

International Polls Find Robust Global Support For Increased Efforts to Address Climate Change

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An analysis by WorldPublicOpinion.org of recent international polls reveals strong support around the world for decisive action to reduce the emission of climate-changing gases.

(UN photo)

Representatives from nearly 190 countries are gathered on the Indonesian island of Bali this week and next for a UN conference that will launch negotiations for a treaty to replace the Kyoto Protocol, which expires in 2012. On the agenda is how to forge new international agreements designed to reduce or mitigate green-house gas emissions.

A new analysis by WorldPublicOpinion.org of 11 recent international polls conducted around the world shows widespread and growing concern about climate change. Large majorities believe that human activity causes climate change and favor policies designed to reduce emissions.

In most countries, majorities see an urgent need for significant action. For example, a recent poll for the BBC by GlobeScan and the Program for International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) found that majorities in 15 out of 21 countries felt that it was necessary to take "major steps, starting very soon" to address climate change. In the other six countries polled, opinion was divided over whether "major" or "modest steps" were needed. Only small minorities thought no steps were necessary.

"Leaders in Bali do not need to worry that they will face a difficult job of selling their general publics on the need for action," said Steven Kull, director of WorldPublicOpinion.org. "Rather, publics around the world are signaling that they are ready to do more than their own governments have been asking of them."

Publics say they would support policies that could affect their pocketbooks and lifestyles. To encourage energy conservation, majorities in most countries believe that it will be necessary to increase the cost of energy that contributes to climate change. There is also widespread support for tax incentives to encourage the development of renewable energy and for raising automobile fuel efficiency standards, even if this increases the cost of buying a new car.

Publics also offered some direction regarding the current impasse between some of the developed and developing countries over the question of whether developing countries have a responsibility to limit their emissions given that developed countries produce more on a per capita basis. Among the publics of developed and developing countries there is support for a deal whereby the developing countries would seek to limit their greenhouse gas emissions and, in exchange, the developed countries should provide them aid.

The analysis included polls from the BBC/GlobeScan/PIPA, the Pew Research Center, GlobeScan, WorldPublicOpinion.org/Chicago Council on Global Affairs, the German Marshall Fund, and Eurobarometer.

Detailed Findings

Whether Climate Change is a Problem or Threat

In every international poll, majorities in all countries polled say that global warming is a problem or a threat. Only very small minorities say it is not a problem.

In a 2007 [Pew](#) poll, majorities in all 37 countries asked agreed that “global warming” is as a serious problem. Majorities in 25 and pluralities in 6 rated the problem as “very serious.” With just a few exceptions the percentage saying that the problem is “not too serious” fell under one in five. The two largest producers of greenhouse gasses—the United States and China—had large majorities saying the problem was serious but relatively lower numbers saying that it was very serious. Seventy-five percent of Americans rated the problem as serious with 47 percent rating it very serious. In China, 88 percent considered global warming a very serious problem, while 42 percent called it very serious. [1]

A 2006 [GlobeScan](#) poll of 30 countries also found majorities in every country saying that “Climate change or global warming, due to the Greenhouse Effect” is a problem. In 24 countries the problem was seen as “very serious” by a majority (23 countries) or a plurality (1). On average, across all countries polled, 65 percent rated the problem as very serious. Similar to the Pew poll, 80 percent of the Chinese rated the problem as serious, with 39 percent calling it very serious. Eighty percent of Americans said the problem was serious, with 49 percent calling it very serious. [2]

A 2007 [WorldPublicOpinion.org/Chicago Council on Global Affairs](#) (CCGA) poll asked respondents in 10 countries to evaluate the threat posed by “global warming” in the next 10 years. In six of the ten countries majorities called it a critical threat, as did pluralities in another three. Only in Ukraine was the public divided about whether the threat was “critical” (33%) or “important but not critical” (33%). Pluralities saw the threat as critical in China (47%-33% important) and the United States (46%-39% important). Only small minorities in all countries called it unimportant. [3]

The [German Marshall Fund](#) (GMF) in 2006 asked the same question in 12 European countries (including Turkey) and the United States, though it used the term “extremely important” to describe the threat rather than “critical.” Results in the United States were almost exactly the same. In the twelve European countries, a larger number—56 percent on average—labeled the threat extremely important while another 34 percent labeled it important. [4]

In 2007 [GMF](#) found majorities in 12 European countries plus the United States believed they would probably “be personally affected by the effects of global warming.” On average across the 12 European countries, 85 percent said it was likely (very 54%, somewhat 31%); and in no country did less than 77 percent say this. Slightly fewer believed this in the United States; 70 percent said it was likely (very 43%, somewhat 27%). [5]

Concern about climate change appears to be growing.

