

Rhetoric of American Identities

Retoryka amerykańskich tożsamości

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ALEXANDER RUSER

UNIVERSITY OF AGDER

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5688-2589>

Alexander.ruser@uia.no

A Mission for MARS: The Success of Climate Change Skeptic Rhetoric in the US

Misja na MARSa: Sukces sceptycznej wobec zmian klimatu retoryki w USA

Abstract

Radio and television broadcasters accuse climate scientists of “promoting a global warming hoax”, recommending that they be “named and fired, drawn and quartered” (Rush Limbaugh); commit “hara kiri” (Glenn Beck); and be “publicly flogged” (Mark Morano). Conservative media are crucial in promoting climate skepticism. Likewise, climate skepticism resonates well with white middle-class men. But why does the middle class continue to support “radical” positions? This article focuses on Anti-Intellectualism to explain why climate skeptic rhetoric resonates with “Middle American Radicals” (MARS).

Nadawcy radiowi i telewizyjni zarzucają naukowcom zajmującym się klimatem „promowanie mistyfikacji globalnego ocieplenia”, zalecając „ujawnienie ich nazwisk i zwolnienie z pracy, powołanie do wojska i zamknięcie w koszarach” (Rush Limbaugh); popełnienie „hara kiri” (Glenn Beck); i „publiczne wychłostanie” (Mark Morano). Konserwatywne media odgrywają kluczową rolę w promowaniu sceptycyzmu wobec zmian klimatu, którą to postawę obserwuje się najczęściej pośród białych mężczyzn z klasy średniej. Pytanie brzmi, dlaczego klasa średnia nadal popiera „radykałne” propozycje? W artykule zaproponowano spojrzenie na ten temat z perspektywy antyintelektualizmu. Postawa ta pozwala wyjaśnić, dlaczego retoryka promująca sceptycyzm wobec zmian klimatu znajduje poparcie pośród „radykałów z amerykańskiej klasy średniej” (ang. MARS = Middle American Radicals).

Key words

climate skepticism, anti-intellectualism, media, common sense, US
sceptycyzm klimatyczny, antyintelektualizm, media, zdrowy rozsądek, USA

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ALEXANDER RUSER
UNIVERSITY OF AGDER
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5688-2589>
Alexander.ruser@uia.no

A Mission for MARS: The Success of Climate Change Skeptic Rhetoric in the US

1. Introduction

Radio and television broadcasters accuse climate scientists of “promoting a global warming hoax”, recommending that they be “named and fired, drawn and quartered” (Rush Limbaugh); commit “hara kiri” (Glenn Beck); and be “publicly flogged” (Mark Morano). These examples listed by James Powell in the *Inquisition of Climate Science* (2011: 1) sound extreme and familiar at the same time. Conservative media in the U.S. have long played a vital role in sustaining and promoting climate skeptic narratives. Likewise, observers are hardly surprised that climate skeptic narratives feature prominent in the American news cycles, and, more importantly, resonate with a considerable number of recipients (Boykoff, Ravi 2007, Boykoff, Boykoff 2007, Dunlap, McCright 2015). Climate skepticism is not only particularly visible in the U.S. (Jacques et al. 2008, Oreskes. Conway 2010, McCright, Dunlap 2011, Ruser 2018), but there is also an “American variant” of climate skepticism: alliances between conservative media outlets – with “FOX News” being only the most prominent example – and climate skeptic pressure groups, think tanks, wealthy donors and foundations (Frank 2004, Mayer 2016) tie the interest of Wall Street to the sorrows of High Street and connect conservative “power elites” (Mills 1956) with culturally conservative middle-class voters (Viala-Gaufrey 2020). Accordingly, the fact airtime is given to climate skeptics by major news outlets and the conservative media’s praise for President Trump’s decision to withdraw from the Paris climate accord seem only “logical”. The prominence of climate skeptic narratives in the American News cycle is *surprisingly unsurprising*.

But why is this so? We learn about climate change from international scientific bodies such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), NGO’s and experts who base their opinion on the research efforts of scientists from around

the world. Their message – that human generated greenhouse gas emissions are having profound and negative consequences for the world’s climate – is certainly the same in the U.S. as elsewhere. The mostly publicly funded research of climate scientists is available to everyone who is interested in the form of official “reports”, “summaries for policymakers”, films like Al Gore’s *Inconvenient Truth* and popular books (e.g. Hansen 2009). Why then, is the message of international climate science *not* resonating as well in the United States as it is, for instance, in European countries? How can we explain why a considerable number of Americans reject what in most countries is “common sense”? Americans are certainly as exposed to climate science as anybody else. And yet, to quote Donald Trump, many just “don’t believe it” (BBC 26 November 2018 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-46351940>).

The persistence of climate skepticism is sometimes attributed to a lack of scientific or “environmental literacy” peculiar to the U.S. (Zimmerman 1997). Other scholars even argue that this illiteracy is deliberately produced and sustained by a “denial countermovement”, orchestrated by an alliance of conservative think tanks, libertarian politicians and payed for by a network of potent donors (Antonio, Brulle 2011, Meyer 2016). It is therefore tempting to explain the existence of climate skepticism by pointing to a lack of information, presuming that audiences “are ignorant and need to be “supplied” good, factual information” Boykoff 2011: 77). However straightforward, such “information deficit models” fail to explain why climate skepticism persists, (Norgaard 2012: 84f, Stehr, Machin 2020: 141f), given the abundance of scientific evidence and ever more sophisticated strategies to communicate it (Bloomfield 2019, Boykoff 2019).

This contribution will therefore acknowledge the significance of cultural aspects (Norgaard 2012: 99) to explain the persistence of climate skepticism in the United States. It focuses on the key question of why climate skeptic narratives resonate particularly well with a specific demographic group, the middle American radicals. To answer this question, the contribution focuses on three key aspects: the narratives themselves, the target audiences, and the role of the media. It will show that climate skepticism fits in the wider context of “anti-intellectual” narratives that have been used by conservatives in the U.S. for many decades. It draws on Donald Warren’s depiction of “middle American radicals“ (MARS) to understand to whom these narratives appeal and why an alleged “extreme” position – such as the rejection of climate change – resonates with constituents who aren’t proponents of fringe positions. Re-engaging with Warrens’ concept seems timely given the rise of the “Tea Party” and the “return of the middle American radical” (Judis 2015).

Particular attention is given to the specific interplay between “conservative” and “liberal” media. It will be argued that the highly polarized media landscape of the U.S. is an important catalyst for the perpetuation of climate skeptic narratives and that the liberal media is (unwittingly) complicit in nurturing anti-intellectual sentiment.

2. Climate Skepticism in the USA

In fact, climate change is a profoundly polarized issue. Throughout the 1990s, on the Internet and AM Radios, in the pages of *Forbes*, *Fortune* and the *Wall Street Journal*, and even in the U.S. Congress, one could find adamant denials that global warming was real, or that if it was real, that it was caused by human activities (Oreskes, Conway 2008: 59).

The quote by Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway encapsulates public debate on climate change in the U.S.: Whether people believe in climate science depends on where they stand on the political spectrum. While most liberals believe in the warnings of climate scientists, many republicans and the “political right” either reject the claim that the climate is changing or doubt that this change is caused by human activity. A representative survey conducted by Yale University in 2019 found that, while almost three in four (74%) Americans believe that “climate change is happening”, only 70% of the self-declared “moderate Republicans” and 42% of the conservative Republicans believed in climate change (see figure 1).

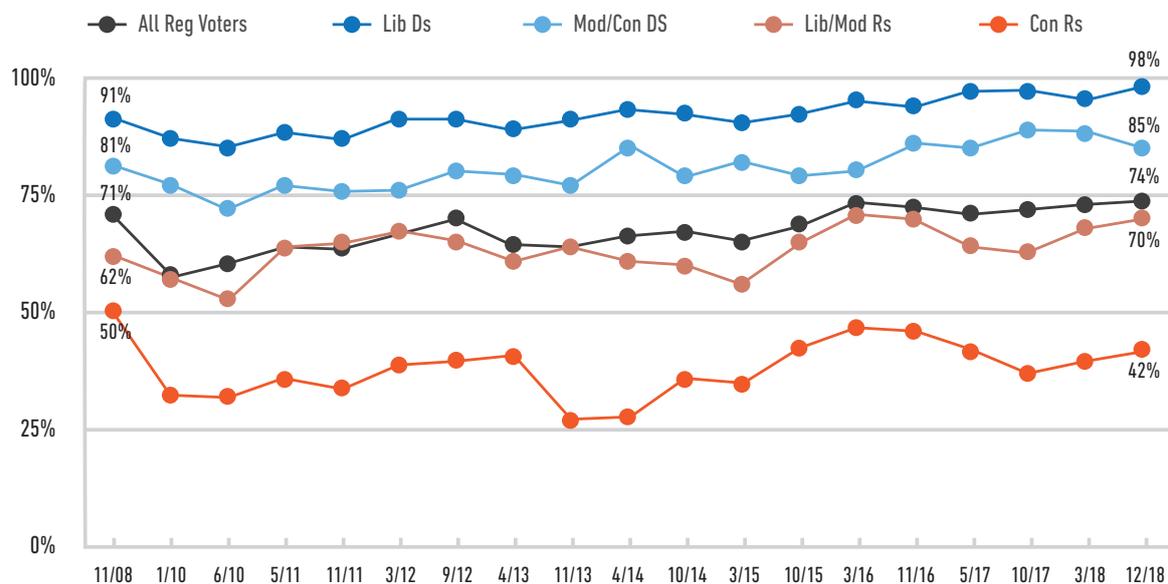


Figure 1: Agreement to question “Is global warming happening”, Source: Leiserowitz et al 2019

While the vast majority of “liberal democrats” (90%) “believe that climate change is mostly human made,” only 53% of the “liberal republicans,” and an

even lower number of the “conservative republicans” (28%), believe that human activity is causing climate change (figure 2). In general, climate skepticism is more common in the U.S. than in other countries. A representative 2018 PEW “Global Attitudes Survey” (PEW Research 2019: 27-28) revealed that 16% of respondents in the U.S. believed climate change to pose “not threat” while only 9% of the Canadians, 4% of Germans, and 3% of people in France share this opinion (other “hotbeds” of climate skepticism include Russia (18%), Australia (12%) or the Philippines (13%),

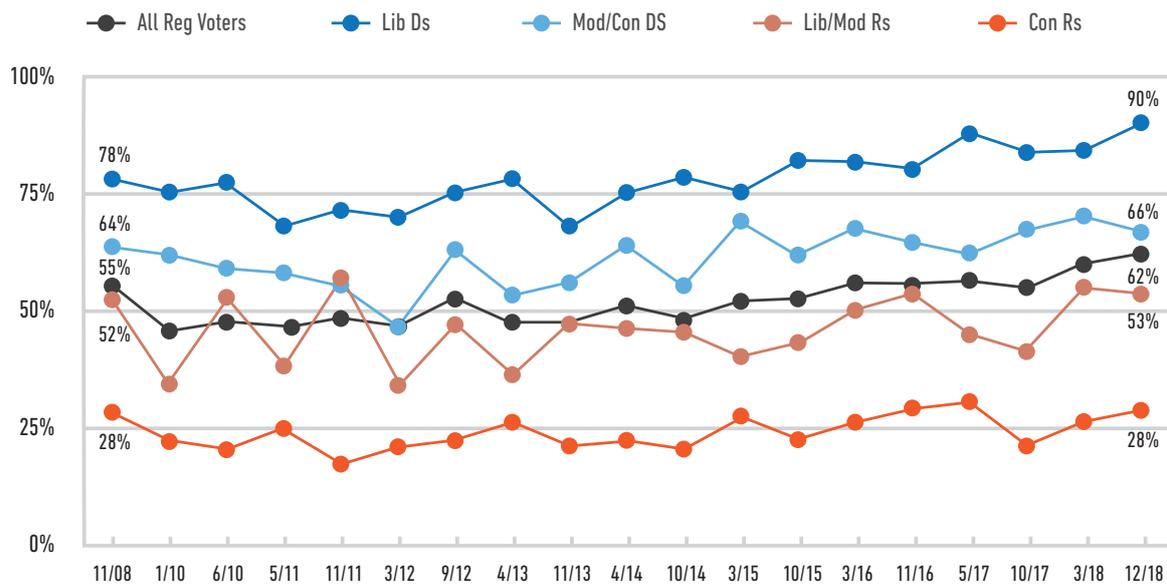


Figure 2: “Believe that climate changes is mostly human made”, Source: Leiserowitz et al 2019

Moreover, the political divide over climate change is remarkably stable. This means that neither new scientific findings nor political appeals at the numerous global climate summits have been able to convince climate skeptics. Apparently, in the United States, climate scientists preach only to the converted. Consequently, the climate debates in the U.S. should be conceived of as disputes over political preferences rather than over the validity of scientific discoveries. More than three decades of scientific research by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has not contributed to a “de-politization” of the matter (Machin 2013: 89). The emphasis on scientific facts, the alleged or actual scientific consensus and the apparent clarity of the scientific message might even have deepened the gulf between climate believers and climate skeptics. The following sections will therefore explore the connection between distinct demographic and political backgrounds and the rejection of (climate) scientific expertise.

3. Don't believe the "eggheads": Anti-Intellectualism in the U.S.

The average American does not want some expert running around prying into his life and his personal affairs and deciding for him how he should live, and if the impression becomes prevalent in the Congress that this legislation is going to establish some sort of an organization in which there would be a lot of short haired-women and long-haired men messing into everybody's personal affairs and lives, (...) you are not going to get your legislation" (cited in: Hofstadter 1963: 36).

By citing a testimony before a "subcommittee of the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce" from 1946, American political historian Richard Hofstadter epitomizes the main characteristics of what he describes as an "epithet in American self-evaluation" (1963:6): anti-intellectualism. Hofstadter (1963: 12) describes "anti-Intellectualism" as an amalgam of opinions and prejudice that comprise "the traditional businessman's suspicion of experts working in any area outside his control, whether in scientific laboratories, universities or diplomatic corps", "a categorical folkish dislike of the educated classes" cultivated in particular by the political right and the conservative reservation towards an alleged "leftist" elite of "Harvard Professors [and] twisted-thinking intellectuals" that are "burdened with Phi Beta Kappa keys and academic honors but not equally loaded with honesty and common sense".

For the conservative right, academic credentials indicate aloofness and pretentiousness rather than a certain competence and expertise. Coining the pejorative term "eggheads", conservative writer Lois Bromfield states the term refers to:

a person of spurious intellectual pretensions often a professor or the protégé of a professor. (...) Supercilious and surfeit with and contempt for the experience of more sound and able men. (...) A doctrinaire supporter of Middle-European socialism as opposed to Greco-French-American ideas of democracy and liberalism" (Bromfield 1952 cited after Hofstadter 1963: 9).

According to Hofstadter (1963: 6), anti-Intellectualism, despite being "subject to cyclical fluctuation", is deeply rooted in American political culture, drawing upon narratives and glorifying the time of an (alleged) American self-made culture "when most business and professional men attained eminence without much formal education [and] academic schooling was often said to be useless" (Hofstadter 1963: 33).

Conservatives therefore entertain narratives that appreciate pragmatic "commons sense" solutions, while at the same time suspecting "that some kind of paternalistic relationship exists between politicians advised by scientific 'experts' and a technologically and scientifically naive general public" (Ashley 2000: 271). In contrast to supercilious "eggheads" who use confusing diagrams and complicated (and condescending) language, "ordinary people's" grasp of reality is surrounded

by – to use the expression of Clifford Geertz (1975: 18) – an “air of of-courseness” an immediate understanding for “the way things go”.

4. Tossing snowballs: Conflating weather and climate

In February 2015, a conservative Oklahoma Senator Jim Inhofe, author of *The Greatest Hoax: How the Global Warming Conspiracy Threatens your Future* (2012), pulled a stunt. Speaking in front of the U.S. Senate, Inhofe produced a snowball from a plastic bag, tossing it to the floor to “prove” that climate science is utterly wrong and climate change nothing but a hoax (Ruser 2018: 85). Two years later Huffington Post journalist Chris D’Angelo called the whole episode “embarrassing” and lamented on the Senator’s inability and unwillingness to accept even basic assumptions of climate science, namely that “no single weather event can prove or disprove climate change” (D’Angelo 2017). The journalistic critique is justified in two ways: Neither does winter snow in Washington disprove global climate change nor did the Senator even try to consider scientific knowledge on the matter. However, Jim Inhofe’s “political stunt” was nevertheless a success. It symbolized the alleged aloofness of climate scientists when the disproof (snow) is in everyone’s plain sight and exemplifies the superiority of common sense over the “far-fetched” theories of some “eggheads”. The same rhetorical trick was used by Donald Trump in a tweet on January 29, 2019:

In the beautiful Midwest, windchill temperatures are reaching minus 60 degrees, the coldest ever recorded. In coming days, expected to get even colder. People can’t last outside even for minutes. What the hell is going on with Global Warming? Please come back fast, we need you!” (Trump cited after Pierre-Loius 2019).

Carelessly (or strategically) conflating “weather” and “climate” is a particularity of the debate about climate science that stems from the complexity of the topic itself. “The climate” – unlike the weather – cannot be experienced directly but has to be described in abstract, scientific language (Machin, Ruser 2019: 204). The term “climate”, in the words of the IPCC, refers to “the ‘average weather’, or more rigorously, as the statistical description in terms of the mean and variability of relevant quantities over a period of time ranging from months to thousands of years. The classical period is 3 decades, as defined by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO)” (IPCC cited after Ruser 2018: 15).

“Climate” is an abstract category and climate *change* is an equally abstract diagnosis made by specialists and based on observation and extrapolation of complex chemical and physical interaction in the Earth’s atmosphere. The findings of climate science lack any “air of of-courseness” and sometimes contradict our

impression of the “way things go” typical for “common sense” knowledge (Geertz 1975:18). It is no coincidence that climate scientists and advocates of climate politics have themselves turned to simple (and simplifying) rhetorical images like the “greenhouse effect” to catch complex processes such as the interplay of different aerosols and solar radiation in various strata of the atmosphere. However, climate science is fighting an uphill battle since its findings become fully understandable only in the context of sophisticated scientific reasoning. Its statements refer to the future rather than immediate experience and its techniques (for instance, climate “modelling”), bear the risk of being misunderstood and misrepresented. At the same time, despite attempts to simplify the message, justifying scientific knowledge claims on climate change require lengthy explanation and reference to opaque data and complicated scientific practices. Communication of the findings of climate is therefore predestined to become a target of anti-intellectual rhetoric. Despite the best efforts to communicate its key findings to wider audiences (e.g. Hansen 2009, Richards, Carruthers 2018), the work of climate scientists seems distant from “ordinary people” and their everyday experience and conversation.

Climate science can become a focal point for all three “types” of anti-intellectualism mentioned above. When, for instance, the IPCC Working Group III suggested that a combination of technological advancement (e.g. fuel efficiency) and behavioral change (IPCC 2014: 20-21) might be necessary to reduce greenhouse gas emission, business representatives could lament the interference with established and profitable business practices. At the same time, conservatives can paint the picture of the new “green scare” that has replaced the “red scare” of the McCarthy era (McCright, Henion 2014), while conservative media outlets, speaking for the “little man on the street”, can flurry about the know-it-all experts at the IPCC. The prevalence of these three variants of anti-intellectualism not only allow us to understand the reaction to climate science, but also help to explain how climate skeptics are able to tailor their messages: When, for instance, the conservative “Competitive Enterprise Institute” launched an ad campaign in reaction to Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*, it was not interested in providing the American public with scientific counter-evidence. The core message of the 2006 media campaign was rather simple and devoid of any reference to science: *Carbon Dioxide: They call it pollution. We call it life.* The message that was distributed through TV ads made reference to “obvious” common sense knowledge. Carbon dioxide is not a pollutant. “We breath it out, plants breath it in”. This simple “fact of life” could only be misinterpreted by the most detached scientists and out-of-touch liberal intellectuals, couldn’t it? Perhaps, even more importantly, the campaign stressed that this lack of “common sense” would have dire consequences for “ordinary people”. Instead of mentioning the potential consequences of climate

change, the campaign paints a dark picture of the everyday lives of the American middle class: Phasing out fossil fuels would put middle class lifestyles at risk, depriving them of the means to care for their families and enjoy the conveniences of driving their kids to football practice. At the same time, the campaign remains vague or silent about the potential consequences of climate change for the well-being of vulnerable populations future generations. The “we call it life” campaign offered a blueprint for a successful climate skeptic rhetoric that has since been widely used in conservative media and public discourses.

Anti-intellectual tropes are combined with the notion that climate politics would directly affect the well-being and lifestyle of hard-working middle Americans while serving the interests of some (geographically and socially) distant people (at best). In short: A distant elite of aloof intellectuals and liberal politicians try to make Americans pay for an imaginary “climate crisis”.

As we will see, neither the inconsistencies nor the shortsightedness (the American middle class could also be affected by climate change) limit the efficiency of this narrative: rather the opposite. Attempts by “liberals” to highlight the flaws in the argumentation tend to increase the impression that intellectuals and scientists believe they can “lecture” ordinary people. To understand why this is the case, we have to turn our attention to the target groups and audiences of climate skeptic narratives.

