

Climate Change: Polling Analysis and Talking Points

Dec 18, 2012

Numerous polls report a significant rebound in the recognition of global warming by Americans over the last three years, particularly among Republicans and the skeptical. Surveys also reflect growing public support for action by Congress and President to address climate change. This shift in public opinion has created space for renewed initiative, as evidenced by recent media coverage and congressional activity.

Looking ahead to upcoming political and policy discussions, public opinion and attitudes on climate change now support the following big-picture talking points:

Climate change is happening right here, right now.

And it is hurting Americans.

Superstorm Sandy, this year's historic wildfires, and recent record-breaking heat waves are examples of natural disasters made worse by climate change.

We need to take action now, to address the changes in our climate and to protect our communities and our resources. We must safeguard and prepare our communities.

How far we go in preparing for climate disruption depends upon how much climate change we prevent. We know an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. And we need to act now to prevent climate disruption from becoming much worse.

Reducing carbon pollution and switching to clean energy is the way forward. We already have the technology, the ingenuity, and the solutions to modernize our energy system.

But big oil is blocking progress on tapping clean energy and cutting pollution. We need to break the political hammerlock of the fossil fuel industry.

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Public Opinion on a Changing Climate

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Growing Recognition of Global warming

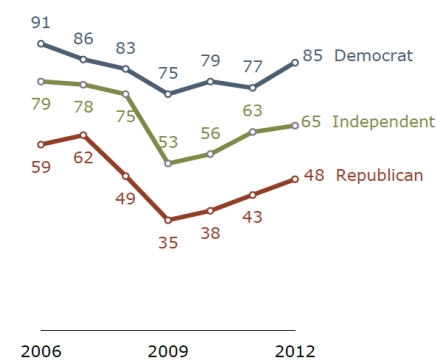
Over the last three years there has been a steady and significant rebound in the recognition of global warming by Americans, particularly among Republicans among whom the percentage saying there is solid evidence for global warming has increased from 35% to 48% going from 2009 to 2012. However, a large partisan divide persists among voters on this issue, with independents siding with Democrats.

[Pew, Oct 2012]

Seven in ten Americans (70%) believe global warming is happening. Relatively few – only 12% – believe it is not. Americans' recognition of the reality of global warming has increased by 13 points over the past two and a half years, from 57% in January 2010 to 70% in September 2012. At the same time, the number of Americans who say global warming is not happening has declined nearly by half, from 20% in January 2010 to 12% today. [Yale Sept 2012]

Across Party Lines, More Say There Is Evidence of Warming

% saying there is solid evidence of warming



PEW RESEARCH CENTER Oct. 4-7, 2012.

There has also been a sea change among those who say they trust scientists only a little or not at all. Within that highly skeptical group (roughly 1 in 3 among all voters), 61 percent now say temperatures have been rising over the past 100 years, a huge increase from 47% 2009. [AP GfK Roper Dec 2012]

Influence of Extreme Weather

Warmer temperatures, extreme weather, and loss of iconic arctic sea ice are among the primary factors driving the increased recognition of climate change and the increased support for action on climate

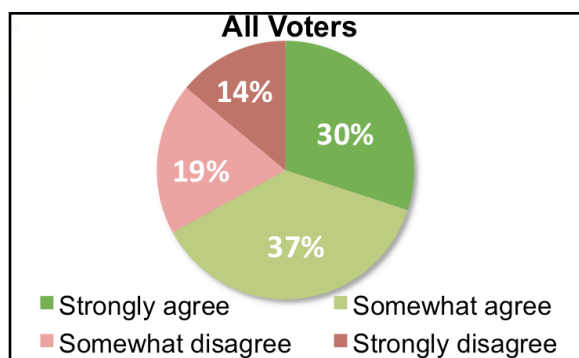
change. [Borick and Rabe Oct 2011; Borick and Rabe Oct 2012; Yale 2012; Myers et al. 2012; AP GfK Roper Dec 2012].

Just prior to Superstorm Sandy 74% of Americans said “global warming is affecting weather in the U.S.” — up 5 points since March 2012. Likewise, 73% of Americans say that global warming made the record-high temperatures of the summer of 2012 worse, while 61% say weather in the U.S. has been getting worse over the past several years, up nine points since March. About 54% of Americans recall unusual weather events having occurred in their local area over the past year, while 61% recall such events that have occurred elsewhere in the US. [Yale2 Sept 2012]

Loss and Damages

A growing number of Americans believe global warming is already harming people both at home and abroad. 40% say people across the world are being harmed right now by climate change (up 8 points since March 2012), while 36% say global warming is currently harming people in the U.S. - up six points since March [Yale4 Sept 2012]. 4 out of 5 Americans live in counties where a natural disaster has been declared since 2006. [Dutzik and Wilcox Feb 2012]. Roughly 20% of Americans say they personally suffered harm to their health, property, and/or finances from an extreme heat wave in the past year, a 6-point increase since March [Yale2 Sept 2012].

