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Fear and Skepticism: A Changing Climate During the Trump Era

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*For space purposes, only sources specifically referenced on this poster are included from my research.

Introduction

The climate science community has repeatedly sounded the alarm on the climate crisis and global climate change for the past several decades but with little to no response from political leaders. One of the possible avenues for meaningful policy change by major powers is through the pressure of public opinion and increased sense of threat from the climate crisis. To understand the evolution of public attitudes on climate change and the environment, this study provides a look into the rhetoric by political elites and political allegiances of various demographics from 2017 to 2020. Income, education, age, party identification, and belief in the Bible are the major factors analyzed and yield interesting trends in this 4-year period.

Literature Review

General Demographics

- **Income and education** provided significant negative effects for fear of climate change by those that identify as conservatives (Ballew et al., 2020).
- **Age** yielded mixed results on its impact on climate views, though the most recent studies imply increased climate change fear among younger people (Hamilton et al., 2019; Blank & Shaw, 2015; Frumkin et al., 2012).
- **Bible Interpretation:** Strong negative relationships between belief that the bible is literally true and acceptance of climate science (Blank and Shaw, 2015).
- **Republicans/Conservatives** are much less likely to believe in climate change or “global warming” and have higher opposition to climate change mitigation policies (McCright, 2016).
- **Democrats and Independents** are more likely to be convinced of climate science when directly exposed to it, while Republican skepticism remained roughly the same even after exposure to the same information (Schuldt et al., 2015; Hamilton et al., 2019)

End Times Theology

- In modern conservative think tanks, religion has made itself the center of political argument and is one of primary arguments against combating climate change with national policy.
- Religious leaders of conservative religions often argue that when God makes his Second Coming, he will judge us by our character rather than our protection of the environment.

Anti-Reflexivity Hypothesis

- McCright and Dunlap popularized the anti-reflexivity hypothesis in their analysis of conservative and wealthy economic interests’ attempts to curb environmentalist movements through the news media and appeals to political conservatism.

Hypotheses

H₁: Republicans are more likely to not fear climate change and have lower environmental concern, while Democrats will hold the opposite attitudes.

H₂: Age will provide a negative relationship to fear of climate change and environmental concern, regardless of partisanship.

H₃: Belief that the Bible is literally true, word-for-word, will cause lower fear of climate change and lower one’s environmentalism.

H₄: The factor of Bible belief will be an even stronger indicator of fear of climate change and environmental concern than partisanship.

Methods and Results

Table 1
Linear Regression on Fear of Climate Change, 2017 - 2020

	2017	2018	2019	2020
Age	-.190+ (-.099+)	-.116+ (-.075*)	-.173+ (-.046)	-.150+ (-.042)
Education	.055 (.014)	.150+ (.075*)	.109+ (-.018)	.129+ (.039)
Income	-.039 (-.036)	.042 (-.030)	.013 (.015)	-.040 (-.063*)
Party Identification	.477+ (0.258+)	.433+ (.214+)	.516+ (.336+)	.516+ (.265+)
Belief in the Bible	.247+ (.060*)	.306+ (.103+)	.299+ (.118+)	.348+ (.123+)

Note. Top values are single linear regression coefficients while those in parentheses are the multiple linear regression values for a Standard Coefficient (B).

*p < 0.05 level

+p < 0.001 level

Table 2
Linear Regression on Environmental Concern, 2017 - 2020

	2017	2018	2019	2020
Age	-.175+ (-.086*)	-.065* (-.029)	-.114+ (-.031)	-.180+ (-.087*)
Education	-.059* (-.054)	.046 (-.008)	-.034 (-.071*)	-.001 (.006)
Income	-.131+ (-.094+)	-.052 (-.088*)	-.139+ (-.111+)	-.183+ (-.168+)
Party Identification	.322+ (.103*)	.260+ (.075)	.343+ (.224+)	.351+ (.206+)
Belief in the Bible	.169+ (.030)	.199+ (.075*)	.190+ (.093*)	.252+ (.122+)