5. Welcome to MARS: The Middle American Radicals

“There is a distinct force in American society which is both volatile and pivotal in its activism” (...) Their presence does not fit readily the traditional molds of liberal and conservative ideologies”. These first sentences from Donald Warren *The Radical Center* (1976: 1) hint at the existence of a peculiar group among the American electorate: The Middle American Radicals or MARS. Warren used this “ideal type” (Weber 1988) to describe a group of Americans who, despite “sharing some characteristics with other groups”, defy being depicted in more traditional political categories of “left” and “right”. They do not fit the “molds of liberal and conservative ideologies” (ibid.) and seem to be suspicious of elites and “needy people” who benefit from government programs the middle American is expected to pay for:

The MAR consistently sees an unholy alliance growing between the liberal and minority establishment at his expense. White efforts to end racism have forced him to carry out good deeds, through his taxes, that he never felt compelled to institute. The burden falls on *his* shoulders to carry out the “social experiment” rather than on the affluent suburbanite or on the welfare poor (Warren 1976: 3).

The Middle American Radicals are particularly skeptical of government regulation, for they see “the government -local to national- allied simultaneously with minority and idealistic doctrines against his own interests and social survival” (Warren 1976: 3).

In recent years, Warren’s depiction of a peculiar group of radical centrists in America has regained its relevance. The middle American radicals are not only “returning” (Judis 2015) but also had a second coming as part of the conservative “Tea Party movement” that emerged in reaction to the election of Barack Obama in 2008. Vanessa Williamson, Theda Skocpol and John Coggin, for instance, found that a main concern of tea party activists was the “perceived federal governments `handouts´ to `undeserving´ groups, the definition of which seems heavily influenced by racial and ethnic stereotypes” (Williamson, Skocpol, Coggin 2011: 25). Like Donald Warren’s MARS, tea party activists were mainly concerned with being taken advantage of by “minorities” and a federal government that is pursuing a political agenda at their expense. Moreover, despite describing the Tea Party as a conservative movement, Williamson and colleagues highlight its self-image as constituted by hard working “ordinary” Americans rather than aligning with a political camp.

The distinction between “workers” and “people who don’t work” is fundamental to Tea Party ideology. First and foremost, Tea Party activists identify themselves as productive citizens (Williamson, Skocpol, Coggin 2011: 32). At the same time “government spending is seen as corrupted by creating benefits for people who do not contribute, who take handouts at the expense of hard-working Americans” (Williamson, Skocpol, Coggin 2011: 33). This description of the Tea Party is consistent with Warren’s findings according to which Middle American radicals display a strong belief in the “protestant ethic of hard work” (1976: 57). At the same time, they criticise welfare agencies for being too generous to people who “think society owns them a living” (Warren 1976: 50). John Judis (2015: 5) found a “considerable overlap between the tea-party worldview and Middle American Radicalism”. Still, neither do they identify as “left” or “right” nor as a “radical” in any sense (Judis 2015: 5). The new middle American radicals are the “Trump supporters of today” who appreciate he is taking a stand for the “silent majority” (themselves) and speaking up against the political, economic and intellectual elites that had betrayed or abandoned them (Judis 2015: 5)

By appealing to the fears and demands of MARS, anti-intellectual narratives are brought to life and link climate skepticism with the everyday worries of a large group of the American electorate. Referring to anti-intellectual traditions helps to explain why climate skeptic narratives resonate so well in the United States. But

this diagnosis still begs the question about the concrete content of these narratives. In order to understand how exactly anti-intellectual, climate skeptic messages are sold to the target audience of MARS, it is necessary to explore the connection between Anti-Intellectualism and the self-portrayal of the middle American radicals.

