Polarization may cause climate communication to backfire

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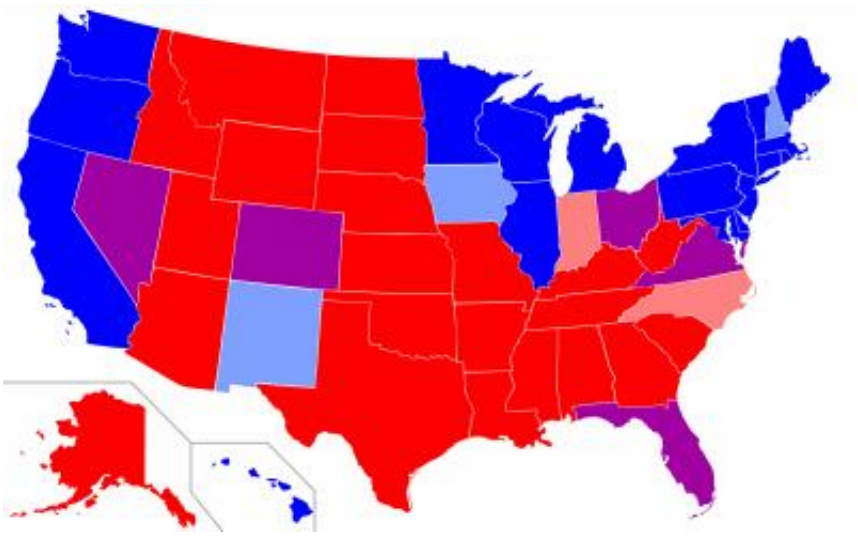

Shown, political party leanings of U.S. states based on voting in the last four presidential elections. Credit: Wikipedia commons

Political advocates who support action on climate change have long sought "the perfect message" for swaying skeptics. If the issue can be framed correctly, they believe, the battle can be won.

A new Duke University study suggests it may be more complicated than that.

"Because climate change has become polarized along party lines, it's no longer just an issue of finding 'the right framing' to convey relevant

facts," said study author Jack Zhou, who will graduate with a Ph.D. in environmental politics next month from Duke's Nicholas School of the Environment. "It has become a matter of political identity, particularly the political party we feel closest to."

Even efforts to frame climate change around seemingly win-win issues such as economic growth, national security or poverty alleviation are likely to backfire, Zhou's study finds, if the communication conflicts with the partisan identity of the targeted audience.

"These efforts don't just fail in terms of being unconvincing," he said. "In most cases, they actually trigger a significant negative effect—or backfire—that polarizes the audience even further."

Zhou published his peer-reviewed study this month in the journal *Environmental Politics*.

In a 2014 survey experiment, Zhou asked more than 470 Republicans and Republican-leaning independents to read one of four randomly assigned messages that framed climate change as an issue society needs to deal with and is worth caring about.

One message framed climate change as an economic issue; one as a national security issue; one as a moral justice issue; and one as a natural disaster issue. The first two messages were written to tap into Republican identity; the last two targeted Democratic identity. To further test the power of partisanship, the four messages were then randomly attributed to one of two sources: a fictional Republican congressman or a fictional Democratic one.

The hypothesis, going in, was that Republicans would be more open to an in-party message from an in-party source and least receptive to on out-party message from an out-party source. Instead, Zhou found that

regardless of the source, all eight vignettes backfired when compared to the control group, who were asked to simply think about climate change as a political issue.

The study also showed that Republican respondents, after exposure to framing, became more opposed to governmental action on climate change and less willing to take personal action on the issue.

"When asked to read information that clashed with their partisan identities, respondents reacted with motivated skepticism," he said. "Not only was there greater opposition after reading the framed messages, there was also less attitudinal ambivalence. This means that people dug in and became more sure of their negative opinions."

These backfire effects doubled or tripled in size among individuals who reported a high personal interest in politics, which functions as a measure of intensity of political identity. These individuals make up roughly one-third of the respondents in the study and one-third of all U.S. Republicans.

"I want to be clear: This reaction is not a matter of intelligence or education. It's not totally irrational. It's just a natural reaction—people want to justify and defend their identities," Zhou stressed. "I would expect if I asked Democrats to read framed messages about how climate change is a hoax, I would also see strong backfire effects."

The take-away message for climate communicators, he said, is that to avoid backfire, they need to take care to target their audience's values and understand how polarization affects their evolving sensitivities and identities.

"I'm not saying it's totally impossible to frame climate change across party lines but it might take more time and resources than advocates

imagine, and a much greater degree of care," Zhou said. "Communication that doesn't work perfectly—if such a thing even exists—could polarize these audiences further from where you want them to be."

More information: Jack Zhou, Boomerangs versus javelins: How does polarization constrain communication on climate change?, *Environmental Politics* (2016). DOI: 10.1080/09644016.2016.1166602

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