

# Talking to The Tea Party About Climate?

Is talking to Tea Partiers about climate that different from talking to your eco-friendly, politically-savvy friends?

Anna Fahey on September 22, 2011 at 2:00 pm



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Striking up a conversation about climate change with somebody who denies the science? Usually I'd say 'don't bother.' But if I'm right and there's actually a little Tea Partier in all of us, maybe there's a thing or two hard-core science deniers can teach us about climate communications more generally.

First things first. Where is the so-called Tea Party on climate change? Recent polling shows that it's not a voting bloc that we're likely to persuade. Indeed, research by [Yale and George Mason University](#) found that among conservatives, it is mainly members of the Tea Party who do not believe climate change is occurring. [While the majority of Democrats](#) (78%), Independents (71%) and Republicans (53%) believe in global warming, only 34% of the Tea Party agrees with them—and 53 percent are pretty adamant it is not happening. (When you ask about man-made climate change, "belief" drops even further for the Tea Party: While 62 percent of Democrats say that global warming is caused mostly by human activities, most Tea Party members say it is either naturally caused (50%) or isn't happening at all (21%.)

That's no big surprise.

And here's further evidence from the Yale/George Mason research that [piling on more facts and data with this group doesn't get us very far](#): "Tea Party members are much more likely to say that they are 'very well informed' about global warming than the other groups. Likewise, they are also much more likely to say they 'do not need any more information' about global warming to make up their mind."

But what *could* move the needle with these folks? And why do I care?

Like I said, I honestly think that when it comes to climate change, there's a little Tea Party in all of us. Denial (or call it compartmentalization, coping, prioritizing, ignoring, fearing change in how we live, or [freaking out on such a massive scale that the only way to deal is to completely push it out of your mind...](#) you know who you are!) is pretty pervasive even among the most progressive, pro-science folks I know. If it weren't, we'd probably be a lot closer to having public and political will for mitigation policies.

My point is, effectively talking to Tea Partiers about climate might not be that different from talking to my own eco-friendly, politically-savvy Seattle friends and neighbors who "get" climate on an intellectual level but haven't necessarily felt the urgency of the situation nor invested in it on an emotional level.

So, here are some tips that apply to just about everybody—thanks to [FrameWorks Institute](#).

[Go for the gut, not the brain](#). "To build support among climate change deniers," FrameWorks researchers write, "it is important to start the conversation by invoking the values that these groups embody. By starting the conversation with a commonly-held value (rather than unframed information), advocates can gain more communicative traction on this issue."



Here are the top-level values FrameWorks identifies:

**Prosperity:** “Tea Party members value economic prosperity. A recent [Nature article about organizations that promote climate skepticism, such as the Heartland Institute](#), shows that skeptics are most often concerned about the economic costs of implementing climate change solutions.”

In other words, like many Americans, Tea Party folks aren’t crazy about any kind of change. Maybe fear of the impacts of climate policy solutions trumps our fear of more abstract and unimaginable climate impacts. FrameWorks suggests that “by talking about clean technology solutions to climate change in a way that illustrates the benefits to our domestic economy, advocates can more effectively engage these groups in a constructive assessment of the situation.”

[Dave Roberts](#) has been saying this for years too. While climate communicators take the bait and keep bickering about the science, the other side is winning on values, identity, and raw emotion. He writes, “we need to be out there arguing that beating global warming will make us more prosperous, more healthy, more just, and happier. We need to make this fight *appealing*. Science is not going to do the work for us.”

**Stewardship:** According to FrameWorks, “framing global warming in terms of stewardship” or as “creation care” can also be an effective reframing approach. They point out that “the Yale report mentions that Tea Party members are more likely to be evangelical Christian, and thus, integrating values of Christian stewardship for the planet can be a stronger starting point that can lead to productive conversations on climate change solutions.” (Note: FrameWorks uses the term “future generations” in their language recommendation—a common refrain that I’m hoping we can entirely eliminate from our messages and our thinking—because the fact is that climate change is happening now—to our generation and to our kids. “Future generations,” in my opinion, reinforces the counterproductive idea that climate change is distant in place and time.)

**Solutions:** FrameWorks says: Focus on pragmatic solutions. We transcend petty political divides and eschew the science debate frame altogether when we talk solutions—and the myriad co-benefits of steering our economy off the dirty fuel roller coaster.

