

## A Bold Strategy for Reaching Consensus on Climate Change

Sunday, August 27, 2017, should have been a sweltering one-hundred degree summer day for the residents of Port Aransas, Texas. Instead, Hurricane Harvey wreaked havoc on the community known for its booming eco-tourism industry, tearing through with one-hundred mile-per-hour winds and dumping over twenty inches of rain. Photographed while crying alongside broken palm trees, a disintegrated boat, and the mere foundation of her home, Melani Zurawski is one of thousands of Harvey victims whose lives were forever changed. Having faced Harvey's wrath, Zurawski and Port Aransas residents are appealing to policymakers for immediate action, so no one has to bear the ravages of climate change again.

The world continues to experience climate change, with rising temperatures and devastating natural disasters—including the 2018 Indonesian tsunami and the 2019 monsoon flooding throughout South Asia—leaving millions to endure its catastrophic impacts. Climate change is a pressing global plight verified by the vast majority of climate scientists, making the fight for a more sustainable planet of the utmost urgency. However, in the United States, both governmental and individual skepticism around climate change persist due to limited science-based policy knowledge and a lack of political will from decision-makers. Given climate change's increasing intensity and the ineffective efforts previously made by stakeholders to combat the problem, multisectoral engagement and implementing bold political change will be critical to ensure American youth, adults, and lawmakers alike take action.

Before the narrow window of action to address climate change closes, young U.S. leaders who will inherit the greater consequences of climate change must be informed and motivated to

advocate for solutions. High school represents a crucial time for young people to form new relationships, explore a variety of intellectual curiosities, and cultivate different passions. The U.S. education system currently requires students in each state to take compulsory classes including math and science. If, as the *Breakthrough - National Centre for Climate Restoration* suggests, climate change will be an “existential risk,” legislation mandating climate change coursework in high schools would enhance students’ understanding and provide a framework for unified action.

A class exploring various scientific, economic, and political causes and effects of climate change would bring forth future political and business leaders, scientists, and climate activists to consider and address the issue. Science education researcher Osman Aksit evaluated 122 college students’ climate change risk perceptions before and after completing a course related to the topic. Aksit concluded that “climate-related courses present an opportunity to increase climate science knowledge and risk perceptions of future decision-makers.” Aksit’s results make clear that instituting a government policy requiring climate change courses as early as high school would increase both youth awareness of climate change and youth interest in climate-related fields.

Once high schoolers realize the implications of climate change, informed dialogue will ensue, which is the first step toward attaining generational reform. A bracing precedent for youth action is sixteen-year-old Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, whose climate change education campaigns inspired millions to demand action.

While it is essential that high schoolers understand climate change and are moved to action, it is equally important to bring together adults who support and oppose climate change in

order to develop consensus. Despite the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and other climate-focused organizations explicitly concluding climate change is human-caused, a 2019 Yale University poll indicates over 20% of American adults continue to believe climate change is unrelated to human activity. A path forward to develop agreement among Americans would be connecting climate change skeptics and experts on moral framing—framing messages based on an individual’s moral preferences—in a neutral setting where they can directly discuss the issue.

According to Matthew Feinberg at Stanford University and Robb Willer at the University of California at Berkeley, “Reframing environmental issues in moral terms offers improve[d] communication between opposing sides.” Feinberg and Willer, for example, utilized religion with conservatives who believe in Christianity—particularly by emphasizing humanity’s responsibility to be stewards of the earth—to bridge the climate change divide. By incorporating moral framing in conversations with climate skeptics, Feinberg and Willer positively swayed the environmental attitudes of participants. As such, a conference where moral framing specialists interact face-to-face with climate change skeptics would reduce polarization between supporters and opponents of climate change.

Uniting youth and adults through transformative policies and education is imperative to influencing public sentiment around climate change. As President Abraham Lincoln said, “Public sentiment is everything...with it, nothing can fail; [without] it, nothing can succeed.” However, even with ordinary citizens acknowledging climate change’s detrimental effects, legislators must be convinced in order to achieve tangible change.

To change certain lawmakers' perspectives on climate change, the use of virtual reality (VR) has proven to be a cost-effective and successful option. After conducting hundreds of VR experiments, Stanford University communications scholar Jeremy Bailenson found VR is not only able to effectively reflect first-hand experiences, but can also reshape people's behavior and attitudes towards subjects and events. Bailenson utilized VR to replicate natural disasters, concluding "these [simulations] are enough to turn even hardened climate change deniers into believers." Thus, having lawmakers experience a VR world devastated by climate change could prompt a shift in opinion on climate-related policies, foster an appropriate sense of urgency, and ultimately bring together key stakeholders in America: youth, adults, and lawmakers.

Climate change is happening—and it is happening quickly. The time of debating climate change against the backdrop of degrading natural wonders like Port Aransas is over. Climate change has moved beyond a threat to reality, with countless studies and stories like Hurricane Harvey victim Melani Zurawski's validating its presence and impact. It is now up to responsible American citizens and policymakers to tackle climate change with bold political action: requiring climate change education for high school students, hosting conferences and other formal meetings to morally reframe the climate conversation for those who doubt, and applying virtual reality to convince lawmakers of the severity of climate change. Now is the time to finally act.

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