

Poll Finds Worldwide Agreement That Climate Change is a Threat

Publics Divide Over Whether Costly Steps Are Needed

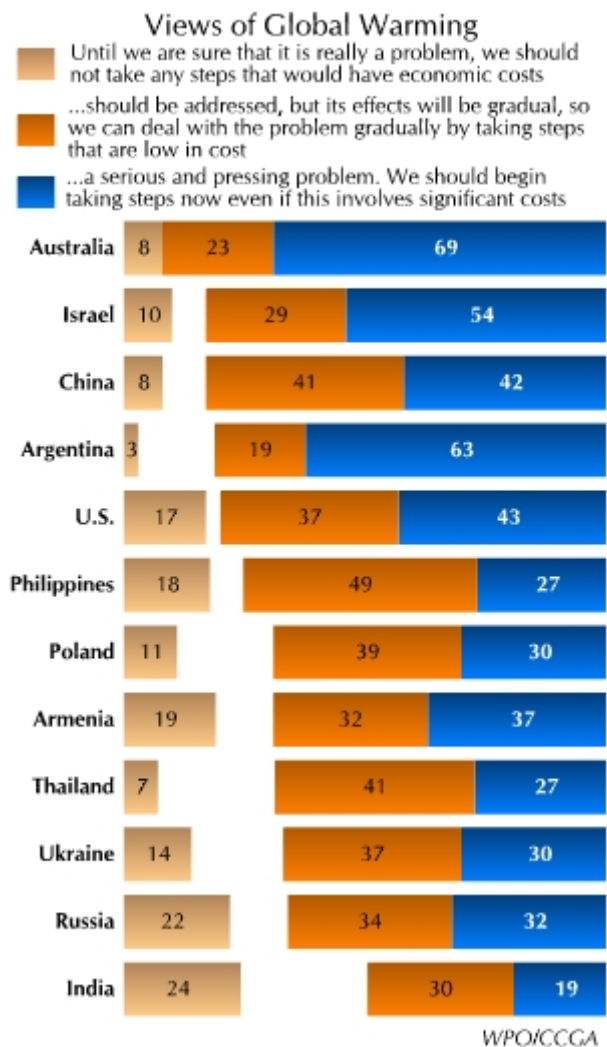
An international poll finds widespread agreement that climate change is a pressing problem. This majority, however, divides over whether the problem of global warming is urgent enough to require immediate, costly measures or whether more modest efforts are sufficient.

The survey was conducted by The Chicago Council on Global Affairs and WorldPublicOpinion.org, in cooperation with polling organizations around the world. It includes 17 countries-- China, India, the United States, Indonesia, Russia, Thailand, Ukraine, Poland, Iran, Mexico, South Korea, the Philippines, Australia, Argentina, Peru, Israel, Armenia—and the Palestinian territories. These represent more than 55 percent of the world population.

This is the first in a series of reports based on the findings of this survey that will analyze international attitudes on key international issues. Not all questions were asked in all countries.

Twelve countries were asked whether steps should be taken to address climate change and majorities in all but one of them favored action. The largest majority in favor of measures to combat global warming is found in Australia (92%).

