

Texas, Jan 16th – 21st

In mid-January I traveled to Texas to experience Texan culture and talk about attitudes to climate change. I normally reside in Cambridge, MA, where I am a visiting fellow at Harvard University's Department of Government. Being one of the strongest Republican footholds in the US, with a highly developed oil and gas sector and persistent climate skepticism, Texas is very far from my everyday environment in New England.

I started out flying to Dallas, where I rented a car which later took me through Fort Worth, Waco, Austin, Enchanted Rock, and then back to Dallas. I went to a rodeo in Fort Worth, hipster bars in Austin, and a gun-and-knife show in Dallas. I witnessed an Angus cattle auction, saw private oil wells and went to saloons with first-class country music.

Admittedly, when I boarded my plane in Boston I had some preconceptions about what Texas would be like. I consciously choose Texas as my destination to maximize the probability of meeting people that are different from those I encounter in Cambridge. Somewhat surprisingly, I ended up loving it. The dry landscapes are beautiful, Texans are exceptionally warm and welcoming, and I love the aesthetics of cowboy boots and hats. Being a vegetarian, I was told that I would go a lot hungry. However, Texan cuisine also contains mouth-watering vegetarian side dishes, great fries and chilis.

Throughout occasional Uber trips, visits to local food outlets and random encounters, I talked with Texans about Texan culture and their perceptions of climate change. During my stay there were abnormally low temperatures, despite having been the hottest December in Texas in 100 years. These extreme weather fluctuations are one indicator of the climate change happening in Texas.

Without doubt, rural Texas continues to be characterized by climate skepticism, despite recent evidence showing that young, urban Texans are increasingly concerned about global warming. A returning quote throughout my interactions with Texans was: "If you don't like the weather in Texas, wait 5 minutes". Many I spoke with acknowledged that 'something' is happening with the weather, but perceived the variations in temperatures as naturally occurring weather fluctuations. Among the people I met in rural Texas who acknowledged that the changes in temperatures could be due to climate change, the majority did not openly attribute this to human activity. In contrast, the younger population in Austin appeared to be less reluctant to the idea that climate change is a pressing concern that requires action.

It is well-documented that the way we interpret information is shaped by pre-existing beliefs and values. The cattle and oil industries, which both are put forward as key sectors in addressing the climate crisis, are proud and economically important fundamentals of Texan culture. This is one likely reason why many Texans continue to be against phasing out fossil fuels, despite acknowledging the toll they have on the environment.¹ Changing how one thinks about global warming would entail questioning the sustainability of distinguished parts of the Texan way of living. It is easier to support climate proactiveness in an environment where doing so does not compromise one's identity.

¹<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/13/climate/republicans-climate-change.html>

After my stay in Texas I have thought a lot about how attitudes to climate change, self-perception and culture interact. My own consumption decisions and research interests are to some degree motivated by climate change concerns. However, the marginal contribution I make to the overall climate cause has very little impact in the aggregate. My flights so far this year have already offset the yearly carbon savings I make by altering my consumption behavior. I am increasingly questioning whether my decisions are truly motivated by climate concerns, or whether I am cherry-picking actions that align well with who I want to be. It is highly likely that my choices would have been different if I grew up on a ranch in Texas, instead of Grünerløkka in Oslo.