



What Americans  
Think about

# CLIMATE CHANGE

*Polling Americans about climate change reveals a largely united desire for government action—and other surprises. **Jon A. Krosnick, Nuri Kim,** and **Bo MacInnis** report.*

**O**n many issues, public opinion is so evenly divided that it does not provide a clear signal to government—but that’s not true on the issue of climate change. During the past 17 years, our research team has been tracking Americans’ opinions. Most recently, we teamed up with RFF to conduct in-depth surveys of Americans on climate change and energy policies. Polls were administered in December 2013 (in partnership with *USA Today*) and again in June 2014 after the Obama administration’s proposal on June 3 to regulate greenhouse gas emissions from existing power plants through the Clean Air Act.

Our surveys suggest that Americans have been overwhelmingly “green” on climate

change issues for many years, despite a barrage of natural disasters, media events, and campaign speeches that one might have imagined would impact such opinions.

As the Obama administration continues its efforts to restrict greenhouse gas emissions, these surveys allow us to compare the administration’s actions with the American public’s beliefs about global warming and preferences regarding government efforts to address it.

## **The Fundamentals**

Over the years in which we’ve tracked public opinion, we have seen very little change in various “fundamental” beliefs about climate change:

***Has the Earth been warming?***

» According to our latest survey results, 73 percent of Americans believed that the world’s temperature has probably been increasing over the past 100 years, down a little from the 77 percent we observed in 1997 (Figure 1).

***Has warming been caused by human activity?***

» Seventy-eight percent of Americans said that if warming has been happening, it’s been due to human activity—the same percentage we found in 1997 (Figure 1).

***Will warming continue?***

» And 76 percent said that the world’s temperature will probably go up during the next 100 years if nothing is done to prevent it.

***Is warming a threat?***

» In 2013, 60 percent of Americans said that the increase in the world’s temperature during the past 100 years was a bad thing.

» Sixty-six percent of Americans said that if the world’s average temperature goes up

5 degrees Fahrenheit during the next 75 years, that would be bad as well, about the same as the 61 percent of Americans who said so in 1997.

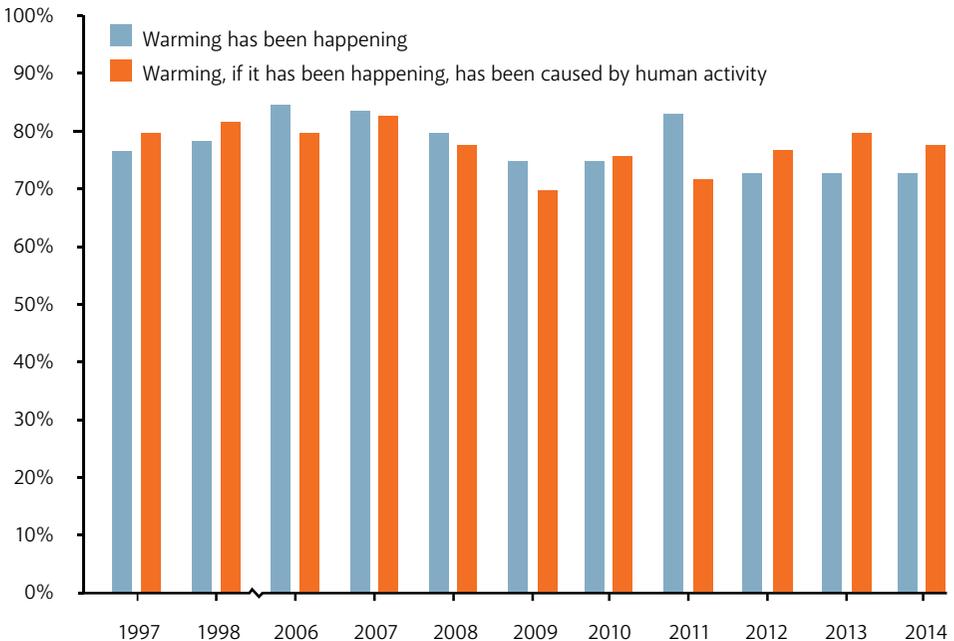
» Only 32 percent of Americans said in 2013 that global warming will hurt them personally either a great deal or a lot if nothing is done to reduce it in the future, but 67 percent believed that global warming will hurt future generations a great deal or a lot.

» Eighty-one percent of Americans said that global warming will be a very serious or somewhat serious problem for the United States.

» An equally large majority, 83 percent, said global warming will be a very serious or somewhat serious problem for the world if nothing is done to reduce it.

These majorities have been quite consistent over the years since 1997. So we see that most Americans are “green” on this issue, and they have been for some time.

**Figure 1. Proportions of Americans Who Believe That Global Warming Has Been Happening and That It Has Been Caused by Human Activity**



**The Weather**

According to our 2013 survey, most Americans believed they had seen changes in climate in recent years that were caused by global warming. Sixty-two percent said that global warming has caused more storms, and 60 percent said it has caused more droughts. Fifty-seven percent said that it caused the damage of Hurricane Sandy to be worse.

emissions by American businesses. And various specific policy approaches have been evaluated positively by most Americans. Government efforts to require or encourage (through tax breaks) construction of more energy-efficient buildings, cars that use less fuel, and appliances that use less electricity were viewed favorably in 2013 by 74 percent, 72 percent, and 71 percent of Americans, respectively. Govern-

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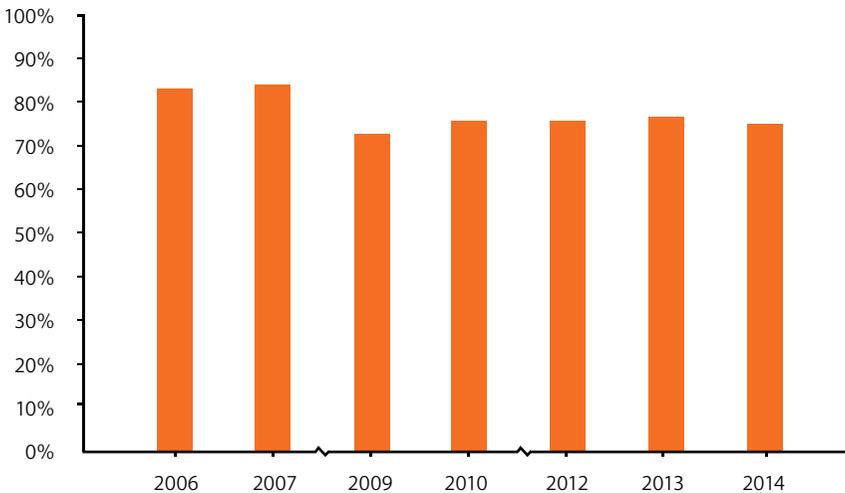
**Government Action**

Even if large numbers of Americans have believed that warming is happening, is human-caused, and poses a threat, such beliefs may not necessarily translate into support for government action to deal with the issue. However, our surveys have documented substantial support for government action.

A remarkable 81 percent said that government should limit greenhouse gas

emissions by American businesses. And various specific policy approaches have been evaluated positively by most Americans. Government efforts to require or encourage (through tax breaks) construction of more energy-efficient buildings, cars that use less fuel, and appliances that use less electricity were viewed favorably in 2013 by 74 percent, 72 percent, and 71 percent of Americans, respectively. Govern-  
ment requiring or encouraging the building of all-electric cars was slightly less popular, with 59 percent of people favoring this idea in 2013. We described a national cap-and-trade system in various different ways in 2013 to different respondents, and the proportion of people favoring it varied from 48 percent to 65 percent. A large majority of Americans—79 percent in 2013 and 77 percent in 2014—said that government should require or encourage power plants

**Figure 2. Proportions of Americans Who Want the Federal Government to Take Steps to Reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions by Power Plants**





Flags hang on a house that was destroyed by Hurricane Sandy in the Belle Harbor neighborhood of New York.

to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions (Figure 2).

