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Historic Attitudes to Climate Change

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1. Overview

Although it has long been accepted that human activity could impact the local climate, it was not until the 1970's that the wider public began to become concerned at the threat of human activity potentially having a global impact.

In the early 1970's, there was initial confusion in that some experts predicted pollution bringing about global warming or, conversely, that we were about to enter a new ice age due to the cooling effects of polluting aerosols. By the end of the 1970's, scientific opinion concluded that warming was the most likely option, probably becoming evident at some time point in a distant future, probably around the year 2000.

From 1970 to the present day, global warming has evolved from an abstract prediction to a very real threat to the planet, with most scientists agreeing that climate change is happening faster than predicted. It is now known that climate change is a very complex web of processes, including changes in cloud cover, effects of air pollution on clouds, uptake of heat by turbulent ocean circulations and uptake of CO₂ by the ocean and land biosphere, not just how greenhouse gases regulate the transfer of radiation through the atmosphere. As a result, across the planet, we have seen unusually hot and cold temperatures and an increase in extreme weather events such as storms, droughts, and floods. Therefore, today we have moved from an exclusive focus on mitigation to the deepening realisation that adaptation is also critical.

In order to gauge current public opinion on climate change, it is important to repeat questions asked in the past and see if attitudes have changed in 2023 in the face of increased knowledge and evidence of its disastrous effects.

References:

The Discovery of Global Warming. The Public and Climate Change, April 2022
<https://history.aip.org/climate/public.htm>

2. Acknowledgment of Climate Change

As far as you know, do you personally think the world's climate is changing, or not?	Responses in 2005 All (%)	Responses in 2010 All (%)
Yes	91	78
No	4	15
Don't know	5	6

Regarding climate change and global warming, which of the following statements comes closest to your view?	Responses in 2009 (Very slightly different wording) All (%)	Responses in 2010 All (%)	Responses in 2012 (Very slightly different wording) All (%)
It is now an established scientific fact that climate change is largely man-made	52	26	57
There is a widespread theory that climate change is largely man-made but this has not yet been conclusively proved	39	38	30 (largely due to natural forces)
Man-made climate change is environmentalist propaganda for which there is little or no real evidence	-	10	-
Climate change is not happening	7	25	7
Don't know	2	1	6

How concerned, if at all, are you about climate change, sometimes referred to as global warming?	2005 All (%)	2010 All (%)
Very concerned	44	28
Fairly concerned	38	43
Not very concerned	12	19
Not at all concerned	3	8
Don't know	1	2

Which of these statements comes closest to your view?	Responses in 2009 All (%)
Climate change is the most serious problem faced by man	23
Climate change is one of a number of serious problems faced by man	58
Climate change has been exaggerated and is not a very serious problem	17
Don't know	1

Would you say that in general the risks of climate change and its possible consequences have been presented proportionately, understated or exaggerated?	Responses in 2009 All (%)	Responses in 2010 All (%)
Proportionately	38	26
Understated	38	19
Exaggerated	22	27

Climate change not happening	2	25
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Which of the following do you agree with most?	Responses in 2005 All (%)	Responses in 2009 All (%)
The amount of climate change we have already experienced is a threat to the world	40	37
Climate change is not currently a threat but will be for future generations unless something is done soon	49	48
Climate change is not a threat	8	11
None of these/Don't know	3	3

Repeating these types of questions will establish whether people today accept that climate change is real, the causes, level of concern and degree of risk.

In 2006, 15% of respondents said they had either not given global warming much thought or thought 'it was a load of rubbish' and in 2010, 28% of respondents agreed with the statement 'I am unsure that climate change is really happening'.

In 2007, similarly, there was still strong degree of scepticism about climate change with 40% of respondents agreeing ('strongly agree/tend to agree') that climate change is too complex and uncertain for scientists to make useful forecasts and 56% agreeing that many leading experts still question if human activity is contributing to climate change. However, 46% of respondents agreed that ultimately they were confident the world community would find a solution to the problems caused by climate change.

