

# **What we learned about public opinion on climate and the environment this year: 10 takeaways from polling in 2021**

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Polling has shown Americans' concerns about climate and environmental issues rising this year. With this heightened concern, we have seen high and enduring public support for a range of actions that would address the climate crisis and put the country on a path to a cleaner future.

This memo summarizes 10 key takeaways from polling on climate and environmental issues this year, including that:

- 1. The public is more worried about climate change than ever before**
- 2. Americans increasingly recognize the link between climate change and extreme weather**
- 3. Hot weather events are the most likely to be seen as climate-driven**
- 4. Republican voters' attitudes toward clean energy are highly malleable**
- 5. Significant numbers of Republican voters disagree with how their party is handling climate and environmental issues**
- 6. Climate change is now a top-tier priority for Democratic voters**
- 7. The Build Back Better plan is popular, and resilient**
- 8. Americans support climate action in Build Back Better, and want more**
- 9. Scientists are still trusted authorities on climate change**
- 10. The public wants to hold corporate polluters accountable for their damage**

## 1.) The public is more worried about climate change than ever before

The 70% of Americans who say they are at least “somewhat” worried about global warming is the highest figure that the [Yale Program on Climate Change Communication and George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication have found in their tracking surveys going back to 2008](#). Roughly one-third say they are “very” worried about global warming (35%), which also represents a new high in Yale and George Mason’s tracking and a 10-point increase between March and September 2021.

The September 2021 Yale/George Mason survey also found record-high recognition that climate change is happening (76%) and record-high percentages saying they are worried about air pollution (76%), extreme heat (76%), and droughts (68%) harming their local area.

Climate change and the environment also now ranks consistently as one of Americans’ top issue priorities in tracking surveys conducted by the Economist and YouGov. The [first Economist/YouGov survey of the year](#), in early January, found that 9% of Americans named climate change and the environment as their single most important issue. In [mid-December](#), 14% named climate change and the environment as their most important issue - putting the issue now on par with jobs and the economy (14%) and trailing only health care (19%).

