

Analyzing impact of climate flooding images and political cues in news coverage

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According to a Rutgers study, news stories that include vivid photos of episodic climate change-related flooding (specifically flooded houses) significantly increase Americans' perception of such flooding as a threat.

The study—by Lauren Feldman, a professor of journalism and media studies at the Rutgers School of Communication and Information, and University of Michigan colleagues P. Sol Hart, Soobin Choi, Annie Li Zhang, and Austin Hegland—was [published](#) in the journal *Science Communication*.

Conversely, when media outlets and other [climate change](#) communicators include images of statistical maps depicting flooding risk, the news coverage has no effect on [people's perceptions](#) of climate change-related flooding as threatening, compared with news coverage that doesn't include any imagery at all.

However, even graphic photos of flooding don't help decrease the polarization between United States liberals and conservatives in their perceptions of the risks posed by climate-change-related flooding. Liberals have much higher flooding risk perceptions than conservatives, regardless of whether the news they consume includes imagery, the researchers found.

The researchers also found when news organizations report Democrats and Republicans are divided in their beliefs about the link between climate change and flooding, these party cues lower the public's perceptions of flooding as a threat.

"News about climate change has become increasingly politicized and polarized over the last several decades, and news stories about climate change often emphasize divides and conflicts between [political parties](#) over [climate policy](#) and other aspects of climate change," said Feldman. "Our findings indicate that when journalists emphasize partisan conflict and division in their reporting on climate change, this can undermine [public concern](#) about the issue."

Feldman pointed to two recent trends in [news coverage](#) of climate

change: the use of imagery depicting extreme weather, such as flooding, and the inclusion of political party cues (i.e., information about where the two U.S. political parties stand on climate change).

"Broadly, we were interested in how different types of news images of flooding, along with the presence of party cues in news stories, affects people's risk perceptions of both flooding and climate change, their collective efficacy beliefs, their intentions to take political action to address climate change and whether the effects of the imagery might vary depending on an individual's political ideology," she said.

Feldman and her collaborators conducted an online survey experiment with a national sample of 4,408 U.S. adults recruited from Lucid, an online sample provider. Participants read a news article created for the study that varied both the presence and type of flooding imagery and the presence and type of party cues.

The researchers compared the effects of two different types of images of flooding: episodic images that focus on a vivid example of flooding (e.g., a photograph of a flooded house) versus thematic images that offer broader context about an issue (e.g., a map of flooding risk based on statistical data).

They also compared the effects of political party cues on the public (i.e., ordinary citizens) versus elites (i.e., members of Congress).

Feldman said the lack of effects for thematic imagery that uses statistical maps may suggest "that people have a difficult time interpreting these images; thus, more care may be needed to ensure the effectiveness of this type of imagery in communicating about climate change risks."

They found that news articles that included political party cues, regardless of whether these cues pertained to the public or political

elites, decreased people's perceptions of flooding as a threat compared with news stories that didn't include party cues.

They also found significant effects of imagery and party cues on people's perceptions of whether flooding is a threat but not on their perceptions of whether climate change is a threat.

"We suspect that this is because people's views on climate change are more fixed than their views on flooding due to the politicization of climate change in the U.S.," Feldman said.

The finding has implications for the practice of climate change journalism and public relations, suggesting that climate advocates and other climate communicators may want to focus on narratives that emphasize the specific threats posed by climate change, such as flooding and public health risks, rather than focusing on climate change in general, Feldman added.

The researchers also explored whether vivid photos of flooding might not only convince the public that climate-change-related flooding is threatening but might inspire them to take some kind of political action to mitigate climate change (e.g., contact an elected official, attend a protest, etc.).

They found that news stories did not directly influence participants' intentions to take action. However, by shifting people's perceptions of flooding, the news stories featuring vivid flooding imagery indirectly boosted the public's intentions to act, whereas news stories containing partisan cues indirectly decreased their intentions.

"Despite this, it's still important to keep in mind that the observed effects were small overall, and [imagery](#) and party cues only had total effects on flooding risk perceptions and not on climate risk perceptions,

collective efficacy beliefs, and [political action](#) intentions," Feldman said. "The results thus point to the limits of using message features to shift climate change attitudes and behaviors."

More information: P. Sol Hart et al, The Influence of Flooding Imagery and Party Cues on Perceived Threat, Collective Efficacy, and Intentions for Political Action to Address Climate Change, *Science Communication* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/10755470231199972](https://doi.org/10.1177/10755470231199972)

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