

ARE CLIMATE ACTIVISTS MISSING SOMETHING?

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Not for Release

Are climate change activists frustrated yet? Public concern for climate change – a key driver for policy action, is declining. Despite massive efforts including Al Gore’s movie, his Nobel Prize, dire predictions from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a hundred million dollar media campaign and signatures of 72,000 qualified scientists, public concern has until recently remained largely unchanged for 20 years.

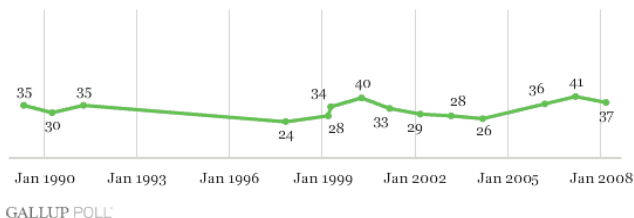
Now Pew Research Center shows a clear 3 year decline in public priority concern. What’s gone wrong with the climate policy campaign for the hearts and minds of citizens?

Do you worry a great deal about global warming? National Gallup Tracking 18 years

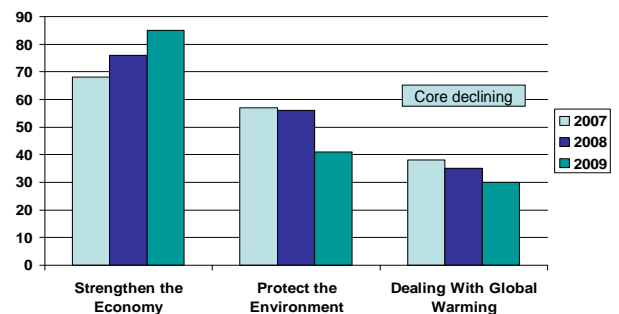
I'm going to read you a list of environmental problems. As I read each one, please tell me if you personally worry about this problem a great deal, a fair amount, only a little, or not at all. How much do you personally worry about ...

The "greenhouse effect" or global warming

■ % Great deal □ Core Support



Latest 2009 Priority Concern Priority Concern – Pew Research Center



Abraham Lincoln stated “Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed.” If true, climate policy advocates might well reconsider their strategy. Yes, the current “economic concern” may be helping displace “climate concern”. Yet, even before the economic downturn the trending wasn’t promising.

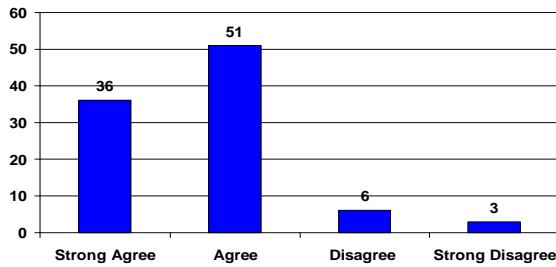
With all that has been said and done about climate change, much more has been said than done. Most people just look out their window for their ‘most reliable’ view of what the climate is doing. Oregonians even seem to think a little warming would be welcome. But there may be a different ‘view out the window’ which supports a climate friendly response, but for a non-climate related reason.

An ongoing series of public opinion surveys suggests that there is broadly shared agreement that “our country would be better off if we all consumed less”. Hmm, what’s up with this? I thought we were a nation of consumers; that we have to consume for the good of the economy as well as our own self gratification. I thought consumption was our national purpose and birthright. While this may be the conventional wisdom, it may not be the true.

Following scientific procedures to minimize bias and error, four successive Oregon-wide surveys indicate strong agreement that our consumption is a problem. In April 2008, 87% of a representative sample of Oregonians felt that “Our country would be a better place if we all consumed less”. This was replicated in November at 75% agreement. While the agreement dropped 12%, those who strongly agreed moved up from 35% to 49%.

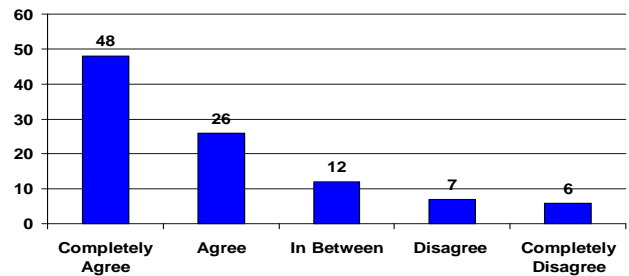
Our country would be a better place if we all consumed less.

March 2008 n=400



Our country would be a better place if we all consumed less.