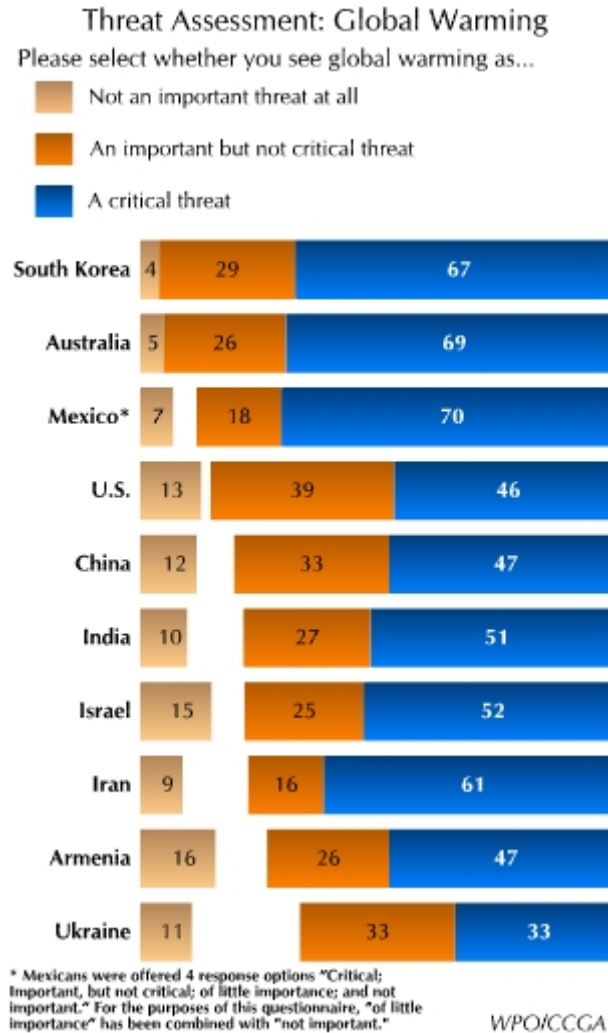
China and Israel are the next most likely (83%) to favor such measures. Eighty percent of respondents in the United States—the world’s largest emitter of greenhouse gases—also support taking such measures. The lowest level of support for taking steps to address the problem is found in India, nonetheless nearly half (49%) favor taking action while just 24 percent oppose it (26% do not answer).



In no country (out of 12 asked) does more than one in four endorse the statement, “Until we are sure that global warming is really a problem, we should not take any steps that would have economic costs.” The countries where the highest percentages favor delaying any action are India (24%), Russia (22%) and Armenia (19%). The countries with the lowest are Argentina (3%), and Thailand (7%).

A separate question, asked in 10 countries, allowed respondents to evaluate the threat posed by “global warming” in the next ten years. Strong majorities in all of the countries say such climate change is an important threat with only small minorities calling it unimportant. The highest percentages of climate change skeptics are found in Armenia (16%) and Israel (15%).

While majorities in all countries agree that the threat posed by global warming is at least important, there is less agreement over whether it is critical. Majorities call it critical in Mexico (70%), Australia (69%), South Korea (67%), Iran (61%), Israel (52%), and India (51%). Pluralities agree in Armenia (47%), China (47%) and the United States (46%). Ukraine is the only country divided about whether the problem is critical (33%) or important but not critical (33%).



Differences Over How Much to Spend

There is general agreement in 12 countries, as discussed above, that steps must be taken to address the problem of global warming, though there are differences over how much should be spent. In five countries, the most common view is: “Global warming is a serious and pressing problem. We should begin taking steps now even if this involves significant costs.” These include: Australia (69%), Argentina (63%), Israel (54%), the United States (43%), and Armenia (37%).

In another five countries, the most commonly held opinion is: “The problem of global warming should be addressed, but its effects will be gradual, so we can deal with the

problem gradually by taking steps that are low in cost.” The countries endorsing a go-slow, low-cost approach are the Philippines (49%), Thailand (41%), Poland (39%), Ukraine (37%) and India (30%).

In two countries, the public is evenly divided between those who favor less expensive measures and those who believe the problem merits action involving significant cost: China (low cost 41%, significant costs 42%) and Russia (low costs 34%, significant costs 32%).

In Peru, only those who indicated they were informed about climate change—39 percent of the total sample—were asked whether steps should be taken to address the problem. Among these respondents, 92 percent favor action, including 69 percent who favor taking steps even if they involve significant costs.

Support for Developing Nations

Some governments, such as China’s and India’s, have argued that developing countries should not be obliged to limit greenhouse gas emissions as they struggle to catch up with the highly industrialized economies of Western Europe and the United States. The developing world, such countries say, releases far less CO₂ and other greenhouse gasses per capita than do industrialized nations, whose cumulative emissions over the past century have caused the current problem.

