

Americans are confused on climate, but support cutting carbon pollution

There's broad support for climate policies in every state and county, but Americans view global warming as a distant problem



Americans love clean energy and climate policies. Photograph: Alamy

The Yale Program on Climate Change Communication published the findings of its 2016 survey on American public opinion about climate change. The results are interesting - in some ways confusing - and yet they reveal surprisingly broad support for action to address climate change. The Yale team created a tool with which the results can be broken down by state, congressional district, or county to drill down into the geographic differences in Americans' climate beliefs.

Acceptance of science despite confusion about expert consensus
The first survey questions asked about participants' beliefs about whether climate change is happening, what's causing it, what scientists think, and whether they trust climate scientists. Overall, 70% of Americans realize that global warming is happening, while just 12% said it's not. A majority of Americans in every state answered the question correctly, ranging from 60% in West Virginia to 77% in New York and 84% in Washington DC. Drilling down to a more local level, majorities in every congressional district and nearly every county in America were aware of the reality of global warming.

But when asked whether most scientists think global warming is happening, Americans got a failing grade. Just 49% correctly answered 'yes,' while 28% believed there's a lot of disagreement among scientists. In reality, even 95% of weathercasters - who are among the most doubtful groups of scientists about human-caused global warming - realize that climate change is happening. This shows that the campaign to cast doubt on the expert consensus on global warming has been remarkably successful in the US.

However, Americans trust climate scientists on the subject of global warming. Overall, 71% trust the scientific experts, while 26% distrust them. Majorities of Americans in every state, county, and congressional district trust climate scientists.

Regarding the cause of that global warming, only 53% of Americans correctly answered that it's caused mostly by human activities, while 32% incorrectly said it's mostly natural. By state, correct responses varied from 42% in Wyoming to 59% in California and 67% in Washington DC.



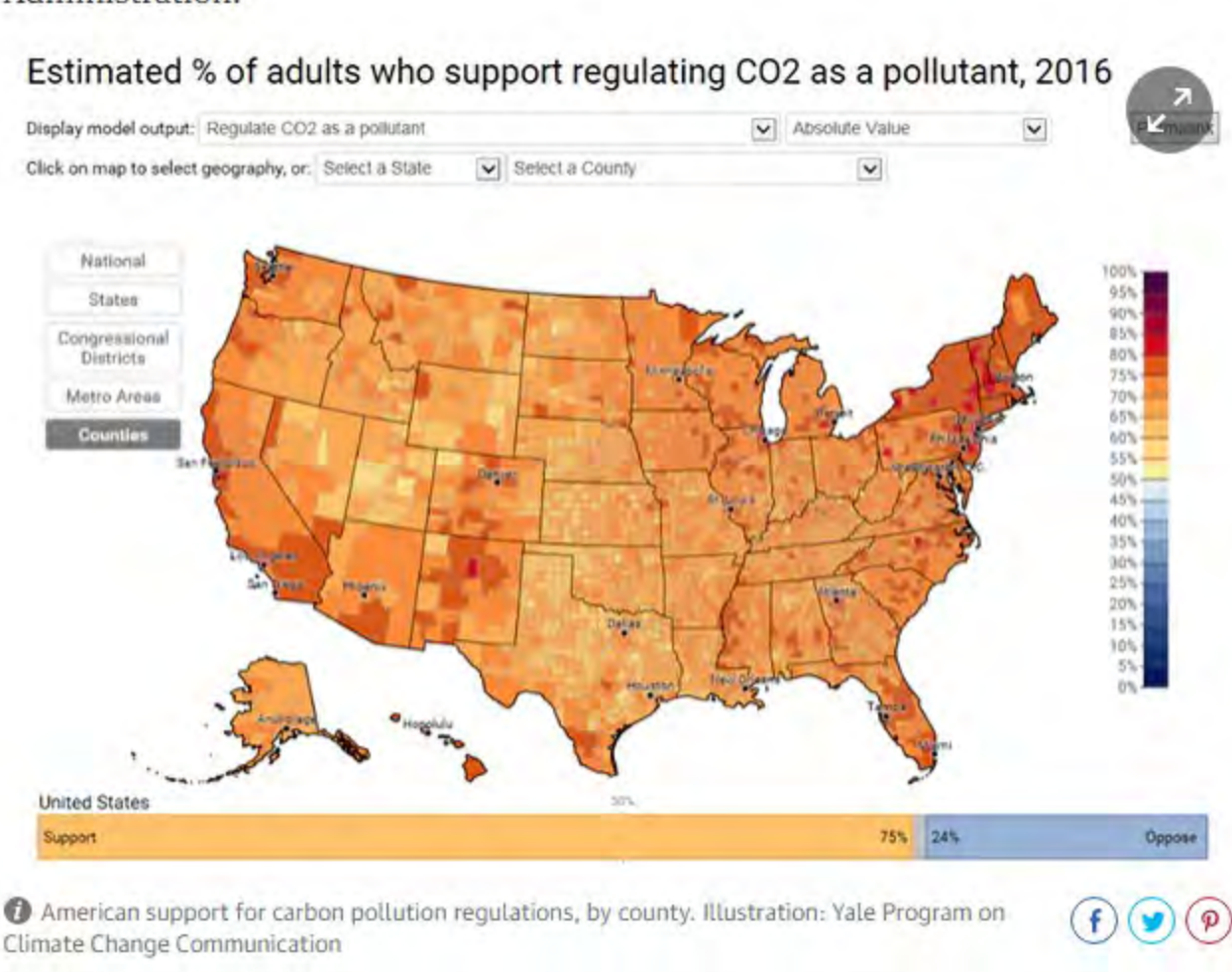
Strangely, more Americans accept that humans are causing global warming than believe scientists agree that the Earth is warming to begin with, even though they trust the scientific experts. This points to a high level of uncertainty among Americans about what scientific experts really think about climate change. Given that Americans don't mind if climate scientists engage in general science advocacy, this suggests that perhaps more scientific experts should speak out about climate science realities and the expert consensus on human-caused global warming.

