

Climate Change Skeptics in the United States

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Rachael Crystal Bynoe Osborne

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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Approved: _____ Date _____
Peter Norton, Department of Engineering and Society

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With the increasingly apparent effects of global warming comes growing pressure for measures to reduce CO₂ emissions. These measures often include increased regulation of the fossil fuel industry. However, these proposed changes have pushed climate change skeptics to fight back. The multifaceted, high-stakes nature of climate change leaves room for rejection or denial; as Connor & Higginbotham (2013) explain: “Climate change presents particular problems of acceptance because of its insidious, long term nature, often distant effects, the numerous and powerful special interests involved, and the necessity for short term actions to solve problems that will only become evident in the longer term.” To find an all-encompassing solution to the climate crisis, it is imperative that we understand why skeptics take their stance and how they garner credibility to gain support in the United States.

Climate change skepticism includes claims that climate change is not occurring as well as acknowledgments of climate change but with denial of humans’ role in it. Organized participants that fall under this category include the American Petroleum Institute (API), Koch Industries, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), Americans for Prosperity (AfP), the Heartland Institute (HI), the Cornwall Alliance (CA), and the American Enterprise Institute (AEI). Additionally, two major groups of unorganized participants have been identified: False Alarmers and Political Skeptics. False Alarmers equate climate change warnings with the boy who cried wolf; they have heard the same apocalyptic scientific predictions for years but have not seen any of the forecasted scenarios come to light. Political Skeptics see climate change and environmental policies as schemes to gain political power. All of these climate skeptics earn

credibility by portraying themselves as fighting for the good of the country, either economically or politically, or by leaning on what they see as past or current scientific inaccuracies as validation for why we should distrust experts.

Review of Research

Hatzisavvidou (2019) explains how Sarah Palin has promoted climate denialism by tying it into the support of free markets, social conservatism, and environmental anti-regulation, all of which find favor among many conservatives. The present work confirms that the same arguments used by Palin to gain credibility are also used among larger participant groups. Bjornberg et al. (2017) found that science deniers (including climate change skeptics) frequently cast doubt on valid scientific data and on the climate scientists themselves, questioning their integrity. He also makes a distinction between the different forms of denial: “literal denial that rejects the facts, interpretive denial that accepts them but makes a different interpretation, and implicatory denial that opposes the psychological, political or moral implications.” Although the specific forms of denial are not used as an analytical tool in this paper, it does present an interesting way to classify participants. For example, the Political Skeptics and those who reject climate change due to the effects on the economy exhibit implicatory denial while the False Alarmers exhibit literal denial.

Bjornberg et al.’s conclusion is confirmed by Norgaard et. al (2011) which contends that the “Climate Change Denial Machine” (fig. 1) attacks climate science because they have realized that it is “more efficacious to question the *need* for environmental regulations by challenging evidence of environmental degradation, rather than the *goal* of environmental protection.” The present work confirms these findings, that science is a common target for organized climate

skeptics; however, it also outlines unorganized climate skeptics that find fault in science's past mistakes.