It seems surprising that when comparing 2005 and 2010 data to the questions above, respondents seemed to rank climate change as less of a threat in 2010 compared to 2005. It would be interesting to understand why this is the case. It may be that during 2010, other more immediate issues took priority, such as the global recession which came about after the US banking crash in 2008 and had far-reaching worldwide effects, as well as the public seemingly in denial about climate change with a lack of new data coming to the fore, and some believing the climate scientists to be unreliable around that time.

A report in 2017 found that while most people agree climate change is caused by humans (80%), at the same time 43% also agree it is a natural cyclical phenomenon, with the conclusion that there is still a lot of confusion. It would be interesting to see how people respond in 2023.

3. The Science of Climate Change

Have you heard anything about in the news recently stories about flaws or weaknesses in the science of climate change?	Responses in 2010 All (%)
Yes	57
No	43

For those who responded 'Yes':

As a result of hearing of flaws or weaknesses in the science of climate change, has your view of the risks of climate change changed at all?	Responses in 2010 All (%)
I am now less convinced of the risks of climate change	11
I am now more convinced of the risks of climate change	16
My view on the risk of climate change has not changed	73

In 2002, scientists working at universities (50%) and scientists working for environmental groups (31%) were found to be the most trusted to give reliable information about the environment. It would be interesting to repeat these questions to see if respondents' attitudes have changed perhaps the Covid-19 pandemic may have had an impact since there has been some mistrust in accuracy of scientific information and advice.

A report in 2021 found that adults in the UK feel that the climate crisis is the third most important societal issue to tackle, coming in behind the Covid-19 pandemic (1st) and poverty (2nd). The most common places to hear information about climate change is through TV news (64%), TV documentaries (55%), newspapers (38%) and websites (34%). Three in 10 (29%) hear about climate change through social media but this is the least trusted source of information, with 62% saying they would not trust the information they saw on social media about climate change. Exploring misinformation and disinformation specifically about the climate crisis, 47% of social media users stated they have come across a news story on social media about the climate crisis that was either exaggerated or made up entirely in the past month. A quarter (26%) said that they have seen a news story about the climate crisis on social media in the past month that they thought was made up at the time they saw it. Therefore it is important to explore sources of information and how accurate it is for future questioning.

4. Specific Impact on UK

There are risks to people in Britain from climate change	Responses in 2005 All (%)	Responses in 2010 All (%)
Agree	77	66
Neither agree/disagree	11	14
Disagree	8	16
Don't know	3	3
I think that climate change is likely to be a serious problem for Britain	Responses in 2010 All (%)	
Agree	62	
Neither agree/disagree	16	
Disagree	19	
Don't know	3	

When, if at all, do you think Britain will start feeling the effects of climate change?	Responses in 2010 All (%)
We're already feeling the effects	41
In next 10 years	13
In next 25 years	14
In next 50 years	11
In next 100 years	5

Beyond next 100 years	4
Never	4
Don't know	7

Which, two or three, if any, of the following, do you think poses the greatest threat to the UK's national interests at this time?	Responses in 2011 All (%)
The state of other countries' economies	70
Over population	39
Terrorist attacks	23
Hostile governments in other countries	21
Global warming and climate change	20
A major health epidemic such as the spread of pandemic flu	11
Other	2
Don't know	4

In an MRS survey in 1990, the biggest environmental concerns in the UK were depletion of ozone layer (44%), air pollution (44%), sea/river pollution (43%), and drinking water quality (43%), all of these coming ahead of global warming (42%) in terms of concern.

In 2007, 76% of respondents agreed (agree strongly/agree) that the effects of climate change are noticeable in Great Britain. While in 2010, 59% of respondents said they had already personally noticed signs of climate change in their lifetime.

