



CONFRONTING CLIMATE SKEPTICISM IN BRAZIL

Recommendations
for Communicators

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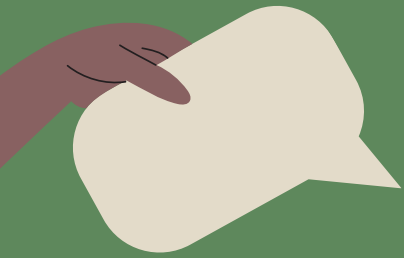
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This report draws on the newly published scholarly article “Climate change beliefs and their correlates in Latin America,” authored by Matias Spektor, Guilherme N. Fasolin, and Juliana Camargo, featured in *Nature Communications* 14, 7241 (2023).



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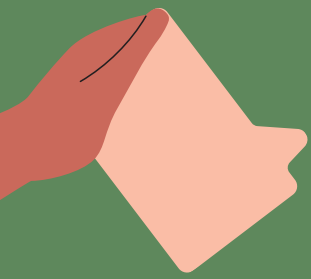


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Executive Summary

Climate skepticism in Brazil poses a significant challenge, encompassing doubts about the existence, human origins, and severity of climate change. Effective communication strategies are essential to address this skepticism and foster public support for climate action. This report delves into the factors shaping Brazilians' beliefs about climate change and offers recommendations for tailored communication strategies.

The report draws on the newly published scholarly article “Climate change beliefs and their correlates in Latin America,” authored by Matias Spektor, Guilherme N. Fasolin, and Juliana Camargo, featured in *Nature Communications* 14, 7241 (2023). This research leveraged survey methodology across seven countries responsible for 80% of CO² emissions in Latin America, including Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Peru. The extensive sample comprised 5,038 respondents, providing a nationally diverse perspective on climate change beliefs and their determinants.

Beliefs about Climate Change in Brazil

While an overwhelming majority of Brazilians recognize climate change as a reality caused by humans, a divide emerges concerning the severity of its consequences. Approximately 44% of the population is not entirely convinced that climate change will significantly disrupt their lives. To combat this skepticism, communication should focus on the tangible, everyday impacts of climate change, emphasizing its immediacy and relevance to people's lives.

Drivers of Belief and Disbelief in Brazil

Two primary factors influence climate beliefs in Brazil: scientific consensus and individualism. A shared perception of scientific consensus strongly influences public belief in climate change. By contrast, individualism, characterized by self-reliance and minimal government intervention, drives skepticism among Brazilians.

Implications

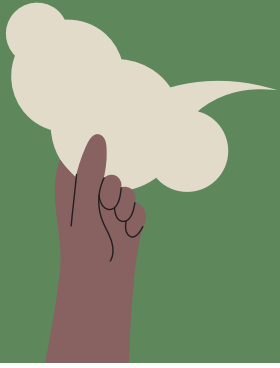
The study reveals three critical implications for journalists and communicators:

1. **Diverse Market for Climate Skepticism:** A broad market for climate skepticism exists in Brazil, particularly regarding the severity of climate change's effects, necessitating targeted communication strategies.
2. **Individualism Fuels Skepticism:** Citizens with individualistic worldviews are susceptible to denialist messages, posing challenges in a context of low trust in institutions.
3. **Skepticism Across the Social Groups:** Climate skepticism transcends political and demographic boundaries, requiring inclusive communication approaches.

Recommendations for Communicators

Given the findings laid out in this report, the final section suggests a host of communication strategies to combat climate skepticism effectively in Brazil. In summary form, they include:

- Highlight the existence of scientific unanimity around the existence, origins, and consequences of climate change.
- Use reporting to equip the public to critically assess information, countering climate misinformation.
- Convey the immediate, tangible effects of climate change on everyday life.
- Disseminate and promote reporting that highlights the role of objective knowledge in guiding individual and collective decisions in coping with climate change.
- Align climate responsibility with individual autonomy and market principles.
- Highlight the economic growth potential for individuals in embracing sustainable practices.
- Illustrate the powerful impact of individual actions on combating climate change.
- Use sources that speak for climate action who are widely seen embodying individualistic worldviews.



