

Environmental messages that promote a return to a positive past found to be more effective in convincing conservatives

December 13 2016, by Bob Yirka



Credit: Tiago Fioreze / Wikipedia

(Phys.org)—A pair of researchers with the University of Cologne in Germany has found that phrasing pro-environmental messages in past-focused ways was received more warmly by people who described themselves as conservatives than messages that warned of future problems. In their paper published in *Proceedings of the National*

Academy of Sciences, Matthew Baldwin and Joris Lammers describe the study they carried out with online volunteers and why they believe their results could have a real-world impact.

The scientific community has very strongly embraced the notion that our planet is heating up due to [greenhouse gas emissions](#). Prior research has shown that people who identify as liberals have also embraced this theory, whereas those who describe themselves as conservatives have tended to be less convinced. In this new effort, the research pair have conducted a study that they believe shows a path toward convincing conservatives to get onboard as well. Their idea is that conservatives tend to take a brighter view of the past than other groups; thus, they might be receptive to arguments regarding global warming couched in more pro-past oriented ways, e.g., "Times were better when you could count on snow for Christmas in northern towns," or "We planted bulbs in the garden on the same spring day every year."

To test this idea, the [researchers](#) enlisted the assistance of 1,600 online volunteers who were asked about their political ideology and then to read an environmental statement that was followed by a questionnaire. Volunteers were given different environmental statements to read. Some had dire warnings about future environmental disasters, while others painted a rosy picture of the past and suggested that there might be ways to bring back the "good old days."

In analyzing the answers given, the researchers found that those who identified as liberals offered the same levels of environmental concern regardless of which message they received, while those who identified as conservatives and read the pro-past statement rated themselves as more environmentally concerned than those who read the future-oriented message. In another experiment, the researchers asked volunteers to donate virtual funds to various causes after reading similar statements and found that conservatives tended to give more to environmental

causes after reading pro-past statements.

The researchers suggest that offering conservatives more pro-past messages regarding climate change might convince many of them that efforts to make environmental changes are desirable.

More information: Matthew Baldwin et al. Past-focused environmental comparisons promote proenvironmental outcomes for conservatives, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2016). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1610834113](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1610834113)

Abstract

Conservatives appear more skeptical about climate change and global warming and less willing to act against it than liberals. We propose that this unwillingness could result from fundamental differences in conservatives' and liberals' temporal focus. Conservatives tend to focus more on the past than do liberals. Across six studies, we rely on this notion to demonstrate that conservatives are positively affected by past-but not by future-focused environmental comparisons. Past comparisons largely eliminated the political divide that separated liberal and conservative respondents' attitudes toward and behavior regarding climate change, so that across these studies conservatives and liberals were nearly equally likely to fight climate change. This research demonstrates how psychological processes, such as temporal comparison, underlie the prevalent ideological gap in addressing climate change. It opens up a promising avenue to convince conservatives effectively of the need to address climate change and global warming.

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Citation: Environmental messages that promote a return to a positive past found to be more effective in convincing conservatives (2016, December 13) retrieved 11 May 2024 from

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