Though the scientific community is nearly unanimous in its agreement about climate change, the public debate about climate science remains highly polarized. A new book by Andrew J. Hoffman, Holcim Professor of Sustainable Enterprise at the University of Michigan, examines the reasons behind this phenomenon. ThisGreenBiz article features an excerpt of the book, How Culture Shapes the Climate Change Debate.

In the excerpt, Hoffman finds the source of climate disagreement in four distinct elements of distrust: distrust of the messenger (notably, environmentalists, liberal politicians, and scientists); distrust of the consensus behind the message; distrust of the message itself (it's overwhelming, it's improbable, it's pagan); and distrust of the solutions (they will intrude on our freedoms).

Hoffman’s book goes on to call for a more thoughtful public discourse, and shows how we can draw lessons from past cultural shifts to help foster a better understanding of climate change and inspire people to take action.

Hoffman is a member of ecoAmerica’s research council, and a respected voice on social engagement and climate change. We share his belief in the value of the social sciences in understanding American worldviews and behaviors. These insights can help us craft a message that resonates and opens the door to support for climate solutions.

From Al Gore to Solyndra, 4 Ways Culture Shapes the Climate Debate

Andrew Hoffman, Holcim (U.S.) Professor of Sustainable Enterprise at the University of Michigan

The following is an excerpt from the recently released book "How Culture Shapes the Climate Debate."

In the view of the social scientist, environmental problems are not primarily technological or economic, but behavioral and cultural.

While technological and economic activity may be the direct cause of our environmental problems, our individual beliefs, cultural norms and societal institutions guide that activity. It follows that we cannot
recognize the environmental problems created by our way of life, nor can we develop solutions to address them, without first facing and changing the beliefs and values that have led to them.

With that as a baseline, let’s consider that the public debate around climate change has centered on a simplified binary statement of the issue: Climate change is currently occurring due to human activity, or it is not.

This simplification is troubling for physical scientists, in that it masks the complexity of the issue. It is intriguing for social scientists, because it helps to expose the extremes of the conversation and the values underlying their competing agendas.

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