U.S. Catholic bishops’ silence and denialism on climate change

Sabrina Danielsen *, Daniel R DiLeo 1 and Emily E Burke 2

1 Department of Cultural and Social Studies, Creighton University, Omaha, NE, United States of America
2 Undergraduate student, Creighton University, Omaha, NE, United States of America

* Author to whom any correspondence should be addressed.

E-mail: SabrinaDanielsen@creighton.edu

Keywords: climate change, religion, politics, denialism, Catholic, conservatism

Abstract

The Catholic Church recognizes climate change as a moral issue, has called for social action, and has the institutional potential to meaningfully address climate change. Many hoped Pope Francis’s 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si’* would spark widespread climate action. However, our quantitative and qualitative content analyses show that U.S. Catholic bishops responsible for leading the Church were silent and denialist about climate change around *Laudato Si’*. Using a newly constructed dataset of 12,077 columns published by U.S. Catholic bishops in the official publications for 171 of the 178 U.S. Catholic dioceses between June 2014–June 2019, we find that (a) as a group, U.S. Catholic bishops were generally silent about climate change and (b) as a group, when U.S. Catholic bishops did mention climate change, they often: (a) diminished and distanced themselves from Church teaching on this issue; (b) downplayed parts of *Laudato Si’* that conflict with a conservative political identity/ideology; and (c) emphasized parts of *Laudato Si’* that correspond to a conservative political identity/ideology. On climate change, our findings indicate individual U.S. Catholic bishops’ diocesan communications have collectively snuffed out the spark of *Laudato Si’*. Our findings suggest politics may trump religion in influencing climate change beliefs even among religious leaders, and that the American Catholic Church subtly engages in climate denialism even though its top religious leader (Pope Francis) has emphasized the scientific reality and urgency of climate change.

1. Introduction

Pope Francis’ (2015) ecological encyclical *Laudato Si’* was a landmark document that expanded existing Catholic teachings on the urgent need to address climate change. Many scholars hoped it would catalyze robust climate action (Brulle and Antonio 2015, Carvalho 2015, Editors 2015, McNutt 2015). Much of this optimism was rooted in assessments by scholars that religion can uniquely catalyze climate action (Veldman et al 2014) and Catholicism is distinctively positioned to address the climate crisis (Dasgupta et al 2015) through many powerful institutional features. These include a community of more than 70 million followers in the U.S. and one billion globally (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate 2021); a hierarchical leadership structure to disseminate papal teachings about environmental and climate justice; a vast system of schools and parishes to educate millions of persons about climate science, ethics, socioeconomics, and policy; advocacy networks to support climate legislation; and an expansive grid of land, buildings, and investments to support renewable energy and energy conservation (DiLeo 2020).

Research has shown that *Laudato Si’* impacted individuals’ concerns about climate change, but those impacts were polarized by politics. In the U.S., Pope Francis’s climate change teachings were positively correlated with increased concerns about climate change (Maibach et al 2015). Among those previously concerned about climate change, there was also a positive correlation between encyclical exposure and climate activism (Myers et al 2017). However, responses among both U.S. Catholics and non-Catholics were impacted by political ideology. Politically conservative Catholics discredited papal climate change teaching (Li et al 2016). Catholic Democrats were more...
likely than Catholic Independents to support climate change policies following review of stories that mentioned Pope Francis (Myrick and Comfort 2019). Irrespective of religion, Democrats and liberals/progressives were more likely to embrace the pope and his climate change teachings while Republicans and conservatives were more likely to resist the pope and these teachings (Landrum et al 2017, Schuld et al 2017, Landrum and Vasquez 2020). These findings are consistent with scholarship that the biggest predictors of climate change beliefs are political identity and ideology in the United States, and that Republicans and conservatives are more skeptical of climate change and less supportive of mitigative actions (Kahan et al 2012, Hornsey et al 2016, Leiserowitz et al 2018).

It remains unknown how politics mediated responses to Laudato Si’ among U.S. Catholic bishops. Bishops lead geographic segments of the Catholic Church within which they have a duty to communicate and implement Church teaching (Second Vatican Council 1964, 1965). Since dioceses administer Catholic parishes, schools, facilities, wealth, and policies that can communicate and enact the climate teachings of Laudato Si’, bishops’ embrace of the encyclical is thus important to fully realizing its potential to spark social action on climate change. The Vatican explicitly stated that ‘bishops should promote Laudato si’ in their dioceses (Vatican Radio 2016).

However, over the past several decades—first under Pope John Paul II (1978–2005) and continued under Pope Benedict XVI (2005–2013)—U.S. bishops are generally recognized to have become more religiously conservative (Gillis 2020, Tentler 2020), politically conservative (Reese 2010, Schlumpf 2019, Rocca and Lovett 2021), likely to identify as Republican (Gelm 1990), sympathetic to Republican leaders (Danielsen et al 2021), and widely viewed as aligned with the Republican party (Quinn 2009, Gehring 2015, NCR Editorial Staff 2020). This comprehensive religious-political shift is consistent with strengthened correlation between religious and political ideology in the post-World War II U.S. Wuthnow (1988)—a phenomenon that was additionally fueled among Catholics and Republicans following the Supreme Court’s decision on Roe v. Wade (Millies 2018) and has since been documented among at least one subset of U.S. Catholic priests (Levesque and Siptroth 2005) and the wider U.S. Catholic population (O’Brien and Abdelhadi 2020). It is also congruent with increased religious conservatism (Greeley 2004), political conservatism, and Republican identification among U.S. priests from among whom many current bishops have been chosen (Jelen 1993, 2003, Stammer 1994, Watanbe 2002).

