

American Doubt

Written by Rodger A Payne

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RODGER A PAYNE, DEC 18 2010

Many Americans doubt climate change science. Consider the results of a poll released in October by the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication. The poll, called Americans' Knowledge of Climate Change, conducted from June 24 – July 22, surveyed over 2000 Americans about “how the climate system works, and the causes, consequences, and potential solutions to global warming.”

Overall, we found that 63 percent of Americans believe that global warming is happening, but many do not understand why.

As recently as March 2006, 85% of Americans thought global warming “has probably been happening.”

Just last night, I received an email from the campus Sustainability Coordinator at University of Louisville noting that the Sustainability Council's recommendation of Elizabeth Kolbert's excellent *Field Notes From a Catastrophe: Man, Nature, and Climate Change*, had been rejected from consideration for next year's campus book-in-common. Why? Well, the program director wants a “book that looked at both sides of the global warming debate (those who believe and those who think it's bunk).”

When I taught briefly about the implications of climate change in my International Security class this fall, many of my students were surprised to learn that the US National Intelligence Council even in 2008 (during the Bush administration) focused on the consequences of climate change — not the certainty of the science:

“We did not evaluate the science of climate change per se...throughout our effort, we remained mindful of what the effects of future climate change would mean for US national security.”

Indeed, as the NIC undoubtedly found when it developed “a good understanding of climate science,” there really isn't much scientific doubt about climate change.

In 2004, social scientist Naomi Oreskes published a short piece in *Science* magazine that investigated a sample of 928 scientific abstracts published in the prior decade in refereed scientific journals featuring the keywords “climate change.” Her findings?

“Remarkably, none of the papers disagreed with the consensus position.”

In April 2010, the Proceedings of the National Academies of Sciences of the United States, published an article submitted by Stanford's Stephen Schneider (since deceased) and three colleagues investigating “Expert credibility in climate change.” Their abstract summarizes their methods and findings:

we use an extensive dataset of 1,372 climate researchers and their publication and citation data to show that (i) 97–98% of the climate researchers most actively publishing in the field support the tenets of ACC [anthropogenic (man-made) climate change] outlined by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and (ii) the relative climate expertise and scientific prominence of the researchers unconvinced of ACC are substantially below that of the convinced researchers.

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Despite this overwhelming scientific consensus, Americans still doubt.

This Wednesday December 15, *The Washington Post* ran a story that helps explain the American public's uncertainty.

Fox News Channel's top Washington editor ordered the network's reporters to couple any mention of global climate change with skepticism about the data underlying such a scientific conclusion, according to an e-mail released by a liberal media-watchdog group

In this instance, Media Matters happened to publish "smoking gun" evidence of something scholars have known for some years. Reporter and editorial

"adherence to first-order journalistic norms – personalization, dramatization, and novelty – significantly influence the employment of second-order norms -- authority-order and balance -- and that this has led to informationally deficient mass media coverage of this crucial issue."

Moreover, as the Union of Concerned Scientists found several years ago, the world's largest oil company has used its oil revenues to protect its economic interests on this issue:

ExxonMobil has funneled nearly \$16 million between 1998 and 2005 to a network of 43 advocacy organizations that seek to confuse the public on global warming science.

"ExxonMobil has manufactured uncertainty about the human causes of global warming just as tobacco companies denied their product caused lung cancer," said Alden Meyer, the Union of Concerned Scientists' Director of Strategy & Policy. "A modest but effective investment has allowed the oil giant to fuel doubt about global warming to delay government action just as Big Tobacco did for over 40 years."

Greenpeace found earlier this year that Koch Industries, headed by the billionaire funders of conservative causes Charles and David Koch, have supplanted ExxonMobil as the primary backers of climate change skepticism in the USA. Moreover, *The Australian* reported in July that ExxonMobil

has broken its pledge to stop funding groups that promote scepticism about man-made climate change.

ExxonMobil gave almost £1 million (\$1.75m) last year to organisations that campaigned against controls on greenhouse gas emissions."

There are almost certainly additional explanations behind American doubt about climate science, but these are good places to start.

About the author:

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