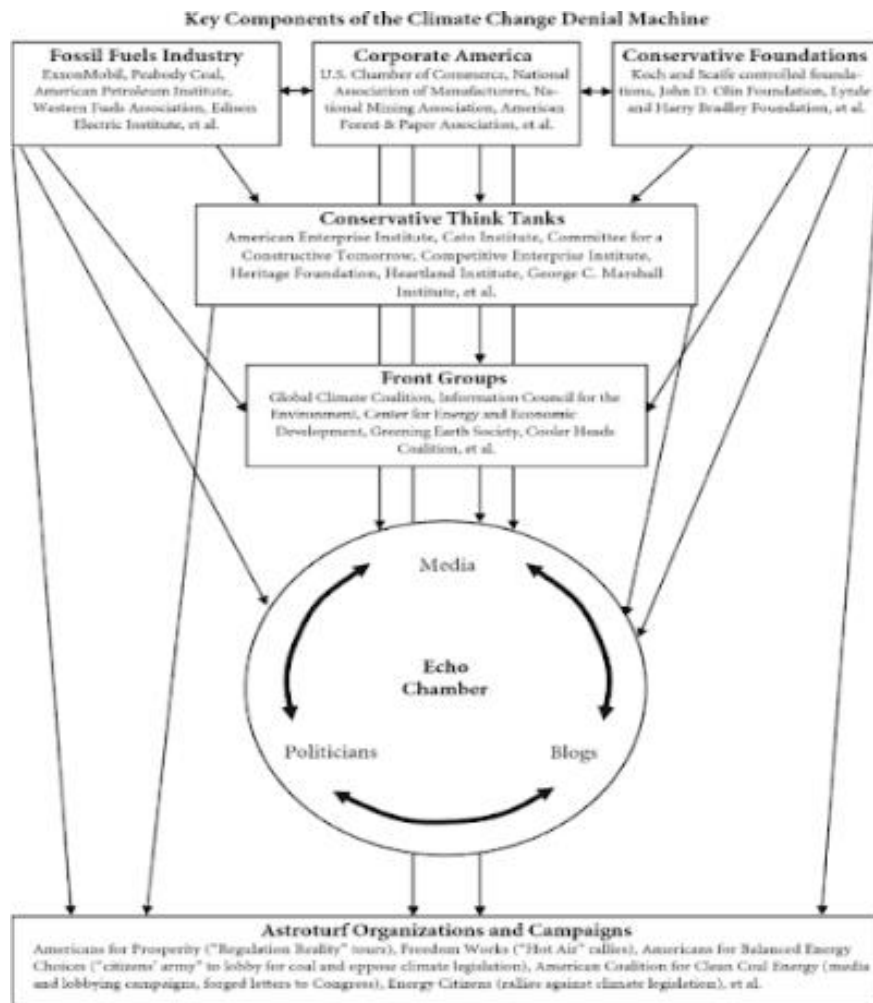


Figure 1. From Norgaard et al. (2011): Depiction of the Climate Change Denial “Machine.”

Collomb (2014) contends that the conservative denier movement is “committed to small government and free enterprise”, standing behind their commitment to the “American Way of Life,” i.e. a life of consumerism and a forever expanding economy which is seldom reconcilable with climate change legislation. However, this pursuit of greater wealth and standards of living

appeals heavily to the middle class. This paper will build off of this contention, analyzing the specifics of how these different groups portray free enterprise as incompatible with climate change. All previous research on the topic of climate skepticism investigates climate deniers as organized participants. In this paper, I will also analyze unorganized participant groups and their sources of credibility.

All for the American Economy

Many climate change skeptics present themselves as advocates of U.S. economic growth; this form of socio-economic patriotism makes them seem more credible. The American Petroleum Institute's (API) position on climate change protects the oil and natural gas industry, claiming that stricter pollution regulations "could increase costs to the American public, reduce America's ability to compete internationally, and threaten American jobs" (API, n.d.) because US natural oil and gas makes "America stronger and more secure" (Green, 2019). To promote API's pro-economy stance, it hired Blue Advertising to publicize the benefits of oil and natural gas (Blue Advertising, n.d) (fig. 2). This social norms campaign showed ordinary people as "energy voters."

API also funds an astroturf group called Energy Citizens which states that "American natural gas and oil are bringing us a better tomorrow" (Energy Citizens, n.d.a). The Energy Citizens frequently use economic stability to support their views. Regarding the Renewable Fuel Standard which supports the use of more biofuels, it explains that "Mandating high-ethanol fuels could also hurt our economy" (Energy Citizens, n.d.b). Although API has a huge material interest in reducing regulations, this is not the motive they present to the public. Rather, their public image shows an organization that is being socially responsible, looking out for the

economic well-being of American citizens. Koch Industries goes one step further in publicly removing themselves from their monetary interests through organizations like the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) and Americans for Prosperity (AfP), whose grievances against regulations are supposedly founded on purely ideological motivations.

American Petroleum Institute

Buffeted by a challenging public opinion environment, the U.S. oil and natural gas industry hired Blue to create an education campaign unprecedented in the industry's history. This campaign, recipient of Telly, Communicator, SABRE and MarCom Awards, focused on showcasing both the benefits oil and natural gas bring to all facets of American life as well as the industry's innovation and technological prowess.

