



The Association of Environmental Justice in Israel (AEJI)
المنظمة للعدل البيئي العمومية לצדק סביבתי (ע"ר)

Climate Awareness and Action – Is there a link between public perceptions and government performance on climate policy? – An international comparison

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Editor: Carmit Lubanov

September 2020



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Acronyms and Abbreviations

AEJI	Association of Environmental Justice in Israel
CAT	Climate Action Tracker
CCA	Climate Change Awareness
CCRP	Climate Change Risk Perception
COVID 19	Corona Virus Disease 2019
EIB	European Investment Bank
EU	European Union
GHG	Greenhouse Gas
INDC	Intended Nationally Determined Contributions
NDC	Nationally Determined Contributions
PCA	Paris Climate Agreement
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
RE	Renewable Energy
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
USA	United States of America

Introduction

In recent years, it seems public discourse around climate change, its causes, and the variety of possible approaches to mitigate and adapt to the worst of its impacts have reached new levels of urgency. Scientific predictions have also become more ominous while many regions around the world have increasingly experienced extreme weather events and warmer average temperatures. The international policy response to climate change has become more ambitious as well, culminating most recently with the landmark 2015 Paris Climate Agreement (PCA), which for the first time in the history of international climate agreements legally obligated signatories to reduce their emissions in pursuit of a *quantifiable* goal: limiting global warming by the end of the century to no more than 2° degrees Celsius, while making all possible efforts to achieve only 1.5° degrees of global temperature rise (UNFCCC, 2020).

Countries party to the agreement have submitted intended nationally determined contributions (INDCs) to the UNFCCC, pledging to reduce their fair share of global emissions by the year 2030 by an amount compatible with a 2°degrees Celsius (and ideally, and 1.5° degree Celsius) warming trajectory. To curb emissions and thus achieve their NDCs, signatory countries will need to enforce major shifts in public policy that transform their economies and provoke widespread behavior changes in their populations (Leiserowitz & Howe, 2015). This is a task much easier said than done, as many sociopolitical, bureaucratic, economic, and financial factors influence the success of environmental policies. Jacobsson & Lauber's "politics of policy" theory states that legislation is *not* developed and implemented in a vacuum devoid of political agendas or values, and thus the views and values of both policymakers and the general public are important determinants of the ultimate efficacy of a policy (2006). By this theory, public perception toward climate change becomes a potentially significant determinant of the strength and ambition of climate mitigation policy, and this report aims to explore this potential association.

Several studies in the past have linked awareness of and concern for climate change and understanding of its causes to strong public advocacy and tolerance for government policies that mitigate climate warming, while others have emphasized the need for public support in order for government climate actions to be successful (Leiserowitz & Howe, 2015; Bord et al., 2000). In general, however, the relationship between climate awareness and concern and the ambition of climate policy in specific countries, especially developing countries, is not well studied or understood. Given the complexity of these interactions, unique confounding factors that exist in the public and political spheres of specific countries, and the

general lack of data on climate perceptions in developing countries, this report will not attempt to establish a robust correlation between these two variables at the cross-national level. However, by observing factors that influence climate awareness and concern at the global and regional level, and by examining climate perceptions and mitigation policy in several key countries, AEJI hopes to contribute to critical discourse on the link between public climate awareness and political climate action.

Methodology

To inform this report, a literature review was conducted that gathered the results of several international and cross-national climate awareness polls that took place between 2015 and 2019. These polls reveal some of the major factors that impact climate perceptions globally, and also give a sense of how climate perceptions in various countries have changed over time. Additionally, national climate awareness polls, academic papers, and country-specific climate policy assessments from Climate Action Tracker were examined to develop a more detailed analysis of the interaction between climate perceptions and policy in the following countries: Israel, the US, and Norway.

General Findings: Global & Regional Surveys

Lee et al., 2015, and 2007-2008 Gallup World Poll

Studies on public climate change perceptions and the various factors that influence them have been disproportionately conducted in Western nations like the US, Australia, and certain EU countries, so little is known about the progression of public awareness and concern for climate change in developing countries and at the global scale (Capstick et al., 2014). Lee et al. conducted the first global cross-sectional study to identify major sociodemographic factors that impact awareness and concern for climate change, the results of which were published in 2015. Their data on climate awareness and risk perception was taken from a 2007-2008 Gallup World Poll on climate change awareness (CCA), which surveyed thousands of respondents in 119 countries, representing about 90% of the world's population (Lee et al., 2015). Factors tested include age, education level, urban vs. rural location, income, access to communication, and community engagement on environmental matters (Mcsweeney, 2015).

According to the findings of Lee et al., there is a wide range of both climate awareness and risk perception throughout the world, though there are clear trends by region and by level of country development (Figure 1)(2015). In general, adults surveyed in developed countries were more likely to say they are aware of climate change, with over 90% of the population in US, Europe, and Japan stating they had heard of it (Mcsweeney, 2015; Lee et al., 2015). Forty percent of adults worldwide have never heard of climate change, a figure which rises as high as 65% in developing countries of Asia and Africa. Of the factors examined for an association with CCA, education level was the strongest predictor worldwide across all regions, although there

