



## How Hot Is Global Warming? A Review of the Polls

By Karlyn Bowman

*In the run-up to Earth Day each year, pollsters take the public's temperature on a variety of environmental issues. This year, pollsters added many new questions on global warming. Their findings provide some clues about how Americans see the problem and what they are willing to do about it.*

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the environment emerged as a powerful political issue. Large majorities of Americans across class and social group lines decided that a clean, healthful environment was a priority and that we should devote considerable resources to achieving one.<sup>1</sup> We as a society agreed on the ends that policy should serve; legislative, regulatory, and court actions followed. Most Americans did not get involved in debates about the means by which complex legislative and regulatory decisions about environmental policy were made. Today, only small numbers of Americans say they are active in the movement, although the environment remains a central value.

Is global warming emerging as a potent issue, much like the environment did four decades ago? To read the headlines this spring and summer, one would think that the answer is a resounding yes. But a careful review of public opinion data suggests that while the public is warming up to global warming, it is not yet a top-tier concern. To understand the polls on global warming, it is helpful to review current polling on the environment.

### Environment Redux?

A substantial body of survey data now exists that enables us to look not only at the level of concern about the environment today and how that has

changed over time, but also at its relative importance. A few survey organizations have asked identically worded questions about the environment for years, and these are especially valuable in understanding how the issue has been transformed.

In 1939, the Gallup Organization devised a useful question that asked people to tell them, in their own words, what was the most important problem facing the country. That question has been asked scores of times since, and the responses provide a fascinating portrait of changing American concerns. In Gallup's most recent poll in July 2007, 2 percent of respondents spontaneously mentioned the environment as the top problem. Thirty-five percent mentioned the war in Iraq.<sup>2</sup> In the past five years, no more than 5 percent have ever mentioned the environment as the nation's most important problem. As a top-of-the-mind concern, the environment has been eclipsed by other issues.

Pollsters assess the importance of issues in other ways. In addition to asking people what is on their minds, they also ask them how worried they are about different kinds of problems. In March 2007, as table 1 shows, health care topped the list in terms of high concern in a Gallup poll, with 63 percent saying they worried about the problem a great deal. Far fewer, 43 percent, were worried about "the quality of the environment."

Even though the environment does not come immediately to mind or rank at the top of a list of today's problems, it is still possible that people

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TABLE 1

**Question:** Next, I'm going to read a list of problems facing this country. For each one, please tell me if you personally worry about this problem a great deal, a fair amount, only a little, or not at all.

	Worry a Great Deal About (%)
The availability and affordability of health care	63
Crime and violence	48
Drug use	45
Illegal immigration	45
The availability and affordability of energy	43
<b>The quality of the environment</b>	<b>43</b>
Hunger and homelessness	43
The possibility of future terrorist attacks in the U.S.	41
The economy	39
Unemployment	25
Race relations	19

SOURCE: Karlyn Bowman, "Polls on the Environment and Global Warming," AEI Public Opinion Study, April 20, 2007, available at [www.aei.org/publication14888/](http://www.aei.org/publication14888/).

could rank it highly as an issue for the president or Congress to address. But this does not appear to be the case. In late April 2007, in an NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll taken at the height of this year's media coverage of Earth Day, the war in Iraq outdistanced all other issues as a top priority for the president (50 percent gave that response), followed by health care (23 percent), illegal immigration (21 percent), terrorism and energy/gas prices (18 percent each), job creation (16 percent), the environment and global warming (12 percent), and the budget deficit (8 percent). Other more recent questions confirm that the environment is a mid- to low-range priority.

Underscoring the lack of urgency associated with the issue are the responses to questions pollsters ask about environmental activism. There is no evidence of an upsurge in activity. Today, most Americans tell pollsters that they are sympathetic to the movement, but not active in it. In Gallup's March 2007 question, for example, 21 percent described themselves as active participants in the environmental movement, 49 percent sympathetic but not active, 23 percent neutral, and 5 percent unsympathetic. Another indicator of inattentiveness comes from a 2006 ABC News/*Time*/Stanford University survey that found only 36 percent saying they had given a lot of thought to the impact they were having on the environment in the past year.

Four decades ago, younger Americans, and particularly those in college, were at the forefront of the environmental

movement. In 1971, 43 percent of college freshmen in a large survey conducted by UCLA indicated that "becoming involved in programs to clean up the environment" was very important or essential to them. In 2006, 23 percent did. In an online Harris Interactive survey conducted in April 2007, those ages 18–30 were no more likely than any other age group to describe themselves as "active environmentalists."