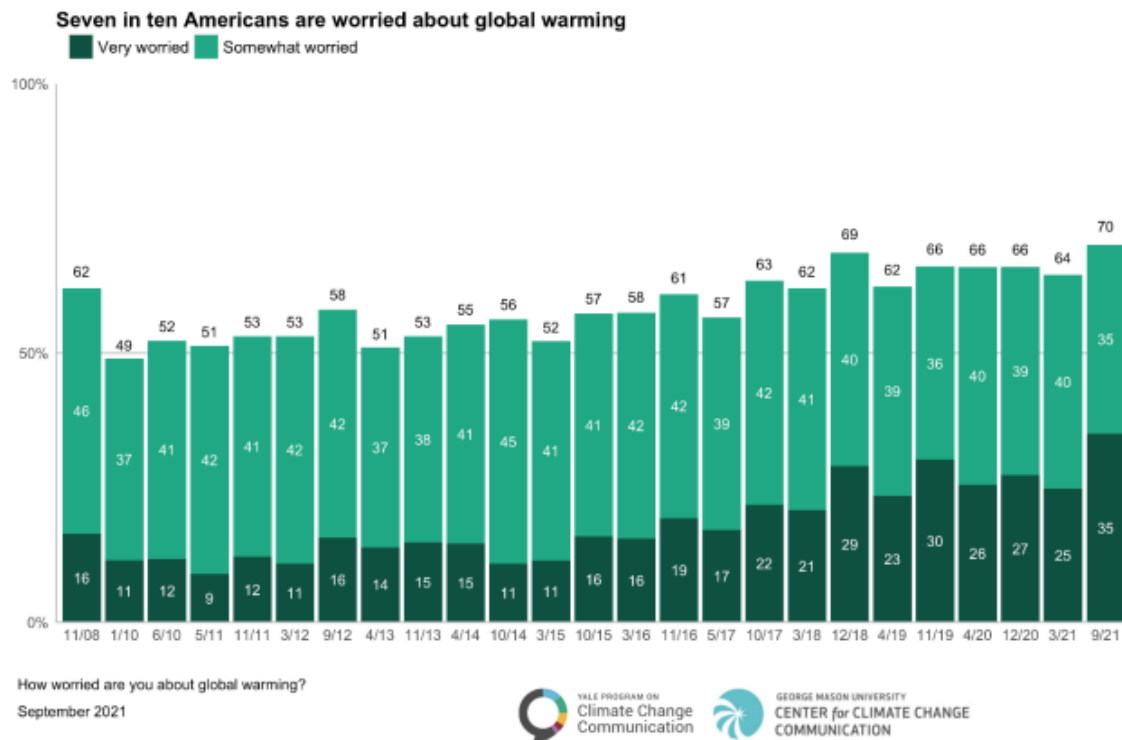


Chart from [Yale Program on Climate Change Communication and George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication, Sep. 2021](#)

## 2.) Americans increasingly recognize the link between climate change and extreme weather

The [latest survey conducted by Yale and George Mason](#) in September 2021 also found that 70% of Americans believe that global warming is affecting weather in the United States, a new high in the two institutions' tracking on this question going back to 2013.

The myriad extreme weather events that occurred during the summer of 2021 appear to have forced more Americans to recognize the increased frequency and severity of extreme weather. The [Pew Research Center found that Americans were particularly attuned to extreme weather this summer](#), with two-thirds (67%) in September saying that extreme weather events in the U.S. were happening more often than in the past.

Between March and September, the percentage saying that global warming was affecting weather in the United States increased by nine points (70%, up from 61%) and the percentage saying that global warming was affecting weather in the United States "a lot" increased by 12 points (43%, up from 31%) in Yale and George Mason's tracking. Relatedly, Yale and George Mason's September survey found majorities for the first time saying they have personally experienced the effects of global warming (52%, up from 42% in March) and that people in in the United States are being harmed "right now" by global warming (55%, up from 45%).

