

Fewer Americans Believe in Global Warming, Poll Shows

By Juliet Eilperin

Wednesday, Nov 25, 2009

The percentage of Americans who believe global warming is happening has dipped from 80 to 72 percent in the past year, according to a new Washington Post-ABC News poll, even as a majority still support a national cap on greenhouse gas emissions.

The poll's findings -- which also show that 55 percent of respondents think the United States should curb its carbon output even if major developing nations such as China and India do less -- suggest increasing political polarization around the issue, just as the Obama administration and congressional Democrats are intensifying efforts to pass climate legislation and broker an international global warming pact.

The increase in climate skepticism is driven largely by a shift within the GOP. Since its peak 3 1/2 years ago, belief that climate change is happening is down sharply among Republicans -- 76 to 54 percent -- and independents -- 86 to 71 percent. It dipped more modestly among Democrats, from 92 to 86 percent. A majority of respondents still support legislation to cap emissions and trade pollution allowances, by 53 to 42 percent.

Amanda Feinberg, a retired administrative assistant living in South Williamsport, Pa., said she became disenchanted with the idea of human-caused global warming when former vice president Al Gore launched a public awareness campaign with his documentary, "An Inconvenient Truth."

"He just seemed a little radical in his views," said Feinberg, a Republican. "I don't deny it's happening, I just think it's just an evolution of nature."

Lisa Woolcott, another Republican poll respondent, said she doesn't think that burning fossil fuels is "causing all the global warming," adding: "We can't control what happens in the atmosphere." But Woolcott, a physician's assistant who lives in Kansas City, Kan., said she supports the idea of a bill that would cap the nation's greenhouse gas emissions and doesn't think the United States should predicate its actions on what other nations do. "We need to do what's best for us," she said. "I don't think we should back down."

Even proponents of action on climate change, such as Democratic pollster Mark Mellman, who has conducted polls on the issue for the American Security Project and the Pew Charitable Trusts, say they have detected a recent fraying of bipartisanship.

"It's a sad state of affairs when science becomes subject to partisan politics," Mellman said. "It can only be attributed to the sense that this issue has become part of a political battle."

This schism poses a challenge for Democratic leaders, who are pushing for more stringent controls on greenhouse gases nationwide and as part of an international agreement that will be discussed when negotiators meet in Copenhagen next month. Both Mellman and Carl Pope, executive director of the Sierra Club, noted that most Americans still support taking action on

climate change.

Still, even respondents such as Woolcott who favored a cap-and-trade bill questioned whether Americans would support a policy that could raise energy prices in the short term, given the current state of the economy.

"Honestly, I don't think the public's going to back it," she said. "Right now it's all they can do to pay their electric bill and put gas in their cars. You're asking me right now, and it's like, let's get through Thanksgiving and Christmas."

David Winston, who has polled for the House and Senate GOP leadership on the issue, said it is less a question of whether Americans think they have contributed to climate change. "Where there's disagreement is how immediate and huge is the threat," he said. As a result, "the majority of people view it as an economic issue."

Polling director Jon Cohen and polling analyst Jennifer Agiesta contributed to this report.