Fear of Climate Change: Motivations for and Impediments of Mitigation Efforts

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Fear of Climate Change: Motivations for and Impediments of Mitigation Efforts
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ABSTRACT:
Fear of climate change in the United States is seen as the prerequisite to effective mitigation efforts. Past macro-theories have cited faulty economic reasoning, inadequate education, and cultural influence as causes for a lack of fear of climate change without effectively analyzing fear on the individual level or exploring its effects on mitigation efforts. Using the Chapman Fear Survey, this paper will explore three variables—age, political ideology, and media exposure—as determinants of individual fear of climate change and then analyze the causes of those connections. Overarchingly, it will challenge the base assumption that fear motivates mitigation and examine its previously obscured effects. Understanding how to communicate the issue of climate change logically and accurately to different age groups and party members in an accessible and inclusive manner is vital in forming a unified front that advances mitigation efforts.

Data

Hypothesis 1: Party Identification x Climate Change

Table 1: Party Identification and Fear of Climate Change correlated

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fear of Climate Change</th>
<th>Party Identification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>1186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Correlation</td>
<td>.514**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hypothesis 2: Generation x Climate Change

The Mischaracterization of Climate Change Fear:
- Fear leads to flight, fight, and ‘freeze’ responses—leading to the Ostrich Effect.
- Fear of climate change is not determined by fear of other environmental disasters.
- Fear is not a knowledge problem.

Hypothesis 3: Media Exposure x Climate Change

Table 7: Media Exposure and Climate Change Fear Regression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Unstandardized Coefficients</th>
<th>Standardized Coefficients</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.285</td>
<td>.126</td>
<td>10.270</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>.901</td>
<td>.084</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.522</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>-.397</td>
<td>.074</td>
<td>.332</td>
<td>.523</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>CNN Exposure</td>
<td>.251</td>
<td>.217</td>
<td>3.390</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Analysis:
1. Party identification and climate change fear are positively correlated (.514). The relationship is significant (.000). Climate change fear is lower among Republicans and higher among Democrats. Strong Republicans are most likely to exhibit no fear, and strong Democrats are most likely to exhibit high fear.

2. The percentage of individuals from each generation reporting climate change increases with age. The percentage of individuals from each generation reporting ‘very afraid’ of climate change is over 2 times the percentage of individuals reporting ‘not afraid’ of climate change increases with age. The percentage of individuals from each generation reporting they are not afraid of climate change increases with age. The percentage of individuals who use local news media are more likely to fear climate change than those who do not.

Results:
1. Party Identification
Party identification and climate change fear have a moderately strong relationship that is statistically significant. The hypothesis can be confirmed.

2. Generation
The percentage of individuals from each generation reporting ‘very afraid’ of climate change is relatively similar (between 22%-27%). However, the percentage of individuals from each generation that report no fear of climate change increases significantly across generations. The hypothesis can be confirmed for high fear levels. It is rejected, however, for low fear levels, which differ significantly across generations.

3. Media Exposure
Social media is not a significant factor in climate change fear.

Conclusion:
Differences in climate change fear persist between Democrats and Republicans. Party identification’s influence on fear levels may be due to political leaders and whether or not they choose to address climate change as a legitimate concern.

Climate change fear at high levels is relatively constant across generations. Climate change fear at low levels varies, increasing in likeliness with age. This may be due to the different political parties older and younger individuals belong to; baby boomers and members of the silent generation are more likely to be Republicans, and Millennials and members of Generation X are more likely to be Democrats, corresponding to the relationship between party identification and climate change fear.

Political outlets, which were criticized for showing climate change as a debatable issue rather than scientific truth, are not uniformly responsible for lack of climate change concern. CNN and Fox News, two main political outlets, facilitate fear and lack of fear, respectively. Those that fear climate change may watch CNN, and those that are unafraid may watch Fox News due to political associations. Climate change fear levels are less a result of political debate than they are political party.

Social media— which allows its users to debate climate change existence and solutions through comment sections, and thus, should arguably lead to lower fear levels—has no relationship with climate change fear. Local news exposure, as consistent with previous research, does predispose views to higher fear levels, including climate change fear.

References: