Emotionally Overheated

Getting to a solution on climate change is as much about feelings as facts.

By Peter Dizikes on December 22, 2015

As recently as 2009, it was not crazy to think the United States Congress might enact legislation to limit the release of greenhouse gases. That was when the Waxman-Markey bill, which would have mandated a cap-and-trade system for greenhouse-gas emissions, passed in the U.S. House of Representatives.

The legislation subsequently died in the U.S. Senate, and it has had no chance of being revived since the Republican Party took control of the House after the 2010 elections. Instead, the climate debate has been subsumed by the tribal wars that animate U.S. politics.

According to Andrew Hoffman, an MIT-trained management professor, we need to understand the cultural and tribal nature of climate politics if we hope to make any policy progress on the issue. Now Hoffman has written a book on the subject, How Culture Shapes the Climate Change Debate, published by Stanford University Press. The book synthesizes a wealth of recent social-science research on the subject.

“I think the social sciences have a lot to offer in terms of why people do not accept the science,” says Hoffman, a professor of sustainable enterprise and director of the Erb Institute for Global Sustainable Enterprise at the University of Michigan. Among other things, social-science research has detailed the ways people's cognitive biases inform their cultural identity, which in turn “can overpower scientific reasoning,” Hoffman writes. Thus, most citizens are likely to be persuaded about issues only by people from their own political tribe.

“The insight that the messenger is as important as the message is important,” says Hoffman. “We need to have people hearing it from people they trust, or they’re not going to listen.”

For starters, this means finding more Republicans willing to speak to other Republicans about the issue and tailoring messages to their concerns, such as personal responsibility, economic competitiveness, and national security. “Climate change has been marginalized as an environmental issue, and it is not,” Hoffman says.
While noting the powerful economic interests opposing climate action, Hoffman prescribes paying less attention to climate-change deniers and focusing on bringing moderates into a coalition in which liberal voices help define one side of the debate. “There are people in the middle who can be persuaded, but you need people on the [left-leaning] radical flank to make the middle moderate,” he says. Otherwise, the middle becomes the left end of the political spectrum.

Writing about institutional change on climate issues synthesizes a number of Hoffman’s own research interests; he received an MS in civil and environmental engineering and a PhD (a joint degree in management and civil and environmental engineering) from MIT, and he has long had an interdisciplinary bent. “I loved my time at the Institute,” says Hoffman. “I just loved the vibrancy of the environment there.” Now he’s working to keep the planet’s environment livable.

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