Especially considering conservative U.S. Catholics generally prioritized partisan orthodoxy over papal authority in response to Laudato Si’ (Li et al 2016), U.S. bishops around the encyclical may have experienced tension around their political ideology, identity, and responsibility to communicate Church teachings on climate change. This seems especially likely since in the U.S., conservative white men have been found more likely to deny climate change than other persons (McCright and Dunlap 2011), white Catholics have been found less likely than Hispanic Catholics to affirm the reality of climate change or attribute global warming to human activities (Funk and Alper 2015), and the U.S. bishops are all men among whom 88% were white in 2016 (Fichter et al 2019). Further, a network of conservative thinktanks, nonprofits, and individuals fund and perpetuate climate denial (Brulle 2014, Farrell 2015) and U.S. bishops are variously connected with politically active wealthy conservative persons and entities (Gehring 2017, NCR Editorial Staff 2019, Roberts 2019). Since Laudato Si’ was the most authoritative Catholic teaching document published during our timeframe and should have preeminently influenced the content of bishops’ teachings, this raises the question: Have U.S. bishops communicated Catholic climate teachings around Laudato Si’? Or have they failed their duty to communicate Church teachings on climate change?

2. Methods

To answer this question, we compiled 12 077 columns published before and after Laudato Si’ by ordinary bishops in official diocesan publications from 171 of the 178 U.S. dioceses. We assessed the quantitative frequency and qualitative features of their climate change discussions. Our data collection and content analysis methods were informed by the best practices in content analysis and grounded theory approaches. There is little research that has systematically quantified discourse on climate change among American religious leaders (but see Danielsen 2013 on Evangelical Protestant environmental discourse) and we know of none since 2014 to which we can compare our findings. In the field of scholarship on U.S. Catholicism, we believe our dataset of bishop official diocesan publication columns is novel.

2.1. Hypotheses

Given existing research on bishops’ ideological conservatism and findings that conservative political identity/ideology are the strongest predictors of climate skepticism and aversion to particular actions, we test the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: As a group, U.S. Catholic bishops were generally silent about climate change.

Hypothesis 2: As a group, when U.S. Catholic bishops did mention climate change, they:

3 Our dataset only includes communications from ordinary bishops who lead a diocese and to whom we exclusively apply the term ‘bishop.’ Our dataset excludes the work of auxiliary bishops who assist an ordinary bishop.
(a) diminished and distanced themselves from Church teaching on this issue.
(b) downplayed parts of Laudato Si' that conflict with a conservative political identity/ideology.
(c) emphasized parts of Laudato Si' that correspond to a conservative political identity/ideology.

2.2. Data
We constructed a dataset of 12,077 English-language columns written by bishops in their official diocesan publications between June 2014–June 2019. Since Laudato Si’ was published in June 2015, our data captures any discussion of climate change one year before and 4 years after the encyclical. Our aim was not to equally compare pre- and post-encyclical discussions of climate change. Our dataset spans all U.S. geographic regions. Within the U.S., there are 178 Roman Catholic dioceses and archdioceses (larger dioceses for urban areas)\(^4\). Our dataset includes the particular, tailored messages that Catholics from rural Alaska to New York City each heard from their local bishop.

We focused on official diocesan publications because these are key media through which each bishop’s teachings seem most likely to consistently have reached individuals in a diocese and represent the most accessible, standardized medium for cross-diocesan analyses. Between June 2014 and June 2019, we found that most U.S. dioceses (173 of 178, or 97%) had an official diocesan publication. The publications were generally sent directly to all registered Catholics within a diocese, usually weekly or monthly as a print or electronic newspaper or magazine. Many had a regular column written by the bishop, while some just had irregular letters. Our dataset includes both regular columns and irregular bishops’ communications. Since there is no national diocesan publication archive, we manually assembled a complete dataset as was reasonably possible. There are two dioceses from which we were unable to gain access to any columns\(^5\). Our final dataset includes 12,077 bishop columns from 171 dioceses (99% of those dioceses with a publication, 96% of all dioceses).

2.3. Content analysis methods
To collect all bishop teachings about climate change, we searched our dataset for every mention of climate and warming\(^6\). We included columns that mentioned climate change or global warming and variant wording like ‘the changing climate’ or ‘warming of the planet’ (hereafter simply referred to as ‘climate change’). We excluded false positives, e.g. discussion of ‘America’s racial climate.’ We found a total of 93 columns that discussed climate change.

We developed codes for the 93 climate change columns (table 1) through a collaborative, iterative process using insights from grounded theory (Emerson et al 2011, Charmaz 2014). We conducted three cycles in which all three co-authors individually coded a random subsample of 20% of columns and together calculated intercoder reliability, discussed discrepancies in our individual coding, and refined our coding scheme and protocol (Neuendorf 2017, Krippendorff 2019). Once our coding scheme and protocol were finalized, we each coded the 93 climate columns individually. Our intercoder reliability was high for the 93 climate columns, despite us coding more interpretive, latent content which has been shown to lower intercoder reliability (Schreier 2012). Across all variables, we averaged 96% agreement, 0.94 Gwet’s AC, and 0.86 Krippendorff’s Alpha. There were two codes for which we were below 0.8 Krippendorff’s alpha, a commonly-used standard designating almost perfect intercoder reliability: Socially controversial (0.75) and Minimizes papal authority (0.74). We encountered the paradox of skewed distribution that lowers Krippendorff’s Alpha, so we also calculated Gwet’s AC which counters this paradox (Gwet 2008, Feng 2014). We were above 0.8 Gwet’s AC for all codes. We discussed all discrepancies in codes and came to 100% intercoder agreement about all 15 codes for all 93 columns.

