

# How to talk about climate change: Highlight harms, not benefits, to alter behavior

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Credit: Markus Spiske from Pexels

Climate change is slowly, but drastically, influencing how we live, work and play. Governments, as well as for-profit and non-profit organizations, are now seeking ways to limit the effects of human

actions on the planet. In many parts of the world, [including Australia](#) and [Canada](#), governments are limiting the use of single-use plastics.

To get people to be more sustainable in their daily lives, governments and environmental advocates have been communicating the harms of [climate change](#) for humans, animals and the planet. However, there is a right and wrong way to spread this message.

Research has recently begun examining how to best convey the importance of human action to the masses. While people are frequently bombarded with appeals to reduce [water use](#) and bring reusable bags to the [grocery store](#), studies are now analyzing the language that should be used to make such appeals effective.

In a [recent paper](#) I co-authored with Jack Lin, a student at the California State University Northridge, we found that stressing the "seriousness" or "importance" of climate change could lead to counterintuitive results.

## **The experiment**

We recruited randomly selected 762 Americans and had them read a passage outlining the effects of climate change. But, in the passage given to half of the participants, we added words such as "serious" and "grave" to stress the importance of the harmful effects of climate change.

We then asked the participants how likely they were to engage in various sustainable behaviors such as eating locally grown foods, taking public transportation and using less water.

You would think that saying that climate change is serious would promote more sustainable behavioral intentions. Instead, we found that using "serious" and other similar adjectives lowered behavioral intentions to make sustainable efforts. This effect was especially

pronounced among participants who identified supporting the Republican Party.

## **Word choice can trigger your sense of free will**

How could these results be explained? Well, [Republican supporters generally are higher on "psychological reactance."](#) Meaning they are typically more averse to restrictions on their individual freedoms and sense of free will. Therefore, to say that climate change effects are "serious" are seen by these individuals as an attempt to influence their perceived views of climate change. Conservatives [in other parts of the world](#) also tend to score higher on psychological reactance.

According to this theory, when people experience a sense of restriction, they can take opposite actions to re-assert their sense of free will. Consistent with this premise, Republicans' higher scores on psychological reactance explained why they said they would, for example, use even more water when they see an appeal that uses adjectives like "serious" to convey the effects of climate change.

Other research has found similar results. For example, you would think that telling people that 97% of the world's prominent scientists believe that human-caused climate change is real. Yet [Republican-aligned research participants](#) who see a statement like this become even less likely to act on it, compared to those that don't see it.

These findings might seem to say that climate change communications and appeals might be futile, especially for Republicans. [Research published a decade ago](#) found that scientists consider the terms "global warming" and "climate change" to mean different things, while most lay people use them interchangeably. This research showed that Republicans are less likely to believe that "global warming is real" but more likely to believe that "climate change is real."

Democrats are more likely to take action against climate change than Republicans, but Democrats themselves are more likely to act against "[global warming](#)" than "climate change"—the opposite effect among Republicans.

## The power of words

Whether one is conservative or liberal, [research](#) has found that highlighting losses is better at promoting behaviors than highlighting gains. For example, indicating the harms to humans, animals and the environment from not acting is more effective than indicating the benefits from acting. [Other research](#) has also found that using pie charts to communicate statistics and figures is better at promoting comprehension than writing those figures down in text form.

What does this all mean? The way we communicate the effects of climate change needs to be considered. How we communicate—and the language we use—are just as important as what we communicate.

People process the information they receive through their own lens—a lens that is shaped by individual as well as cultural histories, differences and expectations. In order to drive our message through to all these individuals of diverse perspectives, we need to ensure that the way we communicate is adapted to those recipients' histories, differences and expectations.

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