Is it worth trying to "reframe" climate change? Probably not.

by [David Roberts](), Vox on March 15, 2016

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The danger of climate change **does not arouse** much public passion, certainly nothing like what the facts would warrant. This drives climate campaigners crazy. Always has.

So how to get people's attention? One strategy might be to talk about climate change differently — to "frame" it differently, in the current jargon.

Over the years, climate scientists, campaigners, and policymakers have returned to this strategy (or, rather, this hope) again and again. And again.

The alternate framings are familiar by now: global warming as an economic opportunity, a way to spur technological innovation, a national security threat, a way of reducing local pollutants, a religious or moral imperative.

These other ways of describing climate change are more visceral than long-term, slow-moving, incremental risk (zzz…). It seems like they ought to be more effective in getting people to pay attention and support action.

But are they? The research on framing effects has thus far been inconclusive, to say the least.

Testing frames, scientifically

A **letter** published this month in *Nature Climate Change* attempts to settle the question. Researchers Thomas Bernauer and Liam F. McGrath, political scientists at Switzerland's Center for Comparative and International Studies, set up experiments in which people (drawn

from different demographic and ideological backgrounds) were randomly assigned texts that framed climate change in different ways. One was "climate risk reduction," the standard frame. The other three were "economic co-benefits, community building, and health benefits." At the end, subjects were tested on three different measures of willingness to support action on climate change, ranging from personal action to policy action.

Long story short: None of it worked. The researchers found that different framings had no consistent or statistically significant effects on subjects' willingness to support climate action.

"In summary," Bernauer and McGrath write, "we do not find any robust empirical evidence for alternative framing (justification) of climate policy being able to increase public support for GHG mitigation—whether in the sample as a whole or amongst particular groups of participants (such as climate sceptics)."

So why don't these frames seem to work?

Magic words in politics

In 2005, cognitive linguist **George Lakoff** released a book called ***Don't Think of an Elephant!*** and became **"the father of framing,"** as the New York Times put it. His ideas became extremely popular on the left, particularly during the mid-to-late 2000s heyday of the "netroots."

Lakoff's academic work is great — I read and loved **one of his books** back in school — but by the time framing reached the broad public, it had, shall we say, lost some of its rigor. Lots of people became convinced that words have a kind of magic power, that anyone can be convinced of anything given the right turn of phrase. Worse, a lot of people thought, "Hey, I can do that!" And overnight, the internet was flooded with newly expert framers, including **Lakoff himself**, coming up with one "elevator pitch for liberalism" after another.

All this mainly served to establish that knowing about framing does not make you good at framing.

What people often forget is that changing the way an issue is framed, especially on any broad public scale, is incredibly difficult, for three reasons.

People's lives and identities have great inertia

Human beings are not freestanding reasoning machines. They are situated in the world, inheritors of particular socioeconomic conditions, worldviews, dispositions, and interpretive filters. They come complete with a strong set of overlapping, mutually reinforcing frames.

To a great extent, those preexisting social and psychological commitments — which are outside the scope of any conceivable climate communication campaign — are going to determine how people assess a specific phenomenon like climate change. Bernauer and McGrath put it this way: "[A] large amount of research shows that climate policy preferences are strongly shaped by factors that cannot be affected or offset through climate change communication per se (for example, political ideology, income, gender, general social norms, weather or climatic conditions, economic conditions of the respective country)."

A lifetime of baggage carries a lot of weight and momentum. Comparatively, a single exposure to a bit of framing is nothing, like blowing on the sails of a giant ship.

Or to switch metaphors: People exist within a matrix of self-reinforcing frames. Getting inside that matrix and tweaking just the climate change frame is no simple matter. It's attached to other things.

The best that could be hoped for is to nudge people to a nearby framing, one that's amenable to their priors, like getting conservatives already suspicious of government to think of inheritance taxes as "death taxes."

People seek out reinforcing frames

Making things even more difficult, people's preexisting dispositions and tribal ties largely determine what messages they will be exposed to in the first place.

"Existing research shows that people usually select information lining up with prior beliefs and attitudes," Bernauer and McGrath write, "to preserve their existing worldviews, self-concept and self-worth, or to sustain beliefs that are in line with prevailing values, ideologies and beliefs in their social network."

It's easy these days to live in an information bubble, to find nothing but confirmation of your priors everywhere you look. A bit of framing that's contrary, or even just novel, is likely to be passed over by people mainly seeking identity reinforcement.

Source and repetition matter more than cleverness

Even if you can create a controlled environment in which everyone is exposed to your framing (and not other, contrary framings simultaneously), there's still no guarantee it will stick.

People often seem to think that clever wordsmithery is the key to good framing, but it's not even really necessary. Two things make a message stick.

First, it comes from a trusted source, which generally means someone within the tribe in question, however it is defined. If the audience is people who are generally hostile toward cultural elites, they're probably not going to listen to a bespectacled Harvard scientist, even if he is framing things just so.

And second, messages stick when they are repeated. As conservative pollster Frank Luntz once famously **said**:

You say it again, and you say it again, and you say it again, and you say it again, and you say it again, and then again and again and again and again, and about the time that you're absolutely sick of saying it is about the time that your target audience has heard it for the first time.

People are bombarded by messages all day long. It's hard to break through.

Breaking through, reaching an audience, has little to do with cleverness and a lot to do with power, money, access to media, and a willingness on the part of messengers to exhibit heroic message discipline.

It's time to abandon the idea of wholesale climate reframing

To sum up, the frames that reach people and actually make a difference are a) resonant with their existing dispositions and affiliations, b) delivered by a trusted source, and c) repeated often enough to penetrate the pervasive information buzz.

That's a heavy lift, to say the least. Changing the way global warming is framed in the popular imagination would require an enormous, well-funded, well-coordinated campaign, and there's no guarantee it would work, even if the climate community could pull it off.

So maybe they should stick with the frame they've got.

That's what Bernauer and McGrath conclude. As they note, the "time, money, political capital, and public attention" required for such a campaign "are very much limited." Spending them on a framing campaign, the effects of which are unclear to say the least, is an enormous risk.

"[O]n the basis of what we know so far," they write, "policymakers should keep a strong focus on climate risk reduction as the dominant justification" for action on climate change. That's the frame "into which the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the scientific community as a whole, and most governments and civil society have invested in very heavily over the past decades."

I've gone back and forth on this over the years, but I more or less agree.

The one frame for climate change that's broadly accepted, frequently repeated, and widely understood is that it's dangerous and we should do what we can to avoid it.

That also turns out to be, objectively speaking, the most important reason to address climate change — the future of humanity and all that.

This isn't to say that other frames can't work for particular audiences at particular times. Entrepreneurs could be (and have been) taken by the notion that climate is an enormous business innovation opportunity. Conservatives could be (and have been) taken by the notion that renewable energy offers energy independence.

Disadvantaged or polluted communities could be (and have been) taken by the notion that climate mitigation also mitigates asthma-causing pollutants.

And so on. "Know your audience and speak to them in a way that resonates" is a fairly old bit of counsel, around long before cognitive linguistics, and it's as true as ever.

But in terms of any large-scale, well-funded, concerted effort to change the way people think and talk about climate change? Meh. It's the kind of thing that forever appeals to funders, but it's a huge undertaking with dubious chances of success at a fairly late stage in the game.

Climate change is what it is. The thing to do is just keep plugging away at it.