



THE CENTRE FOR CLIMATE CHANGE AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS

PUBLIC OPINION IN A TIME OF CLIMATE EMERGENCY

This briefing is designed as a resource for professionals whose work includes the communication of climate change, and for those with a wider interest in the public understanding of climate change.

KEY POINTS

The urgency of climate change is recognised by a majority of our respondents with widespread backing for the UK Parliament's declaration of a climate emergency.

Levels of 'worry' about climate change are at their highest recorded point with extreme weather events, media reporting and wider publicity mentioned as reasons for this increase in concern.

Two-thirds of people felt that we should limit air travel in order to address climate change while just over half of the respondents were of the view that we should reduce the amount of meat in our diets.

CAST is a global hub for understanding the social science of climate action.

The Centre's hub is based at Cardiff University. Additional core partners include University of East Anglia, University of Manchester, University of York and the charity Climate Outreach.

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PUBLIC OPINION IN A TIME OF CLIMATE EMERGENCY

Surveys have shown for some time that most people in the UK recognise the reality of human-caused climate change, but often without expressing strong concern about it.¹ Climate change and the environment have typically been topics deemed to be of lesser importance than other social issues, such as jobs and the economy. Over the past year, however, there has been a palpable shift in the public mood.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's report on the implications of a global 1.5°C temperature increase was picked up by media across the world as underscoring the need for urgent and radical action. The youth strikes and a new wave of climate protests have pushed climate change higher up the news agenda. There have been declarations of climate emergencies by the UK Parliament, as well as the Welsh and Scottish governments, and many local councils and other organisations. New temperature records have been broken across Europe, including the hottest ever day recorded in the UK in late July.²

The last time there was a noticeable spike in public concern was in the aftermath of widespread flooding in late 2013 and 2014, but this soon dropped away as memories of these events faded. Polling from late 2018 onwards suggests a more sustained and convincing upward trend in public concern about the environment in general, reaching unprecedented levels during mid 2019.³

In response to these signs of shifting public opinion, the CAST Centre commissioned research by YouGov in mid-August 2019 to measure national views about climate change with 2,000 members of the UK public, gauging people's views on the urgency of climate change and more radical types of climate action.

Is there a climate emergency?

The urgency of climate change is recognised by a majority of our respondents. More than three out of five (62%) say that addressing climate change requires a 'high' or 'extremely high' level of urgency. Only one in ten (10%) felt that only a 'low level of urgency' or 'little or no urgency' is needed.

When we provided some information about the UK Parliament's declaration of a climate emergency, this too received widespread backing: a majority (61%) supported this, with only 11% opposing.

How worried are we as a nation?

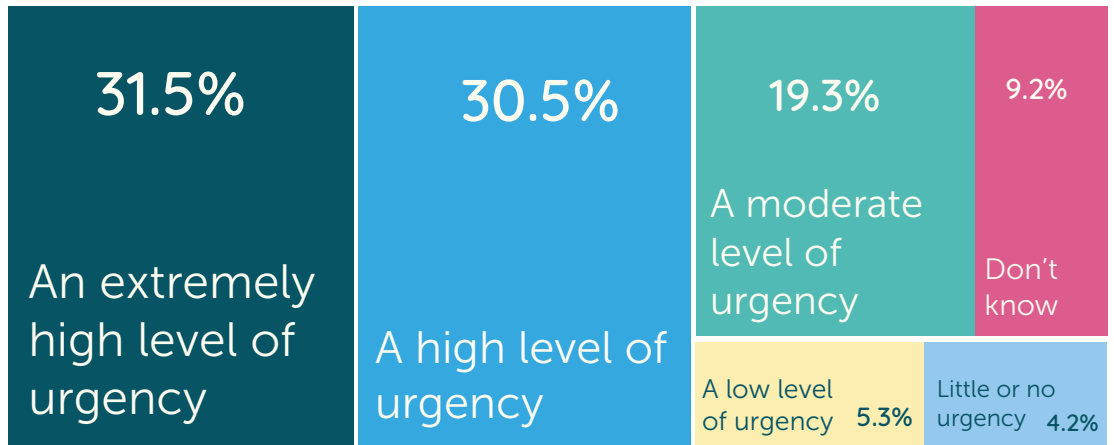
Our results confirm that levels of 'worry' about climate change are at their highest recorded point. More than a third (37%) of the UK population say that they are either very or extremely worried about climate change, up from only a fifth of the population (20%) three years ago.⁴ Only 7% of people in our survey say they are 'not at all worried'.

