

What if we're not all wrong?

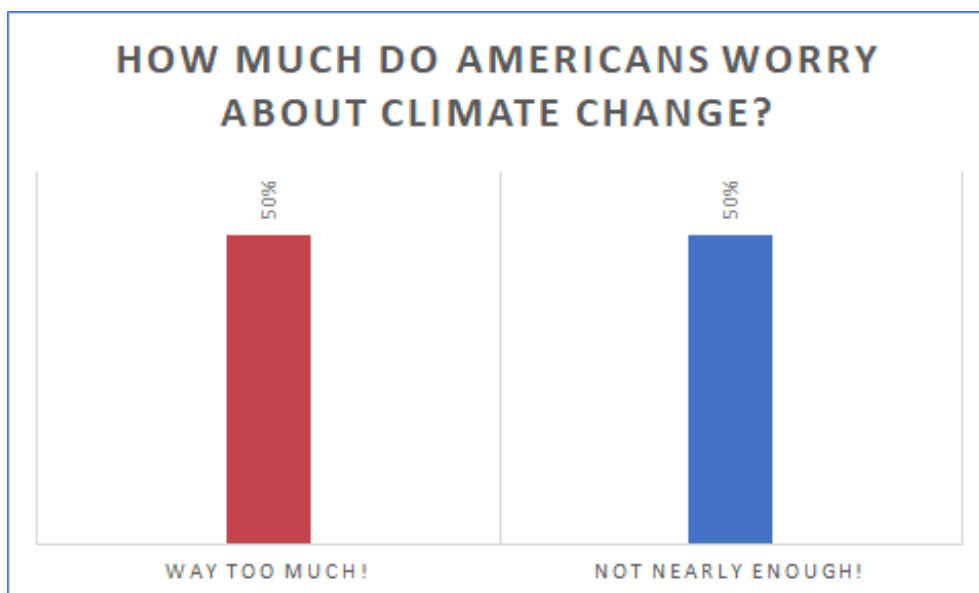
 putanumonit.com/2017/12/04/what-if-were-right/

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Update 12/10: this post is tagged hedgehog alert because it touches on a touchy politicized subject, and a reader was disappointed that I neglected to include an actual hedgehog pic. My apologies! Here's a photo of a hedgehog staying cool in the face of global warming, by the world's most amazing hedgehog photographer, Elena Eremina.

Does the median American worry about climate change too much or not enough? It's a simple enough question, and yet the distribution of answers to it looks something like this:



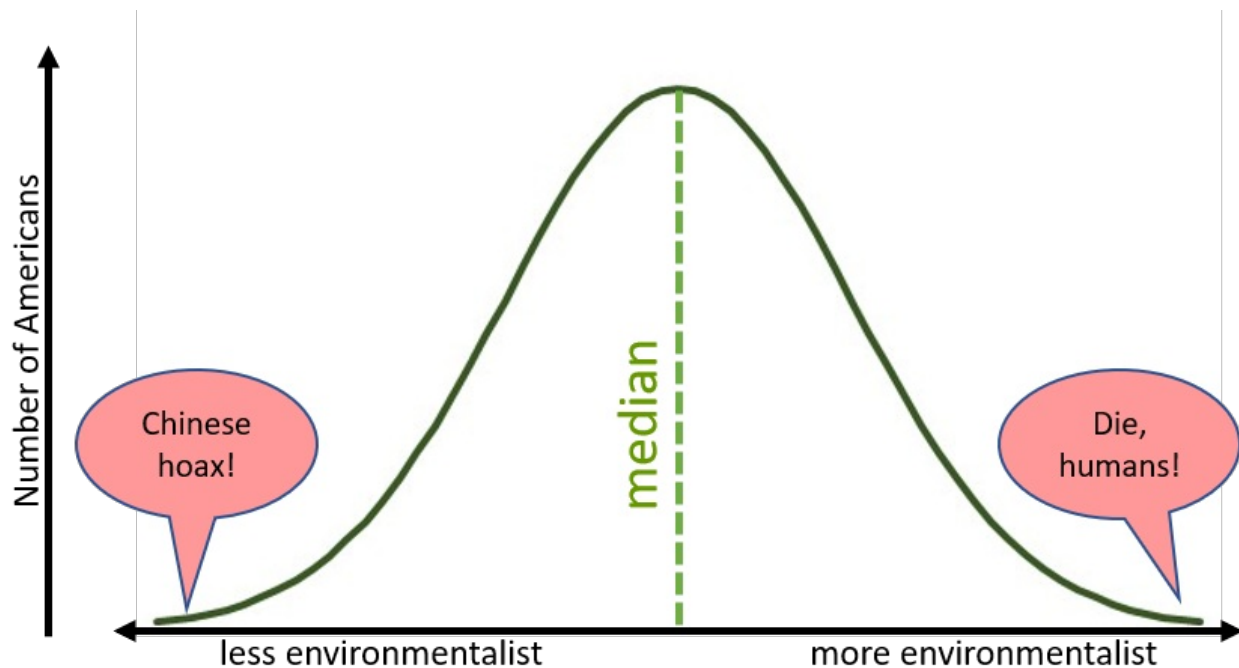
This distribution doesn't strike most people as unusual. But isn't there something missing here? Let's try to figure out if Americans worry about climate change way too much or not nearly enough for ourselves.