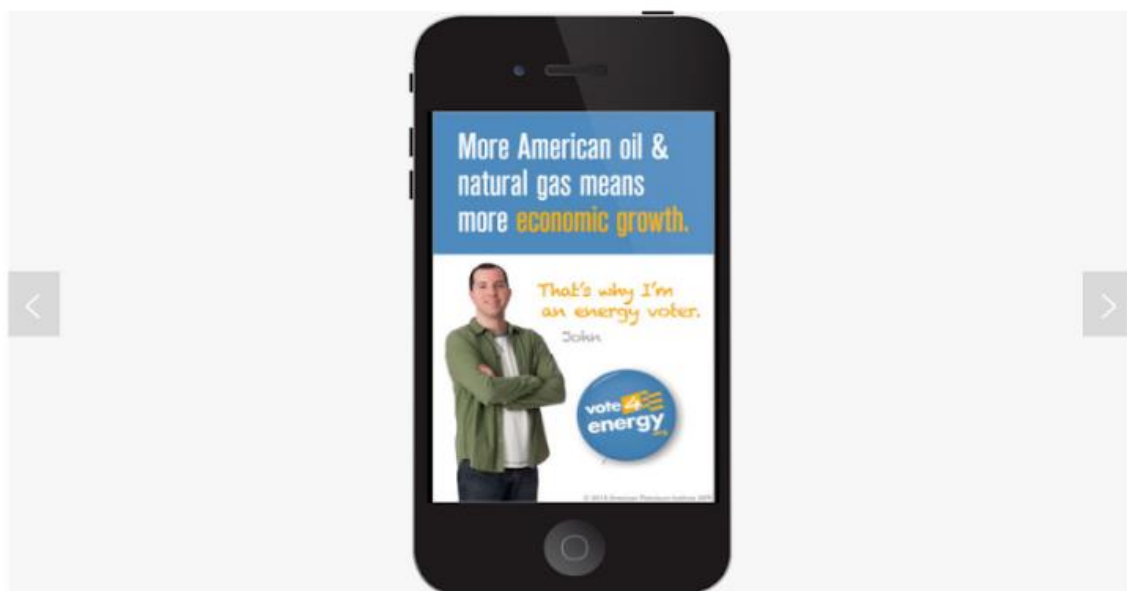


Figure 2. Ad made for API by Blue Advertising (Blue Advertising, n.d).

Koch Industries opposes regulations of carbon and fossil fuels and finances AfP and ALEC. From their perspective, “Free markets in energy produce more options, more energy, lower prices, and less economic disruptions” (ALEC, 2017a). ALEC also states that “a great deal of scientific uncertainty surrounds [climate] changes, and the cost of regulation to inhibit such changes may lead to great economic dislocation” (ALEC, 2017b). It opposes all government

regulations on the grounds that they burden the economy. Like ALEC, AfP supports free markets. On the Obama-era fuel efficiency standards, AfP stresses higher “costs for consumers” (AfP, 2018a). It opposed the proposed carbon tax of 2018, on the grounds that it is not market-driven and its costs to the economy would outweigh any benefits (AfP, 2018b).

The Heartland Institute (HI) argues that “renewable energies don’t protect the environment. They actually harm it by being less efficient and more land-intensive than fossil fuels” (HI, 2016). Furthermore, “Rationing access to energy and forcing a transition to alternatives to fossil fuels would reduce the quality of life of billions of people around the world...and cause the premature death of millions of people” (HI, n.d.). HI’s purportedly pro-energy, pro-environment plan includes repealing global warming regulations because they “would have an insignificant impact on temperature or weather,” repealing renewable energy subsidies because they increase costs for taxpayers with no benefit, and taking advantage of coal, oil, and natural gas resources (HI, 2016). HI states that “Global warming is not a crisis. The threat was exaggerated” and as a result, “Future policies should aim at fostering economic growth to adapt to natural climate change” (HI, 2015).

The Liberal Plot

All sides of a political divide think their ideology will serve the country best. By painting the issue of climate change as a liberal conspiracy, Political Skeptics, which are generally politically conservative, have found credibility among others who share their views. Dunlap et al. (2011) has shown that differences in opinions on climate change have become more polarized along political party lines with time (fig. 3).

