

New Zealanders' beliefs in climate change increasing

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Credit: Victoria University

New research from Victoria University of Wellington and the University of Auckland has found New Zealanders' beliefs in climate change and that humans are causing it are increasing over time.

The study, carried out by Victoria's Dr Taciano Milfont and Professor Marc Wilson, and Auckland's Professor Chris Sibley, examined key

[climate](#) change beliefs over a six-year period—2009 to 2015.

"The two beliefs we investigated were if people believe climate change is real, and if people believe climate change is caused by humans," says Dr Milfont, who led the study.

"We found that the levels of agreement to both beliefs have steadily increased over the six-year period. This increase in [belief](#) has been most pronounced in more recent years, from about 2013 onwards.

"Overall, belief in the reality of climate change was higher at all times than agreement with the idea that climate change is caused by humans. But people who tended to increase their level of agreement in one climate change belief also tended to increase their agreement level in the other belief."

The research used data from the [New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study](#), a national probability sample study that has been tracking New Zealanders' social attitudes, personality and health outcomes since 2009.

"It's the first longitudinal study indicating that climate change belief is increasing over time," says Dr Milfont.

"Past research has relied on a snapshot of data from one-off public [opinion polls](#). But data from opinion polls are based on distinct individuals. We are the first to examine whether climate change beliefs held by the same group of individuals, in this case, more than 10,000 New Zealanders, are changing or not."

Dr Milfont says the observed increase in climate change beliefs could be attributed to a number of factors.

"Other studies suggest that climate change beliefs and concerns may

change after exposure to extreme weather events as well as mainstream media and awareness campaigns."

Other studies also suggest that political affiliation and political ideology are the main predictors of climate change belief, and self-reported conservatives showed low agreement levels in both climate change reality and its human causation. This suggests that the observed increase in climate change beliefs is greater among politically liberal individuals.

"We expect that levels of climate change beliefs will fluctuate over time. With the ongoing nature of the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study, in the future we will be able to pinpoint whether particular socio-economic circumstances directly result in fluctuations on climate change beliefs."

This research, recently published in the international journal PLOS ONE, was supported by a Templeton World Charity Foundation grant to Professor Sibley and a Marsden Fast-Start grant from the Royal Society of New Zealand to Dr Milfont.

[Research jointly co-ordinated by Dr Milfont in 2015](#) found that if people from 24 countries believe that addressing climate change will result in a more caring and moral community, they are more likely to take action.

"Given that climate change beliefs and concerns are key predictors of [climate change](#) action, our findings indicate that a combination of targeted communications endeavours may successfully convey the urgency of the issue," says Dr Milfont.

More information: Taciano L. Milfont et al. The public's belief in climate change and its human cause are increasing over time, *PLOS ONE* (2017). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0174246](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0174246)

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