

It's polling season in the US! What do surveys say about climate change? When asked, do you think global warming is happening, 70% of Americans say yes, 13% say no, and 17% say they don't know.[1] In two additional 2024 surveys, 78% and 75% say global warming is happening.[2,3] This number has been fairly steady over the time periods surveyed, with some dips and rises, going back to 77% in 1997.[3] *The surveys raise questions to ponder. I wonder what can alter climate beliefs? Global warming is caused primarily by human activities say 59%, 29% say by natural changes in the environment, and the remainder give other answers.[1] Does knowing that climate change is human-caused lead to support for policies to reduce carbon pollution? Reporting overall national percentages can hide differences among regions, states, and counties [4] or perhaps variations across generations, gender, or other factors.*

A 61% majority of Americans say global climate change is affecting their local community a great deal or some, while 39% see little or no impact in their own community.[5] Democrats are more likely than Republicans to say they've experienced extreme weather events.[6] *Does extreme weather affect what you think about global warming, or do your beliefs and worldview affect how you experience such events?*

Climate change is a lower priority for Americans than other issues, such as the economy. For the presidential election, 39% say global warming will be very important to their vote.[7] As their **most** important issue, 8% choose climate change and the environment.[8]

On energy policy, 67% say the US should prioritize developing alternate energy sources such as wind and solar; 32% say to prioritize expanding oil, coal, and natural gas production. Should the US phase out fossil fuels completely and instead rely on renewable energy sources? This is supported by 31%, but two thirds (68%) say the country should use a mix of fossil fuels and renewables. Democrats are split on this (48% say phase out; 51% say use a mix). Support for phasing out fossil fuels is higher among younger adults than older adults; it is supported by 48% aged 18-29 but by 20% aged 65+, and this generational spread is also noted among Republicans (phase-out supported by 29% aged 18-29; by 3% aged 65+).[5]

Around the world, knowledge of climate change is uneven, but majorities say climate change is happening, from 67% of respondents in Laos and Haiti, to 83% in the US in this survey, to 96% in Hungary.[9] Another global survey found that 80% want their country to do more and 72% want their country to move away from fossil fuels to clean energy quickly. The US, with 53% agreeing, was one of the least supportive of this. Further, 86% say countries should put their disagreements aside and work together on addressing climate change.[10] In the US, three quarters (74%) support US participation in international efforts to reduce the effects of climate change.[5]

I try to view surveys cautiously, since they are affected by question choice and wording, variably reliable responses, and sampling and other errors. If things appear to be linked, don't jump to conclusions. It could be a random effect or related to unseen factors, and surveys say nothing about cause and effect. Focusing on political party affiliation is problematic for several reasons. Climate change is not a partisan issue; it affects everybody. Party affiliation may be a surrogate for identification with another group or belief set. Within parties there are divergent opinions, as in the different levels of support for phasing out fossil fuels. And there can be agreement across parties on specific policies.[11] For example, requiring oil and gas companies to seal methane gas leaks from oil wells is supported by 93% of Democrats and 77% of Republicans.[12]

What I learned from the surveys is that a majority of Americans and peoples around the world are concerned about global warming and there is a big desire for more climate action. This is good to know, as it might not be apparent from news and media sources. We've had enough polls. Let's turn our attention toward ways to address climate change and push for progress.

-Shirley

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