

# 'Climate contrarianism' is down but not out, expert says

February 23 2024, by Clay Bonnyman Evans

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In 2011, Max Boykoff attended the 2011 Heartland Institute's Sixth International Conference on Climate Change in Washington, D.C., to better understand how the prominent conservative think tank was

influencing the climate debate.

The institute was founded in 1984 to "discover, develop and promote free-market solutions to social and [economic problems](#)," rejecting the consensus of relevant experts on issues such as climate change, health care and tobacco regulation.

In his [2013 paper](#) (co-authored with Shawn Olson-Hazboun), "'Wise contrarians': a keystone species in contemporary climate science, politics and policy," Boykoff examined the motivations, drive and exhilaration among attendees "that prop up these contrarian stances, such as ideological or evidentiary disagreement to the orthodox views of science."

Ten years later, Boykoff ventured back into contrarian country to interview attendees of the Heartland Institute's 14th climate-change conference and examine how it compares with the earlier conference.

In his [recent article](#) in the journal *Climatic Change*, Boykoff identified "10 key themes—five comparisons and five contrasts—that point to adaptive strategies deployed in ongoing and wider CCM (climate-change countermovement) efforts that effectively shape sustainability technology and climate policy."

While in some ways the organization has declined in visibility, Boykoff says it maintains a \$6 million budget.

"There is a tendency to dismiss them as a bunch of goofballs, aging, largely white men who chip away at people doing good work through (the organization's) efforts online and elsewhere," says Boykoff, professor of environmental studies and fellow at CIRES, the Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences, at the University of Colorado Boulder. "But it is a mistake to dismiss them because of their

ongoing activities that they are continuing to pursue often behind the public scenes."

## Understanding climate contrarianism

Through interviews with 21 speakers in the 2021 conference, Boykoff identified five continuities with the 2011 gathering:

- Ongoing rhetoric of freedom, appeals to liberty and support for free-market capitalism
- Attacks on science, scientists and purported climate "alarmism"
- Self-perception as "embattled underdogs"
- Righteousness and confidence that their views trump those of relevant experts
- A proud "us vs. them" stance and nostalgia for past fights that garnered public attention

"[W]hile they may have viewed themselves as benevolently motivated and careful, critical thinkers, in their prepared remarks, self-assurance, appearances of bold conviction, poor listening skills, sensitivity to criticism, and a lack of empathy were evident ... throughout the (2021) conference," Boykoff writes.

He also identified five key contrasts that have developed over the past decade:

- Instances of paranoia—such as doubting Boykoff's credentials—in the face of shrinking prestige
- Waning public-facing influence
- "A penchant to feed climate contrarianism into '[culture wars](#),' including anti-vaccination and anti-mask movements"
- Reflection on their individual legacies
- A shift in focus from federal- to state-level sites of resistance and

increased undermining of environmental, social and governmental (ESG) actions to influence climate change

Of those, Boykoff finds the shift to state-level action and influence, the attack on ESG principles and the conflation of [climate change](#) with seemingly unrelated "culture war" issues the most concerning.

"Hitching their wagon to culture wars ... helps give them a purpose, some semblance of notoriety that some of them seemingly crave," says Boykoff, adding he was careful to "stick with observation" rather than speculation in writing the paper.

## **A potent disrupter**

Boykoff personally experienced the intensity of COVID-related contrarianism, with one man demanding that he remove his mask.

"Anti-masking rhetoric pervaded my conversations," he says. "It helps them feel as if they are fighting some heroic, just cause."

Attacking ESG principles gave participants a "hook to talk about the 'woke left,' the SEC (Securities and Exchange Commission) and the Fed (Federal Reserve). ... Through the freedom and liberty tropes, alarmism and attacks on science, many feel like they are embattled underdogs who think they know better than those who dedicate their lives to this issue," he says.

Despite the vigorous contrarianism he encountered, the 2021 conference struck Boykoff as further evidence of the conference sponsor's fading public-facing influence.

"While this research finds persistent animosity and division fed by Heartland Institute speakers and participants," he writes, "there are

emergent signals that these rhetorical strategies are increasingly being viewed as ossified and fossilized in a decarbonizing world."

Even so, Boykoff warns that the institute remains a potent disrupter, supporting such efforts as mailing climate-contrarian school materials to teachers who may not have time to fully vet the information.

"These are dated perspectives, and the world is moving on," he says. "But they are persistent, and they are still getting a lot of funding."

**More information:** Maxwell Boykoff, Climate change countermovements and adaptive strategies: insights from Heartland Institute annual conferences a decade apart, *Climatic Change* (2023). DOI: [10.1007/s10584-023-03655-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-023-03655-5)

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

Citation: 'Climate contrarianism' is down but not out, expert says (2024, February 23) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-02-climate-contrarianism-expert.html>

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