

Global Politics: Climate Change Denial

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Climate change is one of the most heated topics of political discussion that we deal with in today's world. It is one of the most significant issues that humanity faces today, as its impact can have an effect on the ecosystems, societies, and economies of every corner of the planet. Climate change refers to the long-term variations in the planet's weather patterns and temperature (United Nations). Many people confuse climate change with global warming; however, they are not the same. Global warming is the continued heating of the Earth's atmosphere through the increase of greenhouse gasses (USGS). It is simply one of the contributing factors to climate change. While many factors of climate change are natural, research has shown that human activities are the largest contributor to the increased effects of climate change. This means that we are able to do something about it directly. According to research done by NASA, the effects of climate change first began to be seen in the late 19th century driven largely by increased carbon dioxide emissions into the atmosphere and other human activities (NASA, 2023). So, how does climate change negatively affect us? Many will argue that climate change won't affect us until the future, but that would be incorrect. Climate change is already having significant impacts on the environment and subsequently communities all over the world. Increased sea levels lead to more frequent flooding. Hotter air temperatures are causing farmers to use more water on their crops, which leads to an increase in water usage. Various ecosystems and organisms are being harmed, as seen in the Arctic with the melting of ice caps (NOAA, 2023). These are just some of the many issues associated with climate change.

However, despite all the overwhelming scientific evidence and research that has been done, many people, including global leaders, outright deny the existence of climate change or refuse to do something about this issue. The influence of global leaders is undeniable and the denial of climate change can be dangerous. When a leader outright dismisses scientific evidence,

it can lead to a loss of credibility in scientific research. This then causes a divide on the topic of climate change where many believe it either isn't an issue or isn't real, while many others are trying to solve the issue. Through the lens of political psychology, we can examine why climate change denial and subsequent policy inaction occur. There are many theories in the field of political psychology that could help understand the reasons behind this. In this paper, I will be discussing how certain political psychology theories can explain the division on climate change.

I believe that the issue of climate change pertains to situationism. One of the reasons for this is the economic impact associated with climate change issues. Many countries depend heavily on the fossil fuel industry for energy and job opportunities. Transitioning to renewable fuel sources is a significant economic undertaking for any country and it would take jobs away from many people in these industries. These economic interests create situational pressure that can cause policymakers or other politicians to downplay the importance of climate change in an attempt to protect these interests. Another reason why situationism applies is that the environment in which people get their information from plays a large role in what they think. As stated previously, the stance of an influential leader can significantly impact what their people think. Widespread misinformation and negative stances by media outlets and political interest groups can create an information environment that influences people's thinking. If there is constant misinformation being spread in someone's environment, it can be difficult to obtain accurate information. This leads to situations where someone might believe climate change isn't an issue despite what their personal beliefs are. Another explanation for why climate change is predominantly a situationist perspective is when you consider the social and political context. Political polarization refers to the ideological divide between opposing political groups and how they stray from the middle, instead reaching the extremes of both sides. This is important

because if a person's political party consistently denies the issue of climate change, they are more likely to be influenced by those beliefs due to social conformity and group identity pressures.

I've chosen two theories to explain why so many people deny climate change. The first theory is the Social Identity Theory. This theory refers to the mindset of people who belong to specific social groups, such as political parties. A person's beliefs and behaviors are heavily influenced by their group identities. From the perspective of political parties, this can appear as hostility towards opposing parties and favoritism towards your own. Additionally, identifying with a group is shown to raise self esteem. People typically believe that their party is superior to other parties. Individuals often align with the stance of their political parties or leaders. There is also the aspect of conforming to the group's beliefs which can overtake one's own personal beliefs or behaviors. In the context of climate change, this can create skepticism over the scientific research and overall threat of the issue if a person's political party consistently downplays or disputes facts.

The second theory I will discuss is the prevalence of media outlets and the influence they can have on one's beliefs. Media outlets have a far and wide reach on the general public. The information a media outlet puts out has a great deal of influence when you consider how a platform can elevate said information. Not only that, but people tend to seek out information that aligns with their own beliefs. This is known as selective exposure and causes people to reaffirm their own beliefs with specific information (oxford reference). By doing this, they actively avoid any information that would contradict their beliefs. Another way media outlets can influence someone's thoughts on the matter is through confirmation bias. Individuals are more likely to interpret information in a way that supports their beliefs. For example, a news outlet might cling

to an uncertainty in scientific research to support their skepticism of climate change. Lastly, echo chambers are another area in which it is easy for a group of individuals to reaffirm their beliefs. Echo chambers are an environment in which people only come into contact with beliefs similar to their own. An example of this would be on social media. This creates a space in which the same thoughts and ideas are stated over and over, creating an echo chamber that reaffirms preexisting beliefs.

I believe that these two theories are the best to explain the denial of climate change from a situationist perspective. They illustrate the significant influence that social groups and prominent media outlets have on the beliefs of the general public. As social creatures, humans naturally tend to conform to social groups and surround themselves with like-minded individuals. These theories explain how climate change denial persists by analyzing the various situations people encounter. The pressure of social situations can have a greater impact on a person's decision than their own beliefs and behaviors. Political psychology can help frame the problem by understanding motivations and biases from specific social groups. In doing so, we can tailor education and communication efforts to promote a wider acceptance of climate change research and foster more meaningful engagement in regards to taking action.

A solution that I think would be able to counter the skepticism of climate change is to better educate people on its effects and the dangers of misinformation. For many people, it isn't enough to be told that it is a problem. They need first hand experience to understand the severity of the issue and to understand that it really exists. By better educating our young people on the issue that is climate change, we can begin to change the narrative on it. Schools have the ability to teach students about the dangers of misinformation and how echo chambers can skew their perspective. There needs to be an initiative towards teaching them about media and climate

change literacy. In today's landscape, it can be so easy to encounter misinformation perpetuated by skeptics online. By continuing to educate our students on these topics, we can reach a point where a majority of people agree that climate change is an issue. From there, we can truly begin to tackle climate change in a unified effort instead of a divided one.

I theorize that much of the divide on the issue of climate change comes from the interests of certain political groups and figures. Many of them are more concerned with protecting their economic interests than the health of the environment and its people. However, I also believe that young people have a much deeper desire to do something about climate change. A vast majority of policy makers are older people who weren't educated nearly as much on climate change growing up. A concerted effort is being made to educate the younger generation, and if we can continue to do that with even greater effectiveness, then by the time they enter the political world I believe we will begin to see change. I also believe that a lack of media literacy contributes to a lot of this divide as well. Many people don't understand the biases and nuances of media outlets. With the surge of information and online misinformation, this also contributes to much of the problem. I believe this theory is unique because it looks at more of the psychological and political reasons behind why so many people are skeptical of climate change. Through proper education and a concerted effort to educate people on the misinformation pertaining to climate change, we can begin to bridge this divide.

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