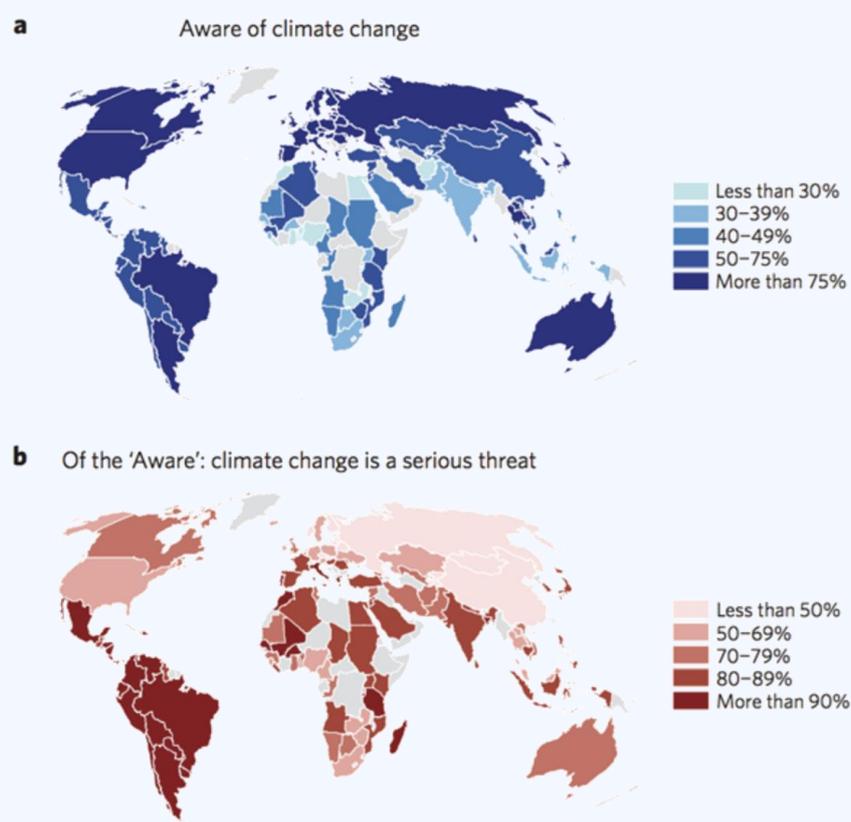


Figure 1. “Global geographic patterns of climate change perception, for a) awareness, and b) concern [in 2007-2008]. Darker shading shows countries where respondents were more aware or concerned. Light grey indicates countries with no data. Source: Lee et al. (2015).” (Mcsweeney, 2015)

was significant variation in top factors (Figure 2). For example, civic engagement, communication access and education were the top factors for the USA, but in China, they were proximity to urban areas, household income, and education. Income was the top predictor in 7 countries, while access to communications was the second highest predictor worldwide.

The results for global trends in climate change risk perception (CCRP) were the inverse of CCA, with people aware of climate change in developing countries of Latin America and Africa generally perceiving much greater risk than those in developed countries (Lee et al., 2015). Latin America and European countries displayed greater CCRP when respondents believed that climate change is mostly human-caused, while in several Asian and African countries, CCRP was most strongly associated with perceived changes in local temperatures. Local political ideologies also played a role in the CCRP of some countries, especially in the USA where the politically liberal are more likely to express concern about climate change than the politically conservative. The complexity and specificity of political situations and ideologies around the world made it difficult for Lee et al. to accurately characterize the influence of local politics on CCRP on a global scale (2015).

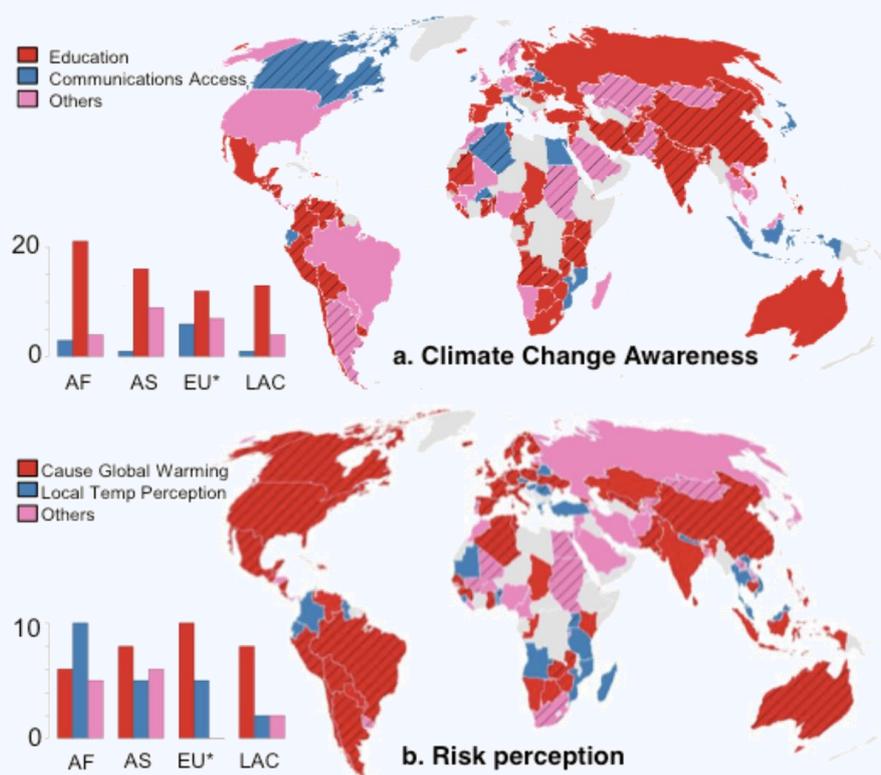


Figure 2. Top predictors by country of climate change awareness (a) and risk perception (b) in 2007-2008. (Lee et al., 2015)

Though Lee et al. did not posit the reason for the inverse relationship between CCA and CCRP in developed vs. developing countries, other studies apply the psychological distance theory to explain low CCRP in developed countries (Spence et al., 2012). According to this

