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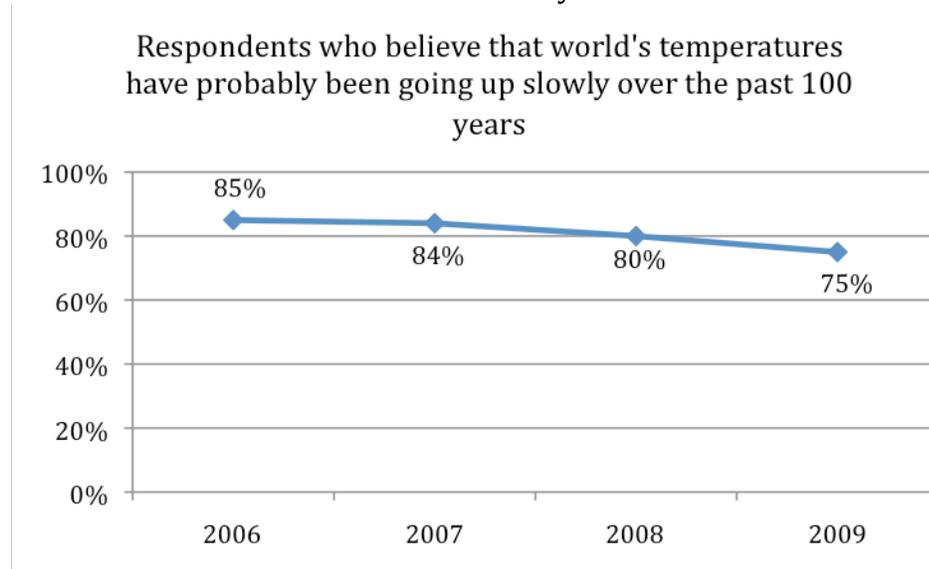
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Majority of Americans continue to believe that global warming is real

By Mark Shwartz

Despite recent news reports questioning the credibility of climate science, the vast majority of Americans continue to trust the scientists who say that global warming is real, according to research by [Jon Krosnick](#), senior fellow at the Woods Institute for the Environment.

“In recent months, we have seen a spate of news stories suggesting that the American public is cooling on global warming - that fewer people now believe that the planet has been heating up than they did a year ago,” said Krosnick, a professor of communication and of political science at Stanford University. “But our work shows that the percentage of Americans who believe in the existence of global warming has only dipped 5 points, from 80 percent in 2008 to 75 percent in 2009, and that public confidence in climate scientists has remained constant over the last few years.”



Those results come from a recent [public opinion survey](#) funded by the Woods Institute and the [Associated Press \(AP\)](#). According to Krosnick, the recent 5-point drop in the percentage of people who believe in global warming was entirely due to a shift in opinions among the minority of Americans who do not trust climate scientists. “A majority of these individuals believe that the Earth has been warming over the long haul, but fewer of these low-trust individuals think so now than thought this a year ago,” he said.

Krosnick has been conducting national surveys on global warming for more than a decade, partnering with major media outlets, including the AP, ABC News, Time, New Scientist, and

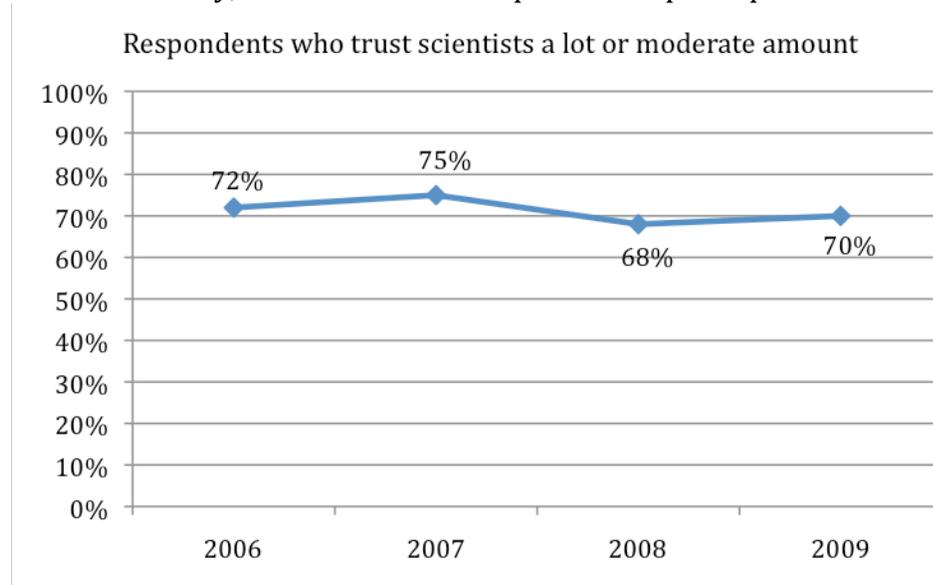
the Washington Post. To get a sense of how public opinion changes over time, many of the surveys have posed the same questions year after year. He presented his findings on March 12 at a climate briefing hosted by the [American Meteorological Society](#) in Washington, D.C.

