

CASE STUDY:

Partisanship, Reason, and Climate Change

In 2018, former US President Barack Obama delivered the Sixteenth Annual Nelson Mandela Lecture. Nelson Mandela was the South African who led the fight against that country's racist apartheid regime. Obama's lecture, "Renewing the Mandela Legacy and Promoting Active Citizenship in a Changing World," focussed on how we can bridge divides, work across ideological lines, and resist oppression and inequality.

In his speech, Obama said:

Most of us prefer to surround ourselves with opinions that validate what we already believe. You notice the people who you think are smart are the people who agree with you. Funny how that works.

But democracy demands that we're able also to get inside the reality of people who are different than us so we can understand their point of view. Maybe we can change their minds, but maybe they'll change ours.

And you can't do this if you just out of hand disregard what your opponents have to say from the start.

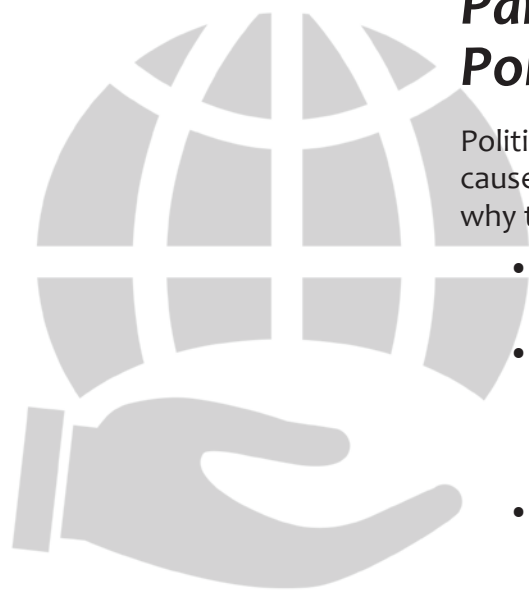
What Obama said is true. When people refuse to even listen to their opponents, society's ability to use reason is hurt. The concept Obama was critiquing in his speech was partisanship.

Partisanship, according to the Cambridge Dictionary, is "strongly supporting a person, principle, or political party, often without considering or judging the matter very carefully." Partisanship often leads people to focus on *who* is making the proposal, not *what* the proposal says.

Partisanship, Laws and Public Policies

Political scientists and psychologists have shown that partisanship causes people to throw aside reason. There are many explanations why this happens, including:

- People are tribal. They try to fit in with their own political group. Opponents are narrowly cast as "others."
- People believe that they come to their own views through careful, dispassionate, and thoughtful analysis. Opposing views are nothing more than the result of weak and partisan analysis.
- People generally do not have the knowledge needed to fully evaluate complex public policies. They often default to the judgment of leaders who they already agree with.



Of course, not all people are blind partisans. However, the more that we fall into partisan thinking, the more likely it is that good ideas will be opposed, regardless of merit.

Climate Change, Partisanship, and Political Psychology

Psychological science researchers Leaf Van Boven, Phillip J. Ehret, and David K. Sherman looked at the impact of partisanship on reason. Their study “Psychological Barriers to Bipartisan Public Support for Climate Policy” revealed problems with partisan approaches to climate change.

The study first looked at American attitudes towards climate change. They found that the vast majority of Americans of all political stripes believe that climate change is real. Across several surveys, roughly 90% of Democrats, 85% of people with no party affiliation, and 70% of Republicans believe that climate change is real.

The finding—the majority of people, regardless of political preference, believe in climate change—stands in contrast to what we see on newscasts and in social media. There, you could get the impression that everyone on the left believes that climate change is real, and everyone on the right is a climate change skeptic. This is not the case.

However, climate change skeptics receive proportionally more airtime and attention in the media than their numbers warrant. This creates a misperception about the climate change debate.

The Experiment

Knowing that the vast majority of people across the political spectrum believe that climate change is real, researchers wanted to know:

What would happen if Democrats were asked to evaluate Republican proposals to fight climate change, and what would happen if Republicans were asked to evaluate Democrat proposals to fight climate change?

In other words, how would partisanship impact people’s judgement about climate policies?

Democrats who were given a Republican proposal to fight climate change overwhelmingly rejected the idea. However, if they were told it was a Democrat proposal, they overwhelmingly approved of the idea. Partisanship guided Democrats’ reasoning.

The same was true of Republicans. Republicans who were given a Democrat proposal to fight climate change overwhelmingly rejected the idea. However, if they were told it was a Republican proposal, they overwhelmingly approved of the idea. Partisanship guided Republicans’ reasoning, too.

This finding led the researchers to say that “the problem, it appears, is not that Republicans are skeptical of climate change. The problem is that Republicans are skeptical of Democrats—and Democrats are skeptical of Republicans.”

Overall, the study suggests that if people could look beyond their own tribes, and reasonably consider the drawbacks and merits of the solutions put forth by their political opponents, society would have a better chance of fighting climate change.

DISCUSS

1. Climate scientists overwhelmingly agree that climate change is real. However, the number of climate change skeptics is growing.
 - a) Do you think the growth in skepticism is due to the minority viewpoint being given disproportionate voice?
 - b) What are the benefits of giving disproportionate voice to a minority viewpoint?
 - c) What are the drawbacks of giving disproportionate voice to a minority viewpoint?
 - d) When should minority viewpoints be given a disproportionately large voice?
2. We rely on experts to help us understand issues we can never fully comprehend. How can we determine which experts are the most trustworthy?
3. Look into the influence that oil companies and lobby groups have on the climate change debate. By creating doubt, are they promoting reason? Or do they have other motives in mind?
4. Why do climate change skeptics receive a disproportionately large share of media coverage?