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The Rise and Fall of the American Fear of Climate Change:

Examining the Trends of Climate Change Fear in the United States

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INTRODUCTION

Gender, Race, Partisanship, & Fear of Climate Change:

- Females, Democrats, and nonwhite individuals are more likely to fear climate change than males, Republicans, and white persons.

Climate Change Polarization & the Trump Administration

- Over the past three decades, the United States has seen a significant rise in the politicization and polarization of climate change which has increased climate fear.
- The Trump administration's minimization of environmental threats and the pivot of attention towards the economy, only exacerbated climate concern and incited fear in the American population.

Media Consumption

- Climate communication through the media has been linked to increased emotional responses including sadness, despair, guilt, fear, anxiety, and anger.
- Higher rates of climate media consumption are associated with increased feelings of self-efficacy, however overexposure to climate science news can lead to "eco-paralysis" or experiencing overwhelming feelings of emotional distress that prevent climate action.

COVID-19

- It has been suggested that the COVID-19 virus led to inadequate coverage of climate pollution, therefore, decreasing engagement, action, and self-efficacy of climate change.

Linville and Fischer's "Finite Pool of Worry" Theory

- The theory proposes that an individual's concern for a risk will decrease if another risk surfaces as individuals only have the capacity to fear one risk at a given time.
- In connection to the pandemic and climate change, the COVID-19 virus may have become a more salient concern over climate change leading to a decrease in climate fears.

HYPOTHESES

1) Due to the COVID-19 pandemic starting in 2020, there has been a decrease in climate change fear as the virus may be considered to be a more pressing matter.

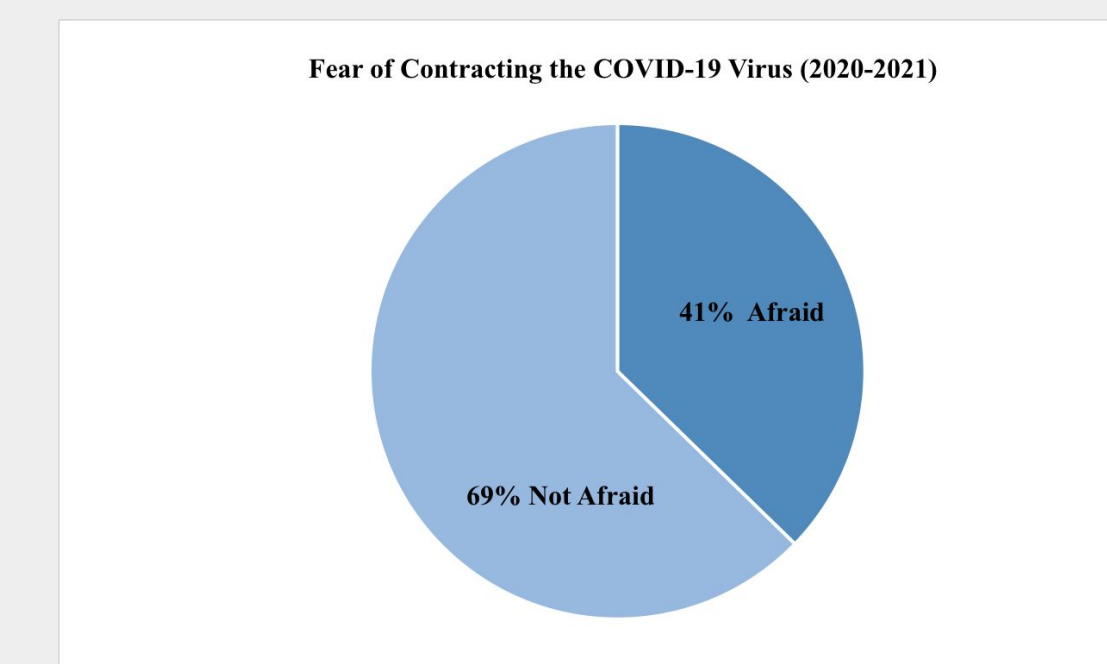
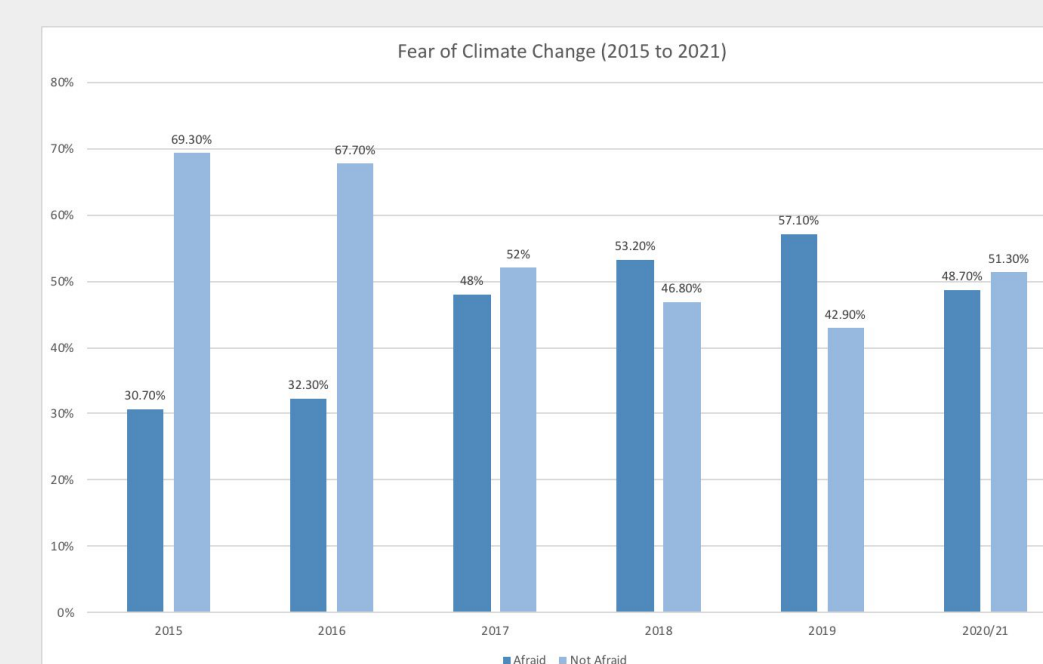
2) Those who consume social media at a higher rate per year in 2020 and 2021 will be less likely to experience fear of climate change as COVID-19 news dominates media sites.