## An Environmental Puzzle

It is difficult to reconcile the muted concern described above with other poll responses that reveal considerable pessimism about the environment. Two-thirds of Americans in the March 2007 Gallup question said that environmental quality was getting worse, and only a quarter said it was getting better. In an early 2007 survey from the Pew Research Center, environmental pessimists outnumbered optimists. Fifty-two percent said the country was losing ground on the problem of environmental pollution. Just 20 percent, the lowest proportion since 1989, said the country was making progress on it.

There are several possible explanations for today's environmental pessimism. In the halcyon economic times of the late 1990s, Americans' good feelings about the economy appeared to have produced similar good feelings about other issues: people felt better about immigration, the environment, and a host of other issues that seemingly had little to do with the records

the economy was setting. Today's pessimism about the environment may stem from the pessimism about Iraq, which infuses the public mood today. Despite considerable evidence about U.S. economic vitality, for example, almost as many people in a recent Gallup poll were pessimistic about the economy—62 percent said economic conditions in the country as a whole were getting worse—as felt the environment was getting worse (67 percent).

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In the 2007 Pacific Research Institute/AEI Press *Index of Leading Environmental Indicators*, AEI's Steven F. Hayward and the Pacific Research Institute's Amy L. Kaleita argue that environmental pessimism may reflect the distinction historian John Lukacs offers between public *sentiment* and public *opinion*.<sup>3</sup> Public sentiment is what people think they are supposed to believe, and public opinion what they actually believe. The authors believe that the general pessimism "probably reflects the default sentimental pessimism of the conventional environmental movement as well as the crisis-mode coverage of most environmental issues in the media."

National-level pessimism does not translate into local pessimism. A majority, 55 percent, in a February 2007 Yale Center for Environmental Law & Policy survey rated the overall quality of the environment in their local community as excellent or good. Only 13 percent described it as poor. By comparison, just 32 percent described the overall quality of the environment in the United States as excellent or good. People were even more pessimistic about the global situation. Only 17 percent rated the environment in the world positively. The Yale results are virtually identical to the results from a late April CBS News/*New York Times* poll in which 56 percent rated the quality of the environment where they lived as excellent or good, while only two in ten rated the condition of the environment in the world as excellent or good. The pattern of greater satisfaction and optimism about things close to home is

a familiar one in public opinion. People are more satisfied, for example, with the education system in their local communities than they are about education nationally. They feel better about the level of crime in their communities than they do about crime in the nation. Views of the nation are formed largely by the national news media, whose relentless negativity has been well documented.<sup>4</sup> National level pessimism about the environment may echo negative news coverage of it.

Another possible explanation is that environmental conditions warrant pessimism, with people giving these gloomy assessments to remind elected officials to pay attention to an issue they are not following closely. Americans are not indifferent to the environment: they are simply inattentive.

### Positioning on Global Warming

If the environment is a core value, but one that lacks urgency today, how do people see global warming, and how has that changed over time? One of the earliest questions in the public domain about global warming was one asked by the Roper Organization (now Roper GfK-NOP) in 1984. People were asked whether certain things would be serious problems for their children or grandchildren twenty-five or fifty years in the future. That year, severe water and air pollution topped the list, with around 70 percent concerned for their progeny. Thirty-seven percent said the greenhouse effect would be serious in the future. Roper had been asking questions about global *cooling's* impact on future generations for a decade, and concern about it rose to a high of 30 percent in a December 1976 poll. In July of that year, the *New York Times* ran a prominent story on the work of climatologists who believed that "the earth's climate has moved into a cooling cycle."<sup>5</sup>

The current crop of polls about global warming reveals some shifts in opinion, particularly in the proportion of people who believe the issue is real and serious.

**Is It Real?** Every recent survey question we have reviewed shows that Americans believe global warming is real. Only a few questions existed on this topic before 1990, but recent questions show that for most Americans, the case has been made. Seventy-seven percent in a January 2007 Pew Research Center survey agreed that there was "solid evidence that the average temperature on earth has been getting warmer over the past few decades." Just 16 percent were climate skeptics. In a

TABLE 2

**Question:** *I'm going to read you a list of environmental problems. As I read each one, please tell me if you personally worry about this problem a great deal, a fair amount, only a little, or not at all. How much do you personally worry about the "greenhouse effect" or global warming? Personally worry a . . .*

	Great Deal (%)	Fair Amount (%)
May 1989	35	28
Apr. 1990	30	27
Apr. 1991	35	27
Oct. 1997	24	26
Mar. 1999	28	31
Apr. 1999	34	34
Apr. 2000	40	32
Mar. 2001	33	30
Mar. 2002	29	29
Mar. 2003	28	30
Mar. 2004	26	25
Mar. 2006	36	26
Mar. 2007	41	24

SOURCE: Karlyn Bowman, "Polls on the Environment and Global Warming," AEI Public Opinion Study, April 20, 2007, available at [www.aei.org/publication14888/](http://www.aei.org/publication14888/).

