

Beyond politics:

Exploring the role of race/ethnicity and environmentalist identity in climate change beliefs

Jonathon P. Schuldt^{1*} & Adam R. Pearson²

1. Department of Communication, Cornell University
2. Department of Psychology, Pomona College

*Corresponding author contact: Jonathon P. Schuldt, Department of Communication, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, 14853. E-mail: jps56@cornell.edu.

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Theoretical Framework

Understanding how audience characteristics relate to attitudes and beliefs targeted for change is a fundamental goal of public communication campaigns (Atkin & Freimuth, 2001). Political identity (e.g., Democrat or Republican) and related value orientations (e.g., ideology) in the United States reliably track climate change opinions in national surveys, with conservatives and Republicans reporting less concern and support for mitigation policies (see McCright & Dulnap, 2011 for an overview). In this vein, scholars have called for climate communication campaigns to employ messages that resonate with more conservative values, such as economic growth (Nisbet, 2009). However, the relationship of other social identities to climate change beliefs has received substantially less theoretical and empirical attention.

Emerging research suggests a unique role of racial/ethnic identity in climate beliefs. Compared to Whites, racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S. report equal concern about climate change (ecoAmerica, 2014) and equal or greater support for a range of climate and energy policies (Leiserowitz & Akerlof, 2010). Yet, non-Whites remain substantially underrepresented in the climate sector—even relative to other scientific fields (Taylor, 2014)—a pattern that may be rooted in identity-related processes (e.g., a sense of belonging; Pearson & Schuldt, in press). To the extent that these disparities are driven, in part, by a perception that the environmental domain is exclusively “White,” minorities may be less likely to personally identify as an “environmentalist”—even when endorsing a range of pro-environmental opinions. We find support for this hypothesis in a national-level survey of U.S. adults. Moreover, we find that non-Whites’ beliefs about whether climate change is occurring are robust to message framing

previously shown to impact beliefs (framing “climate change” as “global warming”; Schuldt et al., 2011). We consider implications of these findings for climate communication and advocacy efforts.

Method and Results

We analyzed data from a survey of 2,041 U.S. Democrats and Republicans fielded by GfK/Knowledge Networks during the summer of 2012. The survey solicited three basic climate beliefs common in national polls, namely, personal belief-certainty that climate change exists (ABC News, Stanford University, & *TIME*, 2006), perceptions of the scientific consensus (adapted from Newport, 2010), and support for regulating greenhouse gases (adapted from *Washington Post* & ABC News, 2010). In addition to political orientation (party affiliation and ideology), items from GfK’s demographic profile assessed race/ethnicity (recoded as White/non-White) and environmentalist self-identification (recoded as Yes/No). The sample was 75.4% White and 24.4% non-White, and 55.2% identified as an environmentalist (“Yes, definitely” or “Yes, somewhat”).

“Environmentalist” self-identification. As hypothesized, non-Whites were significantly less likely to identify as environmentalists (48.8%) than were Whites (57.2%); $OR=1.40$, 95%CI: 1.15 to 1.72), $\chi^2(2039)=10.80$, $p=.001$. We next examined whether this difference in environmentalist self-identification was mirrored in climate beliefs. This was not the case. Whites and non-Whites were similarly likely to report that climate change is happening (66.5% and 63.8%, respectively) and that scientists agree it is happening (68.9% vs. 69.7%), $\chi^2_s \leq 1.22$, ns . In the only observed belief difference, non-Whites were significantly *more* likely than Whites to support regulating greenhouse gases (74.3% vs. 69.0%, respectively; $OR=0.77$, 95%CI: 0.61 to 0.97), $\chi^2(2017)=5.11$, $p=.02$.

Complementing these analyses, ANOVAs with race/ethnicity (White/non-White), environmentalist self-identification (Yes/No), and their interaction term as predictors revealed significant interactions for personal-belief certainty and policy support, $F_s > 4.00$, $p_s < .05$ ¹. Specifically, the difference in personal-belief certainty between environmentalists and non-environmentalists was larger among Whites ($M=5.52$ vs. $M=4.42$) than non-Whites ($M=5.46$ vs. $M=4.86$), an effect driven by significantly greater beliefs of non-Whites who did not identify as environmentalists (95%CI with Bonferroni correction: .11 to .77, $p < .01$). Similarly, the difference in policy support between environmentalists and non-environmentalists was larger among Whites ($M=3.10$ vs. $M=2.44$) than non-Whites ($M=3.15$ vs. $M=2.81$), again driven by significantly greater support among non-Whites who did not identify as environmentalists (95%CI: .18 to .55, $p < .001$).

“Climate change”/“global warming” framing. We next examined whether the personal-belief certainty of non-Whites would be more robust to common message frames (climate change vs. global warming) that elicit different levels of belief among U.S. respondents (Schuldt et al., 2011) and were embedded as an experimental factor in this survey. An ANOVA with race/ethnicity, message frame, and their interaction term as predictors was significant, $F(1,2027)=4.34$, $p < .05$. Whereas Whites expressed lower personal-belief certainty in “global warming” ($M=4.86$) than “climate change” ($M=5.25$) (95%CI: $-.22$ to $-.57$, $p < .001$), non-Whites’ beliefs were unaffected ($M=5.12$ vs. $M=5.16$, respectively; 95%CI: $-.35$ to $.27$, *ns*).

Conclusions

¹ Personal-belief certainty ran from 1=Definitely not happening to 7=Definitely happening; policy support ran from 1=Strongly oppose to 4=Strongly support. Political identification (as Democrat or Republican) was included as a covariate in all ANOVA models.

Taken together, these results extend emerging perspectives on the importance of racial/ethnicity identity in environmental communication (Pearson & Schuldt, in press; Taylor, 2014) and offers implications for bolstering climate engagement in an increasingly diverse society. Although non-Whites were less likely than Whites to identify as environmentalists, they endorsed pro-environmental opinions at equal or greater levels. Moreover, non-Whites' beliefs in the existence of climate change remained unchanged when the issue was framed as "global warming"—a phrase that reduced personal-belief certainty among Whites in our sample.

From a practical standpoint, our findings suggest that climate communication and advocacy campaigns would be wise not to mistake minorities' relatively lower identification as "environmentalists" with a lack of climate knowledge or concern. On the contrary, our results suggest that non-Whites may hold climate-related beliefs that are equal or more pro-environmental than Whites and that are more robust to different climate message frames. Together, these findings point to the importance of broadening research on social identity and climate action beyond political partisanship to include other important but often overlooked social identities, such as race and ethnicity. Furthermore, our findings suggest that among members of minority groups, messages aimed at heightening climate beliefs and concern may be less fruitful than those aimed at promoting a more inclusive climate movement.