A new AP poll reports a sharp increase in the number of people who believe that climate change is happening and will be a problem for the United States. The biggest change was among the significant group of people who say they don't trust scientists. Here's the summary from AP:

- 4 out of every 5 Americans said climate change will be a serious problem for the United States if nothing is done about it.
- 57% of Americans say the U.S. government should do a great deal or quite a bit about the problem.
- Overall, 78% said they believe temperatures are rising.

These survey results have received a lot of attention. Virtually every story that I read about the survey used the same language I used earlier: the biggest change in opinion was among the 30% who "don't trust science." But this language is misleading. The question was more focused. Respondents were asked: "How much do you trust the things that scientists say about the environment – completely, a lot, a moderate amount, a little, or not at all?" The population split about evenly between "a lot," "a moderate amount" and "a little or not at all."

This low level of trust in "the things that scientists say about the environment" contrasts sharply with the general public attitude toward science. As Pew reported in 2009,

> *Americans like science. Overwhelming majorities say that science has had a positive effect on society and that science has made life easier for most people. Most also say that government investments in science, as well as engineering and technology, pay off in the long run.*
>
> *And scientists are very highly rated compared with members of other professions: Only members of the military and teachers are more likely to be viewed as contributing a lot to society's well-being.*

There may also be a political effect. A widely reported article in the American Sociological Review earlier this year reported a sharp decline in trust in science by conservatives. But this study reported that conservative trust did not necessarily extend to science generally:

> *[W]hen examining a series of public attitudes toward science, conservatives' unfavorable attitudes are most acute in relation to government funding of*

> *science and the use of scientific knowledge to influence social policy Conservatives thus appear especially averse to regulatory science, defined here as the mutual dependence of organized science and government policy.*

Unfortunately, the recent AP poll on climate change doesn't provide cross-tabs. It would be interesting to know who belonged to the "don't trust environmental science" group in terms of political affiliation and ideology. Conservatives are probably over-represented in that group (as shown by the ASR paper), but I'd guess they aren't the ones whose opinions of climate change have shifted. More likely, those are moderates, perhaps with conservative leanings. Assuming they maintain their views about climate change, I wonder whether their views about environmental science will shift since they now agree with scientists' views on the most salient environmental issue.

Obviously, it's a mistake to oversimplify public attitudes toward science. We really need better information about how the public envisions the scientific process and its relationship with government policy. Without a clearer understanding of these attitudes, it's hard to interpret the AP survey's report.

It does appear that there are a significant number of Americans who draw their views about climate from recent weather events rather than from climate science. Relying on the evidence of their own senses may feel common sensical to them, but it's really backwards. Given the random element in individual weather events, we really need a lot of data and statistical studies to reach confident conclusions. Although it's nice that they're starting to reach the right conclusions, it would probably take only another random event — like a really cold winter or two — to push them in the other direction.

Obama has stressed the need for renewable energy more than he has discussed climate change as such. Although the numbers on climate change are improving, this strategy still may make political sense. A recent report from the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication reports that "[n]early all Americans (92%) say the president and the Congress should make developing sources of clean energy a 'very high' (31%), 'high' (38%), or 'medium' priority (23%). Very few say it should be a low priority (8%)." In contrast, 23% think climate change should be a low priority.