Some have proposed that an equitable approach would be for developed nations to provide aid to developing nations if they would agree to impose some limits on their emissions. Publics in five developing countries were asked, “If the developed countries are willing to provide substantial aid, do you think the less-developed countries should make a commitment to limit their greenhouse gas emissions?” In all of five countries, majorities or pluralities say they should.

Most significantly, this includes a very large 79 percent majority of Chinese respondents and nearly half of those polled in India (48% agree, 29% disagree, 23% no answer). Majorities in Argentina (68%) and Armenia (63%) also concur. Results in Thailand are similar to those in India: about half of Thai respondents (49%) agree and only 9 percent disagree, though large numbers (43%) are uncertain.

China, India, Argentina, Armenia and Thailand are among the 169 countries that have ratified or accepted the Kyoto Protocol on climate change. They are not, however, considered industrialized countries under the treaty, which means they are not legally obliged to cut back emissions of CO₂ or other pollutants.

The survey also asked respondents in three developed countries whether developed countries should provide “substantial aid” to less-developed countries that “make a commitment to limit their greenhouse gas emissions.” Respondents in all three show a high level of support for providing such assistance: 64 percent of Americans, 84 percent of Poles, and 72 percent of Ukrainians.

The United States, Poland and Ukraine are all considered Annex 1 or industrialized countries under the Kyoto accord, which means they are obligated to reduce emissions. Poland and Ukraine have both ratified the Kyoto Protocol; the United States has signed but refused to ratify it.

General Concern about Global Environment

The survey also finds that world publics are very concerned about the global environment in general. Seven countries were asked to rate the importance of a number of foreign policy goals, including “improving the global environment.” Overwhelming majorities in all seven countries rate improving the global environment as at least an “important” goal and majorities in all call it a “very important” one: Australia, 99 percent (very 88%); South Korea, 96 percent (very 60%); the United States 93 percent (very 54%), Armenia 86 percent (very 54%), China, 85 percent (very 54%); Thailand, 83 percent (very 61%); and India, 79 percent (very 51%).

Respondents were also asked whether “international trade agreements should or should not be required to maintain minimum standards for protection of the environment.” In ten of the 11 countries where this question was asked, very large majorities believe such standards should be required while in one country views are divided. Those in favor of standards include developing countries, whose governments have sometimes resisted environmental regulations, arguing that implementing such costly rules would put their economies at a competitive disadvantage.

In Asia, the Chinese support environmental standards by an overwhelming 85 percent. Seven in ten Thais (69%) also favor such standards as do six in ten Indians (60%). Filipinos are evenly divided (48% in favor, 49% opposed).

In Latin America, an overwhelming majority of Argentines (90%) say such standards should be required. There is also strong support in Mexico (76%), where the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has required the government to enact certain environmental measures. In Eastern Europe, environmental measures are favored in Poland (90%), Ukraine (88%) and Armenia (82%), both of which suffer from severe air and water pollution as well as deforestation dating from the Soviet era.

Support for environmental standards is also strong among the relatively wealthy publics of Israel (93%) and the United States (91%).

Climate Change and Global Environment: Results by Country

Americas

ARGENTINA

Graciela Romer y Asociados, December 2006

Argentines are among those most concerned about environmental issues, including global warming. Four in five Argentines (82%) believe action is needed to address the problem of global warming. Most of these (63%) support taking steps now even if they involve “significant costs.” The remaining 19 percent say that because climate change is gradual, the response should also be gradual and “low in cost.” Asked whether developing countries should agree to limit greenhouse gas emissions provided they are given foreign aid, two-thirds of Argentine respondents (68%) say they should, though one-fourth (25%) decline to answer. Argentines (90%) are overwhelmingly in favor of including “minimum standards for protection of the environment” in international trade agreements.