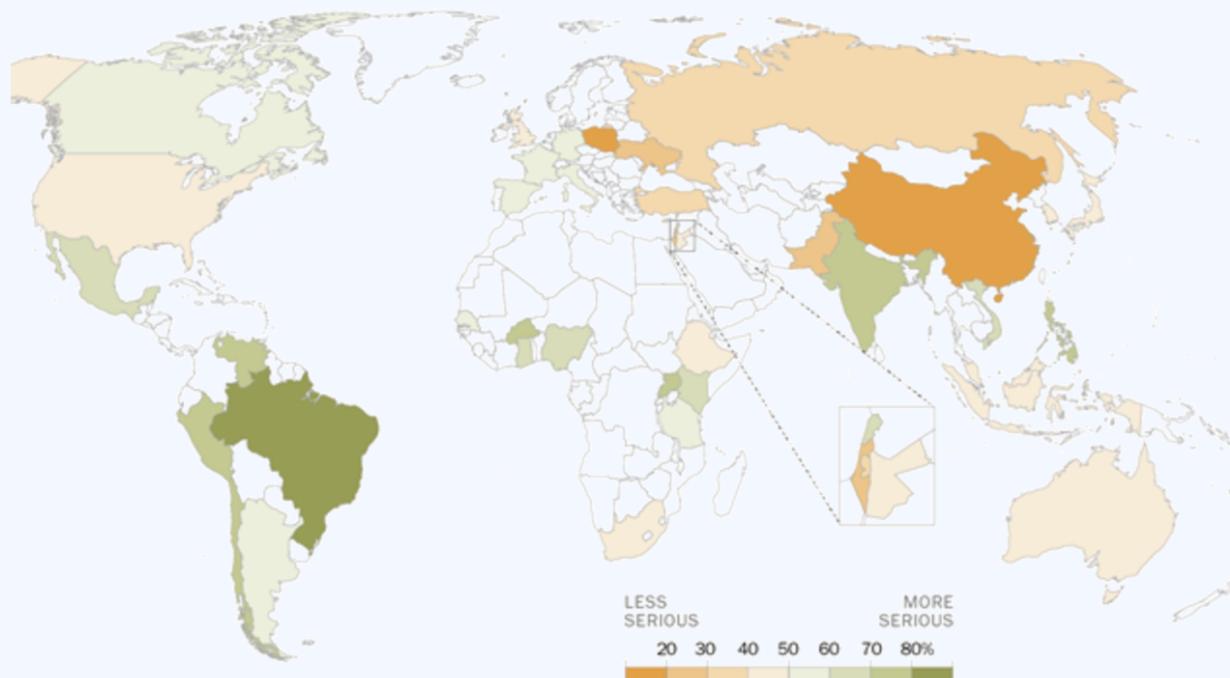
theory, members of developed country populations may feel as though the threat of climate change is far removed from them geographically (the threat is physically far away), temporally (impacts of climate change will only be felt by future generations years or decades from now), or socially (climate change is a threat to people that are *not* like ‘me’), and this as a result can lead to apathy, complacency, or even resistance toward climate action by the government and policy-driven societal change (Steentjes et al., 2017).

2015 Pew Survey on Global Attitudes and Trends

Another major poll to assess public perceptions of climate change in 2015 was a Global Attitudes Survey conducted by Pew Research Center, which gathered responses from 40 countries in the lead up to the United Nations’ 21st conference of the parties (COP) in Paris. The study indicated that climate change was a major priority for countries at that time (perhaps due to the influence of the impending COP), as a majority of those polled in all 40 countries said climate change was a serious problem (Wike, 2016). Still, there was again considerable variation among countries in level of concern about climate change, and like the findings of Lee et al., the Pew survey also found that Latin American and African countries were particularly worried about climate change (Figure 3) (Wike, 2016). Interestingly, a majority of the European population surveyed thought climate change was already harming people, indicating that the temporal aspect of psychological distance was not as present in public perceptions on climate change in Europe at the time. Again, perhaps this was a result of the increased awareness about the current impacts of climate change thanks to media coverage and other public discourse related to the upcoming COP21 in Paris.

Latin America, Africa Most Concerned about Climate Change

Percent saying global climate change is a very serious problem



Source: Spring 2015 Global Attitudes survey, Q32.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 3. Global patterns of climate change concern in 2015 (Pew Research Center).

Another interesting finding of the study was that in general, the greater a country's per capita carbon dioxide emissions, the less intensely concerned its population was about climate change (Figure 4). For example, the US has the highest emissions per capita, yet is among the countries least concerned about climate change. Australia, Canada, and Russia are also in this category. This is unsurprising if we consider that per capita emissions are proportional to a country's GDP per capita, with wealthier, more developed countries having higher GDPs and thus in general, higher per capita emissions than developing nations. This correlation of increasing CO₂ emissions with diminishing concern for climate change agrees with Lee et al.'s finding about CCRP in developed vs. developing countries. One last finding of the Pew survey was that 78% of people believed an international government agreement was needed to combat climate change, indicating widespread support for the Paris Climate Agreement and the development of country-level climate action policies to fulfill it (Wike, 2016).