Introduction

Climate skepticism is a term we hear a lot when talking about global warming and climate change. It's about people having doubts over three main areas: first, whether climate change is really happening; second, if it's actually caused by human activities like burning fossil fuels; and third, how serious the effects of climate change will be.

Not everyone who's skeptical about climate change thinks the same way. Some might agree that the climate is changing but are not convinced that humans are the main reason. Others might question how bad things are going to get because of it. This kind of skepticism matters a lot because it influences what people think and what kind of policies governments might make. When we are trying to deal with something as big as climate change, these doubts and debates play a huge role in deciding how, or even if, we are going to take action.

Tackling climate skepticism isn't just about throwing facts and figures at people. It's about understanding why they have these doubts and then finding the right way to talk to them about it. This is where smart communication strategies come in. Politicians, policymakers, journalists, and communicators all play a big role here. They need to find ways to connect with different audiences, using language and examples that resonate with them. For some, it might be showing how climate change can affect their local community or their pocketbook. For others, it might involve stories that highlight the human side of climate change, like how it impacts farmers or coastal towns. The key is to make the issue feel real and relevant to people's lives, not just something distant or too scientific. When communication hits the right note, it can turn skepticism into understanding, and even

Tackling climate skepticism isn't just about throwing facts and figures at people.

action. This approach can make a huge difference in rallying public support for policies to combat climate change and in shaping a more informed and engaged society.

This report digs deeper into what's shaping people's views on climate change in Brazil. We figure out what people believe when they think about climate change as well as the main factors driving these public beliefs. Doing this helps us detect how best to craft messages that really hit home with Brazilians. By tailoring the language and approach to this particular audience, communicators and policymakers alike can help address the harmful impact of climate skepticism on public opinion. By connecting with people in a way that resonates with their experiences and concerns, strategic communication can help move the conversation forward, fostering a better understanding and encouraging positive action towards tackling climate change in Brazil.