Subsidizing green energy production was also very popular. A majority of Americans, 66 percent, said federal tax breaks for oil companies should be stopped; 42 percent said the same about the tax breaks for natural gas companies. In contrast, a large majority (73 percent) said that tax breaks for companies that make electricity from sunlight, wind, and water should be continued. Similarly, 68 percent of Americans said that government should continue to pay part of the cost for people to put solar panels on their homes, and 71 percent thought that government should give money to companies to help them develop new ways of making electricity that emit fewer greenhouse gases than burning coal, natural gas, and oil.

These policy preferences were consistent with the public's general attitudes toward various methods of generating electricity. A whopping 91 percent of the public said that generating electricity from sunlight was a good idea, and 84 percent and 83 percent said so about wind and water, respectively. Only 48 percent said production of electricity from natural gas was a good idea, 33

percent said so about nuclear power, and a mere 21 percent said so about coal. However, Americans were divided about whether non-fossil energy sources can provide all of the electricity that the United States needs: 52 percent said all of it or most of it can be made from sunlight, wind, natural flowing water, and nuclear power.

Other policy approaches were much less popular. For example, just less than half of Americans (49 percent) favored imposing carbon taxes on power companies, and only 37 percent of Americans favored government giving companies tax breaks to build nuclear power plants.

Some observers have asserted that government efforts to reduce future global warming would reduce American economic competitiveness and vitality. Most Americans did not endorse this view. Only 27 percent in 2014 said that efforts to reduce global warming will hurt the US economy, the same number observed in 2009.

Americans also favor taking action on this issue unilaterally. Specifically, 75 percent of 2013 survey respondents said that the United States should take action on global warming, even if other major emitting countries do less. And 83 percent preferred

taking action soon to prepare for the possible effects of global warming before they happen, rather than waiting to see if global warming has any effects and dealing with them then.

Most Americans wanted the federal government to increase its effort on this issue. In 2013, only 12 percent wanted the federal government to do less than it was about global warming, whereas 66 percent

According to our most recent survey and other research we have done, the answer is no. In fact, taking steps along these lines is likely to please a much larger group of voters than would be displeased by them. In particular, such moves impact the political thinking and action of the people who attach tremendous personal importance to the issue—the citizens whom political scientists call the “global warming

## In 2013, only 12 percent wanted the federal government to do less than it was about global warming, whereas 66 percent wanted the federal government to do more.

wanted the federal government to do more. A majority of Americans (52 percent) said that they wanted the federal government to do a great deal or a lot about global warming, and only 21 percent said that the federal government should do a little or nothing. Yet most Americans believed that the federal government had been doing much less than they'd like. Only 10 percent said that the federal government was doing a great deal or a lot about global warming, and a majority, 57 percent, said the federal government was doing a little or nothing. These results signal a prevalent desire for increased effort.

### **The 2014 Elections**

In recent months, President Obama has reiterated his long-standing commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the United States in various forums, and the US Environmental Protection Agency moved forward with regulations to limit the emissions of power plants. Are these dangerous moves during an election year? Might such “green” efforts hurt the electoral chances of the Democratic Party?

issue public.” In our 2013 survey, almost one in every five Americans fell into this group—the largest we have ever seen and larger than the groups passionate about many other major national issues. The overwhelming majority of these passionate individuals are on the green side of the global warming issue, who are likely to be inspired to vote more often for Democrats as a result.

Our work indicates that if Republican candidates endorse the same “green” policies, they will neutralize the advantage likely to be reaped by Democrats doing the same. When competing candidates take identical positions on an issue, the issue is no longer a meaningful basis for differentiating between the candidates and therefore has no impact on voters’ choices.

Taken together, these results paint a portrait of a largely “green” public on this issue. No doubt, it will be fascinating to watch public opinion and government policymaking during the coming months and years to see whether they come more into line. ●