

Few in U.S. recognize inequities of climate change

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Despite broad scientific consensus that climate change has more serious consequences for some groups—particularly those already socially or economically disadvantaged—a large swath of people in the U.S. doesn't

see it that way.

A recent national survey study found that just over one-third of U.S. adults believe [climate](#) change is impacting some groups more than others. Nearly half feel that climate change impacts all groups about equally. And when the question referenced race in [climate impacts](#), even fewer people believed some groups are more adversely affected than others.

"Our earlier research showed that the American public misperceives who is concerned about environmental issues, and we're wondering why that's the case," said Jonathon Schuldt, associate professor of communication in Cornell University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, and executive director of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

"And one thought we had was, 'Is the American public even aware of the unequal impacts of environmental issues—specifically the unequal impacts of climate change?'" Schuldt said. "Our findings suggest many people might not be."

Schuldt and Adam Pearson, associate professor and chair of psychological science at Pomona College, are co-authors of "Public Recognition of Climate Change Inequities Within the United States," which published Aug. 7 in *Climatic Change*.

In 2022, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, "Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability," concluded that human-induced climate change "has caused widespread adverse impacts and related losses and damages to nature and people, beyond [natural climate variability](#). ... Across sectors and regions the most vulnerable people and systems are observed to be disproportionately affected."

For this study, Schuldts and Pearson—who were co-authors last year on [a study](#) proposing that misperceptions of others' concerns about COVID-19, climate change and other issues are a form of social misinformation that can undermine the trust needed to address global threats—analyzed data from two national surveys they conducted in May and August-September 2022.

For the first study, the question posed to 1,084 respondents was, "Do you think that climate change affects some groups more than others, or does it affect all groups about equally?"

In the second study, a total of 1,017 respondents were randomly assigned either the original question or one of two alternative questions: "Do you think that climate change affects some groups in the U.S. more than others, or does it affect all groups in the U.S. about equally?" or "Do you think that climate change affects some racial groups more than others, or does it affect all racial groups about equally?"

For the first study, just 37% of respondents felt climate change impacts some groups more than others; 46% felt it affected all groups about equally, and 17% weren't sure. For the second study, when the question included the term "racial groups," just 22% felt some groups were affected more than others. Fifty-seven percent felt all racial groups were affected about equally.

Democrats were more likely than Republicans, and younger people more likely than older people, to believe climate change affected some groups more than others. Still, Schuldts said, the misperceptions exist across all groups.

"It's still only a minority of Democrats who are choosing the 'some more than others' response, which is the correct response," he said. "That's a little surprising to us. It does seem like there is this sort of 'common

threat' or 'great equalizer' perception when it comes to climate change, that may prevent people from seeing or acknowledging these inequities."

The biggest surprise, he said, was that when race was included in the question, the belief that some groups were more affected than others was so much weaker.

"That's remarkable to us, because race is a robust social predictor of exposure to climate-related hazards," Schuldt said. "It suggests that calling attention to one of the main factors that puts people at risk might actually backfire."

Schuldt is hoping that this and future research on climate justice leads to more awareness by the public, and consequently, legislation that can make a real difference.

"We know a lot about Americans' [climate change](#) attitudes, but we know relatively little about their perceptions of climate injustice," he said. "We think there's a need for survey researchers to study these in more depth, so that we can track them over time and see how well they predict support for policy aimed at reducing climate inequities in the years to come."

More information: Jonathon P. Schuldt et al, Public recognition of climate change inequities within the United States, *Climatic Change* (2023). [DOI: 10.1007/s10584-023-03594-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-023-03594-1)

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