High CO2 Emitters Are Less Intensely Concerned about Climate Change

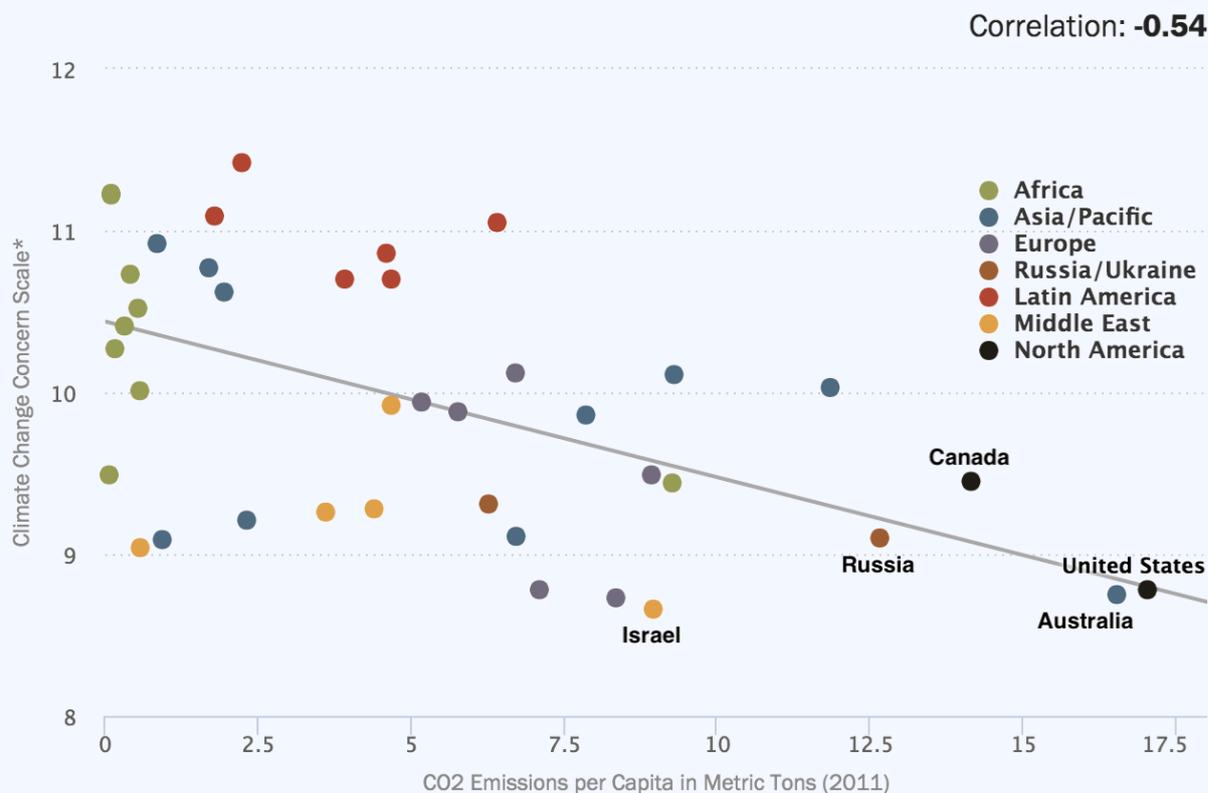


Figure 4. Notice that Israel is in the middle range for per capita CO₂ emissions, yet climate change concern is way below the predicted level by the regression curve. (Pew Research Center, 2016)

2018 Pew Survey on Global Attitudes and Trends

The 2018 Pew Survey on Global Attitudes and Trends did not exclusively focus on public climate change perceptions, but instead yielded interesting insights on what 26 surveyed nations feel are the greatest threats facing the world today, climate change among them. Of the 26, half of all countries named climate change as the top international threat over terrorism by ISIS and cyberattacks from other countries (Figure 5) (Poushter & Huang, 2019). Thorough comparison of this study to Lee et al. (2015) is limited by the lack of polling in Asia and Africa, but we can see that since 2015 and the Gallup polls of 2007-2008, climate change remains the top concern in Latin America, while in Europe it seems to only recently have emerged as a major perceived threat, with 71% of surveyed countries in Europe selecting climate change as their biggest issue. (Poushter & Huang, 2019). This Pew survey also examined how concern for climate change has shifted over time by comparing the results of the 2018 survey with the version conducted in 2017 as well as 2013. We can clearly see that overall concern for climate

change as a major threat has increased steadily among the 23 countries surveyed by Pew since 2013 (Figure 6, Figure 7) (Poushter & Huang, 2019). The Pew surveys do not try to elucidate the drivers of climate change concern, but perhaps the increasing influence of several factors discussed by Lee et al. (for example, perceptions of local temperature and weather changes, and increasing belief or understanding of scientific evidence that climate change is mainly anthropogenic), among other mechanisms, are the cause for increasing risk perceptions (2015).

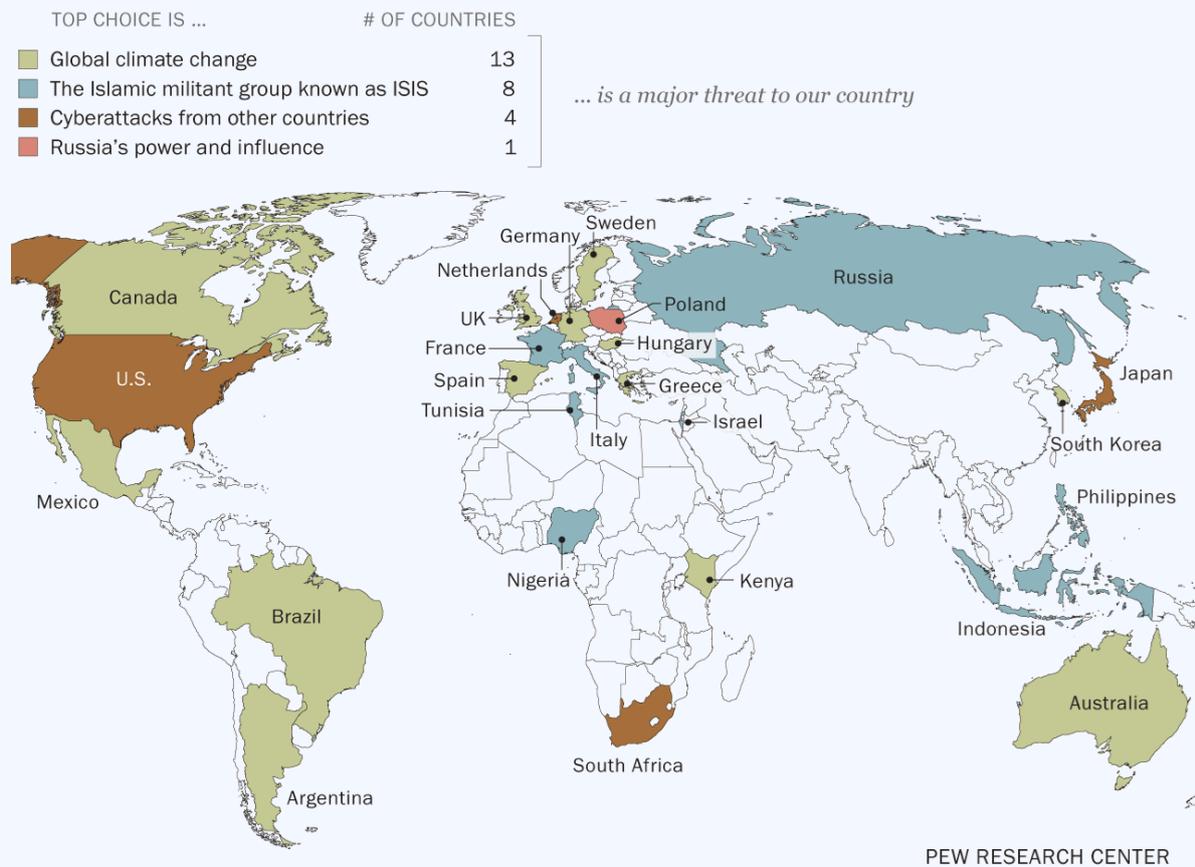


Figure 5. Major perceived threats around the world in 2018 (Pew Research Center)