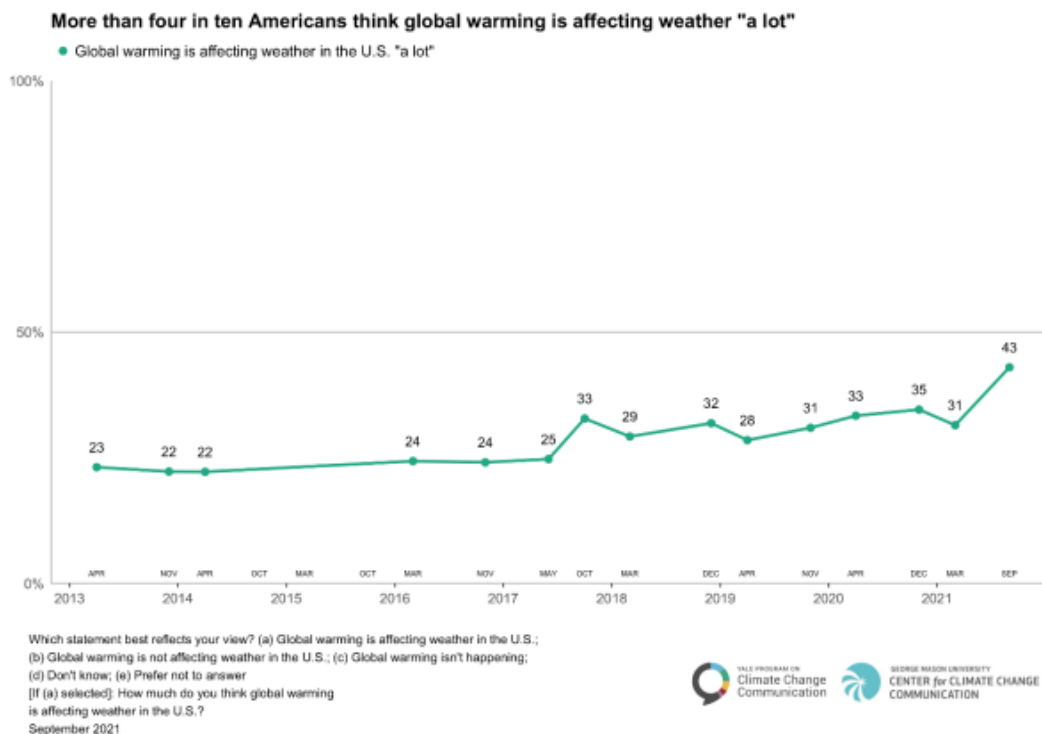
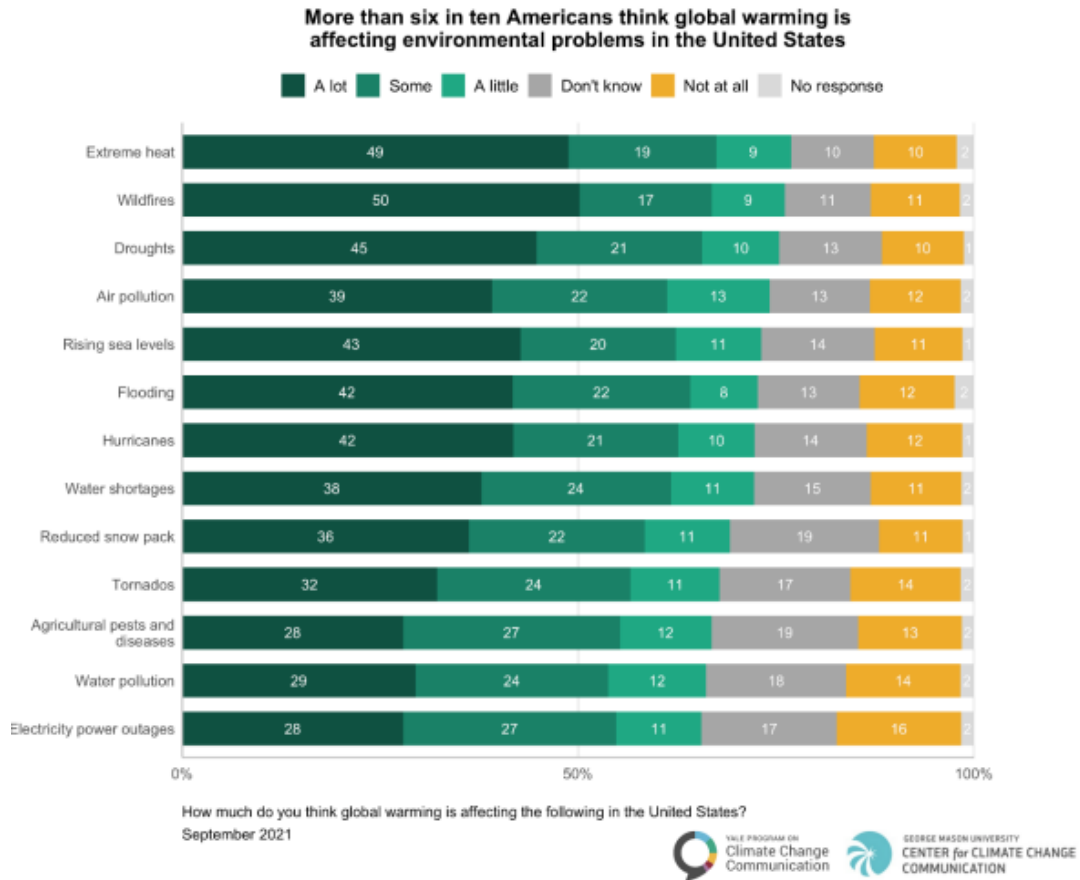


Chart from [Yale Program on Climate Change Communication and George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication, Sep. 2021](#)

### 3.) Hot weather events are the most likely to be seen as climate-driven

In terms of specific types of extreme weather, [Yale and George Mason's September survey](#) shows that Americans are most likely to believe that global warming is having at least “some” effect on hot weather events such as extreme heat (68%), wildfires (67%), and droughts (66%). Slightly lesser majorities believe that global warming is having at least “some” effect on hurricanes (63%) and tornadoes (56%).



Surveys by the Economist and YouGov found a similar effect when tracking attitudes about specific extreme weather events over the summer. In their [late July national survey](#), for example, they found that Americans were slightly more likely to see climate change as a cause behind the Pacific Northwest heat wave (49%) and the California drought emergency (47%) than the Texas cold snap (43%) or severe hurricanes like Katrina and Harvey (43%).

A [study published this year](#) utilizing Yale and George Mason’s survey data relatedly found that hot, dry days increase Americans’ perceived experiences with global warming while extreme rainfall and flooding do not appear to have the same effect.