3. Findings
3.1. Hypothesis 1: as a group, U.S. Catholic bishops were generally silent about climate change
Hypothesis 1 is supported. Of 12,077 columns over five years, only 93 columns (0.8%) mentioned climate change. Most dioceses had no such columns: search for any ad hoc bishop columns. There are several dioceses for which we have partial data (e.g. our dataset is missing certain years or issues). We contacted each diocese multiple times to gain more complete data. We believe we fully exhausted all reasonable avenues for adding columns to our dataset.

\(^4\) Scholars of religion often sample just 176 U.S. Catholic dioceses. However, we included two additional dioceses in our analysis to be more comprehensive in our analysis: (a) Archdiocese for the Military Services, which is not geographic but is based in Washington, DC and serves those in the armed services and their families; and (b) Diocese of St. Vincent, Virgin Islands, a geographic diocese incorporated into the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and, as part of the U.S. Virgin Islands, serves non-voting U.S. citizens.

\(^5\) We worked for nearly a year to compile as complete of data as possible. Many dioceses did not have online archives back to June 2014, so we gathered columns through a variety of methods: contacted dioceses’ communication offices and received mailed or emailed copies of issues or columns; paid for or were given complimentary access to digital archive subscriptions; paid a librarian and a graduate student to respectively scan columns from a local public and university library; and visited a diocesan archive in person to scan hardcopies. There are two dioceses with an official publication for which we lack data. We contacted both dioceses eight times trying to gain access. We were informed that neither dioceses’ bishop had a regular column, but the offices lacked the staffing to help us.

\(^6\) We also searched for term greenhouse effect but found it was used just once in the dataset and in a column that also mentioned climate change.
Table 1. Content analysis codes for bishops’ columns that mentioned climate change, global warming, or their equivalent (N = 93 columns).

| Code          | Description                                                                 | Prevalence          |
|---------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Depth         | 1–3. 1 = Barely mentions environment/ecology (one passing reference); 2 = Somewhat addresses ecology; 3 = Substantively engages (at least half the column dedicated to ecology). | 1: 15 (16%)  
                |                                                                                   | 2: 22 (24%)  
                |                                                                                   | 3: 56 (60%) |
| Educates about climate change |                                                                                           |                     |
| Educates scientific | 0, 1. 1 = Speaks about climate change as real.                                        | 56 (60%)            |
| Educates religious | 0, 1. 1 = Speaks about climate change as a religious issue about which the Catholic Church has taught. | 49 (53%)            |
| Educates urgent | 0, 1. 1 = Speaks about climate change in urgent terms (e.g. timeliness, severity of physical/human consequences). | 29 (31%)            |
| Educates economic root cause | 0, 1. 1 = Speaks about climate change as a direct result of our economic system. | 2 (2%)              |
| Conveys personal view | 0, 1. 1 = Conveys personal view about climate change (e.g. declarative rhetoric, use of first-person pronouns). | 42 (45%)            |
| Mitigative actions mentioned |                                                                                           |                     |
| Internal action | 0, 1. 1 = Positively or neutrally mentions internal action vis-à-vis environment at the individual level (e.g. think, feel, learn, pray, respect, reconsider, ecological conversion) or group level (e.g. vague suggestions of dialogue or concrete events, like conferences, where people can learn more). | 73 (78%) |
| Micro action | 0, 1. 1 = Positively or neutrally mentions concrete mitigative action vis-à-vis environment that is a voluntary action by the individual. | 14 (15%) |
| Meso action | 0, 1. 1 = Positively or neutrally mentions concrete mitigative action vis-à-vis environment that is a voluntary action by a collective or organization. | 14 (15%) |
| Macro action | 0, 1. 1 = Positively or neutrally mentions concrete mitigative action vis-à-vis environment that is political, i.e. mentions policies or actions to influence policies. | 20 (22%) |
| Undermining language |                                                                                           |                     |
| Socially controversial | 0, 1. 1 = Speaks about climate change as socially controversial, i.e. within society. | 28 (30%) |
| Scientifically controversial | 0, 1. 2. 0 = No mention of scientific controversy existing around climate change; 1 = Speaks of scientific controversy around climate change AND does NOT immediately challenge or diminish that controversy. 2 = Affirms scientific consensus on climate change or challenges the idea that there is legitimate scientific controversy. | 1: 11 (12%)  
                |                                                                                   | 2: 14 (15%) |
| Escape hatch | 0,1. 1 = Provides readers with an opportunity to dismiss climate change as real or important. | 6 (6%)              |
| Minimizes papal authority | 0, 1. 1 = Minimizes papal authority to teach about climate change without re-affirming authority with equal or greater emphasis. | 6 (6%)              |
| Minimizes climate change in Catholic Church teachings | 0,1. 1 = Minimizes climate change in Catholic Church teachings without reaffirming its importance with equal or greater emphasis. | 9 (10%) |

118 (69%) of the 171 dioceses we assessed did not publish a column in which the bishop mentioned climate change (figure 1). Most bishops failed to teach about climate change: 148 (74%) of the 201 bishops who served a diocese in our dataset never once mentioned climate change. In the majority of dioceses, U.S. Catholics heard nothing about climate change from their local bishop in his official diocesan publication around Laudato Si’. As discussed in detail below, it is worth noting here that bishops were not silent about other social issues.

