

Factors Influencing Concern for Climate Change

Presenter Bryson King, Geography major

Mentored by Dr. Georgina DeWeese

After a steady growth in the acceptance of climate change, the U.S. public concern has polarized in recent decades. Environmentalists have been pushing for legislation to deal with climate change for years. Yet, for the American public, climate change is not a central issue and concern is constantly fluctuating. What's driving this change? The public's perception of climate change is complex and speculations on why the public's attitude might change ranges from personal experience to mass social psychology. Utilizing the online survey tool 'SurveyMonkey' I examined several factors that may account for any changes in the public's perception: 1) experience with extreme weather events, 2) level of education and 3) Scientific information. In addition to my survey, I analyzed whether media coverage and economic recession has a significant influence on the public's concern. A time-series analysis of the climate change threat index conducted by Robert J. Brulle, and J. Craig Jenkins reveals that media coverage has the largest effect on the level of public concern. Experience with extreme weather events has no effect on aggregate public opinion. An individual's educational achievement shows no correlation to an increase in overall concern while the promotion of scientific information has a minimal effect on public attitude. The implication would seem to be that while scientific advocacy has a minor effect on public concern, political mobilization and media coverage is the critical factor in influencing public opinion on climate change.