



The Climate Change Denial Campaign

Riley E. Dunlap, Oklahoma State University
Aaron M. McCright, Michigan State University

The threat to America and the world from global warming was placed on the public agenda in the late 1980s. In testimony to the Senate in 1988 during a severe drought, Dr. James Hansen argued that global warming had already begun and human activities, especially energy use, were major contributors. Two years later the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change issued its first report largely confirming Hansen's testimony. Four years later, the 1992 Rio "Earth Summit" signaled the emergence of global environmentalism as a powerful force calling for environmental protection, including limits on greenhouse gas emissions. The 1997 Kyoto Conference aimed at fashioning an international agreement to reduce such emissions.

In the United States, fossil fuel interests and ideological conservatives were alarmed by these developments and quickly joined forces to launch a fierce disinformation campaign to discredit climate-science warnings and push back against proposed solutions. If U.S. leaders and citizens accepted the necessity of controlling greenhouse gas emissions generated by burning coal, oil, and gas, new government regulations would likely follow. Supporters of the disinformation campaign were determined to cut off that possibility.

Profits and Ideology

Along with others, we have done extensive research to track the development and tactics of climate-change denial efforts. The fossil fuels industry started the campaign, which was soon joined by much of corporate America and the conservative movement.

- Industry was motivated by bottom-line considerations, especially energy company profits, and aversion to government regulation across all economic sectors.
- Ideological conservatives not only detest government regulations in principle; they also realize that acknowledging human-caused global warming could raise questions about their longstanding vision of endless prosperity via the free market.
- The rise of global environmentalism and the specter of international treaties both alarm conservatives and serve as useful bogeymen. Just as global warming became a focal point, the Soviet Union fell apart and the "Red Scare" lost its usefulness for rallying the political right. By highlighting an emerging "Green Scare," U.S. conservatives have been able to target another international threat to the American (and Western) "way of life."

A Vast Web of Forces Attacking Climate Science

During the 1980s under President Ronald Reagan, anti-environmentalists learned that head-on attacks against regulations could provoke a public backlash and arouse new public support for environmental causes. In the fight against global warming regulations, opponents decided to challenge the very definition of the problem to be solved – not just proposed government rules to address it. Taking aim at research findings and arguments, opponents stoked "environmental skepticism" about the scientific basis for belief in human-caused global warming. Denial orchestrators have moved from raising questions about findings to waging an all-out assault on the field of climate science. Attacks are mounted against scientific peer review and institutions like the National Academy of Sciences that endorse evidence of global warming. Concerted efforts have been mounted by a vast web of actors over the past quarter century:

- Resources and lobbying come from corporations such as Exxon Mobil, Peabody Coal, Ford, and General Motors as well as from trade associations such as the American Petroleum Institute and the Western Fuels Association – plus the National Association of Manufacturers and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

- Disinformation campaigns are launched with hidden donations from industry to “front groups” such as the Global Climate Coalition and the Information Council for the Environment.
- Denial campaigns are supported by conservative foundations, particularly those supported by the Koch, Scaife, and Bradley families.
- Attacks on climate science are often orchestrated by conservative think tanks, such as the Marshall Institute, Heritage Foundation, Hoover Institution, Competitive Enterprise Institute, Cato Institute, National Center for Policy Analysis, and American Enterprise Institute.
- Nonprofit advocacy groups (such as the Cooler Heads Coalition and Freedom Works) attack climate science using funds given covertly by corporations and conservative philanthropists.
- Conservative-minded contrarian scientists (often with PhDs in disciplines marginally related to climate science) are brought in to give apparent credibility to denial campaigns.
- The conservative media amplifies denial claims – through an “echo chamber” that includes Fox television, right-wing talk radio, and conservative bloggers and newspapers.
- Conservative politicians beat the drums of denial – not just individuals like Senator James Inhofe and Congressman Joe Barton, but now virtually the entire Tea Party wing of the GOP.
- Artificial public relations campaigns are sponsored by denial groups. To oppose recent climate legislation in Congress, for example, Freedom Works sponsored “Hot Air Rallies” and Americans for Balanced Energy Choices mounted a fake “Citizens Army.”

The climate change denial campaign has been successful. Organized and well-funded denial efforts have convinced many policy-makers and citizens that the scientific evidence for human-caused atmospheric warming remains so uncertain that regulating carbon emissions is not urgent. As a result, the United States remains a laggard, and often an obstacle, in international efforts to ameliorate this grave threat to the planet and the wellbeing of many Americans.

Read more in Riley E. Dunlap and Aaron M. McCright, “Organized Climate Change Denial,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Climate Change and Society*, edited by John S. Dryzek, Richard B. Norgaard, and David Schlosberg (Oxford University Press, 2011), 144-160, and Riley E. Dunlap and Aaron M. McCright, “Climate Change Denial: Sources, Actors and Strategies,” in *Routledge Handbook of Climate Change and Society*, edited by Constance Lever-Tracy (Routledge, 2010), 240-259.