3.2. Hypothesis 2a: as a group, when U.S. Catholic bishops did mention climate change, they diminished and distanced themselves from Church teaching on this issue

Hypothesis 2a is supported. Forty-four of the 93 columns (47%) that mentioned climate change did not describe it as a religious issue about which the Catholic Church has established teaching. This is significant since religious framing of climate change is precisely what many scholars feel is essential to helping inspire widespread action. Here, it is important to note that even among the 49 columns that did
Figure 1. Geographic distribution of U.S. Catholic bishops’ attention to climate change. Colors indicate frequency that a diocese’s bishop mentioned climate change or global warming in his official diocesan publication column between June 2014 and June 2019. As described, not all mentions constitute substantive engagement with the issue. Dioceses with no data include five dioceses with no official publication and two dioceses that have an official diocesan publication, but for which we lack data. Note: 176 U.S. Catholic dioceses shown, excluding the Archdiocese of Military Services and Diocese of St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Between June 2014 and June 2019, the bishop of the former mentioned climate change twice in his official diocesan publication column while the bishop of the latter did not mention climate at all.

3.3. Hypothesis 2b: as a group, when U.S. Catholic bishops did mention climate change, they downplayed relevant parts of Laudato Si’ that conflict with a conservative political identity/ideology

Hypothesis 2b is supported. This was especially true regarding climate science, economics, and action. In Laudato Si’ (no. 23–25), Pope Francis reiterates Catholic teaching that affirms the scientific certainty of anthropogenic climate change and urgency of the climate crisis. Conversely, U.S. political conservatism has a documented history of ignoring and sowing doubt about the overwhelming scientific consensus that humans are the primary cause of climate change (Oreskes and Conway 2010, Mayer 2016, Leonard 2019). In our dataset, U.S. bishops engaged in these behaviors. Out of 12,077 columns, only 56 columns (0.46%) described climate change in terms that suggest it is real or currently happening. Of these 56 columns, 23 (41%) were published in the first three months after the encyclical’s release. These 56 columns were written by 36 different bishops scattered across the country (figure 2). Bishop Pates of Des Moines (Iowa) wrote the most such columns (seven). It is worth noting during our time span, Bishop Pates was the only bishop affiliated with Catholic Climate Covenant, the leading U.S. Catholic organization working to address climate change.

Out of 12,077 total columns, only 29 columns (0.24%) discussed climate changes as something that is urgent and only 14 columns (0.12%) discussed the general scientific consensus that climate change is real. Relatedly, six of the 93 columns that mentioned climate change provided readers with clear opportunities to deny the scientific reality or importance of global warming, through statements like ‘no matter your position on climate change, there are important truths in Laudato Si’.”
In *Laudato Si’* (no. 109), Pope Francis supports scholarly analysis that the predominate cause of climate change is growth-based, deregulated neoliberal capitalism driven by a ‘treadmill of production’ and consumption that narrowly defines efficiency in terms of monetary profit and externalizes the socioecological costs of greenhouse gas pollution (Pelling *et al* 2012). This reading directly challenges orthodox conservative free-market economic philosophy (Klein 2014). Amidst this dissonance, bishops are nearly silent on Pope Francis’s teachings about the economic causes of climate change. Of the 56 columns that spoke about climate change as real, only two columns (4%) described this phenomenon as a result of our economic systems. Thus, the vast majority (96%) of columns that recognize climate change as a problem [something few bishops even do], yet fails to diagnose the root causes’ (Petersen *et al* 2019).

In *Laudato Si’* (nos. 52–57, 163–198, 202–232), Pope Francis stresses the need for individual and collective environmental action that is both internal (e.g. prayer and education) and external (e.g. political). This approach reflects Catholic teaching that internal and external actions are complementary and essential. Although most U.S. adults believe religious groups should stay out of American politics (Gecewicz *et al* 2019), Francis’s writing also expresses Catholic teaching that the Church has ‘a right and a duty’ to participate in politics generally (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2019) and environmental politics specifically (Benedict 2010). Conversely, conservative Catholic theology often prioritizes interiority/spirituality over external systemic reform (Ahern 2015) and political conservatism generally resists state intervention and climate change policies in particular (Leiserowitz *et al* 2018).

Amidst these tensions, bishops who discussed climate change positively mentioned internal more often than external environmental action, especially the need for climate policies. Of the 93 columns that mention climate change, 73 columns (78%) mentioned internal action and 36 columns (39%) mentioned an external environmental action. Twenty of the 93 columns (22%) referenced environmental politics, which we defined as concrete policies or actions to influence policies. Only 14 columns specifically mentioned climate change politics (as opposed to general environmental politics) and only nine columns mentioned a particular climate change policy (e.g. Paris Agreement). Bishops’ relative silence on environmental politics is especially notable since they were not silent about politics on other social issues. Compared to the 14 columns on climate change politics, 284 columns mentioned abortion politics, 118 columns mentioned healthcare politics, and 93 columns mentioned immigration politics (figure 3).

The bishops arguably also indirectly undermined dialogue and action around Church teaching on climate change politics by framing climate change as socially controversial, e.g. as a topic that divides...
Figure 3. Bishops’ columns that mention concrete policies or actions to influence policies related to key social issues. Out of 12,077 U.S. bishops’ columns from June 2014 to June 2019, total number of columns that mention policy or action to influence policy on climate change (coded by hand by reading all columns on climate change); abortion (keywords: Roe v. Wade, March for Life); healthcare (keywords: Affordable Care Act, Obamacare, HHS mandate); and immigration (keywords: DACA, Dream Act, Dreamers).