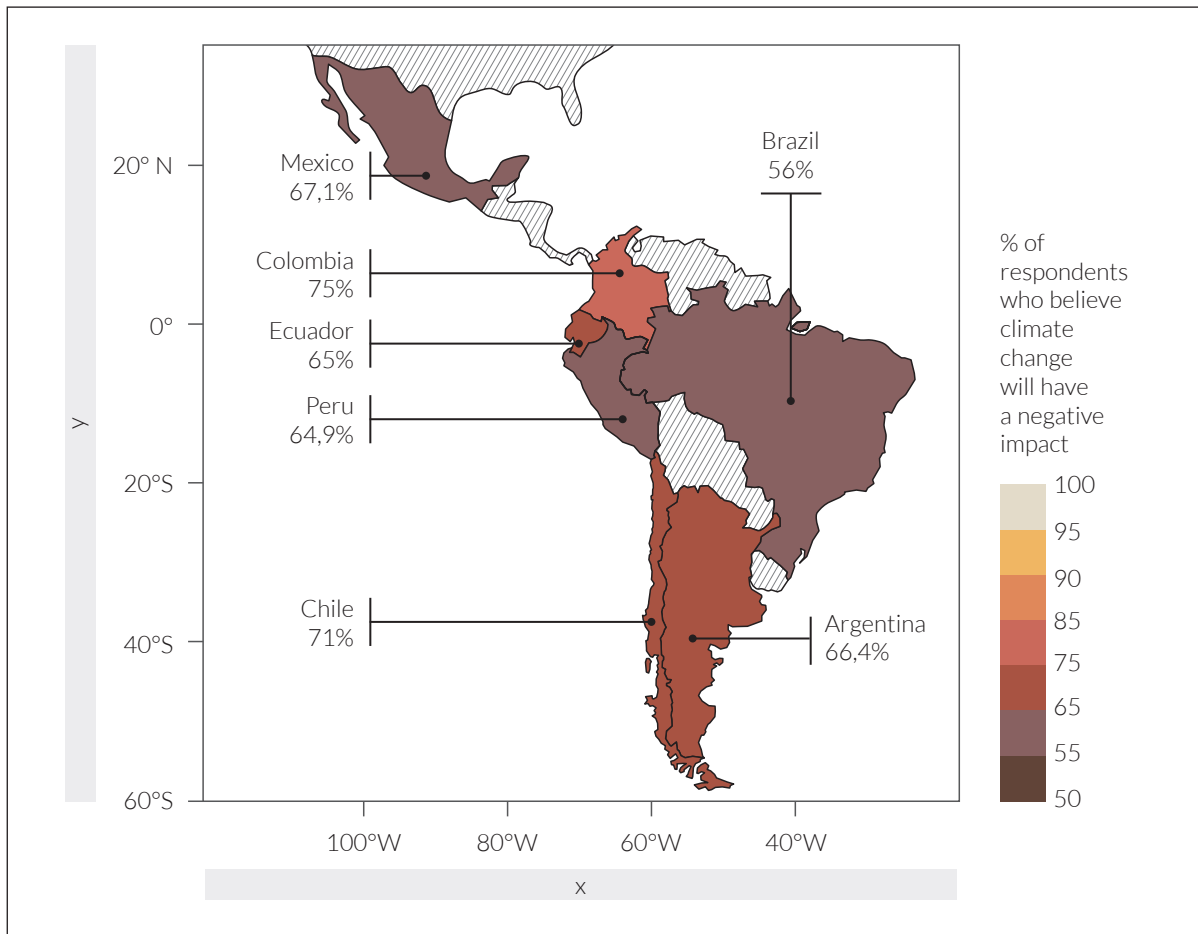
Beliefs about Climate Change in Brazil

In Brazil, a striking consensus has emerged: a vast majority of people recognize that climate change is not just a theory but a reality (94%), and they're on the same page about humans being the culprits behind it (91%). Despite this shared understanding, however, the waters get murkier when it comes to the severity of climate change's fallout. There's a deep divide, with nearly half of the population (44%) not fully convinced that climate change will disrupt their lives in significant ways.

This divide signals where climate communications need to zero in: the tangible, everyday consequences of climate change. Since this is where skepticism has the strongest foothold, pro-climate messages must be crafted to illuminate how climate change isn't just a problem for burning forests or future generations – it's here, it's now, and it's affecting all of us, our families, and our way of life.

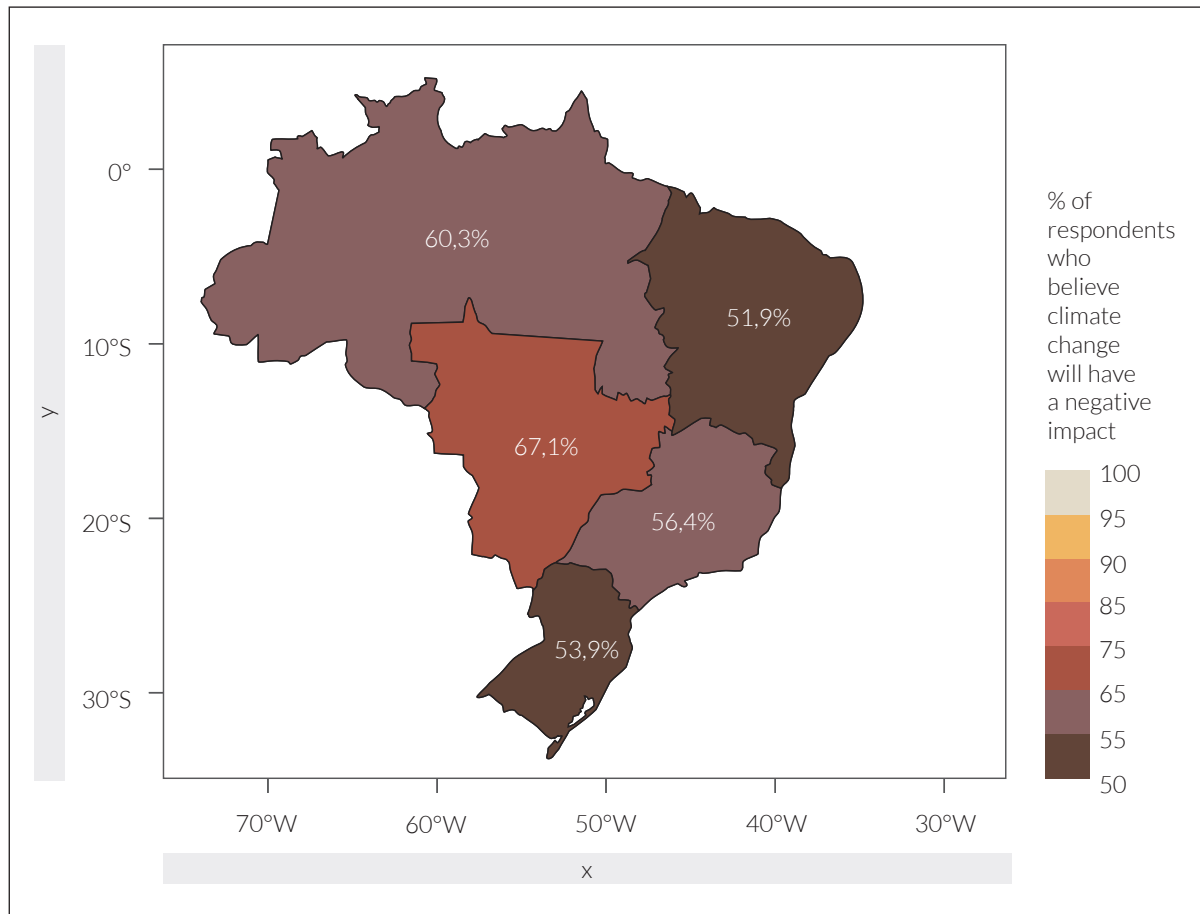
Social polarization over the severity of climate change in Brazil contrasts with the reality in some of its neighboring countries in Latin America. Consider for instance Figure 1, which portrays levels of public agreement with the notion that the “impact of climate change is severe”. In Brazil, the percentage of the population that perceives the impact of climate change as severe is the lowest among the presented countries, at 56%. Conversely, Colombia registers the highest percentage, with 75% of respondents acknowledging the severe implications of climate change. Brazil's relatively lower percentage suggests a more skeptical attitude towards the

