

More Republicans Than You Think Support Action on Climate Change

New polls suggest Republicans' views on global warming may be at a tipping point.

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Democrats and Republicans have clashed fiercely on many issues — the Mueller investigation, immigration, gun control — but can the two parties come together on climate change, the biggest issue of all?

Most analysts say no. After all, since President Trump took office, the terms “global warming” and “climate change” have been expunged from some government websites. Mr. Trump says his “very high level of intelligence” has led him to reject the findings of 13 federal agencies, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the World Meteorological Organization.

But how many of his fellow Republicans agree? If we compare the extremes in each party — liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans — as the media often does, the split is clear. But if we compare *all* Republicans with *all* Democrats, we see a new and encouraging overlap.

In March, well before the most destructive wildfires in California history, the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication polled 1,067 registered voters on climate change. The study found that while they disagree on the cause, majorities in both parties agree that the world is experiencing global warming and call for government action to address it.

The poll asked whether the United States should “set strict carbon dioxide emission limits on existing coal-fired power plants to reduce global warming and improve public health,” even if “the cost of electricity to consumers and companies would likely increase.” Eighty-seven percent of Democrats and 56 percent of Republicans said yes.

Should the United States require fossil fuel companies to pay a carbon tax and use the money to reduce other taxes (such as income tax) by an equal amount? Eighty-four percent of Democrats and 56 percent of Republicans said yes.

Asked, “When there’s a conflict between environmental protection and economic growth, which do you think is more important?” 85 percent of Democrats and 52 percent of Republicans said that environmental protection should come first.

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The survey also found that majorities in both parties think the government should fund research into solar and wind energy, offer tax rebates to those buying energy-efficient vehicles and solar panels, and encourage schools to teach children about the causes and consequences of global warming, and potential solutions. A majority of Democrats and Republicans believe the United States should participate in the Paris climate accord and reduce greenhouse gas emissions regardless of what other countries do.

A study conducted in June by Stanford, ABC News and Resources for the Future uncovered a similar trend. It found that 66 percent of Republicans believe the increase in temperature is “mostly or partly caused by humans.” Another poll, released last month by Monmouth University in New Jersey, found that most Republicans now support action on climate change.

To be sure, not every poll shows the same thing. An NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll recently asked people if they believed climate change is “serious” and requires “immediate action.” Only around 15 percent of Republicans said yes compared with 71 percent of Democrats. It’s notable that the poll did not ask, as the Yale study did, for views on specific remedies — which is where the two parties seem to find more common ground.

On a trip to rural Louisiana in 2016, we visited Mike Schaff, a Trump and Tea Party supporter who recently retired from a career in the oil industry. He had lost his beloved home to an enormous sinkhole caused by a reckless drilling company and become an active board member of Louisiana’s GreenArmy, a small but remarkable environmental group. But about climate change, Mr. Schaff shook his head. “I’ll worry about global warming in 50 years,” he said.

Out fishing on the bayou in the late-afternoon mist, he told us: “We’re running out of oil anyway, so I’d love to rely on clean energy. Wouldn’t have to drill. And as soon as it’s as cheap as fossil fuel, and feasible, I think we should switch. It would make us independent.” He continued, “It’s time for a modern-day Manhattan Project to effect a major change in the way humans use and produce energy.”

Climate change activists would do well to embrace Americans like Mike Schaff, even if they don’t agree on everything.

Many conservative Republicans feel that frightening news of climate change usually comes from alarmist liberals who belittle their religious faith, elitists who condescend to them and a federal government that, until Mr. Trump, had forgotten them. Curiously, Americans who live near extreme flooding and fires are no more likely to worry about climate change than those far from the threat of such disasters. But that doesn’t mean they can’t change their minds.

Studies by a University of Colorado psychologist, Leaf Van Boven, and two colleagues points to a “party over policy” effect, in which people’s views on a carbon tax depend less on the content of the proposal than on the party they believe proposed it. This is true for both Democrats and Republicans. So maybe Republicans just need to hear from messengers they trust.

A talk by an evangelical climate scientist, one study shows, altered the views of climate skeptics studying at evangelical colleges. Similarly, we need to find ways of showing science-doubting Republican oil workers that the leaders of Exxon Mobil, Chevron, ConocoPhillips and BP have acknowledged the risk of climate change and that steps must be taken to address it. Republicans who greatly admire the military could learn about the ways the Pentagon has already acknowledged the risk of climate change as a security issue and has quietly set about installing renewable energy projects on bases across the country.

Democrats should celebrate Republicans who are out front on climate change. The Republican mayor of San Diego, Kevin Faulconer, recently announced, as a “nonpartisan issue,” his city’s commitment to achieve 100 percent renewable energy by 2035 — a goal that is 10 years sooner than the one that California’s Democratic governor, Jerry Brown, set for the state. Twenty-nine states have renewable energy mandates in place; 13 were signed into law by Republican governors.

Two Republican former secretaries of state, George Shultz and James Baker, have called for a gradually increasing carbon tax, with all revenue rebated directly to the American people. A family of four would get about \$2,000 a year in “carbon dividends.” The idea is similar to one backed by the nonpartisan Citizens’ Climate Lobby, which has more than 100,000 members and chapters throughout the country. It helped form the bipartisan House Climate Solutions Caucus and has supported the bipartisan Energy Innovation and Carbon Dividend Act now before Congress.

So while Americans have been focusing on the split between Democrats and Republicans, the more important gap may now be between Republican voters and the leaders they elected.

Unpredictable weather is not new, of course, but recent events are making climate change harder than ever to ignore, let alone deny. Over the past two years, wildfires have burned nearly three million acres in California, while hurricanes have battered the Southeast with increasing intensity.

The smoking ruins of Paradise, Calif., and Houston’s flooded homes, are as shocking and devastating, in their own ways, as the tragedy of Sept. 11. Climate change is a different kind of emergency. It does not occur on a single day, and no one person gave the order. But in the long run its impact will be greater. It’s time for us to join hands across party lines to address it.

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