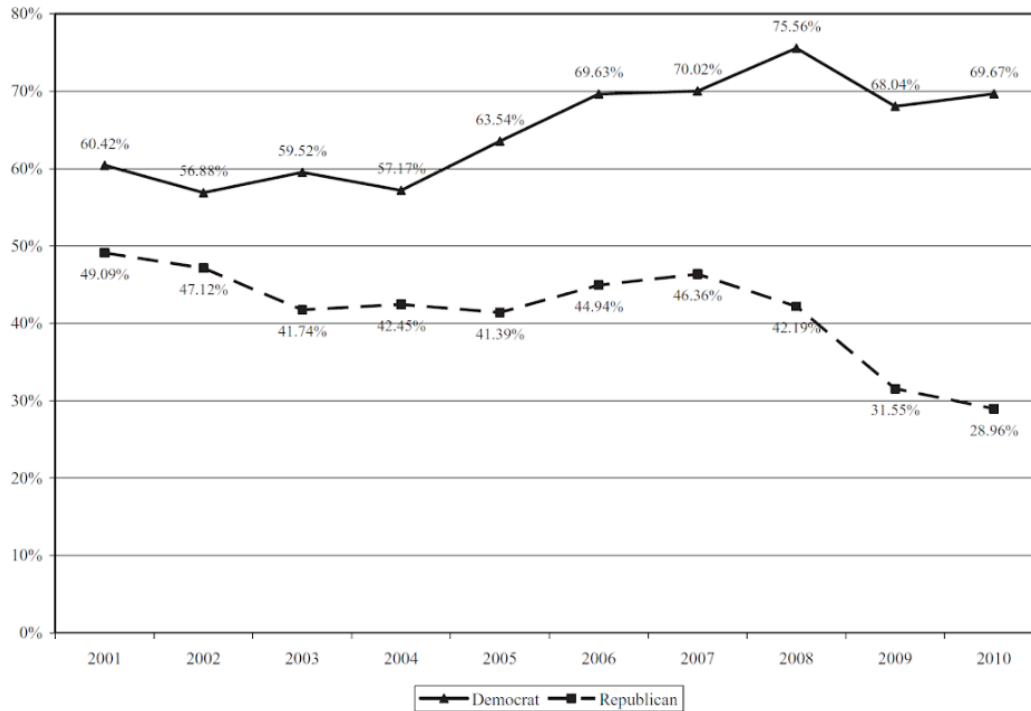


Figure 3. Percentage of Americans who believe the effects of global warming have already begun to happen, 2001-2010, by party identification (Dunlap et al., 2011).

Polarization has made it easier to gain credibility based on political alignments. In his opinion article, Kurt Schlichter (2019) describes climate science as “a package of self-serving lies buttressing the transnational liberal elite’s preferred narrative.” His position on climate change is that “Human-produced carbon might be one of the factors, but there’s simply no evidence that it is a significant one.” Ensuing comments on his article claim that “Democrats only lie” and “liberalism is fear mongering.” Some comments cite previous climate crises: “What about the hole in the ozone layer!!! Another liberal hoax fail!!!” commenter Sam Smith says. In a letter to Shreveport Times’ editor, Poleman (2018) expresses frustration that the newspaper only presents articles in support of climate change: “Like everything else, all of you liberals want to blame everything on climate change and it’s beyond insanity.” He goes on to say how climate change, “is all part of the extreme progressive social movement which leads to liberals wanting

to implement more regulations to control our lives. How is it you people cannot see the truth? It is simply amazing to think and believe like a liberal. It's all about changing the country we have lived in since it's beginning. It will never be accepted.” Poleman’s disdain towards this supposedly liberal political tactic is palpable. Pry (2019) voices a similar narrative in his opinion article, stating that “Democrats and liberal mainstream media claim environmental apocalypse will become irreversible in 12 years — unless the Democratic Party is empowered to radically transform the economy, cultural values and lifestyles of the United States and the world.”

This is supported by Antonio & Brulle (2011) who observed that many Republican congress members shared views with their base “who see climate change and regulation of energy consumption to be a left-wing anti-capitalist conspiracy.” Although this perspective is not the focus of the organization, the Cornwall Alliance (CA) also contends that “settled science” is a term used by the left to ostracize those who think differently. “When it comes to any cause or agenda item that the left is pushing, science is called upon as the arbiter of ‘truth’” (Dyke, 2019). The Political Skeptics view climate change as a trojan horse, an attempt to bend the nation to the liberal will disguised as good-natured concern for the environment and future of humanity. “Global warming/cooling has been the battle cry of liberal icons...for quite some time now” (Klump, 2020).

Faulty Science

Many climate deniers attack climate science to gain credibility. To support its view, HI attacks scientific studies, saying they contain “bad data” (Burnett, 2019). This is confirmed by Cann and Raymond (2018), who found that 74.1% of HI’s climate articles attack the scientific basis of climate change. In another article from HI, Burnett states that “When federal agencies in

the United States..., university researchers, and weather agencies abroad, aren't outright manipulating data...they are using data from severely compromised sources" (Burnett, 2019). HI combats the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a scientific community that functions as part of the United Nations, with its own scientific organization, the Non-Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (NIPCC). The NIPCC states that "Because we are not predisposed to believe climate change is caused by human greenhouse gas emissions, we are able to look at evidence the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) ignores" (NIPCC, n.d.). The NIPCC is often referred to by HI as an alternative perspective which authoritatively disproves the scientific consensus on climate change (Burnett, 2018).