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Figure 1. Belief in the Consequences of Climate Change in Latin America.

potential negative consequences of climate change. Indeed, our research finds that climate skepticism is more appealing in Brazil than in neighboring countries such as Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Peru.

In making sense of skepticism about the severity of the impacts of climate change, it is instructive to zoom into variations within Brazil. Figure 2 portrays a map of Brazil with a focus on the belief in the negative impacts of climate change across different regions. The color coding indicates the percentage of respondents by region who believe that climate change will have adverse effects. In the northern region, 60.3% of respondents believe in the negative impacts of climate change, which is the highest percentage across the country. The Midwest shows a majority as well, with 67.1% of respondents convinced of the detrimental effects. In contrast, the Southeast has the lowest percentage, where only 51.9% of respondents believe in the negative impacts. The South and Northeast are close in perception, with 56.4% and 53.9% respectively.

Figure 2. Belief in the Consequences of Climate Change across Brazilian regions.

This data suggests a varied landscape of belief in the severity of climate change's consequences across Brazil. While there is a significant acknowledgment of the negative impacts in some regions, others show high levels of skepticism. This regional disparity underscores the challenge communicators and policymakers face in addressing climate change concerns. Tailoring communication strategies to the specific contexts and perceptions of each region could be key in enhancing the understanding of climate change's seriousness.



Drivers of Belief and Disbelief in Brazil

Scientific Consensus

The factor that most powerfully influences how Brazilians relate to the three beliefs – that climate change exists, is caused by human activity, and has severe consequences – is a shared perception of **scientific consensus**. When citizens perceive the scientific community united on the issue, it is ready to follow the consensus. The scientific consensus message is powerful not only because it can correct people’s misperceptions but also because it can act as a “gateway belief”. When the general public acknowledges the consensus among scientists, this acceptance reinforces the recognition of climate change as an authentic and urgent issue, also paving the way for the acceptance of its severe consequences.

