

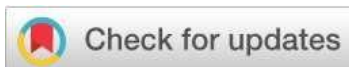
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Denying the Heat: Climate Change Skepticism on the American Far-Right

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Abstract

This research adopts secondary research with an exploratory design, suitable for examining the complex and multifaceted nature of climate change skepticism within the American far-right. The study is structured around three key dimensions. Historical Analysis: Archival research and secondary data sources (e.g., speeches, policy documents, media articles, and think tank publications from the 1960s onward) are used to trace the evolution of anti-environmentalism and its institutionalization within conservative politics. Ideological Discourse Analysis: The research employs discourse analysis to examine the narratives promoted by far-right political figures, conservative think tanks, and biased media outlets, particularly those shaping public attitudes toward climate change. Elite Interviews that are available on Pakistani social media YouTube access including policymakers, environmental activists, former think tank affiliates, and climate journalists, to gain insider perspectives on the mechanisms and motivations behind climate skepticism. The author of this paper analyzed data using thematic analysis. Themes are developed inductively, identifying recurring patterns and divergences across ideological, economic, and media-related dimensions. Insights are integrated with findings from the literature and discourse analysis to develop a holistic understanding of the climate change skepticism on the American right phenomenon.

Keywords: Environmentalism, Climate denial machinery, Skepticism, Far-right, Climate change, United States.



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Introduction

The phenomenon of global warming and its dire environmental consequences has garnered widespread attention, prompting calls for decisive climate action. However, the emergence of a powerful "climate denial machinery" in the United States has persistently undermined these efforts. Together, these actors form a coordinated opposition to environmental regulations and policies aimed at mitigating climate change. The genesis of this resistance can be traced to the rise of modern environmentalism in the 1960s, marked by pivotal developments such as the publication of *Silent Spring* (1962), the Clean Air Act (1963), and the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency (1970). These milestones spurred a counter-movement funded primarily by fossil fuel industries, seeking to safeguard their corporate interests against perceived threats from environmental regulations. Over time, this opposition evolved into a sophisticated network, leveraging libertarian ideals of free-market economics, conservative political alliances, and media influence to propagate climate skepticism. This study seeks to investigate the roots and mechanisms of climate change skepticism within the American far-right, focusing on its interplay with the climate denial machinery. By exploring the political, economic, and ideological factors driving this resistance, the research aims to illuminate its implications for U.S. climate policy and global environmental governance. As the world grapples with the escalating climate crisis, understanding and addressing these dynamics is critical to overcoming obstacles to effective climate action. In this paper, there are some research questions. How have historical developments shaped the emergence and institutionalization of climate change skepticism within the American far-right? What narratives and rhetorical strategies have far-right political figures, think tanks, and media outlets used to frame climate change and environmental policy? What existing evidence demonstrates the influence of fossil fuel industries and neo-liberal ideologies on the promotion of climate skepticism in the United States? How has right-wing media coverage contributed to public misunderstanding or mistrust of climate science, according to existing studies and discourse analyses? What patterns can be observed in the climate-related policies and public statements of the Trump administration, based on secondary sources and policy reviews? How is climate change discourse constructed within far-right populist and nationalist ideologies, according to prior academic and journalistic sources? What does existing literature suggest about the impact of American far-right climate denial on international environmental agreements and cooperation?

Literature Review

Research has consistently highlighted the nexus between far-right ideologies and climate change skepticism. Forchtner identifies that far-right political parties like the Republican Party, Freedom Party of Austria, and National Democratic Party of Germany dismiss anthropogenic climate change, often framing environmentalism as an anti-capitalist agenda. (Forchtner, 2019) Gerrard argue that conservatives perceive environmental regulations as threats to free-market capitalism, (Gerrard & Dernbach, 2019) while Lahsen (Lahsen, 2008) and Oreskes (Oreskes, 2004) emphasize the pivotal role of conservative think tanks, such as the Cato Institute and Heartland Institute, in spreading climate skepticism through misinformation. Oreskes and Conway underline the financial and ideological support these think tanks receive from fossil fuel corporations, such as Exxon Mobil and Koch Industries, which fund contrarian scientists and media campaigns.(Oreskes & Conway, 2010) Georgeson and Maslin point to the influence of conservative media, particularly Fox News, in perpetuating climate confusion, with incidents like "Climategate" amplifying public skepticism.(Georgeson et al., 2016) Agrawala and Van Aalst connect the climate denial movement to nationalist and economic priorities, exemplified by the Trump administration's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, driven by concerns over

job losses and national interests.(Agrawala & Van Aalst, 2008) Bond reveals a shift in denial tactics, focusing on discrediting climate science rather than directly opposing policies, while Cockett traces the origins of neoliberal resistance to environmental regulation back to the establishment of the EPA in the 1970s.(Cockett, 1995) Collectively, these studies underscore how far-right ideologies, corporate interests, and organized misinformation campaigns have obstructed climate action, emphasizing the need for systemic solutions to counter these entrenched narratives.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework provides the foundation for understanding the convergence of far-right politics and climate change skepticism. It is structured into three key dimensions:

1. Theories on Climate Change and Environment:

- **Environmental Scepticism:** Popularized by Bjørn Lomborg, this theory asserts that global warming claims are exaggerated, with misrepresented data fueling skepticism.
- **Climate Change Denial:** Haydn and Cook describe denialists as rejecting the occurrence, anthropogenic causes, or severity of climate change, often driven by fossil fuel industries.
- **Anti-Environmentalism:** Opposes environmental regulations, claiming they hinder economic growth and rely on Earth's capacity for self-repair.

2. Theories Explaining Far-Right Politics:

- **Far-Right Ideology:** Cas Mudde identifies far-right ideologies as combining ultra-nationalism, nativism, and populism, often opposing climate policies as elite-driven.
- **Right-Wing Populism:** Frames climate policies as threats to ordinary people, promoting anti-environmentalism and nationalism.
- **Neo-Fascism and Reactionism:** Advocates for national supremacy and resistance to change, aligning with opposition to climate regulations.

3. Economic Theories on Climate Scepticism:

- **Neoliberalism:** Emphasizes deregulation and free-market capitalism, often prioritizing corporate profits over environmental protection.
- **Corporatocracy:** Highlights corporate dominance in policymaking, resisting climate policies perceived as threats to economic interests.
- **Propaganda Model:** Chomsky and Herman explain how media propagates skepticism, often driven by corporate influence.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework outlines the relationship between core concepts in the study:

1. **Climate Change:** Defined as long-term changes in Earth's weather patterns due to human-induced greenhouse gas emissions, resulting in global warming and environmental degradation.
2. **Skepticism:** A questioning attitude that challenges the legitimacy of climate science, often linked to environmental skepticism and denialism.
3. **Far-Right Politics:** A political ideology characterized by ultra-nationalism, populism, and conservatism, opposing climate policies perceived as threats to the status quo or national interests.

Interrelationship

Far-right ideologies provide a fertile ground for climate skepticism by leveraging nationalism, economic liberalism, and anti-environmental sentiment to resist climate policies. The symbiosis between these concepts perpetuates opposition to environmental action, framing it as an elite agenda detrimental to ordinary citizens and national interests. The roots of environmental awareness trace back to the early conservation movement in the 20th century, which sought to protect natural resources and wildlife habitats. This movement was championed by President Theodore Roosevelt, who implemented policies to safeguard public lands and established the United States Forest Service in 1905. Under his leadership, millions of acres were designated as national parks, nature reserves, and wildlife refuges, laying the groundwork for future environmental efforts. The modern environmental movement gained momentum in the mid-20th century, spurred by growing public awareness of environmental degradation. Rachel Carson's seminal book, *Silent Spring* (1962), highlighted the ecological harm caused by pesticides like DDT, galvanizing public concern. (Carson, 2002) This led to legislative milestones such as the Clean Air Act of 1963, the establishment of Earth Day in 1970, and the creation of the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1970. The internationalization of environmental issues began with the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, which emphasized global cooperation in addressing environmental challenges. This conference led to the establishment of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), tasked with promoting sustainable development worldwide. The 1970s were pivotal for environmental policy, with U.S. Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford enacting key legislation, such as the Clean Air Extension Act (1970), Toxic Substances Control Act (1976), and Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (1976). These measures addressed air pollution, hazardous chemicals, and waste management, marking significant progress in environmental governance.

Historical background

This historical evolution reflects a growing recognition of the disconnectedness of human activity and environmental health, shaping the trajectory of modern environmentalism and its influence on global policy-making. The rise of environmentalism in the 1970s marked a pivotal shift in global political discourse, as concerns over ecological degradation and the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources gained traction. This period saw a significant increase in political and social mobilization around environmental issues, which led to the formation of green parties and environmental organizations that sought to influence national and international policies. The genesis of green politics can be traced to the formation of the United Tasmania Group in 1972, the world's first green party, which was led by Dr. Richard Jones, a biologist deeply influenced by the environmental movement in the United States. (Milne, 2006) This party, alongside the Values Party in New Zealand, which was formed shortly after in 1972, laid the foundation for a wave of green political activism that spread across the globe. These early green parties advocated for ecological sustainability, environmental laws, and policies aimed at protecting natural resources. In Europe, green politics took root with the creation of the PEOPLE Party in the UK in 1972, inspired by scholars such as Paul R. Ehrlich and his work, *The Population Bomb*, which warned of the dangers of overpopulation and environmental collapse. (Ehrlich & Ehrlich, 1968) By the 1980s, numerous green parties had emerged across Europe, including the German Green Party, Ecolo in Belgium, The Greens in France, and Groen Links in the Netherlands. In addition to political mobilization, the 1970s also saw the rise of environmental movements in the Global South. One notable example is the Chipko Movement in India, which began in 1973. This forest conservation movement sought to prevent deforestation

