

The Language of Doubt Impacts Consensus Judgements

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Abstract

Scepticism of science is growing, with notable gaps between public acceptance and scientific consensus. This divide is especially concerning for collective action problems such as climate change. Highlighting consensus on a topic is an effective strategy to spur belief change and increase trust in science, but the deliberate manufacture of doubt has obscured this information. In our experiment, participants read factual or moral claims, each presented with public agreement statistics from sources like Pew Research Center. Participants indicated their prior belief, then judged either a presence or lack of consensus on each claim. We found that consensus judgements were largely based on the existing percentage of agreement and one's prior beliefs about the claim. However, prior belief had minimal impact when judging a lack of consensus, suggesting that framing information to introduce doubt may influence how people interpret scientific agreement.