In 2010, 32% of respondents thought climate change will mostly affect areas that are far away from here, while 48% disagreed with this. 58% of respondents felt their local area would be affected by climate change. It would be interesting to repeat these questions to see if a greater proportion of respondents now think that climate change is a very real threat to the UK rather than something that will pose a greater threat to distant 3rd world countries that may lack the infrastructure to deal with the problem.

In terms of the threat to the UK's national interests, it would be interesting to repeat this question, particularly to see how climate change is ranked following the Covid-19 pandemic which would be likely to be seen now as a much greater threat than in 2011 (11%), as well as outbreak of war (eg in view of current wars in Ukraine, Israel-Hamas).

5. Effect on Children and Young People

How concerned are you about the impact of the long term effects of global warming on the health and happiness of your children?	1999 All parents with children age 15 years or under (%)
Very	26}
Fairly	41} 67%
Not very	21
Not at all	6
Don't know	6

In terms of 'very/fairly concerned', drug abuse (95%), HIV/AIDS (89%), and the decreasing number of secure jobs (86%) were ranked ahead of global warming.

How likely to you think environmental disasters eg global warming will affect you when you are an adult?	1998 Children age 11-16 years (%)
Very likely	29}
Fairly likely	36} 65%
Not very likely	18
Not at all likely	3
Don't know	11

n terms of 'very likely/fairly likely', changing ways of working (74%) was ranked higher than global warming, and was only marginally higher than War between different countries (61%) and Increasing gap between rich and poor (61%).

In an MRS survey in 1990, whilst being one of the groups least concerned about the environment in general, greater proportions of 16 - 24 year olds were concerned about the major problems of global warming (52%), ozone layer depletion, nuclear power etc than any other age group whose full effects were forecast to be felt in the first 20 or 30 years of the next century - when present 16 to 24 year olds will be in middle age.

It would be interesting to see how parents and children rank the significance of global warming today and whether or not young people feel better informed about the subject today, given that a report in 2021 found a quarter of young people feel uninformed about climate change and do not always trust social media which is a common source of information.

6. Personal Responsibility and Willingness to Make Sacrifices to Tackle Climate Change

I have strong opinions about climate change	Responses in 2005 All (%)	Responses in 2010 All (%)
Agree	59	41
Neither Agree/Disagree	23	25
Disagree	15	22
Don't know	2	1

Which one, if any, of these do you think should be mainly responsible for taking action against climate change?	Responses in 2005 All (%)	Responses in 2010 All (%)
Environmental groups	4	3
Individuals and their families	8	18
Industry/companies	10	16
Local authorities	2	3
National Governments	39	32

International community	32	30
None of these	-	3
Don't know	2	3

Climate change is a global problem and unless the rest of the world, especially big polluters like USA and China also introduce green taxes and cut back on activities that contribute to climate change, there is little point in Great Britain doing so	Responses in 2006
	All (%)
Agree	60
Disagree	38
Don't know	1

Do you think climate change is something that individuals like you can fight by changing your behaviour, or do you think it will happen regardless of what individuals like you choose to do?	Responses in 2009
	All (%)
Fight by changing behaviour	46
Will happen regardless of what individuals do	52
Don't know	1

I am ready to make significant changes to the way I live to help prevent global warming or climate change	Responses in 2009	Responses in 2010
	All (%)	All (%)
Agree	83	76
Disagree	16	20
Don't know	1	5

Which of the following do you think people like you should be prepared to consider to limit climate change?	Responses in 2005	Responses in 2009
	All (%)	All (%)
Buy smaller more fuel efficient cars	83	83
Fit solar panels to your house to generate energy	78	65
Travel more by public transport	74	68
Drive less	67	75
Buy less food grown outside Europe that has to be transported by air	63	75
Fly less	56	69
Pay a charge per mile to drive	26	33
None of these/Don't know	3	3