How can we assess the position of the median/general American on the topic? We could start by looking for a representative sample of Americans' opinions offered online. Here's a search for the phrase "global warming" on Twitter:



In general, the opinions seem to be evenly allocated between “It’s a Chinese hoax” and “Humans should just all die” with little in between. Maybe Twitter isn’t the best way to gauge national opinions.

We remember that online visibility is negatively correlated with reasonableness, and that there’s usually a quieter majority in the middle of the bell curve. Our default model should be that the distribution of Americans’ opinions on global warming looks something like this, even if it’s not precisely a bell curve:

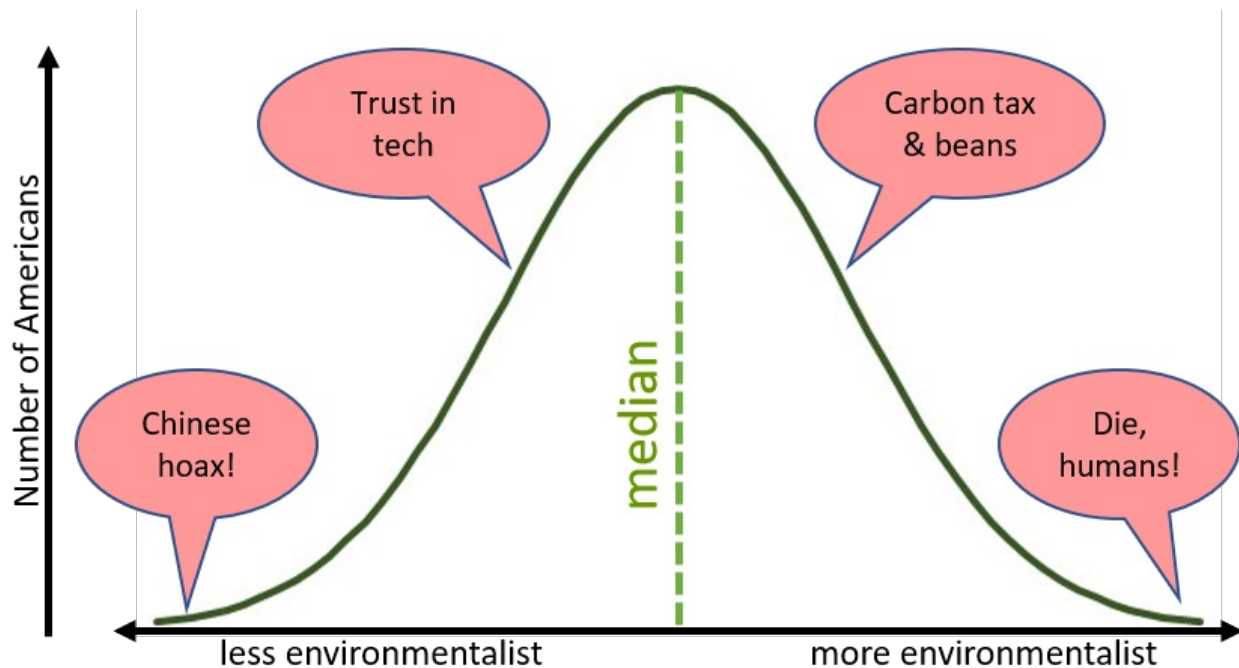


Again, our question is whether the median/general/consensus opinion, or more generally the entire curve, is too far to the right or to the left of where it should be given the planet, the economy etc. There are really stupid opinions on both edges. Are there equally smart opinions close to the median on both sides? It seems to me that there are.

I have smart friends who noticed that US emissions peaked over a decade ago and are still falling, and that we already put enough subsidies in renewable energy to set in on a path to economic viability that can't be much accelerated by more money. They point out that 20% of Indians still don't have access to electricity. We'll just have to swallow the emissions cost of hooking them (and Africa and rural China) to the grids and accept a moderate increase in temperatures. They don't think we can do too much about that increase right now that isn't prohibitively expensive, and they're more optimistic about the potential technological solutions to global warming.

