About the Authors

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About RFF

Resources for the Future (RFF) is an independent, nonprofit research institution in Washington, DC. Its mission is to improve environmental, energy, and natural resource decisions through impartial economic research and policy engagement. RFF is committed to being the most widely trusted source of research insights and policy solutions leading to a healthy environment and a thriving economy. The views expressed here are those of the individual authors and may differ from those of other RFF experts, its officers, or its directors.

About the Project

This report is the third in a series by researchers at Stanford University, Resources for the Future, and ReconMR examining American public opinion on issues related to climate change—beliefs about existence and threat, as well as public support for government action and specific policy preferences. Since 1997, Stanford University Professor Jon Krosnick has explored American public opinion on these issues through a series of rigorous national surveys of random samples of American adults, often in collaboration with RFF.

For the 2020 iteration of the Climate Insights survey, 999 American adults were interviewed during the 80-day period from May 28, 2020 to August 16, 2020.
This Climate Insights report focuses on Americans' opinions regarding government policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This series is accompanied by an interactive data tool, which can be used to view specific data from the survey. Please visit [www.rff.org/climateinsights](http://www.rff.org/climateinsights) or [https://climatepublicopinion.stanford.edu/](https://climatepublicopinion.stanford.edu/) for more information and to access the data tool, report series, blog posts, and more.

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**Note:** Since 1997, Stanford University Professor Jon Krosnick has led surveys exploring American public opinion on issues related to global warming, human activity, government policies to address climate change, and more, through a series of rigorous national surveys of random samples of American adults. When this research program began, "global warming" was the term in common parlance. That term was used throughout the surveys over the decades and was always defined for respondents, so it was properly understood. In recent years, the term "climate change" has risen in popularity, so both terms are used in this report interchangeably. When describing survey question wordings and results, the term "global warming" is used, to match the term referenced during interviews. Empirical studies have shown that survey respondents interpret the terms "global warming" and "climate change" to have equivalent meanings (Villar and Krosnick 2011).
Acknowledgments

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The data included in this report comes from sources with varying sharing policies. Please check the references for more information, and email krosnick@stanford.edu with any questions.
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Introduction

In *Climate Insights 2020: Overall Trends*, we showed that huge majorities of Americans believe that Earth has been warming, that the warming has been caused by human activity, that warming poses a significant threat to the nation and the world—especially to future generations—and that governments, businesses, and individuals should be taking steps to address it.

In this report, we turn to specific government opportunities to reduce future greenhouse gas emissions, often referred to as climate change mitigation. Policies to accomplish this goal fall into multiple categories, including:

1. **Consumer incentives** that reward people for taking steps that reduce their use of fossil fuels and, by extension, reduce their carbon footprint

2. **Carbon pricing policies** that require emitters to pay for their carbon emissions, such as a **carbon tax** (which would require carbon emitters to pay a tax for each ton of carbon they emit), or a **cap-and-trade program** (which would require businesses to have a permit for each ton of carbon they emit)

3. **Regulations** that require manufacturers to increase energy efficiency of their products, including automobiles, appliances, and buildings

4. **Tax incentives** that encourage manufacturers to increase the energy efficiency of their products

The 2020 survey asked Americans about their opinions on a wide array of such policies, which allows us to not only assess current attitudes, but also to track changes in those attitudes over the past two decades through comparisons with responses to comparable questions asked in earlier national surveys. As we outlined in our first report, one might imagine that the current public health, economic, and social crises facing the nation may have caused Americans to be less willing to support government climate mitigation efforts in favor of addressing more immediate problems. As we shall see, that did not happen.

We also took this opportunity to explore whether people evaluate government policies based on what they believe is best for the nation as a whole (called "sociotropic" reasoning) or whether each individual evaluates policies based on their own personal financial interests (called "pocketbook" reasoning). As we explored in previous installments in this report series, a great deal of economic theory has portrayed people as rational actors pursuing their own personal material self-interests (Kiewiet 1983; Kinder and Kiewiet 1981; Lewis-Beck and Paldam 2000). Rational choice theory suggests that people will support a public policy if they perceive that it will yield greater economic benefits to them than the costs incurred (Downs 1957). However, research has shown that a person’s material self-interests have little impact when forming opinions about government policies. Instead, people form their opinions based much more on "sociotropic" reasoning (Lau and Heldman 2009; Sears and Funk 1990; Sears et al. 1980).
To test these competing hypotheses, we explore the extent to which support for mitigation policies is driven by beliefs that unchecked global warming will either hurt (or help) the respondent personally or hurt (or help) society as a whole, and whether efforts to mitigate global warming will have unintentional side-effects that will either hurt (or help) the respondent economically or hurt (or help) society economically.
Climate Insights 2020  |  Policies and Politics