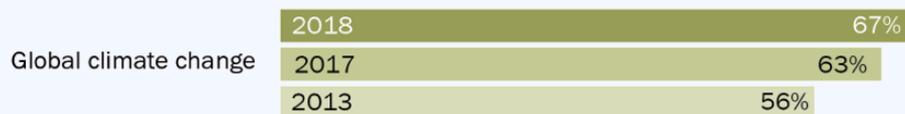


Figure 6. Publics around the world increasingly see climate change as a threat. The bars represent the percentage of global respondents in 26 countries that view climate change as a major threat to their country. (Pew Research Center, 2018)

Since 2013, concerns about climate change have increased in many countries

Climate change is a major threat to our country



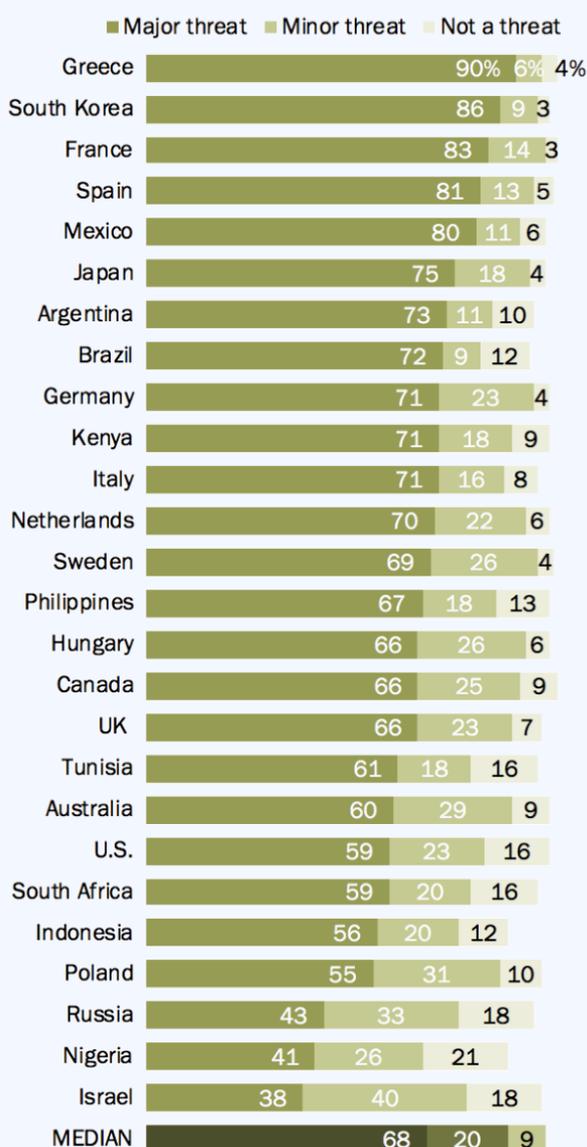
Note: Countries shown experienced a 10 percentage point change or greater over this time period.
 Source: Spring 2018 Global Attitudes Survey, Q22d.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 7. Increase in climate change concern in select countries between 2013 and 2018 (Pew Research Center).

In most surveyed countries, majorities see climate change as a major threat

Global climate change is a ___ to our country



Source: Spring 2018 Global Attitudes Survey. Q22d.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 8. Public perception of the threat posed by global climate change in select countries

concern in China between 2007 and 2015 was significantly lower than both the EU and the US, and only recently may have experienced a significant increase, as evidenced by the EIB survey results. This increase in Chinese concern may be due to an increasing understanding of the anthropogenic causes of climate change, as well as more frequent experiences of weather and temperature abnormalities among Chinese populations, as posited by Lee et al. (Figure 9)

2019 European Investment Bank (EIB) Climate Survey

Compared to the surveys discussed in the report thus far, the EIB Climate Survey is even more selective, examining climate change attitudes in the EU, the US, and China exclusively. In general, the overrepresentation of developed nations in public opinion research on climate is an issue, and researchers and policymakers would truly benefit from understanding diverse climate change perspectives on a global scale. But it is simultaneously important to have a robust understanding of how populations of major world powers feel about climate change, as the EU and top emitters like the US and China must lead the charge on ambitious climate action and mitigation policy if there is any hope of achieving the goals of the Paris Agreement. For this reason, this survey was included in the report. According to the EIB, about half of Europeans, 39% of Americans, and 73% of Chinese think climate change is a major threat (Figure 9) (Fleming, 2020). Across the studies

discussed in this report thus far, climate change concern in the US was typically found to be lower than concern in EU countries by up to 10%, while

(2015). The physical component of psychological distance toward climate change is practically non-existent among Chinese, with 98% reporting that climate change currently impacts their daily lives.