Climate deniers intuitively know how influential scientific consensus can be. As a result, they systematically strive to erode public confidence in the scientific consensus on climate change, employing a spectrum of tactics. Misinformation and disinformation campaigns use telecommunications channels and social media to propagate their narrative, ranging from the exaggeration of scientific uncertainty to outright assault on the credibility of individual scientists. By meticulously emphasizing purported disagreements within the scientific community or presenting pseudoscientific theories, these players create an illusion of significant scientific disagreement. One of the most pernicious tactics employed is false-balance media coverage, wherein contrarian voices are accorded the same weight as *bona fide* climate experts. This approach falsely suggests a dichotomy of equal standing, leaving the public with an erroneous perception, despite the overwhelming consensus among climate experts. Responsible reporting, if it must include contrarian views, ought to contextualize these as counterfactual.

Individualism

The main factor determining climate skepticism in Brazil is the degree of **individualism** among citizens. In essence, individuals who align with a more individualistic worldview tend to be less inclined to attribute climate change to human activities and often downplay its severe repercussions. This perspective revolves around the idea that an ideal society is one where individuals are self-reliant and independent, with minimal government intervention.

In contexts where individualistic values hold sway, there is often limited support for public policies aimed at collective goals, such as initiatives to mitigate global warming. The reason behind this lies in the fact that some of these policies necessitate government intervention and regulations, which individuals with an individualistic worldview tend to resist. The fear is that acknowledging human responsibility for climate change and its consequences could lead to increased government intervention in personal lifestyles. This resistance is further exacerbated by the cognitive bias in the interpretation of climate change information, which tends to reinforce pre-existing values and safeguard individual identities. In Brazil, the trend towards an individualistic worldview is compounded by a growing belief that state institutions do not do a good job in providing public goods and a decline in social trust.

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Citizens with individualistic worldviews often align with political ideologies that promote free-market principles, creating a synergy between these perspectives. This convergence frequently influences attitudes on issues like climate change, where the balance between individual rights and collective responsibility becomes a key point of contention. The alignment between individualistic worldviews and political ideologies that champion free-market principles often leads to skepticism and disbelief in climate change.

This convergence is rooted in several factors. First, individuals adhering to free-market ideology tend to be wary of government intervention in economic and social matters, viewing climate-related regulations as government overreach and an infringement on personal freedoms. Second, they may perceive climate change mitigation efforts as economic threats, fearing job losses and market disruptions, which can lead to resistance in acknowledging the severity of climate change. Third, free-market proponents emphasize individual responsibility and self-reliance, rejecting the concept of collective action to address climate change. This rejection of shared responsibility can manifest as disbelief in the need for coordinated government intervention.

Presenting climate action as an opportunity for innovation and economic growth would align pro-climate messages with self-reliance.

Moreover, free-market ideology can align with the interests of industries that contribute to greenhouse gas emissions, such as fossil fuel companies. These industries often promote climate skepticism to safeguard their economic interests, exposing individuals influenced by free-market ideology to climate misinformation. Lastly, like-minded individuals tend to form ideological echo chambers, reinforcing their existing beliefs. Those adhering to free-market principles may engage with media outlets and communities that propagate climate skepticism, further solidifying their doubt about climate change.

Our study underscores a crucial insight that can potentially offer a way out: having factual, accurate knowledge about climate change plays a key role in shaping people's beliefs about it. Although the influence of objective knowledge isn't uniform across all countries in our sample, it's clear that focusing communication efforts on clear, factual information can make a real difference. Objective knowledge about climate change can therefore serve as a potent antidote to the challenges posed by individualism in Brazil. It offers a common ground for understanding, beyond personal and economic ideologies, the real impacts of climate change. By investing in educational campaigns that convey the tangible evidence of human-induced climate change and its immediate effects on the Brazilian environment

and society, it is possible to transcend individual biases. Empirical data and scientific consensus can illustrate the dire need for collective action, making the case that climate change is not merely a distant or abstract problem, but a concrete issue affecting individual lives and communities. Furthermore, by presenting climate action as an opportunity for innovation and economic growth, it aligns with the individualistic value of self-reliance, framing environmental regulations not as governmental overreach but as a pathway to new markets and jobs. In doing so, objective knowledge could gradually shift perspectives, fostering a more collective approach to climate issues in Brazil, and mitigating the negative impact of individualism on climate policy support and behavior.

Given the power of individualism as a driver of climate skepticism in Brazil, pro-climate actors need to craft strategic communication messages that are capable of sensitizing those citizens who rank high on individualistic worldviews.