Greenhouse Gas Emissions Reduction Policies

Extremely Popular Policies

Shifting Electricity Generation to Renewable Power

A number of policies are extremely popular with Americans in 2020 and have been consistently popular across past surveys as well. For example, huge numbers of Americans favor government effort to shift electricity generation away from fossil fuels and toward renewable energy sources.

In 2020, 83% of Americans believe that the government should offer tax breaks to utilities in exchange for making more electricity from water, wind, and solar power. This percentage has been steady since 2006.

Slight changes to the question wording yielded similar results: 81% of Americans in 2020 favor either requiring or offering tax breaks to utilities to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from power plants. This number is about the same as it has been since 2009. Before that, it was slightly higher: 86% and 88% in 2006 and 2007, respectively.

The vast majority of Americans favor government effort to shift power generation away from fossil fuels and toward renewable energy sources.

Figure 1. Percentage of Americans who think the US government should give utilities tax breaks to produce electricity from water, wind, and solar power

Figure 2. Percentage of Americans who think the US government should either require or give tax breaks to lower greenhouse gas emissions from power plants
83% of Americans believe the government should offer tax breaks to utilities to produce more electricity from water, wind, and solar power.
Increasing Energy Efficiency of Products

Energy efficiency improvements are often considered to be easy to attain, but they do require consumers to spend more when buying products.

About three-quarters of Americans favor government efforts through tax breaks or mandates to improve the energy efficiency of various consumer products.

Specifically, 71% of Americans favor increasing the fuel efficiency of automobiles, 71% favor increasing the energy efficiency of appliances, and 75% favor increasing the energy efficiency of new buildings.

Public support for all of these policies has been steady since 2012, peaking in 2006 and 2007, and dipping to its lowest levels in March 2012, but not for long.

Most Americans think the government should encourage or require better energy efficiency.

Figure 3. Percentage of Americans who think the US government should either require or give tax breaks to construct more energy-efficient cars

Figure 4. Percentage of Americans who think the US government should either require or give tax breaks to develop more energy-efficient appliances

Figure 5. Percentage of Americans who think the US government should either require or give tax breaks to have more energy-efficient buildings
Carbon pricing and carbon sequestration policies are a bit less popular than energy efficiency and renewable energy policies, but are still favored by majorities of Americans.

Carbon Pricing Policies

Carbon pricing policies hold businesses financially responsible for their greenhouse gas emissions. These policies generally fall into two categories: carbon taxes (which charge businesses for each ton of greenhouse gases they emit) and cap-and-trade programs (which limit businesses' total emissions by requiring them to have a permit for each ton they emit, which may also be traded to other businesses). These policies can generate revenue for the government, which can be used in a number of ways, including replacing other taxes, spending on government programs, and returning the money to consumers as a payment called a dividend.

EXPERT INSIGHT

As outlined in the first installment in this report series, a majority of survey respondents over the past 23 years have consistently agreed with the statement that the US government should do more to deal with global warming. Economists typically agree that the most economically efficient way to fight global warming is with a carbon price, which places a price on each ton of carbon dioxide emitted.

Historically, however, these policies have not been politically attractive, and, with a few exceptions, carbon pricing proposals at both the federal and state levels have not been adopted to date. Alternative policy options do exist for the electricity, transportation, and buildings sectors and can reduce emissions without pricing carbon directly, albeit less efficiently.

—Karen Palmer, RFF Senior Fellow and Director of RFF’s Future of Power Initiative

EXPERT INSIGHT

In the electricity sector, a clean energy standard (CES) is a market-based policy alternative to carbon pricing that requires that a certain percentage of electricity generation comes from "clean" resources, which are defined as low- or zero-carbon-emitting resources. The percentage requirement typically increases over time to encourage greater investment in cleaner generators and thus lead to higher emissions reductions. RFF analysis of proposed legislation for a national clean energy standard indicates that the impacts on electricity prices to consumers will be small (Picciano et al. 2019).

