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"What can we learn from climate scepticism?"

In their recent report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has warned that exceeding a global warming threshold of 1.5°C could produce catastrophic consequences. This revises the previous view that "dangerous" climate change would be anything beyond 2°C. But this lower target will be far more difficult to achieve, and requires even more urgent and coordinated mitigation efforts. For some people, this news is simply more of the same: they know that climate change is an urgent problem, and that failure would mean very great costs in terms of human rights and the natural environment.

But for substantial numbers of other people, this news is unlikely to spur any change in behaviour or in voting preferences. Across the world, many remain sceptical about climate change – despite global mean temperatures increasing by 1°C and despite the frequency of extreme weather events previously considered rare. Although 97% of climate scientists conclude that human activity is warming the planet, most people in the US are either unaware of this or reject it, while as few as 12% realise that scientific agreement is above 90% (Leiserowitz et al. 2014). The most common response among sceptics is to think that whatever is happening to the climate, human beings aren't responsible. Only 43% of people in the UK, 49% in Germany, 55% in France, and just 34% in Norway believe that climate change is either entirely or mostly anthropogenic (Pidgeon et al. 2016). Similarly, US President Donald Trump recently opined that he did not think humans were responsible for the changing climate. Trump also added that the climate would probably change back anyway.[1] Unlike his previous assertion that climate change was a hoax invented by the Chinese, these latest claims at least have the merit of being popular.[2]

What does the prevalence of such views mean for avoiding dangerous climate change? Before answering this, we need to understand why climate scepticism is still alive and kicking, 26 years after the international community of states acknowledged climate change as a matter of "common concern for humanity", and after decades of authoritative scientific reports and policy proposals. One might think that decades of efforts by scientists to communicate the basic consensus, and the basic risks of unaddressed climate change would have reduced these responses to a small minority. Especially in liberal democratic societies with free media and largely unfettered access to information, the persistence of climate scepticism seems remarkable.

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[1] https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/oct/15/itll-change-back-trump-says-climate-change-not-a-hoax-but-denies-lasting-impact
https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/climate/trump-climate-change-fact-check.html
[2] https://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2016/jun/03/hillary-clinton/yes-donald-trump-did-call-climate-change-chinese-h/

We now know we cannot resolve our disagreements through a more sober presentation of the 'facts': information about politicised issues such as climate change is interpreted according to political and moral values, and not on its epistemic status alone (Kahan et al. 2006; Kahan, Jenkins-Smith, and Braman 2011). People tend to be reliably bad assessors of truth and of authoritative experts. And people's political and moral values are among the most significant determinants of what they will believe about supposedly factual questions, such as whether climate change is man-made, above formal education or gender.

Climate scepticism is not a special case. Our increasingly interconnected societies have never produced or shared as much data as they do now. Yet our societies now appear more polarised than at any time since the Second World War. Consider Europe's refugee crisis, gun rights in the US, and the rise of right-wing populists citing 'alternative facts'. Our disagreements no longer seem to share the common reference points that democratic politics is based upon. Even in the wealthiest societies with over half a century of universal suffrage, mass education, and a free press, similar problems to climate scepticism abound. For instance, a rallying point in the success of Italy's Five Star Movement was scepticism about the effectiveness and side-effects of vaccinations. Such beliefs take on a life of their own in the unregulated space of social media, forging links between those who share similar views and isolating opposing claims.

It appears impossible to have meaningful policy debates when significant sections of society have beliefs that are systematically false. Nor could we pretend that people with systematically false beliefs understand what they are voting for or against, beyond mere partisan allegiance. Given this, some political scientists and theorists conclude that it is unrealistic to think that many are capable of participating in democracies at a standard

acceptable to even the most cynical Schumpeterian democrat. Indeed, some now argue that as a result we should hold onto our liberal ideals and jettison universal suffrage (Brennan 2016).

