

# Some of Psychology's Contributions to Understanding the Climate Crisis

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## Sources:

American Psychological Association Task Force on the Interface Between Psychology and Global Climate Change

Yale Project on Climate Communication: Engaging Diverse Audiences with Climate Change: Message Strategies for Global Warming's Six Americas and Climate Change Psychology: Five Insights;

The work of George Marshall and George Lakoff

Acknowledgments: Paul Belanger- Technical Assistance; Thad Cummins- Videos

## Presentation Outline

### I. What Do Americans Think About Climate Change?

Profiles of Six “Attitude Types”: The Six “Americas”  
Video Profiles: One Alarmed and One Dismissive Citizen

### II. What are the Communication Challenges? (Psychological Processes that Influence How Individuals Cope with Climate Change)

Inhibitors of Taking Action  
Complications of Assessing Risk  
Difficulties Persuading the Doubters and Dismissives

### III. What Lessons Can Be Drawn from Psychology Regarding Climate Communication?

# The Six Americas



## The Six Americas Differ With Respect Key Beliefs About Climate Change and :

Demographic characteristics

Political ideology, behavior, and party identification

Cultural values

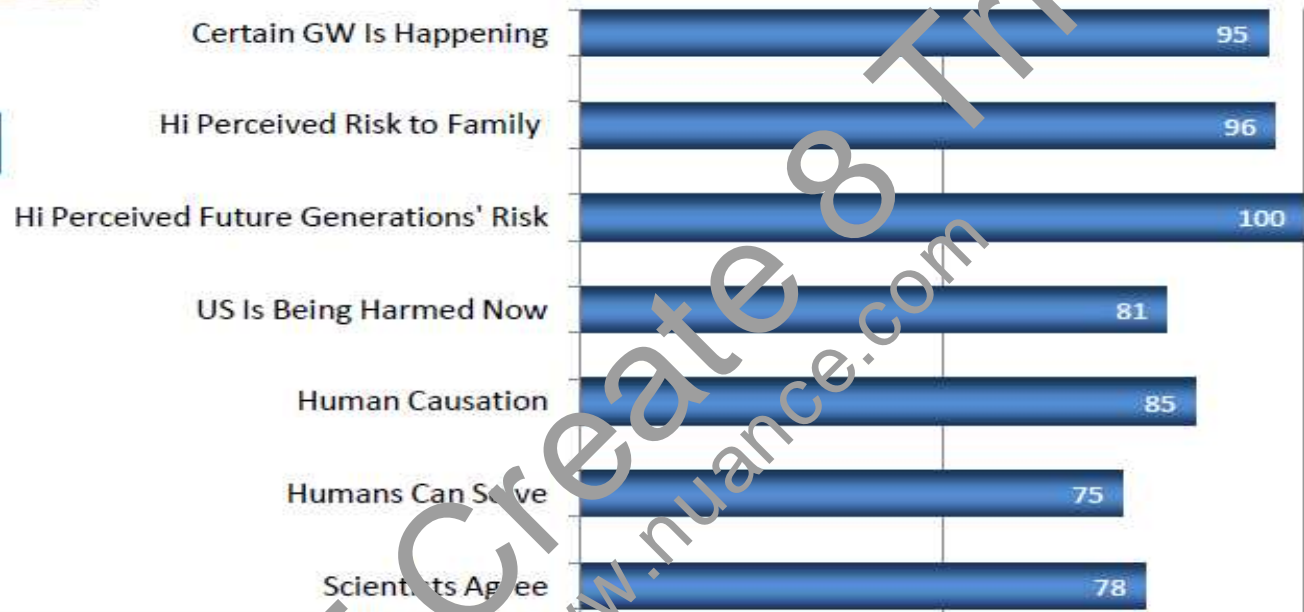
Involvement with the issue

