

Why political partisans don't like facts

To paraphrase an observation attributed to the late Senator Daniel P. Moynihan, people are entitled to their own opinions, not to their own facts. But on some politically charged issues, people's ideological commitments sometimes settle their judgments about questions of fact.

Consider current debates over genetically modified organisms and climate change. With respect to GMOs, Democrats are far more likely than Republicans to reject the prevailing scientific judgment. The reverse is true with respect to climate change.

Yale Law School professor Dan Kahan's research points to the crucial role of pre-existing ideological commitments, which can, on particular issues, crowd out the effects of scientific findings.

Many Republicans are opposed, in principle, to government interference with free markets. They're inclined to be suspicious of scientific evidence that purports to justify that interference, especially in the environmental domain. By contrast, many Democrats are willing to indulge the assumption that corporate efforts to interfere with nature are potentially dangerous, especially if those efforts involve chemicals, new technologies or pollution.

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