



American evangelicals and global warming



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ABSTRACT

American evangelicals have long played a significant role in American culture and politics. Drawing from a nationally representative survey, this article describes American evangelicals' global warming risk assessments and policy preferences and tests several theory-based factors hypothesized to influence their views. American evangelicals are less likely than non-evangelicals to believe that global warming is happening, caused mostly by human activities, and causing serious harm, yet a majority of evangelicals are concerned about climate change and support a range of climate change and energy related policies. Multiple regression analyses found that the combination of biospheric, altruistic, and egoistic value orientations is a more significant predictor of evangelicals' risk assessments and policy support than negative affect, egalitarian or individualistic worldviews, or socio-demographic variables.

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1. Introduction

Christianity and modern environmentalism have often had a troubled relationship. In 1967, historian Lynn White argued that the Judeo-Christian worldview was a root cause of the Western world's destructive relationship with nature. Specifically, he argued that the Old Testament book of Genesis had long been interpreted as giving humanity the right to dominate nature and exploit its resources for human use (White, 1967). His article sparked a heated controversy that continues to this day, including extended theological debates over whether "dominion" means domination or stewardship, and numerous research studies that have examined the relationship between religion, environmental concern, and behavior (Djupe and Hunt, 2009). The results of these investigations have been mixed. Several studies have found that some types of religious belief (e.g. conservative eschatology or 'End of Times' thinking) are associated with lower levels of environmental concern (Hand and Van Liere, 1984; Eckberg and Blocker, 1989; Guth et al., 1995). Others, however, have found that the belief in God or identification with particular religions is not or only weakly associated with measures of environmental concern (Boyd, 1999; Hayes and Marangudakis, 2000, 2001).

Yet other studies have found that individuals who attend church more often are more likely to engage in environmentally protective behavior (Kanagy and Willits, 1993; Woodrum and Wolkomir, 1997). Still other studies have found that biblical literalism is associated with greater concern about environmental impacts on humans, but less concern about environmental impacts on plants and animals (Schultz et al., 2000). Finally, some scholars argue that organized religions have fundamentally shaped human cultural and ethical values around the world (Kaplan, 2010). Faith communities thus have the unique ability to construct moral frameworks that can encourage human beings to protect the Earth (Tucker, 2003). Evangelicals are one such group. National surveys have found that between 25 and 30% of the American public consider themselves 'born again' or evangelical Christians (Pew, 2008; Gallup, 2005). Their political profile is mixed, although majorities identify with the Republican Party and have a conservative political ideology (Pew, 2008). In turn, evangelical organizations and opinion leaders have had a significant influence on American public discourse and government policies for many years (Wills, 1991; Kohut et al., 2000). Layman and Hussey (2007), for example, argue that evangelicals were of significant importance for the election and re-election of President George W. Bush. Often voting in large numbers, evangelicals have tended to support politically conservative candidates whose political beliefs (including pro death penalty, anti gun control, anti gay marriage, etc.) resonate with their own (Wilcox, 2000).

The present study explores how the American evangelical community engages with the issue of global warming. More specifically, how evangelicals perceive the risks of global warming,

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whether they support or oppose climate change and energy policies, and what factors influence their views. Given the socio-political influence evangelicals have in contemporary American society, it is important to know how the community engages with global warming, particularly as the issue has become increasingly politicized in recent years (Dunlap and McCright, 2008).

American evangelicals have engaged a broad range of environmental issues for many years (Kearns, 1996, 1997; Shibley and Wiggins, 1997), but only recently have they turned their attention to global warming. A number of evangelical leaders have argued that anthropogenic climate change is a fundamental moral and ethical issue that must be addressed by people of faith. In 2002, a University of Oxford forum facilitated discussions among prominent climatologists and members of the US National Association of Evangelicals. This event, combined with subsequent meetings and discussions, led to the Evangelical Climate Initiative and its 'Call to Action' plan for dealing with the global warming challenge (ECI, 2006).

This 'Call to Action' outlines how evangelicals should engage with global warming. First and foremost is acceptance of the anthropogenic causes of global warming, followed by an acknowledgment that the consequences will be severe and will hit the poorest areas of the world the hardest (ECI, 2006). A campaign to engage the American evangelical community followed the publication of the Call to Action, and numerous advertisements appeared in major American newspapers urging efforts to combat the crisis. Using the tagline 'Our commitment to Jesus Christ compels us to solve the global warming crisis' these advertisements argued that evangelicals have a duty and responsibility to protect the planet. Other initiatives developed to promote environmental stewardship and evangelical engagement with global warming include The Evangelical Environmental Network, 'Restoring Eden' Christians for Environmental Stewardship, and the Youth Evangelical Climate Initiative.