As stated above, climate skepticism resonates with the three types of anti-intellectuals: businessmen, the conservative right and the less educated. Empirical studies such as the seminal *Cool Dudes: The denial of climate change among conservative white males in the United States* by Aaron McCright and Riley Dunlap confirm that conservative white men form the bulk of climate deniers in the U.S. Apart from an “atypically low environmental risk perception” (McCright, Dunlap 2011: 1171), which contradicts the dire warnings of imminent climate crises issued by climate scientists (Watts 2018), McCright and Dunlap explain the prevalence of climate skeptic positions among white conservatives with the “identity protective cognition thesis”. According to this thesis, “variance in risk perceptions—across persons generally, and across race and gender in particular—reflects a form of motivated cognition through which people seek to deflect threats to identities they hold, and roles they occupy, by virtue of contested cultural norms” (Kahan et al 2007 cited after McCright, Dunlap 2011: 1164). The authors find the rejection of climate science is prevalent among “confident” white conservative men. This group also conceives of itself as having a particularly good understanding of climate issues. These findings are consistent with anti-intellectual tropes that stress that the complicated and verbose explanations of intellectuals (“eggheads”) add nothing to the common-sense understanding and “hands-on knowledge” of “ordinary people” who trust their own senses. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, they help us to understand why climate protection policies are seen as a *threat*. For the lifestyles and livelihoods of white conservatives are depended on economic, political and social settings and practices (e.g. jobs in fossil industries, consumerist lifestyles) that are increasingly labelled “unsustainable”. Embracing anti-intellectual rhetoric, therefore, is as much about dismissing the “know-it-all”-attitude of some “eggheads” as it is a way of defending the lifestyle of middle Americans.

6. Americans against Climate Science: Climate Denial and the Conservative Media

If climate skeptic messages are targeted at Middle American Radicals, we should expect them to echo their fears of social and political tinkering at the expenses of “hard-working people”. Moreover, they should stress the unholy alliance “between the liberal establishment and minorities”. Finally, they should aim at exposing the

“naïve” and idealistic character of liberal climate politics and their negative consequences for the American middle class.

This last aspect is particularly visible in conservative news media coverage of climate politics. In the show *Tucker Carlson Tonight* on July 12, 2019, the conservative host attacked democratic congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC), sponsor of a “green new deal in the United States”:

Well, AOC's team say they saw global warming as a pretext for taking over the economy. That doesn't mean their plan was based on evidence of an actual problem, because despite what they tell you, the science is not settled. We can all agree that the climate is warming, temperatures are going up, but we are not sure why” (mediamatters 15 July 2019: <https://www.mediamatters.org/video/2019/07/15/Tucker-Carlson-goes-full-on-climate-denier-hypes-debunked-document-that-blames-global-warm/224217>)

Portraying the presentation of (preliminary) ideas for dealing with the physical and socio-economic consequences of climate change as a “takeover of the economy” is playing on the fears of “political experiments”. At the same time, formulations like “we can all agree that” and “we are not sure why” imply that the proponents of such ideas distance themselves from common people and common sense.

Moreover, climate skeptics like Fox News Mandy Gundasekara seek to “uncover” the “idealistic doctrines” behind climate politics that would eventually fall on the feet of ordinary workers. In an opinion paper from April 30, 2019, Gundasekara defends Donald Trump’s decision to withdraw from the “unfair” Paris Climate Accord by stating:

Trump understood that the Paris climate accord was a bad deal for the American people. It gave major polluters like China and India a free pass while locking in the last administration’s economically ruinous regulations that would have cost millions of jobs and undercut our recent economic success. Even more alarming is that all of those lost jobs would be sent overseas to countries that don’t use basic pollution control technology American industrial operators have been using for decades (Gundasekara 2019).

Gundasekara’s claim is perfectly tailored to correspond with the fears of MARS. The free pass – allegedly offered to China and India – is implicitly contrasted to the self-image of the hard-working American who would never be given anything for free and would never ask for it. Moreover, she highlights the delusional state of liberal climate politicians who not only fail their own American electorate, but also are unable to protecting the environment.

This statement blends in the overall narrative entertained by prolific media personalities. To give some further examples, in a 2019 interview with Fox News, talk radio “legend” Rush Limbaugh, claimed that “climate change is what allows them to poison the minds of young kids” (<https://www.mediamatters.org/rush-limbaugh/fox-news-rush-limbaugh-says-climate-change-what-allows-them-poison-minds-young-kids>),

while former and actual Fox News stars such as Bill O’Riley or Sean Hannity “often ridicule climate science”, accuse scientists of “manufacturing” findings and associating the “acceptance of global warming science with “liberal” views” (Hamilton 2011).

7. Unwitting accomplices: Liberal Media

Conservative narratives can refer to established anti-intellectual tropes to present climate science as yet just another attempt of liberal intellectuals to tell hardworking Americans what to do. Moreover, by targeting their message at MARS, they can frame international climate diplomacy as a scam by foreign countries who are trying to take advantage of the U.S. However, despite being well-routed in American cultural tradition, the success of playing on anti-intellectual narratives alone to spread conservative climate skeptic messages depends on the support of “unwitting accomplices”: the liberal media.