Chart from [Yale Program on Climate Change Communication and George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication, Sep. 2021](#)

## 4.) Republican voters' attitudes toward clean energy are highly malleable

One of the major findings in the [Pew Research Center's annual environmental report](#) was the dramatic change in self-identified Republicans' attitudes about environmental issues between May 2020 and April 2021 - coinciding with the transition of power from Trump's presidential administration to Biden's.

For example, while Pew found that 65% of Republican voters in early 2020 believed that the country should prioritize renewables over fossil fuels, more Republican voters in April 2021 said that expanding fossil fuels should be the country's energy priority (52%) than developing alternative energy sources (47%).

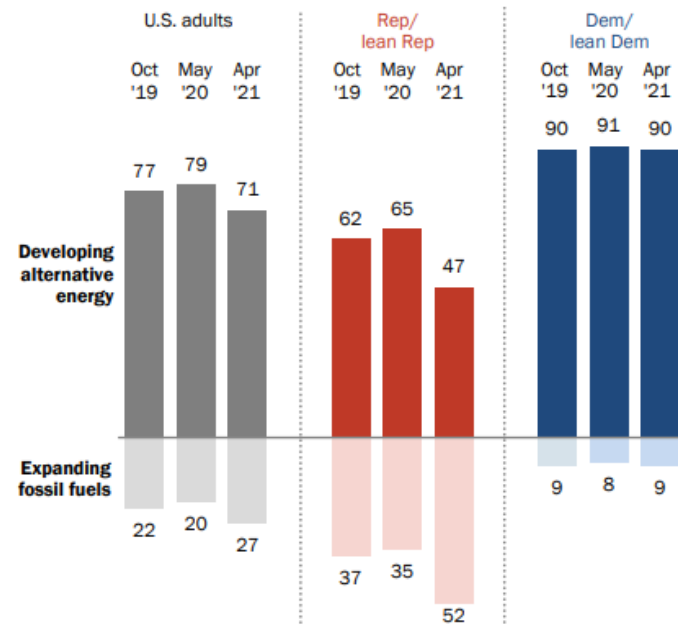
Between the two surveys, Pew also found that Republican voters' support for expanding solar power (73%, down from 84%) and wind power (62%, down from 75%) both dropped by double digits.

Yale and George Mason observed a similar shift in Republicans' attitudes between [April 2020](#) and [March 2021](#). They found that the percentage of Republicans who said that developing sources of clean energy should be a "very high" or "high" priority for the President and Congress dropped by 16 points (31%, down from 47%) over that time span before rebounding to 42% in their [September 2021 survey](#) - providing further evidence of how fluid Republican voters' attitudes are on the issue.

Chart from [Pew Research Center, Apr. 2021](#)

### Most Democrats prioritize alternative energy development, Republicans are now divided

% of U.S. adults who say the more important priority for addressing America's energy supply should be ...



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted April 20-29, 2021.

"Gen Z, Millennials Stand Out for Climate Change Activism, Social Media Engagement With Issue"

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## **5.) Significant numbers of Republican voters disagree with how their party is handling climate and environmental issues**

Morning Consult periodically asks respondents in their national voter surveys which party they trust more on major issues, and this polling has shown clear wedges between the Republican Party and many of its voters on climate change and the environment.

In a [December survey](#), for example, Morning Consult found that self-identified Republican voters nearly universally said they trusted Republicans in Congress over Democrats in Congress on issues such as the economy (88%), national security (88%), and immigration (88%). However,

far lesser majorities of Republican voters said that they trusted Republicans in Congress over Democrats in Congress on the environment (64%) and climate change (59%). Further, these are the only two issues on which double-digit percentages of Republican voters said that they trusted Democrats in Congress over their own party.

These findings are consistent with an [August Reuters/Ipsos poll](#) that asked respondents whether the Democratic Party, Republican Party, or independents had a “better plan, policy, or approach” to major issues. Clear majorities of self-identified Republican voters said that they preferred the Republican Party’s handling of issues such as immigration (74%) and the U.S. economy (72%), while the environment was the only issue tested on which *less than half* of Republican voters (44%) said that the Republican Party had the best approach.