January 2007 Fox News/Opinion Dynamics survey, 82 percent said global warming exists, while 10 percent said it did not. Another perspective is provided by the 2007 Yale study. About a third agreed that "too much fuss is made about global warming," but a substantial 63 percent disagreed.

In a Gallup question from 1997, 48 percent said the effects of global warming had already begun. When the survey organization repeated the question in March 2007, six in ten said that was the case. About a quarter said it would either affect future generations or never happen.

Since 1989, the Gallup Organization has been asking people how worried they are about global warming. In Gallup's survey, as table 2 shows, 41 percent of respondents reported being worried a great deal (up slightly from 35 percent in 1989). Another 24 percent in 2007 worried a fair amount about it. Partisan divisions were strong: 85 percent of Democrats and those who said they leaned toward the Democratic Party said they were worried a great deal, compared to 46 percent of Republicans and Republican leaners.<sup>6</sup> Fifty-two percent in 2007, up from 27 percent a decade ago, told ABC/*Washington Post*/Stanford interviewers that the issue was important to them.

The scientific consensus on global warming has been the subject of debate, and pollsters have explored Americans' thoughts about it. In Gallup's 2006 question,

nearly two-thirds said most scientists believed global warming is occurring. Seven percent said most scientists believed it was not. A significant 29 percent said they were not sure. ABC News/*Washington Post*/Stanford results from 2007 found that 40 percent thought most scientists agreed with one another that global warming was happening, but 56 percent thought there was a lot of disagreement.

Not only do people believe global warming is real, but they also claim to understand it better than in the past. In Gallup's polling, 76 percent in 2007 said that they felt they understood global warming very well or fairly well, up from 53 percent in 1992. The 2007 Yale survey cited above found that 35 percent mostly agreed and 32 percent agreed somewhat with the statement, "If I had to, I could explain global warming to someone I meet in passing." Three in ten disagreed.

**How Serious Is It?** As the questions discussed above demonstrate, when global warming is examined as a stand-alone issue, people say it is serious. When it is compared to other issues, however, the picture is considerably different.

Pew reported that global warming is not a top-tier issue, describing the public opinion as "lukewarm" about the importance of the issue in a January 2007 poll release.<sup>7</sup> In Pew's annual list of policy priorities for

TABLE 3

*Question: I'm going to read you a list of environmental problems. As I read each one, please tell me if you personally worry about this problem a great deal, a fair amount, only a little, or not at all. How much do you personally worry about?*

	Great Deal (%)	Fair Amount (%)
Pollution of drinking water	58	24
Pollution of rivers, lakes, and reservoirs	53	31
Contamination of soil and water by toxic waste	52	28
Maintenance of the nation's supply of fresh water for household needs	51	27
Air pollution	46	33
Damage to the earth's ozone layer	43	27
The loss of tropical rain forests	43	30
The "greenhouse effect" or global warming	41	24
Extinction of plant and animal species	39	30
Acid rain	25	25

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the president and Congress, global warming ranked fourth lowest of the twenty-three items tested, with 38 percent rating it a top priority. For Republicans the issue ranked dead last, for Democrats it ranked seventeenth, and for independents it ranked nineteenth.<sup>8</sup> Other polls confirm the pattern, including a May-June survey taken by the *Washington Post*, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University. Global warming ranked eighth out of ten issues the pollsters asked about in terms of being extremely important to the respondent personally. For Republicans, the issue ranked last, and for independents, it was second to last. Democrats put global warming in fifth place.

Perhaps more striking, given the intense media coverage of global warming, is the issue's ranking among environmental problems. In Gallup's March 2007 question about ten different environmental problems, the issue placed eighth (see table 3). Gallup's release stated, "Although a majority of Americans say they are at least fairly worried about global warming, the issue ranks near the bottom of other environmental issues rated."<sup>9</sup>

One reason for the issue's relatively low salience may be that while people think it is real and a serious problem, they are more likely to think that is the case for the future and not for the present. Indeed, some survey data support this. In the 2007 Gallup poll, only 35 percent, up from 25 percent in 1997, said global warming would present a threat to them in their lifetime. The

2006 ABC News/*Time*/Stanford survey reported that 60 percent believed global warming would threaten future generations a great deal, and another 28 percent said a good amount.