Demographics

In the United States and Europe, climate skepticism often aligns with specific **demographic** characteristics, with skeptics tending to lean right-wing, conservative, older, less educated, and rural, while climate believers lean left-wing, progressive, younger, more educated, and urban. However, Brazil presents a departure from these patterns. Surprisingly, political orientation and other demographic features do not operate as clear determinants of climate skepticism. On the one hand, this should be a source of concern in that climate skepticism can be found across the board, without attaching to any specific social group. On the other, however, this unique Brazilian context suggests that pro-climate movements can potentially emerge across the political spectrum, even among conservative and right-wing individuals, and there is even room for the growth of pro-climate initiatives in rural areas. Policymakers, civil society organizations, and communicators should take advantage of this, in the sense that the Brazilian public holds more open and malleable views on climate change than is the case elsewhere, providing fertile ground for productive engagement and belief-building efforts.



Implications

The study underpinning this report holds critical implications for journalists and communicators covering climate change in Brazil:

Diverse Climate Skepticism Market: There is a broad market for climate skepticism in Brazil, particularly concerning the severity of climate change's effects. This suggests a need for targeted communication strategies to address disbelief in the serious consequences of climate change for citizens and their families.

Individualism Fuels Skepticism: Citizens of Brazil who rank high on individualistic worldviews – that is, who suspect the state is unable or unwilling to provide reliable solutions to collective problems – are the easiest targets for denialist messages. This is concerning given Brazil's relatively low levels of interpersonal trust and trust in political institutions.

Skepticism Across the Political Spectrum: The data indicate that climate skepticism is not confined to one end of the political spectrum but extends across both right-wing and left-wing segments and varied social demographics. This underscores the complexity of climate communication in Brazil, necessitating inclusive approaches that resonate with diverse audiences.



Recommendations for Communicators

In the face of the growing challenge posed by misinformation and fake news, journalists and communicators in Brazil can play a pivotal role in combating climate change skepticism. Here is a list of practical recommendations building on the research underpinning this report.

Appeal to Scientific Consensus: Stress the robust unanimity within the scientific community regarding the existence, causes, and consequences of climate change, reinforcing the necessity of evidence-based approaches in public and private decision-making spheres. Clarify that accepting this consensus is not merely about agreement, but about engaging with an evidence-backed framework that enhances the quality of discourse and policy formulation. Advocate for the integration of this consensus into educational curricula, public communication, and policy debates, providing a solid foundation for discussions that affect societal and environmental futures. Ensure that this emphasis on scientific consensus is portrayed as an embodiment of rational thought in the pursuit of truth and a proactive stance against the existential threat of climate change. This strategy not only fosters informed decision-making but also fortifies the public against the pitfalls of misinformation, enabling a society that values and utilizes scientific understanding in its stewardship of the planet.

Confront Misinformation Campaigns: Proactively identify and reveal the tactics and underlying agendas of misinformation campaigns that undermine the public's understanding of climate change. Educate citizens on how to critically evaluate the information they encounter, particularly that which challenges the scientific consensus. By doing so, it is possible to foster a public opinion that is not only aware but also resilient to the spread of deceptive narratives. Develop and disseminate resources and tools that assist in discerning credible information, equipping society to challenge unsubstantiated

claims. Promote transparency and accountability in media and information sources, thereby creating an environment where truth prevails, and falsehoods are swiftly countered. This initiative is vital in cultivating an informed citizenry, capable of participating in meaningful dialogue and making decisions in the face of climate change challenges.

Explain the Impact of Climate Change: Illuminate the grave impacts of climate change by detailing its manifestations in daily life, from increased frequency of extreme weather events to the subtle yet profound shifts in seasonal patterns. Provide the public with clear, concrete examples of how climate change is altering their immediate environment, health, and local economies. Through storytelling and data visualization, bring to life the stories of individuals and communities grappling with these changes,

Encourage critical thinking and the evaluation of evidence, showing that understanding the scientific basis of climate change is in itself an act of individual autonomy and responsibility.

fostering a visceral understanding of climate change as an immediate cause of the everyday challenges people confront. Highlight adaptation and resilience efforts that are underway, underscoring the adaptive capacities that are being built and the urgent need for further action. By doing so, you can transform abstract statistics into relatable narratives, making the concept of climate change more tangible and compelling, thereby motivating individual belief in the severity of climate change.

