

# Climate Change: Public Skeptical, Scientists Sure

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The American public is [less likely to believe in global warming than it was just five years ago](#). Yet, paradoxically, scientists are more confident than ever that climate change is real and caused largely by human activities.

Something a bit strange is happening with public opinion and climate change.

Anthony Leiserowitz, who directs the Yale University Project on Climate Change Communication, delved into this in [a recent poll](#). He not only asked citizens what they thought of climate change, he also asked them to estimate how climate scientists feel about global warming.

"Only 13 percent of Americans got the correct answer, which is that in fact about 97 percent of American scientists say that climate change is happening, and about a third of Americans just simply say they don't know," he said.

Most Americans are unaware that the National Academy of Sciences, known for its cautious and even-handed reviews of the state of science, is firmly on board with climate change. It has been for years.

Ralph Cicerone, president of the National Academy, paraphrased its most recent report on the subject.

"The consensus statement is that climate changes are being observed, are certainly real, they seem to be increasing, and that humans are mostly likely the cause of all or most of these changes," he said.

That's not just the view of the U.S. National Academies. There's also a consensus statement from the presidents of science academies from around the world, including the academies of China, the United Kingdom, India, Japan, Russia, France, Brazil, the list goes on.

Cicerone also points to strong statements about climate change from the leading professional organizations in the United States, including from the American Chemical Society, the American Physical Society and others.

Of course, it's still possible to find a few scientists who reject the consensus. Cicerone says it is appealing to think they are right when they say there's no need to worry about complicated cap-and-trade policies or otherwise fuss about climate change.

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**- Anthony Leiserowitz, Yale University Project on Climate Change Communication**

think it's particularly American, although it happens everywhere," he said. "And in fact, this is the way scientists work.

"Scientists don't gain respect, and attention, and fame, if you will, by going along with the mainstream, and I don't know of many scientists who try to go along with the mainstream — they're trying to go the opposite direction."

Though a few are still finding reasons for doubt, Cicerone says he and most of his colleagues find the science of climate change is stronger the harder they look. So does this public disbelief mean that Americans are becoming more anti-science?

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Leiserowitz of Yale University says that's not what his polls show.

"Most Americans have overwhelming trust in the science and trust in scientists," he said.

But the public is largely unaware of the consensus because that's not what they're hearing on cable TV or reading in blogs.

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"They mostly get exposed to a much more conflicted view, and that's of course not by accident," he said.

Leiserowitz is now starting to ask how public opinion changes when people actually know that the National Academy of Sciences and other groups consider climate change to be a big concern.

"So far the evidence shows that the more people understand that there is this consensus, the more they tend to believe that climate change is happening, the more they understand that humans are a major contributor, and the more worried they are about it," Leiserowitz said.

He says if you drill down a bit, the American public actually is not split when you ask them if they'd like to see a gradual transition from fossil fuels to clean energy.

"We find overwhelming bipartisan agreement about that," he said.

As it happens, that transition is a step toward slowing the pace of global climate change.

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