MEXICO

Center for Economic Research and Teaching (CIDE)/Mexican Council of Foreign Relations (COMEXI), July 2006

Mexicans believe that climate change may endanger their country’s interests in the near future. Nearly nine in ten (88%) say global warming could pose a threat to their country’s “vital interests” in the next ten years. Of these 70 percent—the highest percentage among the ten countries polled—say they consider it a “critical threat.” Only 7 percent say global warming is “not an important threat at all.” There is also broad support in Mexico for addressing environmental concerns in negotiations over international trade. More than three-quarters (76%) say that trade agreements should include “minimum standards for the protection of the environment.”

PERU

Grupo de Opinión Pública, Universidad de Lima, November 2006

In Peru, sixty-one percent of those polled said they were not informed about the issue of global warming. Only the 39 percent who indicated they were aware of the issue were asked what should be done about it. Of these, 92 percent favor taking action to deal with global warming, including 69 percent who say they support doing something “now even if this involves significant costs.” The other 23 percent say that because climate change will occur gradually only gradual, low-cost measures are needed. Only 6 percent of those who say they are informed about the issue believe that nothing involving economic costs should be done “until we are sure that it is really a problem.”

UNITED STATES

Chicago Council on Global Affairs, July 2006

A strong majority of Americans thinks global warming is a problem and a plurality believes that costly methods are needed to address it. Four in five Americans (80%) say climate change requires action. Of these 43 percent think immediate steps should be taken “even if this involves significant costs,” while 37 percent prefer a less costly, go-slow approach. Only 17 percent say expensive measures should be avoided “until we are sure that global warming is really a problem.” A robust majority (85%) of Americans see global warming as a possible threat to the United States in the next 10 years. Forty-six percent say it could be a critical threat. Americans also tend to support foreign aid for developing countries that agree to limit greenhouse gas emissions: 64 percent say developed countries should be ready to give “substantial aid;” 32 percent say they should not. Americans also believe nearly unanimously that improving the global environment should be a U.S. foreign policy goal. Ninety-three percent say it should be an important goal, including 54 percent who call it very important. Nearly all Americans also think international trade agreements should address environmental concerns: 91 percent feel that “minimum standards” for environmental protection should be included in trade agreements.

Asia/Pacific

AUSTRALIA

Lowy Institute, July 2006

Australians are the most likely among the 13 countries asked to favor taking steps to deal with the problem of global warming. Nine in ten Australians (92%) agree that climate change requires action, including 69 percent who support immediate steps “even if this involves significant costs.” Another 23 percent say the effects of climate change will be gradual and that it can be dealt with “by taking steps that are low in cost.” Australians also believe overwhelmingly (95%) that global warming could threaten Australia’s vital interests in the next decade. This includes more than two-thirds (69%) who say it constitutes a “critical threat.” Unsurprisingly, given what they believe to be the seriousness of the issue, Australians almost unanimously (99%) say that improving the global environment should be an important foreign policy goal, including 88 percent who consider it “very important.”

CHINA

Chicago Council on Global Affairs, July 2006

The Chinese public is among the most convinced that global warming needs to be addressed. They are divided, however, about whether the problem requires high- or low-cost remedies. Eighty-three percent say steps should be taken to address global warming. Of these, 42 percent believe it is a “serious and pressing problem” that demands immediate action “even if this involves significant costs” and 41 percent say the effects will be gradual and should be dealt with through “steps that are low in cost.” Most Chinese (80%) think global warming could be an important threat to their country’s “vital interests” in the next ten years. Nearly half consider it a “critical threat.” The Chinese public believes developing countries should agree to limit carbon emissions in return for

foreign assistance. Four in five Chinese respondents (79%) say that if developed countries are willing to provide aid, “less-developed countries should make a commitment to limit greenhouse gas emissions.” Large majorities of Chinese respondents think “improving the global environment” should be an important goal of foreign policy (85%) and that international trade agreements should include “minimum standards for the protection of the environment (85%).

