

Notes on the left/right divide on climate change

1. The political divide on the “detection” problem

Most people agree that the climate has changed in recent decades, and that there has been some global warming since the late 19th century. More than 90% of scientists agree on this.

However, there is a small minority of people who disagree. This seems to vary from 5% to 20% from country to country. The reasons why people believe this are unclear. In many cases, it may be due to an ambiguity in the framing of the questions. Some have suggested that these people are “in denial”, and so terms such as “climate change denier”, “climate denier”, “climate denialist”, etc. are often used to describe this small minority.

There is a strong left/right divide here in that most of this small minority are right-wing and very few are left-wing. However, because this represents only a small demographic, it is unlikely to have much importance for the debate over climate policies.

Summary of the “detection problem” political divide

- **The question:** Has there recently been climate change? *Or* Has there been some global warming since the late-19th century?
- **Scientific community:** More than 90% of scientists agree there has been
- **General public:** More than 70-80% of the public (including those on the right) agree there has been. But, the small minority who disagree are mostly right-wing.

2. The political divide on the “attribution” problem

There is a second political divide which is more nuanced and has considerable political relevance, i.e., the debate over the “attribution problem”. The “attribution problem” asks, “how much of the recent climate change/global warming is human-caused vs. natural?”

As Roger Pielke Jr. explained in a very insightful 2005 paper

(<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2005.06.013>), the attribution question is very policy relevant.

Specifically,

1. If someone believes that recent climate change is entirely human-caused (due to GHG emissions), then essentially the only realistic way to minimise the negative effects of future climate change would be through “climate mitigation”, i.e., reducing GHG emissions. Also, they may tend to blame *any* unusual climatic changes on “climate inaction”, creating a major sense of urgency and frustration.

2. On the other hand, if they believe that it is entirely natural (e.g., through long-term changes in solar variability) then “climate mitigation” would seem as pointless and unrealistic as King Canute trying to stop the tide from coming in

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/King_Canute_and_the_tide). In that case, “climate

adaptation” is the only way to minimise any negative effects of future climate change. They may also be dubious of the reliability of the Global Climate Model projections which much climate policy tends to be based on.

3. If they believe that it is a combination of natural and anthropogenic factors then they may favour a mixture of “climate mitigation” and “climate adaptation”. The urgency and magnitude of “climate mitigation” that they favour would presumably be influenced by how big a role they assign to anthropogenic factors.

That is, if they believe that recent climate change is “mostly human-caused”, then they may well still be in favour of urgent “climate mitigation” like (1). **But**, if they believe it is “mostly natural”, they are **not** likely to consider it a particularly urgent issue. Instead, they would probably treat it more as a gradual “concern” to be addressed over the coming century – e.g., along the arguments of Bjorn Lomborg and other “lukewarmers”.

Most of the available research suggests that those on the left are more likely to believe (1) and those on the right are more likely to believe (2).

I will also add that my own anecdotal experience from researching this book has been that many “centrists” believe (3). But, most of the literature until now has tended to group (1) and (3) together as “believe humans are playing a significant role”. So, I don’t have any systematic assessment of this intermediate case yet.

I have also noted from my interviews that people who believe (1) often tend to consider “climate mitigation” to be the **most** important aspect of “environmental protection”, while those who believe (2) consider it the **least** important aspect. Instead, those who believe (2) tend to argue that “environmental protection” should focus on reducing local air and water pollution, conserving wild-life and nature preserves. [*This distinction between “local” pollution vs. “global” pollution seems to be particularly important in terms of the left/right divide*]

Note that all three of the above categories believe that there has been “climate change” – they’re not “climate change deniers”. However, unfortunately, most of the early research in this subject was focused on the simplistic “has there been climate change or not?” dichotomy.

