

## 36 Reasons Many People Do Not Understand and Combat Climate Change

Andy Zucker, November 2016

My [Psychology and Climate Change blog](#) discusses more than three dozen reasons why human beings, notably in the United States, have been slow to understand climate change and to combat it effectively. The links below lead to discussions on the blog of each barrier to understanding; click on a link to bring up a post discussing that barrier. The blog also includes dozens of references (links) for those who wish to delve deeper. Somewhat arbitrarily, I identify the barriers below under three headings: climate change itself, the way people's minds work, and the biases many of us take for granted because we live in the United States or other free-market, "capitalist" societies (which now includes most nations in the world).

### The Nature of the Climate Change Problem

1. Climate change is a [complex, "wicked" problem](#), involving science, technology, politics, governance, regulations, taxes, diplomacy, ethics, values, and other perspectives.
2. For most students, [climate change is not well taught in school](#), and it is addressed mainly in "hard science" classes, as if it were only a scientific issue.
3. Certain [important ideas about climate change](#), such as "tipping points," are not well reported and are therefore not well understood by many people.
4. Even those who strongly favor combating climate change can be [vague](#) about how to accomplish this goal.

### The Way People's Minds Work

5. Human beings seem to be "[wired](#)" to think more about near-term problems than long-term ones, and often respond to emotional stimuli, such as fear, more than to analytic thinking.
6. Many people [trust peer groups](#) more than certified "experts."
7. [Hearing opinions from experts on both sides of an issue](#) on which there is near-unanimous agreement, like anthropogenic climate change, confuses people more than it helps them.
8. Only about [one-third of people](#) talk with family and friends about climate change.
9. People's understanding of [probability](#), such as the odds of something happening, is poor.
10. Few people understand the [power of exponential growth](#), such as for carbon emissions, and therefore do not understand the huge growth in emissions just [since the decade of the 1970s](#).
11. Some people are pessimists and think "[nothing can be done](#)," or "there is nothing I can do."
12. While it is clear that pessimism can be a barrier to action, so can [optimism](#). People often discount even clear personal risks, such as heart attacks, due to misguided optimism.
13. Some people [complain](#) that reports of climate change are unduly alarming or hysterical, and because messages seem to have "the wrong tone" they cannot pay attention. Some people need [hopeful messages](#) more than [alarming messages](#) in order to pay attention to climate change.
14. Certain ways of [framing](#) climate change work better with political conservatives than others.

15. [Interpreting complex graphs](#), such as those showing the “carbon budget” available for humanity to “spend” and still stay below 2° C warming, is difficult for many people.
16. Some easy-to-understand symbols representing the threat of climate change, such as the “[Doomsday Clock](#),” are unfamiliar to most people.
17. Only a minority of people believe that climate change is [harmful “right now.”](#)
18. The “[public learning curve](#)” showing people’s changing views on difficult issues is almost always a lengthy one.
19. The “[science” of climate change is not what most people focus on](#); instead, they focus on the impacts on themselves—of climate change and of efforts to combat it.
20. [Greed](#) is a significant factor affecting both individuals and corporations. For example, greed is one reason that explains the climate disinformation campaign promoted by fossil fuel companies and by some politicians.
21. Privileged people, as many Americans are, find it [hard to change their lifestyles](#), such as is the case of growing numbers of wealthy people flying all over the world as tourists despite the carbon emissions that result.
22. Among [evangelical Christians](#), many seem to believe that God would not allow Man to destroy the Earth, and therefore climate change can’t be a real problem.
23. [World leaders are misleading people](#) into believing there is a reasonable chance that global warming will be limited to 2° C. Experts say that [is very unlikely](#).
24. As a corollary to the statement above, people who think about the [Paris climate agreement](#) may interpret it in very different ways.
25. Climate change is [not the only example](#) where policymakers know what needs to be done yet fail to do it, and sometimes do the opposite of what is needed.
26. [Research findings in psychology](#) help us understand how people think, but many key findings are not well-known or as well-applied as they should be.

#### **Beliefs in the U.S. and Other Free-Market, “Capitalist” Societies**

27. Americans’ [faith in free market economics](#), low taxes, and a smaller government are barriers to understanding that climate change is real and could be averted.
28. On the whole, [Republicans are much more skeptical](#) about climate change than Democrats.
29. There has been a well-funded “[disinformation campaign](#),” partly funded by the fossil fuel industry, [spreading doubt](#) that climate change is a serious threat, or even real.
30. [Some key media sources](#), such as the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*, distort facts, and [most media coverage](#) has been so limited as to be inadequate.
31. Moderators in [the 2012 and 2016 Presidential debates](#) asked *no* questions about climate change.
32. [Civic activism](#) has substantially declined in the U.S. Most Americans are [not politically active](#).
33. Americans’ [trust in government](#) has declined precipitously during the past fifty years.
34. [Legislators are people first](#), and share the same weaknesses in thinking as others people do. [Policymakers in democracies are often cautious](#) and [respond to business interests](#).
35. The United States is often an opinion leader in the world. However, Americans’ lifestyles and beliefs about government and markets may have [slowed perceptions worldwide](#).
36. Many [other nations, not only the United States](#), failed to actively combat climate change for decades. The problem of acting too slowly is a worldwide phenomenon.