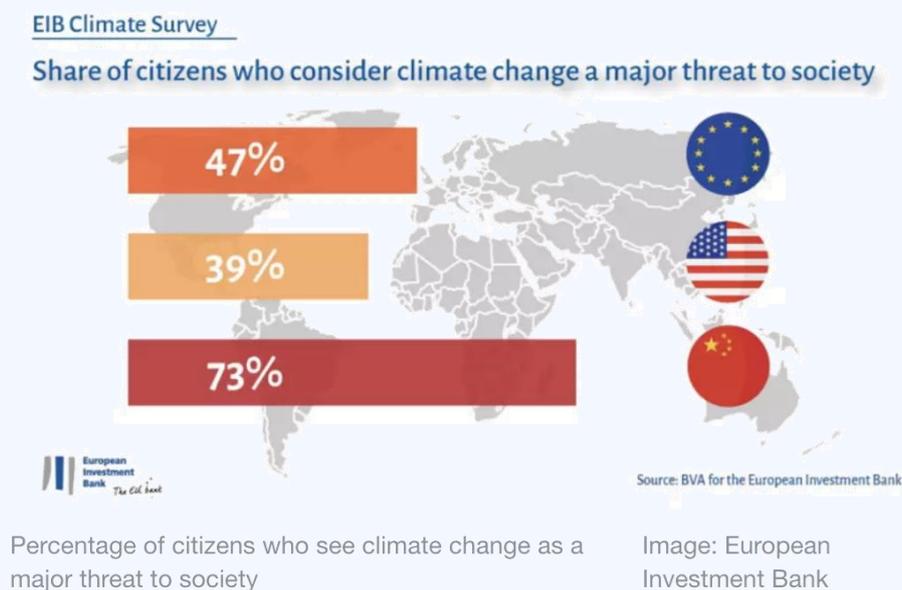


Figure 9. Perceptions of the threat of climate change in the EU, China, and US (EIB, 2020)

In Europe, the perceived influence of climate change in daily life is slightly different by region, with over 90% of South and Eastern Europeans perceiving a daily impact from climate change, versus 70% or less of North Europeans (Figure 10) (EIB, 2020). This is an interesting difference considering that among various issues, climate change was found to be of greatest concern for North Europe countries like the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark and Germany, while for South Europe countries like Spain and Italy, unemployment overshadowed climate worries, despite the reported toll that climate change is already having on Southern Europe (EIB, 2020).

Country-Specific Findings and Comparisons: The US, Norway, and Israel

This section will examine climate change perceptions and the ambition of climate action policy in three countries. The US was chosen as one of the world's major greenhouse gas emitters, while Norway was chosen due to its reputation for environmentalism and sustainability. Finally, as a small and rapidly-developed nation, Israel will also be examined.

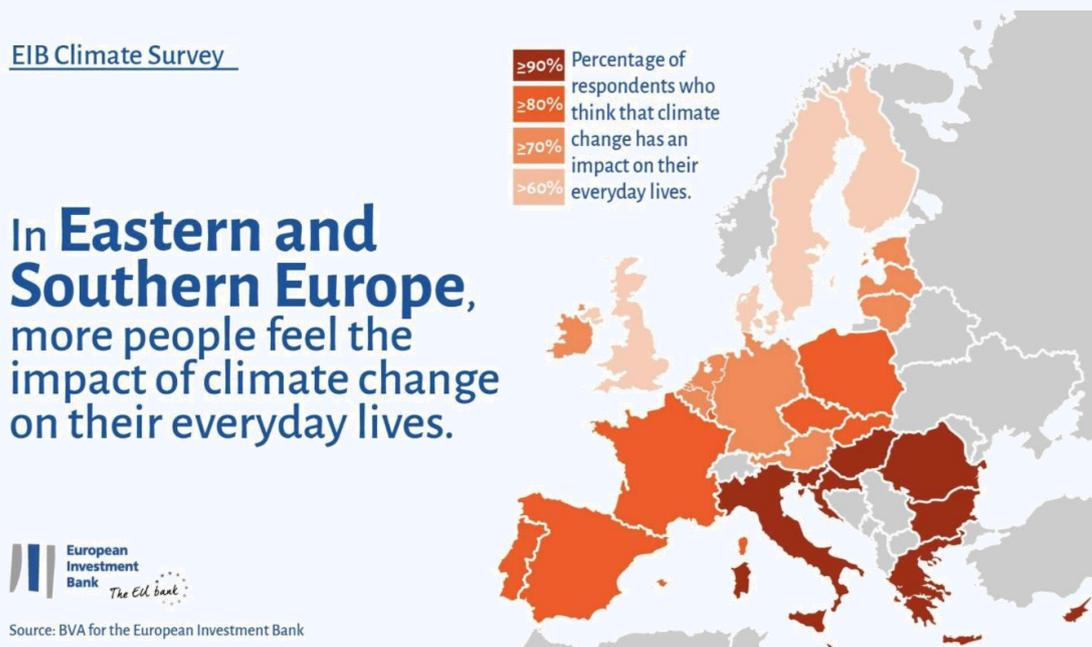


Figure 10. Public perceptions of the daily impact of climate change in the EU (EIB, 2020)

The USA

CCA is among the highest in the world in the US according to Lee et al., with 97.7% Americans reporting they are aware of climate change. However, at only 64%, CCRP among Americans is on the low end of the global spectrum based on results of the 2007-2008 Gallup World Poll. CCRP was even lower in 2018, with only 59% of Americans reporting climate change as a major threat to the country in the Pew Global Attitudes survey (Figure 8), though CCRP in the US has increased nearly 20% since 2013 (Figure 7) (Poushter & Huang, 2019). One potential cause of lower CCRP in the US after the 2008 survey could be the impact of climate skepticism, which increased in the US between 2006-2010 according to several studies (Smith & Leiserowitz, 2012). Climate skepticism has remained pervasive in the US, with potentially greater influence on climate perceptions in recent years due to the rise of the Trump Administration. In 2019, 13% of Americans surveyed by the YouGov-Cambridge Globalism

Project agreed that the climate is changing, but humans aren't responsible, making the US the country with the highest percentage of anthropogenic climate deniers in the developed world (Milman & Harvey, 2019). By contrast, only about 6% of Chinese, and 4% of British denied the anthropogenic nature of climate change.