—Kathryne Cleary, RFF Research Associate
Carbon Taxes

When asked whether companies should be charged a tax for every ton of greenhouse gases they emit, 62% of respondents were in favor. To explore whether returning the tax revenue to respondents in the form of a dividend, we randomly assigned groups of respondents to be told that each American would receive $200 annually, $600 annually, or $800 annually. Providing this information did not significantly increase support for a carbon tax: 58% of Americans favored a carbon tax with a $200 annual per-person dividend, 63% with a $600 dividend, and 57% with an $800 dividend. None of these are significantly different from the 62% in favor of carbon taxes with an unspecified dividend, meaning that the value of a dividend had no impact on opinions.

Figure 6. Percentage of Americans who think the government should charge companies a tax for every ton of greenhouse gases they emit (2020)

Although economists generally assert that a carbon tax incentivizes companies to reduce emissions, it does not guarantee that such emissions reductions will happen. Supporting a carbon tax as a way to reduce future global warming requires Americans to accept the assertion that economic incentives will be sufficiently effective to drive down emissions—and perhaps not everyone does.

EXPERT INSIGHT

Two categories of adverse economic impacts from carbon taxation have been widely discussed: 1) the impacts from higher energy prices on consumers in different income groups/geographical areas of the country; and 2) the impacts on energy-intensive, trade-exposed industries in terms of lost production and jobs. Although recent polling suggests that Americans are not overly concerned about these adverse economic impacts, and research by myself and colleagues has shown that the impacts can be substantially reduced or eliminated for most income and industry groups, the issue remains alive in political circles. Future polling should try to better understand the cause of these differences. Is the general public truly unconcerned about adverse impacts or is their response based on a lack of information? Is there a threshold where concern about adverse impacts might influence public perception?

—Richard Morgenstern, RFF Senior Fellow

EXPERT INSIGHT

Under a carbon price, one can generally be certain about either the amount of emissions reductions (under cap and trade) or the cost of emissions reductions (under a carbon tax). My recent research shows that a tax adjustment mechanism may make it possible to gain certainty about the emissions results of a carbon tax. Future polling may be able to tease out whether Americans think economic incentives can reduce emissions and if their support for a tax would increase if it could guarantee reductions through a tax adjustment mechanism.

—Marc Hafstead, RFF Fellow
Cap and Trade

The logic that Americans would support a carbon tax more if assured that it would result in emissions reductions is challenged by the fact that cap-and-trade and cap-and-dividend policies are also only moderately popular with Americans. Cap and trade involves imposing a cap on greenhouse gas emissions by businesses, thus assuring emissions reduction. The cap is imposed by government-issued permits to limit emissions, and the government gives, sells, or auctions the permits to companies, which can generate revenue. Cap and dividend returns this revenue to consumers, giving each household a rebate.

In 2020, 61% of Americans favored a cap-and-dividend policy, which is slightly lower than in 2013 (65%) and about the same as in 2015 (62%).

E X P E R T  I N S I G H T

I was happy to see in the first installment of this report that 64% of Americans believe the US government should do more to address global warming, even during the COVID-19 pandemic. But what types of policies would the public support? 60% would support a carbon tax and dividend approach (though interestingly support falls if respondents are told how much money they would receive back) and 58% would support a cap-and-trade program that used revenues to cut income taxes. Both policies are similar and would raise the prices of electricity and gasoline for consumers, yet only 24% and 42% of respondents favored increasing taxes on electricity and gasoline, respectively, to cause people to use less. This signals to me that more public education on how carbon pricing works and how it can bring down emissions, such as our carbon pricing explainer series, is necessary.

—Marc Hafstead, RFF Fellow
Carbon Sequestration

In 2020, 63% of Americans favor reducing emissions by sequestering (i.e., capturing and storing) carbon released by burning coal. This level of support has been steady over the past 11 years.