American society. Of the 93 columns that mention climate change, 28 columns (30%) discussed the phenomenon as a socially controversial topic. Eighteen columns (19% of 93 climate change columns) only addressed climate change in terms of its social controversy (i.e. did not also affirm the scientific consensus of climate change or recognize Church teaching on the issue). Notably, 11 of those 18 columns (61%) substantively addressed ecology (Depth = 3). Exclusive emphasis on climate change as socially controversial was thus not limited to bishops’ cursory ecological references. Since invocation of controversy may decrease dialogue (Chen and Berger 2013) that can mitigate polarization (Barthold 2020) of the sort preventing U.S. climate policy (Jaffe 2018), the bishops’ reification of social controversy may thus have indirectly inhibited discussion of Church teaching on climate change policy.

3.4. Hypothesis 2c: as a group, when U.S. Catholic bishops did mention climate change, they emphasized parts of Laudato Si’ that correspond to a conservative political identity/ideology

Hypothesis 2c is supported. Although U.S. Catholic bishops were overwhelmingly silent on climate change, they were not so silent about other social issues that are nearly or entirely absent from Laudato Si’ but have become identified priorities for U.S. political conservatives—especially abortion (Kurtzleben 2020) and religious freedom (Green 2017). Compared to the 93 columns that mentioned climate change, 1036 columns mentioned abortion and 534 mentioned religious liberty or religious freedom. Although Laudato Si’ mentions climate change 24 times more than abortion, the bishops mentioned the issues with equal frequency in the context of the encyclical. Out of 211 bishop columns that referenced Laudato Si’, an equal number (59 columns) mentioned abortion or pro-life (a term that for many Catholics is solely synonymous with abortion opposition) as mentioned climate change.

Thus, although climate change was a preeminent focus of Laudato Si’, the U.S. Catholic bishops disproportionately lifted up their own priorities generally and in the presence of Laudato Si’ specifically. Interestingly, the conservative Fox News Channel—widely known for promoting climate change skepticism (Feldman et al. 2012, Hoewe et al. 2020)—employed a similar ‘issue diversion’ tactic in its coverage of Laudato Si’ to manage the dissonance between Pope Francis’s climate change teachings and conservative political identity/ideology (Tandoc et al. 2018). This is particularly notable since in 2016, 47% of U.S. bishop survey respondents said Fox News Channel was as their primary source of cable news (Fichter et al. 2019).

4. Discussion

Our study offers the first comprehensive, systematic analysis of U.S. Catholic bishops’ discussion of climate change around Laudato Si’ and tests four hypotheses based on existing research that (a) political conservatism is associated with climate denial and negative reactions to Laudato Si’ and (b) U.S. Catholic bishops as a group are generally politically conservative. Using a dataset of 12,077 columns published by U.S. Catholic bishops in official diocesan publications around Laudato Si’, we found all hypotheses were...
Environ. Res. Lett. 16 (2021) 114006 S Danielsen et al

Figure 4. Bishops’ columns that mention key social issues. Out of 12,077 U.S. bishops’ columns from June 2014 to June 2019, total number of columns that include keywords climate change or global warming; keyword abortion; keywords religious liberty or religious freedom.

supported. As a group, U.S. Catholic bishops were generally silent about climate change (Hypothesis 1). When they did mention climate change, the U.S. Catholic bishops often undermined Church teaching on the topic (Hypothesis 2a), downplayed relevant parts of Laudato Si’ that conflicted with political conservatism (Hypothesis 2b), and emphasized parts of Laudato Si’ that correspond to political conservatism (Hypothesis 2c).

Our findings do not definitively show that U.S. Catholic bishops’ political conservatism was the single or even primary cause of their silence on climate change or skewed teachings around Laudato Si’. Correlation does not prove causation and there could be other reasons for why bishops communicated as they did. For example, some bishops in the 1980s likely did not speak about the National Conference of Catholic Bishops’ two documents on peace/war and economics because of perceived personal lack of topical technical expertise and fear of pushback from Catholics in their diocese (DiLeo 2015). Thus, it is conceivable that some bishops did not speak on climate change around Laudato Si’ primarily for similar reasons. It is also worth noting that some bishops generally viewed as politically conservative did speak on climate change while some bishops widely recognized as politically progressive did not speak on climate change—sometimes very often, sometimes at all.

Nevertheless, our findings demonstrate that around Laudato Si’ U.S. Catholic bishops were silent on and distorted Church climate change teaching. This research supports existing literature that political identity/ideology is the strongest predictor of climate change beliefs and conservatism positively correlates with climate change skepticism (Kahan et al 2012, Hornsey et al 2016, Leiserowitz et al 2018). Relatedly, our findings extend this literature by showing these phenomena appears true among religious leaders. Our findings also offer a potential new, religious illustration of the theoretical ‘conspiracy of silence, whereby a group of people tacitly agree to outwardly ignore something of which they are all personally aware’ (Zerubavel 2006). In this case, the U.S. bishops were undoubtedly aware of the climate change teachings in Laudato Si’ but overwhelmingly chose to ignore them.