“The 2009 Woods Institute-AP survey shows that Americans can be divided into two groups – 70 percent who trust scientists, and 30 percent who do not,” Krosnick said. “Our latest study illuminates how these two groups of people think differently about this issue.”

Trust in scientists

For the 2009 survey, pollsters conducted telephone interviews with 1,055 adults from Nov. 17 to Nov. 29. During that time period, controversial emails from prominent climate scientists were leaked to the news media. The emails, which were hacked from a server at a British university, included vitriolic attacks on critics of global warming and raised questions about scientists manipulating climate data. The controversy, called “climategate” by global warming skeptics, soon made headlines around the world. But according to Krosnick, the effect on public opinion was minimal.

“Our research shows that the negative publicity surrounding climategate had no meaningful impact on public confidence in climate scientists,” he said. “In 2008, 68 percent of our respondents said they trusted scientists completely, a lot or a moderate amount. In the 2009 survey, the number was 70 percent – up two points.”

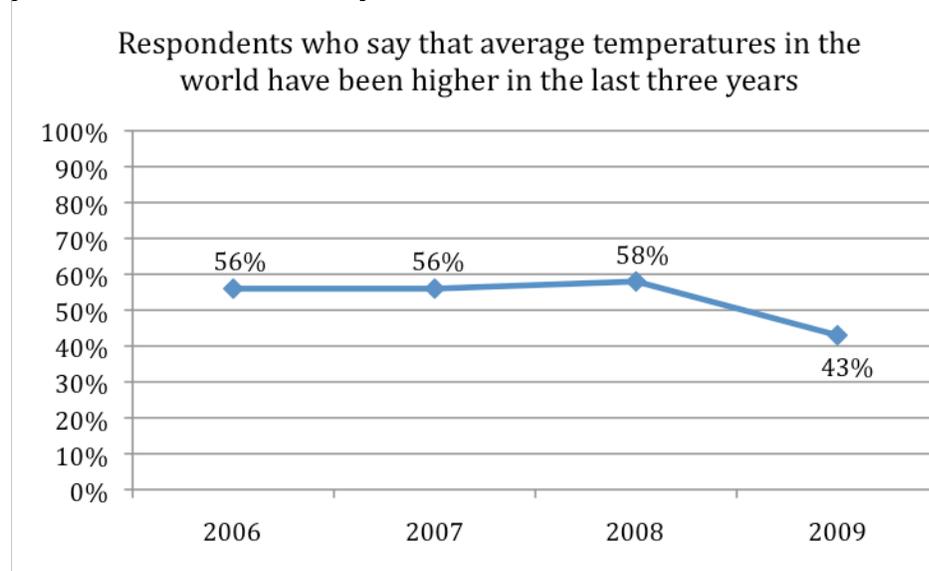


Climategate was followed by more negative headlines in December 2009. This time, the focus was on a 2007 forecast by the United Nations [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change \(IPCC\)](#) suggesting that melting glaciers in the Himalayas were likely to disappear by 2035. That forecast turned out to be erroneous, which caused even greater turmoil among climate researchers. On March 10, 2010, in reaction to the growing controversy, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon announced the creation of an independent panel to review the work of the IPCC.

“The scientific community is overreacting to these events,” Krosnick said. “In theory, it’s possible that public regard for climate scientists has dropped sharply since our 2009 survey. But based on my 30 years of experience in this field, that’s very unlikely, because American public opinion, even on a highly publicized and frequently debated issue, changes very, very slowly. So in a two-month period, it’s unlikely that there would be a dramatic change. My guess is that relatively few Americans are aware of the media controversy or are paying attention to it, and even fewer are influenced by it.”

Changing weather

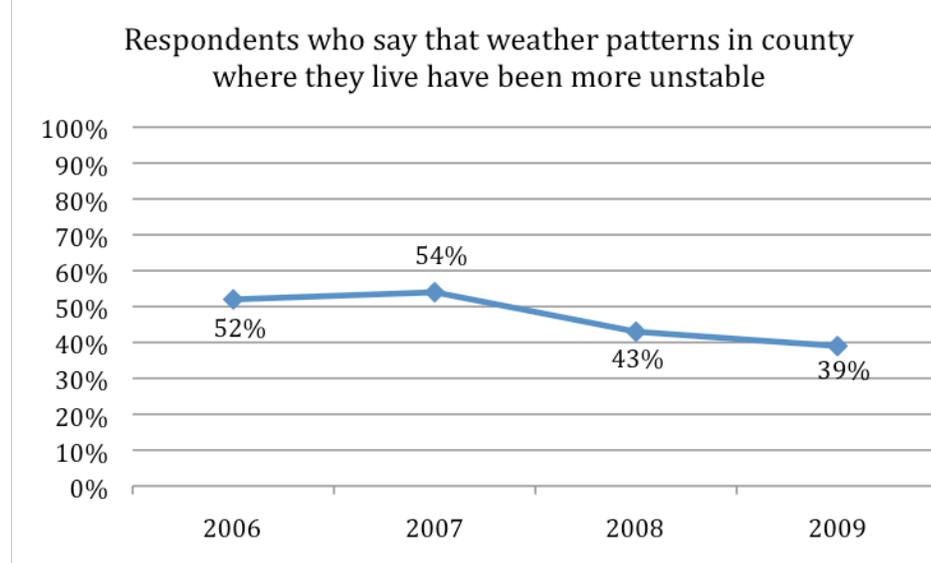
One factor that can influence opinion is the perception of local changes in the weather, Krosnick said. Using data going back to 1880, [NASA](#) scientists report that globally, 2000 to 2009 included nine of the 10 hottest years on record. However, [below average temperatures](#) in parts of the United States over the last two years have led some Americans to wonder if the Earth is actually getting cooler, Krosnick noted. As a result, when the November 2009 survey asked if average world temperatures were higher or lower in the last three years than in previous years, only 43 percent said higher, compared to 58 percent in the 2008 survey, which was conducted in the summertime.