November 2008 n=400

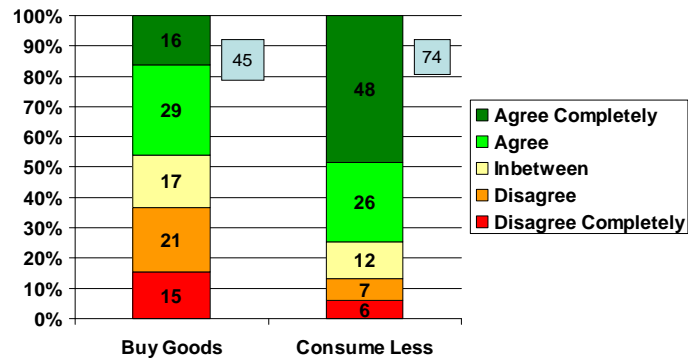


In a related question, a choice between two competing values was also a surprise. “Given this economic downturn our leaders should do everything they can to stimulate the economy” OR “This economic downturn may be just what we need to reorder our values” showed a 4:6 response respectively in November. These results are drawn from two different 400 sample surveys designed to replicate the demographic adult Oregonians with a margin of error of less than 5%.

Still another set of questions again showed similar disposition toward some competing beliefs, where 45% of the respondents agreed “we need to buy things for the good of the economy” compared to 74% agreement for “our country would be better off if we all consumed less”. Comparing those two questions, three times more respondents felt strongly that we should ‘consume less’ than ‘buy goods for the good of the economy’.

Compare: “We need to buy goods for the good of the economy” – “Our Country would be better off if we all consumed less”

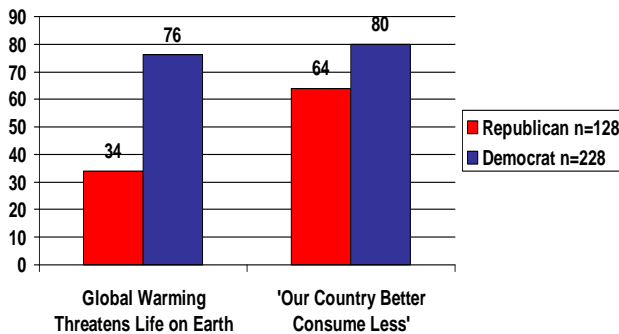
(Compare V1A & V1C)



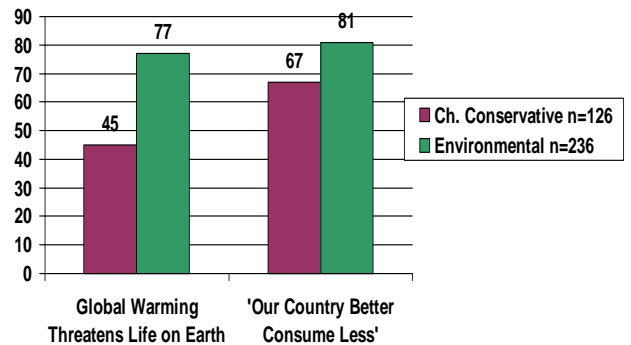
Clearly, something unusual is going on here challenging the conventional wisdom about our predisposition to consume.

The people who support climate change action tend generally toward the political left with resistance and dispute from the political right. But such party or ideological differences largely dissolve in the view of our consumption habit.

Political Party Ideology Comparison
Compare Global Warming / Consume less
 PI November 2008 n=400 V4A/V1A (expressed as % Agreement of Sector)



Cultural Ideology Comparison
Christian Conservative & Environmentalist
Compare Global Warming / Consume less
 PI November 2008 n=400 V4A/V1A (expressed as % Agreement of Sector)



In other words, while a majority may not agree that climate change is an urgent problem, the issue of consumption provides a “bigger tent” under which we may find common ground to rethink what’s important in life. Furthermore, thinking of climate change as *a symptom* rather than *the problem* may help us find the democratic majorities required for effective public policies – policies that address over-consumption directly and global warming indirectly, but effectively. This is because an ecological majority must be built by including sectors who do not see climate change as “the problem”.

The left is now pushing economic stimulus while discussing carbon reductions. Meanwhile, the right is discussing personal accountability and letting the free market deal with the economy. Underneath this polarization, both sides concur that our country would be better off if we all consumed less. Hmm, is there room for some common solutions here?

Our new President’s chief of staff said “a crisis is a terrible thing to waste”. Well, which crisis are we talking about? When the history books are written in two hundred years, which item will get ink, the current economic crisis, or climate crisis? Oh, sorry. The issue isn’t climate. We have a crisis of consumption, or should I say “values”, which got us into this economic mess. It just so happens that disposition to reduce consumption is conducive to greenhouse emission reductions. And other beneficial outcomes for the environment. Different reasons, same result.

We cannot dismiss the challenges which lowering our consumption represents to the status quo. The economic and political systems are deeply vested in ever increasing economic and material thru-puts. A question which leadership might ponder is to what extent the economic downturn may be caused by a shifting public perception about the never ending chase for more “things”. Or how current public opinion toward consumption might be embraced to build the world we jointly aspire to.

Unless noted, survey results from PolicyInteractive, an Oregon based public opinion research project.

Tom Bowerman directs PolicyInteractive and is a member of the American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR). Research design and result is peer reviewed and conform to AAPOR's Standards of Practice and Code of Conduct.

Feedback welcome:

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