Scientists recently discovered a planet made of diamond, an amazing discovery. One of them has commented on how well that scientific discovery was received, as opposed to research on climate change:

> Our host institutions were thrilled with the publicity and most of us enjoyed our 15 minutes of fame. The attention we received was 100% positive, but how different that could have been.
>
> How so? Well, we could have been climate scientists.
>
> Imagine for a minute that, instead of discovering a diamond planet, we'd made a breakthrough in global temperature projections.
>
> Let's say we studied computer models of the influence of excessive greenhouse gases, verified them through observations, then had them peer-reviewed and published in *Science*.
>
> Instead of sitting back and basking in the glory, I suspect we'd find a lot of commentators, many with no scientific qualifications, pouring scorn on our findings.

What's interesting is not just that there are different public reactions to climate change than other scientific research. What's *really* interesting that quite often the climate skeptics are not neanderthals who reject *all* science. It's only climate science (and maybe evolution) that they reject. For instance, Leonard Steinhart writes:

> Consider an entrepreneur I know who has a deep reverence for science and enjoys seeing the fruits of chemistry emerge in the products he sells. Yet whenever climate change comes up, he throws up his arms, insults Al Gore, and despite knowing that there's near-universal agreement among scientists about global warming, dismisses it as yet another fabrication of liberals trying to impose government on the rest of us.

People like this entrepreneur are perfectly willing to believe in astrophysics and to entrust their lives to airplanes designed on the same supercomputers that run climate models. They don't think that the moon landings were fake or that the sun goes around the earth. They certainly don't spend their time posting comments on

blogs about how “the moon is really made of green cheese, just like the so-called diamond planet.”

But they don’t seem to see the inconsistency. Of course, some of them are getting paid for their work; maybe if the Big Cheese lobby was stronger we’d see those blog postings as well. But many of them like Steinhart’s friend are undoubtedly sincere.

Yet, the ways that we know about the diamond planet or the physics of semiconductors are really no different from the ways that we know about climate change. Of course, that means that we don’t have complete certainty about any of these matters — in the case of climate change, the IPCC views the science as establishing about 90% probability for the key claims. (If climate science was a hoax or just the result of groupthink by scientists, we wouldn’t see this degree of care in assessing the strength of claims.) Climate sciences is based on decades of very hard, sophisticated scientific investigation by hundreds if not thousands of investigators. It’s a little hard to see why that work isn’t entitled to the respect given other scientific research.

So why the different reaction to climate science? The answer seems fairly obvious: when scientific evidence becomes sufficiently inconvenient, skepticism suddenly becomes too seductive to resist. But we should dig a little deeper to understand the roots of this attitude.

Steinhart believes that there are several factors contributing to the problem: anti-liberalism, anti-intellectualism, religious conservatism, and corporate self-interest. Putting aside corporate self-interest for the moment, the other three have a strong strain in common. They are often associated with belief in the autonomous individual and a corresponding rejection of human interdependence (at least outside the nuclear family). Anti-liberalism means that people do not need the help of government; religious conservatism (at least of the evangelical variety) means that individuals rather than religious institutions are in charge of their own spiritual destinies; and anti-intellectualism means that we don’t have to rely on specialized knowledge controlled by other people. And even corporate self-interest fits, being tied with the belief that we can all pursue our own self-interest without worrying about other people, because the invisible hand of the market will iron out any apparent harms.

Climate science is threatening in part because it would require changes in government and the economy that conservatives find distasteful. But more

fundamentally, the basic insight of climate science is that the world has intricate and enormously important webs of interaction and feedback. The cumulative effect of small and seemingly innocuous actions in one place can contribute to long-term, serious harms halfway around the world. This degree of interdependency is hard to accept if you have based your entire worldview on a vision of the absolutely autonomous individual.

I don't mean that the science dictates views about religion or politics. Obviously n0t. There's no logical reason why someone couldn't be a libertarian, intellectual, evangelical, corporate officer who believes in climate science. No doubt there are such people. But if you're a libertarian, an evangelical, a populist, and a corporate officer — or any one of those three — it may be just a little easier to live in a world that lacks the kinds of deep interdependencies highlighted by climate science.