I have an in-law who is, shall we say, rather skeptical about climate change. Any discussion on the topic usually begins with some contrarian science theory that he heard on one of his favorite talk shows (e.g. sun spots, deep ocean magma, urban heat islands), and then devolves from there.

Why do some Americans believe the antithesis of the scientific consensus on issues like climate change?

This topic is explored by Professor Andy Hoffman of the University of Michigan in his new book, *How Culture Shapes the Climate Change Debate*. As suggested by the title, Hoffman’s thesis – a distillation of considerable research from social scientists over the past several years – is that the public’s understanding of climate change, like other historically contentious issues such as evolution, acid rain, the ozone hole, and genetically modified food – is as much a cultural issue as a scientific one.

One of the key arguments is that a scientific consensus does not necessarily reflect a “social consensus,” the latter being something that the majority of society would consider to be true. For instance, the scientific consensus that cigarettes harm human health emerged decades before the social consensus emerged. “Scientific knowledge is never socially or politically inert,” Hoffman writes, “particularly when it prompts changes in people’s beliefs or actions.” Indeed, we see that even today when there is a broad scientific and cultural consensus on the potential mortal harm of cigarette smoke, an estimated 42 million Americans smoke, 16 million live with cigarette-related disease, and cigarettes still account for around 20% of US deaths annually, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

A social consensus can be difficult to achieve in the face of a scientific one because individuals filter science news through their pre-existing beliefs, which are in turn influenced by their group values. This can be clearly seen in climate change polling, which breaks down predominantly along party lines.

Hoffman explains that disbelief of climate change is exacerbated by distrust of the typical messengers (environmentalists, Democrats, scientists), the process of scientific research (which most people do not understand), and the solutions (regulation, renewables).

Further, when a scientific consensus exists but the solutions pose a threat to the economic status quo (e.g. acid rain, tobacco, ozone hole, climate change), those opposed to change often work to discredit the science and create doubt in the minds of the undecided. *Merchants of Doubt*, a book by Naomi Oreskes of Harvard University and the basis of a current documentary film, explores the history of such disinformation campaigns.

Recognizing that the messenger can be as important as the message, the C2ES (then Pew Center) Business Environmental Leadership Council was formed in 1998 in part as progressive corporate alternative to the Global Climate Coalition, a group of companies that actively funded a campaign to question the science of climate change and thus the need for action. Ten years later, more than 90 organizations, including 75+ business (and some former members of the Global Climate Coalition), joined an ad campaign led in part by C2ES to support climate and clean energy legislation.

So times do change.

Yet it is also important to remember that even if and when a social consensus is reached, changes in human behavior can still be difficult to achieve, as we saw in the smoking example (and if you subscribe to the notion that the global economy is “addicted” to fossil fuels, perhaps the metaphor is even stronger). This example also suggests that even if people are able to draw a connection between climate change and their personal experience – even their own health – getting them to act will remain a challenge.

Recently, we’ve seen some hopeful developments. Several climate change related amendments received bipartisan support in the Senate earlier this year, and companies and governments alike are making climate commitments leading up to the Paris climate talks in December.

In the end, as Hoffman says, talking about solutions can be most productive. Sure enough, my climate skeptical in-law is paradoxically a fanatic about being energy efficient at home – something he and I can agree on. And finding common ground helps to continue the conversation.