by encouraging people, particularly rural women, to hug trees and protect forests from commercial logging. The slogan "ecology is the permanent economy" encapsulated the movement's belief in sustainable development and the importance of protecting natural resources. Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) also played a crucial role in raising awareness and driving policy changes during this time. Organizations like the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF), founded in 1965, and Friends of the Earth, founded in 1969, became prominent voices advocating for environmental protection and sustainable development. These NGOs were instrumental in pushing for laws to mitigate environmental damage, raise public awareness, and hold governments and corporations accountable for their environmental impact. Greenpeace, founded in 1971, is another example of an influential environmental NGO that campaigned for climate justice, the protection of biodiversity, and the fight against deforestation. As environmentalism gained prominence, it also gave rise to a counter-movement: anti-environmentalism. The roots of modern anti-environmentalism can be traced to the conservative push-back against growing environmental regulation and governmental intervention in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly after the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in the United States in 1970. The conservative backlash, spearheaded by think tanks such as the Cato Institute, Heritage Foundation, and Heartland Institute, sought to undermine the growing momentum of environmental regulation by promoting skepticism around climate science, particularly the issue of global warming. These think tanks, funded by major corporations and fossil fuel industries, played a pivotal role in spreading disinformation and challenging the scientific consensus on climate change. The advent of anti-environmentalism reached its peak during the presidency of Ronald Reagan, who took office in 1981. Reagan's administration appointed anti-environmentalist figures to key positions within the EPA and sought to roll back many of the environmental laws and regulations put in place by previous administrations. These efforts to limit the scope of environmental protection laws were supported by conservative think tanks and business lobbies, who argued that climate policies were detrimental to economic growth and free-market principles. The rise of green parties, environmental organizations, and the counter-movement of anti-environmentalism shaped the global discourse on climate change, resource management, and sustainability throughout the late 20th century. The legacy of these movements continues to influence contemporary debates on environmental policy, climate action, and the role of governmental regulation in managing natural resources.

Reasons Behind Far-Right Climate Change Skepticism

The persistence of climate change skepticism within the American far-right is driven by a confluence of ideological, economic, political, and cultural factors. These elements interact to reinforce a worldview that resists environmental action and distrusts the scientific consensus on anthropological climate change. Key reasons include:

1. Economic Interests and Corporate Influence

One of the most significant drivers of climate skepticism is the entrenched economic interest of fossil fuel industries. Corporations such as Exxon-Mobil and Koch Industries have long funded conservative think tanks and political action committees that promote climate denial. These entities frame environmental regulation as a direct threat to economic growth, job creation, and American energy independence. The fossil fuel sector's lobbying power has effectively aligned corporate interests with far-right policy agendas, creating a material basis for resistance to climate action.

2. Ideological Commitment to Free-Market Capitalism

At the heart of far-right skepticism lies a neo-liberal commitment to deregulation, limited government, and free-market principles. Climate policies are often portrayed as overreaches of state authority that hinder individual liberties and market freedoms. This ideological stance is amplified by libertarian think tanks such as the Cato Institute and the Competitive Enterprise Institute, which argue that environmental regulations distort markets and constitute an attack on economic liberty.

3. Populism and Anti-Elitism

Far-right populist leaders frequently frame climate change discourse as part of a liberal "elite" agenda disconnected from the concerns of ordinary citizens. Climate scientists, international institutions, and environmental activists are portrayed as technocratic elites who seek to impose costly lifestyle changes on working-class Americans. This anti-elitist rhetoric resonates strongly in rural and industrial regions where environmental regulations are viewed as a threat to traditional livelihoods, especially in coal, oil, and manufacturing sectors.

4. Cultural and Nationalist Resistance

Climate skepticism is often embedded in a broader nationalist and cultural identity. Far-right ideologues see international agreements like the Paris Climate Accord as infringements on national sovereignty, imposed by globalist institutions. Environmentalism, in this view, is a cultural imposition that undermines traditional American values, such as self-reliance, national pride, and economic independence. The far-right mobilizes this narrative to oppose transnational environmental cooperation.

5. Media Ecosystems and Misinformation

Right-wing media outlets, particularly Fox News, Breitbart, and talk radio networks, play a critical role in shaping public opinion and perpetuating climate misinformation. These platforms amplify contrarian voices, distort scientific findings, and promote conspiracy theories such as "Climate-gate" to erode trust in climate science. The repetition of misleading narratives fosters a polarized media environment where skepticism becomes part of partisan identity.