Our findings also confirm that people see themselves as more worried than they were before. In our August 2019 data, close to a half of those surveyed (48%) said they had grown more worried over the past 12 months; two-fifths (40%) said their views had remained the same, with only 6% saying they were less worried now than a year ago.

Perceived level of urgency required to address climate change

“Which of these best describes your views about the way in which climate change needs to be addressed?”

Addressing climate change requires...



Why have we become more worried?

We also asked survey participants directly why their views had changed. In response, many of those who said they had become more worried referred to weather-related factors (27%), including extreme weather events. They also made frequent mention of a growth in media reporting and wider publicity given to climate change (20%). Some referred to their perception that environmental changes were accelerating or presenting new levels of risk (12%). Others pointed out their sense of a lack of political and society-wide action to address climate change (19%): this was mentioned particularly by those who said they were much more worried about climate change than they had been 12 months ago (compared to those that said they were only slightly more worried).

Should we fly less and eat less meat?

People are more split when it comes to specific action to tackle climate change. While a small majority (53%) say that we should reduce the amount of meat in our diets to address climate change, a substantial 37% are of the view that this is not necessary. The proposition that we limit air travel was more strongly favoured: fully two-thirds (67%) of people felt that we should ‘definitely’ or ‘probably’ do this, versus only 22% who felt that we ‘don’t really’ need to do this, or ‘don’t need to do this at all’.

Where now for public opinion?

These new findings tally with the conclusions of other recent surveys⁵ and suggest we are witnessing a genuine change in the public mood. That said, it cannot be taken for granted that this shift will be sustained in the medium to long term. Were the UK to experience an economic downturn, for example, this could be accompanied by diminished public concern about climate change – as we know has happened in the past.⁶

The timing of our survey in mid-August coincided with a series of events that probably combined to raise the profile of climate change in local, national and international contexts – including the summer heatwave in Europe, and rising media coverage during 2019.⁷ More enduring citizen engagement will require a concerted effort and continued attention to be paid to this critical set of issues. There is a unique opportunity for this to happen in the UK, as Parliament launches its national Citizens’ Assembly on climate change⁸ in late 2019, and as Scotland gears up to host the UN climate talks in 2020. All of us who recognise the importance of public opinion on climate change have a responsibility and an opportunity to do what we can to keep awareness and interest high, and climate change at the top of the public agenda.

References

1. Steentjes, K. et al. (2017). European Perceptions of Climate Change: Topline findings of a survey conducted in four European countries in 2016. [Data collected June 2016.]

European Social Survey (2018). European Attitudes to Climate Change and Energy: Topline Results from Round 8 of the European Social Survey. [Data collected between August 2016 and December 2017.]

2. Met Office press release, 29th July 2019. New official highest temperature in UK confirmed.

3. YouGov blog, 5th June 2019. Concern for the environment at record highs.

4. Comparison based on combined figures for 'very worried' and 'extremely worried' responses in Steentjes et al. (2017) as above. Figures derived from original dataset, with rounding to 20% following the summation of these two categories.

5. Survation blog, 13th September 2019. British public supportive of efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, new survey reveals.

Ipsos MORI blog, 12th August 2019. Concern about climate change reaches record levels with half now 'very concerned'. Carbon Brief blog, 10th May 2019. Polls reveal surge in concern in UK about climate change.

6. Capstick, S. et al. (2015). International trends in public perceptions of climate change over the past quarter century. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, 6(1), 35-61.

7. Boykoff, M. et al. (2019). (2019). United Kingdom Newspaper Coverage of Climate Change or Global Warming, 2000-2019. Media and Climate Change Observatory Data Sets.

8. UK Parliament press release, 20th June 2019. Select Committees announce plans for Citizens' Assembly.

Suggested citation: Capstick, S., Demski, C., Poortinga, W., Whitmarsh, L., Steentjes, K., Corner, A. & Graham, H. (2019), Public opinion in a time of climate emergency. CAST Briefing Paper 02.

Topline survey findings and methods

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov, with research commissioned by the Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations (CAST). Total sample size was 2,018 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 15th-16th August 2019. The survey was carried out online. YouGov is a member of the British Polling Council and abide by their rules.

The items used and response proportions are given below. Figures shown are weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 18+) with the exception of coded open-ended responses for question 2. Percentages for question 2 were derived from text responses provided by survey respondents and were coded according to a framework developed by CAST researchers. Each response was coded independently by one of two researchers and subsequently reviewed for consistency. For percentage figures, numbers are rounded to one decimal place for each table cell.

