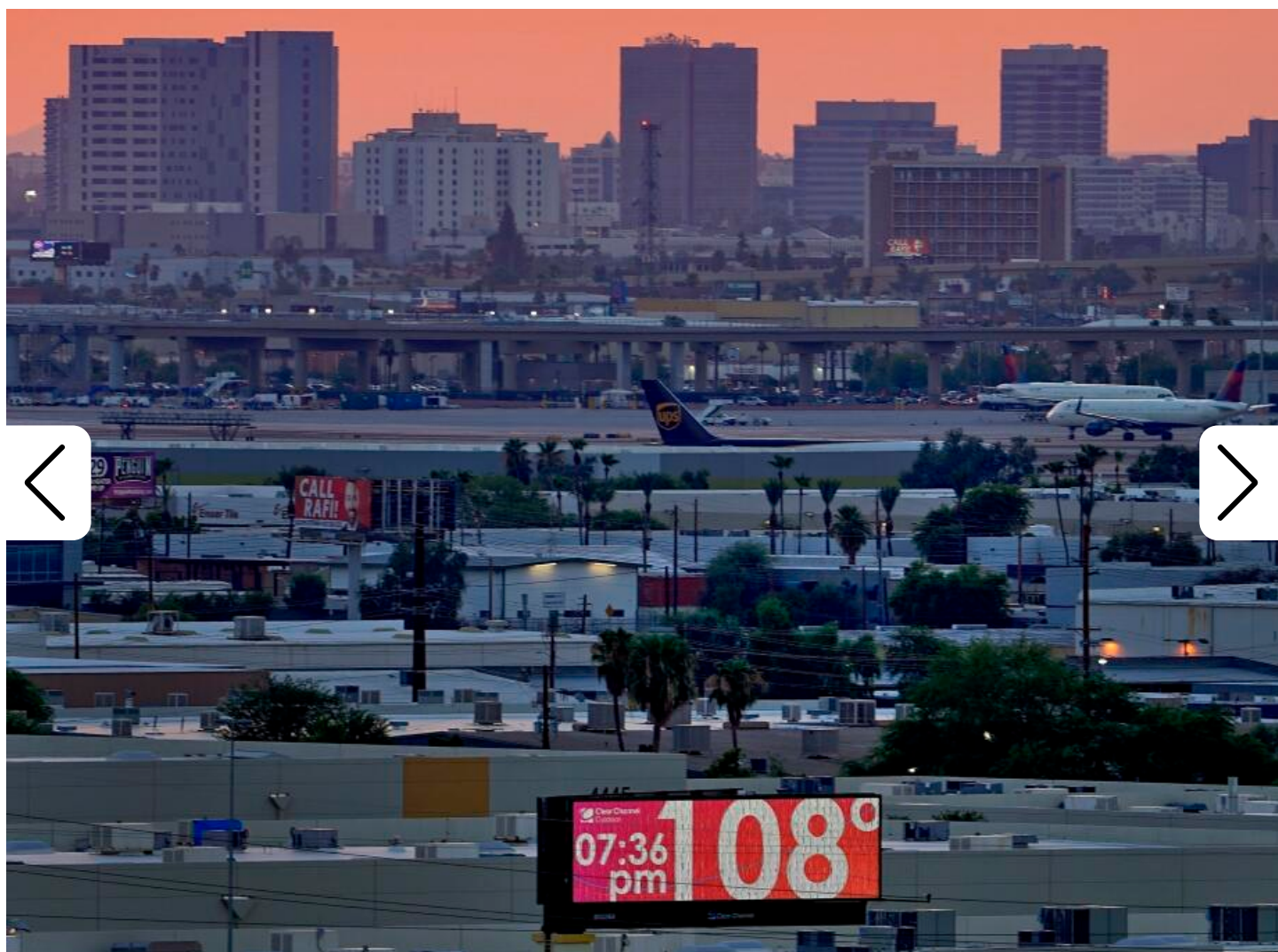


‘It’s not going away’: Santa Rosa-based group finds surprising American consensus on climate

The country is becoming more unified in its acceptance of global warming – and “in realizing that we’ve got to take action,” said Alison Head, founder of Project Information Literacy. |  105



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FILE — The unofficial temperature hits 108 degrees at dusk at Sky Harbor International Airport in Phoenix on July 12, 2023. Of the more than 6100 people surveyed by Santa Rosa-based Project Information Literacy in 2023 and early 2024, over 80% said they live in a community that’s been affected by extreme weather since 2021. (AP Photo/Matt York, File)

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It wasn't until the 27th minute of Kamala Harris' 38-minute acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention that she made her solitary mention of the climate crisis.

It was a brief, fleeting name-check, and then she moved on — a bit of a letdown for some readers, who'd sent us emails expressing passionate interest in that issue.

But it was in keeping with the VP's strategy since stepping in for her boss at the top of the ticket. As the New York Times noted two days before that speech, Harris has gone "light" on climate policy talk, offering no specifics on how she intends to control global warming.

Harris, it turned out, is leery of alienating the moderates and disaffected Republicans her campaign is trying to peel off.

But the subject of climate change isn't nearly as polarizing as political consultants believe. There's far more consensus on the subject than division. That's one of the primary findings of a new national study by Project Information Literacy (PIL), an independent nonprofit research institute founded and directed by longtime Santa Rosa resident Alison Head, one of the country's foremost information researchers.