PARTY TRUST ON ISSUES (REPUBLICANS)		
<i>Which party do you trust more on...</i>	Democrats in Congress	Republicans in Congress
Climate change	14	59
The environment	14	64
Medicare & Social Security	9	75
Health care	9	77
Coronavirus	8	74
Gun policy	8	81
Education	7	79
Energy	7	80
Voting rights	6	80
Immigration	5	88
Jobs	4	86
The economy	4	88
National security	3	88

Chart uses data from [POLITICO + Morning Consult, Dec. 2021](#)

## 6.) Climate change is now a top-tier priority for Democratic voters

Among Democratic voters, climate change has emerged as an issue of nearly unparalleled concern this year. In a [December survey by POLITICO and Morning Consult](#), more Democrats said that passing a bill to address climate change and its effects should be a “top priority” for Congress (56%) than any other priority aside from stimulating the economy to recover from the coronavirus pandemic (60%) and passing a healthcare reform bill (57%).

The Economist and YouGov have recorded a similar trend among Democratic voters. In their [mid-December survey](#), more self-identified Democrats named climate change and the environment when asked to name their single “most important issue” (26%) than any other issue besides health care (27%). Of the 14 issue areas to select from, jobs and the economy (10%) and civil rights (10%) were the only other options that double-digit percentages of Democrats chose as their top priority.

This represents a notable shift in Democratic voters’ priorities over the course of the year, with climate change and the environment rising sharply in importance and reverting back to even higher than its pre-pandemic levels of priority. At the start of 2021, [the Economist and YouGov found](#) that climate change and the environment was the third-highest priority for Democrats with 14% naming it as their “most important” issue - a few points behind jobs and the economy (17%) and well behind health care (33%). Democratic voters’ priorities now more closely mirror where they were in mid-January 2020, just before the first confirmed COVID-19 cases in the U.S, when [Economist/YouGov polling](#) found that health care (29%) and the environment (22%) were Democrats’ preeminent issue concerns.

Chart uses data from [POLITICO + Morning Consult, Dec. 2021](#)

TOP PRIORITIES FOR CONGRESS		
<i>How high of a priority should [X] be for Congress? (% saying “a top priority”)</i>	All Registered Voters	Democrats
Stimulating the economy to recover from the pandemic	54	60
Healthcare reform bill	44	57
Bill to address climate change and its effects	35	56
Legislation placing additional restrictions on gun ownership	34	54
Infrastructure spending bill	34	46
Bill to reduce inequality	26	41
Reducing the federal budget deficit	48	35
Eliminating the Senate filibuster	24	35
Student loan debt relief bill	23	32
Immigration reform bill	36	31
Regulating tech companies	19	21
Bill to legalize marijuana	17	21



## 7.) The Build Back Better plan is popular, and resilient

Polls have consistently shown that the majority of Americans support the Build Back Better Act when they are told about it, and the level of public support has been very stable over time.

Monmouth University has asked about the proposal now known as the Build Back Better plan [in four polls since April 2021](#) and found that support consistently hovers between 61% and 64%.

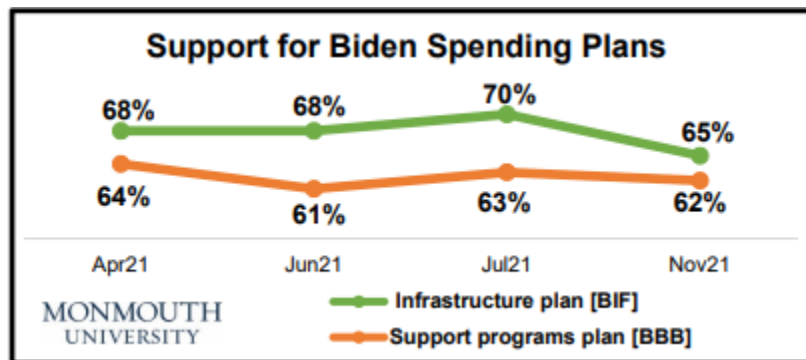
Invest in America and Data for Progress have asked about the current iteration of the plan in [four surveys since early November](#), and similarly found that roughly three-fifths of Americans supported the plan in each poll. This has also been the consistent finding in [polling by Navigator](#), which has measured support for the plan between 58% and 60% in three surveys since early November.