Climate stability can also play a role in people’s perception of global warming, he said. Since 2006, Krosnick and his colleagues have included the following question in their surveys: “Would you say that weather patterns in the county where you live have been more stable in the past three years than before that, more unstable or about the same?” In 2006, a year after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, 52 percent of respondents said that local weather patterns had become more unstable. By 2008, that figure had dropped to 43 percent.

“Katrina is a distant memory,” Krosnick said. “[2008](#) wasn’t a year of giant-sized storms, but it was a year of [lower temperatures](#) since 1997. [2009](#) also saw the fewest storms since 1997. For some people – especially those who say that they have little or no trust in climate scientists – that’s real information. They see that the weather appears to be more stable

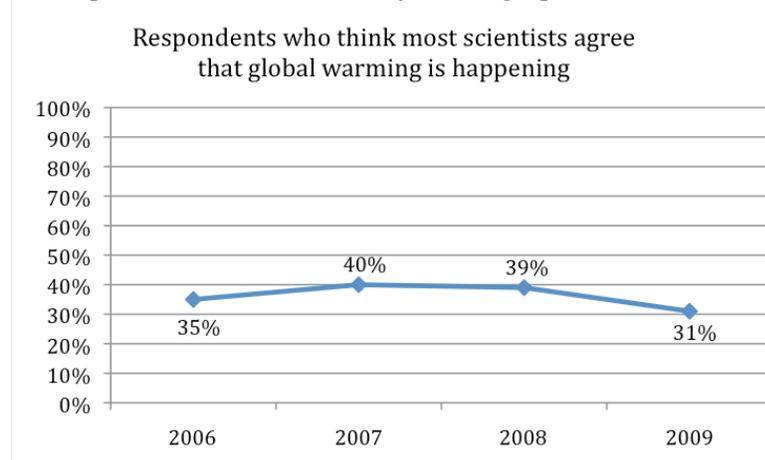
and that temperatures are cooler, and their reaction is, ‘it stopped getting hotter, so maybe global warming isn’t happening after all.’”



Climate skeptics

After analyzing all of the data from 2009 survey, Krosnick and his Stanford colleagues concluded that the 5-point drop in the percentage of Americans who believe in the global warming was largely made up of people who both mistrust scientists and think that the Earth is cooling down naturally.

Where do those opinions come from? According to Krosnick, they are the result of successful efforts by climate skeptics to convince the public that there is disagreement among scientists about global warming. “This is where climate skeptics have been making some headway, because in reality, there is broad consensus among scientists that global warming is real and poses a serious threat for future generations,” he said. “But in our last survey, there was an 8 point decline in the percentage of people who think that most scientists agree on global warming – from 39 percent in 2008 to 31 percent in 2009. That decline happened completely among people who don’t trust scientists. So the accumulation of skeptical evidence is finally adding up to success.”



Majority opinion

When respondents were asked to give their personal opinion in 2009, 75 percent said that global warming probably has been happening, and only 22 percent said probably not. "It's really important to recognize that 75 percent is a huge majority of Americans, and 5 percent of Americans shifting is a pretty small movement," Krosnick said.

According to Krosnick, it is important to take a long-term perspective on this and other global warming surveys. "Skeptics might look at this 5 percent dip in public opinion and conclude that Americans are finally waking up, that the critics are getting traction and that this is just the beginning of a downward trend - that 75 percent will soon drop to 50 percent, then 25 percent and eventually people will look back and say that climate change was a hoax," he said. "But the reality is, if the natural scientists are correct in saying that the cooler weather is just a temporary aberration, and that average temperatures will continue to rise from year to year, then this little downward trend will go away. My guess is that if warming and unstable weather increases, the public opinion numbers will bounce back up again."

For more information: <http://woods.stanford.edu/research/surveys.html>

Woods Institute for the Environment: <http://woods.stanford.edu>

Climate Data

NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies

NOAA Climatic Data Center and National Hurricane Center