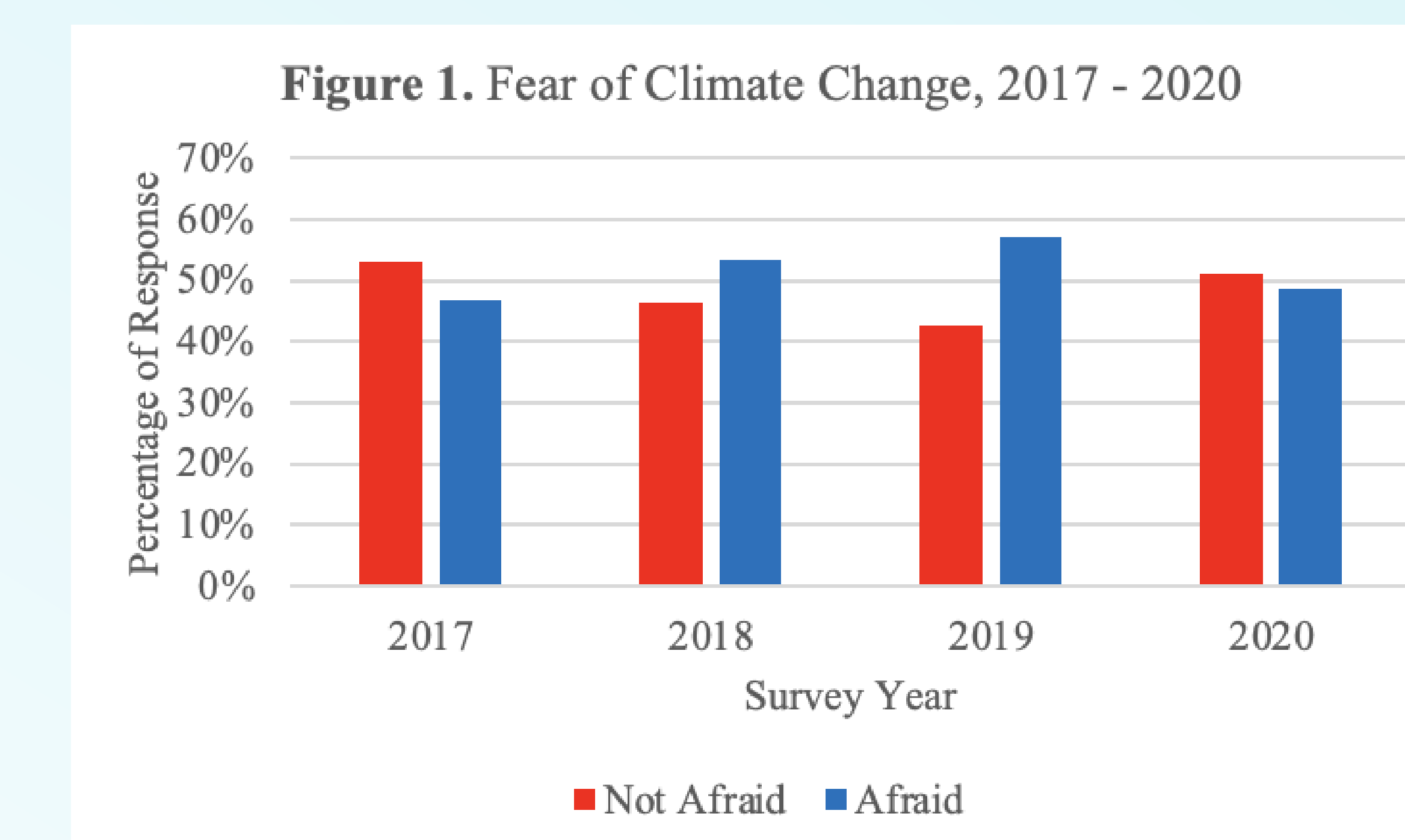
Note. Top values are single linear regression models while those in parentheses are the multiple linear regression values for a Standard Coefficient (B).