Americans Link Recent Heat Waves to Climate Change



Do you agree that “global warming made record high summer temperatures in 2012 worse?”_PSB 2012

A clear majority of Americans understand Hurricane Sandy was made worse by climate change. Strong majorities of voters also connect climate change to the record high summer temperatures witnessed in 2012 as well as this year’s extraordinary drought and wildfires. 60 % of Americans who voted in the 2012 presidential election agree with the statement that “global warming made Hurricane Sandy worse.” 67% agree with the statement “global warming made record high temperatures in 2012 worse.” And 70% agree with the statement “global warming made drought in the Midwest and Great Plains worse.” 65% of Americans agree that global warming worsened this year’s “record forest fires in the American West.” [PSB Nov 2012; Yale2 Sept 2012]

Note: when discussing the connection between climate change and individual events such as Superstorm Sandy, it is best to highlight the connections where the science is indisputable. In some instances, such as Superstorm Sandy and western wildfires, climate change magnified the scope of the disaster (through rising sea levels in the case of Sandy which contributed to increased storm surge, and in the case of western wildfires through dead forests killed by beetles overwintering in warmer years). Sometimes the contribution is direct, such as in the case of heat waves. Thus it is simplest to generally frame climate change as contributing to the “disaster” as opposed to contributing to or causing the underlying event.

Public Opinion on Preparation/Adaptation

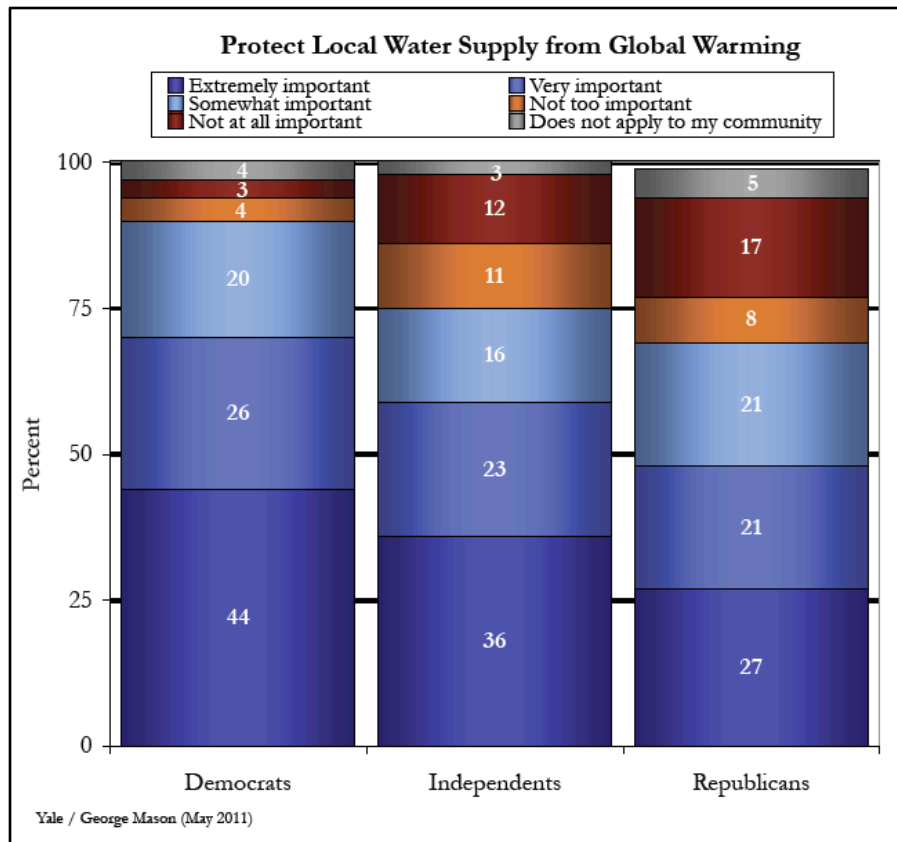
Superstorm Sandy, this year's historic wildfires, and recent record heat waves are examples of natural disasters made worse by climate change.

We need to take action now to address the changes in climate and to protect our communities and our resources.

We must safeguard and prepare our communities.