This perceived sense of duty and responsibility to protect the planet draws directly from the moral conviction among some evangelicals that human beings are called to protect God's creation (Kearns, 1997; Hayhoe and Farley, 2009; Moore and Nelson, 2010). They argue that not only do humans have a responsibility to look after the Earth, as they are dependent on its resources for survival, but that there is also a moral imperative to do what is right, as instructed by God. Often drawing upon a stewardship interpretation of the word "dominion" in the book of Genesis, these evangelicals argue that Christians have a moral responsibility to protect God's creation (Kearns, 1997; Robinson, 2010).

Wilkinson (2010, 2012) and Wardekker et al. (2009) examined the moral narratives American evangelicals have used as they engage with the issue of global warming. They identified two key moral themes in evangelical thought and literature: 'creation care' and 'neighbor care'. 'Creation care' emphasizes environmental stewardship and the responsibility humans have to look after God's creation, while 'neighbor care' focuses on the importance of caring for one's neighbor, especially the poor, sick, and vulnerable. Some evangelical leaders have drawn upon both of these biblical imperatives to develop their response to global warming, arguing that climate change is likely to have severe impacts on both humans and non-human nature, and especially on the world's poor, who are often the most vulnerable to changes in the climate.

Recent qualitative research has also documented various 'opinion drivers' for how evangelicals understand global warming. Wilkinson (2010, 2012) asked respondents from nine evangelical churches in the southeastern United States to read the ECI's "Call to Action". Focus group discussions were then conducted to explore their opinions in greater depth. She found that although tenets of the creation and neighbor care themes resonated with evangelical churchgoers, the topic of global warming also generated polarized

views. More specifically, lay evangelicals in these focus groups tended to be much more skeptical of climate change science and the potential consequences than the leaders who had signed the ECI. This research also found that distrust of scientists and a conservative political ideology were important factors. These findings are in line with other research that demarcates evangelical beliefs along political lines. For example, McCammack (2007) describes the difference between liberal and conservative evangelical environmentalists. Liberal evangelicals broadly accept that global warming is occurring and accept a biblical mandate to take action to protect God's creation, while conservative evangelicals doubt global warming science and support policies which protect the economy rather than the environment.

These prior studies, however, have been based either on limited qualitative data or analysis of key texts. But how do American evangelicals as a group perceive global warming? What policies do they support or oppose? To what extent do they accept the arguments being made by some evangelical leaders that climate change is a serious moral and religious issue? Very little survey research has investigated how evangelicals respond to this issue. A few results from public opinion polls have found that evangelicals are less likely than the national average to believe that global warming has an anthropogenic basis (Pew, 2009). Furthermore, evangelicals have also been found to be less likely to believe that the federal government should do more to mitigate the threat (Public Religion Research Institute, 2009). This paper describes American evangelicals' global warming risk assessments and policy preferences, and tests several theoretically derived predictors of their views – the roles of affect, cultural worldviews and environmental value orientations.

1.1. Risk as analysis vs. risk as feeling: the importance of affect

How individuals understand and process risk information centers around two fundamental yet distinct approaches. The 'risk as analysis' paradigm emphasizes the use of cognitive deliberation and analytic processing of risk, whereas the 'risk as feelings' approach is experiential, arguing that people are often more reliant upon affect and emotion when making risk judgments and decisions (Slovic and Peters, 2006; Finucane, 2008). Treating response to risk as primarily cognitive, traditional risk perception and mental model studies have identified the various heuristics and biases individuals use to process and understand risk information. Knowledge, or rather the lack of knowledge, for example has been used to account for important misconceptions public have about climate change, among other risk issues (Kempton, 1991; Bostrom et al., 1994; O'Connor et al., 1999).

More recent research has focused on the role of "affect", or the emotional quality of 'good' or 'bad' associated with different risks (Slovic et al., 2002). This research has found that people draw upon both affect and emotional cues to process information and make decisions about risk. Affect is processed quickly, automatically, and efficiently and enables people to make daily decisions with relatively little cognitive effort. As such, affect helps to guide perceptions of risk and benefit. Individuals are often motivated to engage in activities that produce positive and pleasant feelings, but also to avoid activities that produce negative and unpleasant feelings. Empirical support for this 'affective heuristic' is growing and has been used to explore public risk perceptions for a range of issues (e.g. Finucane et al., 2000).

Researchers have also investigated the affective dimensions of public risk perceptions of global warming, using affective imagery analysis. "Imagery" here refers to mental representations or cognitive content within the individual mind and can include both perceptual and symbolic representations (Damasio, 1999). "Affective imagery" is therefore defined as "sights, sounds, smells, ideas,

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