GlobeScan surveys have documented the world’s increasing concern about climate change. In polls conducted across 16 countries in [2006 and 2003](#), the percentages calling climate change/global warming a “very serious” problem increased an average of 16 points. In only one country was there a significant decline in the perceived severity of the problem of climate change.

GMF has also found signs of increasing concern. In 10 European countries polled in [2005 and 2007](#), the average percentage saying that global warming is an extremely important threat went up 5 points (from 51% to 56%). In the United States, this number went up 5 points (from 41% to 46%).

In most countries, majorities say that they have heard a significant amount about climate change. Not surprisingly, willingness to take action in regard to climate change rises with greater awareness.

A Fall 2007 [BBC/GlobeScan/Program on International Policy Attitudes](#) (PIPA) 21-country poll found that majorities in 16 countries said they had heard at least something about the issue. This included many developing countries (China 72%, Brazil 78%, Turkey 72%, Mexico 73%, and Philippines 63%). On average across all countries polled, seven in 10 had heard a great deal (35%) or some (35%). In only a few countries did large numbers say that they had heard little or nothing, including Indonesia (65%), Kenya (53%), and Nigeria (48%). Curiously, a majority of Russians (64%) also said they had heard little or nothing about climate change. [\[6\]](#)

A 2006 [Pew](#) poll found that overall seven in ten respondents (69%) in the 15 countries polled had heard of global warming. Only in four countries did majorities say they had “never heard of it” (Egypt 51%, Indonesia 57%, Pakistan 60%, and Nigeria 54%). [\[7\]](#)

Not surprisingly, those who have heard more about climate change are more willing to take action. In the Fall 2007 [BBC/GlobeScan/PIPA](#) poll, among those who indicated they had heard nothing at all about global warming, only 47 percent supported taking significant measures. That rose to 56 percent among those who said they had not heard very much, 66 percent among those who had heard some, and fully 74 percent among respondents who had heard “a great deal.”

Perception of Role of Human Activity

Large majorities perceive climate change to be caused by human activity.

A Fall 2007 [BBC/GlobeScan/PIPA](#) poll found that in 20 out of 21 countries polled, two-thirds or more believed that “human activity, including industry and transportation, [is] a significant cause of climate change.” On average eight in 10 held this view. In no country did more than one in three respondents disagree with this view and in all except one country, two-thirds or more endorsed it. The one exception was India where a plurality (47%) attributed climate change to human activity, 21 percent disagreed, and 33 percent did not answer. [\[8\]](#)

A 2006 [BBC/GlobeScan/PIPA](#) poll found that robust majorities in all 19 countries polled expressed concern that “the way the world produces and uses energy is causing environmental problems, including climate change.” Overall, an average of 81 percent expressed concern about this, with 47 percent saying they were very concerned. The highest levels of concern were found in Australia (94%, 69% very), Great Britain (93%, 66% very), Canada (91%, 62% very), and Italy (91%, 60% very); the lowest in Poland (58%, 17% very), India (61%, 41% very), and Russia (66%, 20% very). [\[9\]](#)

Readiness to Take Action

Large majorities around the world support taking action to address the problem of global warming. More often than not majorities favor taking major steps, urgently.

A Fall 2007 [BBC/GlobeScan/PIPA](#) poll asked respondents in 21 countries whether it was necessary to address climate change by taking: 1) “major steps starting very soon;” 2) “modest steps over the coming years;” or whether it was 3) “not necessary to take any steps.”

In no country did a majority say that no steps were necessary and on average less than one in 10 selected this option. In 15 of the 21 countries, majorities favored taking major steps promptly, with the largest majorities found in Spain (91%), Italy (86%) and France (85%). A large majority also favored quick action in China (70%) as did a majority in the United States (59%).

