



PROJECT

Information Literacy

NEWS RELEASE

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National study reveals the United States is not as divided over climate change as most assume, although many Americans are unsure what to think or do as the climate emergency lands in their backyard.

Santa Rosa, Calif. – Climate change has become a political issue that seems to mirror a starkly divided populace. And yet, as a majority of Americans personally experience extreme weather events, understanding of the climate crisis is shifting from skepticism toward acceptance and, for many, to a rising sense of urgency about taking collective action to save a planet in peril.

That is one of the findings of a comprehensive new national study by [Project Information Literacy](#) (PIL), an independent nonprofit research institute. PIL details how Americans’ understanding of the climate crisis depends on the information worlds they inhabit. And these sharply divergent worlds, and the arrangement of collective channels of news and information people encounter and engage with, shape their attitudes and responses to the challenge of living and surviving on a warming planet.

In this latest report, PIL examined how people encounter, engage with, and respond to climate change news and information, and how their attitudes and beliefs influence whether or not they feel hopeful and willing to take action. The yearlong study, released in the midst of a hotly contested presidential campaign, is based on an online survey of more than 6,100 people from the general public as well as students enrolled at nine colleges and universities across the country.

“There’s no shortage of news about climate change, but is anyone listening?” said Dr. Alison Head, PIL’s director and the lead author of the climate change report. “A vast majority of our survey participants tell us there’s too much negative news about the climate crisis and not enough coverage about solutions for grasping the bigger picture.”

The study's findings include:

- A third of respondents were highly engaged with climate change news and eager to see action, while only 9% expressed skepticism. Nearly half were largely concerned about climate change, but unsure how pressing it is or what to do about it.
- The vast majority of survey participants had been through one or more extreme weather events during the past three years, creating a “flattening effect” of shared firsthand experience, raising the profile of climate change as a major issue.
- Few actively sought out climate change information but rather came across it, with many seeing little climate change news in a given week. Given the episodic coverage of climate change, focused on disasters and policy disputes, news audiences struggled to cobble together the big picture, leaving many with a vague sense of impending doom, or as one survey participant commented, “there are so many issues at the moment that no single one elicits a particularly strong reaction, I feel neutral.”
- A third of those engaged in climate change largely trusted the work of journalists and scientists and took steps to check the reliability of news about climate change, while the more detached survey participants doubted the trustworthiness of climate change information, even when they were concerned about the crisis. Reaching this large group is imperative and may require finding ways to share information through trusted channels, such as personal connections and shared experiences.
- Though many encountered climate change news through social media, few shared it with others online or face to face. Yet most survey participants reported a surprising willingness to discuss climate change with others, even when they didn't expect to agree, and felt that talking about climate change could be productive, suggesting potential routes for engagement in climate action.
- Survey responses revealed a troubling gap in the U.S. between awareness of the climate emergency and confidence that taking action can make a difference. Although a majority of respondents believed individuals can make a difference and said they were motivated to be part of the solution, many felt powerless and less than a third participated in community efforts to address climate change.

- There is good news in the findings, too: Among the nearly half of respondents who were not fully engaged with the issue of climate change, there were signs of a trend toward hope and willingness to take part in collective action.
- Almost all participants in our college sample tilt toward the most engaged third of our general sample. Those aged 18 to 24 in the general sample were likewise more concerned about climate change than older respondents. Though anxiety is high among this age group, so is interest in climate action. As one student participant said, “It’s very easy to feel hopeless about a situation you don’t directly have control over, but progress always starts from the bottom.”

A key takeaway from this unique study is that although acceptance of climate change is at an all-time high in this country, a large percentage of Americans remain ambivalent about what the crisis means for them.

By examining how people form their climate change understanding through a complex and personalized web of information — a social media feed, a conversation with a friend, or a headline or photo that catches their eye — this research has uncovered alternate routes for encouraging climate action and a sense of hope that a shared future is in our hands.

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Affiliate support was provided by the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), an international nonprofit with more than three million members and online activists, who work to safeguard the earth—its people, its plants and animals, and the natural systems on which all life depends.

Pepperwood Preserve is an affiliated supporter of the PIL climate change research project.

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The study's co-researchers had domain expertise in information science, information literacy, media literacy, and data science: Alison J. Head, Ph.D., PIL Executive Director and Fulbright Specialist Scholar, 2023-2026; Steven Geoffrey, PIL Senior Research Scientist and Associate Teaching Professor, Northeastern University; Barbara Fister, PIL Inaugural Scholar-in-Residence and Emerita Professor, Gustavus Adolphus College (MN); and Kirsten Hostetler, Ph.D, PIL Senior Research Analyst and Instruction and Outreach Librarian, Central Oregon Community College.

Project Information Literacy (PIL) is a nonprofit, independent research institute based in the San Francisco Bay Area that works in small teams on large, national research projects about information seeking in the digital age. Since 2009, PIL has published a series of 14 open-access research reports using social science and data science methods to study adults living in the U.S. Altogether, the team has surveyed and interviewed more than 22,500 participants for inclusion in PIL studies.

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The OA report will be available on July 9, 2024

Title: How information worlds shape our response to climate change

Report available at <https://projectinfolit.org/pubs/climate-study>

Project page: <https://projectinfolit.org/publications/climate-study>

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