



Published on *Climate Realists* (<https://climaterealists.org.nz>)

[Home](#) > The more science you know, the less worried you are about climate

---

## The more science you know, the less worried you are about climate

Submitted by climaterealists on Wed, 20/06/2012 - 14:24

'Abandon focus on sound science', say trick-cyclists

By [Lewis Page](#) <sup>[1]</sup> ?

Posted in [Energy](#) <sup>[2]</sup>, [29th May 2012](#) <sup>[3]</sup>

[http://www.theregister.co.uk/2012/05/29/science\\_and\\_maths\\_knowledge\\_makes\\_you\\_sceptical/](http://www.theregister.co.uk/2012/05/29/science_and_maths_knowledge_makes_you_sceptical/)  
<sup>[4]</sup>

A US government-funded survey has found that Americans with higher levels of scientific and mathematical knowledge are more sceptical regarding the dangers of climate change than their more poorly educated fellow citizens.

The results of the survey are especially remarkable as it was plainly not intended to show any such thing: Rather, the researchers and trick-cyclists who carried it out were doing so from the position that the "scientific consensus" (carbon-driven global warming is ongoing and extremely dangerous) is a settled fact, and the priority is now to find some way of getting US voters to believe in the need for urgent, immediate and massive action to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

A theory exists among some psychologists, sociologists and other soft "scientists" that it should be possible to convince the ordinary citizenry to accept the various huge costs advocated by environmentalists, by simply raising the level of scientific knowledge and numeracy. People would then be able to understand that there is a terrible danger facing the human race and so would support action to address it. Certainly it appears to be a fact that very few people in the general public ? or indeed, in various architecture and industrial-design faculties ? have enough basic physics and numeracy to join the debate at all (as the recent rash of human-powered "crowd farm" [generator projects](#) <sup>[5]</sup> illustrates all too plainly).

Thus, in a just-published US National Science Foundation-funded study, participants' science knowledge and numeracy was tested and compared with levels of concern regarding climate change. The soft-studies profs were amazed, however, to find that as one moves up the scale of science knowledge and numeracy, people become *more* sceptical, not less.

According to the profs, this is not because the idea of imminent carbon-driven catastrophe is perhaps a bit scientifically suspect. Rather it is because people classed as "egalitarian communitarians" (roughly speaking, left-wingers) are always highly concerned about climate change, and become slightly more so as they acquire more science and numeracy.

Unfortunately, however, "hierarchical individualists" (basically, right-wingers) are quite concerned about climate change when they're ignorant: but if they have any scientific, mathematic or technical education this causes them to become strongly sceptical.

As scientific/tech knowledge and numeracy appears to be more common among "hierarchical individualists" than among "egalitarian communitarians", this meant that in the sample as a whole the effect of more scientific knowledge and numeracy was to increase scepticism.

Given that the profs had assumed from the start that scepticism is wrong, this forced them to the conclusion that simply teaching people more science and giving them more facts and numbers is not a good idea as it will lead them into bad (sceptical) decisions. They write:

This form of reasoning can have a highly negative impact on collective decision making ... it is very harmful to collective welfare for individuals in aggregate to form beliefs this way.

One aim of science communication, we submit, should be to dispel this tragedy ... A communication strategy that focuses only on transmission of sound scientific information, our results suggest, is unlikely to do that. As worthwhile as it would be, simply improving the clarity of scientific information will not dispel public conflict ...

Thus it is, according to the assembled profs, that the US government should seek to fund a communication strategy on climate change which is *not* focused on sound scientific information.

It does not follow, however, that nothing can be done ... Effective strategies include use of culturally diverse communicators, whose affinity with different communities enhances their credibility, and information-framing techniques that invest policy solutions with resonances congenial to diverse groups. Perfecting such techniques through a new science of science communication is a public good of singular importance.

There's [something of a push](#) <sup>[6]</sup> developing in psychology, sociology and other soft-science departments worldwide for this "new science of communicating science", which is supposed to galvanise the electorates of the developed world into demanding serious action against carbon emissions and acceptance of the serious sacrifices this would mean. We've compared this idea before to Isaac Asimov's science-fictional notion of the discipline of "Psychohistory" - a set of methods which could be used to manipulate populations on a large scale\*.

This might be seen from an egalitarian communitarian viewpoint as a good thing, simply changing people's beliefs for the manifest collective good.

Your hierarchical individualist, however, might sneer cynically ? first at the prospect of a shower of trick-cyclists managing to change his or her mind on climate change by means of spin rather than hard numbers. The hierarchical individualist might also view the "science of communicating science" push as a rather ignoble attempt by the soft-studies profs to get a share of the climate change research funding bonanza that has poured into the hard science and biology faculties in recent decades.

And anyone at all might be rather alarmed, perhaps, at the prospect of actual success in the matter of developing a working discipline of Psychohistory ? which could and would surely be used in other areas than climate change policy, and would surely be a threat to democracy if it worked as advertised.

For all that there's no serious likelihood of the soft-studies profs genuinely managing to pump up climate fear successfully where legions of activists and climatologists before them have failed, US taxpayers of every political stripe might very well quarrel with the idea of spending their science budget with the aim of placing enormous political power in the hands of the trick-cyclist community.

The new study is published by *Nature Climate Change* [here](#) <sup>[7]</sup>. ®

## Bootnote

\*Though in the *Foundation* saga this was only possible with vast galactic populations of the far future, with humans as numerous as gas molecules in a pressure vessel, and even then it was necessary to keep the existence of Psychohistory a secret.

## Tags:

[Members' Contributions](#) <sup>[8]</sup>

Powered by [Drupal](#)

---

**Source URL:** <https://climaterealist.org.nz/node/900#comment-0>

## Links

[1]

[http://forms.theregister.co.uk/mail\\_author/?story\\_url=/2012/05/29/science\\_and\\_maths\\_knowledge\\_makes\\_you\\_sceptical/](http://forms.theregister.co.uk/mail_author/?story_url=/2012/05/29/science_and_maths_knowledge_makes_you_sceptical/)

[2] <http://www.theregister.co.uk/science/energy/>

[3] <http://www.theregister.co.uk/2012/05/29/>

[4] [http://www.theregister.co.uk/2012/05/29/science\\_and\\_maths\\_knowledge\\_makes\\_you\\_sceptical/](http://www.theregister.co.uk/2012/05/29/science_and_maths_knowledge_makes_you_sceptical/)

[5] [http://www.theregister.co.uk/2012/05/27/human\\_powered\\_electricity\\_please\\_make\\_it\\_stop/](http://www.theregister.co.uk/2012/05/27/human_powered_electricity_please_make_it_stop/)

[6] <http://search.theregister.co.uk/?q=psychohistory+climate&site=&psite=0>

[7] <http://www.nature.com/nclimate/journal/vaop/ncurrent/full/nclimate1547.html#/f1>

[8] <https://climaterealist.org.nz/taxonomy/term/2>