Summary of the “attribution problem” political divide

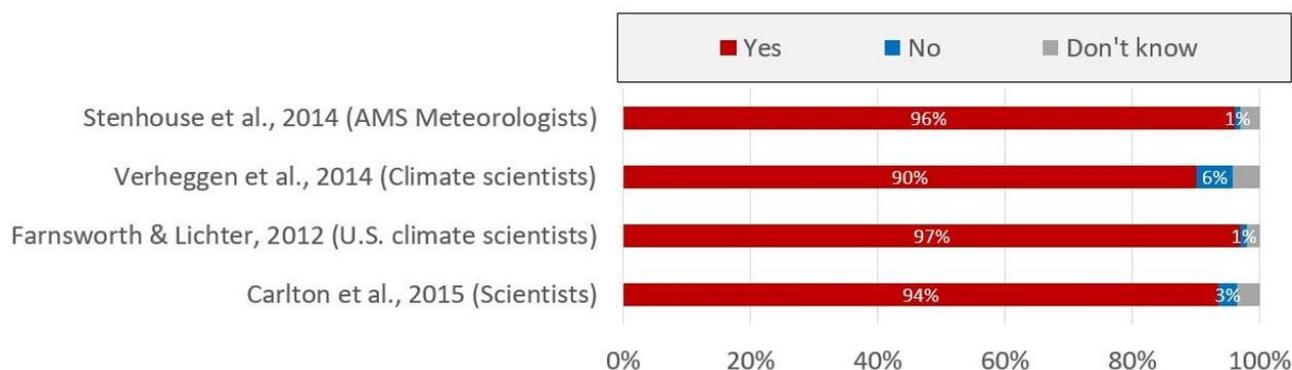
- **The question:** How much of the recent climate change/global warming is human-caused vs. natural?
- **Scientific community:** There is a range of opinion, but at least 70% agree there has been at least some natural component while at least 80% agree there has been at least some human-caused contribution.
- **General public:** The most popular answer is a mixture of both, but people on the left tend to give a greater role to human-activity, while those on the right tend to give a greater role to natural variability.

Detailed breakdown of the detection and attribution problems

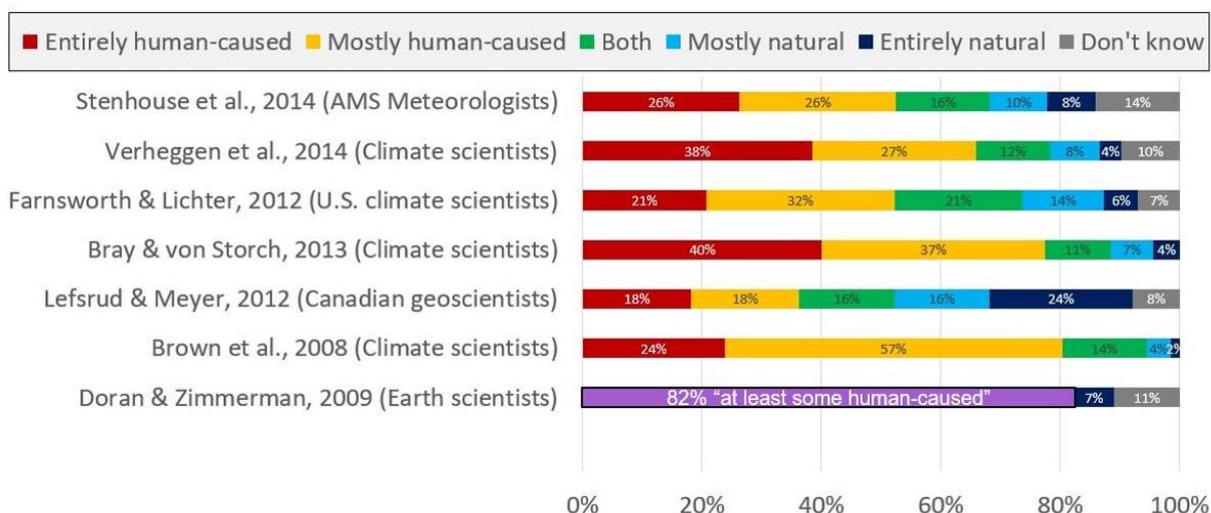
The following figures are from a presentation I did a while back – if you’re interested I can give you more details on them. You can see the well-known “95% of scientists agree on climate change” actually just refers to the “detection problem”. With regards to the “attribution problem”, a majority of scientists agree in a large “human-caused” role, but a sizeable fraction also believe there is a significant natural role in recent climate change.

Surveys of the scientific community on climate change

Q1. Regardless of cause, has there been recent climate change/global warming?



Q2. How much of the recent climate change/global warming is human-caused vs. natural?