Americans view climate change as a distant problem
58% of the Americans surveyed said they're worried about global warming, while 42% aren't. By state, answers varied from 45% worry in West Virginia to 67% in New York and 74% in Washington DC. Interestingly, even in a coal-heavy state like West Virginia, nearly half of Americans are worried about climate change.

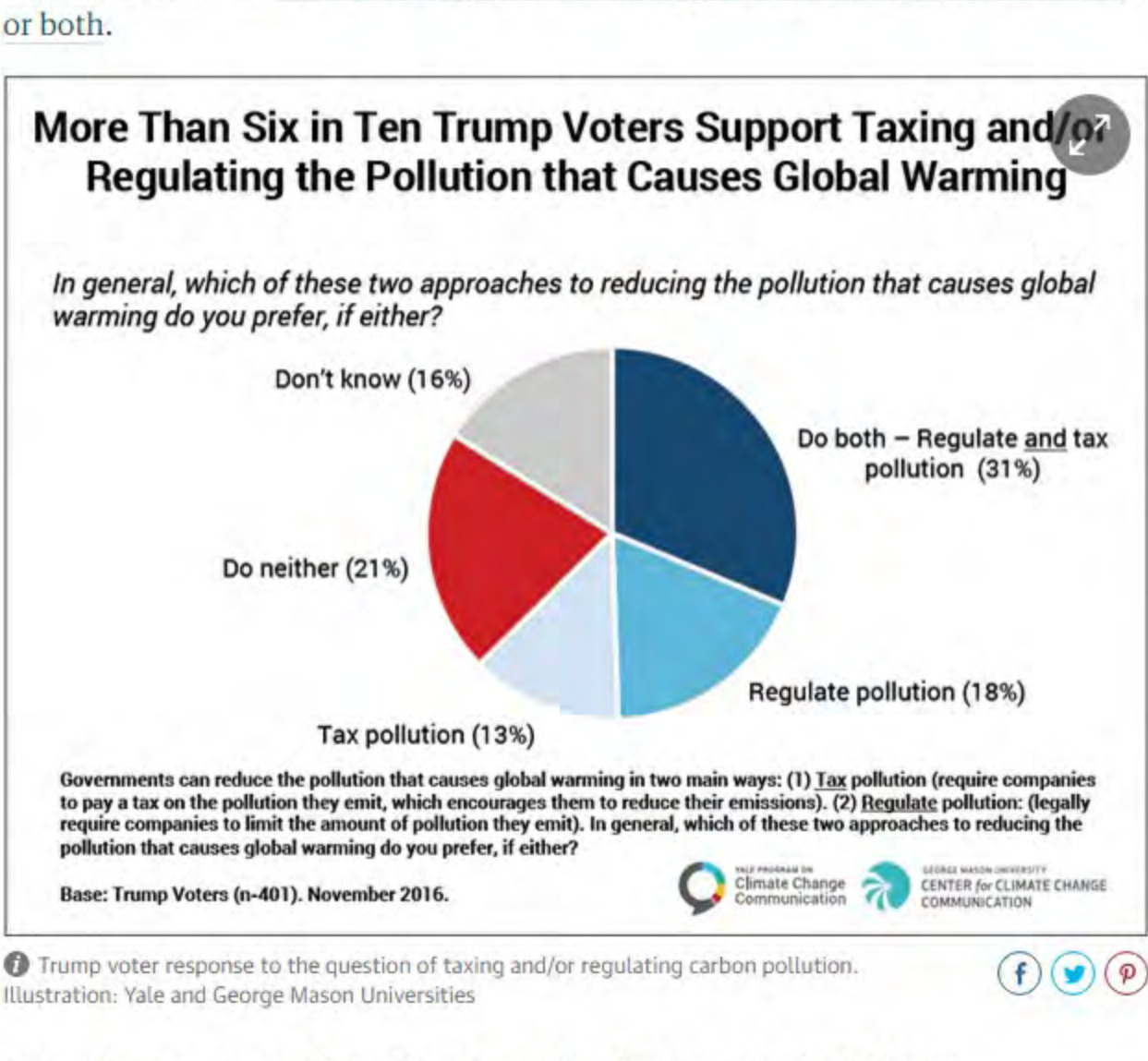
However, only 40% of Americans think global warming is harming them today (with no state reaching 50%), and just 58% think global warming will harm Americans in the future. 63% of Americans think climate change will harm people in third world countries, 70% think it will harm future generations, and 69% think it will harm plants and animals.

In short, these survey results confirm that Americans tend to view climate change as a problem distant in time and space. They think it won't harm them; rather, that it will mostly hurt people far away and/or in the future. This explains why - despite majority acceptance of the science - Americans view climate change as a low priority.

But Americans want climate action
However, Americans displayed wide and broad support for climate solutions. 82% favor funding for renewable energy research; in fact, support was at least 78% in every state. 75% of Americans also support regulating carbon as a pollutant, ranging from 66% support in Wyoming to 81% in New York and 86% in Washington DC. This despite the fact eliminating EPA carbon pollution regulations is currently high on the agenda for House Republicans and the Trump Administration.



Similarly, a majority of Americans in every state (even coal-heavy states) support setting strict carbon pollution regulations for coal power plants, and requiring utilities to produce 20% of their electricity from renewable sources. Simply put, Americans love clean energy and support taking action to curb carbon pollution. This even holds for Trump voters, 62% whom support carbon taxes, regulations, or both.



American support for climate action is broad but shallow

The two most important results from this survey are that a strong majority of Americans in every state, county, and congressional district support climate policies, but relatively few are worried about climate change ever hurting them personally. In short, because Americans view climate change as a problem distant in time and space, they don't consider it an urgent problem or high priority, and thus they don't penalize politicians who take actions to undermine the climate policies that American voters support.

The fact that Americans wrongly think scientists are divided on the mere existence of global warming may help explain their lack of perceived urgency. Studies have shown that when people are aware of the 97% expert consensus on human-caused climate change, they're more likely to accept the scientific reality themselves, and also more likely to support policies to address the problem.

If people think the experts are divided, it implies uncertainty, which undermines perceptions of urgency. That being said, people are generally good at risk management, which is why Americans support taking action to address climate threats despite these misperceptions about the expert agreement and urgency of the problem.

However, the fossil fuel industry and its web of denial have succeeded in sowing enough doubt to keep climate change toward the bottom of most Americans' list of priorities. So far, the Merchants of Doubt are still winning, which means the rest of the planet is losing.

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