Bi-partisan Agreement

There is very strong bi-partisan support for taking steps to protect against a wide range of global warming impacts. Polling done in May of 2011, well before the last two summers of extreme weather, found that 80% of Americans feel it is important for their “community to take steps to protect the water supply from global warming.” 62% feel it is very or extremely important. Among Republicans, 69% say it is important, 48% feel it is very or extremely important. Roughly the same proportions feel the same about protecting agriculture, public health, sewer systems and other resources against the impact of global warming. [Yale May 2011]



In early 2012, polling done in four cities (Tucson, Albuquerque, Green Bay, and Grand Rapids) found that very large majorities (80-86%) say it is important “for the US to prepare for more extreme weather.” [private polling March 2012]

Preparedness vs. Adaptation

Voters see “preparedness” as the preferred approach to address climate impacts. “Protection” and “safety” are also favored approaches – even for three quarters of Republicans. “Adaptation” is much less favored than “preparedness.” In a battery of poll testing conducted in early 2012, Americans were asked to evaluate two messages arguing for action on changing weather and one counter message arguing that there is uncertainty about causes and changes and that there are many other more important issues on which to focus. The usual mark of a persuasive message is when at least 40 percent of voters find it very convincing. No message achieved the 40 percent threshold, but the counter frame and the “preparedness” message both came close, at 38% and 37% respectively. Taking a broader look, “preparedness” beat the counter frame by 7 points (79% vs. 72%) when combining the percentage of voters who found the arguments very and somewhat convincing. [Lake Research April 2012; Environics 2005; Mellman Jan 2011].

“Adaptation,” a term currently in use by some, was found to be unconvincing in terms of action on climate change, falling significantly below the counter frame. Only 28% of those surveyed found “Adaptation” very convincing, versus 38% for the counter frame and 37% for preparedness [Lake Research April 2012].

Public Opinion on Prevention/Mitigation

Ultimately how far we go in preparing for climate change depends upon how much we climate change we prevent. And we all know an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

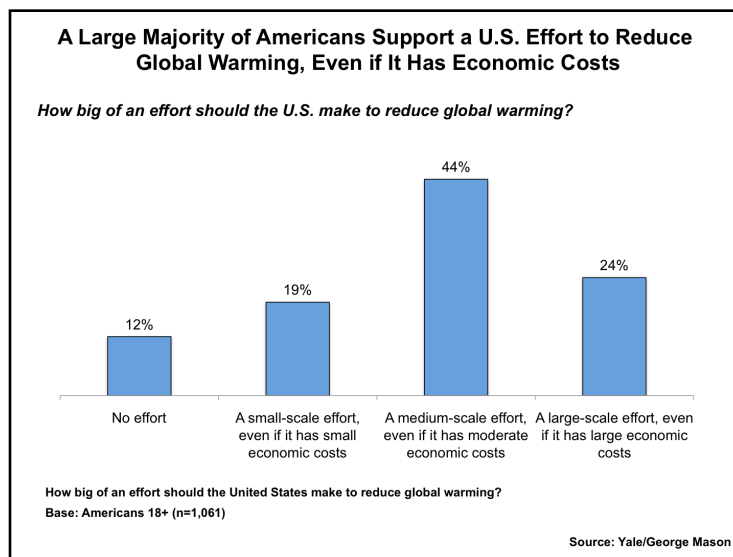
We need to act now to prevent climate disruption from becoming much worse as it locks in. Reducing carbon pollution and switching to clean energy is the way forward.

We already have the ingenuity, the technology, and solutions to modernize our energy system.

But big oil is blocking progress on clean energy and cutting pollution. We need to break the political hammerlock of the fossil fuel industry to move forward.

Support for Action is Wide but Not Deep

There is growing support for action by the Congress and President. A large majority (77%) say global warming should be a “very high” (18%), “high” (25%), or “medium” priority (34%) for the president and Congress. One in four (23%) say it should be a low priority. [Yale3 Sept 2012]



While Americans clearly support action on climate change, the intensity of their concern remains significantly lower than the intensity of their concern for other issues on the public agenda, as reflected in Americans’ ranking of issues for priority action by the President. [Gallup July 2012]

Although Americans increasingly see climate change as an immediate concern, many still see the problem mainly as an issue for the future, [Yeager et al. 2011], underscoring the importance of communicating the challenge of the carbon budget, i.e. “doing the math.”