*p < 0.05 level

+p < 0.001 level

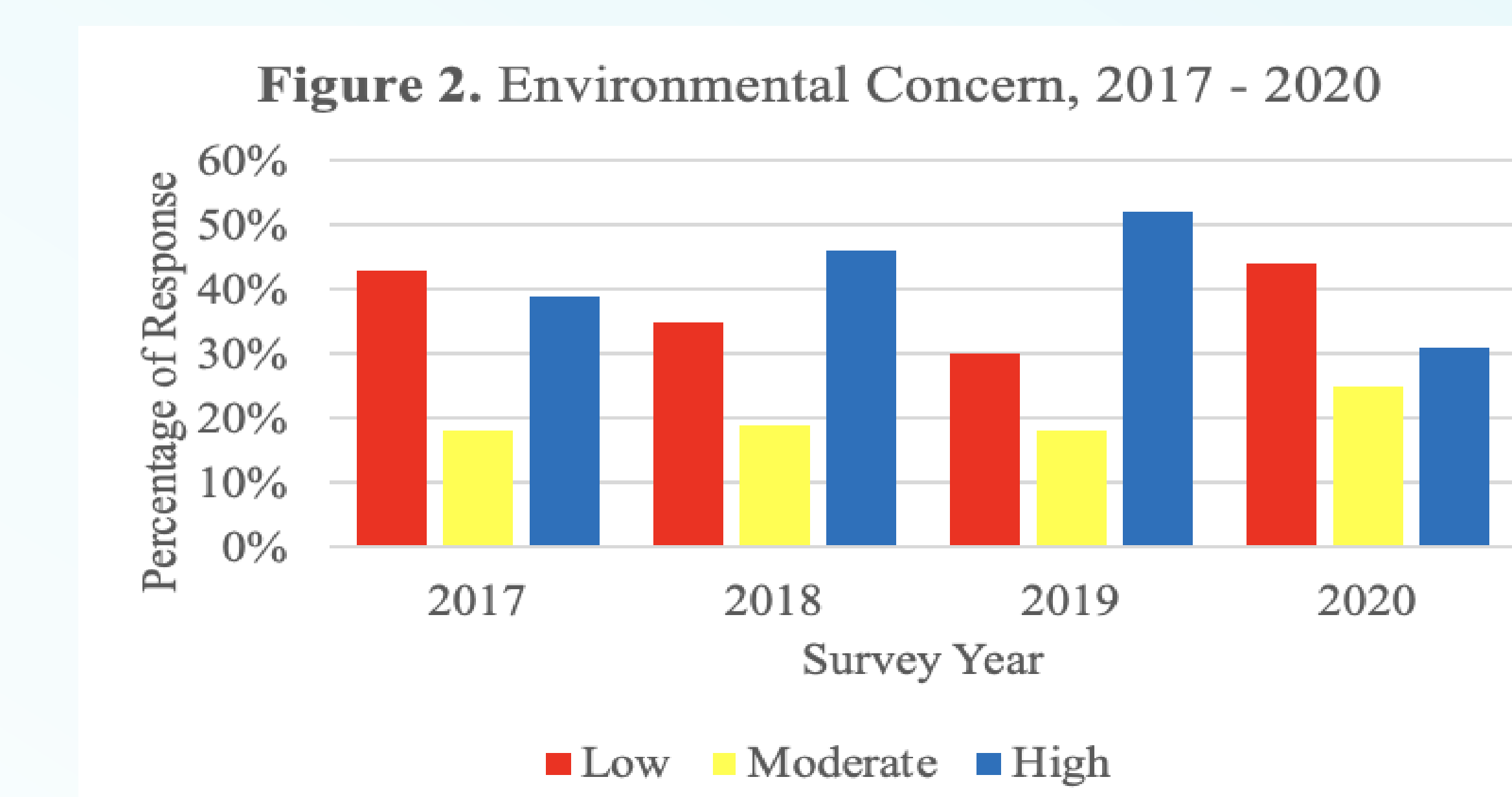
- Source: *Chapman Survey on American Fears*, survey years 2017 – 2020.
- Fear of Climate Change ranged from 1 = “Not Afraid”, to 4 = “Very Afraid”.
- Environmental Concern is an index of 5 questions. For each question that a person responds 3 or 4 to on the survey, they are assigned a point on the 0 – 5 index scale. These questions include fear of Air Pollution, Drinking Water Pollution, River/Lake and Ocean Pollution, Extinction of Plant/Animal Species, and Oil Spills.
- A response of 1 on the bible belief question is the interpretation of the Bible as being literally true, word-for-word, while a response of 4 is the belief that Bible is flawed and an ancient book of myth.
- Party identification is on a 7-point scale, with Strong Republicans valued as 1, and Strong Democrats valued at 7.

General Population’s Fear of Climate Change



- Not Afraid includes responses of 1 and 2, Afraid includes responses of 3 and 4.

General Population’s Environmental Concern



- Low index score is valued 0 – 1, moderate 2 - 3, high 4 – 5.

Discussion

Party Identification and Ideology

- Partisanship, as expected, saw a positive and moderately strong relationship to fear of climate change. With a B of .516 in the 2020 survey, Democrats were more likely than Republicans to fear climate change and a B of .361 in the same year indicates higher environmental concern among Democrats than Republicans.

Age

- Older individuals are less likely to fear climate change and have lower environmental concern.
- Age was statistically significant in predicting fear of climate change for all 4 survey years, making it one of the more stable variables tested.

Bible Belief

- Belief in the Bible became a much stronger predictor of climate change fear and environmental concern across the 4 years of data, marking the Evangelical and Christian Conservative movement’s increased allegiance to President Trump by the end of his presidency.
- Strong Bible belief affirms the End Times Theology argument that religious conservatives are more likely to reject climate science and not be afraid of relating topics.
- H4 was made void by this study; while the variable grew stronger over time, party identification remains the premiere indicator of climate and environmental attitudes contrary to speculations by scholars in this field.

General

- Climate change fear had an upward trend and appeared to follow the rhetoric by Democrats during the 2018 midterm elections in their opposition to President Trump’s climate policies.
- The COVID-19 pandemic appears to have reduced overall climate fears in the 2020 survey year. Further research to measure climate fears in this and future survey years may be able to solve the sudden dip as shown in the figures.

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