A second reason may be that there have been few tangible manifestations of global warming thus far. In Gallup's ranking of environmental problems shown in table 3, problems that people could see in their own communities commanded the most attention.

Yet another reason for the issue's relatively low rating could stem from concerns among a significant chunk of the population about media exaggeration. In an April 2007 Harris Interactive poll, for example, 37 percent said they agreed with the statement that the media exaggerates threats to the environment to get people to pay attention.

Finally, the media attention and the vocal debate among interest groups and politicians about what should be done about global warming may be convincing the public that the issue is already being taken seriously. States are taking action, and a record number of companies are "going green"—developments that may also convince Americans that they have been heard.

**What Should Be Done?** Here survey data provide little guidance. Most of the questions the pollsters ask are hypothetical. It is one thing to ask people in the abstract whether they would be willing to pay twenty-five cents

TABLE 4

**Question:** *In order to help reduce global warming, would you be willing or not willing to pay more for electricity if it were generated by renewable sources like solar or wind energy?*

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Willing	75%
Not willing	20

**Question:** *For each of the following please tell me whether you favor or oppose it as a way for the federal government to try to reduce future global warming: increase taxes on electricity so people use less of it.*

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Favor	20%
Oppose	79

**Question:** *Now I'm going to read a list of steps the government can take to reduce global warming. Please say for each if that is something the government should or should not be doing. How about requiring a surcharge on utility bills when energy use limits are exceeded?*

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Should	46%
Should not	52

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SOURCE: Karlyn Bowman, "Polls on the Environment and Global Warming," AEI Public Opinion Study, April 20, 2007, available at [www.aei.org/publication14888/](http://www.aei.org/publication14888/).

more for a gallon of gas or whether they would be willing to buy a hybrid car. It is quite another when people confront an increase in the price at the pump and compound that with price increases at the grocery store or the pharmacy.

Two recent examples from survey literature demonstrate how misleading hypothetical polling questions can be. Virtually every survey question asked between 1984 and early 2005 showed strong support for the idea of personal retirement accounts. But when President George W. Bush announced that the accounts would be a priority in his second term and the issue became real, public support collapsed in the political combat that followed. There were many reasons for the outcome, including a united wall of Democratic opposition, AARP opposition, and administration ineptitude—but the fact remains that questions asked in isolation about personal accounts did not offer guidance about how the debate would play out.<sup>10</sup>

A second example comes from surveys about the Medicare Part D prescription drug plan. Many surveys conducted before the new law was implemented predicted substantial opposition from senior citizens. A Democratic advocacy group, the Democracy Corps, put out an alert in 2006 entitled *Prescription Drug Plan: Prospect of a Voter Revolt*.<sup>11</sup> The report described the plan as "already unpopular" and argued that Democrats had the opportunity "to raise opposition to [the plan] to

new heights." Yet, at least at this writing, most seniors appear to have positive views about the program. Again, the polls were a poor guide.

Recent questions about what people are willing to do about global warming provide support for the public opinion truism that how you word a question and the information you provide can affect results. As table 4 shows, 75 percent of respondents told CBS/*New York Times* interviewers in April that they would be willing to pay more for electricity generated by popular renewable sources in order to help reduce global warming. But in the April ABC/*Washington Post*/Stanford poll, 79 percent opposed increasing taxes on electricity so people use less of it as a way for the federal government to try to reduce future global warming. In Gallup's March 2007 question, 52 percent were opposed to requiring a surcharge on utility bills when energy use exceeded limits (46 percent were in favor).

Fifty-three percent in the CBS poll said it was likely that people would change their driving habits to save energy and cut down on greenhouse gases (46 percent said this was unlikely). In ABC polls in 2006 and 2007, 68 and 67 percent, respectively, opposed "increasing taxes on gasoline so people either drive less or buy cars that use less gas." In Gallup's survey, 55 percent opposed banning vehicles that did not average at least thirty miles per gallon.

People are willing to do things that are easy to improve the environment or address global warming. Only 25 percent say they do not recycle in ABC's poll. Ninety-four percent in the April 2007 ABC News/*Washington Post*/Stanford survey say they are willing to make changes in their lives in order to help the environment, but far fewer, 50 percent, say they are very willing to do so. On the broader issue of the environment, only about a quarter today say they are keeping their homes a

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little warmer in the summer and a little cooler in the winter to help the environment (two-thirds said they would be willing to do so). The poll found that 11 percent consider a manufacturer's environmental record when they shop, while 79 percent said they mainly decide on price and quality. When asked whether they considered a store's environmental policies in deciding where to shop, 8 percent did, but 87 percent decided mainly on the basis of other factors, such as convenience, prices, and brands.