So what might be done? First and most obviously we need media reform. Most information about climate change is communicated via traditional mass media, albeit repackaged on social media feeds. The reporting of climate change by the mass media has on the whole failed to reflect the state of scientific research, confusing and undermining public discussion. Instead, much coverage continues to trade on a misplaced idea of reporting a "balance" of opinions, too often pitting conservative politicians and paid "professional" climate sceptics against authoritative science. This has been one direct cause of ongoing climate scepticism (Gallup 2013, 2015; Pidgeon et al. 2016). Journalists too often still fail to interrogate the ties between prominent climate skeptics and the fossil fuel lobby. More effective media regulation could enforce accurate reporting, including penalisation for publishing claims that can be easily shown to be false, and greater scrutiny of conflicts of interest. Given the potentially catastrophic risks of runaway climate change, there may also be a case for imposing penalties upon those who knowingly fabricate and disseminate misinformation. Better funded critical and independent state media is an alternative which can provide a range of societal benefits including greater press freedom, higher voter turnout, decreased right-wing extremism, and decreased corruption.[3]

A second reform concerns social media. Social media opinion 'bubbles' reinforce the pre-existing beliefs and prejudices of individuals via personalised newsfeeds based

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[3] See the recent report by the European Broadcasting Union, available at https://www.ebu.ch/news/2016/08/ebu-research-shows-strong-public-service-media-contributes-to-a-healthy-democracy.

upon previous user preferences. Personalised newsfeeds place the burden of locating additional sources entirely onto users. Unfortunately this means that alternative viewpoints are de facto invisible given the low willingness of many to undertake independent investigation. An alternative would be to require personalised media feeds to display a wider variety of content, and not just what users themselves would like to see. This should not be left to the discretion of social media companies themselves, who have shown little willingness to do anything about how their data is used until they are held publicly accountable; and often not even then.

Another proposal is for scientists and public figures to adopt communication strategies aimed at avoiding the triggering of partisan biases that oppose engagement with the issue. People are more likely to respond open-mindedly to information about the threat posed by climate change if this information is framed consistently with their cultural values (Kahan, Jenkins-Smith, and Braman 2011).

But the problem isn't just a question of access to information. Voters are increasingly disengaged from the democratic process, and appear to feel unrepresented by mainstream parties. If so, they are learning a lesson long-shown by political scientists: that our democracies seldom reflect public interests, and are driven instead by powerful lobbies and corporate interests. This supports the old thesis that it is rational for voters to be ignorant of politics, since the costs to become informed are high and the change that their votes make any difference are incredibly low.

A second essential suggestion is the creation of adequate opportunities for deliberation, which are currently lacking in most societies. Deliberative opinion polls, citizens' assemblies and other deliberative fora can greatly improve the quality of citizen participation (Fishkin 1991; Dahl 1990; Dryzek 2000). The use of deliberative fora might appear utopian for problems as complex as climate change. But Ireland's recent use of a citizen's assembly demonstrates that it works. Irish citizens had recognised that, like other countries, Ireland was failing to meet any of its national climate pledges. The Irish citizens' assembly was specifically charged to deliberate about how Ireland could become a leader in climate policy. The results of this forum were much more radical than had been anticipated.[4] Each of the 13 proposals made by the assembly received overwhelming support. This included support for a new tax to limit greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture, a proposal previously seen as politically infeasible. 98% of members supported a proposition recommending that climate change be at the centre of Irish policymaking in future, and proposed that an independent regulatory body be urgently established to address climate change. Four out of five members also voted in favour of a proposition to pay higher taxes on carbon-intensive activities.

What does this tell us about the challenge of avoiding dangerous climate change? I think we can learn two things. First, as climate change and many other contemporary issues amply demonstrate, there is something wrong with the current flow of information about important matters of public policy. The echo chamber effect of social media in particular reinforcing existing biases, insulating people from information that they can and should understand. Second, politics as usual does not encourage voters to become informed or to vote reasonably on the merits of policies. While this is not a new problem, the urgency of climate change should encourage more rather than less public deliberation and participation. When given the opportunity, ordinary people are capable of overcoming partisan bias.

Neither of these problems are unresolvable. But they will not resolve themselves.

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[4] McGreevy, Ronan. 2017, 'Citizens' Assembly votes for radical moves to tackle climate change', *The Irish Times* (accessed January 29, 2018).

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