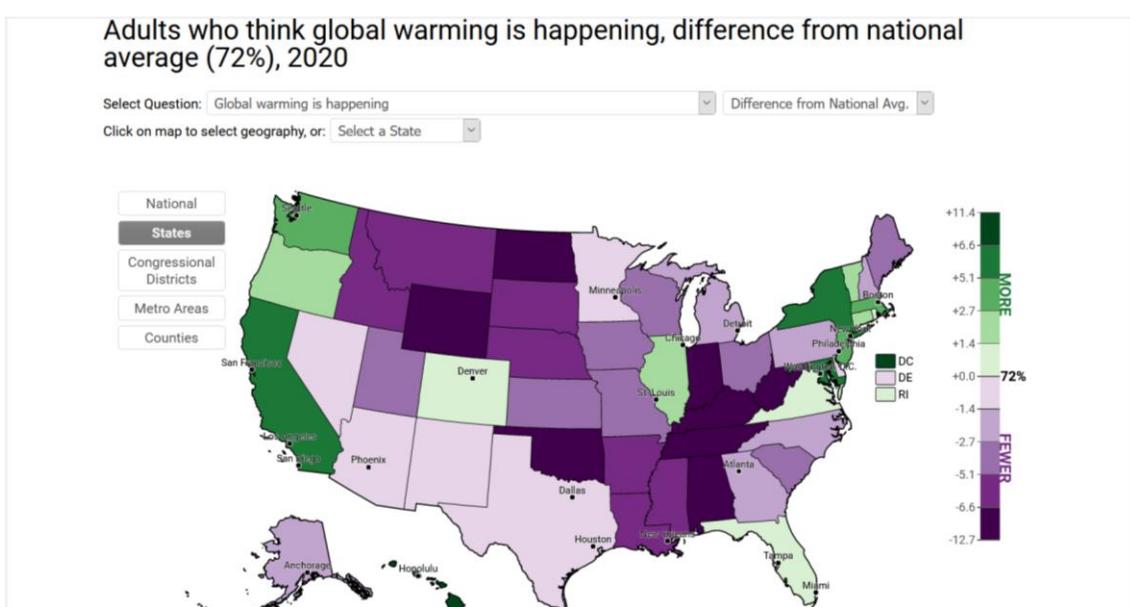


## Dealing with climate denial in the classroom

Climate change can be a controversial topic. It is prudent to anticipate trouble. The instructor should be prepared to deal with potential problems. Here, climate denial during class discussion.

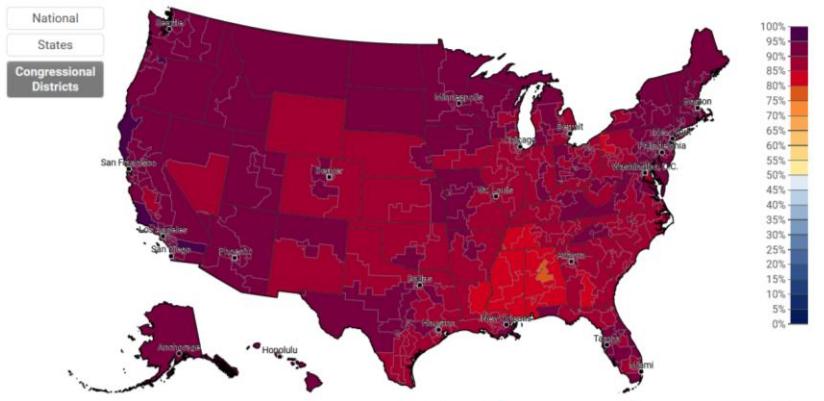
Opinion polls show that, overall, 72% of the American public now thinks global warming is happening. (Smaller majorities believe it is serious, or that it is caused by human activity rather than by some non-human, natural process.) But, as these maps show, there are significant differences. First, by geography:



And differences by party affiliation, Democrats vs Republicans:

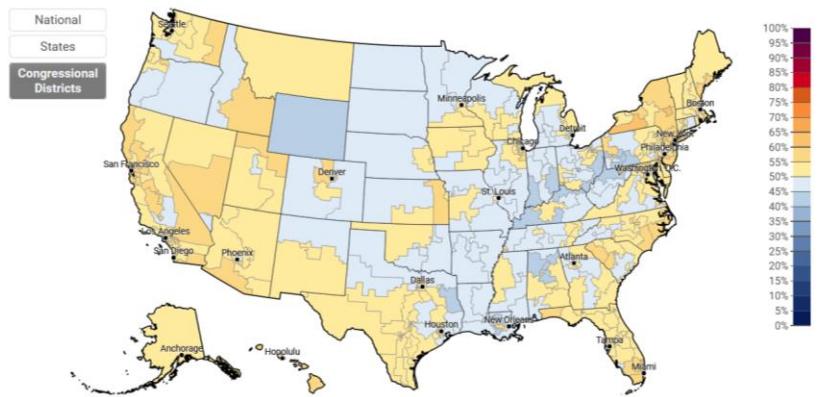
Estimated % of registered Democrats who think global warming is happening (91%), 2018

Display model output: Global warming is happening  
 Click on map to select geography, or: Select a State Select a Congressional District  
 Permalink



Estimated % of registered Republicans who think global warming is happening (52%), 2018

Display model output: Global warming is happening  
 Click on map to select geography, or: Select a State Select a Congressional District  
 Permalink



( <https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/visualizations-data/ycom-us/>, and <https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/visualizations-data/partisan-maps-2018/?est=happening&group=rep&type=value&geo=cd> )

It is possible, then – and in some parts of the nation quite likely – that when one teaches this module one will have in the class one or more students who have denialist beliefs and are willing to express those beliefs in class.

What does one do?

First of all, let me point out that sociological perspectives on quite a few contemporary social issues can be, similarly, quite controversial. Trouble can arise in our classes any time we discuss an issue that has gotten caught up in the “culture wars” of American society, be that racial/ethnic or class or gender inequalities, abortion, gay marriage, any and all LGBTQ+ issues, gun control, immigration, and so on. The challenge of dealing with climate denial is, in many ways, no different than the challenge of dealing with any of the potentially controversial topics that we deal with in our Sociology classes.

A second point: what one does depends, in part, on the *source* of a student’s denialist views and also on the *intensity* with which those views are held and expressed. *Sources* can vary, from incorrect information heard or seen on internet/social media, to denialist beliefs that are pretty much required to hold as badges of identity/membership in an anti-climate “tribe,” most likely a political one or a conservative faith community. Views can vary in intensity, from views held somewhat neutrally, without great emotion, to view being held passionately, with certainty, expressed vehemently, perhaps angrily.

How to respond when climate denialism enters the discussion? That will depend on your assessment of the situation. (And, of course, what one does depends on time constraints: How much class time can I devote to a debate, for example?)

Instances of what one might label “low intensity” denial. i.e. denial that is more cognitive than emotional, that is not driven by identity- or value- or worldview-commitments:

-- listening: What does the student believe? From what sources did they get their beliefs?

-- responding:

-- offer factual rebuttals. Here are internet sites that list refutations of the most frequently cited denialist talking points:

- <https://www.skepticalscience.com/argument.php>
- <https://www.climatechangecommunication.org/debunking-handbook-2020/>

-- offer a sociology of climate denial. See research resources listed on the “for students” page, topic #15, “climate denial, the counter-movement.” The best articles written by sociologist are by Aaron McCright and Riley Dunlap. On the broader topic of science for hire in the service of denial (tobacco, ozone hole, acid rain) one could cite Conway and Oreskes, *MERCHANTS OF DOUBT*.

-- ask students to study the issue, both the denier literature (websites, youtube videos) and the debunking literature (again, resources listed on the “for students” page, topic #15, “climate denial, the counter-movement;” then write up their findings.

-- organize a debate in class, the science vs the denial;

-- role reversal debate: As above, but assign students the task of articulating the views opposite of the views they currently hold, followed by a debriefing discussion.

Instances of “high intensity” denial, denial rooted in firmly-held, passionate political or religious beliefs:

In such cases denial is based not primarily on information but is integral to the person’s identity. Admitting that climate change is real, is serious, is caused by human activity, can be profoundly threatening to the student’s sense of self, and one should anticipate extreme responses, hostile, angry.

One might first try any of the responses described above. Wonderful if it works, even somewhat. It may turn out, however, that there is no constructive way to deal with the situation. At the extreme, things may go so radically off the rail that one might have to resort to implementing procedures one has (or one’s campus has) for dealing with disturbing or disruptive situations in any classroom.