1. “Generally speaking, would you say that you have become more or less worried about climate change over the past 12 months, or have your views remained about the same?”

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Much more worried	415	20.5%	20.5%
Slightly more worried	545	27.0%	47.6%
About the same	806	39.9%	87.5%
Slightly less worried	50	2.5%	89.9%
Much less worried	70	3.5%	93.4%
Don't know	134	6.6%	100%
Total	2018	100%	

2. “Why are you [much more / slightly more / no more nor less / slightly less / much less] worried about climate change than you were 12 months ago?”

Answers to this question were provided as text responses from survey respondents. A coding framework was developed by CAST researchers, to encompass the main themes across responses. Responses were only coded for those who were more concerned. Codes were not assigned exclusively (many responses covered more than one category of response); frequencies and percentages given are for each code across the full sample.

Code; brief description	Frequency	% respondents mentioning	Example text response
Weather; changing weather patterns, extreme weather, temperature change	270	27.2%	“Extreme weather events are becoming more common”
Media and publicity; news, documentaries, social media	198	20.0%	“There has been more in the media/ news about it”
Social and political; inadequate action taken at local to international levels	185	18.7%	“...worldwide unwillingness to actually take major actions to reduce carbon emissions”
Growing risks, threats; worsening or accelerating harm, crisis	119	12.0%	“It’s happening at a faster rate than was previously envisaged”
Environmental change; impacts and damage including deforestation, harm to ecosystems, plastics pollution	108	10.9%	“Plastic everywhere, ice melting, global warming, poor air quality”
Information (generic or non-specific); general reference to information	70	7.1%	“The evidence is building up”
Science and research; direct reference to scientific reports, material	59	6.0%	“Worrying statistics from leading scientists looking into climate change”
Impacts (generic or non-specific); general reference to impacts	38	3.8%	“Visible effects”
Protest, campaigns; climate protests, school strikes	15	1.5%	“Rise of organisations such as Extinction Rebellion who have brought this to [our] attention”
Uncoded; unclear or none of the above	162	16.3%	/

Further analysis of respondents' answers showed that respondents who said they were 'much more worried' were significantly more likely to mention growing risks and threats from climate change ($z=2.76$, $p<0.001$) and social and political inaction ($z=4.72$, $p<0.001$), compared to respondents who were only 'slightly more worried'.

3. "How worried are you about climate change?"

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Extremely worried	348	17.3%	17.3%
Very worried	398	19.7%	37.0%
Somewhat worried	692	34.3%	71.3%
Not very worried	319	15.8%	87.1%
Not at all worried	139	6.9%	94.0%
Don't know	121	6.0%	100%
Total	2018	100%	

4. "Thinking about the potential ways to tackle climate change, to what extent do you think we should do the following?"

a. Reduce the amount of meat in our diets

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
We should definitely do this	426	21.1%	21.1%
We should probably do this	635	31.5%	52.6%
We don't really need to do this	463	22.9%	75.5%
We don't need to do this at all	286	14.2%	89.7%
Don't know	208	10.3%	100%
Total	2018	100%	

a. Limit the amount of air travel (flying) we do

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
We should definitely do this	570	28.2%	28.2%
We should probably do this	781	38.7%	67.0%
We don't really need to do this	295	14.6%	81.6%
We don't need to do this at all	153	7.6%	89.2%
Don't know	218	10.8%	100%
Total	2018	100%	

5. "Which of these best describes your views about the way in which climate change needs to be addressed?"

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Addressing climate change requires an extremely high level of urgency	636	31.5%	31.5%
Addressing climate change requires a high level of urgency	615	30.5%	62.0%
Addressing climate change requires a moderate level of urgency	389	19.3%	81.3%
Addressing climate change requires a low level of urgency	107	5.3%	86.6%
Addressing climate change requires little or no urgency	85	4.2%	90.8%
Don't know	186	9.2%	100%
Total	2018	100%	

6. "The UK Parliament, as well as some cities and organisations, have recently declared a state of 'climate emergency', a motion that recognises the need to take urgent steps to tackle climate change. To what extent do you support or oppose the UK Government declaring a 'climate emergency'?"

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Strongly support	704	34.9%	34.9%
Tend to support	524	26.0%	60.9%
Neither support nor oppose	394	19.5%	80.4%
Tend to oppose	121	6.0%	86.4%
Strongly oppose	98	4.9%	91.3%
Don't know	176	8.7%	100%
Total	2018	100%	