

Community characteristics shape climate change discussions after extreme weather

December 9 2019, by Michelle Klamp



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Political affiliations, the presence of local environmental organizations and prior local media coverage of climate change play a role in how a community reacts to an extreme weather event, an article published

today in *Nature Climate Change* concludes.

"Extreme weather events such as a catastrophic wildfire, a 500-year flood or a record-breaking heatwave may result in some local discussion and action around climate change, but not as much as might be expected and not in every community," said Hilary Boudet, the paper's lead author and an associate professor of public policy in Oregon State University's School of Public Policy in the College of Liberal Arts.

"In terms of making links to climate change, local reactions to an [extreme weather](#) event depend both on aspects of the event itself, but also on [political leanings](#) and resources within the community before the event took place."

Boudet's work is part of a growing body of research exploring the links between [personal experience](#) with an extreme weather event and social mobilization around climate change. The study was part of a project examining community reactions to extreme weather in the U.S.

The researchers sought to better understand how [extreme weather events](#) might influence local attitudes and actions related to climate change.

Researchers conducted 164 interviews with local residents and [community leaders](#) in 15 communities across the United States that had experienced extreme weather events that caused at least four fatalities between 2012 and 2015. They also analyzed media coverage to better understand what kinds of public discussions, actions and policies around climate change occurred in those communities.

Of the 15 communities, nine showed evidence of public discussion about the event's connection to climate change in the wake of the disaster.

"Although many of the extreme events we studied spurred significant

emergency response from volunteers and donations for rescue and recovery efforts, we found these events sparked little mobilization around climate change," Boudet said. "Yet there was also a distinct difference between cases where community climate change discussion occurred and where it did not, allowing us to trace pathways to that discussion."

When there was some scientific certainty that the weather event was related to climate change, discussion about the connection was more likely to occur, particularly in communities that leaned Democratic or where residents were highly educated, Boudet said.

However, even in communities where climate change was discussed in relation to the weather event, it was often a marginal issue. Other more immediate concerns, such as emergency response management and economic recovery, generated far more discussion and subsequent action.

Some of those interviewed suggested that broaching the topic of climate change amid disaster recovery efforts could be interpreted as using a tragedy to advance a political agenda, Boudet said.

"Recent shifts in U.S. opinions on climate change suggest that it may become a more acceptable topic of conversation following an extreme weather event," Boudet said. "Yet our results indicate that it may take time for such discussions to take place, particularly in Republican-leaning communities."

While the work challenges the notion that a single extreme [weather](#) event will yield rapid local social mobilization around [climate](#) change, the researchers found that communities may still make important changes post-event to ensure more effective responses to future events.

Boudet and her team are currently examining local policy action post-event to understand how such action relates to local [climate change](#) discussion.

More information: Boudet, H., Giordano, L., Zanocco, C. et al. Event attribution and partisanship shape local discussion of climate change after extreme weather. *Nat. Clim. Chang.* (2019) [DOI: 10.1038/s41558-019-0641-3](#) , [nature.com/articles/s41558-019-0641-3](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41558-019-0641-3)

Provided by Oregon State University

Citation: Community characteristics shape climate change discussions after extreme weather (2019, December 9) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-12-characteristics-climate-discussions-extreme-weather.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.