

Examining the Framing of Carbon Taxes in American Politics: Have Democrats Changed Their Tactics?

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Abstract

The consequences of unmitigated climate change are far-reaching and span all races, cultures, and borders. This problem requires rapid solutions, and one prominent solution amongst scientists and economists alike is carbon taxes (Parry, 2019). There has been substantial literature on how political framing has been dominated by Republicans, but there has been little change in the linguistic landscape. This case study examined three months of congressional records to find the current carbon tax frames perpetuated through the U.S. Congress and found that the frames dominating carbon taxes are the same as the frames dominating the broader climate movement: Socioeconomic Consequences, Scientific Uncertainty, and Industrial Leadership. These frames are inherently detrimental to carbon tax policies. As these frames are perpetuated by Republicans, Democrats fail to use value-based framing in favor of carbon taxes and instead seek to avoid carbon taxes in favor of an Opportunity frame whose broadness devalues the importance of carbon taxes as a solution to the climate challenge. If Democrats maintain their current framing methods, they will continue to be overshadowed by Republicans and will remain complicit in the United States' near immobility towards a solution to the climate challenge.

Keywords: Global Warming, Climate Change, Carbon Taxes, Frame Analysis, Political Framing

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Introduction

Bill Nye went on Tucker Carlson's show to explain the exigence of the climate crisis. During the debate, Nye provided overwhelming evidence pointing to human accelerated climate change, while Carlson kept responding with the same question: "To what degree has human activity caused climate change?" Knowing that a quantitative response is difficult to achieve, Carlson used further qualifying language such as "it's a simple question" and "I am hoping you can give me a simple answer" to create doubt regardless of Nye's response. This interview provides a perfect example of uncertainty framing, and Carlson is not alone in his use of uncertainty framing to create confusion about the climate debate.

Framing is a linguistic technique defined as "the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue" (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p.104). It capitalizes on the connotations of words and phrases to shape how people think about the subject, and it is immensely powerful. A series of experiments by Thibodeau and Boroditsky (2011) showed the effects of framing on the way people think about complex issues, and they discovered framing's effect to be as strong or stronger than political affiliation. Similar experimental evidence from Jaspaert et al. (2011) showed framing to be highly effective in shaping people's cognition about complex issues more broadly.

The goal of this study is to investigate how framing has been used in the climate debate and how it has controlled the public discourse on solutions to the climate crisis. The consequences of unmitigated climate change are far-reaching. More intense storms, rising seas, biodiversity loss, crop destruction, and water-cycle destabilization will affect every living creature and span all races, cultures, and borders. This problem requires rapid solutions, and the prominent solution amongst scientists and economists alike is carbon taxes (Parry, 2019). Furthermore, data from the Pew Research Center (2020) shows that 73% of Americans, including 89% of Democrats and 55% of Republicans support the idea of taxing businesses' carbon

emissions. Since there is broad support for the ideas behind carbon taxes, it is interesting that not a single state has them. Some states have cap and trade carbon-pricing systems, however, none has an explicit carbon tax (Ye, 2021). This mismatch between voters' beliefs and their decisions at the polls combined with an understanding of how influential framing is in political discourse motivated examination into how politicians can use framing to increase support for carbon taxes.

There is a plethora of linguistic scholarship focused on framing in the political and climate discourse that explores the frames dominating carbon taxes and how to make those frames more favorable. There is also sufficient investigation into the "global warming" to "climate change" frameshift within the climate change movement providing insights into how effective frameshifting is and how it works. However, there is limited attention on framing carbon taxes as a solution to the climate challenge. This case study investigates how carbon taxes are currently framed by U.S. congress members to better understand why the current frames are ineffective in harboring support at the polls.

The frames characterizing carbon taxes are inherently detrimental because they adopted the frames from the climate movement, which are dominated by Republicans. This, combined with the Opportunity frame that the Democrats built around the Build Back Better Plan, contribute to the lack of support for carbon taxes at the polls. Therefore, to disrupt the current linguistic dominance of Republicans, Democrats should abandon their broad Opportunity frame that focuses on the closing window of time to pass critical climate legislation and instead embrace value-based framing techniques with respect to carbon taxes.

Literature Review

Political Framing: Republicans vs Democrats

Framing is one of the strongest tools in politicians' linguistic toolkits, and it is ubiquitous in modern politics. However, Democrats and Republicans have not capitalized on the benefits of framing equally.

