

CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE AMERICAN MIND

Americans' Global Warming Beliefs
and Attitudes in March 2012



YALE PROJECT ON
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Climate Change in the American Mind: Americans' Global Warming Beliefs and Attitudes in March 2012

Interview dates: March 12, 2012 – March 30, 2012 Interviews: 1,008 Adults (18+)

Margin of error: +/- 3 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

NOTE: All results show percentages among all respondents, unless otherwise labeled. Totals may occasionally sum to more than 100 percent due to rounding.

This study was conducted by the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication, and was funded by the Surdna Foundation, the 11th Hour Project, the Grantham Foundation for the Protection of the Environment, and the V. Kann Rasmussen Foundation.

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Cite as: Leiserowitz, A., Maibach, E., Roser-Renouf, C., & Hmielowski, J. D. (2012) *Climate change in the American Mind: Americans' global warming beliefs and attitudes in March 2012*. Yale University and George Mason University. New Haven, CT: Yale Project on Climate Change Communication.
<http://environment.yale.edu/climate/files/Climate-Beliefs-March-2012.pdf>

Executive Summary

Overview

Overall, Americans' beliefs and attitudes about global warming have remained relatively stable over the past several months, with a few exceptions. There has been a slight increase in the proportion of people that believe global warming is happening and a slight decrease in the proportion that believe it is caused by mostly by human activities. There has also been a slight decrease in the proportion of people who believe that most scientists think global warming is happening; this decline is at odds with the widespread agreement among scientists that global warming is happening and primarily human caused. The public also overestimates the level of global warming disbelief in the United States.

Finally, in this election year, we find that approximately half of Americans (47%) trust President Obama as a source of information about global warming, which is essentially unchanged since November of 2011. By contrast, only 21 percent of Americans trust Mitt Romney on this issue and his level of trust dropped 5 points since November, with “strong distrust” increasing by 8 points to 39 percent.

Beliefs and Attitudes

- Since November 2011, public belief that global warming is happening increased by 3 points, to 66 percent. However, belief that it is caused mostly by human activities decreased four points, to 46 percent.
- Americans continue to think global warming will harm plant and animal species (64%), future generations of people (65%), and people in developing countries (52%) more than people in the United States (46%), people in their community (34%), their family (33%), or themselves personally (29%).
- 42 percent of Americans think global warming is harming people in the United States now (30%) or will within the next 10 years (12%). By contrast, 45 percent say global warming won't start to harm people in the United States for 50 years (14%), 100 years (15%), or ever (16%).
- 54 percent of Americans worry about global warming, while 61 percent say the issue is personally important to them, both essentially unchanged since November.
- Since November, however, there has been a 6 point decrease (to 35%) in the proportion of Americans who believe that most scientists think global warming is happening, with a 2 point increase (to 41%) in those who believe there is a lot of disagreement among scientists.
- A large majority of Americans (70%) say they need “a lot” (19%), “some” (28%), or “a little” (23%) more information before they make up their mind about global warming.
- A large majority (80%) say they have not changed their opinions about global warming in the past year or two, but 9 percent say they have, while 11 percent say they don't know.

- Since November, Americans have become more polarized in their views of the efficacy of individual action, with a 7 point increase (to 18%) in those who strongly agree that “the actions of a single individual won’t make any difference in global warming” while those who strongly disagree with this statement also increased by 6 points to 21 percent.
- Since November, Americans have also become more skeptical that “new technologies can solve global warming, without individuals having to make big changes in their lives” with a 12 point increase in those who strongly disagree with this statement (to 28%).
- In a new question to assess Americans’ perceptions of public opinion on this issue, we asked respondents to estimate how many of their fellow Americans hold several key beliefs about global warming. On average:
 - Respondents correctly estimated that 38 percent of Americans believe global warming is happening due mostly to human activities.¹
 - Respondents correctly estimated that 20 percent of Americans haven’t yet made up their mind about whether or not global warming is happening.
 - Respondents incorrectly estimated that 21 percent of Americans don’t believe that global warming is happening – an overestimate of 7 points (it’s actually 14%).
 - Respondents incorrectly estimated that 25 percent of Americans believe that global warming is happening due mostly to natural causes – an overestimate of 6 points (it’s actually 19%).²

Trust

- Large majorities of Americans continue to trust climate scientists (74%), other kinds of scientists (65%), and television weather reporters (62%) as sources of information about global warming. The mainstream news media is trusted by 43 percent.
- President Obama is trusted by 47 percent of Americans, while Mitt Romney is trusted by only 21 percent as a source of information about global warming. Since November, trust in President Obama has held steady, while trust in Mitt Romney dropped by 5 points, with “strong distrust” increasing by 8 points to 39 percent.
- Only 24 percent of Americans trust consumer good companies (e.g., Levi-Strauss, Nike, and Avon), 20 percent trust car companies (e.g., GM and Toyota) (20%), and only 13 percent trust oil, gas and coal companies (e.g., ExxonMobil and Peabody Energy) as sources of information about global warming.

¹ 38 percent is the proportion of respondents that: 1) said global warming is happening, *and* 2) that it is mostly caused by human activities. The cause question begins, "Assuming global warming is happening, do you think it is..." Some respondents that said they do not believe that global warming is happening, or that they don't know, nonetheless chose either natural or human causes in the cause question and thus were not included in this calculation.

² 19 percent is the proportion that said they believe global warming is happening, *and* that it is mostly caused by natural changes in the environment.