

Deadlines may be effective in building support for climate change action

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Human-caused climate change—including increased extreme weather and climate events—is here, according to the recently released United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2021 report, but the best way to communicate the concern is still debated.

The panel's previous report in 2018 was widely reported by media as setting a 12-year deadline of 2030 to turn things around and start reducing the planet's temperature before the Earth reaches a tipping

point of no-return. This messaging was sometimes criticized, including by the 2018 IPCC report's authors, as causing people to feel hopelessness, despair and disengagement.

However, a new University of Central Florida study in the journal *Environmental Communication* finds that this deadline messaging may be effective after all.

In an experiment involving more than 1,000 participants from an online Qualtrics panel, the study's authors found that using "deadline-ism" messaging increased perceptions of the threat of climate change and support for making climate change a government priority. Qualtrics is a U.S.-based research company.

Critics of the 12-year "deadline-ism" message argued it would have a counterproductive influence, resulting in despair and disengagement, says the study's lead author, Patrice Kohl, an assistant professor in UCF's Nicholson School of Communication and Media.

"Communication scholars often propose portraying climate change in more proximate terms could play an important role in engaging audiences by making climate change more personally relevant," Kohl says. "We did not find any evidence of deadline-ism resulting in disengagement or other counterproductive responses. Our results more closely align with arguments in favor of presenting climate change in more proximate terms."

For the study, the researchers randomly assigned participants to one of two experimental groups or a control group. Participants in the [experimental groups](#) read one of two versions of a news article about climate change, one that gave a deadline for taking meaningful climate change action or one that referred to a deadline but then refuted it. Participants in the control group did not read any article.

Rather than be disengaged, the researchers found that participants who read the deadline article significantly supported more [political action](#) to mitigate climate change than those in the control condition.

These participants also perceived the severity of climate change as greater than those in the control group and they also had a greater sense that they, individually and collectively, could do something about it.

Perceived ability to do something about climate change, individually and collectively, was also greater in the no-deadline group than the [control group](#), perhaps because the article refutes the idea of an expiration date for meaningful climate change action to reduce impacts—that any action, at any time, makes a difference, Kohl says.

But only the deadline article group also resulted in greater support for political climate change action than the control condition.

"As the recent IPCC report illustrates, we're going to have to learn how to talk about tough [climate](#) change realities in ways that engage rather than disengage audiences," Kohl says. "I understand why critics worry that the idea of a deadline for meaningful action in avoiding catastrophic [climate change](#) might cause people to throw up their hands in defeat. But our research suggests that assumption might not be quite right."

More information: Patrice A. Kohl et al, 12 Years Left: How a Climate Change Action Deadline Influences Perceptions and Engagement, *Environmental Communication* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/17524032.2021.1941175](#)

Provided by University of Central Florida

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