Since silence about climate change can be a form of denial (Washington and Cook 2011), the bishops’ silence regarding Church teachings on climate change can plausibly be taken as such. This is especially so given the history of climate denial by Republicans and other political conservatives with whom the bishops identify as well as the bishops’ aforementioned engagement in ‘ideological denialism’ (Petersen et al 2019). Considering U.S. bishops are connected with politically active wealthy conservative persons and entities (Gehring 2017, NCR Editorial Staff 2019, Roberts 2019), our findings also raise significant questions about the relationships between U.S. Catholic bishops specifically and religion more broadly to the network of conservative thinktanks, nonprofits, and individuals that fund and perpetuate climate denial (Brulle 2014, Farrell 2015).

Amidst these questions, our findings contribute to research that climate denialism is spread by organizations (e.g. Supran and Oreskes (2017) on ExxonMobil). However, our work expands this literature by showing that organizational climate denial appears to exist within a religious organization whose
leader emphasized the reality of and urgency to act on climate change. This invites scholars to apply environmental communications and organizational sociology research that has been done on companies (Allen 2016) to religious institutions. This seems especially relevant to our findings since the Catholic Church in many ways mirrors the scope and structure of a transnational corporation (Lin 2018).

5. Conclusion

Many hoped Laudato Si’ would ignite action to mitigate the climate crisis. However, our findings indicate individual U.S. Catholic bishops’ diocesan communications have collectively snuffed out the spark of Laudato Si’). Consistent with our hypotheses, we found that U.S. Catholic bishops’ political conservatism correlates with silence, denial, and biased communications of Church climate change teachings in their official diocesan publications around Laudato Si’.

We encourage future research into how political conservatives, such as U.S. bishops, may come to accept and prioritize climate change despite Republican Party resistance. We also encourage scholars to assess diocesan activities related to climate change, which would complement our research on bishops’ communication. A bishop may have led his diocese to take practical climate action while remaining silent on the issue in his diocesan publication columns. Scholars could also examine bishops’ climate action and communication over time, especially around the Vatican’s new Laudato Si’ Action Platform (Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development 2021) and the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference that Pope Francis will attend (Pullella 2021) and in which the U.S. bishops are accredited to participate (Krantz 2021). Future research could additionally compare bishops’ climate action and communication to those of leaders from other Catholic institutions, such as parish priests, university presidents, and hospital CEOs. If these leaders are more committed to Catholic climate change teaching than bishops, activists might prioritize working with them. Finally, scholars and activists could both explore how lobbying and nonviolent action strategies from political and social sciences could inform those still willing to directly engage bishops. This would build on recent calls from two Catholic cardinals for Catholics to communicate with their bishop about climate change (Roewe 2021a, 2021b).

Data availability statements

The data generated and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available for legal/ethical reasons but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the Louisville Institute Project Grant for Researchers, the George F Had- dix President’s Faculty Research Fund at Creighton University, and the Kripke Center for the Study of Religion and Society at Creighton University. The authors thank the staff at many dioceses and libraries for their generous gift of time and knowledge. The following people provided helpful feedback that strengthened our final paper: anonymous peer-reviewers, Pierce Greenberg, Katharine Hayhoe, Veerabhadran Ramanathan, and Ryan Wishart.