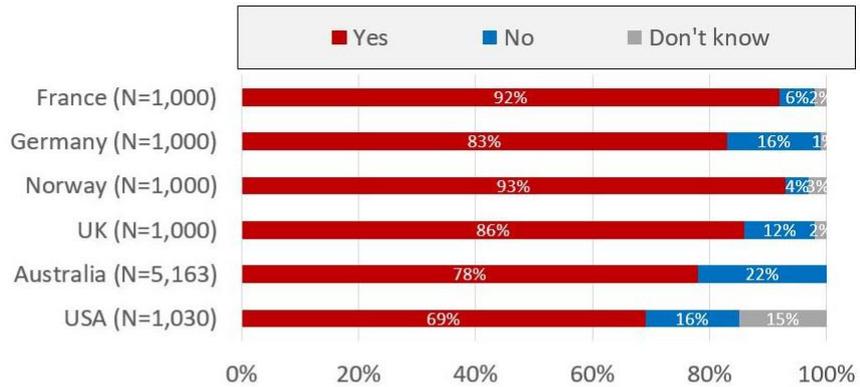
[As an aside, I am finding from my interviews that scientists who place a greater weight on computer model results tend to argue for a larger “human-caused” role than those who are more focused on experimental observations.]

Below are comparable survey results of the general public for 6 countries: France, Germany, Norway, UK, Australia and USA. It is true that there is a higher percentage of “climate change denial” in the general public than the scientific community. But, even for the USA, the vast majority of the public agree that there has been recent climate change.

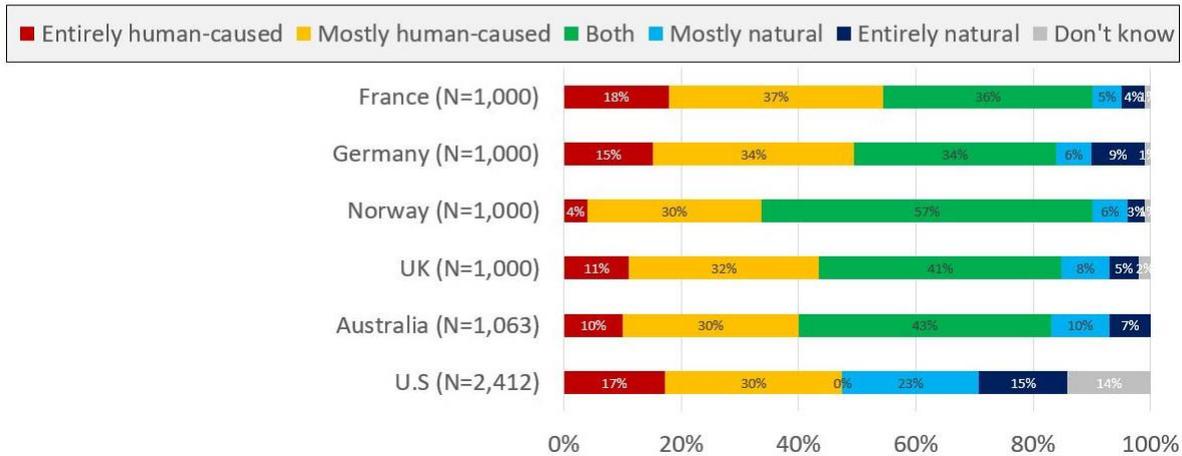
Instead, the main point of disagreement lies with the “attribution problem”. Notice, in particular, the very high incidence of the “both” category. Believers in “both” are not “climate change deniers” and not even “climate change sceptics”. But, from talking to them I find that they are far less likely to consider “climate mitigation” an urgent priority than those who believe it is “mostly” or “entirely human-caused”.

Surveys of the general public on climate change

Q1. Regardless of cause, has there been recent climate change/global warming?