Views were more mixed in six of the countries polled. Germans leaned in favor of major steps (50%) rather than more modest measures (45%), as did Nigerians (50% to 27%). Egyptians were divided (43% to 43%) as were Russians (44% modest to 43% major). Indians—whose government opposes emissions caps—favored major steps over modest ones by 37 percent to 26 percent. Only 12 percent said no steps were necessary, though large numbers did not answer (26%). [10]

A 2007 WorldPublicOpinion.org/CCGA poll asked respondents in thirteen countries a similar question. In no country did 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." In six countries, the most common view was that "Global warming is a serious and pressing problem. We should begin taking steps now even if this involves significant costs." These included France (78%), Australia (69%), Argentina (63%), Israel (54%), the United States (43%), and Armenia (37%). Another five countries tended to believe that "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 Philippines (49%), Thailand (41%), Poland (39%), Ukraine (37%) and India (30%). In two countries, the public was evenly divided between those who favored less expensive measures and those wanted action even at significant cost: China (low cost 41%, significant costs 42%) and Russia (low cost 34%, significant costs 32%). [11]

A 2007 Eurobarometer poll of 30 European countries found that very large majorities in every country said that the EU needed to deal with global warming; in 22 of them, majorities said the problem required very urgent action. On average 59 percent in all countries polled said it should be dealt with very urgently. The same poll found that large majorities said "The European Union should urgently put new policies in place to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 20% by 2020." [12]

Large majorities believe that it will be necessary for people to change their lifestyle in order to reduce their production of climate changing gasses.

A Fall 2007 BBC/GlobeScan/PIPA poll asked respondents in 21 countries whether it would be necessary for individuals "to make changes in their life style and behavior in order to reduce the amount of climate changing gases they produce." In all countries polled, large majorities agreed with this statement: 83 percent on average said this would be necessary and 46 percent said it would "definitely" be necessary. The countries with the largest percentages saying definitely necessary were Spain (68%), Mexico (64%), Canada (63%), Italy (62%), and China (59%). The countries with the largest numbers saying that such lifestyle changes would not be necessary were Nigeria (33%), Egypt (29%), Kenya (25%), the United States (19%), and India (18%). [13]

To motivate changes in energy use, majorities in most countries believe that it will be necessary to increase the cost of energy that causes climate change. The idea of raising taxes on such forms of energy meets with mixed responses, however if the revenues of such a tax are earmarked to address the problem of climate change, or are offset with tax reductions, support becomes very high.

A Fall 2007 BBC/GlobeScan/PIPA polled asked respondents whether it would be necessary to "increase the cost of the types of energy that most cause climate change, such as coal and oil, in order to encourage individuals and industry to use less." In 14 out of 21 countries, a majority said that it would be necessary and a plurality did so in India (49% to 28%). On

average 61 percent supported this idea. Interestingly, the survey found the highest level of support in China (83%) followed by Australia (81%), Chile (79%), Great Britain (77%), Germany (70%), and the United States (65%). Four countries were divided and just two leaned against the idea—Nigeria (47 to 52%) and Russia (35 to 50%). There were no countries where a clear majority said price increases would not be necessary. [14]

Reactions were more mixed to the question of whether taxes should be increased on the energy sources that contribute to climate change so as to encourage people and industry to use less. In only nine of the 21 countries did a majority or plurality favor such an energy tax increase. Six countries were divided, and six opposed. On average in all countries polled, 50 percent favored raising taxes and 44 percent opposed it. The Chinese had the largest majority—85 percent—saying they would support raising taxes on the fuels that contribute most to climate change. The proportion of Chinese respondents favoring higher fuel taxes was 24 points greater than the next largest majorities in Australia and Chile (61% in both). Majorities were opposed to higher fuel taxes in Italy (62%), South Korea (59%), the Philippines (58%), Brazil (55%), Egypt (52%), and the United States (51%).

However attitudes shifted sharply under certain conditions. Half of those who did not initially support tax increases were asked whether they would do so if the revenues were “devoted only to increasing energy efficiency and developing energy sources that do not produce climate change.” [15] Another half were asked if they would do so if “your other taxes were reduced by the same amount, keeping your total taxes at the current level.” [16] Very large numbers shifted their position under these conditions. Adding those who initially favored increases with those who favored them under these conditions, majorities in every country support higher energy taxes to reduce consumption. In every country, this measure is supported by a ratio of at least two to one. On average 77 percent favor the measure if revenues were earmarked and 76 percent would if the increase were offset.

To reduce reliance on oil and coal large majorities favor creating tax incentives to encourage alternative energy sources and requiring automakers to increase fuel efficiency. Views are more mixed on building more nuclear power plants.