Figure 8. Percentage of Americans who favor the US government giving tax breaks to companies to reduce air pollution from burning coal
Nuclear Power Tax Breaks

Although nuclear power plants do not emit greenhouse gases, tax breaks for the construction of new nuclear power plants is among the least popular policies in 2020. Only 37% of Americans favor this policy—a near record low. This is down slightly from 41% in early 2006 and is significantly lower than the peak support of 54% in 2009.

Figure 9. Percentage of Americans who favor the US government giving tax breaks to companies to build nuclear power plants

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**EXPERT INSIGHT**

Tax credits for new nuclear power plants leave many Americans feeling conflicted. On the one hand, people are concerned about radiation releases and sky-high construction costs. On the other hand, nuclear power is a low-emissions way to produce a steady supply of power.

The drop in support for tax credits for new nuclear plants after 2010 may be explained by the disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant in March 2011. More recently, support among those surveyed went back up somewhat from 2015 to 2018 then back down again by this year. Some possible reasons for the decline since 2018 are that the one US nuclear plant under construction has continued to get more expensive, other low-emitting generation technologies have continued to get cheaper, and electricity demand is down.

—Daniel Shawhan, RFF Fellow
Consumer Incentives

The least popular policies impose new taxes on consumers to incentivize them to consume less fossil fuels. Only a minority of Americans approved of increased taxes on retail gasoline and electricity purchases for this purpose, with no stated use of the generated revenue: 28% approved increasing taxes on electricity, and 43% approved increasing taxes on gasoline. Both approval numbers are at an all-time high for the history of this survey, but neither policy has received majority support.

Figure 10. Percentage of Americans who believe that the US government should increase taxes on electricity to cause people to use less

Figure 11. Percentage of Americans who believe that the US government should increase taxes on gasoline to cause people to use less
63% of Americans favor reducing emissions by sequestering carbon released by burning coal.
Implementing many policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions will cost consumers and companies in the short term, and implementing such policies may increase the cost of American-made goods and services relative to the costs of those goods and services produced elsewhere. This has led some observers to urge caution about implementing greenhouse gas emissions policies, because they may result in undesirable economic side-effects.

However, this argument does not appear to have taken hold with majorities of Americans, even at times over the past 20 years when the American economy was weaker. For example, only 29% of Americans in 2020 believe that taking action to address global warming will hurt the US economy, a number that’s just about the same as it was in 2009 (27%). In 2010, only about one in five Americans (21%) believed that these efforts will hurt their state economy, which remains similar in 2020 at 23%. Conversely, belief about how climate action will affect the economy has remained unshaken over the last decade. In fact, 47% of Americans believe efforts to address global warming will actually help the national economy—about the same as 11 years ago (46%).

Figure 12. Percentage of Americans who believe that the US government taking action on global warming will help or hurt the US economy or the respondent’s state’s economy
A similar picture emerged regarding impressions of how climate change action would affect job availability. Only 23% of Americans believe that efforts to reduce emissions will reduce the number of jobs in the nation—the same as in 2009 during the height of the global recession. And in both 2009 and 2020, 40% of Americans believe that climate change action would increase the number of jobs in the country.

A minority of Americans believe that climate change action would reduce the amount of jobs in their state—19% believed this to be the case in 2010, and 22% said so in 2020. On the contrary, 37% of Americans in 2020 believe that climate action would increase the number of jobs in their state, down from 45% of Americans in 2010.

**Figure 13. Percentage of Americans who believe that the government taking action on global warming will decrease the number of jobs in the country or the respondent’s state**

EXPERT INSIGHT

When climate policies are proposed, proponents often cite the potential for new green jobs while opponents attack the policies as job killers. The polling results suggest that neither of these arguments truly resonate with the public, as only 40% of respondents believe government action on global warming would increase jobs and 23% believe action would decrease jobs. These views are consistent with my research that suggests that overall employment levels are not likely to be significantly impacted by environmental policies as new jobs in some industries offset job losses in other industries (Hafstead 2019).

—Marc Hafstead, RFF Fellow
Most Americans do not think climate action will affect the amount of money they have or their job prospects.

In 2020, we asked respondents for the first time about the likely impact of mitigation efforts on their own personal economic situations. Large majorities of Americans believe that there will be no such impact, and that they will have the same amount of money regardless of mitigation efforts. 20% believe their wealth will increase, and only 11% believe that climate change mitigation will reduce their wealth.