INDIA

Chicago Council on Global Affairs, July 2006

Indians are the most skeptical about the need for action against global warming among the nine publics polled on this question. Only half (49%) favor taking steps to address the issue and of these only 19 percent say the problem is pressing enough to merit immediate, costly measures. The other 30 percent believe that because the effects of global warming will be gradual, only gradual, low-cost steps are needed. A quarter (24%) say costly action should be avoided “until we are sure that it is really a problem.” Another quarter (26%) declined to answer. Nonetheless, more than three-quarters of Indian respondents (78%) say that global warming could threaten their country’s “vital interests” within the next decade. Half of them (51%) believe it could become a “critical threat.” Indians also tend to favor requiring developing nations to limit greenhouse gas emissions provided developed countries offer foreign assistance: 48 percent say they would support such a deal while only 29 percent would not. Asked more generally whether they think “improving the global environment” should be an important foreign policy goal, 79 percent say it should, including 51 percent who say it should be very important. A majority of Indians (60%) also believe that international trade agreements should include “minimum standards for protection of the environment,” though a significant number (28%) believes such standards should not be required.

PHILIPPINES

Social Weather Station, November 2006

Most Filipinos are convinced that global warming should be dealt with. Three-quarters (76%) of those polled in the Philippines say steps need to be taken to address the problem. Of these 49 percent consider climate change to be gradual, requiring only gradual, low-cost measures and 27 percent call it a “serious and pressing problem” that should be addressed “now even if this involves significant costs.” Only 18 percent feel no steps having economic costs should be taken “until we are sure it is really a problem.” Filipinos, however, are divided about whether environmental issues should be included in international trade negotiations (an unusual position as most publics strongly endorse this idea): 49 percent believe “minimum standards for protection of the environment” should not be part of trade pacts and 48 percent think they should.

SOUTH KOREA

East Asia Institute, July 2006

South Koreans are overwhelmingly convinced that global warming could become a threat to their country's vital interests in the next decade. Nearly all respondents (96%)—the highest percentage among the ten publics asked this question—say they consider climate change an important threat and two-thirds (67%) call it a critical threat. South Koreans are also nearly unanimous in their belief that “improving the global environment” should be one of their country's foreign policy goals. Ninety-six percent say this should be an important goal, including (60%) who say it should be very important.

THAILAND

ABAC Poll Research Center, September 2006

A majority of Thais believe that global warming is a problem that needs to be addressed. Nearly seven in ten (68%) say measures should be taken to deal with climate change. Of these, 41 percent consider global warming to be a gradual problem requiring only “steps that are low in cost.” The other 27 percent think climate change is a “serious and pressing problem” that needs to be addressed quickly “even if this involves significant costs.” A large percentage of respondents (24%), however, declined to answer. About half of those polled in Thailand (49%) say they would favor a deal requiring developing nations to limit carbon emissions in return for foreign aid; only 9 percent say developing nations should not make such a commitment. Nearly half (43%), however, declined to answer. Thais believe overwhelmingly (83%) that “improving the global environment” should be one of their government's foreign policy goals, including 61 percent who say it should be a “very important” goal. Seven in ten Thais (69%) say international trade agreements should include minimum standards for protecting the environment.

Middle East

IRAN

WorldPublicOpinion.org, December 2006

Most Iranians believe global warming could threaten their country's vital interests in the near future. More than three-quarters (77%) say that global warming will be a threat to Iran in the next 10 years, including a majority (61%) who say it represents a “critical threat.” Only a small minority (9%) consider climate change to be unimportant.