According to Lakoff (2003), Republicans have capitalized on framing's advantages since the 1970s by investing billions of dollars into forming language-centered think tanks and creating strong frames centered on Republican moral values (Powell, 2003). An early example of Republicans' framing ability happened in the George W. Bush administration when the phrase "tax relief" began floating around. Conservatives in the Bush administration used "tax relief" because "relief" gives the feeling of removing some imposed pain, and since "tax relief" was framed as a painkiller, it was inherently good (Lakoff, 2006). Framing the lowering of taxes for the wealthy as "tax relief" allowed Republicans to frame themselves as heroes who remove suffering from the American people. They then used this Hero frame to connect tax relief with job creation, thus persuading millions of working-class Americans, who pay no less in taxes, to support lower taxes for the wealthy. Lakoff argues that Republicans are so effective at dominating political frames because their investment in them has allowed them to develop a systematic use of language that encompasses "value-laden catchword and metaphors that invoke the 'strong father' worldview" (Iyengar, 2005, p. 2). This "strong father" worldview supports looser governmental power and believes most problems should be handled by individuals. This contrasts with the Democrats' "nurturing mother" worldview, where they subscribe to an expansive set of governmental powers to eliminate barriers for all members of society. Republicans capitalize on metaphors bringing their positions closer to their moral identity and providing them advantages at the polls. Their unwavering moral values connect with their frames which inform their political messaging, thus increasing trust and providing an illusion of stability that has allowed them to maintain large numbers in the government while having a minority of the electorate (Iyengar, 2005).

Unlike Republicans, Democrats failed at developing strategic frames early and are currently trying to catch up. Lakoff's reasoning for the Democrats' weak messaging is because they suffer "from a paucity of core concepts," and they have yet to discover the value of

“strategic initiatives.” (Iyengar, 2005, p.2). This means that they are unable to communicate their most fundamental beliefs effectively past shallow moral ideals, and they lack the ability to use a core policy position to act as a foundation to launch the rest of their agenda. Furthermore, Democrats tend to endorse negative stereotypes about themselves while lacking a clear brand image due to their historical passivity in negotiations. These, combined with Democrats’ lack of an emotional vocabulary and refusal to accept their ideological label of “liberals,” give them “little in the way of a cognitive or emotional hook on which to maintain a mobilizing loyalty,” (Entman, 2015, p.4). Therefore, it is extremely difficult for them to overcome the frames set on them by Republicans. If Democrats ever wanted to assert their frames as the dominant ones, they would first have to overtake the frames set on them by Republicans. Then they would have to create frames that compete with Republican ones in the overall political discourse. This shows that Democrats have a long way to go before they can match the framing abilities of the Republicans.

Climate Framing: From 1990 to 2019

Democrats’ inability to dominate the discourse provides a reasonable explanation for why the current frames dominating the climate discourse are inherently detrimental. The frames fall into three main segments: Industry, Government, and Media.

Schlichting (2013) examined the frames used by industry actors (nongovernmental businesses and corporations) in the climate change debate and found three transitions from 1990 to 2010. The oldest frame used by industry actors was *scientific uncertainty*, and it was popular in the early to mid-1990s. This frame is showcased perfectly in the previously mentioned Carlson/Nye interview and capitalizes on the fact that, at the time, there was little consensus and still emerging evidence on the anthropogenic causes of climate change. The next frame, popular from the late 1990s to the early 2000s, was *socioeconomic consequences*. This frame asserts that climate action creates economic damage that disproportionately harms lower socioeconomic classes.

The last frame, popular from 2000 to 2010, was *industrial leadership*, in which corporations acknowledge their responsibility to protect the climate. However, they shift responsibility to technological advancements as the solution to the climate challenge.

These frames are similar to those used by political oppositionists to the pro-climate movement. Every one of those frames was suggested by Luntz (2002), a Republican communication consultant, in a memo to the Bush administration. As strategies to win the climate debate, he suggested emphasizing three things: “the scientific debate remains open,” “Technology and innovations are the keys,” and “Stringent environmental policies hit the most vulnerable among us – the elderly, the poor,” (Luntz, 2002, p. 137-139). Additionally, Lakoff (2010) shows how framing is used in the climate debate as a political tool. He finds that similar to the broad political discourse, Republicans’ effective value-based framing is the largest barrier to Democrats’ pro-climate agenda.

Lastly, research by Stecula and Merkley (2019) examined the use of frames by the media. They found that the frames used by media in the climate debate coincide with the frames found by Schlichting (2013). Fortunately for activists, they also found that pro-climate-action frames, perpetuated by Democrats, have been appearing at a detriment to anti-climate-action ones perpetuated by Republicans. However, as Lakoff (2010) mentioned, Democrats still have many barriers to overcome before they dominate the climate frames, similar to the larger political discourse.

