

Researcher Finds that Politics May Trump Facts on View of Climate Change

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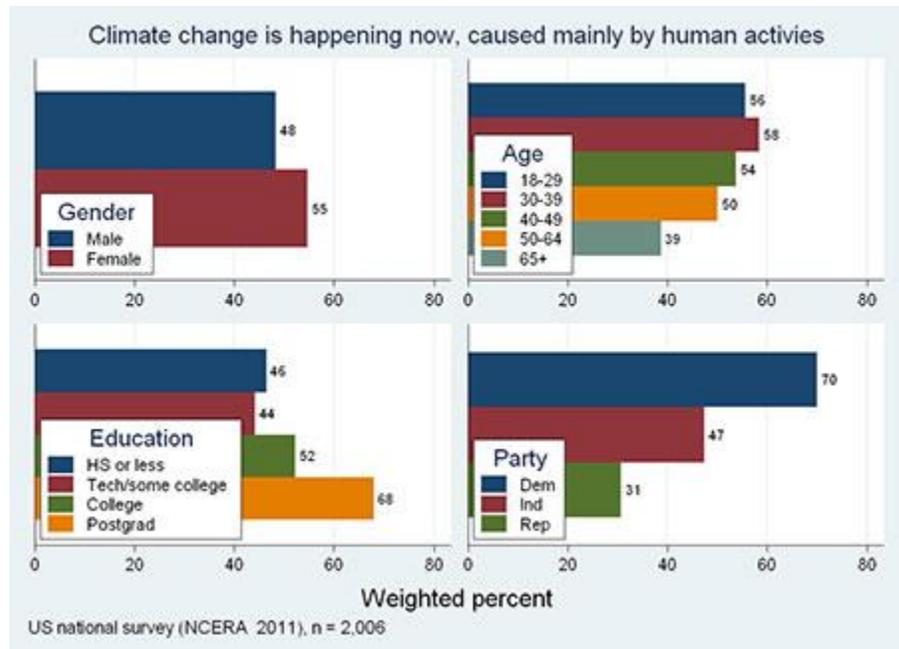
For some people, scientific facts help determine what they believe about an issue. But for others, political views trump scientific facts and determine what information they will accept as true. It's a phenomenon that is particularly prevalent on the issue of climate change.

These are among the research findings presented by Lawrence Hamilton,

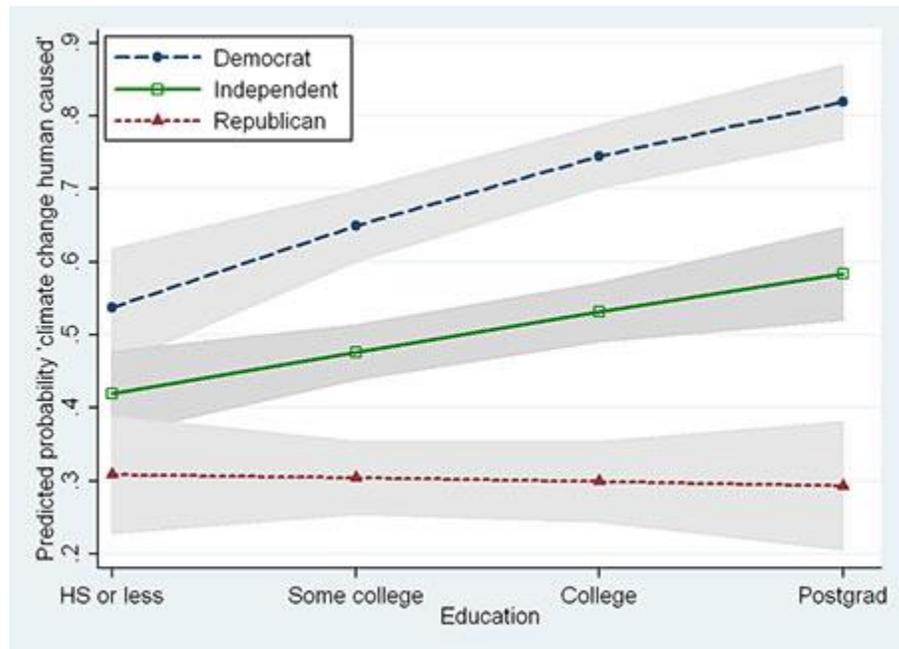
professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire, in the article, [“Did the Arctic ice recover? Demographics of true and false climate facts.”](#) The article is available online now in the journal *Weather, Climate, and Society*.

“Science education and outreach efforts commonly aim to communicate basic information that underlies scientific conclusions. An information-to-conclusions ordering follows the natural logic of science, but it fares less well with public opinion on politicized topics where bias works in the opposite direction. Even well-established observations may be discounted in favor of ideologically more palatable claims available to anyone with television or an Internet connection,” Hamilton says.

Hamilton used data from representative national and statewide surveys conducted in 2011 and 2012 by the University of New Hampshire Survey Center.



According to Hamilton, across major science organizations, national academies, and scientific reviews there is a broad consensus about climate change, and agreement on certain key observations such as the global increase in CO₂ levels, or the decline of Arctic ice. He turned some of those key observations into questions on public



opinion surveys, to map out which facts have reached public awareness. In addition to CO₂ and Arctic ice, other questions asked about the meaning of “greenhouse effect,” whether the melting of sea ice or land ice could have greater effects on sea level, and whether recent volcanoes or human activities have released more CO₂.

“People who agree with the scientific consensus that climate change is happening now, caused mainly by human activities, are more likely to know what the term ‘greenhouse effect’ means. They also are more likely to give accurate answers to questions about whether, in recent decades, the late-summer area of Arctic sea ice has decreased, CO₂ levels in the air have increased, melting land or sea ice could have greater effects on sea level, and volcanoes or human activities released more CO₂,” Hamilton says.

However, the pattern of wrong answers on these questions is interesting.

“Some wrong answers, such as ‘Arctic ice increased,’ appear to simply reflect a lack of knowledge. But other wrong answers promoted by various Internet and political writers, such as ‘Arctic ice declined, then recovered,’ seem to reflect people’s political identification and general beliefs about climate change,” Hamilton says.

The volcanoes question is a difficult one, he says, and many people answer “I don’t know.” Those who agree with the scientific consensus on climate change, however, are more likely to know or guess the right answer. The best scientific estimates are that human activities in recent decades released about one hundred times more CO₂ than volcanic activity did.

“But again, some wrong answers, such as ‘humans and volcanoes about the same,’ seem to reflect lack of knowledge. Other answers that have been politically promoted, such as ‘volcanoes released more,’ are predicted by an individual’s politics and beliefs,” Hamilton says.

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