Inclination to accept or reject climate science



Figure 6: *Alarmed* Key Beliefs & Issue Involvement

Key Beliefs



Issue Involvement

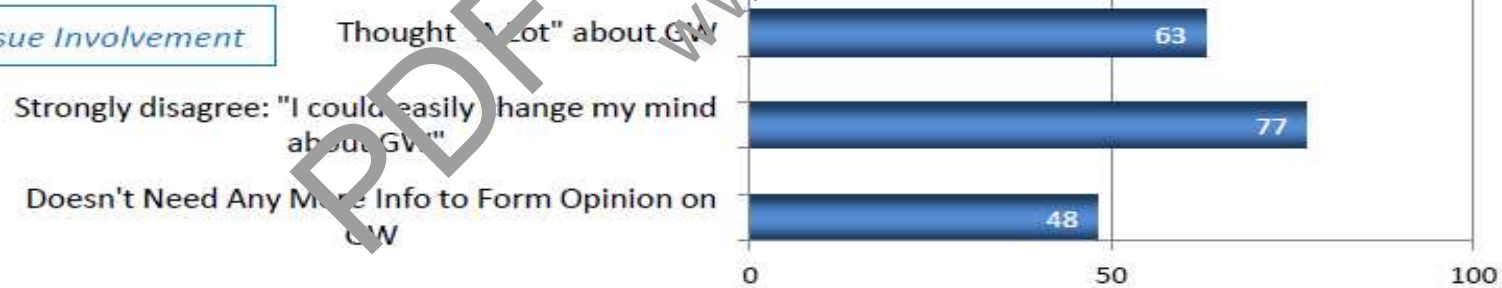




Figure 7: *Concerned* Key Beliefs & Issue Involvement

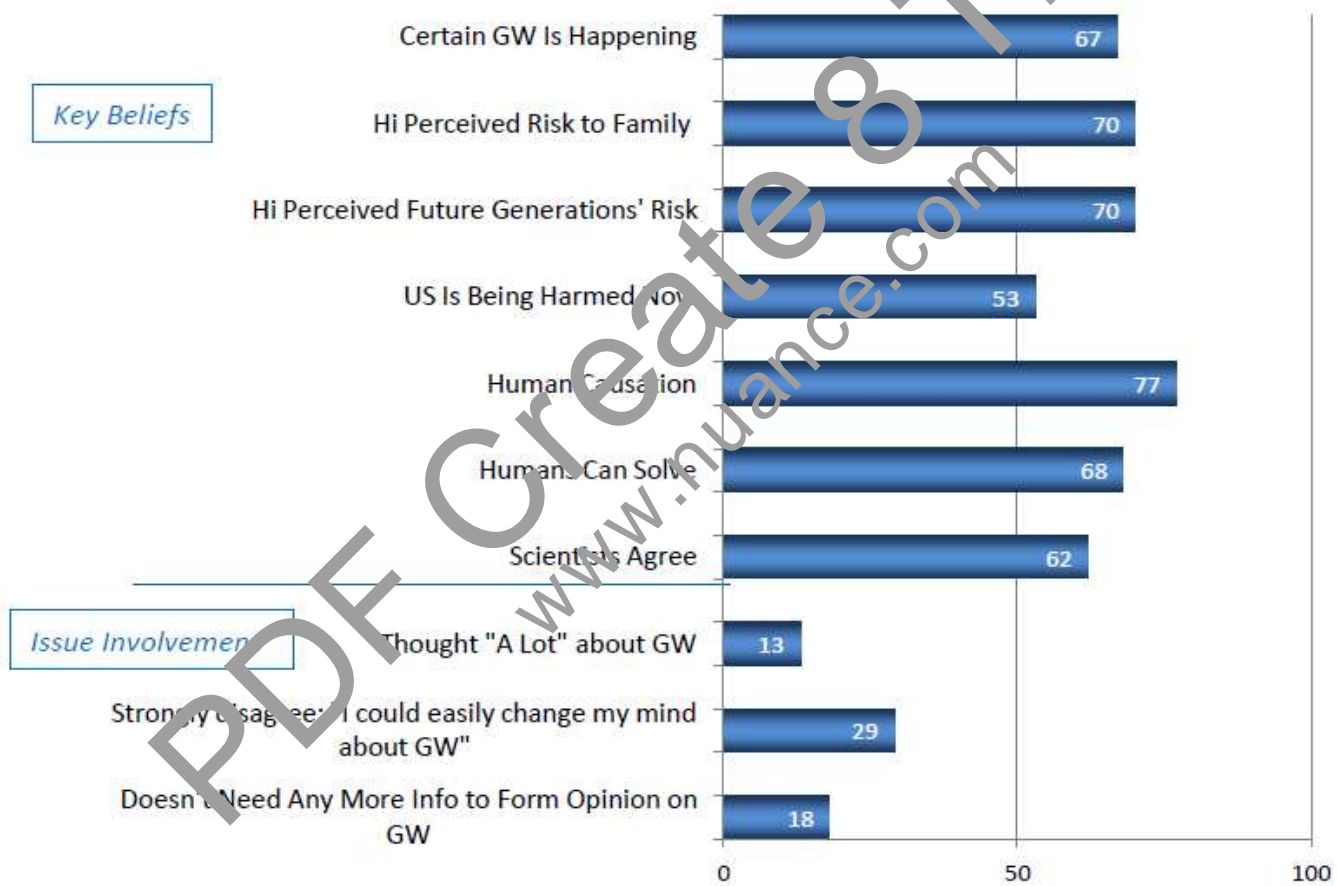




Figure 8: *Cautious Key Beliefs & Issue Involvement*

