Tea Partiers and traditional Republicans are split on science

BYLINE: Chris Mooney

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It is very common these days to hear references to Republicans having conflicts with science. Most recently, Politico reported last week that the “next battle in the war on science” will involve efforts by congressional Republicans to control funding for (or even seek to defund) a variety of types of government supported research, including climate research and social science.

But if a new study just out in the journal Environmental Politics is correct, the conflict between "Republicans” and the scientific community may really boil down to a conflict between scientists and today's so-called Tea Party. The paper suggests that on a large array of scientific topics, members of the Tea Party diverge markedly from more traditional members of the GOP.

"There are greater differences on environment and science questions between Tea Party supporters and non-Tea Party Republicans than there are between non-Tea Party Republicans and Independents," says sociologist Lawrence Hamilton of the University of New Hampshire, who co-authored the paper with his university colleague Kei Saito. "As far as I know, that hasn't been found before, and we found that standing out in our data analysis."

The study unpacks responses from a series of science questions that have been asked of New Hampshire residents from 2010 to 2014 as part of the Granite State Poll (New Hampshire residents are not a perfect proxy for the U.S. as a whole, but they're "pretty close," according Hamilton).

The questions concerned anything from beliefs in evolution and the human causation of climate change to the following: "Would you say that you trust, don't trust, or are unsure about scientists as a source of information about environmental issues?" and "How much do you feel that you understand about the issue of global warming or climate change? Would you say a great deal, a moderate amount, only a little, or nothing at all?"

In the surveys, mainline Republicans were distinguished from Tea Party followers based on a simple question that asked whether they "support, oppose, or are neutral” about "the political movement known as the Tea Party.” Republicans who answered "oppose” or "neutral” were considered non-Tea Party members of the GOP.

As you can see, compared with these traditional Republicans, Tea Partiers are considerably less trusting of environmental scientists (chart 1 below), less accepting of human evolution (chart 2) and of a central or dominant human role in causing climate change (chart 5), and also -- interestingly -- more sure that they understand the issue of global warming (chart 12). (The full list of questions is in the study here -- warning, paywalled -- but some of the
questions can also be found in an earlier publication, here.)

Zooming in on one scientific issue in particular -- climate change -- underscores the differences between mainline Republicans and Tea Partiers. For instance, when Hamilton and Saito examined the four groups’ views over time on the question of whether climate change is "happening now, caused mainly by human activities," they found that traditional Republicans were generally in a public opinion space between Independents and the Tea Party right:

The study also examined how beliefs change, across these four political groups, as people become higher in their levels of education -- from holding a high school diploma all the way up to holding a postgraduate degree. Fascinatingly, with increasing education, every group except Tea Party supporters becomes more accepting of the idea that climate change is happening now and mainly caused by humans. But Tea Party supporters move in the opposite direction:

So in sum, we have a picture of a Tea Party whose members are both more distrusting of scientists and what they have to say on major issues of scientific consensus, like evolution and climate change -- and also quite sure they're right in their beliefs, and unswayed even with higher levels of education.

In fairness, polling questions about "trust" in scientists have recently been problematized. "There's debate among researchers on the value of self-report 'trust in science' measures. There are a wide variety and none has been validated in any systematic way," says Yale opinion researcher Dan Kahan, who argues that he's not sure that measures of whether people "trust" scientists can be separated from their simple issue positions on scientific issues like climate change.

The University of New Hampshire's Hamilton agrees to some extent that "trust in scientists" and one's views of climate change are "wrapped up" with one another. But he adds, "I don't think they're the same thing. My thinking is that if you don't like a solution, you're going to reject that the problem exists, and in this case, that means finding reasons not to trust the scientists on the topic."

Issue of trust notwithstanding, though, it is at least clear that large majorities of Tea Party members do not believe what scientists say about climate change and evolution.