

Trends in Public Attitudes on Global Warming

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Given the movement of the US Congress towards passing global warming related legislation and the recent Copenhagen Conference, it is crucial to gauge the public's interest, understanding and support for such issues. MIT conducted a national survey in the fall of 2009 aimed at determining public concern for environmental issues, the current level of awareness of mitigation technologies and the overall willingness for action and to pay for global warming mitigation. The 2009 survey was the third in a series of polls conducted by MIT with these ends in mind. Essentially the same survey questionnaire was used in the 2003, 2006 and 2009 polls allowing for the direct comparisons of results.

Our 2009 survey showed a three-fold increase in the recognition of Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS). It also showed that the urgency the public displayed in previous surveys appears to have somewhat dissipated when it comes to taking action on global warming. For the first time in our surveys, global warming has become a politicized topic with Democrats consistently seeing as it a more serious issue and having a higher willingness to pay to solve it than either Republicans or Independents.

Carbon Capture and Storage

Participants were asked to if they had heard of or read about (in the last year) any of a list of technologies all of which could be used in some capacity to mitigate global warming. Recognition of CCS made a large increase, from 4% in 2003, 5% in 2006 to

17% in 2009. This can be compared to nuclear energy, thought of as a very recognized technology, hovering around 57%. In examining the demographics of the population that had heard about CCS, it is skewed to those with high incomes (over \$100,000 dollars) or and a high education level (at least a bachelors degree).

Name recognition does not translate into support for the technology. When prompting to select which technologies they would use to solve global warming, CCS ranked among the lowest with iron fertilization and nuclear energy. For legislation to be passed or even introduced with serious funding for CCS, the public must be better informed of its risk, cost and benefits.

Urgency and Willingness to Pay

A number of questions dealt with the issue of the severity of global warming, how soon should something be done about it and how much would you be willing to pay to make that something happen. Overall, there has been a retreat in the urgency to solve global warming. When asked to rank the most important issues facing the US today, the economy, health care and unemployment dominated while the environment ranked 12th on the list of 22 choices (down from 10th 3 three years ago).

The public appears to have remained consistent in their belief that some action should be taken, however fewer believe that immediate action be taken. The number who think the government should be doing more has dropped from 71% in 2006 to 60% in 2009. Additionally, in the past three years the number of people who believe concern for global warming is unwarranted has almost doubled going from six to eleven percent.

The public's willingness to pay in order to solve global warming has also

decreased since 2006 and now is closer to the levels recorded in 2003. For example, at ten dollars per month, 60% of respondents were willing to pay in 2006 as compared with 53% in 2003 and most recently 51% in 2009. More Democrats were willing to pay at each price interval from five dollars up through 100 dollars. The decreasing exponential pattern from 2003 and 2006 has stayed consistent.

International Treaty

In 2003, survey participants were asked how they felt on the US decision not to join the Kyoto Protocol. At that time, the public was relatively indecisive, with 50% choosing not to answer the question, while 30% said should have joined and 20% said should not have joined. Since that time, opinions on joining international treaties have shifted substantially. In 2009, forty nine percent of those polled believed that we should join with other nations to set emission standards with only 32 percent abstaining from the question. Overwhelmingly, Democrats support joining more than any other demographic.

Survey supported by MIT Carbon Sequestration Initiative. Surveys conducted by Knowledge Networks. Additional information available at:
<http://sequestration.mit.edu/research/survey2009.html>