Talk solutions. All kinds of people get behind solutions—even the ones who deny the science and arch against liberals, government, and the like. [I’ve noted this before—many times, in fact](#). But, FrameWorks points to the Yale study to reinforce this idea, noting that “the majority of all four parties expressed support for specific climate solutions, such as research funding for renewable energy and providing tax rebates for purchases of solar panels and energy efficient vehicles.”

In other words, talking about no-brainer solutions works with Tea Partiers and all kinds of other audiences too.

I agree on all those points. I’d also add that we should have an accurate, direct, and balanced conversation about impacts that are already happening right now, including [extreme weather](#), as a way of talking about climate change in concrete, local, and visual ways.

Now, you may be thinking that the average Tea Partier has long since walked away, unmoved—and probably annoyed. That may be true. But, let’s keep thinking about that Seattle (or Portland, or Boise, or Vancouver) neighbor who prides herself on meticulous recycling and who brings reusable bags to the grocery store, but who gets kind of irked when you incessantly bring up climate change at her cocktail parties. (What a downer!) What about the tiny slice of Tea Party in her?

Here are more tips that work for anybody with strong opinions:

**Start by making people feel confident about their personal strengths (a.k.a. butter them up). And show pictures!**

Why? As [Chris Mooney](#) explains over at [DeSmogBlog](#), there’s a funny thing political science researchers call “motivated reasoning”—where “people’s subconscious emotional impulses lead them to respond, in a biased way, to information that challenges their deeply held beliefs and worldviews.” Studies have shown that when confronted with politically inconvenient or world-view-clashing information, it can actually have a “backfire effect” where subjects actually cling even more tightly to existing beliefs in the face of contrary evidence.

But, new research on “the power of political misinformation” by [Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler](#), shows that when contradictory information was presented in the form of a *convincing graph*, showing a clear trend, the subjects were more likely to accept the new information—or less likely to get defensive and refute it than when they read about the same data without a visual. (You can see the wonky text that failed to convince with the graph that worked, [here](#)).

And, as Mooney explains, when subjects went through a “self-affirmation” exercise, “in which they were asked to describe a positive character attribute or value that they possessed, and talk about a situation in which showing that attribute or trait made them feel good about themselves,” they were far less likely to reject the information that discredited previously held beliefs. As Mooney explains, “what this shows is that people are clearly resisting facts because these threaten their identities—which means that arguing back at them factually will only make them more defensive and engender a backfire effect. By contrast, approaching them in an emotionally sensitive and aware manner, and making them feel less threatened, will open them up. (Sometimes, at least).”

Mooney is quick to point out that the findings aren’t without some problems—especially when it comes to climate change. The study wasn’t conducted “in a really partisan context that would have gotten people’s political emotions firing,” for one thing. Talking about climate change or Obama or—heaven forbid—Al Gore, might throw the “backfire effect” back into high gear for many whose identity is defined in large part by their political views (and against others’ views). These are likely the same folks who will also go to great lengths to trash perfectly legitimate graphical representations of climate information.

Still, there’s no reason not to try these approaches—even if you never talk to a real live Tea Partier. *Try it on your best friend!*

So, once again, here’s the checklist (in no particular order):

1. Take your climate change conversations from the intellectual to the emotional level and talk in terms of core values;
2. Use faith language when appropriate and when it’s authentic;
3. Talk solutions (and their benefits for health, economic stability, and quality of life);
4. Talk about impacts happening here and now;
5. Tell your audience how smart they are (or have them tell you why they are smart);
6. Show them some charts and graphs.

And...if all that doesn’t work, ask your friend to watch the Republican primary debates with you! Why? According to [Jon Krosnick, a political science professor at Stanford University](#), Americans are forced to think about their stance on global warming when watching conservatives debate climate change. He credits a rise in overall belief in global warming—from [75 percent last year to 83 percent](#) in a [September 2011 Reuters/Stanford/Ipsos](#) poll—to a backlash against all the highly-publicized climate science denialism going on in the political arena.

Remind your groovy friends that, as [Reuters](#) reports, “Republican presidential candidates, aside from Jon Huntsman, have mostly blasted the idea that emissions from burning fossil fuels and other human actions are warming the planet. The current front-runner, Texas Governor Rick Perry, has accused scientists of manipulating climate data while Michele Bachmann has said climate change is a hoax.”

No wonder [Bill Clinton](#) recently said “We look like a joke!”—talking about American climate science denial. The point is that it’s not only the deniers who look bad here; we *all* look like a joke when the rest of us are complacent about what’s going on.

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