6. Strategic Political Calculations

Republican political leaders have increasingly adopted climate skepticism as a strategic stance to consolidate their electoral base, particularly in fossil fuel-dependent states. Climate denial serves as a political signal of loyalty to conservative values and economic nationalism. The Trump administration's rollback of environmental regulations and withdrawal from the Paris Agreement reflected a calculated alignment with this base, demonstrating how skepticism functions not just as belief, but as political performance.

7. Religious and Anthropocentric Worldviews

Segments of the American far-right draw on religious ideologies that either dismiss climate change as divine will or assert human dominion over nature. These beliefs can lead to the perception that environmental degradation is either a sign of an impending apocalypse (and thus beyond human control) or that nature exists to serve human needs, making conservation secondary to economic growth.

These interwoven factors help explain why climate change skepticism on the American far-right is not merely rooted in scientific misunderstanding but in deeply held ideological, economic, and cultural convictions. Recognizing these drivers is crucial for developing communication strategies and policy approaches that bridge ideological divides and fosters broader consensus on

the urgency of climate action. The ascendancy of Donald Trump to the presidency marked a pivotal moment in the global climate change debate, as his administration became a focal point for climate change denial and environmental deregulation. Trump's skepticism towards climate science was evident in his speeches, where he dismissed global warming as a "hoax" and criticized the efforts of previous administrations to curb carbon emissions. His appointments of climate change skeptics, such as Scott Pruitt and Andrew Wheeler to lead the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), reflected a broader strategy to roll back environmental protections. Trump's administration reversed key policies like the Clean Power Plan and weakened regulations on methane emissions, coal plants, and fuel efficiency standards. By dismantling regulations aimed at combating climate change, Trump not only undermined environmental efforts domestically but also withdrew the U.S. from the Paris Climate Agreement, signaling a retreat from global climate leadership. His administration's policies prioritized the interests of fossil fuel industries, emphasizing economic growth over environmental sustainability, and sowed doubt among the public regarding the scientific consensus on climate change. These actions illustrate the powerful influence of far-right, anti-environmentalist forces in shaping U.S. climate policy under Trump. The Paris Climate Agreement, adopted by 196 countries in December 2015, aims to limit global temperature rise to well below 2°C, with efforts to restrict it to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and to enhance the ability of nations to adapt to climate impacts through financial support. Countries set voluntary targets, known as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), to reduce carbon emissions. While these NDCs are not binding and lack enforcement mechanisms, they represent each nation's commitment to climate action. Under the Obama administration, the U.S. pledged to reduce its emissions by 26-28% by 2025, while China committed to peak emissions by 2030. However, in June 2017, President Donald Trump announced the U.S. would withdraw from the Paris Agreement, citing unfair economic burdens on U.S. workers and businesses, and emphasizing China's delayed commitment to emissions reductions. The formal withdrawal took effect in November 2020, representing a significant setback for global climate efforts, especially considering the U.S. is the second-largest emitter of greenhouse gases. Trump's stance mirrored his broader anti-environmental policies, further delaying U.S. leadership in global climate action.

Conclusion

Climate change skepticism with far-right ideology in the United States represents a major barrier to global environmental progress. As this paper has explored, climate denialism is not a mere difference of opinion, but a strategically engineered movement rooted in economic interests, conservative ideologies, and media systems that profit from perpetuating doubt. From the rise of modern environmentalism in the 1960s to the Trump administration's rollback of climate regulations, the far-right has consistently portrayed environmental policies as elitist, economically harmful, and fundamentally un-American. Conservative think tanks, fossil fuel corporations, and partisan media have played a central role in embedding climate skepticism into mainstream political discourse, particularly within the Republican Party. Key historical moments such as the rejection of the Kyoto Protocol and withdrawal from the Paris Agreement demonstrate how U.S. climate denialism can undermine global efforts and delay crucial climate goals. This denialism is not just opposition to scientific consensus; it is a deliberate political and economic project. It draws strength from neo-liberal values that prioritize deregulation and privatization, populist narratives that frame climate action as elite overreach, and corporate interests that resist environmental regulation. These elements together form a powerful "climate denial machinery" a network of institutions and actors working to obstruct climate progress. The global consequences are profound. As a leading emitter and geopolitical power, the United States holds significant influence over international climate policy. When it retreats from global

agreements, it not only erodes its credibility but also emboldens other nations to resist action. Tackling climate change requires more than scientific and technological solutions it demands addressing the political and ideological forces that sustain denial. Policymakers, educators, and advocates must engage with the cultural narratives that fuel skepticism and craft strategies that resonate across ideological divides. This includes efforts to depoliticize climate science, rebuild trust in institutions, and promote environmental justice in ways that align ecological action with economic equity. Dismantling the climate denial machinery is not just an environmental necessity it is a democratic one. Confronting the economic and ideological foundations of denialism is essential to restoring public trust, advancing climate governance, and safeguarding the planet for future generations.

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