When it comes to the impact of mitigation efforts on the respondent's own ability to get a good-paying job, a large majority believe that mitigation efforts will have no impact on them in this regard. On the other hand, 17% believe that mitigation efforts will make them more likely to get a good-paying job, whereas 12% believe it will reduce their ability to secure a good-paying job.

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**Figure 14.** Percentage of Americans who believe that the US government taking action on global warming will affect the amount of money they have or their chances of having a good-paying job

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impact</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More money</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less money</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same amount of money</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More likely to have a good-paying job</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less likely to have a good-paying job</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same chance of having a good-paying job</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Since March 2020, the federal government has spent trillions of dollars to help American businesses and workers get through the economic crisis brought on by the coronavirus pandemic. In the past, the government has sometimes spent stimulus funds to strategically create jobs that serve the public good, such as infrastructure construction and clean energy deployment (White House 2016). In the coronavirus-related economic crisis, green stimulus investments could be strategically made to reduce future global warming. In this survey, we asked a series of questions to explore whether Americans support such spending of federal dollars.

Two-thirds (66%) of Americans want future federal stimulus packages to include creating new jobs and new technologies to reduce future global warming.

Figure 15. Percentage of Americans who believe the federal stimulus packages should include creating new jobs and new technologies to reduce future global warming (2020)
Two-thirds (66%) of Americans want future federal stimulus packages to include creating new jobs and new technologies to reduce future global warming.
When these people were asked what specific goals should be advanced by such strategic investments, the most popular was investing in new inventions to make electricity that put out less greenhouse gases, endorsed by 61% of all surveyed Americans.

Planting large numbers of trees to absorb and store greenhouse gases was endorsed by 59% of all surveyed Americans.

Majorities of Americans favor helping companies make smaller, longer-lasting batteries (56%), strengthen oil and gas pipelines to reduce leaking and pollution (54%), and installing charging equipment in parking lots to be used by electric cars and trucks (51%). Just under half of surveyed Americans favor making cars and trucks that run entirely on electricity (45%).

Figure 16. Percentage of Americans who think the government should spend money during the economic crisis to help companies act in various ways to support the economy and environment (2020)

EXPERT INSIGHT

Some "green stimulus" options have the potential to not only reduce greenhouse gas emissions, but also employ fossil energy workers who are struggling right now. This includes options to speed the deployment of carbon capture, use, and sequestration; along with geothermal energy. Other measures, such as using federal funds to plug orphaned and abandoned oil and gas wells, could also provide environmental benefits while employing displaced fossil energy workers.

—Daniel Raimi, RFF Senior Research Associate
Figure 17. Percentage of Americans who think the government should spend money helping people install solar panels on the roofs of houses or apartments (August 2020)

In sum, we see majority support for various strategic spending features of stimulus packages to reduce future global warming, but none of these majorities are large.
We explored the sociotropic reasoning and pocketbook reasoning hypotheses by examining the impact of perceived benefits and undesirable side effects of emission reduction efforts. We asked whether respondents' support for emissions reduction policies was driven more by perceptions of the damage that would be prevented to future generations, or to themselves personally. And we asked whether respondent support for these policies was driven more by perceptions of undesirable economic side effects for the nation, for the state where the respondent lives, or for themselves personally.

To test whether respondents' support for emissions reductions were driven by perceptions of personal or collective interests, we estimated the parameters of an ordinary least squares regression equation predicting the percentage of eleven emissions reduction policies favored by the respondent.

As expected, perceptions that unchecked global warming will hurt future generations increased support for emissions reduction policies. In contrast, perceptions that unchecked global warming will affect the respondent had no impact on policy support.

Figure 18. Effect of perceptions of unchecked global warming on policy support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceptions that unchecked global warming will benefit or hurt future generations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hurt future generations a great deal and not benefit future generations at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefit and hurt future generations at equal amounts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefit future generations a great deal and not hurt future generations at all</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceptions that unchecked global warming will benefit or harm the respondent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hurt respondent personally a great deal and not benefit them personally at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hurt and benefit respondent personally at equal amounts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefit respondent personally a great deal and not hurt them personally at all</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Increased policy support was also the result of perceptions that emissions reduction efforts will benefit the national economy and respondents' own state economy.