References

Ahern K 2015 Structures of Grace: Catholic Organizations Serving the Global Common Good (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books)
Allen M 2016 Strategic Communication for Sustainable Organizations: Theory and Practice (Berlin: Springer)
Barthold L S 2020 Overcoming Polarization in the Public Square: Civic Dialogue (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan)
Benedict P 2010 If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana)
Brulle R J 2014 Institutionalizing delay: foundation funding and the creation of U.S. climate change counter-movement organizations Clim. Change 122 681–94
Brulle R J and Antonio R J 2015 The Pope’s fateful vision of hope for society and the planet Nat. Clim. Change 5 900–1
Carvalho A 2015 The Pope’s encyclical as a call for democratic social change Nat. Clim. Change 5 905–7
Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate 2021 Frequently requested church statistics (available at: https://cara.georgetown.edu/frequently-requested-church-statistics/ (Accessed 2 June 2021))
Charmaz K 2014 Constructing Grounded Theory 2nd edn (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications)
Chen Z and Berger J 2013 When, why, and how controversy causes conversation J. Consum. Res. 40 580–93
Danielsen S 2013 Fracturing over creation care? Shifting environmental beliefs among evangelicals, 1984–2010 J. Sci. Study Relig. 52 198–215
Danielsen S, Burke E E and DiLeo D R 2021 U.S. Catholic bishops’ discussion of President Obama vs. President Trump, 2014–2019 J. Relig. Soc. 23 146–67
Dasgupta P et al 2015 Climate change and the common good: a statement of the problem and the demand for transformative solutions Pontifica Academia Scientiarum (available at: www.casinapioiv.va/content/dam/academia/pdf/statement_climate_change_common_good%20(final).pdf (Accessed 1 June 2021))
Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development 2021 Laudato Si’ action platform (available at: https://laudatosiactionplatform.org/ (Accessed 4 June 2021))
DiLeo D R 2015 Public theology then and now: lessons for Pope Francis’ encyclical on ecology from The Challenge of Peace and Economic Justice for All Paper Presented at the College Theology Society Annual Meeting (Portland, OR, 30 May)
DiLeo D R 2020 Introduction: the ‘climate emergency’ and US Catholic responses to Laudato Si’ J. Moral Theol. 9 1–18
Editors 2015 Using my religion Nat. Clim. Change 5 899
Emerson R M, Fretz R I and Shaw L L 2011 Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes 2nd edn (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press)
Farrell J 2015 Network structure and influence of the climate change counter-movement Nat. Clim. Change 6 570–4
Feldman L, Malibach E W, Roser-Renouf C and Leiserowitz A 2012 Climate on cable: the nature and impact of global warming
coverage on Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC Int. J. Press/Politics 17 3–31
Feng C G 2014 Intercoder reliability indices: disuse, misuse, and abuse Qual. Quant. 48 1803–15
Fichter S J, Gaunt T P, Hosgeman C and Perl P M 2019 Catholic Bishops in the United States: Church Leadership in the Third Millennium (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
Francis P 2015 Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana)
Funk C and Alper B A 2015 Religion and science: highly religious Americans are less likely than others to see conflict between faith and science Pew Research Center (available at: www.pewresearch.org/internet/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2015/10/PL_2015-10_22_religion-and-science_FINAL.pdf) (Accessed 2 June 2021)
Gecewicz C, Smith G A, Cox K, Cooperman A, Mohamed B, Podrebarac Scupic E, Alper B A and Starr K J 2019 Americans have positive views about religion’s role in society, but want it out of politics Pew Research Center (available at: www.pewforum.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2019/11/PP_11.15.19_trust_in_religion_FULL_REPORT.pdf) (Accessed 3 June 2021)
Gehring J 2015 The Francis Effect: A Radical Pope’s Challenge to the American Catholic Church (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield)
Gehring J 2017 Bad business: why would Catholic University host Charles Koch? Commonweal Magazine (available at: www.commonwealmagazine.org/bad-business (Accessed 4 June 2021))
Gelm R J 1990 The United States Catholic bishops: a survey research perspective Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association (San Francisco, 30 August–2 September)
Gillis C 2020 Roman Catholicism in America (New York: Columbia University Press)
Greeley A M 2004 Priests A Calling in Crisis (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press)
Green E 2017 Protecting religious freedom is a foreign-policy priority of the Trump Administration The Atlantic (available at: www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/05/religious-freedom-trump-administration/526329/) (Accessed 3 June 2021))
Gwet K L 2008 Computing inter-rater reliability and its variance in the presence of high agreement Br. J. Math. Stat. Psychol. 61 29–49
Hoewe J, Cramer Brownell K and Wiemer E C 2020 The role and impact of Fox News Forum 18 367–88
Hornsey M J, Harris E A, Bain P G and Fielding K S 2016 Meta-analyses of the determinants and outcomes of belief in climate change Nat. Clim. Change 6 622–6
Jaffe C 2018 Melting the polarization around climate change politics Georget Environ. Law Rev. 30 455–97
Jelen T G 1993 The Political World of the Clergy (Westport, CT: Praeger)
Jelen T G 2003 Catholic priests and the political order: the political behavior of Catholic pastors J. Sci. Study Relig. 42 591–604
Kahan D M, Peters E, Wittlin M, Slovic P, Ouellette L L., Braman D and Mandel G 2012 The polarizing impact of science literacy and numeracy on perceived climate change risks Nat. Clim. Change 2 732–5
Klein N 2014 This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate (New York: Simon & Schuster)
Krantz D 2021 COP and the cloth: quantitatively and normatively assessing religious NGO participation at the conference of parties to the United Nations framework convention on climate change Science 3 24
Krippendorf K 2019 Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology 4th edn (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications)
Kurtzleben D 2020 The complicated importance of abortion to Trump voters National Public Radio (available at: www.npr.org/2020/09/17/11389176/the-complicated-importance-of-abortion-to-trump-voters (Accessed 4 June 2021))
Landrum A R, Lull R B, Akin H, Hasell A and Jamieson K H 2017 Processing the papal encyclical through perceptual filters: Pope Francis, identity-protective cognition, and climate change concern Cognition 166 1–12
Landrum A R and Vasquez R 2020 Polarized U.S. publics, Pope Francis, and climate change: reviewing the studies and data collected around the 2015 Papal Encyclical WIBEs Clim. Change 11 674
Leiserowitz A, Maibach E, Roser-Renouf C, Rosenthal S and Cutler Mand Kotcher J 2018 Politics & Global Warming, March 2018 (New Haven, CT: Yale University and George Mason University) Yale Project on Climate Change Communication (available at: http://climatecommunication.yale.edu/publications/politics-global-warming-march-2018/ (Accessed 1 June 2021))
