EarthBeat
Politics

Cows graze under wind turbines in the early morning outside Albuquerque, N.M., April 28, 2023. (OSV News photo/Bob Roller)

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Household appliances used to be a safe conversation topic, if a boring one. But these days, many Republican politicians see gas stoves, refrigerators, dishwashers, and laundry machines as symbols of the government meddling in people's lives. Earlier this year, lawmakers in the House passed the "Hands Off Our Home Appliances Act" to make it harder for the Department of Energy to create new energy-saving standards, though it stalled in the Senate. Other appliance-related bills proposed this year included the "Refrigerator Freedom Act" and "Liberty in Laundry Act."

The uproar over efficient appliances is just one of the ways that deepening polarization threatens efforts to cut carbon emissions. On the campaign trail, President-elect Donald Trump revived longstanding complaints about energy-efficient dishwashers and showerheads and also railed against clean technologies, falsely claiming that wind turbines break down when exposed to saltwater and that hydrogen-powered cars are prone to blowing up like bombs.

A growing portion of the public appears to share some of Trump's reservations. Four years ago, 84% of Republicans supported new solar farms; by this spring, the number had slumped to 64% according to polling from Pew Research Center. Wind power saw a similar dip in support, and the share of Americans who say they would consider buying an electric vehicle for their next purchase dropped from 38% in 2023 to 29% this year.

A laundry room is seen at Second Farms housing complex, a property of Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York, in the Bronx borough of New York City April 1, 2021. (CNS photo/Johnny Zhang, courtesy Catholic Charities)

Dislodging climate change from the culture wars might feel nearly impossible. But scientists have found ways to talk about the changing weather that resonate with Fox News fans, a segment of the population that many climate advocates consider a lost cause, by taking a "just the facts" approach.

"If you're talking about just pure observations, there's nothing political about that," said Keith Sietter, a lecturer at the College of the Holy Cross and executive director emeritus at the American Meteorological Society. Telling people that hurricanes are intensifying more rapidly because they're sitting over record-warm ocean water, for instance, lets them come to their own conclusions about how the world is changing.

Related: Trump's election, embrace of fossil fuels casts shadow over UN climate summit

Climate Central, a nonprofit that aims to be "scrupulously non-advocacy and non-partisan," provides localized data and graphics to help newspapers, online news sites, meteorologists, and TV and radio programs explain the science behind our increasingly weird weather, from warming winters to longer allergy seasons. The organization has had success working with right-leaning media, like Fox affiliates, because of its apolitical approach, according to Peter Girard, Climate Central's vice president for external communications.

"Audiences, regardless of what their political stripes are, want to know what the science is telling them about the weather and climatological experiences that they're having in their backyards," Girard said.

Cars are submerged in floodwaters after Hurricane Beryl passed in Houston July 8, 2024. Hurricane Beryl slammed into Texas early that morning, knocking out power to nearly 3 million homes and businesses, unleashing heavy rain and causing multiple deaths it moved east and later weakened to a tropical depression, the National Hurricane Center said. (OSV News photo/Rich Matthews, Reuters)

Yet even as fires, floods, and heat waves become noticeably worse, Democrats and Republicans are further apart on the science of human-caused global warming than almost any other issue. Some observers have noted that the resistance to accepting climate science might not be about the science at all, but what attempts to fix the problem might entail. An experiment in 2014 found that Republicans who read a speech about the United States using environmentally friendly technologies to fuel the economy, versus a speech about enacting stringent environmental regulations and pollution taxes, were twice as likely as other Republicans to agree with mainstream climate science. In other words, it might be easier to just ignore a problem if you don't like the proposed solution.

This concept of "solution aversion" might help explain how the culture war over climate solutions started. In the early 1990s, with the public freshly alerted by scientists that global warming had already begun, momentum began building for global action, with countries considering mandatory requirements to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Corporations that had a stake in continuing to burn fossil fuels — oil companies, utilities, automakers, railroads, and steelmakers — saw this as an impending disaster and organized a counter-offensive. Conservatives began casting doubt on climate science and arguing that shifting away from fossil fuels threatened the economy and the American way of life. A gulf grew between Republicans and Democrats on a subject they used to mostly agree on, with congressional Republicans increasingly voting against environmental measures.

Climate change "became the stand-in for everything that's wrong with the government," said Aaron McCright, a sociologist at Michigan State University, in an interview with CNN last year. "'You can't tell me what I can and can't do on my land. Federal government — stay away from me.'" Between 1992 and 2012, the gap in support for environmental action between Democrats and Republicans widened from 5% to 39%, according to Pew polling.

The fault lines have deepened in recent years. When progressives pushed for a Green New Deal in 2019, Republicans falsely claimed, "They want to take away your hamburgers." It became a refrain, with the right warning that Democrats were coming for your cars and your gas stoves. "This is all part of an agenda to control you, and to control your behavior," said Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis in a speech last year, delivered in front of an oil rig in West Texas. "They are trying to limit your choices as Americans."

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There have been efforts to position climate action in a way that appeals to conservative values, tying it to patriotism, innovation, or competition with China. But Kenneth Barish, a psychologist and the author of the upcoming book *Bridging Our Political Divide: How Liberals and Conservatives Can Understand Each Other and Find Common Ground*, says that in practice, conservatives might reject this kind of framing outright, because they feel like they haven't been listened to. His formula for depolarization starts with a one-on-one conversation between two people who disagree. The goal is to learn why your discussion partner feels the way they do, and then work together to find solutions that address both of your concerns.

A supporter of former U.S. President Donald Trump and an anti-Trump demonstrator argue near the Wilkie D. Ferguson Jr. U.S. Courthouse, on the day Trump appeared for his arraignment on classified document charges, in Miami June 13, 2023. (OSV News photo/Marco Bello, Reuters)

This kind of dialogue creates opportunities for creative, pragmatic workarounds — perhaps ones that manage to reduce greenhouse gas emissions while limiting the government's power over household decisions. Matthew Burgess, an environmental economist at the University of Wyoming, said it's possible that simply making electric stoves more responsive to temperature adjustments, or making electric vehicles cheaper and charging stations more readily available, would dissolve some of the resistance to those technologies.

"When you make this shift from having an opinion to understanding the concern that underlies the opinion, it's really a different kind of conversation," Barish said.

The approach is reminiscent of "deep canvassing," an outreach method developed by LGBTQ+ advocates that involves listening to people's worries without judgment and helping them work through their conflicted feelings. Personal conversations like these have been shown to change people's minds, with lasting effects.

In one experiment in British Columbia, volunteers hoping to convince local governments to shift to 100% renewable energy kept running into roadblocks in the rural town of Trail, home to one of the world's largest lead and zinc smelting plants. They spoke to hundreds of residents, listening to their concerns about lost jobs and working to find common ground. In the end, 40% of residents shifted their beliefs, and Trail's city council voted in 2022 to move to 100% renewable energy by 2050.

It's evidence that breakthroughs can happen, but also suggests there's a lot of work for climate advocates ahead. Knee-jerk reactions are fast and easy; engaging in meaningful dialogue is slow and difficult. Barish said that better conversations require acknowledging that complex problems like climate change need to be seen from different perspectives. "If we come at someone who is opposing certain interventions and try and convince her why we're right and she's wrong, then we're probably not going to get anywhere."

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