

Electric utilities misled the public on climate change for decades

Significant parts of the American electric utility industry actively promoted climate doubt and denial, and later delayed climate action. Utilities that maintain the most fossil assets today also historically promoted the most denial, doubt and delay.

Based on E.L. Williams, S.A. Bartone, E.K. Swanson, and L.S. Stokes. "The American electric utility industry's role in promoting climate denial, doubt, and delay," [Environmental Research Letters](#) (2022).

The Policy Problem

Oil and gas companies conducted in-house research and knew, earlier than most of us, that fossil fuel combustion was driving climate change. Motivated by their financial interests in fossil fuels, an array of corporations, trade associations, think tanks, lobbying firms and faith-based organizations built an opposition movement (Brulle 2019). Despite growing scientific consensus on human-caused global warming, these groups spread disinformation in the form of climate doubt, denial and delay.

Climate disinformation is harmful: it can affect media coverage, public opinion and—as a result—the feasibility of political action. It is now well-established that the fossil fuel industry undermined climate science, publicly casting doubt on the existence of global warming and its human cause (Supran and Oreskes 2017, Bonneuil et al 2021). We have known less about the role of other industries such as electric utilities—this research addresses that gap.

Key findings and proposed solutions

- In the 1980s, the utility industry joined hands with oil and gas companies to cast doubt on climate science.
- Throughout the 1990s, despite the established scientific consensus on human-caused climate change, utilities shifted toward outright climate denial, including founding front groups to spread climate disinformation.

- By the 2000s, utilities' messaging shifted to delay, shifting responsibility to other countries and sectors, and promoting CCS and "clean coal" as the most promising climate solutions.
- Utilities sell electricity - not fossil fuels, so they don't need fossil fuels to survive. Recent policy successes increase incentives to decarbonize, clearing the path for utilities to move toward clean electricity and electrification.

What We Found

We built a representative sample of 188 primary documents from utility companies, trade associations, and front groups published between 1968 and 2019. We coded each document based on its rhetoric about the existence, cause, impacts, and solvability of climate change. The results suggest that American electric utility industry organizations, like their counterparts in the fossil fuel industry, promoted messaging designed to avoid taking action on reducing carbon pollution over multiple decades. Utilities knew about climate change in the 1970s and 1980s. From the 1990s onward, key industry organizations created front groups to, in their own words, "reposition global warming as theory, not fact," as well as lobby against taking climate action. In the 2000s, many front groups shut down, and industry tactics shifted to acknowledging the science while shifting responsibility, distracting, and delaying the clean energy transition.

Ten utilities stand out as being extensively involved in climate denial, doubt, and delay. These utilities had documented participation or membership in three or more known climate denial, doubt and/or delay organizations: Southern Company, AEP, Ameren, Duke, APS, DTE, FirstEnergy, Consumers Energy, Dominion, and Northern Indiana Public Service Company (NIPSCO). Notably, many of the utilities most involved in spreading disinformation are also the [dirtiest utilities today](#), operating the most coal-fired power plants without plans for retirement, and continuing to build out fossil gas.

Electric utilities as a whole are moving too slowly toward decarbonization. But it doesn't have to stay that way: unlike fossil fuel companies, electric utilities do not sell fossil fuels. Utilities can play a significant role in solving the climate crisis through clean electricity and electrification, if they take advantage of the opportunity.

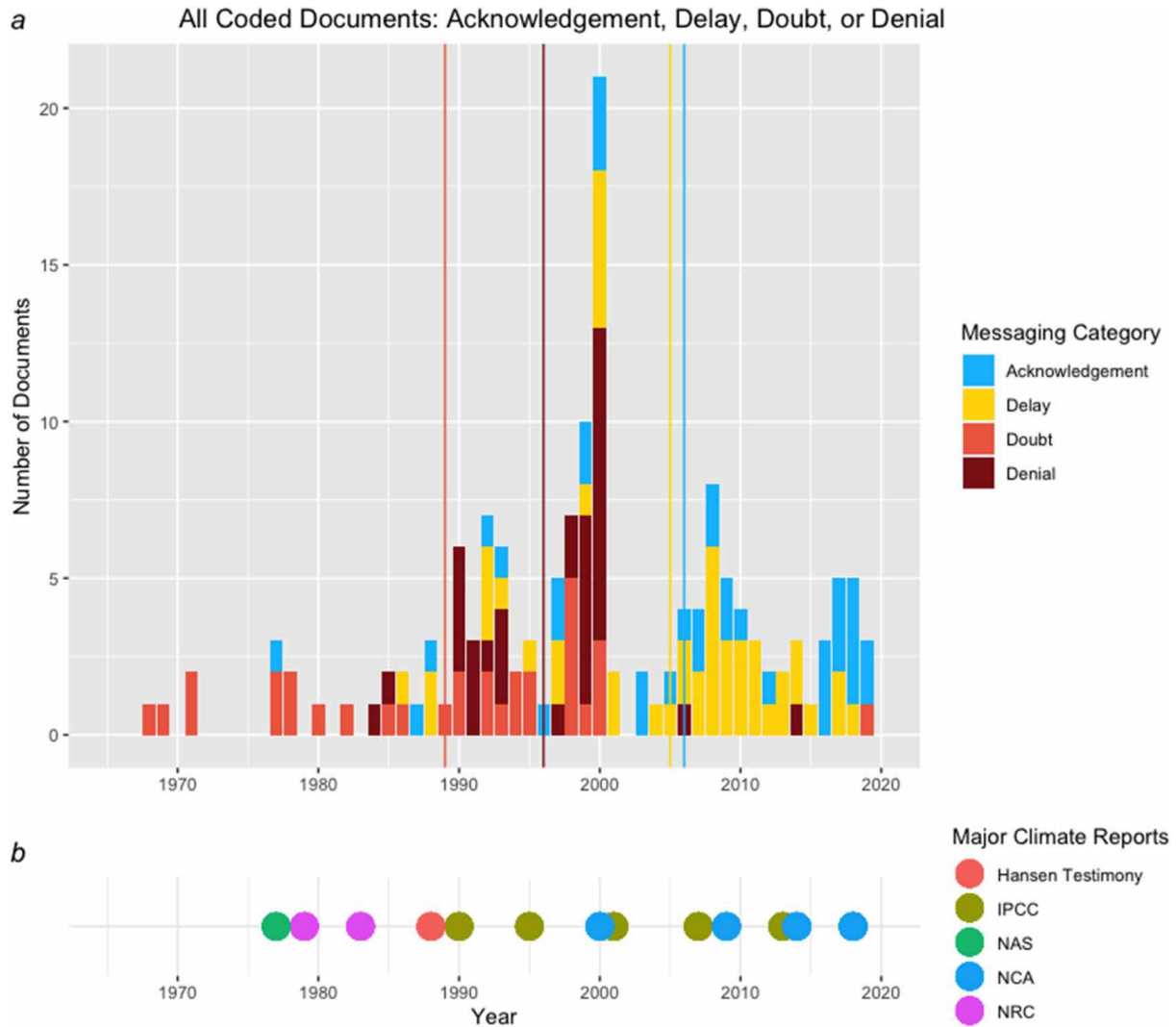


Fig. 2 Temporal distribution of categorized codes for all documents, (a). Taking the average year for documents in each messaging category, acknowledgement documents are centered in 2006, delay documents are centered in 2005, doubt documents are centered in 1989, and denial documents are centered in 1996 (years indicated as vertical lines). Major climate reports are shown (b) from the IPCC (olive), National Climate Assessment (blue), National Research Council (magenta), National Academies of Science (green), and Hansen congressional testimony (red).