*Key Beliefs*

*Issue Involvement*

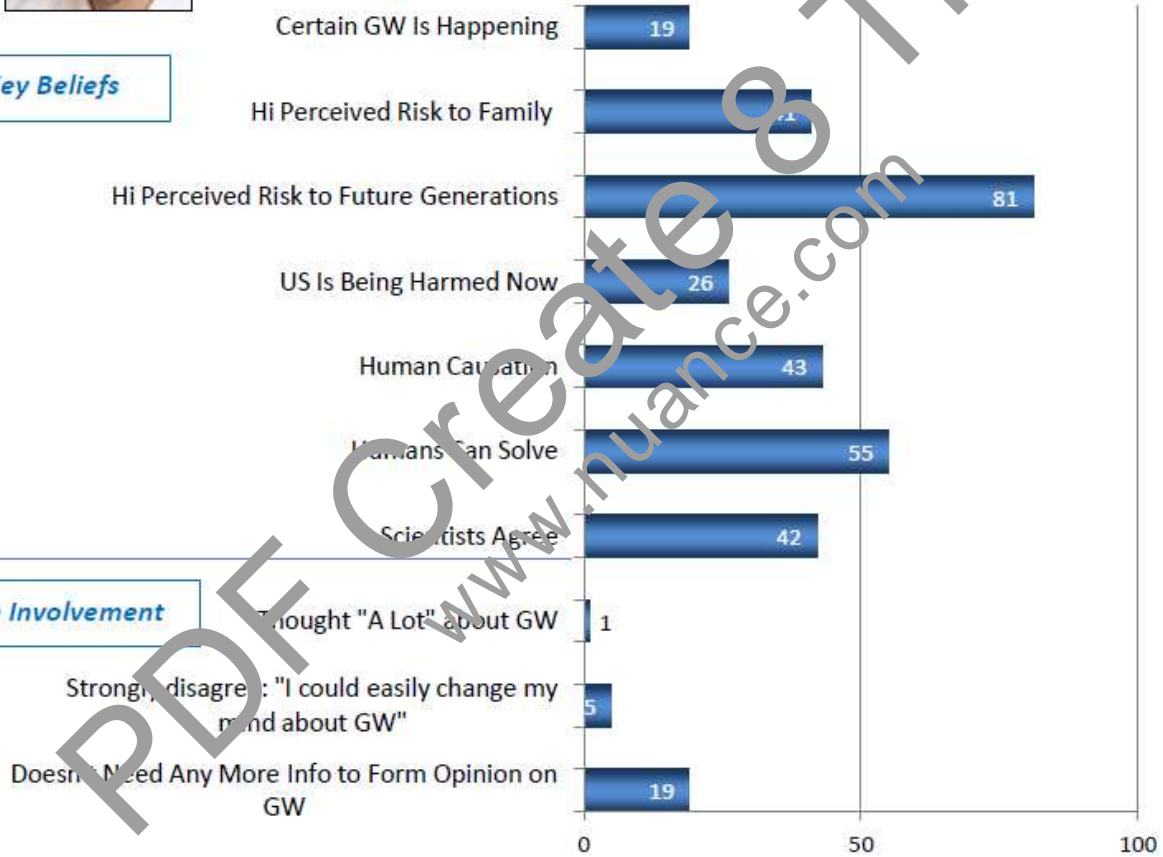




Figure 9: *Disengaged* Key Beliefs & Issue Engagement

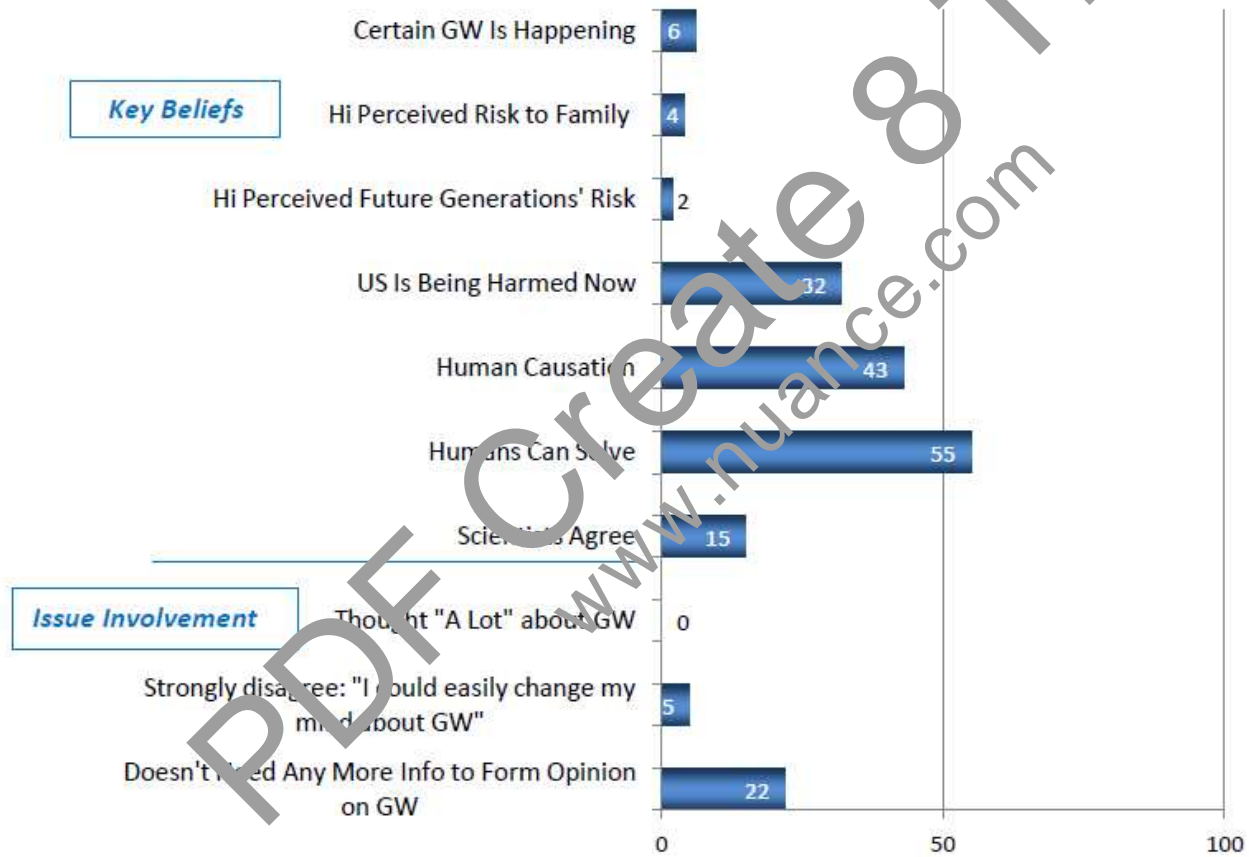






Figure 11: *Doubtful* Key Beliefs & Issue Involvement

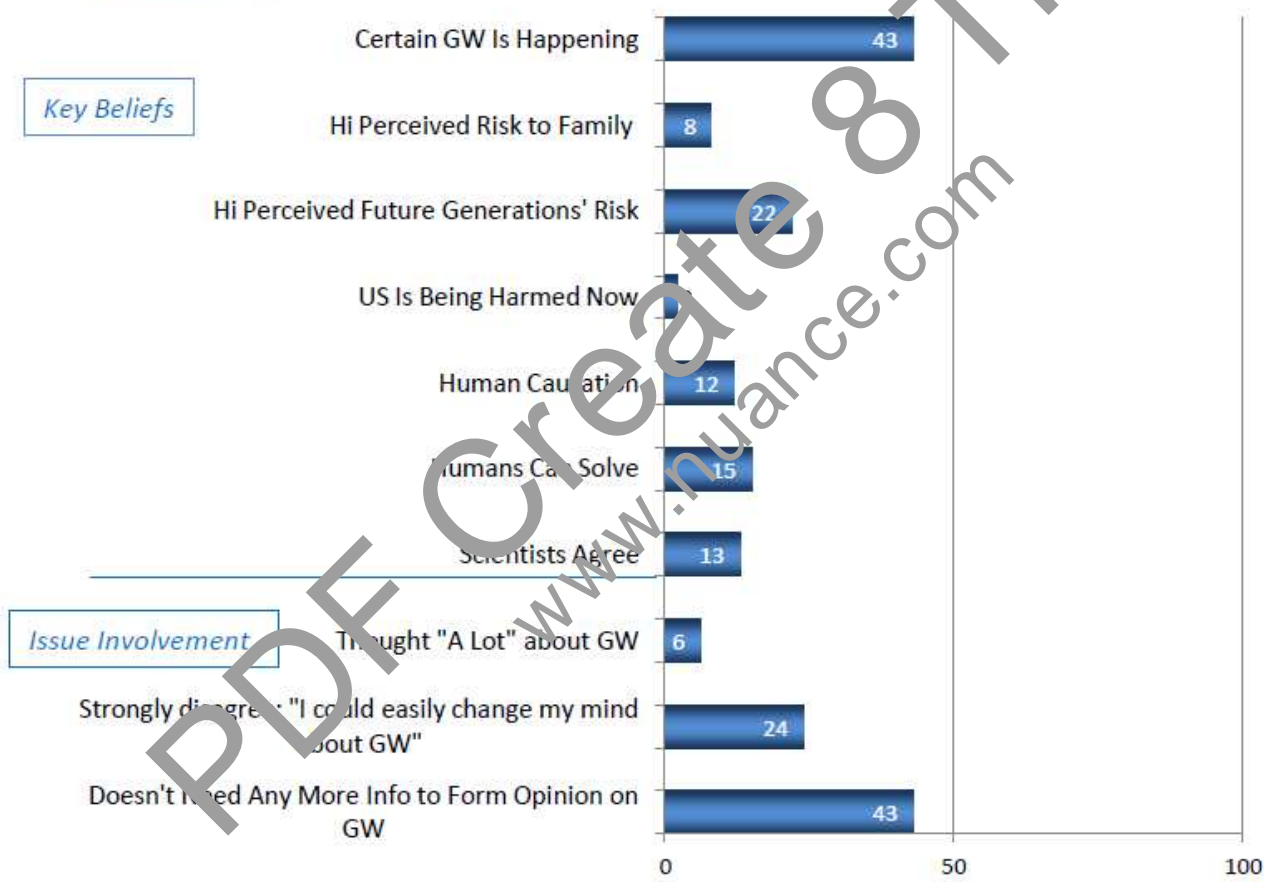
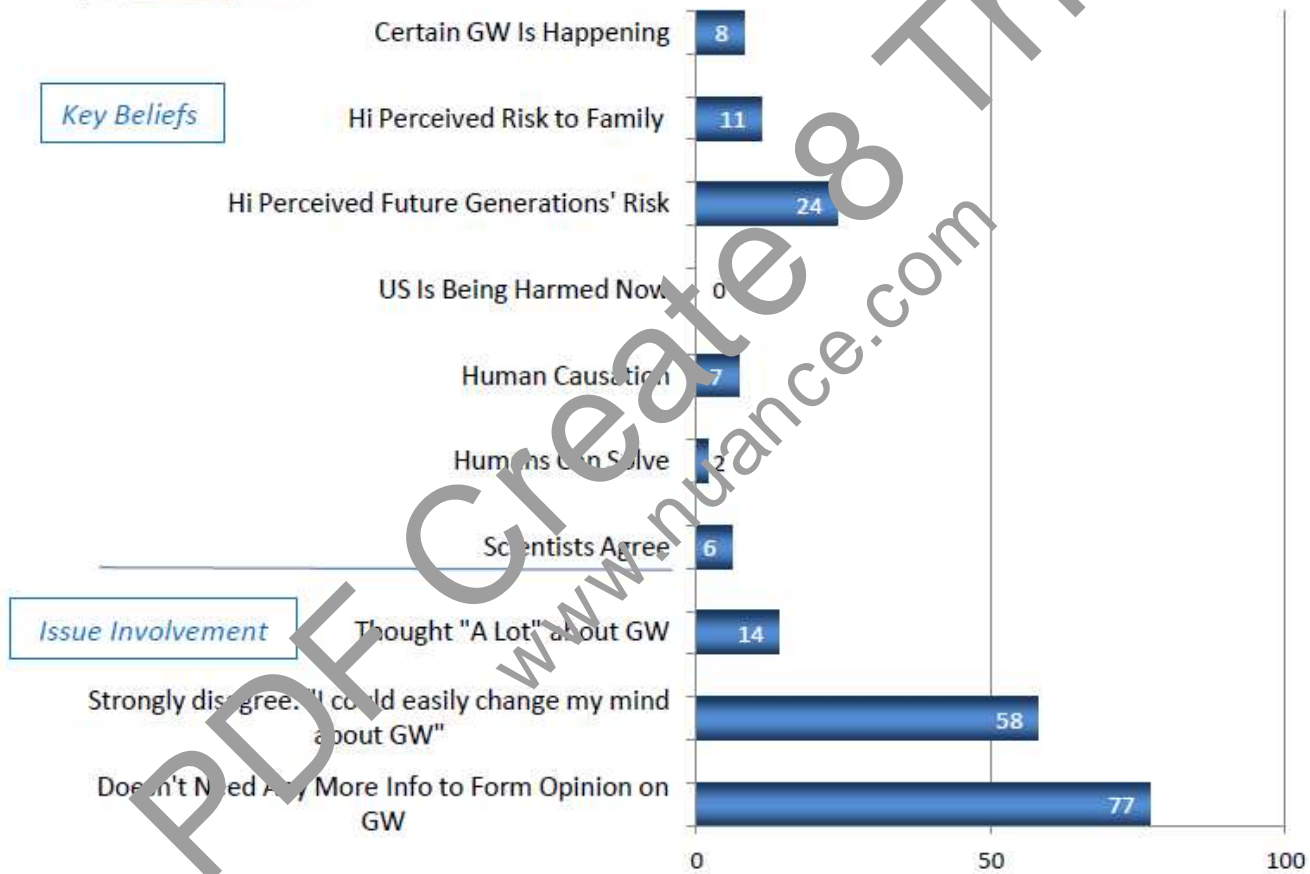