Reframing in the Climate Debate: Was it Effective?

Democrats were successful at reframing one aspect of the climate debate. They were successful in frameshifting from global warming (GW) to climate change (CC). The research is conflicting; however, it converges on the fact that GW is more emotive and polarizing than CC, and it can seemingly be dispelled by a single cold front. The point of tension and nuance within the debate lies at its effectiveness and who benefited the most from it. The terms were coined in the mid-

1900s, with Plass (1956) using the term CC and Broecker (1975) using GW. When created, these terms were not synonyms as they are often used today; GW corresponded to a subset of CC, defined as the rise in global temperatures. As they transitioned to synonyms in the non-scientific community, they were adopted by both sides of the political debate. GW was taken in by the Republicans and CC by the Democrats (Benjamin et al., 2016). Although CC became the dominant frame, the research is inconclusive in determining the effect of this reframing past basic connotative analysis, making the effectiveness of each on beliefs difficult to measure (Benjamin et al., 2016). This high level of inconclusiveness is possibly due to the changing views over time; however, it may also speak to broader nuance in the framing debate, suggesting that the reframing of a single term is not robust enough to create strong messages that can dominate political frames.

Methodology

Data Collection

President Biden's recent Build Back Better Plan (BBBP) has a large focus on combating the consequence of climate change. Therefore, the political discourse is filled with discussions surrounding climate change. Since the frames dominating the climate discussion are inherently detrimental due to Republicans' historical dominance, this study examines if those frames are also prevalent in the debate around carbon taxes specifically. To determine how to get ahead of these frames when messaging for solutions to the climate challenge and to find examples of carbon tax framing in the current political discourse, the researcher conducted a contextual analysis of three months of congressional records (from August 2021 to October 2021) using a keyword search for "carbon." This analysis consisted of the daily congressional issues for both the House and Senate because they provide the most current frames utilized in the climate debate. Once "carbon" was identified that section of the record was examined, to find other keywords such as "tax," "pricing," or "fee." All sections

found to mention carbon taxes were saved for further examination and frame analysis.

Data Analysis

The researcher performed an inductive frame analysis, adopted by Van Gorp (2009) and Schlichting (2013), on the sections found relating to carbon taxes. He first did an open coding where he assigned a set of frames to each section with no regard to the frames currently present in the climate discourse. In practice, this involved analyzing the rhetoric of each section to determine how each politician framed their argument or statement. The first step is characterized by open coding because the analysis was performed without emphasis on intersectional relationships and instead focused on the precise “empirical indicators that may [have] contributed to the readers’ interpretation of the texts” (Van Gorp, 2009, p.94). An emphasis on the relationships between the sections was the focus of the next step, which is where the narrowly applied frames found in the previous step were arranged around “axes of meaning” (Van Gorp, 2009, p. 95). These axes of meaning acted as umbrella terms to group the essence of the narrow frames together. To do this, the researcher decreased the specificity of the original codes and abstracted their underlying meaning to discover overarching patterns between the various texts. Lastly, the researcher compared the broader frames that were found while arranging the original codes around the axes of meaning with the current discourse to see if they were unique or concurrent with the existing literature.

Limitations

The limitations of this analysis stem from the restrictions set on the data collection. Given the limited timeframe and amount of information in Congressional Records, this study was limited to keyword searching through only three months of data. Although August 2021 to October 2021 was a time of much carbon tax debate in congress, the carbon tax debate has been going on for years. Examining only three months of data provides insights into the current

frames; however, it fails to discover overarching trends. Therefore, the researcher relied on the past literature to compare the overall frames. Given the lack of literature on carbon tax frames specifically, current carbon tax frames are compared to the frames historically used in the climate debate. Fortunately, given all the similarities that will be discussed, it seems as if that comparison is reasonable. Lastly, the three months of records only provided ten distinct mentions of carbon taxes which is reasonable to analyze. However, a more extensive review of congressional records would provide more insight into how carbon taxes are framed.

Results

The investigation found ten distinct members of congress, from both parties, who mentioned carbon taxes. The seven Republican representatives in the analysis included Sen. Scott (FL), Rep. Thompson (PA), Sen. Cornyn (TX), Sen. Capito (WV), Sen. Graham (WV), Sen. Ernst (IA), and Sen. Barrasso (WY). The three Democratic representatives in the analysis included Rep. Auchincloss (MA), Sen. Cardin (MD), and Sen. Whitehouse (RI). After analyzing the frames employed by each representative, the researcher derived a set of carbon tax frames perpetuated by each congress member and separated them by party. The list of frames along with a brief description and example can be seen in the table.