On the "pocketbook" level, perceptions that emissions reduction efforts will hurt or help the respondent personally also influenced policy support.

Thus, it appears that perceived benefits and costs to the collective are important drivers to public support for emissions reduction policies. Personal benefits and costs are also influencers, but appear to be less notable.

**Figure 19. Effect of perceptions on the economic effects of emissions reduction on policy support**

- **How emissions reduction will affect the national economy**
  - Help the national economy and jobs a great deal
  - Neither hurt nor help the national economy and jobs
  - Hurt the national economy and jobs a great deal

- **How emissions reduction will affect the respondent’s state’s economy**
  - Help the state economy and jobs a great deal
  - Neither hurt nor help the state economy and jobs
  - Hurt the state economy and jobs a great deal

- **Perceptions that emissions reduction efforts will affect the respondent economically**
  - Help respondent’s personal wealth and job prospects a great deal
  - Neither hurt nor help respondent’s personal wealth and job prospects
  - Hurt respondent’s personal wealth and job prospects a great deal
In July 2020, the New York Times reviewed 100 environmental rules that the Trump administration had reversed or was in the process of undoing. Many of these rules were put in place by the Obama administration, including policies on vehicle greenhouse gas standards and mercury emissions from coal power plants (Popovich et al. 2020). We selected four of these policies on which to gauge American opinions:

1. The Paris Agreement, an agreement between more than 190 countries, in which the United States pledged to produce 25% less greenhouse gas emissions in 2025 than it put out in 2005
2. The Clean Power Plan, which states that, by 2030, power plants must put out 30% less greenhouse gas emissions than they did in 2005
3. An executive order to cut federal greenhouse gas emissions by 40% by 2025
4. An increase to the Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) standards, requiring American-made vehicles to have an average gas mileage of 55 miles per gallon by 2025

Randomly-selected survey respondents were told about the policies and were asked whether they favored or opposed each one. Rather than using the name of each policy, respondents were given the policy details; without prior knowledge, they would not necessarily have been aware that these four specific policies were those mentioned. All of the policies received majority support, in some cases by large margins.

In 2020, 81% of respondents favor efforts by the federal government to lower US greenhouse gas emissions by 25% from 2005 levels by 2025, with no penalty for failing to achieve this goal. This was, of course, a major part of the US commitment to the Paris Agreement.

More than three-quarters of Americans (77%) favor a plan for the US government to require power plants to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by 30% below 2005 levels by 2025—goals laid out in the Clean Power Plan.

Two in three Americans—66%—favor the federal government lowering its own greenhouse gas emissions by 40% by 2025, relative to 2015. Finally, 64% favor the government requiring that all new cars and trucks made in the United States after 2025 get at least 55 miles per gallon (as laid out by the CAFE standards under the Obama Administration).

Figure 20. Percentage of Americans who support various policies implemented by the Obama administration that the Trump administration rolled back or was working to roll back

- 81% The Paris Agreement
- 77% The Clean Power Plan
- 66% The federal government cutting its greenhouse gas emissions by 40% by 2025
- 64% An increase to the Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) standards
Built into the questionnaire was an experiment in which some respondents were told that President Obama had spearheaded each policy, other respondents were told that President Trump had reversed the policy, and still other respondents were told about both presidents' involvement.

This experiment was implemented to assess the malleability of American opinions regarding these policies. American professors Arthur Lupia and Mathew D. McCubbins (1998) asserted that on issues about which Americans know little or nothing, they often take cues from leaders they trust. Thus, if a policy is favored by a politician or political party whom a citizen supports, the citizen is inclined to favor the policy as well, and vice versa. We set out to gauge whether such "elite cues" would notably alter public support for these four policies that President Obama had created and President Trump reversed.

To do so, we estimated the parameters of ordinary least squares regressions predicting the number of the four policies that each respondent favored. We used variables to represent whether the respondent was told President Obama favored the policies, whether the respondent was told that President Trump reversed the policies, the respondents' liberal/conservative ideology, and demographics.

In fact, public support for these policies was generally not increased or decreased by endorsement from a politician of the respondent's party.