CA opposes climate action on religious grounds. It describes the current environmental movement as "overwhelmingly anti-Christian," and claims its "science and economics are often poorly done" (CA, n.d.). It characterizes environmentalist views, such as global warming, as radical falsehoods that environmentalists masquerade as science. CA labels environmentalist views as distortions based on "faulty computer climate models" and "imaginary forecasts" (Jayaraj, 2019). The American Enterprise Institute (AEI), a public policy think tank, doubts scientists' credibility: "Unfortunately, the cadre of climate scientists who have dominated public discussion and have controlled the IPCC have been demonstrated to be far, far less than trustworthy" (Barone, 2010).

The history of smoking regulation is an analogous scenario that can help us understand our current situation. In the 1950s and 1960s, medical reports confirmed that tobacco causes lung cancer ("A brief history," 2013). In 1954, American tobacco companies released "A Frank Statement to Cigarette Smokers" (fig. 4). In this advertisement, they stated that "there is no proof that cigarette smoking is one of the causes" of lung cancer and "the validity of the statistics

themselves,” those that link smoking to lung cancer, “is questioned by numerous scientists” (TIRC, 1954). Science threatened the interests of the tobacco companies and they pushed back by calling the science into question. Matt Myers, president of the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids, states that “The tobacco industry wrote the playbook for the rest of the industries. Whether it’s the chemical industry, whether it’s climate change You see it in industry after industry” (Heath, 2016).

A Frank Statement to Cigarette Smokers

RECENT REPORTS on experiments with mice have given wide publicity to a theory that cigarette smoking is in some way linked with lung cancer in human beings.

Although conducted by doctors of professional standing, these experiments are not regarded as conclusive in the field of cancer research. However, we do not believe that any serious medical research, even though its results are inconclusive should be disregarded or lightly dismissed.

At the same time, we feel it is in the public interest to call attention to the fact that eminent doctors and research scientists have publicly questioned the claimed significance of these experiments.

Distinguished authorities point out:

1. That medical research of recent years indicates many possible causes of lung cancer.
2. That there is no agreement among the authorities regarding what the cause is.
3. That there is no proof that cigarette smoking is one of the causes.
4. That statistics purporting to link cigarette smoking with the disease could apply with equal force to any one of many other aspects of modern life. Indeed the validity of the statistics themselves is questioned by numerous scientists.

We accept an interest in people's health as a basic responsibility, paramount to every other consideration in our business.

We believe the products we make are not injurious to health.

We always have and always will cooperate closely with those whose task it is to safeguard the public health.

For more than 300 years tobacco has given solace, relaxation, and enjoyment to mankind. At one time or another during those years critics have held it responsible for practically every disease of the human body. One by one these charges have been abandoned for lack of evidence.

Regardless of the record of the past, the fact that cigarette smoking today should even be suspected as a cause of a serious disease is a matter of deep concern to us.

Many people have asked us what we are doing to meet the public's concern aroused by the recent reports. Here is the answer:

1. We are pledging aid and assistance to the research effort into all phases of tobacco use and health. This joint financial aid will of course be in addition to what is already being contributed by individual companies.
2. For this purpose we are establishing a joint industry group consisting initially of the undersigned. This group will be known as TOBACCO INDUSTRY RESEARCH COMMITTEE.
3. In charge of the research activities of the Committee will be a scientist of unimpeachable integrity and national repute. In addition there will be an Advisory Board of scientists disinterested in the cigarette industry. A group of distinguished men from medicine, science, and education will be invited to serve on this Board. These scientists will advise the Committee on its research activities.

This statement is being issued because we believe the people are entitled to know where we stand on this matter and what we intend to do about it.

TOBACCO INDUSTRY RESEARCH COMMITTEE

5400 EMPIRE STATE BUILDING, NEW YORK 1, N. Y.

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Figure 4. 1954 Ad from the *New York Times* (TIRC, 1954).

Don't Listen to the Experts

False Alarmers cite previous failures of experts as cause for disbelief, pointing to instances of false predictions to give themselves credibility. In *Religion Unplugged*, Jillian Cheney (2019) tries to explain why most Evangelicals do not accept climate change. Curt B.'s comment on Cheney's analysis perfectly expresses the concerns of False Alarmers:

Has the author considered [that] many don't buy into it because ... we don't see it happening? None of the computer models have come true, arctic and antarctic ice recedes, then reforms, sea levels rise, then lower, temperature[s] rise, then drop ...