It's important to note that polls conducted by Monmouth, Invest in America

+ Data for Progress, and Navigator have all measured support for Build Back Better after providing respondents with short descriptions of the plan that include some mention of its major provisions. Polling on the plan has consistently shown that Americans support the plan more the more they learn about what's in it, so the stable support that these organizations have found in their polling should be interpreted as support for the *substance* of the legislation.

Polls that have asked about Build Back Better without providing any real specifics about what's in it, such as a [December poll by POLITICO and Morning Consult](#) that asked whether voters support or oppose "the Democrats' roughly \$2 trillion Build Back Better climate and social spending package" (50% support / 37% oppose), tend to yield narrower margins in favor of it.

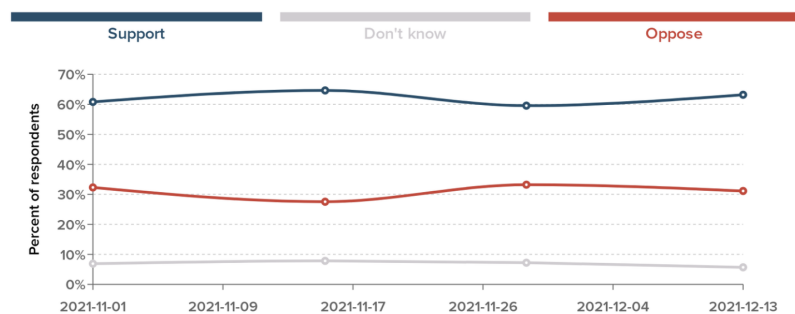
Charts from [Monmouth University, Nov. 2021](#) and [Invest in America + Data for Progress, Dec. 2021](#)



### The Build Back Better Act Has Remained Popular Over Time

The Build Back Better Act is a proposal to invest \$1.75 trillion over the next ten years to better fund long-term care for seniors and people with disabilities, expand Medicare coverage to include hearing, invest in clean energy, extend tax credits for families with children, and provide subsidies for child care.

Based on what you know now, do you support or oppose the Build Back Better Act?



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## 8.) Americans support climate action in Build Back Better, and want more

Polling about the Build Back Better plan has also consistently shown that Americans support several of the plan's major provisions by even wider margins than they support the plan on the whole, helping to explain why support tends to rise the more people learn about the substance of the legislation.

While [the plan's health care provisions tend to attract the broadest support](#), clear majorities also support several of its major policies related to climate, clean energy, and the environment. [An October poll by the Sierra Club and Data for Progress](#), conducted shortly after the new

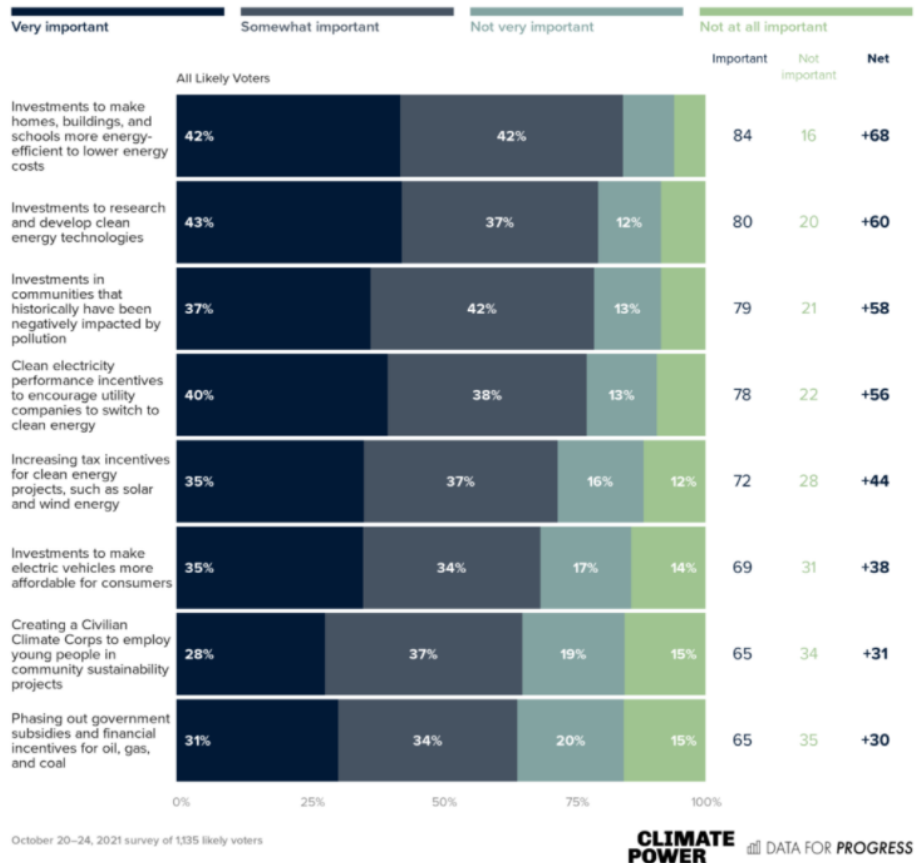
Build Back Better framework was unveiled, showed majority support for a range of climate and clean energy provisions - including particularly high support for investments to make homes, buildings, and schools more energy-efficient (77%), investments to expand and strengthen the electric grid with more access to wind and solar power (71%), and rebates for rooftop solar (70%).