“He thinks that there is some raw value in being contrary. That if you are against what ‘they’ say, that somehow you’re striking a blow for the regular guy”. This remark by CNN’s Chris Cuomo (cited after Barden 2019) completed a “mocking” of Donald Trump for (apparently) confusing “climate” and “weather” when he begged “Global warming to come back fast” in the midst of a “polar vortex” that brought a severe cold spell to large parts of the U.S. Cuomo is certainly “right” in pointing out that Trump erred, and that climate change is consistent with episodes of cold weather. However, to conservative viewers he is likely to appear self-righteous and condescending towards anyone who has just doubts about climate science.

Likewise, when MSNBC talk show host Rachel Maddow declares “[t]here is only one Earth and here on Earth, the partisan divide on this subject in particular and the different partisan experience right now of this subject in Washington is just nuts” (Maddow cited after Colarossi 2019) she is actually reinforcing this partisan divide by dismissing dissenting views as “crazy”. In December 10, 2018 CNN went even further by publishing a tweet to support one of their video messages urging viewers: “Don't believe these climate change lies.@CNNweather's team of meteorologists debunk common climate change myths spread by some politicians and pundits” (Rupar 2018). In the polarized media landscape of the U.S the tweet is likely to be regarded an affront to conservative viewers, thus further “proving” the contempt of liberal media for the believes and convictions of “ordinary” conservative Americans. Liberal media outlets thus become unwitting accomplices by playing the role of the aloof “backseat drivers” that the conservative narrative invented for them.

8. Conclusion: A Mission for MARS

But these messages became just more ammunition in the rhetorical war. Headlines on the one side read, “White House Smacks Down Climate Deniers in New Video,” “White House Strikes Back at Climate Skeptics over ‘Polar Vortex,’” and “W.H. Science Director Knocks Climate Change Skeptics.” Headlines on the other side countered, “The White House Gets into the ‘Polar Vortex’ Climate Change Blame Business,” and “Global Warming Propaganda Video White House Wasting Tax Payer Money On (Hoffman 2015: 2).

The rhetorical war on climate change is part of a larger dispute about cultural issues. It draws on and is an example of the prevalence of anti-intellectual tropes and caters to the fears and demands of a distinct target group of middle American radicals. The connection between contemporary climate skepticism and “time-tested” anti-intellectual narratives is crucial for understanding why such “radical” positions resonate with citizens who consider themselves part of the center. The political center is often conceived of as being open to political compromise (Ruser, Machin 2017: 3) and as an arena for reconciling the more extreme political views held by people on the political fringes. For the middle American radicals, however, climate skepticism is part of the center ground and middle position, while climate scientists and climate politicians are dismissed as aloof intellectual liberals and proponents of “radical” policies that threaten the lifestyles of hard-working Americans. Conservative forces and conservative media are thus able to prolong climate skeptic narratives, not only despite, but also because of the “mounting scientific evidence”, brought forward by climate experts and liberal journalists.

The true secret of the success of the conservative “mission for MARS” lies in the rhetorical trap that stands at its basis. Denying the scientific ground of climate change or discrediting climate politics as a dangerous experiment and government overreach “lures” scientists, politicians and liberal journalists into playing the very role of condescending lecturers of ordinary people and aloof “eggheads” that anti-intellectual narratives have imagined for them. The “ridiculous” stunts (like tossing a snowball) and “outrageous” claims about the “fake” climate science are not intended to “disprove” climate change. They are designed to provoke representatives of “mainstream science” and liberal media to reveal themselves as know-it-all eggheads and condescending leftists. Climate scientists and representatives of the liberal media thus become complicit in perpetuating the narratives that fuel the self-imagining of middle American radicals.

Unfortunately, with political and public debates about climate change and climate politics becoming ever more adversarial and implacable, dismissing climate skepticism as “just nuts” and skeptics as “idiots” (Thibault 2019) is becoming more tempting too. Climate scientists, journalists and activists might become “fed up” with preaching to deaf ears. However understandable, adding to the polarization

inevitably plays into the hands of a long tradition of anti-intellectualism in the U.S and is therefore unlikely to succeed. The challenge for climate communicators therefore is not to invent “better ways” of communicating scientific evidence, but rather to find rhetorical escape routes.

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