Promote Objective Knowledge: Underscore the importance of disseminating objective, factual knowledge about climate change. Highlight how access to accurate information empowers individuals to make informed decisions that are not only beneficial for the environment but also for their personal and economic well-being. Encourage critical thinking and the evaluation of evidence, showing that understanding the scientific basis of climate change is in itself an act of individual autonomy and responsibility. Emphasize educational initiatives that build climate literacy, enabling citizens to navigate through misinformation and to understand the broader impact of their actions. This approach can help bridge the gap between individualistic viewpoints and collective climate action,

demonstrating that informed individuals can lead in making choices that contribute to the larger good while still aligning with their personal beliefs in independence and self-determination.

Reframe Climate Action in Individualist Terms: Articulate how actions against climate change resonate with the principles of self-sufficiency and personal liberty. Emphasize that adopting measures to counteract climate change can be a declaration of individual choice and empowerment. Showcase clean energy as a catalyst for autonomy, allowing individuals to take control of their energy sources, reduce dependencies, and make choices that align with their values and lifestyles. By presenting environmental responsibility as an aspect of personal agency, it can be empowering of individuals. This perspective highlights the alignment of climate action with the pursuit of innovation, economic freedom, and the ability to leave a legacy of a preserved environment for future generations. Through this lens, climate change initiatives can be seen not as mandates, but as opportunities for individuals to exercise their rights to choose a sustainable future.

Focus on the burgeoning market for green technologies and the incentives for eco-friendly innovation, presenting these as not just ethical choices but as lucrative and forward-thinking economic strategies.

Emphasize Economic Opportunities through Sustainable Practices: Accentuate the financial and developmental opportunities that arise from climate-conscious initiatives. Illuminate the success stories of entrepreneurs and investors who have prospered by integrating environmental sustainability into their business models. Focus on the burgeoning market for green technologies and the incentives for eco-friendly innovation, presenting these as not just ethical choices but as lucrative and forward-thinking economic strategies. Highlight how these initiatives contribute to job creation in emerging industries and how they can drive economic revitalization in traditional sectors through sustainable practices. Encourage a narrative that views climate action as an engine for economic prosperity, aligning ecological responsibility with economic advancement, and personal financial success. By showcasing the tangible

benefits that sustainable practices have already provided, affirm the potential for green initiatives to shape a resilient and thriving economy.

Spotlight on Personal Climate Initiatives: Cast a light on the inspiring actions taken by individuals to combat climate change through personal resolve and innovation. Share compelling narratives of farmers turning to regenerative agriculture, small businesses implementing green practices, and citizens living in large cities curbing use of fossil fuels. These stories not only serve as practical examples but also as testimonies to the power of individual contribution. Encourage the notion that every person holds the power to effect environmental change, whether through modest home-based efforts or transformative business models. Highlighting these individual actions fosters a sense of achievable change and personal agency, illustrating that environmental stewardship is within everyone's reach and can lead to substantial collective impact. Such storytelling can inspire others to embark on their own sustainable journeys, building a groundswell of grassroots climate action.

Leverage Diverse Advocates for Climate Action: Use a spectrum of different voices to convey the urgency and importance of climate action, selecting messengers who echo the values and perspectives of the intended audience. Incorporate advocates who can articulate the compatibility of climate action with individualistic and free-market principles, showing that environmental responsibility and economic liberty are not mutually exclusive. By presenting a diverse array of proponents – from entrepreneurs who have capitalized on green markets to conservative leaders who support sustainable solutions – this approach underscores the universal relevance of climate action. It bridges ideological divides, demonstrating that a sustainable future benefits all sectors of society and garners support across the political and economic spectrum. This strategy not only amplifies the message but also solidifies a broad-based coalition for climate advocacy, reinforcing the notion that caring for the planet transcends traditional boundaries and unites us in common cause.

These strategies can help bridge the gap between individualistic worldviews and climate action, fostering greater acceptance and engagement among audiences that may initially be skeptical of climate-related discussions.

