

Want to do something about global warming? Talk about it with your family and friends

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There's the old saying that you should never discuss politics or religion in polite company. Nowadays, it seems climate change has joined that list.

Barely more than a third of Americans broach the subject often or even occasionally, according to a recent survey by researchers at the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication.

All this not talking about [climate change](#) has given Americans a rather skewed perception of what the rest of the country thinks about the issue.

The average person estimates that only 54% of her fellow Americans believe climate change is happening. In reality, 69% do, according to the same Yale survey.

The more we talk about [global warming](#), the more we might move the needle on [public opinion](#), the Yale team reported Monday in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

The researchers found that simply increasing the frequency of climate-related discussions shifted people's perceptions of the scientific consensus on human-caused warming as well as their own attitudes on the matter.

"These findings suggest that climate conversations with friends and family enter people into a proclimate social feedback loop," the researchers wrote.

Matthew Goldberg is a social psychologist at Yale University and lead author of the new study. He spoke with the Los Angeles Times about climate silence and how to break it.

Question: What is climate silence?

Answer: Our most recent nationally representative survey shows that 69% of people find climate change to be at least somewhat important to them. But only 37% discuss it at least occasionally. So most people think

it's important, yet most people don't talk about it. This discrepancy is often referred to as climate silence.

Q: Why don't Americans talk about climate change more?

A: There are a lot of reasons. For some, the issue just isn't salient to them. But there's also a lot of research on perceptions about what others think. People are hesitant to talk about something that they see as contested or potentially controversial in their social network, so they remain silent.

Q: But you found that people are often wrong when it comes to judging what others think about climate change. Does that help suppress conversation?

A: If you think everyone disagrees with you, or most people disagree with you, then you are not going to want to speak up. It starts this spiral of silence where people misjudge the beliefs of others, and then they remain quiet about this important issue.

Q: Is everyone equally mistaken, or do misperceptions vary across groups?

A: In general, you tend to think that people around you share the beliefs that you have. So the most accurate folks were liberal Democrats. They were off by just 6 percentage points, guessing 63% instead of 69%. That's likely because liberal Democrats know a lot of other Democrats, so they correctly believe that a lot of people around them believe climate change is happening.

Where we see the biggest discrepancy is at the opposite end of the political spectrum: conservative Republicans. If you're only hearing from elite Republicans who are largely dismissive of climate science, then you

are going to infer that a lot of people around you don't believe it's happening. So they were way off. They estimated the percentage was 48%.

Q: It seems like this 69% must encompass a broader swath of society than just liberal Democrats. Who are the others?

A: There's no doubt that it's not just a liberal phenomenon, and I think that needs to be part of our messaging strategy.

We've been highlighting prominent Republican voices, to the best extent we can, to show that there are people across the spectrum that believe this is an important issue. It's just that their voices aren't loud enough.

Q: Can you describe your new study?

A: We dug into data that we collected back in 2015, when Pope Francis was giving speeches across the United States talking about the importance of climate change, and there was a lot of change in public opinion because people heard about it more in the media.

In the surveys, which were taken seven months apart, people reported how frequently they talked about climate change with family and friends. We wanted to know whether talking more about it altered people's perceptions of the scientific agreement around human-caused global warming, and we found that it did.

Q: Why did you focus on the scientific consensus?

A: One reason is that past research coming out of our center has shown that it's very influential. There's still work to be done on why, but I suspect it's because it's easy to communicate and it's very powerful.

Q: And what is the scientific consensus?

A: Studies show that 97% of climate scientists have concluded that human-caused global warming is happening.

Q: When you looked at the numbers, what did you find?

A: We found that an increase in discussion—from rarely to occasionally, or occasionally to often—predicted a 2- to 3-percentage-point increase in the belief in the scientific consensus.

It's a modest effect, but it matters a lot when you're hovering around 50%, which is the most common estimate of scientific agreement. People have this false dichotomy that some scientists believe it's happening and some scientists don't.

Q: What else happened when people talked more about this?

A: Changes in the perception of scientific consensus led to significant changes in people's own beliefs that climate change is happening, that it's human-caused, and in their worry about the issue. So those small changes can lead to big practical differences.

Q: Why are family and friends so powerful?

A: Messengers matter very much. If a message comes from a credible communicator or one that has moral authority, then that will be very persuasive. And family and friends are the most important messengers. For one thing, they have closest proximity. They also are not easily ignored.

Q: Your results suggest there's a kind of feedback loop. What's going on there?

A: We found that discussion leads to increased belief in the scientific consensus around human-caused warming and that belief in scientific consensus leads to more discussion. That could potentially start this positive cycle toward belief change.

It's hard to say why that is. I speculate that once you have more certainty in a belief, it's easier to go and share your belief rather than your ambivalence.

Q: How do you suggest starting a conversation about climate change?

A: Start with common ground. To the extent that you can overlap the issue of climate change with the values of whoever you are talking to, the more effective your message will be.

For many people, climate change is really low on the list of issue priorities. But it's so far-reaching that it can wrap into most other important issues. So you could take a healthcare angle, you could take a national security angle, an economic angle, or a campaign finance one. A lot of people care about these issues.

I find that taking a pollution perspective makes it very easy to talk to people about climate change. Because who is not against pollution?

Q: What's another example?

A: We have a new study coming out where we engaged Christians on the issue of climate change.

And we found that, of people that believe it's happening, 19% cited protecting God's creation as the single most important motivation for wanting to reduce global warming. That's 1 in 5.

We followed that study up with two experiments. We wrote messages that tried to convey that other Christians clearly care about this issue, and that it is our moral and religious obligation to deal with it.

Basically, we said, "If you believe that God created this Earth, then this is something that you should want to protect and not allow to be degraded." And we found that that was a very influential message.

Q: Isn't that kind of manipulative?

A: I see it more as understanding what's most important to people. I'm trying to speak to what you care about.

Q: Got any icebreakers?

A: It's almost comical how often weather is used for [small talk](#). But that's a good entry point. For instance, you could mention that there are temperature records being broken all over the world. Weather is also a good way to not touch on the buzzwords for potentially skeptical audiences.

Another approach is to weave in climate change if you're already talking about another issue, like extreme weather or natural disasters. There's a way to ease into it by saying something like, "Did you know that a warming climate will make hurricanes worse?"

Q: In the big picture, how important is it that we start talking more about [climate](#) change?

A: I think it's massively important, particularly because we are not doing it enough. A lot of the time, we assume that we are always going to be having these conversations with a skeptical audience. But in many cases, the other person cares about it just as much as you do.

There is the potential for it to backfire when you have people that are very strongly on the other end of this, but they are in the minority. This is why I emphasize the role of friends and family, because they are not relationships you can easily ignore.

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