

Study finds liberals and conservatives differ on climate change beliefs—but are relatively united in taking action

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Credit: Markus Spiske from Pexels

The division between liberals and conservatives on both climate-change beliefs and related policy support is long-standing. However, the results

of a newly released global experiment show that despite these differences, the two camps actually align when it comes to taking certain actions to combat climate change.

The [study](#), led by researchers at New York University, finds that when given the opportunity, liberals and conservatives take action to address [climate change](#) at roughly the same levels—and that this is due to conservatives choosing to take action despite their climate-change beliefs rather than liberals failing to act on theirs.

"Our work shows a disconnect between beliefs and behaviors among conservatives when it comes to environmental matters while, at the same time, revealing common ground with liberals when it comes to taking action," explains Madalina Vlasceanu, an assistant professor in NYU's Department of Psychology who led the study, which is published in the journal *Nature Communications*.

Additionally, the researchers identified which messages—or interventions—can be effective in boosting beliefs in climate change and policy support among both conservatives and liberals.

"These results paint an optimistic picture for policymakers and climate activists in their efforts to influence public opinion on climate change and related policies," says Michael Berkebile-Weinberg, an NYU doctoral student and the paper's first author.

"Several interventions were effective in altering beliefs and policy support across the ideological divide, in liberals and conservatives alike."

However, the study's authors caution that the impact of interventions was not uniform. For instance, framing certain actions as a climate change solution can backfire and decrease conservatives' engagement. For example, informing conservatives that a majority of Americans are

concerned about the climate crisis led to them planting fewer trees.

"This suggests that interventions aimed at increasing conservatives' pro-environmental behaviors should not involve their climate-change beliefs," explains Danielle Goldwert, the study's co-lead author and an NYU doctoral student. "Instead, framing climate-change actions as beneficial for ideologically consistent reasons might be more effective in spurring action."

The findings stem from an experiment involving 50,000 participants across 60 countries, including Algeria, China, Denmark, Germany, Israel, Japan, New Zealand, Peru, and the United States.

To capture the participants' views on climate change, the researchers asked a series of questions pertaining to beliefs in climate change (e.g., "Human activities are causing climate change.") and support for related policies (e.g., "I support increasing the number of charging stations for electric vehicles.").

In these measures, the participants around the globe showed significant political polarization, with liberals expressing belief in climate change and supporting climate-change policies to a far greater extent than conservatives—a finding consistent with previous surveys.

The researchers then tested participants' engagement with actions aimed at addressing climate change. But prior to asking related questions, the researchers posed a series of messages, or interventions, to the participants in order to test their impact. These interventions included, among others, the following:

- Emphasizing scientific consensus on climate change (i.e., "Ninety-nine percent of expert climate change scientists agree that the Earth is warming, and climate change is happening,

mainly because of human activity.").

- Touting the effectiveness of collective action in addressing climate change by providing examples of successful climate actions people took in the past.
- Asking participants to write a letter to a socially close child, as a member of the future generation.
- Asking participants to write a letter to a future generation member outlining what climate actions they are undertaking today to make the planet livable in 2055.

To gauge the effectiveness of these interventions, the paper's authors tested participants' support for several climate-related views, policies, and actions (e.g., "Climate change poses a serious threat to humanity," "I support raising carbon taxes on gas/fossil fuels/coal," participation in a tree-planting initiative).

Finally, the paper's authors gauged the desire of participants to share climate-mitigation information on [social media](#), "Did you know that removing meat and dairy for only two out of three meals per day could decrease food-related carbon emissions by 60%?" The data were collected between July 2022 and May 2023.

The researchers found that three interventions—emphasizing effective collective actions, writing a letter to a future generation member, and writing a letter from the future self—boosted the climate beliefs and policy support of both liberals and conservatives. Notably, emphasizing [scientific consensus](#) stimulated liberals' willingness to participate in a tree-planting initiative, but this message had no impact on conservatives.

"Different interventions are more effective at increasing liberals' and conservatives' climate awareness and action, so practitioners and [policy makers](#) can use our results to administer the most effective [intervention](#) for their target audience," explains Vlasceanu.

The study's other authors were Kimberly Doell, senior scientist at the University of Vienna, and Jay Van Bavel, an NYU professor of psychology.

More information: Michael Berkebile-Weinberg et al, The differential impact of climate interventions along the political divide in 60 countries, *Nature Communications* (2024). [DOI: 10.1038/s41467-024-48112-8](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-024-48112-8)

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