Which of the following do you do to help the environment?	Responses in 2007
	All (%)
Turn lights off when you're not in the room	94
Turn the television off standby at night	84
Use energy-saving light bulbs	77
Have showers instead of baths	74
Re-use your shopping bags	73
Unplug your phone charger when you're not using it	73

None of these	-
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In 2010, 53% of respondents said they personally felt they could make a difference with regard to climate change and 70% said they felt it was their responsibility to do so. It would be interesting to repeat questions to find out how much personal versus collective responsibility respondents feel towards tackling climate change today. It may be that today, the view might be that individual action is futile in the face of growing evidence of rapid climate change. In addition, the UK government now appears to be backtracking on its commitment to environmental policies which may result in individuals seeing it as pointless to try to mitigate against climate change on a personal level. For example, the UK is now seeking to become more self-sufficient in terms of fuel supply so the government has just recently granted licences for more oil to be extracted from the North Sea, as well as pushing back the deadline by which old gas and other fossil fuel boilers must be replaced with low carbon technologies, moves which have angered environmental groups.

Regarding making sacrifices, in 2010, 65% of respondents said they would be willing to greatly reduce energy levels to help tackle climate change and 44% said they would pay more for energy efficient products; it would be interesting to ask these type of questions again. In 2023, the ULEZ charge was introduced in London and is being adopted in other UK cities. The aim is to help improve air quality by reducing the number of vehicles that do not meet emissions standards. Despite this, the ULEZ scheme has been met with considerable resistance which may show that respondents say they are willing to make sacrifices and pay more to support environmentally friendly policies, but may in fact not be willing to do so in practice.

Similarly, there is a reluctant acceptance that nuclear power is needed to help combat climate change and improve energy security in the UK (in 2010 57% agree), and in both 2005 and 2010, roughly the same proportion of respondents would support the building of new nuclear power stations (54%, 56%). However, in 2010, 60% in 2010 would oppose this if it were in their local area.

With the drive towards phasing out diesel and petrol cars in favour of EVs, it could be hypothesised that there would be widespread acceptance of the need to move towards EVs, although questions today should include an assessment of EV infrastructure in the UK which is often seen as inadequate to support the increased numbers of electric cars.

7. Role of Government in Tackling Climate Change

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? It is now clear that climate change is already having an effect on the environment and it is urgent that governments take steps to address it.	Responses in 2006 All (%)
Agree	89

Disagree	10
Don't know	2

How confident, if at all, are you that the government will deal with climate change in the next few years?	Responses in 2007 All (%)
Very confident	5
Fairly confident	33
Not very confident	36
Not at all confident	21
Don't know	5
<i>Very/fairly confident</i>	38
<i>Not very/not at all confident</i>	57

Would you be more inclined to vote for a party that takes Green issues seriously?	Responses in 2006 All (%)
Yes	73
No	27

Which of the main political parties do you think has the best policies for tackling climate change and global warming?	Responses in 2006 All (%)	Responses in 2007 All (%)
Conservative	20	16

Labour	21	14
Lib Dem	29	14
Other	-	15
None of them	18	17
Don't know	11	24

It is interesting that the Green Party was not generally specifically identified very often as being the most suitable political party to deal with climate change, despite research in 1990 which found a fifth of Conservative voters and a quarter of Labour voters believed the Green Party is best prepared to deal with the problems associated with the environment. However, in an MRS survey in 1990, 68% of adults aged 16 or over believed it was a government responsibility to deal with environmental issues, but the age profile of who best to deal with it varied. 2 out of 5 16-24 yr olds mentioned the Green Party compared to only 1 in 12 over 65 yr olds.

Perhaps respondents in 2023 may give more overall support to the Green Party, or those parties with Green credentials, which would be significant as it would potentially mean shifts in political allegiance if concern over the state of the environment deepens. It is interesting to note that in 2010, most respondents did not trust the British government to take appropriate action against climate change (51%), while 31% said they did have trust in the government.

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