Figure 12: *Dismissive* Key Beliefs & Issue Involvement



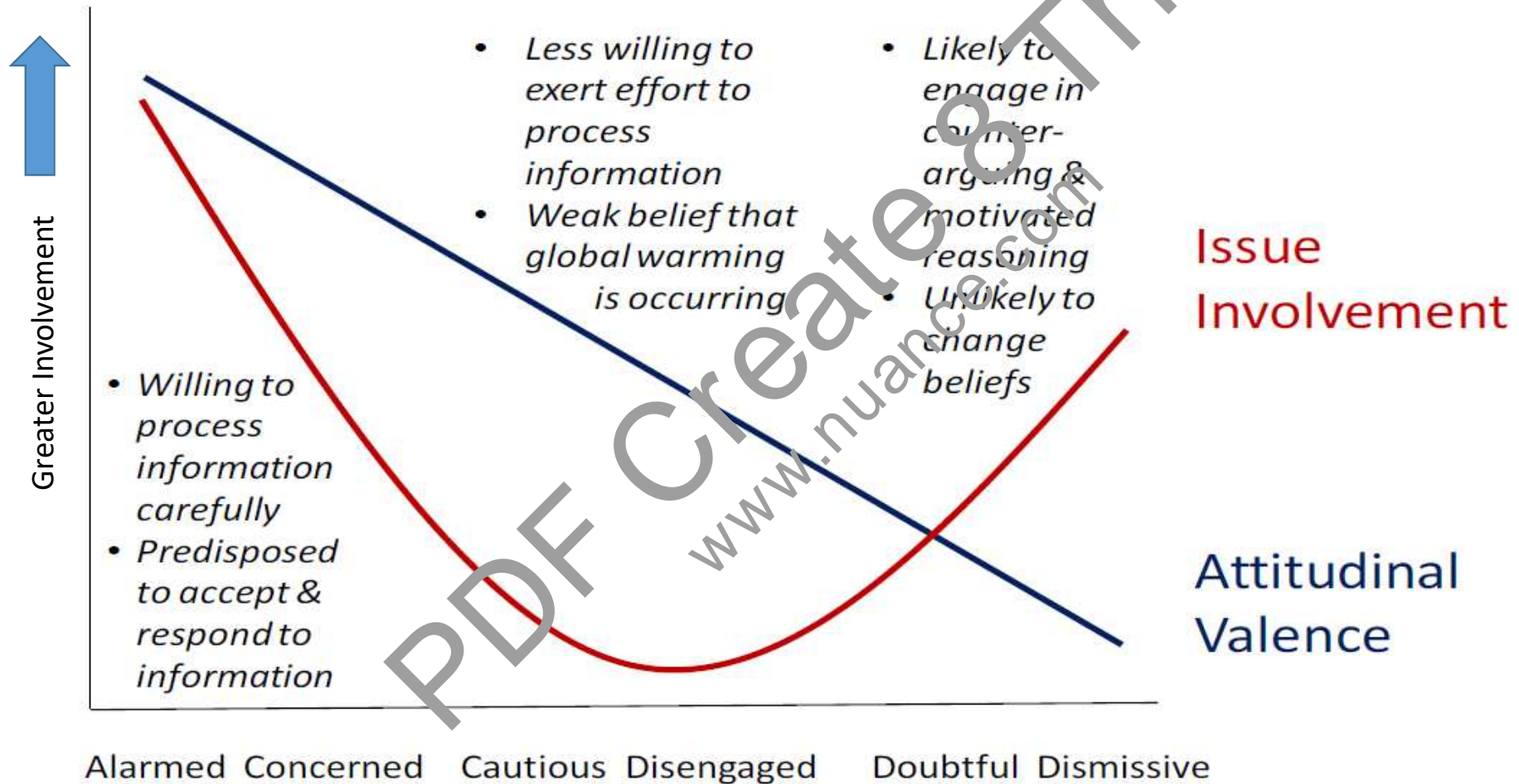
## Two Examples: Senator Bernie Sanders and Former Governor Sarah Palin

Listen for Attitudes About Science, Willingness to Process Information, Engagement with Climate Issue, Moral Presuppositions

