



Written by [James Heiser](#) on June 3, 2012

Scientific Literacy Linked to Rejecting Climate Change Theory

In light of a new study of public opinion that correlates scientific knowledge and concerns regarding global warming, it appears that environmental fear-mongering is tapping into fear of the unknown. In other words, the more scientifically knowledgeable a person is, the less likely he is to be troubled by the alarmist rhetoric of the purveyors of ecological gloom and doom.



The study, entitled "[The polarizing impact of science literacy and numeracy on perceived climate change risks](#)," was published at Nature.com on May 27. The study was conducted as a test of some of the fundamental premises of those who have made a habit of assaulting "climate change deniers" as either servants of industry or uneducated rubes. According to the authors of the study:

Seeming public apathy over climate change is often attributed to a deficit in comprehension. The public knows too little science, it is claimed, to understand the evidence or avoid being misled. Widespread limits on technical reasoning aggravate the problem by forcing citizens to use unreliable cognitive heuristics to assess risk. *We conducted a study to test this account and found no support for it. Members of the public with the highest degrees of science literacy and technical reasoning capacity were not the most concerned about climate change.* Rather, they were the ones among whom cultural polarization was greatest. This result suggests that public divisions over climate change stem not from the public's incomprehension of science but from a distinctive conflict of interest: between the personal interest individuals have in forming beliefs in line with those held by others with whom they share close ties and the collective one they all share in making use of the best available science to promote common welfare. (Emphasis added.)

Since the eruption of the "Climategate" scandal in the fall of 2009, advocates of the theory that human activity is the cause of global warming have resorted to increasingly harsh language to assault the credibility of their opponents. Thus, for example, when University of Oregon sociology and environmental studies professor Kari Marie Norgaard spoke at the Planet Under Pressure Conference in March, she likened climate-change deniers to advocates of slavery in the pre-Civil War South. As recounted by a [media statement](#) issued by the University of Oregon:

In many discussions in the last 30 years, climate change has been seen as either a hoax or fixable with minimal political or economic intervention, said Norgaard, author of the book "Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions and Everyday Life" (2011, MIT Press). "This kind of cultural resistance to very significant social threat is something that we would expect in any society facing a



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massive threat,” she said. The discussion, she said, is comparable to what happened with challenges to racism or slavery in the U.S. South.

“Just as we cannot overhaul a car fleet overnight, we cannot change our ideological superstructure overnight,” Norgaard said. “We must first be aware that this resistance is happening at all levels of our society,” she said. “If you have to push a heavy weight, it doesn’t mean it can’t be moved, but in order to push it you had better know that you have something heavy and figure out how to move it — where to put the lever to shift the weight.”

An [article by Michael Patrickson for AddictingInfo.org](#) took Norgaard’s arguments even further:

Scientists claim climate change deniers are in need of treatment. American anti-intellectualism is a disease. Action must be taken to break the individual and cultural inertia preventing an adequate response to the global threat of human-caused climate change.

According to leading experts on global environmental and social issues, resistance to the reality of anthropogenic global warming (human-caused climate change) must be recognized and treated before real action can be taken to effectively address this significant threat facing our planet....

The organized attempts by climate change deniers to downplay, deny or dismiss the scientific consensus on the extent of global warming, its significance, and its connection to human behavior, is a destructive, maladaptive, and irrational condition requiring intervention and treatment.

Many conservative Americans are reluctant to accept what science demonstrates. There is an anti-intellectualism that is rampant among conservatives, a toxic brew of misinformation and religious superstition that prevents many Americans from accepting such simple scientific realities as evolution.

However, contrary to Patrickson’s and Norgaard’s assessments, critics of the theory of anthropogenic climate change believe that what is needed is less changing of ideological superstructures and more plausible science. And, contrary to the expectations of the theory’s most strident supporters, the opponents of the theory are likely to be those who are capable of evaluating the science of global warming. In the words of the study:

As respondents’ science-literacy scores increased, concern with climate change decreased ($r=-0.05$, $P=0.05$). There was also a negative correlation between numeracy and climate change risk ($r=-0.09$, $P<0.01$). The differences were small, but nevertheless inconsistent with SCT [science comprehension thesis], which predicts effects with the opposite signs.

Furthermore, the study demonstrated that political partisanship does not account for the different assessments of the validity of the theory of manmade climate change:

Nevertheless, the impact that cultural world-views has on climate change risk perceptions cannot be reduced to partisanship. The mean hierarchical individualist in our sample was an Independent who leans Republican and is slightly conservative; the mean egalitarian communitarian was also an Independent, but one who leans Democrat and is slightly liberal ([Supplementary Fig. S4](#)). The difference between their respective perceptions of climate change risk, however, significantly exceeded what political-orientation measures alone would predict for individuals who identify themselves as conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats.

Contrary to the demeaning, even dehumanizing, rhetoric to which advocates of the theory have been subjecting its deniers, the study upheld the competence of climate-change deniers to understand the



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significance of scientific information to their own best interests: “Our findings could be viewed as evidence of how remarkably well-equipped ordinary individuals are to discern which stances towards scientific information secure their personal interests.” Certainly climate-change deniers will understand that they are vastly better equipped to understand the science than those who are busy comparing them to slave-owners or calling them “diseased.”



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