As for what the government should do, people think it should do more, but it is unclear what this means. In Gallup's 2007 environment poll, large majorities supported starting major research efforts to develop new energy resources, and separately requiring government office buildings to use renewable energy resources. Developing new energy sources is popular in the abstract.

It is extremely difficult to get reliable information about how far the public wants to go in terms of taxing, spending, or regulating by asking hypothetical questions. Polls are not well-suited to this task.

## Political Potency

In every poll since 1971, the Democrats lead the Republicans as the party better able to handle the environment. In exit polls of voters conducted on Election Day, small numbers say the environment is the most important issue to them in casting their presidential vote. In 2000, the last time the exit pollsters included the environment on a list of issues people could choose as the most important, 9 percent of voters said it was one of their top two issues. As a point of comparison,

35 percent, the top response that year, picked moral/ethical values. The small number of single-issue environmental voters vote in overwhelming numbers for Democratic presidential candidates. In 2000, 76 percent voted for Gore—and 12 percent for Bush.

Global warming, another issue on which Democrats lead the Republicans consistently in the polls, has done little for its chief spokesman, Al Gore. In Gallup's mid-July 2007 poll, 51 percent had a favorable opinion of Gore and 40 an unfavorable one. His favorable rating is down a few points from the time of the Oscars (55 percent favorable), when his documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*, won an award. Question after question in polls about the 2008 race show that a huge slice of the electorate does not want to see him run for president. In March, 57 percent told Gallup/*USA Today* pollsters that they did not want Gore to run. Just 38 percent did.

In the April CBS News/*New York Times* poll, 35 percent said the issue of the environment was so important to them that they could never vote for a candidate who disagreed with them on the environment. In comparison, 51 percent said they could. As for a presidential candidate calling for everyone to make sacrifices to help protect the environment, a third said they would be more likely to vote for him, but 48 percent said this would make no difference in their vote. Fifteen percent said they would be less likely to vote for a candidate calling for sacrifice. The data suggest that politicians who disparage global warming may have much to lose, but there is also little to suggest that championing the issue will significantly boost a politician's fortunes.

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*AEI research assistant Adam Foster and editorial associate Nicole Passan worked with Ms. Bowman to edit and produce this Environmental Policy Outlook.*

## Notes

1. Everett Carl Ladd and Karlyn H. Bowman, *Attitudes toward the Environment: Twenty-Five Years after Earth Day* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 1995), available at [www.aei.org/book18/](http://www.aei.org/book18/).
2. All the survey data in this article can be found in Karlyn Bowman, "Polls on the Environment and Global Warming," AEI Public Opinion Study, April 20, 2007, available at [www.aei.org/publication14888/](http://www.aei.org/publication14888/).
3. Steven F. Hayward and Amy L. Kaleita, *Index of Leading Environmental Indicators 2007* (Washington, DC: Pacific Research Institute/AEI Press, 2007), available at [www.aei.org/book882/](http://www.aei.org/book882/).

4. See, for example, Ben J. Wattenberg, *The Good News Is the Bad News Is Wrong* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), available at [www.aei.org/book106](http://www.aei.org/book106); and Gregg Easterbrook, *A Moment on Earth: The Coming Age of Environmental Optimism* (New York: Viking Press, 1995).

5. James P. Sterba, "Climatologists Forecast Stormy Economic Future," *New York Times*, July 12, 1976.

6. Lydia Saad, "Did Hollywood's Glare Heat Up Public Concern about Global Warming?" Gallup News Service, available at [www.gallupoll.com/content/Default.aspx?ci=26932&version=p](http://www.gallupoll.com/content/Default.aspx?ci=26932&version=p).

7. Pew Research Center, *Global Warming: A Divide on Causes and Solutions*, "Summary of Findings" (Washington, DC:

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9. Lydia Saad, "Did Hollywood's Glare Heat Up Public Concern about Global Warming?"

10. Jackie Calmes, "Lost Appeal: How a Victorious Bush Fumbled Plan to Revamp Social Security," *Wall Street Journal*, October 20, 2005.

11. Stan Greenberg, James Carville, and Matt Hogan, *Prescription Drug Plan: Prospect of a Voter Revolt*, Democracy Corps, February 10, 2006, available at [www.democracycorps.com/reports/analyses/Democracy\\_Corps\\_February\\_10\\_2006\\_Alert.pdf](http://www.democracycorps.com/reports/analyses/Democracy_Corps_February_10_2006_Alert.pdf).