A large majority of Americans (88%) say the U.S. should make an effort to reduce global warming, even if it has economic costs. Breaking this down further, a plurality (44%) favors a medium-scale effort, even if it has moderate economic costs. One in four (24%) supports a large-scale effort even if there are large economic costs. And one in five (19%) supports a small-scale effort, even if it has small economic costs. [Yale3 Sept 2012]

Leading up to the election, 75% of likely Obama voters and 65% of undecided voters said global warming would be one of several “important issues” determining their votes for president. Only 32% of likely Romney voters said it would be one of the “important issues” determining their presidential vote. [Yale5 Sept 2012]

Six in ten Americans (61%) say the U.S. should reduce its own greenhouse gas emissions regardless of what other countries do. [Yale3 Sept 2012]

For the first time since 2008, more than half of Americans believe global warming is caused mostly by human activities, an increase of 8 points since March 2012. The amount of Americans who say it is caused mostly by natural changes in the environment has declined to 30% (from 37% in March). [Yale4 Sept 2012]

People are more likely to act if they believe changes in climate are human-caused. 92% of those who say climate changes are caused by humans (and 79% of those who say changes are caused by both human and natural fluctuations) are willing to take action compared to only 54% of those who say change are just natural fluctuations. [Lake Research April 2012]

It's Carbon Pollution

Framing mitigation in terms of limiting carbon pollution is effective with strong majorities of Americans, as reflected in the testing of competing arguments for and against control of carbon emissions. 72% of voters nationwide support the EPA implementing new standards on carbon emissions, including overwhelming majorities of Democrats and independents and even a majority of Republicans. Voters overwhelmingly believe such carbon standards will have a positive impact on air quality (74%) and public health (73%) and, more importantly, a 44 to 25 percent plurality believe they will have a positive impact on the economy and jobs. After a balanced debate with messages in support of and opposition to new carbon standards, support still remains robust, near a 2-to-1 margin nationally (63% favor, 33% oppose). Even after the balanced messaging, independents continue to support the new standards by a 32-point margin (65% to 33%).

Support remains very robust in Maine and Pennsylvania (64% in each state), and also achieves a majority in Ohio (52%). [GQR March 2012]

Battle Testing the Proposal to Limit Carbon Emissions

	Overall	Dems	Inds	Reps	ME	OH	PA
Initial							
Favorable	72	87	72	54	71	63	69
Unfavorable	24	8	24	44	23	34	26
Net	+47	+79	+48	+10	+48	+29	+43
Final							
Favorable	63	83	65	37	64	52	64
Unfavorable	33	12	33	59	31	44	31
Net	+29	+71	+32	-22	+34	+7	+33

“...do you favor or oppose the Environmental Protection Agency, or EPA, implementing standards with stricter limits on carbon emissions. [GQR March 2012]

Bi-partisan Support for Clean Energy

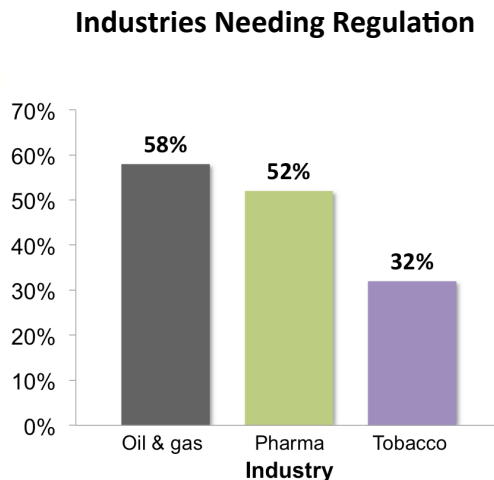
There is strong bi-partisan support for accelerating the transition to clean energy, as evidenced by numerous polls testing the issue in many different ways.

For example, large majorities of Democrats (81%) and Independents (77%) say the president and Congress should make the development of clean energy sources a high or very high priority; nearly half of Republicans agree (46%). [Yale3 Sept 2012]

A renewable energy standard is supported by 78% of Americans, and 59% strongly support such a proposal, as opposed to only 17% who express some level of opposition. 77% of Americans support a vehicle fuel economy standard similar to that approved by the Obama Administration and now moving into its early stages of implementation, with 60% strongly supportive, as opposed to only 18% registering opposition. [Borick and Rabe Oct 2012]

Big Oil Plays the Bad Guy in the Story

The oil and gas industry is viewed the most negatively, by far and away, of any of the 25 industries tested by Gallup. 58% of voters believe the industry needs more regulation, compared to 32% of voters who believe the tobacco industry needs more regulation. [Gallup August 2012, PSB 2011 Post-SOTU Poll]



“For which of the following industries do you think consumers would benefit from more government regulation?” [PSB 2011 Post-SOTU Poll]

Nearly six out of ten voters are troubled a lot or a fair amount by “oil companies pouring tens of millions of dollars into so-called super- PACS advertising campaigns in order to influence key elections.” [Harstad May 2012]

“Reducing corruption in the federal government” is a top priority for voters in the President’s second term, ranking only behind creating good jobs. [Gallup July 2012]

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