

Ways & Means Transcript – S4E1 How Parenthood Affects Climate Change Skeptics

Emily Hanford (EH): From the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, this is Ways & Means. I'm Emily Hanford.

Bob Inglis (BI): I said that climate change was nonsense. I didn't know anything about it except that Al Gore was for it. And since I represented one of the reddest districts in the reddest state in the nation, that was the end of the inquiry. I admit that's pretty ignorant but that's the way it was for my first six years in Congress.

EH: This is Bob Inglis. He's a Republican who represented South Carolina's 4th Congressional district in the mid-90s. According to the League of Conservation Voters, he had a terrible voting record on environmental issues.

BI: Yeah I was completely dismissive of climate change. It seemed to me that people like Al Gore wanted to regulate our very breath.

EH: Bob served in Washington for 6 years, then he worked in private industry. In the early 2000s he decided to run for Congress again. It was 2004. There was no doubt at this point that the climate was changing, and that humans were the cause. The scientific evidence was clear. But climate change still wasn't a priority for Bob Inglis.

Then something happened.

BI: My son came to me. He was voting for the first time because he just turned 18, so he said Dad I'll vote for you, but you're going to clean up your act on the environment. I knew that my son was going to vote for me no matter what. I mean what if we'd lost by one vote. But what he was really saying and I knew it and feel it intensely to this day is, he was really saying Dad I love you. And you can be better than you were before, and uh be relevant to my future and my four sisters' futures.

EH: He'd been voting faithfully with his party on the environment because that's what you do – you vote with your party. But, as his son reminded him, he was more than his political party. He was a father, maybe a future grandfather. And he was someone who cared about the environment. He grew up in the lowlands of South Carolina – in Bluffton, near the ocean.

BI: When I grew up there it was a very small town that was into timber and oystering...You know I grew up on a saltwater estuary that at the time was an S double AA river. One of the highest classifications of clean rivers.

EH: The river is not clean now. Bob started to realize that his votes on climate didn't actually line up that well with many things he really cared about. He didn't suddenly make the environment a big thing in his campaign. He won the election—and his son's vote—without addressing climate change at all. But he kept thinking about what his son had said. Then he joined a congressional delegation to Antarctica where he talked to researchers grappling with the melting of the polar ice.

And he went on a trip to Australia where he met a scientist named Scott Heron.

Scott is a NOAA oceanographer. He's also a committed Christian...just like Bob Inglis is a committed Christian...and when Scott Heron started talking about climate change, he spoke about it in language Bob could relate to.

BI: Scott was preaching the gospel I could see it in his eyes I could hear it in his voice.

EH: Scott told Bob about the Great Barrier Reef. It's an awesome thing—the largest structure on earth made by living organisms. And it's being destroyed by rising ocean temperatures. Scott took Bob out to the reef.

BI: As he would go down and show me things and we come to the surface and he be all excited about the incredible things that were there that he was showing me. And so I knew we shared a world view. I could see that he was worshipping God. Later we had a chance to talk and he told me about conservation changes that he's making in his life in order to love God and love people. And I got right inspired. I wanted to be like Scott—loving God and loving people.

EH: Bob had found a kindred spirit in a climate scientist—and pretty soon Bob Inglis—the Republican Congressman from one of the reddest districts in one of the reddest states in the nation—was saying things like,

BI: Listen I was just wrong before. Climate change is real and we can do something about it. And let's get going.

Music

EH: Coming up on this episode of Ways & Means—new research into what it takes to turn climate change skeptics into climate change believers...who want to do something to turn things around.

(Music ends)

There's a big difference between Republicans and Democrats when it comes to beliefs about climate change.

Megan Mullin (MM): In a nutshell you see about a 40-percentage point gap between people who identify as Democrats and people who identify as Republicans in their concern about this problem.

EH: This is Megan Mullin. Megan's an associate professor of environmental politics at the Nicholas School of the Environment at Duke University. She studies public opinion about climate change in the U.S.

She says there wasn't always a partisan divide on support for policies to protect the environment.

Vintage Commercial: People start pollution, people can stop it. Give a hoot, don't pollute. In the city or in the woods, help keep America looking good.

MM: Back in the 1970s and early 1980s there was essentially no difference between Democrats and Republicans in their support for spending on the environment. There was less difference in support for spending on the environment than for any other issue. There was essentially no partisan gap.

EH: But things began to change as the conversation turned from protecting the environment to dealing with the threats posed by climate change in particular.

MM: Early on, when the problem you know emerged in the public sphere, there were Republican leaders, you know, President George Bush the first...

President George H.W. Bush: We all know that human activities are changing the atmosphere in unexpected and in unprecedented ways.

Later even George W. Bush on the campaign trail who said that the national government, the federal government really needs to tackle this problem. But over time fewer and fewer Republicans were saying that, and more and more Republicans were not only discounting the severity of the problem, but bringing into question whether this really even exists.