At this point, why in the world would we believe "experts" who have been caught manipulating data and literally flying in private jets to collect environmental awards.

Remember when salt was bad for you, how about the idea of "healthy" high carbohydrate snacks? These ideas were brought to us by "experts" as well, and now we're dying of obesity related conditions by the millions, thanks to nutrition "experts." So forgive us in fly-over country if we don't buy into climate change when the only answer/solution presented to us is a massive increase in the power of government, no thank you.

Curt B.'s distrust of scientists and experts is echoed in many of the other comments on this article. An opinion article from the Institute for Energy Research (IER) also expresses disbelief in climate change due to frequently falsified predictions (Bradley, 2018). Bradley describes past predictions made by climate scientists as "Malthusian scares." He observes that when experts are proven wrong they never own up to their exaggeration or make new predictions. As an example of a "scare-and-hide prediction," he cites how in 2012 "Peter Wadhams, professor of ocean physics at the University of Cambridge, predicted 'global disaster' from the demise of Arctic sea ice in four years. He too, has gone quiet."

There is considerable overlap between the Political Skeptics and the False Alarmers. For example, in the same article where she expresses the link between climate change and liberalism, Pry (2019) recounts a list of instances throughout her life when scientific predictions proved

false. “In 1968, Stanford University Professor Paul Ehrlich’s book ‘The Population Bomb’ started widespread panic among liberal scientists and the media that it was ‘already too late’ to avoid worldwide famine by 1975.” She proceeds with examples from the 60s, 70s, 80s, and 2000s. “Part of New York City was supposed to be submerged by 2019. In 2004, climate hoaxers predicted Britain would be like Siberia by 2020.” Instead of being terrified of the climate apocalypse, Pry suggests devoting time to more worthwhile efforts, like voting republican and supporting President Trump.

Klump (2020), another Political Skeptic, also reflects on points throughout her life when scientists backed exaggerated predictions: “One of our daughters was taught that by a certain year all the trees on the planet would be gone. She believed that until she went up in a plane and saw nothing BUT trees; the grand pronouncements, made with such gravity, were so much blather.” Klump recalls when climate change was termed global warming, explaining how they changed the rhetoric. “Well, these predictions failed, so it has been renamed ‘global climate change,’ which covers either event, warming or cooling. After all, we DO have to keep the general populace stirred up and worried about what is happening in our world.” Put succinctly, “Modern doomsayers have been predicting climate and environmental disasters since the 1960s. They continue to do so today. None of the apocalyptic predictions with due dates as of today have come true” (Ebell, 2019).

Conclusion

Many of the tactics used by climate skeptics to gain credibility are widely applicable to other situations. Concealing material motives with more noble, ideological principles to make a cause more palatable for the public eye is common even for less consequential applications like

advertisements. It has shown to be useful with regards to climate change because many of us are inclined to support whichever side promises more economic stability. In addition, we have learned that politicizing an issue is a simple way to gain support. History shows us that people are often loyal to their political party; this has proven incredibly useful for climate skeptics. As we saw in the cases of the tobacco industry and climate change, if science stands in the way of an organization's monetary gain, they will dispute the accuracy of the science. Sometimes they will even go so far as to make their own scientific committee, like the NIPCC, to “review” the dissatisfactory scientific findings. Finally, this paper has shown that diminishing public trust in scientific expertise emboldens the climate skeptics’ cause. This same phenomenon can be seen in the case of vaccines and how refusal to take vaccines may be associated with a lack of trust for the government or healthcare system. Although it is commonly assumed that climate skeptics are usually part of larger organizations like the fossil fuel industries and think tanks, this paper has also shown that two important unorganized participant groups, the False Alarmers and Political Skeptics, play an important role as well.

You cannot expect to solve a problem without first fully understanding it. In order to address the challenges posed by climate change, we need to understand what causes people to push against it. For example, in the case of the False Alarmers, we now know that it is an issue of trust between the scientific community and ordinary people. This trust must be rebuilt before the False Alarmers will join ranks with the climate community. With the Political Skeptics, it may be useful to find a way to depoliticize climate change and environmentalism. In the future, an analysis of the media climate skeptics use to promote their perspectives could be insightful. This paper touched on a few mediums, like astroturf groups, opinion articles, and scientific reviews, but other forms of sponsored content and advertising could also be investigated. There

is also some evidence to suggest that groups with seemingly different motivations behind their climate views are connected through funding. This is another topic in need of deeper analysis: the interconnectedness of the “Climate Change Denial Machine” and the magnitude of its influence on climate legislation.

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