Leonard C 2019 Koehland: The Secret History of Koch Industries and Corporate Power in America (New York: Simon & Schuster)
Levesque P J and Siproth S M 2005 The correlation between political and ecclesial ideologies of Catholic priests: a research note Sociol. Relig. 66 419–29
Li N, Hilgard J, Scheufele D A, Winneke K M and Jamieson K H 2016 Cross-pressuring conservative Catholics? Effects of Pope Francis’ encyclical on the U.S. public opinion on climate change Clim. Change 137 367–80
Lin A 2018 Pope Francis’ encyclical on the environment as private environmental governance UC Davis (available at: https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6v68r9kh (Accessed 31 May 2021))
Maibach E, Leiserowitz A, Myers T, Rosenthal S, Feinberg G and Roser-Renouf C 2015 The Francis Effect: How Pope Francis Changed the Conversation About Global Warming (Fairfax, VA: George Mason University and Yale University) George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication (available at: https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/The_Francis_Effect.pdf (Accessed 4 June 2021))
Mayer J 2016 Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires behind the Rise of the Radical Right (New York: Doubleday)
McCright A M and Dunlap R E 2011 Cool dudes: the denial of climate change among conservative white males in the United States Glob. Environ. Change 21 1163–72
McNutt M 2015 Climate warming, 50 years later Science 350 721
Millies S P 2018 Good Intentions: A History of Catholic Voters’ Road from Roe to Trump (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press)
Myers T A, Roser-Renouf C, Maibach E and Leiserowitz A 2017 Exposure to the Pope’s climate change message activated convinced Americans to take certain activism actions Glob. Chall. 1 1600019
Myrick J G and Comfort S E 2019 The pope, politics, and climate change: an experimental test of the influence of news about Pope Francis on American climate change attitudes and intentions J. Relig. Media Digit. Cult. 8 226–45
NCR Editorial Staff 2019 Editorial: money shapes the US Catholic narrative National Catholic Reporter (available at: www.ncronline.org/news/accountability/editorial-money-shapes-us-catholic-narrative (Accessed 3 June 2021))
NCR Editorial Staff 2020 Editorial: Dolan delivers the church to Trump and the GOP National Catholic Reporter (available at: www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/editorial-dolan-delivers-church-trump-and-gop (Accessed 3 June 2021))
Neuendorf K A 2017 The Content Analysis Guidebook 2nd edn (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications)
O’Brien J and Abdelahi E 2020 Re-examining restructuring: racialization, religious conservatism, and political leanings in contemporary American life Soc. Forces 99 474–503
Oreskes N and Conway E M 2010 Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from
Tobacco Smoke to Climate Change (New York: Bloomsbury)
Pelling M, Manuel-Navarrete D and Redclift M 2012 Climate Change and the Crisis of Capitalism: A Chance to Reclaim Self, Society and Nature (New York: Routledge)
Petersen B, Stuart D and Gunderson R 2019 Reconceptualizing climate change denial: ideological denialism misdiagnoses climate change and limits effective action Hum. Ecol. Rev. 25 117–40
Pulcella P 2021 Pope to attend November U.N. climate conference in Glasgow, health permitting Reuters (available at: www.reuters.com/world/pope-attend-november-un-climate-conference-glasgow-health-permitting-2021-07-12/ (Accessed 1 June 2021))
Quinn J R 2009 The public duty of bishops: lessons from the storm in South Bend America Magazine (available at: www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2009/08/31/public-duty-bishops-lessons-storm-south-bend (Accessed 2 June 2021))
Reese T 2010 Catholic bishops tilt right Georgetown University Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs (available at: https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/catholic-bishops-tilt-to-right (Accessed 4 June 2021))
Roberts T 2019 ‘The rise of the Catholic right: how right-wing billionaires are attempting a hostile takeover of the U.S. Catholic Church’ Sojourners (available at: https://sojo.net/magazine/march-2019/rise-catholic-right (Accessed 1 June 2021))
Rocca F X and Lovett I 2021 Pope struggles to contain conservative-liberal tensions in Catholic Church The Wall Street Journal (available at: www.wsj.com/articles/pope-struggles-to-contain-conservative-liberal-tensions-in-catholic-church-11616245220 (Accessed 3 June 2021))
Roewe B 2021a Cardinal Cupich: to save planet, US must reject ‘false idol’ of money National Catholic Reporter (available at: www.ncronline.org/news/earthbeat/cardinal-cupich-save-planet-us-must-reject-false-idol-money (Accessed 31 May 2021))
Roewe B 2021b Vatican official: church divestment from fossil fuels is ‘moral imperative’ National Catholic Reporter (available at: www.ncronline.org/news/earthbeat/vatican-official-church-divestment-fossil-fuels-moral-imperative (Accessed 31 May 2021))
Schlumpf H 2019 Conservatives still rule the US bishops’ conference National Catholic Reporter (available at: www.ncronline.org/news/accountability/conservatives-still-rule-us-bishops-conference (Accessed 30 May 2021))
Schreier M 2012 Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications)
Schuldt J P, Pearson A R, Romero-Canas R and Larson-Konar D 2017 Brief exposure to pope Francis heightens moral beliefs about climate change Clim. Change 141 167–77
Second Vatican Council 1964 Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana)
Second Vatican Council 1965 Christus Dominus: Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana)
Stammer L B 1994 Conservative trend found in younger priests Los Angeles Times (available at: www.latimes.com/local/la-940221priestpoll-story.html (Accessed 5 June 2021))
Supran G and Oreskes N 2017 Assessing ExxonMobil’s climate change communications (1977–2014) Environ. Res. Lett. 12 084019
Tandoc E C Jr., Takahashi B and Thomas R J 2018 Bias vs. bias: how Fox News anchors discussed Pope Francis’s stance on climate change Journal Pract. 12 834–49
Tentler L W 2020 American Catholics: A History (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press)
Vatican Radio 2016 Cardinal Turkson: bishops should promote Laudato si Vatican Radio (available at: www.archivioradiovaticana.va/storico/2016/01/22/ cardinal_turkson_bishops_should_promote_laudato_si/en-1202931 (Accessed 27 March 2021))
Veldman R G, Szasz A and Haluza-delay R 2014 How the World’s Religions are Responding to Climate Change (New York: Routledge)
Washington H and Cook I 2011 Climate Change Denial: Heads in the Sand (New York: Routledge)
Watanabe T 2002 Young priests hold old values Los Angeles Times (available at: www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2002-oct-21-me-priest21-story.html (Accessed 5 June 2021))
Wuthnow R 1988 The Restructuring of American Religion (Princeton, N J: Princeton University Press)
Zerubavel E 2006 The Elephant in the Room: Silence and Denial in Everyday Life (Oxford: Oxford University Press)