'It's on your doorstep'

It had long been an article of faith in politics: where people stood on climate change depended on how they voted.

But that assumption is crumbling, according to PIL's research, as global warming brings extreme weather events to the doorsteps of more and more Americans.

"Something's happening in America," observed Head. While the state of our politics remains tribal, the country is becoming more unified in its acceptance of climate change — "and also in realizing that we've got to take action," she said.

Of the more than 6,100 people surveyed by PIL in 2023 and early 2024, more than 80% said they live in a community that's been affected by extreme weather since 2021.

Personal encounters with severe weather have become "a shared experience across every region of the country," according to the study's authors, "collapsing differences in political orientation, religion, income and age."

Climate change isn't some faraway phenomenon happening "at the ends of the earth," said Head. "It's not some sad polar bears in the Arctic. It's on your doorstep. And it's not going away."

After growing up in Sonoma County — her father, Donald B. Head, was the county's Director of Public Works from 1959-1989 — Alison earned her Masters in Journalism at Boston University and her PhD. in Library and Information Science at UC Berkeley. A former fellow and visiting scholar at Harvard, she also led the Press Democrat's news research department in the 1990s, bringing the paper into the digital age.

While participating last year in the UC-affiliated [Climate Stewards course](#), offered by [Pepperwood Preserve](#), Head applied elements of what she learned to the PIL research project. Pepperwood eventually agreed to become a co-sponsor.

This latest study is PIL's 14th open-access research report since its inception in 2009. Altogether, Head and her co-researchers have surveyed and interviewed more than 22,500 participants.

She works to ensure that the reports are devoid of stuffy academic writing that's often impenetrable to the layperson, describing the PIL's blend of scholarly research and journalism "scholarism."

"It's not very academic. But it's readable."

Three main groups

Respondents to this survey answered three dozen questions. Researchers were particularly interested in learning about their sources for climate change information, including but not limited to TV news, podcasts, newspapers, social media, pastors, friends — "all the tributaries that make up their information world," said Head.

Survey participants tended to cluster in three prominent groups. The Engaged, 33%, are convinced that the climate crisis is happening. They feel a civic duty to stay informed and keep up with climate change news. Their Achilles' heel: They're likely to take action, but it's individual action.

Moving the needle on global warming, said Head, will require collective action.

The Detached, at 47%, are "largely convinced" that climate change is real, according to the report's authors, but don't agree how pressing it is, and aren't sure what to think or do about the planet's environmental future.

The Resistant, at 9% the smallest group, don't believe climate is happening, and do not engage with news and information on that topic. "They don't trust scientists, journalists, and claims that climate change are real," says a summary of the report.

(The remaining 10%, said Head, gave responses too “goofy” to fit in anywhere.)

Experts such as Holland Gistelli, education program manager at Pepperwood Preserve, the ecological institute just north of Safari West, see good news in the study’s findings. Often, in the media and on social media, she said, “it can feel like the world is a lot more divided than what this report really showed.”

She wasn’t surprised that the largest bloc of respondents were The Detached. Many people “feel really overwhelmed” by the magnitude of the climate crisis. It feels like such a huge problem. And they’re just trying to get through their day-to-day.”

Gistelli and others see great potential in The Detached, “who may be in a frozen or apathetic kind of place,” she said, but “can very easily be moved into that engaged circle.”

Also instructive was the surprisingly low percentage of true-believing, dead-end climate change deniers — a group whose voice in America, the study would seem to suggest, is amplified to a level disproportionate to its numbers. It helps to have a big megaphone.

Noah Padecky, a recent graduate from Casa Grande High School in Petaluma and intern at Project Information Literacy, is now a freshman at UC-Berkeley. Calling from his new dorm, he explained why climate change is such a paramount issue for Gen Z.

Seemingly ‘unconquerable’ problem

With all the “wildfires, hurricanes, glaciers melting, all these natural phenomena — well, unnatural, I guess you could say, that scientists say have their basis in climate change” — all coming in remarkably rapid succession, he added, the climate crisis “just kinda looms greater than ever.”

Padecky, who also has a Press Democrat connection — his father is sports columnist Bob Padecky — gets why the “detached” group made up nearly half the study’s respondents.

“The problem of climate change just seems so unconquerable, it feels like a lot of people have descended into a more nihilistic place.

“It’s not that they don’t want things to get better, or have opinions about it. But the opinions they do have, they feel, are too insignificant to make a difference.”

The good news from the PIL report Padecky himself worked on is that people’s understanding of the climate crisis is moving from skepticism toward acceptance, and for many, said Head, a rising sense of urgency to take collective action.

Such action might take the form of enrolling in Pepperwood Preserve’s next Climate Steward’s course, or casting a vote for the candidate most likely to enact clean energy policies. In the case of Kamala Harris, it took the form of choosing a running mate with a robust record of climate accomplishments.

It seemed significant that during her Thursday interview with CNN’s Dana Bash, Harris was much more voluble on the subject of climate change. While explaining her evolving stance on fracking, the VP declared that “the climate crisis is real” and pointed out how the Inflation Reduction Act set goals for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions.

Perhaps, in the week since her DNC acceptance speech, the Vice President had skimmed the PIL report. It is, after all, very readable.

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