

Sarah Liez

Dr. Daniel Kubis

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The Rhetoric of Climate Change Skepticism

Anthropogenic climate change is a global issue of the utmost urgency. As our planet's climate warms at a rapid pace, swift and efficient mitigation is needed, and this work may only be done when people believe in the reality of this issue. However, effective climate action is stagnant due to widespread skepticism. This disbelief is often instigated, both intentionally and unintentionally, by those in positions of authority, such as politicians and media representatives whose rhetorical choices generate uncertainty. With many doubting the validity of climate science and conspiracy theories running rampant, the need to analyze how we talk about climate change is greater than ever — especially when this research can improve communication and diminish skepticism. It is thus crucial to examine how those in power may use rhetorical strategies to combat anthropogenic climate change skepticism and best convey both the reality and significance of this issue.

The rhetoric of skepticism: rhetorical framing, criticism, the changing rhetoric of today

It is inarguable that discourse surrounding anthropogenic climate change is biased towards the speaker's personal opinions, with endorsement typically fluctuating on a scale of liberal versus conservative politics. The more liberal an individual's views, the more likely that person is to believe in climate change and support mitigation efforts — and vice versa for those leaning towards a more conservative ideology (Walsh). In a politically divided world, it is incredibly difficult to propose and legalize policies that support science and mitigation efforts in limiting the impacts of climate change through strategies such as carbon capture, renewable

energy sources, and carbon taxes. Politicians hold not only legislative power, however, but considerable influence. This especially holds true for the United States, which has been identified as one of the only high carbon-emitting countries where political interest yields substantial impacts on climate change perception (Ruser). Considerable research has concluded that politicians have great influence on the source of information as well as opinions presented to the general public, suggesting the importance of these particular speakers in widespread views about climate change (Balbe and Carvalho).

Within the rhetoric of skepticism, logic and facts are often overlooked — this being in how science consistently proves that our planet's temperature is rising at an alarming rate, with more and more greenhouse gasses emitted each year, due to human causes (Dryzek). In public discussions, media representatives and politicians normally acknowledge the presence of climate change while also questioning the validity of the claim that it is driven, above all else, by human activity. In 2017, for example, former President Trump's nominee for heading the Environmental Protection agency, Scott Pruitt, claimed to support the idea that our global climate is warming as a result of human activity. When asked whether he agreed with the 97 percent of scientists who believe that climate change is a primarily anthropogenic issue, however, Pruitt argued that this fact is subject to considerable debate (Crist). Even though conservative influencers and even scientists may express support for climate change, their so-called advocacy is laced with misinformation that opposes mitigation strategies.

Additionally, even when clear scientific data is presented it is often “characterized as a collection of cherry-picked information and research findings indicating the uncertainties of methods” of and in opposition towards well-researched claims backed by comprehensive data (Sources of doubt: actors, forums, and language of climate change skepticism). All

logos-centered arguments are thus backed by logical fallacy through the inclusion of conspiracy-based criticism. This is an efficient technique in promoting anthropogenic climate change skepticism as authors deliberately misrepresent information to coerce their audience towards a specific view. Simply pairing accurate data with anti-climate change criticism can cause both misinterpretation and anti-climate change dissent (Bolsen, Palm, and Kingsland).

Likewise, many studies on this topic find that rhetorical framing strategies such as diction, syntax, and figurative language are just as important in convincing an audience as the evidence that factually backs authors' claims (Sources of doubt: actors, forums, and language of climate change skepticism). This is critical to understanding how rhetorical strategies may be used to combat skepticism, for intentional framing of the issue goes a long way to persuade an audience towards support versus opposition. Framing is an especially frequent strategy in communicating science and data as this allows speakers to tie in opinion to fact in order to create disparate understandings of climate change based off of rhetorically supported interpretation of scientific data (Recalculating climate change consensus: The question of position and rhetoric).

Framing, while a tool for skeptics, also proves an effective method for supporters of climate change. As previously discussed, framing may denote the use of intentional rhetorical strategies to create a biased attitude by generating, for example, solemn versus irritated tones, impassioned versus dull diction, or vivid versus vague imagery (Sources of doubt: actors, forums, and language of climate change skepticism). Framing the issue within a specific field, as well, may impact how a speaker wants their audience to understand and react to climate change. Some of the most common frames used by climate change advocates include scientific, economic, and environmental followed by public health, disaster, and morality/ethics (Badullovich, Grant, and Colvin). While the frames used do differ in purpose and efficiency

depending on country and socio-political context, all may be used to sway how the issue is received. For example, framing global warming as a moral or ethical issue can create feelings of guilt and responsibility that support mitigation efforts, whereas an environmental or scientific approach may be better suited for individuals with backgrounds in STEM or analytics (Badullovich, Grant, and Colvin). Effective communication of climate change should be tailored to an audience, connecting the topic to cultural values and beliefs that make the issue meaningful and as personally impactful as possible (Ruser).