Frames Used by Republicans: Economic, Innovation, Uncertainty

Three of the Republicans provided direct support for the Economic frame in which they continually addressed the negative economic consequences of a carbon tax.

Across America, families are going through grocery store aisles, seeing higher prices, and having to figure out what they can afford to eat this week. Folks are passing by gas station after gas station, looking for lower prices— to no avail. These aren't just headlines and stories; these are real families who are

living paycheck to paycheck and struggling to keep up. (Scott, 2021, p. S7408).

Focusing on the reality that the price increases will disproportionately harm citizens of lower socioeconomic classes, Sen. Scott continually mentioned how life for middle-class families is becoming less affordable. Using the Economic frame, he related the unaffordability of common goods such as gas and groceries to taxes broadly while directly mentioning carbon taxes. This was a strategic move on his part to encourage people to relate carbon taxes to higher prices.

Two of the Republicans utilized the Innovation frame, claiming that carbon taxes were not the best solution to the climate crisis and therefore should not draw focus. Instead, they claimed, “We are also making serious strides in energy innovation through cutting-edge carbon capture and storage projects. That is the answer. It is called innovation. Not more taxes” (Cornyn, 2021, p. S7117). In saying this, they shifted responsibility away from themselves because it is not traditionally the government’s responsibility to create innovation in non-emerging, relatively stable markets.

The last frame that arose within the Republican mentions was the Uncertainty frame, which Sen. Graham perpetuated in the same way as Carlson, questioning, “What the hell is a border-adjusted carbon tax?” (Graham, 2021, p. S6206). As a senator with almost two decades of experience, Graham is well versed in different taxation methods, meaning he used this questioning to create uncertainty around the tax. Additionally, Graham also utilized an informal tone to make himself more relatable to the average American, trying to showcase most Americans’ lack of carbon tax understanding.

In addition to maintaining congruence in carbon tax framing with the Republican Party’s climate messaging, most of the Republicans also used the exact same phrase to describe the proposed democratic legislation: “Reckless tax-and-spending bill.” Providing further evidence for the Republican Party’s excellence at creating consistent and coherent messaging to further their interests.

Democrats and the Opportunity Frame

Unlike Republicans, Democrats converged on one frame; however, their frame was less correlated with carbon taxes directly and more generally related to the BBBP. The frame perpetuated by two of the Democrats was the Opportunity frame, which is characterized by language that focuses on the timing of political decisions and how there are only certain windows to pass legislation before it is too late. They consistently mentioned that we have a “once-in-a-generation opportunity” to pass sweeping climate action legislation. However, they did not directly mention utilizing this opportunity to pass carbon tax legislation. Instead, they focused on the negative consequences of inaction. Briefly, they stated, “We will have a chance with the Tax Code to reduce carbon emissions” (Cardin, 2021, p. S6093) and “I further support instituting a carbon tax” (Auchincloss, 2021, p. H5689). Without further expansion on their support for carbon taxes, they failed to frame carbon taxes at all, therefore allowing the frames characterizing carbon taxes to be assigned by the party who opposes them.

The last Democratic senator who mentioned carbon taxes failed to assign any supportive frame to them; instead, he pointed out the fact that corporations use the Innovation frame to try and alleviate their responsibility for climate action.

you can't count on corporate America . . . They join series and talk about their support for climate and how it is urgent and how they support carbon pricing. But when it comes to the levers of power here in this building, forget about it . . . Trade association after trade association, business group after business group—not one has been switched on to do anything about climate. (Whitehouse, 2021, p. S6189).

This summary of Sen. Whitehouse's mention of carbon taxes shows how he failed to create any frame for carbon taxes; instead, he decided to use his time to point out the do-nothing attitude of corporate

America where they shift responsibility away from themselves with the Innovation frame.