Considering it's profile as a high CCA and relatively low CCRP country, as well as its historic role as one of the world's top GHG emitters, it is not surprising that the US is one of the most unambitious countries in the world when it comes to it's NDC under the Paris Agreement and it's national climate mitigation policy. According to Climate Action Tracker (CAT), the US's current NDC is "critically insufficient", and is compatible with a warming trajectory that exceeds 4° degrees by the end of the century (CAT, 2020). Major rollbacks of climate policy and relaxation of environmental regulations since the Trump Administration came to power have devastated the US' mitigation efforts, which were lackluster even before Trump's election. In the last four years the Trump government has done away with Obama-era vehicle emissions and fuel efficiency standards, lowered energy efficiency appliances standards, and weakened regulations on the release of methane from oil and gas-fired power plants, among numerous other actions that have deterred the US's climate response (CAT, 2020). Moreover, in a symbolic statement of the current government's apathy towards the climate crisis, Trump initiated the official withdrawal of the US from the Paris agreement in 2019 (CAT, 2020).

Though the Trump administration has done much harm to US climate policy, there is still hope that a newly elected administration in 2020 will see the implementation of a "New Green Deal" policy package that would revitalize the US economy in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, and cut national emissions by transformation of the energy, building, and transport sectors (CAT, 2020). It is also likely that Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement will be reversed if a new administration is elected.

Norway

Norway's CCA is also among the highest in the world, with 97.5% of Norwegians reporting they are aware of climate change (Lee et al., 2015; Mcsweeney, 2015). At the same time, Norway is among the 10 lowest countries for CCRP, with only 45.5% of Norwegians considering climate change a serious threat (Lee et al., 2015; Mcsweeney, 2015). Despite low concern about climate change, Norway like other Scandinavian countries has a reputation for environmentalism and sustainability both domestically and internationally (Steentjes et al., 2017). For example, 57% of Norwegians consider being environmentally friendly an important

part of their national identity (Steentjes et al., 2017). Norway's domestic energy sector is essentially carbon-neutral and renewable, with 95% of electricity generated by hydropower plants, and the rest from wind farms (CAT, 2020). However, as the world's fifth largest exporter of crude oil, Norway has the biggest hydrocarbon reserves in Europe, and this industry represents a substantial amount of the country's annual GHG footprint (CAT, 2020; Steentjes et al., 2017).

The conflict of interest between the Norwegian environmental identity and the country's highly-polluting oil and gas industry create a challenge for national policymakers when it comes to climate action. This along with the potential influence of low CCRP among the Norwegian public may in part explain Norway's unambitious Paris Agreement NDC, which Climate Action Tracker labels as insufficient, and compatible with between 2-3° degrees of warming (CAT, 2020). Even with the increased ambition of its newly revised NDC, submitted to the UNFCCC in February 2020, Norway's emissions reduction goals still support a warming trajectory greater than 2 degrees. However, the fact that Norway was one of the first countries to submit a revision of its NDC is an indication of the country's serious commitment to the PCA. Additionally, in June 2019, the Norwegian Parliament voted to divest a major government pension fund from its oil and gas industries, instead diverting some of these investments into developing renewable energy (CAT, 2020). In terms of long-term climate action, Norway has enforced a carbon tax on its offshore drilling activities since 1991, and by 2018, 80% of the country's GHG emissions were taxed (CAT, 2020). Finally, when it comes to future mitigation policy, Norway's National Transport Plan aims to fully decarbonize the national transport system by 2029 (CAT, 2020)

Israel

Climate change awareness has been growing slowly in Israel, but CCRP remains fairly low despite the severe climate impacts predicted for the Middle East in the coming decades. In a 2010 Gallup Poll, 83% of Israelis were familiar with the terms 'global warming' and 'climate change', though a survey conducted by AEJI to assess public climate perceptions in Israel in 2015 found that only 73% of Israelis were familiar with climate change (AEJI, 2015). Even in the last five years, CCRP in Israel has been quite low, with less than 30% of Israelis considering climate change a very serious problem according to the 2015 Pew Survey (Figure 3, Figure 4), though there was an increase to 38% in the 2018 version of the survey (Figure 8) (Wike, 2016; Poushter & Huang, 2019). Thus, it appears that concern over climate change is indeed increasing among the Israeli public, however, other threats maintain higher priority in the

public attention, including terrorism, cyberattacks from other nations, regional war, and traffic accidents (AEJI, 2015; Poushter & Huang, 2019). Temporal distance from climate change doesn't seem to influence a majority of Israeli perceptions, as 66% believe impacts from climate change are already occurring (AEJI, 2015). However, concern for climate change is low, the public remains focused on issues unrelated to the environment, and there is a pervasive attitude among the Israeli public and government that Israel's tiny size makes its actions for or against climate change mitigation ultimately insignificant, all of which have unpromising implications for the ambition of Israeli climate policy.

Unsurprisingly, Israel has little for climate change legislation, despite being a signatory to the PCA, and is one of four OECD countries without a major framework plan to achieve the emissions reductions pledged in its NDC (Schuster, 2019). In the past, Israel has also spent substantially less of its federal budget on climate change-related programs compared to the EU and the United States. For example, in 2010 Israel spent only about 0.07% of its state budget on a nation-wide plan to reduce GHG emissions, which is about 57 times less than the average national budget expenditure for climate action in the European Union (4%), and 4.3 times less than federal budget climate expenditure in the United States (0.3%) (Levy, 2016). In terms of progress towards its NDC, Israel is already lagging behind in meeting its emissions reduction targets according to senior members of Israel Union for Environmental Defense, and even if it is actually achieved, the target set out in Israel's NDC would still lead to a net rise in the country's emissions by 2050 (Schuster, 2019). Israel's budgetary commitments to emissions reduction have remained reluctant since its signing of the PCA, with only about 10 million NIS allocated to climate programs in 2015-2016, and a 23% budget reduction of 70 million NIS from federal energy efficiency investment grants in 2017-2018, which were promoted as a major climate action strategy in the government's 2016 GHG reduction plan to fulfill Israel's NDC (Levy, 2016). Additionally, the rapid and recent development of Israel's natural gas industry poses a serious conflict of interest to emission reduction efforts, and is an obstacle to the development of robust climate action policy for Israel's energy sector. Despite this fact, the Ministry of Energy did just announce in June 2020 an updated renewable energy (RE) plan for 2030 as part of Israel's commitment to the PCA, raising the national target from 17% to 30%, and pledging billions of shekels of investment in the domestic RE industry. This policy is a step in the right direction, but many policymakers and RE industry leaders say that the goal could be more ambitious still.

