Hot tempers can help cool the planet

When conveyed in a bipartisan fashion, collective anger can be a powerful unifier across partisan divisions. **Anandita Sabherwal, Adam Pearson,** *and* **Gregg Sparkman** *write that, by expressing their anger, activists can turn individuals who may be sitting at home stewing into a collective that is emboldened to act. Despite our differences, our anger reflects our shared values, and a shared desire for a more sustainable future.*

As world leaders gathered in Glasgow earlier this month to negotiate the latest round of emissions targets, outside, angry protesters could be heard chanting, "end climate betrayal". During the conference, many frustrated attendees, including Greta Thunberg, interrupted and exited a panel on carbon offsets, demanding "No greenwashing," and former President Obama urged young activists to "stay angry" and to "harness that frustration."

Worldwide, anger has been brewing towards politicians, banking executives, and corporate leaders, with over 10 million people protesting to express their dissatisfaction with current efforts to address climate change. Surveys suggest anger among young adults is particularly acute, with a majority (58%) of those polled in 10 nations reporting that they feel "betrayed" when they think about their government's response to climate change. Amidst rising temperatures and need for immediate action, is growing public outrage about the climate crisis a constructive response?

Although often viewed as an antisocial and destructive emotion, our research suggests displays of public anger like these may have hidden perks for mobilising public responses to tackling climate change.

In a series of survey experiments with a politically diverse online sample of US adults, we found that simple messages conveying growing public anger about climate inaction within the US can lead people across the political spectrum to shift their thinking on the issue in important ways.

In our studies, participants received one of four messages, each featuring a simple line graph, showing that a growing number of Americans either is angry about climate inaction, believes in human-caused climate change, or supports climate mitigation. Those in a control condition read about trends in television viewership. We then asked participants to estimate other Americans' views about climate change, including their belief in anthropogenic climate change and support for climate mitigation, and indicate their own views in response to these questions.

What did we find?

First, when survey-takers learned that a growing number of Americans is angry about climate inaction, they inferred that a larger share of the US public supports climate mitigation policies, like setting strict carbon dioxide emission limits on existing coal-fired power plants, and prioritises climate change when deciding whom to vote for, compared to those who received the other messages.

Second, this message led our participants to anticipate that more Americans will take collective action to address climate change in the future (such as donate, volunteer, vote and strike). Importantly, the anger message also emboldened our participants to express their own anger towards climate inaction and increased their personal support for climate mitigation.

Anger is a powerful signal that *others* are willing to take action—which is critical for a collective problem like climate change, where people may often feel that their own actions have little impact.

Notably, these effects were just as pronounced for Republicans and Democrats. In fact, Republicans who viewed the anger consensus message were more likely to indicate that others "should" take action compared to those shown a neutral statement. Learning that a growing number of Americans feels angry about climate inaction actually brought people across the political spectrum closer together.

Why are messages like these so effective?

Our findings suggest that collective emotions like anger affect perceptions of not only what others feel, but also what they are likely to *do* (a motivational state), and this belief may help to mobilise not just the highly engaged, but also those on the fence to join the effort.

Effects of anger as a motivating emotion are well-documented. If we believe that others are angry about a lack of progress in addressing an issue like climate change, we may not only assume that people believe that climate change is real, but that we have a collective responsibility to address it and that others are willing and prepared to take action, too.

Unlike messages that highlight what others think about an issue like climate change, like statistics indicating that most Americans or most scientists believe that climate change is human-caused, or that most Americans support policies to cut carbon emissions, messages that highlight what people *feel* may motivate people to take action themselves. Feeling the crowd is on our side, we might be more inclined to join.

Anger also connotes that a particular group or entity is to blame for a problem and assigning blame may make a problem feel more tractable or solvable. For instance, research shows that assigning blame for an economic recession to specific groups (e.g., bankers) has a stronger effect on enhancing feelings of control over one's own economic situation than does blaming the economic system more generally. Similarly, in other survey research, we have found that viewing US government officials as responsible for mitigating climate change is associated with a greater sense that climate change can be collectively managed, and this was particularly true for US Republicans.

Feeling that a problem is tractable may be particularly important for mobilising collective action to address politically contentious, complex, and socially divisive issues, like climate change, where the most socially appropriate and effective course of action may often be unclear. A message of public anger may, thus, help to fuel more targeted forms of collective action that may hold powerful institutions, such as governments and large corporations, accountable.

These effects of the anger consensus message were also likely strengthened by our use of a *dynamic* rather than static norm appeal, suggesting that anger is on the rise, which may be particularly important for reaching more sceptical audiences.

Previous studies have shown that messages signal ling that public perceptions are changing are often more effective in generating conformity than messages emphasising the views of a simple majority. One reason for this is that dynamic appeals recognise that a particular viewpoint or sentiment (such as anger about climate change) may not have been normative in the past, which may reduce scepticism among those who disagree with the message.

Whose anger matters?

In our studies, we attempted to strike a balance between persuasiveness and ensuring message credibility, particularly for a bipartisan audience. Our studies conveyed a trend of growing public anger using a simple line graph. Although attention-grabbing, communicating collective anger through protest imagery or other visuals showing a narrow segment of the public might have been ineffective or even backfired if it conveyed that only a niche audience cared, rather than a growing consensus. Studies suggest that visuals of angry young protesters may draw attention to a subset of the population—environmentalists—who are sometimes stereotyped as young and naïve, which could lead people to distance themselves from a protest group or its cause.

In contrast, imagery that features a variety of protesters, including those who may not conform to the prototypical or niche image of a youth climate activist, may be more effective for portraying a widely endorsed public consensus.

To bolster the credibility of our message, we tested several different versions of our message, including a version that showed separate trends for US Democrats, Republicans, and Independents. This was intended to acknowledge partisan differences while also conveying similar trends in public sentiment across partisan groups. Survey-takers who viewed this message showed similar, albeit weaker effects, compared to those who viewed a single trend that emphasized a single, national consensus, perhaps because it led participants to focus on the divisions among Americans, rather than the broader consensus. The final and most effective version of our appeal included a brief text statement below the graphic acknowledging that, compared to Republicans, a higher percentage of Democrats are angry about climate inaction.

To be sure, simple appeals noting shared public outrage about an issue like climate change may only go so far. Expressing support for policies is one thing — mobilising large-scale protests, or other collective behaviours is another. Anger may also fuel more punitive than prosocial responses (a key question for future research).

Nevertheless, punitive reactions may be beneficial, particularly for politically intractable problems, like climate change, prompting a search for other remedies such as through legal action and regulatory enforcement. A recent analysis found that climate lawsuits have increased sharply over the last decade, fuelled by frustration with political inaction, with over 1000 cases filed since 2015 seeking damages and remediation for past and future harms from major emitters.

Our findings suggest that when conveyed in a bipartisan fashion, collective anger can be a powerful unifier. By highlighting that, despite our differences, our anger reflects our shared values, and a shared desire for a more sustainable future, activists and organisations can transform individuals who may be sitting at home stewing, into a collective that is emboldened to take action.

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Notes:

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