EH: Voting yes on things like cleaning up rivers and protecting wildlife was one thing. Dealing with the reality of climate change was another. It involves difficult economic choices, reckoning with the impact of powerful interests, such as the coal and oil industries. Megan says polls show that as more Republicans questioned climate change, more Democrats became convinced about the urgency of the problem.

MM: In the past few years you actually see in the overall U.S. population growing levels of belief—growing levels of concern—but the movement is primarily among Democrats and to some extent independents, and you still see people who identify as Republicans resistant to the idea that humans cause climate change and not expressing high levels of concern about this problem.

EH: Right now, what we have is a big gulf, a huge difference of opinion that falls squarely along partisan lines.

(Music)

Whether you believe in climate change seems to have become a matter of partisan principle. Is there a way to get past this?

Megan Mullin thinks there is. She says, when trying to bridge partisan divides, many experts have focused for a long time on reframing the debate. The idea is, it's the language we use to describe things that drives us apart. If we could just learn to speak each other's language, we could come to some kind of agreement. But Megan Mullin thinks with climate change, there may be better strategies.

MM: It's not simply craft a message, right, that overcomes the partisan divide. But are there ways that we can tap parts of peoples' identities, parts of peoples' predispositions, and get them to think about climate change in a different way than what we're trained to do in the political sphere. Can we evoke something else in people that will help overcome that divide?

EH: This is where Emily Pechar comes in. Emily is working on her PhD in environmental policy at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke. Emily studies the impact our personal identities have on how we think about climate change.

We all have many identities—there's our gender, our race, ethnicity, religion, social class, our age, where we live.

But even as we have these different identities inside us, research shows it's our partisan identity that is the boss when it comes to how we think about climate change.

Emily Pechar (EP): So, your partisan identity, whether or not you identify as a Republican or a Democrat or a liberal or conservative, is one of the biggest drivers of how you feel about climate change.

EH: Think about our different identities as different sets of glasses. When we talk about climate change, we're usually wearing our Republican or Democrat glasses.

That's because climate change usually comes up in the context of politics. "Which solution should we choose? Republicans want this, Democrats want that...."

And because we tend to be wearing our Republican or Democrat glasses when we think about climate change, our partisan identity is salient, or top of mind. So, our opinions about climate change tend to run along party lines.

For example, take this a hypothetical – a guy named Joe. He's a Republican. And because he's Republican...

EP: In general we would expect that more often than not, he would be skeptical of climate change or at least skeptical of the policy responses that are required to fight climate change.

Now let's imagine Joe is at a political rally (so he has his Republican glasses on). There are signs like "Vote Republican" and "I May Not be Perfect, but At Least I'm Not a Democrat!"

President Donald Trump: Who believes in global warming? Raise your hand. Wow, not much, huh?

EH: So Joe is listening to all of this, he's fitting in with his group. His Republican glasses are definitely on. Not only is Joe going along with his group, odds are being at this rally, his anti-climate change views will become even stronger.

EP: He's going to double down on his opposition against climate change policies.

EH: But then the rally ends. Joe gets in his car. Let's say you're Joe. You drive home....

EP: Now you're with your family and your identity as a parent has replaced your partisan identity in terms of which one is most top of mind, which one is salient. We might expect your attitudes and behaviors to be more reflective of your parental identity than your partisan identity in that context.

EH: In other words, you've switched your Republican glasses for your parent glasses. Kind of like Congressman Bob Inglis did when his son prodded him to clean up his act on the environment. He had his parent glasses on when he was talking to his son and that made him think about his positions on the environment a little bit differently—as a dad instead of as a Republican.

(Music)

So Emily Pechar was thinking about all of this—that people have different identities, and our identities influence our feelings on climate change—and then she had an idea.

She wondered, what if researchers created a situation where people put on their parent glasses before thinking about climate change. What would happen? Would Republicans see climate change differently?

So she tried it. She recruited a group of people to take an online survey.

EP: So they identified as either a Republican or a Democrat. But they also were a parent.

EH: She divided the participants into groups. One group started with questions that were designed to make them put on their political glasses—to think about their partisan identities.

EP: So it asked them a number of questions about what their partisan identity was, how important to them it was, etc. Really it was just designed to bring that identity top of mind.

EH: Getting people to think about themselves in a certain way before you ask them something is called priming. So the first group was being primed to think of themselves as either a Republican or a Democrat.

EP: Now another treatment group, instead, got a series of questions that were designed to prime their parental identity, asking them if they were a parent how many children they had—making them think about their role as a parent in society.

EH: So one group has their parent glasses on. Another has their partisan glasses on. Next, everyone got the same message.

EP: Specifically about the impact of climate change on future generations. So, this was an excerpt from a report from UNICEF that looked at how devastating climate change will be for children:

Male narrator: In every crisis, children are the most vulnerable. Climate change is no exception. As increased droughts and flooding affect food production, children will face more hunger and malnutrition.

