

Climate scepticism is not just American

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CHRIS MOONEY has a new book out, "The Republican Mind" (here's a brief [essay-length version of the thesis](#)), that looks from a frankly liberal standpoint at evidence that conservatives and liberals tend to have different character types and different attitudinal approaches to reality. There's plenty such evidence, and, before half the people who read this blog go ballistic, it really shouldn't be considered offensive to point out the correlations between character types and political affiliation. Anyway, Mr Mooney thinks that in a broad variety of political clashes—and here I'm just describing Mr Mooney's views so I can get to the main point—conservatives have a tendency to begin building alternate universes of fact that close off the possibility of debate. The most familiar and consequential example is the widespread conservative disbelief that the world is getting hotter, the sea level is rising, and it's happening because humans burn fossil fuels. And the concomitant widespread belief that the scientific consensus on climate change is some form of conspiracy or hoax.

The thing is, while it makes sense that character types correlate with political persuasions, it doesn't make sense to attribute specific political beliefs to character types. Conservative and liberal character types had different political convictions in 1650 than they do today (mostly), and they believe different things in Iran today than they do in America (mostly). [Kevin Drum](#) takes up this criticism with regard to climate change:

[T]he problem I have with Chris's piece is this: temperament is universal, but Republicans are Americans. And it's Republicans who deny global warming and evolution. European conservatives don't. In fact, as near as I can tell, European conservatives don't generally hold anti-science views any more strongly than European progressives.

I'm going to keep this post short because, as I said, I haven't read the book. Maybe Chris addresses this at greater length there. But in the MoJo piece, at least, he doesn't really address the question of why differences in brain wiring have produced such extreme anti-science views in American conservatives but not in European conservatives. So consider this an invitation, Chris. Is your contention that American conservatives are unique in some way? Or that American brains are wired differently? Or am I wrong about European conservatives?

I think that on climate change, Mr Drum is somewhat wrong about European conservatives. In the Netherlands, at least, the climate-change debate functions in much the same way it does in America, if less intensely. People who vote for Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom certainly tend to think that anthropogenic climate change is bunk, and that the scientists who believe in it are involved in a giant hoax or a mass delusion. This is tied up in an anti-elitist discourse that's very similar to what one might hear coming from a Republican political campaign, with polemics against the "arrogant" mainstream media, intellectuals, government bureaucrats, "subsidy-slurpers" and so forth. It's wonderful to listen to Mr Wilders pronounce the word *linkse* ("left"); he lingers on the "l" in a marvellously contemptuous fashion, every bit the stylistic equal of Rush Limbaugh. (They even both hate "Europe"! Though of course when a European conservative says "Europe" he means Brussels.) The chief difference is the general absence of *religious* content, or even moderate hostility towards religion, which is why Mr Wilders' supporters have no particular beef with the theory of evolution.

Another difference is related to [Julian Sanchez's observation](#) about the artificiality of America's bipolar two-party system and the way it flattens disparate philosophical commitments onto a single left-right axis. Because the Dutch political scene is divided between a plethora of different parties, it hasn't become obligatory to adhere to climate-change scepticism for conservative tribal-recognition purposes, certainly not if you're affiliated with a centre-right party such as the Liberals or Christian Democrats. The American system exacerbates these kinds of conflicts by forcing allegiances on all sorts of unrelated issues into tight alignment.

The contours of the debate are broadly similar in Britain, but I'm not quite sure why climate-change scepticism hasn't conquered the Tories to the same extent it has triumphed among Republicans. And I have no idea how these issues play out in France or Italy. Nevertheless, there does seem to be some deep-seated affinity between the more reactionary varieties of conservatism and climate-change scepticism that crosses national boundaries. Similarly, I think there's an affinity between a certain kind of responsibility-averse pessimistic leftism and climate-change catastrophism. Which suggests that while attitudes and character don't entirely determine political beliefs or allegiances, they strongly influence the kinds of arguments you're going to find appealing.