

Changing the message could help communicate dangers of climate change

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Credit: University at Buffalo

As a political issue, climate change splits mostly along ideological lines in the U.S.

Research shows that U.S. liberals and Democrats tend to express beliefs that are consistent with the [scientific consensus](#) on climate change, while conservatives and Republicans are less likely to do so.

However, a new study conducted by researchers from the University at

Buffalo, University of Maine and Cornell University suggests that tailoring the message might influence opinions toward the scientific consensus, particularly among those on the political right.

"We know that the U.S. is politically divided about climate change, but the results of our study suggest that sharing the right information can bring about a lot of movement in opinions toward this issue, especially among the conservatives," says Janet Yang, an associate professor in the University at Buffalo's Department of Communication and co-author with Cornell's Jonathon P. Schuldt on the study led by the University of Maine's Laura N. Rickard.

The study, published in the journal *Global Environmental Change*, adds to a growing body of evidence that suggests effectively communicating the threat of climate change should involve strategic messaging for specific audiences.

"You just have to identify the right ingredient when designing the message," says Yang, an expert on the communication of risk information related to science, health and environmental issues.

Researchers used samples in the United States and Singapore that revolved around the concept of "departure dates."

As part of a widely publicized 2013 paper published in the journal *Nature*, researchers from the University of Hawaii at Mānoa presented an index of departure dates, a catalogued projection for when a region's climate would begin to "depart" from its historic record and begin moving toward a new state of conditions.

Yang and her colleagues contacted the authors of that study. It turned out that both the [social scientists](#) involved in the current study and the physical scientists who published the *Nature* paper were curious about

how people would react to this information.

"We all said, 'Let's do this,'" said Yang.

The aim was to get a sense for how the idea of departure dates might encourage greater public engagement about climate change.

"There is a real danger here, yet some people still think abstractly about climate change," said Yang. "To them, it exists, but it doesn't really affect them."

The social scientists used mock-up news articles that manipulated temporal and spatial distance by introducing three different departure dates (2020, 2047 and 2066) for two different locations, New York City and Singapore.

They wanted to gain insight on policy support (how likely are people to support climate change policies), risk perception (is climate change a significant risk to people's well-being) and affective response (do people have positive or negative feelings about climate change).

Overall, the Singaporeans had greater negative affect and greater risk perception, according to Yang. They also generally support [climate change policy](#) more than the U.S. participants, which she says makes sense given Singapore's tropical location and limited resources.

"To that audience, climate change is more tangible," says Yang.

But the key to this study, according to Yang, is the comparison between the U.S. liberals and conservatives.

"We think of the U.S. as a divided nation when it comes to climate change, but our results suggest that part of that perception can be

influenced," says Yang. "When we think about the different departure dates around the globe, the natural inclination is to alert people of the closest date – 2020, which will arrive in tropical regions, such as Manokwari, Indonesia. Based on our study, however, that might not be the best way to communicate the message. Some dates might be too close, too fear-inducing.

"We have some information that to encourage conservatives to support climate policies, perhaps a more effective strategy is to highlight a departure date that is spatially close, like New York City, but temporally far, like 2066."

Yang notes that the current study needs to be replicated, but the potential for effectively communicating the dangers of [climate change](#) is promising.

"This is one study," she says. "But if we're able to do this in several different designs, we might then identify a combination of time and location that creates a message that will motivate both liberals and conservatives."

Provided by University at Buffalo

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