A 2006 [BBC/GlobeScan/PIPA](#) poll of 19 countries asked respondents whether they favored a number of methods for reducing reliance on oil and coal, without specifically mentioning the purpose. The most popular of the four proposed measures was “creating tax incentives that would encourage the development and use of alternative energy sources, such as solar or wind power.” Majorities in all 19 countries—on average 80 percent—would support such incentives. In nine of the countries majorities favored them strongly (overall average 50 percent). [17]

The next most popular measure was to require “auto makers to increase fuel efficiency, even if this means the price of cars would go up.” This was supported by majorities in 17 of the 19 countries (overall average 67%). Only Australians (59%) supported this idea strongly, however. The next highest support was among Americans (50%). On average among all of those polled, 34 percent strongly supported this measure. [18]

Respondents were divided about “building new nuclear power plants, to reduce reliance on oil and coal.” It received majority support in just 10 countries (on average 49 percent with 44 percent opposed). [19] The least popular measure was “increasing energy taxes to encourage conservation,” which received majority support in just four countries (on average 37 percent, with 59 percent opposed). [20]

Role of Developing Countries

Majorities in developing as well as developed countries think that developing countries have a responsibility to limit their emissions in an effort to deal with climate change.

A Fall 2007 [BBC/GlobeScan/PIPA](#) poll asked respondents about two positions on dealing with global warming. The first position was one taken by the government of many developing countries: "Because countries that are less wealthy produce relatively low emissions per person, they should not be expected to limit their emissions of climate changing gasses." The second was one advocated by governments of some developed nations: "Because total emissions from less-wealthy countries are substantial and growing these countries should limit their emissions of climate changing gasses." In 18 of the 21 countries polled, respondents tended to agree that less-wealthy countries should limit emissions (overall average 59%). Just three countries opted instead for the position that less wealthy countries should not be expected to limit emissions: Egypt (53%), Nigeria (50%), and Italy (49%). Those favoring limits on the emissions of less-wealthy countries included some publics whose governments have opposed such agreements: a resounding 68 percent majority in China and a plurality of Indians (33% to 24%), though many Indians (43%) do not have an opinion. This was also the dominant view in Mexico (75%), Kenya (64%), Brazil (63%), Indonesia (54%), Philippines (49%), and Turkey (41%). [\[21\]](#)

Among most countries—developed and developing—there is a consensus that the developing countries should seek to limit their greenhouse gas emissions and, in exchange, the developed countries should provide them with aid.

A Fall 2007 [BBC/GlobeScan/PIPA](#) poll asked 21 countries about a possible deal in which "wealthy countries agree to provide less-wealthy countries with financial assistance and technology, while less-wealthy countries agree to limit their emissions of climate changing gases along with wealthy countries." In 19 countries a majority favored this idea and in two a plurality did so. All of the wealthy countries polled endorsed the idea by very large margins, ranging from 70 percent in the United States to 84 percent in Canada and Australia, as did robust majorities in all of the developing countries polled, including China (90%). The two countries with the least enthusiasm were Nigeria (50% favor, 46% oppose) and India (47% favor, 19% oppose). [\[22\]](#)

The 2007 [WorldPublicOpinion.org/CCGA](#) poll asked publics in five developing countries: "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 five, majorities or pluralities said they should. Most significantly, this included a very large 79 percent majority of Chinese respondents and nearly half of those polled in India (48% agree, 29% disagree, 23% no answer). 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 showed a high level of support including Americans (64%), Poles (84%), and Ukrainians (72%). [\[23\]](#)

US Policy/Role

Global publics largely disapprove of how the United States is handling the problem of climate change. In general, the United States is most widely seen as the country having the most negative effect on the world's environment, followed by China.

A Winter 2007 [BBC/GlobeScan/PIPA](#) poll of 25 countries found that majorities or pluralities in 19 disapproved of how the United States was handling global warming or climate change. On average, 56 percent disapproved and only 27 percent approved. Four European allies (France 86%, Germany 84%, Great Britain 79%, and Portugal 79%) showed the highest level of disapproval. A majority of Americans also disapproved (54%). In only three countries did majorities approve of US policies on climate change: Nigeria (67%), the Philippines (60%) and Kenya (56%). [\[24\]](#)

A 2007 [Pew](#) poll asked publics in 37 countries which country is "hurting the world's

environment the most." In all but three countries, the United States was the country named by the largest number of respondents, followed by China. [\[25\]](#)