

Poll: Energy-saving habits vary in popularity

September 27 2019, by John Flesher and Emily Swanson



Tay Harris, talks with her son, Joshua Moore, 4, on the porch of their home in Terre Haute, Ind., Thursday, Sept. 26, 2019. "It has to be pitch dark outside for me to turn a light on," said Tay Harris, 25. She said she wants to help with climate change and considers it common sense to save electricity. "If you have the beautiful sun that God blessed us with, use it." (AP Photo/Michael Conroy)

Turn off the lights when they aren't needed? Check. Lower the

thermostat a few degrees in winter? Maybe. Go full-time vegetarian? Probably not.

Americans are willing to go only so far in engaging in habits that conserve energy and reduce emissions that are warming the planet, according to a new poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. The poll adds to research showing that many take modest steps they consider convenient and feasible—and good for their pocketbooks. But actions that would involve significant lifestyle choices such as diet or transportation are a tougher sell.

Roughly 9 in 10 Americans say they often or always turn off unnecessary lights, including 6 in 10 who do so all the time.

About half often or always set the thermostat at 68 degrees or lower in winter to reduce heating, while slightly fewer say they keep summertime air conditioning temperatures at 76 degrees or higher.

"It has to be pitch dark outside for me to turn a light on," said sandwich shop worker Tay Harris, 25, of Terre Haute, Indiana, who said she wants to help with climate change and considers it common sense to save electricity. "If you have the beautiful sun that God blessed us with, use it."



In this Wednesday, Sept. 25, 2019 photo, George Johnson points to a thermostat at the barber shop where he works in Longwood, Fla. Johnson says he rarely uses public transportation but is worried about climate change and keeps his driving to a minimum. He sometimes takes other conservation steps such as eating vegetarian meals and planting trees while always turning off unnecessary lights. "You've got to start somewhere," he said. "If everybody just turned off their lights one hour or anything, it can help." (AP Photo/John Raoux)

The poll found about 2 in 10 Americans often or always use public transportation, carpool, bike or walk instead of driving, while nearly 3 in 10 do so some of the time.

Similarly, while only 5% say they always eat vegetarian meals, another 13% said they often do so and 37% said they sometimes do. Meat

production contributes to global warming in numerous ways, scientists say. It generates manure that releases methane to the atmosphere and encourages destruction of forests that store carbon dioxide, the primary greenhouse gas, to clear land for pasture and livestock feed crops.

Overall, 14% said they frequently plant trees. About 6 in 10 city dwellers said they rarely or never plant trees, as opposed to about half of those living elsewhere.

Climate concern isn't the only reason Americans conserve energy. Previous research by The AP-NORC Center suggests another motive is saving money. The latest survey, conducted last month, shows that some people who don't believe in climate change routinely take some actions, such as turning off lights and limiting use of heat and air conditioning. So do many who acknowledge the planet is warming but think it's happening naturally, instead of from human activities.



Tay Harris, walks with her son, Joshua Moore, 4, near their home in Terre Haute, Ind., Thursday, Sept. 26, 2019. "It has to be pitch dark outside for me to turn a light on," said Tay Harris, 25, of Terre Haute, Indiana, who said she wants to help with climate change and considers it common sense to save electricity. "If you have the beautiful sun that God blessed us with, use it." (AP Photo/Michael Conroy)

Jon Dahlstrom, 77, who lives in Iowa's Lynn County, said climate change is real but described the idea of people causing it as "kind of grandiose thinking." Still, he often dims the lights and sometimes adjusts the thermostat to limit [energy use](#).

"That's just to help lower the bills, or get to where I feel comfortable," the retired elevator mechanic said.

Still, the poll found that people who believe in climate change are more likely to take environmentally friendly steps than those who don't. For example, more than half of those who think climate change is happening often or always set the thermostat at 68 degrees or lower in winter, while about 4 in 10 of the nonbelievers do so.

The poll found that 19% of those who believe climate is warming use alternatives to driving, compared to 7% of the nonbelievers.



In this Wednesday, April 10, 2019 file photo, rush-hour traffic heads west, right, and east, left, along the Schuylkill Expressway in Philadelphia. According to a new poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research released on Friday, Sept. 27, 2019, Americans have mixed feelings about changing personal habits to conserve energy and reduce emissions that are warming the planet. (AP Photo/Jacqueline Larma)

Among climate change believers, those who think their actions can make a difference are slightly more likely than those who do not to take some climate-friendly actions. For example, about 8 in 10 of those who believe their actions matter say they at least sometimes keep the thermostat lower in winter, compared with about 7 in 10 of those who don't think their actions make a difference.

Feasibility is a big factor with some actions. While 30% of those who live in [urban areas](#) say they frequently use alternatives to driving, just 14% of those in suburbs or rural areas do the same.

"I'm out in the middle of the county in Iowa, so there is no public transportation," Dahlstrom said.

George Johnson, 48, a barber in Deltona, Florida, said he rarely uses public transportation but is worried about [climate change](#) and keeps his driving to a minimum. He sometimes eats vegetarian meals and plants trees; he always turning off unnecessary lights.



In this Wednesday, Sept. 25, 2019 photo, George Johnson takes a break during some downtime at the barber shop where he works in Longwood, Fla. Johnson says he rarely uses public transportation but is worried about climate change and keeps his driving to a minimum. He sometimes takes other conservation steps such as eating vegetarian meals and planting trees while always turning off unnecessary lights. "You've got to start somewhere," he said. "If everybody just turned off their lights one hour or anything, it can help." (AP Photo/John Raoux)

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The poll also found Democrats were slightly more likely than Republicans to often cut off lights, though both groups tend to do that. Democrats were significantly more willing than Republicans to use alternatives to driving and to eat vegetarian at least sometimes.

Americans with college degrees were more likely than those without them to say they always or often set the thermostat lower in winter and higher in summer, as well as eat vegetarian meals.

Individual actions alone won't solve the climate crisis, said Peter Kalmus, an atmospheric scientist who wrote a book about his personal efforts to reduce carbon emissions, which included giving up air travel. But they can build support for government policies and technological advances needed to turn the tide, he said.



In this Wednesday, Dec. 9, 2015 file photo, cattle graze in a pasture against a backdrop of wind turbines which are part of the 155 turbine Smoky Hill Wind Farm near Vesper, Kan. According to a new poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research released on Friday, Sept. 27, 2019, Americans have mixed feelings about changing personal habits to conserve energy and reduce emissions that are warming the planet. (AP Photo/Charlie Riedel)

"If you're an advocate for [climate](#) action and you want to see systems change and global emissions go down, your message becomes far more urgent if you're actually walking the walk," Kalmus said. "The best reason to do this is to shift the culture."

The AP-NORC poll of 1,058 adults was conducted Aug. 15-18 using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 4.2 percentage points. Respondents were first selected randomly using address-based sampling methods and later were interviewed online or by phone.

More information: AP-NORC Center: www.apnorc.org

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