

# Campaigning on climate science consensus may backfire, warn scholars

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Climate change campaigns that focus on correcting public beliefs about scientific consensus are likely to backfire and undermine policy efforts, according to an expert commentary published today in *Environmental Communication*.

The six authors of the commentary argue campaigns which emphasize variations on messages such as, "97% of [climate](#) scientists have concluded that human-caused climate change is happening," hold several serious drawbacks.

Firstly, the difficulties involved in statistically quantifying [consensus](#) and what is included in the climate science literature have generated intense disagreement. The messaging strategy has also promoted confusion over whether consensus extends to various impacts such as extreme weather events. Rather than ending conflict over the reality of human-caused climate change, these efforts have fueled further debate.

Secondly, the studies evaluating the impact of consensus messaging on public attitudes have been published by a relatively small group of affiliated researchers and challenged by other social scientists, resulting in an uncertain evidence-base around which to invest funding on behalf of expensive communication campaigns.

Thirdly, past scholarship suggests that acceptance of scientific consensus is not needed for the public to support solutions to environmental problems. For example, the Montreal Protocol for the protection of the

[ozone layer](#) was signed in the face of the shocking discovery of the [ozone hole](#). However, a decade earlier the US public had already started to shift from using spray cans containing [ozone](#) destroying chemicals, at a time when no scientific consensus on ozone layer protection existed.

The final point discussed highlights how narrowly focusing on scientific consensus displaces debate over the wider issues posed by climate change, which involve many different, and often conflicting, [policy](#) options.

Co-author, Reiner Grundmann, from the School of Sociology and Social Policy at University of Nottingham in the UK, commented: "The '97% consensus' has become a popular slogan for climate campaigners, but the strategy is self-defeating. There is a danger of overreach in that numbers like the 97% consensus are implicitly extended to all areas of climate science, and used to close down debate over complex topics like extreme weather events. This approach also makes the implausible assumption that publics will follow the correct policy path once given the relevant scientific information, and that acceptance of scientific consensus is needed to support specific solutions."

**More information:** Warren Pearce et al, Beyond Counting Climate Consensus, *Environmental Communication* (2017). [DOI: 10.1080/17524032.2017.1333965](#)

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