METHODS & DATA

Methods: The following tests were used to assess the hypotheses: frequency tables were used to report the count and percentage for all variables; crosstabulations were run to find the correlation between fear of climate change and partisanship and the correlation between gender, partisanship, and climate fear; a regression on race, partisanship, and fear of climate change; a correlation between media consumption and fear of climate change.

Results:

Hypothesis 1:



Hypothesis 2:

		How afraid are you of the following: Global warming and climate change?	How often do you get news from social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook)?
How afraid are you of the following: Global warming and climate change?	Pearson Correlation	1	0.111**
	Significance (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	1034	1034
How often do you get news from social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook)?	Pearson Correlation	0.111**	1
	Significance (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	1034	1034

Table Interpretation: The table measures media consumption and climate fear. Those who consume social media more frequently are more likely to be afraid of climate change. These results are statistically significant as the p-value is .000 which is less than .05.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Hypothesis 1: COVID-19 Pandemic & Fear of Climate Change (Accepted)

In 2020 and 2021, fear of climate change declined; during this time the global COVID-19 pandemic occurred. Based on Linville and Fischer's "finite pool of worry" theory, it is hypothesized that this decline in fear was rooted in the rise of fear of contracting the COVID-19 virus.

Hypothesis 2: Social Media Consumption & Fear of Climate Change (Rejected)

Regardless of the amount of climate change content, those who consumed social media at a higher rate still were exposed to more climate coverage than those who consumed less social media. Therefore, those with higher social media exposure rates in 2020 and 2021 are far more likely to fear climate change and pollution than those with lower exposures.

CONCLUSION

During the Trump administration from 2016 to 2020, the United States saw an increase in climate change fears. It is expected that this increase in climate fear can be attributed to the Trump's lack of interest in pro-climate policies and direct action against strict environmental regulations. From 2020 to 2021, the coronavirus pandemic became a more pressing concern in the United States over climate change. Higher consumption rates of social media led to an increase in climate fear, however the virus led to a decrease. Future research can provide ways to reduce eco-paralysis through climate media communication and enact more public action to fight climate change.

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