I have other smart friends who note that Americans still lead the world in CO₂ emissions per capita. They'll argue that we should do more both personally (like overpaying for solar panels and eating less meat) and collectively (a national carbon tax) to not only bring our emissions in line with the rest of the world but also to lead by example. They'll point out that even mild increases in temperature can have outsized harms (like the 2017 hurricane season), and that the risk of catastrophic heating is still high enough to demand drastic action.

So the full curve looks something like this:



Now personally, I'm neither an expert on climate science nor incentivized to become one. Senators don't come to Putanumonit for advice on setting a carbon tax (yet, growth mindset!), and the impact of my personal lifestyle choice on the issue is quite small. As a non-expert, the dumb positions on the extremes of the curve seem equally dumb to me, and the reasonable positions closer to the middle seem equally reasonable. The latter provides much stronger evidence than the former for the median being roughly correct, but those two symmetries tend to show up together.

Of course, things like incentives and availability of knowledge could skew the opinions one way or another. But in this case, on first approximation, the potential skewing factors also appear symmetrical.

Partisan blue-tribers have the same incentive to exaggerate their worries about global warming as partisan red-tribers have to downplay it. Industrialist are incentivized to ignore the danger of climate change and they have money to lobby and advertise, but climate scientists are incentivized to overstate these dangers and they have trust and prestige. Figuring out which side the curve is skewed based on relative incentives and power is probably as tough as figuring it out based on understanding atmosphere physics and trade economics. Both tasks are way above my pay grade.