**Figure 21. Effects of presidential endorsement on policy support (2020)**

**Democrats**
- Pres. Obama mentioned
- Pres. Obama not mentioned
- Pres. Trump mentioned
- Pres. Trump not mentioned

**Republicans**
- Pres. Obama mentioned
- Pres. Obama not mentioned
- Pres. Trump mentioned
- Pres. Trump not mentioned

**Independents**
- Pres. Obama mentioned
- Pres. Obama not mentioned
- Pres. Trump mentioned
- Pres. Trump not mentioned
Among Democrats, mentioning President Obama's support of the policies did not increase policy support. Among Independents, neither mentioning President Obama's support nor mentioning President Trump's opposition to the policies altered support for them. Among Republicans, mentioning President Trump's opposition to the original policies did not decrease support either. Interestingly, the only apparent effect of cues appeared among Republicans—mentioning that President Obama had spearheaded the policies reduced support by 15 percentage points.

**EXPERT INSIGHT**

President Obama and President Trump are already widely associated with one or another view on each of these policies, so it is not surprising that mentioning them did not sway many respondents' views. I expect that previous research stating that Americans take cues from trusted leaders is correct in this case: as climate change has been a politically polarizing issue for several decades now, it's possible that these "elite cues" of leaders who stand or against climate action have been internalized long ago. An unnamed policy to roll back climate action is widely expected to come from President Trump, while a policy to curb emissions is anticipated to come from a Democratic president like Obama.

Americans may not vote solely on a single issue like the Paris Agreement, hand guns, or health care, yet all these issues have overwhelming majorities of support for apparently progressive reforms. However, policy movement requires bipartisan support and that may not be easy to achieve given the role of primaries in the electoral process, which tend to nominate people at the poles of the political spectrum.

Although the change of politics may not yet be quite imminent, I think that a shift in climate change policies will occur and will be sudden. (An example of when no change happens, until it seems to happen all at once due to bipartisan support, is rights pertaining to sexual orientation.) Without a doubt, many Republican legislators want to make progress on climate policy. Moreover, they see it as a growing political liability if their party does not make progress.

—Dallas Burtraw, RFF Darius Gaskins Senior Fellow

**EXPERT INSIGHT**

According to a previous installment of this report, 65% of Americans who report believing in climate change are extremely or very sure that the climate has been getting warmer and will get even warmer over the next 100 years (the latter percentage is 69%)—the highest percentage ever recorded by this survey. But the story is similar for the deniers, where a historically high percent (45%) are extremely or very sure that temperature will not increase over the next 100 years—and this after only 35% felt this way in 2018. My own work surveying populations in the United States, China, and Sweden in 2010 and 2019 finds increasing polarization as well and that the deniers are overwhelming Republicans in the US and right wing groups in Sweden (Carlsson et al. 2020). Interestingly, the Communist Party members in China are more bullish than others on the reality of climate change. Such increasing polarization can only make legislative and Executive actions more difficult in the United States and Sweden. However, Sweden has already been so active that they are well ahead of the United States in addressing this issue.

—Alan Krupnick, RFF Senior Fellow
Are the many policy preferences outlined in this report just talk, or do they inspire action?
Are the many policy preferences outlined in this report just talk, or do they inspire action? We turn to that question next and describe a test examining that possibility of these preferences affecting voting habits. Respondents were read a statement by a hypothetical candidate running for a seat in the US Senate and were asked whether hearing that statement would make the respondents more likely to vote for the candidate, less likely to vote for the candidate, or would have no impact.

One statement expressed “green views” that essentially parroted back to respondents the opinions expressed by most Americans as described above in this report:

"I believe that global warming has been happening for the past 100 years, mainly because we have been burning fossil fuels and putting out greenhouse gases. Now is the time for us to be using new forms of energy that are made in America and will be renewable forever. We can manufacture better cars that use less gasoline and build better appliances that use less electricity. We need to transform the outdated ways of generating energy into new ones that create jobs and entire industries, and stop the damage we’ve been doing to the environment."

The other statement was posed by a candidate committed to continuing to expand energy production of traditional fossil fuels like oil and coal:

"The science on global warming is a hoax and is an attempt to perpetrate a fraud on the American people. I don’t buy into the whole man-caused global warming mantra. We must spend no effort to deal with something that is not a problem at all. We should not invest in windmills and solar panels as alternative energy sources. Instead we should continue to focus on our traditional sources of energy: coal, oil, and natural gas. We should expand energy production in our country, including continuing to mine our coal and doing more drilling for oil here at home."