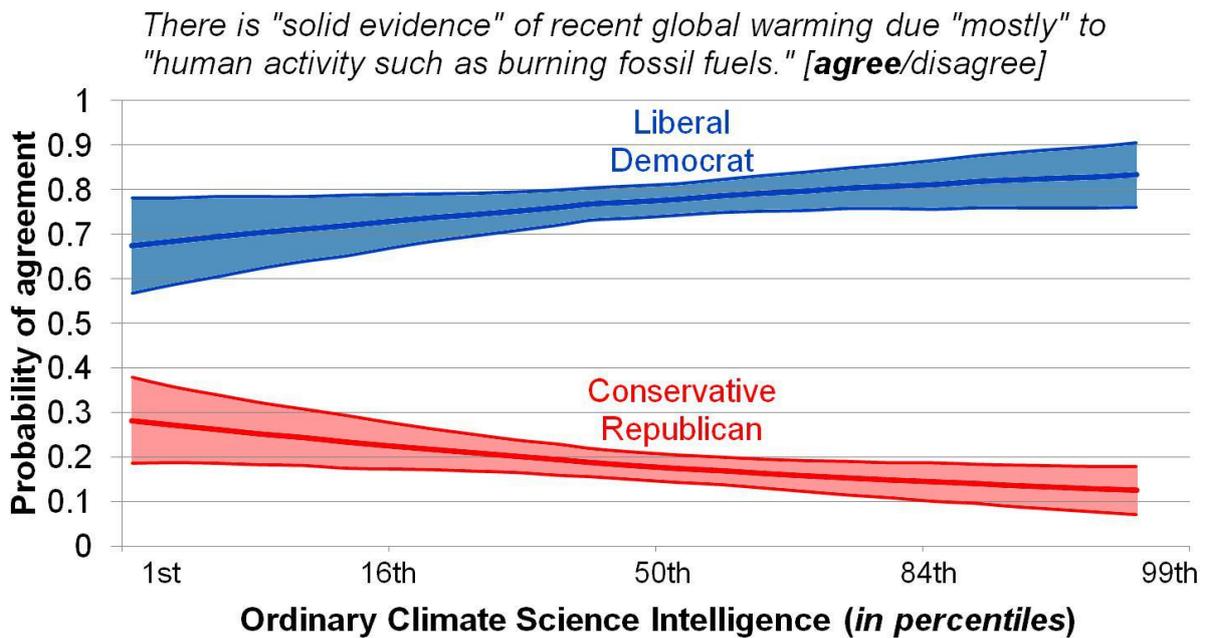
Q2. How much of the recent climate change/global warming is human-caused vs. natural?



With regards to the left-right perspective, unfortunately, many of the studies have focused just on the “detection problem”. Here the problem is typically framed in terms of “right-wing climate change denial”. That is the small minority of people who believe there has been no climate change tends to be right-wing.

However, the left-right perspective I’m focusing on for this book is on the more subtle “attribution” problem. That is, those on the left are more likely to believe that recent climate change is “mostly human-caused” while those on the right are more likely to believe that it is “mostly natural”.

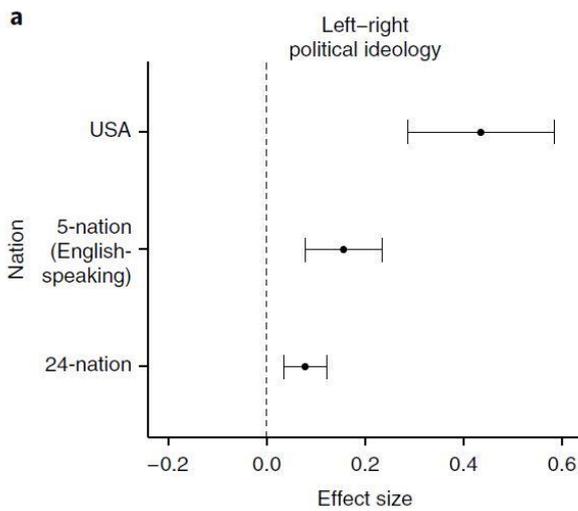
Interestingly, Dan Kahan (of Yale University) has found that (for the U.S., at least) this partisan divide actually increases the more people know about “climate science”:



The research has tended to focus on the U.S. until recently, but in the last few years it has become apparent that it is **not** just a U.S. phenomenon, e.g.,

- UK (Whitmarsh, 2011, "Scepticism and uncertainty about climate change: dimensions, determinants and change over time")
- Australia (Tranter, 2017, "It's only natural: conservatives and climate change in Australia")
- Norway (Krange et al., 2018, "Cool dudes in Norway: climate change denial among conservative Norwegian men")
- Germany (Forchtner et al., 2018, "Being sceptical? Exploring far-right climate-change communication in Germany")

Recently, Hornsey et al., 2018 ("Relationships among conspiratorial beliefs, conservatism and climate scepticism across nations") argued that the left-right correlation with climate scepticism (which they define as people answering either "mostly" or "entirely natural") was greatest for the U.S., but smaller for other countries (especially non-English speaking). But, they still found a net effect when averaged over 24 different nations:



The effect was apparently particularly noticeable for USA, UK, Singapore, Japan, Indonesia, Canada and Australia, but the sample sizes for many countries were quite small.

Another more qualitative approach is to compare political party policies on climate change. I agree that most parties these days nominally list “climate change” in their manifestos. But, there does seem to be a general tendency for the more left-wing parties to actually prioritise “climate action”, while the more centrist parties typically list “climate change” as a concern but don’t propose to do anything about it. Meanwhile, we can see a number of populist right-wing parties that either ignore “climate change” or else explicitly state climate sceptic views.

