

# Opinion polls underestimate Americans' concern about the environment, study finds

May 13 2010

---

When pollsters ask Americans to name the most important problem facing the country, the environment is rarely mentioned. But this time-honored polling question masks the public's true concern about environmental issues, according to Stanford University researchers.

"For years, the wording used in traditional surveys has systematically underestimated the priority that the public has placed on global warming and the [environment](#)," said Jon Krosnick, a professor of communication and of [political science](#) at Stanford. "To fully understand public concern about these issues, traditional surveys should be asking a different question."

In a recent study, Krosnick and his colleagues focused on what public opinion experts call the "most important problem" (MIP) question. Developed by pollster George Gallup in the 1930s, the MIP question has become a staple of many national surveys.

As an example, the researchers cited the following question from a September 2009 New York Times/CBS News Poll: "What do you think is the most important problem facing the country today?"

In that poll, only 1 percent of respondents mentioned the environment, while 41 percent said the economy or jobs. "In prior surveys going back to 2007, the percentage of those who mentioned environmental issues never rose above 3 percent," Krosnick said. "These results seem to suggest that few if any Americans place top priority on the government

dealing with global warming or the environment."

But the Stanford study revealed that when the question was reframed in terms of the most serious problem facing the planet if left unchecked, the environment and global warming rose to the top. "How a question is phrased can significantly change the results," said Krosnick, a senior fellow at Stanford's Woods Institute for the Environment.

## **Internet survey**

For the Stanford study, the research team analyzed the results of two national surveys. The first was a September 2009 Internet poll of 906 adults. Respondents were randomly asked one of the following open-ended questions:

1. "What do you think is the most important problem facing the country today?"

In this traditional MIP question, about 49 percent answered the economy or unemployment, while only 1 percent mentioned the environment or global warming.

2. "What do you think is the most important problem facing the world today?"

Substituting the word "country" with "world" produced a significant change: 7 percent mentioned environmental issues, while 32 percent named the economy or unemployment.

3. "What do you think will be the most important problem facing the world in the future?"

When asked to consider the future of the planet, 14 percent chose the environment or global warming, while economic issues slipped to 21 percent.

4. "What do you think will be the most serious problem facing the world in the future if nothing is done to stop it?"

This time, 25 percent said the environment or global warming, and only 10 percent picked the economy or unemployment.

"Thus, when asked to name the most serious problem facing the world in the future if nothing is done to stop it, one-quarter of all Americans mentioned either global warming or the environment," Krosnick said. "In fact, [environmental issues](#) were cited more often in response to question 4 than any other category, including terrorism, which was only mentioned by 10 percent of respondents."

## **Stanford-AP Environment Poll**

The researchers found similar results when they analyzed a November 2009 telephone survey of 1,055 adults sponsored by the Woods Institute for the Environment and the Associated Press (AP).

When asked the traditional MIP question, "What do you think is the most important problem facing the country today," 54 percent said economic issues, and just 2 percent mentioned environmental problems.

But when asked, "What do you think will be the most serious problem facing the world in the future if nothing is done to stop it," only 16 percent named the economy and unemployment, while 21 percent said global warming and the environment.

The Sanford-AP Environment Poll also asked, "How much effort do you think the federal government in Washington should put into dealing with the serious problems the world will face in the future if nothing is done to stop them?" Three out of four respondents said they wanted the government to devote "a great deal" or "a lot" of effort to combat serious

problems, such as global warming, in the future.

"Contrary to what traditional surveys suggest, we found strong evidence that Americans attach a great deal of significance to [global warming](#) and the environment," Krosnick said. "Therefore, to accurately measure the American public's issue priorities, it may be useful for national surveys to include alternative questions that emphasize future problems and their solutions."

Provided by Stanford University

Citation: Opinion polls underestimate Americans' concern about the environment, study finds (2010, May 13) retrieved 17 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-05-opinion-polls-underestimate-americans-environment.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.