to say that we can do something here.

"Now that we can understand some of these different positions, we can do something in terms of bridging these positions."

Provided by University of Alberta

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