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Americans among most misinformed about global warming

Environment

CHAMPAIGN, Ill. -- Despite huge differences in all kinds of resources, citizens of poorer developing countries have essentially the same level of knowledge about the sources of global warming as citizens of richer developed countries -- and that level isn't very high.

"I find this quite remarkable," said Steven R. Brechin, the author of a new cross-national study of public opinion and global climatic change. "In essence, we humans are equally ignorant about the causes of global climatic change. Citizens of poor countries have a pretty good excuse, but what is ours?"

A sociology professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Brechin presented his findings to the American Sociological Association meeting in August. His study will be published this fall in a special issue of the *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*.

For his study of the views and attitudes of ordinary citizens all over the globe, Brechin analyzed a variety of public opinion polls conducted since the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, the international agreement created to regulate the release of greenhouse gases. Polls included various Gallup and Pew Research Center polls and studies by the research group Environics International.

Some of the most surprising findings concern U.S. citizens. Not only are Americans "more or less equally misinformed" as people elsewhere about the causes of global warming, but they also are "among the most misinformed of the developed nations surveyed. Only the Japanese and the French are more so," Brechin wrote.

A 2001 poll, for example, found that only 15 percent of the U.S. citizens surveyed correctly identified burning fossil fuels as the primary cause of global warming. "Even the Cubans, at 17 percent, were slightly more informed," Brechin wrote. The citizens of Mexico led all 15 countries surveyed, with 26 percent of the respondents correctly identifying fossil fuels.

Two years earlier, a 27-nation study of the human sources of greenhouse gases revealed that most of the respondents in each country did not know that burning fossil fuels, such as oil, gas and coal, and their resulting release of carbon dioxide, was the main human source of greenhouse gases. Finland achieved the highest percentage of correct responses (17); the United States and China each got 11 percent.

Although the United States remains the largest emitter of carbon dioxide from fuel combustion, the Bush administration in 2001 withdrew from the Kyoto Protocol because, the White House said, it would hurt American business too much. Only 29 percent of the American people approved of the Bush decision; 44 percent disapproved, which was about half the number of Europeans who disapproved.

Brechin concludes that where global warming policy is concerned, "the international community, especially the Europeans and Japanese, may need to continue to serve as America's conscience."

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