Economic	Innovation	Uncertainty	Opportunity
This frame emphasizes the costs associated with climate mitigation efforts without accounting for negative externalities.	This frame claims that technology is the only viable solution to cutting emissions, so focusing on carbon taxes (or other government interventions) is distracting.	This frame asserts that the science behind climate change is still developing and sows doubt in the consensus by continually asking misleading or misguided questions.	This frame ignores carbon taxes and focus on how important it is to take climate action now instead of delaying and facing more severe consequences.
“Families are going through grocery store aisles, seeing higher prices, and having to figure out what they can afford to eat this week . . . These aren’t just headlines and stories; these are real families who are living paycheck to paycheck and struggling to keep up.” (Scott, 2021, p. S7408).	“We are also making serious strides in energy innovation through cutting-edge carbon capture and storage projects. That is the answer. It is called innovation. Not more taxes” (Cornyn, 2021, p. S7117).	“To what degree has human activity caused climate change? . . . It’s a simple question . . . I am hoping you can give me a simple answer” (Carlson, 2017).	“We need to take dramatic action in order to deal with the realities of climate change . . . we will have a chance with the Tax Code . . . this once-in-a-generation opportunity to bring down the cost to Americans, to deal with climate change” (Cardin, 2021, p. S6093).

Table 1: Carbon Tax Frames by Members of Congress

In doing this, Whitehouse also refused to take control of carbon tax framing, allowing the discourse to be dominated by Republicans.

Discussion

This frame analysis demonstrates that the frames characterizing carbon taxes are dominated by the Republican Party and are directly related to the inherently detrimental frames characterizing the broader climate discourse. Therefore, to change the current narrative and increase public support for carbon taxes, Democrats must pivot their current framing tactics and instead utilize value-based framing techniques that specifically frame carbon taxes more positively.

Republicans used their strong framing abilities to perpetuate negative carbon tax frames similar to how they established the frames in the broader climate discourse. The main tactic employed by Republicans was the use of value-based framing combined with the constant repetition of a single phrase to paint the Democrats' agenda as unfavorable. Republicans' ability to dominate the carbon tax discourse provides evidence supporting Lakoff's idea that Republicans' use of value-based framing is highly effective. Additionally, the fact that Republicans mentioned carbon taxes more than twice as often as Democrats suggests that because they talk about them more, the repetition of their frames helped to establish them as dominant. Furthermore, Republicans used this repetition strategy to create a negative view of the BBBP. As previously mentioned, the majority of Republicans used the exact same phrase to discuss the Democrats' proposal. Repeating that the Democrats had a "reckless tax-and-spending bill" linked the BBBP to the preexisting frames dominating the climate discourse.

Democrats decided to avoid speaking to carbon taxes directly and instead tried to keep their focus on the BBBP. Their repetition of the phrase "we have a once in a generation opportunity" consistently reinforced the Opportunity frame that they used to characterize the BBBP. However, this frame was detrimental to the framing of carbon

taxes because it resulted in the Democrats avoiding carbon taxes altogether. This avoidance allowed Republicans to dominate the carbon tax frames unchallenged. Since Republicans' carbon tax frames were mostly unchallenged, it is unsurprising that carbon taxes are viewed as negative by the populace even though they have theoretical support and are the most prominent solution to the climate challenge (Tyson and Kennedy, 2020 and Ye, 2021).

Republicans' control of climate frames is further seen in the recently passed Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) of 2022. Even with a majority in both houses and control of the White House, Democrats were unable to pass their more ambitious BBBP and instead had to settle for a much smaller spending package. The IRA invested almost 200 billion dollars less in climate mitigation efforts than was hoped for in the already reduced BBBP (Senate Democratic Leadership, 2022 and The White House, 2021). Furthermore, neither the BBBP nor the IRA included carbon taxes as a way to decrease carbon emissions. Overall, the IRA was a step in the right direction for U.S. climate policy, but it should not have been so hard. Democrats took severe compromises with respect to climate policies while controlling the executive and legislative branches and while having the support of over 70% of Americans (Tyson and Kennedy, 2020).

This analysis showcases the still existing failures in Democrats' political messaging. There is little variation in the frames uncovered by this analysis and the frames uncovered by Schlichting (2013) and Stecula and Merkley (2019). This reinforcement of the existing literature suggests that there has been little change in the linguistically dominant political party. Democrats' avoidance of carbon taxes almost entirely shows their refusal to use emotional language and strong central ideals to message all aspects of the climate discourse. This shows that the suggestions made by Lakoff (2006) have gone ignored with respect to carbon taxes and environmental framing. Given that the Democrats have ignored Lakoff's advice and still fail to assert dominant frames, they should focus on adopting value-based framing tactics through using emotional and consistent language. If Democrats

continue their current framing methods, there is little reason for a change in the status quo. This means they will continue to be overshadowed by Republicans and will continue to have trouble passing sweeping climate policies. Thus, maintaining the United States' limited progress towards a solution to the climate challenge.

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