

Public views of climate change are shifting, even among Republicans. But there's a lot of confusion left about the causes and remedies for climate change. What do we know about the state of public opinion? And what should we do next?

## **Is climate change happening?**

A [recent poll](#) by Monmouth University shows a significant shift in attitudes toward climate change. Here are the key findings. I've deleted the parenthetical numbers in order to improve readability, but the figures are consistent with the narrative statements. First there's clear movement toward a consensus that climate change is happening: 'Nearly 8-in-10 Americans believe the world's climate is undergoing a change that is causing more extreme weather patterns and sea level rise, up from 70% in December 2015.' This includes two-thirds of Republicans, though belief in climate change continues to be higher among and independents. I would suggest that we forget about the twenty percent who deny the problem at all. If their minds are to be changed, this is likely to be happening as climate change becomes even more dramatic or through persuasion by others who have a mild belief in climate change. Advocates of climate action may be the least likely group for them to listen to. If something can change their mind, it won't be coming from the kind of people who are likely to read this blog.

## **Is climate change a serious problem?**

A majority believes that climate change is a serious problem. A "majority of Americans currently say that climate change is a *very serious* problem, which is up significantly from 41% in Monmouth's 2015 poll," while another seventeen percent say it is "somewhat serious". But only a quarter of Republicans feel it is a serious problem. A [Politico poll](#) also showed evidence of serious public concern: "Many voters also see climate change as an urgent problem for the U.S.: 46 percent say it's a critical threat to the vital interests of the country, while 29 percent say it's an important threat but not critical. Only 19 percent say it is not an important threat at all. Residents of coastal states are more likely to recognize the seriousness of climate change." These results are also consistent with a [Pew survey](#) showing two-thirds of those living near coasts believe climate change is impacting their lives. If you look at the [cross-tabs](#) of the Monmouth survey, differences based on gender and age pop out. Women are 20% more likely to think the problem is "very serious" than men, and millennials are 20% more likely than baby boomers. Interestingly, levels of education or income don't seem to matter.

## What is causing climate change?

Opinion is unsettled about what's causing climate change and what can be done. Many people are confused (or misinformed) about causation: "A plurality of Americans say human activity and natural changes in the environment are equally to blame. Three-in-ten say human activity is more to blame and 10% say natural changes in the environment are the larger cause."

There's definitely a partisan divide on this question. According to a poll by Politico, "More than 3 in 4 Democratic voters, 78 percent, say human activity is causing climate change, compared with 34 percent of Republicans and 58 percent of independents." There seems to be a generation gap on this. Another [survey](#) by Pew found that "[a]bout a third (36%) of Millennials in the GOP say the Earth is warming mostly due to human activity, double the share of Republicans in the Baby Boomer or older generations." The cross-tabs also show that women were about 10% more likely than men to get this question right. Opinion is divided about whether it is too late to act: "Regardless of the cause, a majority of Americans say there is still time to prevent the worst effects of climate change. Another 16% say it is too late to act and 4% volunteer that there is nothing we can or should do about it."

## What are the best directions for educating the public?

We are well on the way toward victory over the most basic form of denialism, flat refusal to believe that the climate is even changing. Moreover, about two-thirds of 'Americans think that climate change is at least partly caused by humans. (Even Trump seems to concede this, though he wants to minimize the human role.) Putting aside the twenty percent who still are pretending the climate isn't changing, we have several challenges:

- **Raising the salience of the issue.** More people need to understand that the problem is serious. Among the segment of the population who understand the seriousness of the problem, more of a sense of urgency is needed.
- **Education about causation.** Persuading those who believe that nature is partly to blame for warming that this is a mistake.
- **Selling the public on solutions.** Convincing people that we can head off future climate change with renewables. This also goes hand in hand with education about causation and salience, because people are more likely to view the problem as a high priority and accept the human role in causing the problem if they see the problem as solvable.

Getting people to see that climate change is real is also a big step. Not only is it a

prerequisite for considering causation and remedies, but it opens the door to a powerful argument against the denialists: “The same people who are telling you that the problem isn’t caused by humans or isn’t fixable are the very same people who told you there was no such thing as climate change. They were wrong, and the scientists were right all along.”

As I pointed out in a [post](#) last year, Trump’s views on environmental matters are out of tune with the public’s. A poll by Politico and Harvard showed that sixty percent of Americans favored staying in the Paris Agreement after it was explained to them. Not surprisingly, a clear majority of Republicans disagreed – but somewhat more surprisingly, 39% percent of Republicans favored staying in the agreement, far more than I would have guessed. Moreover, except for Republicans, Americans don’t seem to be buying the idea that environmental regulations destroy jobs, and even a third of Republicans reject the idea. Thus, there should be fertile ground for pushing forward on environmental issues.