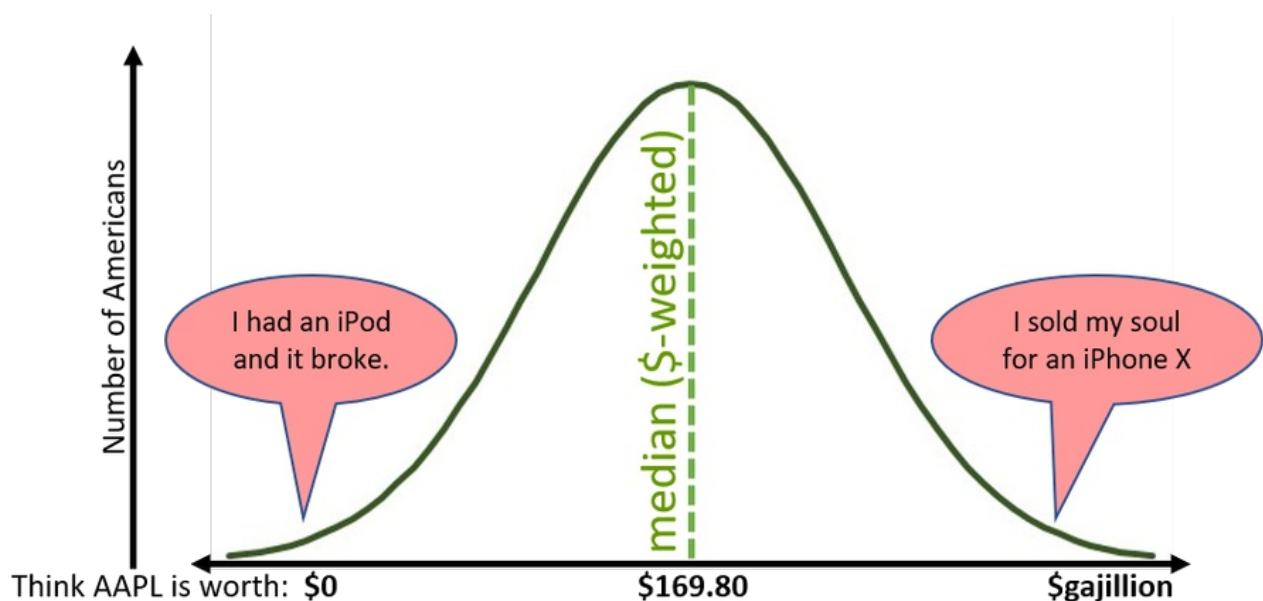
That leads me to adopt two positions with regards to climate change. The first is a relatively centrist position on the issue itself: I think a moderate carbon tax would be a good idea but we shouldn't impose one on poor countries, that Teslas and nuclear power plants are cool but obsessing about local tomatoes and light bulb efficiency is silly.

And with regards the original question I raised, the national conversation about climate change and the environment, I'm led to conclude that **Americans, on average, are worried roughly the correct amount**, and that the conversation is roughly where it needs to be.

I've noticed that even people who are relatively OK with my opinion on climate change itself are apoplectic about the second part. How can I not think that on, the issue of climate change, everyone is wrong, crazy, evil, or all three at the same time?

Like I said, I think that a lot of people on the extremes *are* wrong and crazy (although almost nobody is evil). But they're not wrong on *average*, which means that the conversation as a whole can't be too much improved. Opinion curves can move, but they're very hard to squeeze. It's an unavoidable fact that any distribution of opinions will slide into insanity at the edges, and that the gap between the crazies on either side will remain gigantic.

For example, there's a distribution of opinions about how much a share of Apple Inc. should be worth:



I've heard opinions about Apple that are as batshit as anything global-warming Twitter can provide, but they're about equally batshit on both sides. Closer to the middle, there are good reports by analysts who think Apple should trade around \$150 and equally good reports by equally competent analysts who think it should trade around \$190. Collectively, we are probably not too far off in figuring out that a share of Apple should be worth close to \$169.80, where it trades as of this writing.

There are self-corrective mechanisms that apply to the pricing of stocks that don't apply to climate change, but the shape of the curve is likely to be the same. This means that I'm much more confident we're right about Apple than I am that we're right about climate action, but the location of my opinion is still around the average barring new evidence.

I could have picked 10 topics even more controversial than climate change. Like climate change, they all involve complex trade-offs that distribute suffering and utility. Like climate change, they become politicized and the online conversation about them is

terrible. But that doesn't mean that the average of that conversation is way off.

Not every controversial issue is symmetrical, not every market is efficient, and you may have special knowledge on a subject that makes it clear that the average opinion is way off. But by default, debates shouldn't appear one-sided because they almost always aren't.

You shouldn't be afraid to notice the symmetry of good and bad arguments, the symmetry of knowledge and incentives on both sides, and say: **“I think as a society we are roughly in the correct spot on this issue. I shouldn't be trying to nudge the discussion in either direction, I should probably just shut up and focus on something else.”**

It's a strange thought at first, but liberating once you've tried it.