ISRAEL

Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research, November 2006

Israelis are among the publics most willing to take steps to address the problem of global warming. An overwhelming majority of Israelis (83%) favor measures to deal with climate change. Given three options, a modest majority (54%) agrees that global warming is a “serious and pressing problem” that requires immediate action “even if this involves significant costs.” An additional 29 percent think that the effects of climate change “will be gradual” and that they can be dealt with by “taking steps that are low in cost.” Only 10 percent favor delaying steps that would have economic costs “until we are sure that global warming is really a problem.” Most Israelis (77%) think global warming

could pose a threat to their national interests over the next decade, including 52 percent who see it as a “critical threat.” Israelis also believe trade talks should address environmental issues: More than nine in ten (93%) say international trade agreements should include “minimum standards for protection of the environment.”

Europe

ARMENIA

Armenian Center for National and International Studies, December 2006

Majorities in Armenia favor taking steps to address climate change and believe that the problem could put their national interests at risk. Seven in ten Armenians (69%) say something should be done to deal with global warming but they are divided about how much to spend. Thirty-seven percent consider climate change “serious and pressing” requiring prompt action “even if this involves significant costs.” Nearly as many (32%), however, say the problem is gradual and should be dealt with by “taking steps that are low in cost.” About one in five (19%) thinks that action should be postponed “until we are sure that global warming is really a problem.” Three-quarters of those polled in Armenia say that climate change could threaten their “vital interests” within the next ten years. Of these, 47 percent consider this threat to be “critical.” A majority of Armenians (63%) believe that developed countries should provide aid to less developed countries that agree to limit greenhouse gas emissions, though 16 percent are unsure. Most Armenians (86%) think “improving the global environment” should be an important foreign policy goal and more than half (54%) think it should be “very important.”

POLAND

CBOS Public Opinion Research Center, September 2006

A majority of Poles agree that global warming is a real problem though they disagree about how to deal with it. Sixty-nine percent say something should be done about climate change. Of those 39 percent believe that its effects will only be felt gradually and that it should therefore be dealt with over time through measures that are low in cost. The remaining 30 percent feel that the issue is more urgent and requires action “even if this involves significant costs.” Only 11 percent believe in postponing any measures “until we are sure global warming is really a problem.” Most Poles (84%) think that if less developed countries make a commitment to limit their greenhouse gas emissions, developed countries should provide “substantial aid.” An overwhelming majority (90%) says international trade agreements should include “minimum standards for protection of the environment.”

RUSSIA

Levada Center, September 2006

A majority of Russians consider global warming a problem that must be addressed, though they are divided over how much to spend. Two-thirds of those polled (66%) believe something should be done about climate change. Of these, 34 percent say that the

issue should be addressed gradually with steps that are low in cost. The other 32 percent think the problem is “pressing” and that it requires immediate action even this “involves significant costs.” A sizeable minority (22%), however, says action on climate change should be postponed until “we are sure that it is really a problem.” Among the twelve countries polled, only Indians are more skeptical than Russians on the need for action.

UKRAINE

Kiev International Institute of Sociology, September 2006

Majorities in Ukraine believe that global warming is real and that it could threaten their national interests. Sixty-seven percent of the Ukrainians polled say climate change needs to be addressed, though they disagree about its urgency. Thirty-seven percent of these respondents believe global warming will occur gradually and that therefore measures should be implemented over time and at relatively low cost. The other 30 percent see the problem as “serious and pressing” and think immediate steps are necessary even if they involve “significant costs.” Only 14 percent believe no costs should be incurred until “we are sure that it is really a problem.” Two-thirds of Ukrainians (66%) think global warming could threaten their national interests in the next decade. Half of these (33%) see climate change as a “critical threat” and half (33%) as an “important but not critical” threat. Eleven percent believe it is not an important threat at all and about a quarter (23%) are unsure. Asked whether developed countries should provide aid to less developed countries that promise to limit greenhouse gas emissions, seventy-two percent of Ukrainian respondents agree and only 4 percent disagree. Again, however, many respondents (24%) are unsure. Most Ukrainians (88%) think that international trade agreements should include “minimum standards for protection of the environment.”