[Bernie Sanders YouTube clip](#) – played from beginning to 5 minutes

[Sarah Palin YouTube Clip](#) – played from 00:15 to 1:42

## Figure 2: Information-Processing Propensities Among the Six Americas



## What are the Key Communication Challenges for Three Groups

1. [High Involvement Public/Accept Climate Change](#): The Alarmed and the Concerned (45%)
2. [Low Involvement Public](#): The Cautious and the Disengaged (34%)
3. [High Involvement Public/Reject Climate Change](#): The Doubtful and the Dismissive (21%)

## Communication Challenges:

Group 1: Highly attentive to information, want to know what they can do to reduce global warming

**KEY Challenge**: Motivating them to take action

Group 2: Uncertain about reality of climate change, but unlikely to find answers, as they pay little attention to information about issue

**KEY Challenge**: Reaching them with information

Group 3: Fairly certain climate change is not happening

**KEY Challenge**: Understanding the motivational structure behind views and promoting the adoption of new views

## Group 1: The Alarmed and the Concerned

### Why motivating them to take action is difficult:

Nature of the phenomena: Everyone is to blame

Social construction of climate change: Social norms have developed that exclude climate change from what can be addressed and/or discussed publicly

Passive bystander effect: Management of conflict between wanting to act and wanting to protect the self by claiming to know less than one does and waiting for others to act first

Negative psychological effects of climate change: Gradual, accumulative, paralyzing

## Group 1: The Alarmed and the Concerned

### Communication Strategies to Promote Engagement:

Employ messages with information and complexity

Use strong logically-sound arguments for actions

Focus on solutions to climate change

Build perceptions of collective- and self-efficacy

Help Group 1 to become opinion leaders



## Group 2: The Cautious and the Disengaged

Why risk of climate change is difficult to apprehend and reaching this group with information is a challenge:

Nature of the phenomena: Invisible, result of systemic rather than direct causes, described in terms of variables distributed over time

Requires cognitive rather than primarily emotional processing and making concrete abstract events that will occur in the future

Influenced by generalized expectations of stability and change, pre-existing frames of reference

## Group 2: The Cautious and the Disengaged

Significant percentages don't understand news or seek information about climate change:

“I have difficulty understanding news reports about global warming.” Cautious=44% and Disengaged=77%

“In general, I don't like to read or hear anything about global warming.” Cautious=37% and Disengaged=59%

## Group 2: The Cautious and the Disengaged

### Communication Strategies to Promote Acceptance of Information

Unlikely to attend to information that requires cognitive effort

More likely to attend to messages that:

Rely on peripheral/heuristic information processing (e.g., humor)

Demonstrate that appropriate climate change views are respected and advocated by sources credible to the target audience (**social norms**)

Show rather than tell what is happening

Personalize the threat so that the information provided is emotionally significant

Generate involvement through story (**narrative strategies**)

### Group 3: The Doubtful and the Dismissive

Why persuading others to adopt counter-attitudinal views is difficult:

Information may trigger counter-arguing

Information casting doubt on the seriousness of climate change may be accepted uncritically whereas the opposite message (climate change is a serious threat) may be rejected uncritically

### Group 3: The Doubtful and the Dismissive

Climate change may be perceived as a threat to pre-existing cultural values making it especially challenging to reach these groups

Direct engagement may result in a boomerang effect such that pre-existing attitudes are strengthened

However:

For the Doubtful, emphasis on personal experiences with climate change may be helpful

For both groups, a focus on public health effects of climate change may work

## Key Communication Strategies From Psychology

**Five lessons from Psychology that policy-makers can use to engage a significant portion (but not all) of the general public:**

Privilege experience over analysis

Link message to group norms

Reduce psychological distance

Frame the big picture: Nobody likes losing but everyone likes gaining

Play the long-game: Tap the potential of human motivation

## The End

The EEE seminar disrupts silence and interrupts despair over climate change, encourages a culture of urgent engagement, and helps us to develop narratives of hope.

Thank you.