Discussion & Conclusion:

Given the plethora of unique factors at the national level that affect public awareness and concern for climate change, and as well as climate action policy in a particular country, it remains a challenge to discern a clear, causal relationship between widespread climate awareness and concern and ambitious climate mitigation by national governments. However, despite the complexity of these variables, it is still possible to summarize some important insights from the studies and sources discussed in this report.

From Lee et. al's findings, it is clear that education is vital for increasing climate awareness, which is a necessary precursor for cultivating climate concern, risk perception, and advocacy (2015). Thus, all countries, especially developing ones, would benefit from increasing basic education and climate literacy. In addition, because of the obstacle that psychological distance poses for cultivating climate change concern and activism in some countries (especially wealthy, developed ones), increasing individuals' understanding of the localized impacts and personal significance of climate change through public education initiatives could be an effective way to cultivate public engagement and support for climate action (Leiserowitz & Howe, 2015). These changes are likely to occur naturally over time as standards of living and education levels around the world continue to rise. Public concern in many countries is also likely to grow on its own as people begin experiencing abnormal temperature and weather patterns at greater intensities and frequencies. However, we cannot wait for these trends to occur naturally - we must be proactive about cultivating climate awareness and advocacy in the present and near future, as the mitigation window we have to enforce strong policies and reduce global emissions before future climate impacts become drastic is narrowing quickly.

Political ideologies and economic interests have a complicated and often negative impact on the interaction between public climate concerns and climate action policy. This is evident from the political and economic issues that plague the US's climate mitigation attempts, and slow the growth of climate activism in Israel, as well as from the industrial interests that prevent even a reputedly sustainable country like Norway from achieving its climate action goals under the Paris Agreement. One important, but perhaps more long-term strategy to deal with economic and political issues is to bolster the value of the natural environment, sustainability, and climate advocacy within a country's national identity by increasing basic education and climate literacy.

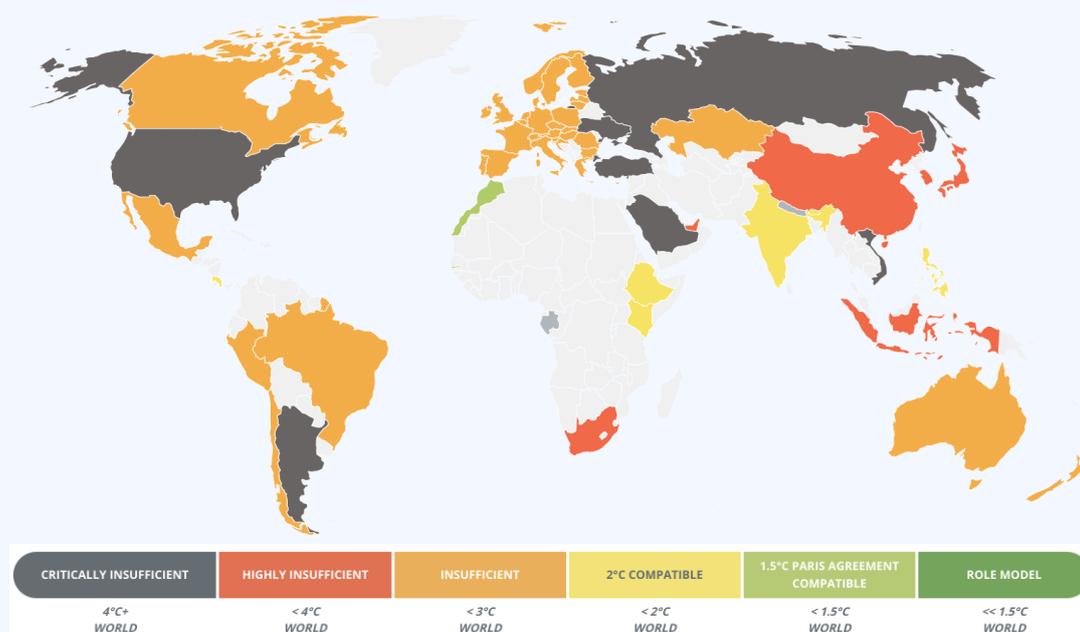


Figure 11. Compatibility of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) with the goals of the Paris Agreement, based on historical emissions by country and resulting level of emissions reduction needed to maintain global warming below 1.5° degrees Celsius. (CAT, 2020)

If members of a society are raised with strong environmental values, this could strengthen the environmental agenda of the public against the short-sighted interests of national governments and economies. However, a concerned public does not necessarily ensure strong climate policy - as even countries with the most concerned populations still fail to achieve the goals of the Paris Climate Agreement through their NDCs and other national climate policies (Figure 11). Thus, it appears that policymakers need to approach both policy and public perception as independent (albeit interrelated) components of climate action.

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Association of Environmental Justice in Israel (AEJI) is a non-partisan, an independent non-profit body, set up as a Research and Resources Center that focuses on the inter-connectedness of society, environment and the decision-making framework in different governance levels, in order to produce policy recommendations that are real and acceptable while promoting the strengthening of democracy, equality and open governance values.

AEJI works with different stakeholders in the governance, academia, civic society and with the international community to advance sustainable solutions and to create an economic basis for civic engagement among disadvantaged population groups, especially of minorities.

AEJI works to strengthen regional collaborations in the Middle-East and the Mediterranean basin region, based on the understanding that partnerships will lead to reducing environmental risks and strengthen economic, social and environmental resilience and regional sustainability for the benefit of all peoples in the region.



How to Take Action on Climate?

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