



The Vast Right-Wing Conspiracy to Lie About Climate Change Has Worked

A new study shows that Americans are more skeptical about human-caused climate change than they were ten years ago, despite virtually unanimous scientific consensus on the matter. Jay Michaelson shakes his head.

By: Jay Michaelson - October 17th, 2012

Upton Sinclair once said, “It is difficult to get a man to understand a thing when his salary depends upon his not understanding it.”

This is the best way to summarize the mindbending results of the climate change study the Pew Research Center released on Monday, which found that more than one in two conservative Republicans—and more than a third of moderate Republicans—refuse to believe that the planet is getting warmer.

Let’s get one thing out of the way: It is a measured, observable fact that the Earth’s average temperature has been rising for the last several decades. Indeed, eleven of the twelve hottest years on record occurred between 2001 and 2011. This is not a theory about why this is happening; it is a measurable—and measured—fact that it is happening.

Yet disconcertingly large numbers of people on the right seem unable to accept it: the Pew study found that only 63 percent of moderate Republicans and 49 percent of conservative Republicans believe the climate is changing, while 93 percent of those who identify as liberals (and 90 percent of moderate Democrats) believe it. What is going on?

Another statistic from the Pew poll helps answer that question:

Only 45% of Americans (58% of Democrats, 30% of Republicans) believe that there is scientific consensus that human activities (e.g., burning fossil fuels) are causing the climate to change. This partisan confusion over why the Earth is warming has now led to a confusion as to whether it’s happening at all.

So let’s now be clear about a second fact: there is a scientific consensus on this issue. All reputable climatologists agree that human-caused (“anthrogenic”) climate change is real.

Our popular confusion is the result not of an honest difference of opinion, but, to quote our Secretary of State, of a vast right-wing conspiracy.

It's no secret that for nearly as long as scientists have spoken about climate change, energy companies have been funding conservative think tanks—CTTs in Beltway-speak—to create the impression that there is no scientific consensus on the topic. They have blitzed the airwaves and the bookshelves with pseudo-scientific fact-muddling written by non-specialists. For example, according to a 2008 study BY WHOM?, of the 141 books denying the seriousness of environmental problems that have been published since 1972, 130 were published by CTTs or written by authors affiliated with them.

Celebrity Global-Warming Deniers

By contrast, 928 peer-reviewed articles were published in scientific journals between 1998 and 2002 adducing evidence proving the existence of human-caused climate change, and zero—zero!—were published contradicting it. If that's not consensus, I don't know what is. Yet it matters not a whit to the industry's PR campaign.

And as the Pew study shows, this strategy of deliberate ignorance, obfuscation and misinformation has been abundantly successful.

During the same five-year period in which peer-reviewed believers outnumbered deniers 928 to zero, 53 percent of major newspaper stories gave airtime to “both sides” of this scientific “debate.” That's like giving “both sides” equal time to debate the question of whether the law of gravity exists.

Who are these so-called “climate skeptics”? As described in Naomi Oreskes' “Merchants of Doubt,” they're not climate scientists; they're paid political lackeys.

For example, Steven Milloy, who co-authored the American Petroleum Institute's 1998 plan to sow doubt and confusion about climate change, is also a Fox News commentator, a scholar at the Cato Institute, and a former lobbyist for Exxon, Philip Morris, the Edison Electric Institute, and Monsanto. He holds an undergraduate degree in natural sciences and an MA in health statistics, but no PhD and no climatology credentials. Yet he's an “expert.”

Or take Dr. Timothy Ball, a former geography professor who's published just four peer-reviewed journal articles, none of which addressed atmospheric science. Yet CTTs such as the Frontier Centre and the amusingly named Friends of Science say he has an “extensive science background in climatology.” Ball actually said once that climate change would be good for Canada, since the weather there would be warmer—perhaps forgetting that even a small shift in climate would wipe out crops, destroy fragile ecosystems, inundate coastal areas, and decimate alpine areas and the economies that depend on them.

In short, nearly every climate skeptic been funded by the energy industry.