EP: And then I wanted to see if priming their partisan identity compared to their parental identity would change their levels of climate change concern, their support for various climate change policies, and their willingness to undertake political behaviors in support of climate change policies. So, one of the main things I found in this study is that, among Republican parents when their parental identity was primed before they received this message, these individuals were actually more likely to be concerned about climate change more likely to undertake political behaviors in support of climate change policies.

EH: They were up to 12% more likely. So, more than one in ten Republicans moved in a positive direction when it came to support for policies to reduce the effects of climate change-

And 1 in 10 people changing their minds—that could make a difference between climate change policy stalling in Congress, or getting passed.

Emily thinks policymakers and advocates could learn from her results.

EP: So it may not necessarily always lead to bipartisan support, but we're going to start to get the Democrats and Republicans feeling more like parents, for example, like a group of parents that feel similarly as opposed to partisans who feel different.

(Music)

EH: Congressman Bob Inglis used to see climate change as a wild exaggeration by Democrats. Now he sees it as a threat to his kids and to future generations. In 2009, shortly after his epiphany at the Great Barrier Reef, Bob did something professionally risky. He introduced a bill in Congress to tax fossil fuels because they cause pollution that contributes to global warming.

In an effort to appeal to his Republican colleagues, Bob wrote the bill so proceeds from the tax wouldn't go into government programs. The proceeds would go back to taxpayers through payroll tax cuts.

His bill never got a hearing.

And then, Bob was voted out of office. He believes his sponsorship of that fossil fuels bill was a big part of why he lost.

But he's not giving up on the idea that Republicans like him can change their minds about climate change. He founded an organization called RepublicEn.org. (The "En" stands for energy and enterprise.) The group is affiliated with George Mason University, and they're part of a growing movement known as the "EcoRight." Bob is the public face of that movement.

RepublicEn.org runs a news service about free-market approaches to combatting climate change. In 2018, the group completed a 14-city bus tour of the U.S., trying to get more Republicans to join the fight against climate change by supporting solutions that might not sound so Republican now, but were actually touted by big name Republicans in the past.

Phil Donahue (PD): Dr. Friedman is our guest and we hope you'll join us.

BI: We love to show a clip of Milton Friedman on the Phil Donahue Show in the 80s...

Milton Friedman (MF): There is a case for doing something about pollution, but the way we've been going about it is the wrong way.

BI: ...Who was asked by Phil Donahue, "What do you do about pollution, then, Dr. Friedman if you don't want it regulated?"

PD: Is there a case for the government to do something?

MF: Yes there is a case for the government to do something about it.

BI: And Friedman, you know, father of modern conservatism and one of Reagan's economics advisers says, "Well you tax it of course, you tax pollution."

MF: Well the best way to do it is to impose a tax on the amount of pollutants emitted by a car and make it in the self-interest of the car manufacturers and of the consumers to keep down the amount of pollution in that way.

(Music)

EH: Whether this approach will convince other Republicans remains to be seen.

One thing that's pretty clear, though, is Bob Inglis would do well to figure out how to get his audience to put on their "parent glasses." After all, it's how he himself changed his mind on climate change. That 180 cost him his political career, but Bob says he doesn't have any regrets.

BI: For me, you know there a choice between sort of two groups—the temporary affection (and I can tell you based on experience that it is an oh-so-very temporary affection) of the electorate, or the lasting devotion of one's family. And so, for me, I chose that family group. And I know I chose the better because just ask anybody whose first name has become former about just how much that crowd still loves you.

EH: Duke researcher Emily Pechar thinks there's a lesson in Bob's story and her research.

EP: If we can begin to start talking about climate change and other highly polarizing policy issues in a way that gets people to think about how it affects them at a different level than their partisanship—how maybe it affects them as a parent, or affects them as a member of a certain community, or affects them in terms of their gender—then we have a greater

likelihood of building more bipartisan agreement that will help us get the policy changes that we need.

(Music)

EH: This is the first of a four-part series about climate change.

Next time, we'll bring you the story of a government innovation team in Durham, North Carolina that's tackling a big issue when it comes to a changing climate—how to get more people to quit driving their cars—and take the bus instead.

(Sound of bus)

Durham North Carolina Mayor Steve Schewel says local governments have to step up and join the fight against climate change.

Teaser: Well, we have to do this locally now because with the U.S. government pulling out of the Paris Accords, we have to begin to take these things into our own hands at the state and local level.

EH: Ways & Means is produced by Carol Jackson, Alison Jones and Karen Kemp. Our associate producer and graphic designer is Melissa Carrico. Production assistance by Sydney Colopy.

If you go to our website, waysandmeansshow.org, we have links to more information about this episode, including Bob Inglis's group RepublicEn.org and Emily Pechar's study.

Our engineer is Johnny Vince Evans.

We're a production of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University.

Thanks for listening. I'm Emily Hanford.