

## **PUBLIC OPINION: Polls show wide partisan gap, erroneous beliefs on climate (04/20/2011)**

**Evan Lehmann, E&E reporter**

A series of polls was conducted recently to ask about the facts of climate change while trying to avoid the divisive political beliefs around government policies to address it.

It didn't work.

Researchers [found](#) that seemingly neutral questions about the level of people's knowledge of climate change, their notions about scientific consensus and their personal beliefs on warming resulted in strong partisan responses. They were stimulated, apparently, by the question of whether the government should, or should not, employ policies to limit greenhouse gases.

The results suggest that Democrats justify government policies by saying overwhelmingly that humans are contributing to climate change. Republicans, who generally oppose those policies, conveyed with equal conviction that warming is naturally occurring.

"I expected there'd be some partisan difference, by the nature of the issue. But I thought it might be less with the way we worded the questions," said Lawrence Hamilton, a professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire. "It's not only very strong, it's very consistent over time and across locations. On some surveys, they're comparable to really hot-button social issues."

It was among respondents who claimed to have a great or moderate understanding of climate change that the deepest political divisions were found.

In four statewide polls in New Hampshire, between 77 and 86 percent of Democrats with that high level of knowledge said they believe man-made emissions are causing the changes. But only between 23 and 26 percent of Republicans with the same understanding of climate change think humans are a contributing factor.

The divisions shrink among people who claim to have a weaker grasp on the issue. Fewer of those Democrats think man is the problem, and more Republicans do.

### **Teenagers and climate change and rockets?**

Similar partisan divisions were found in six other polls conducted in parts of Alaska, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana and Washington state and in the "North Country" of New England. The biggest gaps between Democrats and Republicans who believe in man-made climate change surfaced on Washington's Olympic Peninsula and in southeast Alaska, both of which showed a 52 percent division between the political camps.

The smallest gap was found in the Kentucky coal country counties of Harlan and Letcher, where 49 percent of Democrats and 29 percent of Republicans believe humans are contributing to climate change. A separate poll was released this week focusing on opinions among teenagers. The survey by Yale University found that 54 percent of teens say that global warming is occurring, compared to 63 percent of adults.

Fewer middle and high school students also believe that most scientists agree climate change is happening (35 percent, compared to 39 percent of adults), and that vehicles contribute to warming (46 percent, compared to 49 percent of adults).

And then there's this: 44 percent of teens believe climate change could be reduced by stopping rockets from puncturing the atmosphere, a correlation, perhaps, to the incorrect belief by 35 percent of them that the ozone hole over the Southern Hemisphere contributes to warming.

On the other hand, teens were more accurate than adults in understanding that greenhouse gases trap heat in the atmosphere (77 percent of teens, 66 percent of adults), and that burning fossil fuels produces carbon dioxide (71 percent, compared to 67 percent).

It's unknown what future attitudes about climate change will reveal, but Hamilton, the New Hampshire-based researcher, suggests that partisan perceptions will reign until they're overthrown by Mother Nature.

People rarely get their information from objective scientists, instead relying on partisan blogs, television and politicians.

"That is climate as a social construction, not climate as having to do with real wind and weather and temperatures," Hamilton said. "If these scientists are right, there will become a point these physical changes become harder and harder to overlook. And that may be transformative in a way that the politics and even the science so far have not been."