Moreover, when it comes to persuading people towards an understanding of anthropogenic climate change that supports mitigation efforts, there are a number of additional strategies that may be used to combat skepticism. One key tactic is that of connecting climate issues to major historical events. By focusing on notable moments of public revelations — such as major weather events and catastrophes like Hurricane Katrina, the California forest fires, or the Texas snow storms — individuals doubtful of climate change must confront tangible impacts of the issue that they themselves have witnessed, whether in person or via the media (Hamblyn). This makes it more difficult for skeptics to argue for the absence of major shifts in the climate, thus forcing them to confront the reality of drastic shifts in weather. Research often labels this strategy “extreme event attribution” or EEA, hypothesizing that connecting specific extreme weather events with climate change can help engage public interest. Studies have supported this theory, citing the unique ability of EEA to link distinct, attention-grabbing scientific information with personal experiences and observations of extreme weather. This strategy is particularly successful at confronting the nuances that surround climate change vulnerability, mitigation strategies, and disaster risk reduction (Ettinger et al).

Alongside the EEA strategy comes linking anthropogenic climate change to global patterns. While it is extremely crucial to highlight intense weather events specific to the region of the targeted audience, it is nevertheless important to place the issue within an international context. Climate change impacts all people on Earth — just not equally. For many, the risks posed by global warming, such as rising ocean levels and lengthened drought periods, are merely virtual concerns only perceived through a screen. In order for people largely unaffected by climate change to effectively gauge its impacts, they must be exposed to numerous, authentic examples of climate change ramifications (Nerlich, Koetyko, and Brown). This is best done in conjunction with framing, where rhetorical devices such as imagery and personal anecdotes may be used to stress both the authenticity and severity of the issue, encouraging empathy and concern towards those more profoundly impacted (Sources of doubt: actors, forums, and language of climate change skepticism). Anecdotes may be strategically chosen, as well, in a manner that appeals to the audience's shared values and beliefs. In this manner, framing anthropogenic climate change as a global issue promotes collective action through advocating diverse perspectives of the problem accompanied with potential solutions (Nerlich, Koetyko, and Brown).

In addition, another useful strategy when communicating climate change geared towards an audience of skeptics is prolepsis. This is the process of anticipating the audience's concerns before they are brought up, often by posing questions with prepared answers. When people of influence, such as politicians and news media representatives, discuss climate change from a liberal standpoint they often poke fun at or insult skeptic claims and concerns. This was done by Obama, for example, in 2014 while speaking at a University of California Commencement Speech (Mason). While this may be a potentially unifying strategy for a speaker's more liberal

audiences, this dismissive rhetoric only serves to invalidate skepticism and alienate conservatives who misunderstand the science behind anthropogenic climate change (Besel). Rather than outright canceling the apprehension experienced by many climate change deniers, prolepsis is a far more effective strategy at pushing skeptics towards an improved understanding of the topic. Strategically acknowledging and validating disbelievers' anxieties about climate science lets the audience know that the speaker is paying attention to their doubts and is genuinely interested in meeting their needs through compassion and mutual understanding (DiCaglio et al).

Furthermore, an integral aspect of negating anthropogenic climate change skepticism is recognizing the political barriers that prevent even the most influential individuals from accomplishing this goal. Climate change is an innately political issue characterized by severely different attitudes on each side of the spectrum, with liberals inclined towards supportive views and conservatives inclined towards oppositional views. The political nature of climate change recognition and mitigation is further intensified by the power held by politicians and news-related media representatives, as discussed earlier. Their views on climate change are often framed through a lens of doubt and elite rhetoric that glosses over logic and instead emphasizes reactionary, nationalistic values above all else (Ruser). While information on how to best communicate and tailor conversations surrounding anthropogenic climate change towards skeptics is certainly valuable and essential to mitigation efforts, these strategies can only go so far on their own. People — American citizens especially — would be far less likely to doubt climate change if science and mitigation strategies were supported by conservative representatives in politics and media. Until rhetorical training is given and properly utilized by those with the power to sway conservative views, countries will continue to struggle to promote and pass policies that fight climate change.

To conclude, anthropogenic climate change is a crucial, urgent issue whose communication is only going to grow in importance and frequency over the coming years. Those with great influence over public opinion, such as politicians, media representatives, and scientists, need to recognize the weight of their words and their rhetoric when communicating climate change to their followers. There are a variety of rhetorical strategies that these influential individuals must learn to incorporate into their speech in order to effectively communicate both the validity of this issue and the crucial need for swift mitigation, such as rhetorical framing, use of extreme weather events, connection to global patterns, and prolepsis. Still, political agendas and conservative thinking remains a significant obstacle in the face of mitigation efforts no matter how well the issue comes across.

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