

The *NY Times* reports some very interesting [poll results](#) regarding climate change. The poll shows that Americans are more likely to support a candidate who favors action on climate change, less likely to favor a candidate who takes the “I am not a scientist” line, and much less likely to favor one who calls climate change a hoax.

Some of the most intriguing – “startling” might be a better word – results relate to Tea Party supporters. According to the poll, 46% of Tea Party supporters said they would be more likely to vote for a candidate if the candidate *avored* action on climate change. (Drag your cursor over the results on the *Times* page to see the cross-tabs.) Here’s the exact wording of the hypothetical candidate’s position that people were asked about:

*“I believe that global warming has been happening for the past 100 years, mainly because we have been burning fossil fuels and putting out greenhouse gasses. Now is the time for us to be using new forms of energy that are made in America and will be renewable forever. We can manufacture better cars that use less gasoline and build better appliances that use less electricity. We need to transform the outdated ways of generating energy into new ones that create jobs and entire industries, and stop the damage we’ve been doing to the environment.”*

And 55% of Tea Party supporters said the government should limit greenhouse gases emissions.

What makes these numbers so surprising is that the Tea Party has been a bastion of climate denial. For instance, in a 2011 [poll](#) by Yale University, “only 34 percent of Tea Party members believe global warming is happening, while 53 percent say it is not happening.” And in 2013, according to the [LA Times](#), only 25% of within the Tea Party believed that climate change is real.

So what’s going on here? One factor may be a softening of Tea Party views about the reality of climate change. The willingness of nearly every Republican in the Senate to endorse a statement that the climate is changing, with fifteen GOP Senators willing to say that humans had some role, may suggest that climate denial is no longer as much of an article of faith as it was even a year or two ago. An earlier question in the new poll suggests that even some Tea Party adherents are worried about the potential future impacts of climate change.

Another factor may also be relevant. If you look again at the hypothetical candidate’s position statement that I quoted earlier, you’ll see that there’s a lot in the statement that would resonate with conservatives about energy independence and technological progress. Some of that language might be drawing Tea Party support. Moreover, the questions asked

about global warming and greenhouse gases, avoided the term “climate change” which may now be a trigger for negative attitudes by conservatives. It would be helpful to know whether this same question has been used before, and if so how the results might have shifted.

We should also not overestimate the fixity of even strongly held beliefs about climate policy among the general public. Most people understandably have spent relatively little time thinking about the issue, and their beliefs are driven much more by what they’re heard recently about the subject, and more specifically by views among their reference group. For that reason, they can be subject to sudden shifts if people sense that others are also shifting their views.

We’ll have to wait for further polling results to know whether we’re seeing a real shift in attitudes toward climate policy. Although the recent poll involved a large sample and respected polling organizations, I’m not yet willing to bet on a shift in Tea Party attitudes. There’s always the chance that the Tea Party sub-sample was unrepresentative or the phrasing of the question skewed the results. But I’d certainly like to see follow-up polling.