Nearly two-thirds of Americans (64%) report being more likely to vote for the candidate who expressed “green” views—nearly the same percentage as when the question was posed five years earlier in 2015 (66%). Democrats are significantly more likely to be driven to support a “green” candidate (87%) than Republicans (42%) and Independents (58%).
Comparatively, 67% of respondents said that they would be less likely to vote for someone who expressed "not-green" views. This is most prominent in Democrats (88%), followed by Independents (67%) and Republicans (37%). Only a quarter of Republicans report themselves more likely to support a candidate with an "not-green" platform (26%). By comparison, 5% of Democrats and 14% of Independents say they would be more likely to support the "not-green" candidate.

Hearing the candidate make a green statement made nearly two-thirds of Americans (64%) more likely to vote for them—nearly the same percentage as when the question was posed five years earlier in 2015 (66%). Only 13% of Americans were made less likely to vote for the candidate.

Conversely, hearing the candidate make a not-green statement made 67% of Americans less likely to vote for him or her, whereas only 14% were made more likely to vote for the candidate. Thus, taking a green position helps a candidate's prospects notably, and taking a not-green position hurts.

Because Republican citizens almost all vote for Republican candidates, and Democratic citizens almost all vote for Democratic candidates, the most impact of candidate statements in shaping election outcomes is among Independents. And among them, the same pattern appears that appeared among all Americans: taking a green position helped, and taking a not-green position hurt. This same pattern was even apparent among Republican respondents, though more weakly, and among Democrats.

Figure 22. Impact on voting of hearing a candidate make a “green” or “not-green” statement (2020)

Figure 23. Impact on voting of hearing a candidate make a “green” or “not-green” statement, by party (2020)
Taken together, these results point to climate change mitigation policies that may be pursued in the future with widespread—and bipartisan—public support. What's more, these results identify policy directions that, while perhaps plausible in theory and in practice, are not well received by the American public.

The survey results also provide evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic and associated economic upheaval did not reduce the public's support for mitigation policies, as shown by the steady levels of support from previous years. Additionally, the pandemic and economic downturn have not exacerbated perceptions of unintended economic side effects of mitigation efforts.

For decades, scholars and policymakers alike have presumed that economic growth and environmental protection are incompatible and that any efforts to grow the economy must, of necessity, take resources away from helping the environment. Such a presumption creates an “either the economy or the environment” mindset. This mindset has been reinforced by survey questions asking Americans, for example: “With which one of these statements about the environment and the economy do you most agree? Protection of the environment should be given priority, even at the risk of curbing economic growth. Or, Economic growth should be given priority, even if the environment suffers to some extent.”

If Americans do indeed naturally perceive this trade-off as inevitable, the current pandemic and economic crisis would presumably tilt them away from environmental protection. The present study refutes that notion resoundingly—compared to 2018 and before, we see no evidence in 2020 of reduction in the public's support for mitigation policies.

Widespread support for emissions reduction policies results from sociotropic thinking. Few people believe that taking such steps will hurt the national economy, their state's economy, or their personal finances, whereas large numbers of Americans believe such policies will help future generations substantially.

The evidence reported here that elite cues do not alter public attitudes toward policies validates the claim that these views are well-crystallized in the minds of Americans.

Contrary to the hopeless message of polarization of the issue along party lines, our research identified climate change mitigation measures that see favor from majorities, and sometimes vast majorities, of Americans. And although there are partisan differences in support for Obama-era policies that were later reversed by President Trump, a majority of Americans supported the underlying principles of major climate policies when divorced from politics. This suggests a significant opportunity for policymakers to introduce legislation in the future that could enjoy bipartisan support, as well as buy-in from American constituents.
Finally, we saw that the policy positions candidates take on this issue are likely to influence the votes of many Americans. Thus, policymakers and their challengers have opportunities to use these issues to help assemble the coalitions needed to accomplish electoral victories.
These results point to climate change mitigation policies that may be pursued in the future with widespread—and bipartisan—public support.
References