Here’s an example from a 2015 survey of Australia:

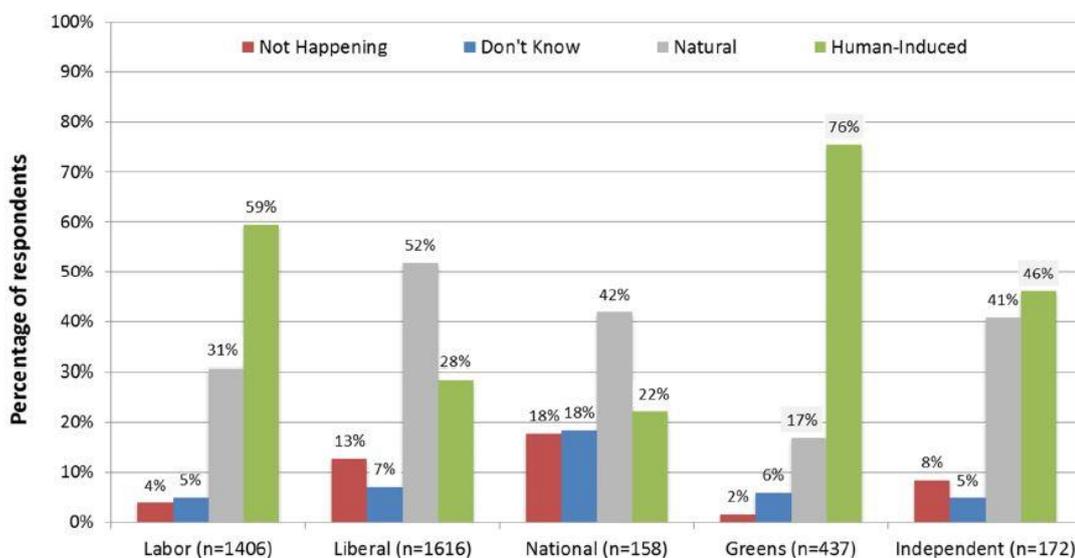


Figure 42 Opinions about climate change by voting behaviour in last federal election, by opinion-type (N=3789)³⁷

The “Liberal” and “National” parties are right-wing, “Labour” is centre-left and “Greens” are left-wing. Note the high % of “climate change is mostly natural” for the right-wing Liberal and National

parties vs. the higher % of “climate change is mostly human-induced” for the left-wing Labour and Greens parties.

Unfortunately, I haven't been able to find any systematic research into how many of the centre-left/centre-right parties believe climate change is “both human-caused and natural” or “mostly natural” (as opposed to “mostly/entirely human-caused”). But I have noticed that many of these parties seem to just include some “climate change is important” statement in their manifesto as kind of “lip service”.

If a party believes that there is climate change, but that it is mostly natural, then they would be happy to acknowledge that “climate change is important”, but they would have little motivation for any major attempts at “climate action”. So, it is hard to ascertain where they fall on the spectrum merely from the fact that they acknowledge the fact that “there has been recent climate change/global warming”.

However, as we go further to the right-wing, the trend becomes a lot more apparent. A lot of countries have recently seen an increase in popularity for right-wing populist parties or politicians that are openly opposed to “climate action”, e.g.,

- Brazil: Jair Bolsonaro who won the presidency by 55% in the 2018 election is a climate sceptic.
- The Netherlands: Thierry Baudet, the leader of the right-wing FvD party that won 15% of the seats in last week's provincial elections (and is now the largest party in many provinces) is a climate sceptic.
- Germany: AfD, the right-wing populist party (currently largest opposition party in the Bundestag with 12.8% of the seats) contains many climate sceptics.
- Sweden: Sweden Democrats, the 3rd largest party (17.5%) and another right-wing populist party also seems to be quite sceptical of the “mostly human-caused” position, e.g., <https://www.politico.eu/article/sweden-far-right-democrats-sees-red-on-green-populism-climate-change-heatwave/>.
- Poland: The right-wing governing party, PiS (“Law and Justice”) includes many climate sceptics.
- UK: Several studies have found a high incidence of climate scepticism among Brexit voters
- France: From what I can tell Le Pen doesn't **seem** to be a major advocate for “climate action”, e.g., <https://www.carbonbrief.org/french-election-2017-where-candidates-stand-energy-climate-change>