An [October poll by Climate Power and Data for Progress](#) further found that 65% or more of voters nationwide said it was important to include each of eight Build Back Better provisions tested that related to climate and the environment. This included over three-quarters (78%) who said it was important to include a clean electricity performance incentive for utilities, which ultimately did not make it into the new Build Back Better framework - showing that the public appetite for climate action goes well above and beyond what's being considered in the legislation.

Chart from [Climate Power + Data for Progress, Oct. 2021](#)

### Voters Want to Pass the Build Back Better Plan's Key Climate and Clean Energy Proposals

Lawmakers in Congress are currently debating whether they will pass the following proposals that are included in the Build Back Better plan. Please indicate how important or not important you think it that Congress passes each of the following policies included in the Build Back Better plan:



## 9.) Scientists are still trusted authorities on climate change

Despite the continued politicization of science and expertise around COVID-19, polls show that public trust in the scientific community has remained high. A [survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in April 2020](#), for example, found that the overwhelming majority of Americans (87%) trust scientists at least a “fair amount” to act in the best interests of the public.

When it comes to climate change specifically, a [September 2021 Morning Consult survey](#) found that 70% of Americans trust scientists at least “somewhat” about climate change - more than any other group included in the survey. Further, scientists were the most trusted authority among Americans of all political affiliations.

The effectiveness of scientists as messengers on climate change was borne out in [persuasion experiments conducted by the Potential Energy Coalition this year](#). The group found that, in randomized control experiments, an ad about scientists’ 99% consensus on climate change created a more than eight percentage point increase in strong support for immediate government action on climate change. Additionally, the Potential Energy Coalition reported that the ad was “by far the least polarizing message of the dozens and dozens” they have tested.

Educating Americans about the scientific consensus on climate change is particularly important because the public underestimates the level of scientific consensus on the issue: [Yale and George Mason found in September](#) that only one about one-quarter of Americans (24%) correctly estimate the percentage of climate scientists that have concluded that human-caused global warming is happening to be above 90%.

TRUST IN PEOPLE + INSTITUTIONS ON CLIMATE CHANGE				
<i>When it comes to climate change, how much do you trust [X]? (% saying “a great deal” or “somewhat”)</i>	All Adults	Democrats	Independents	Republicans
Scientists	70	87	66	53
National environmental groups	61	81	55	39
The EPA	61	82	52	45
President Biden	44	77	31	13
Democrats in Congress	42	76	26	13
Economists	40	55	33	31
Republicans in Congress	26	17	14	51
Business leaders	24	32	15	25

Chart uses data from [Morning Consult, Sep. 2021](#)

## 10.) The public wants to hold corporate polluters accountable for their damage

Polls this year have shown Americans consistently call for oil and gas companies and other corporate polluters to pay for the damage they've done to the climate.

[The Pew Research Center found in April](#) that over two-thirds of Americans (69%) believe that large businesses and corporations are doing “too little” to help reduce the effects of climate change. The survey also showed that Americans support multiple policy measures to hold corporate polluters accountable, including tougher restrictions on power plant carbon emissions (76% in favor) and taxing corporations based on their carbon emissions (70%).

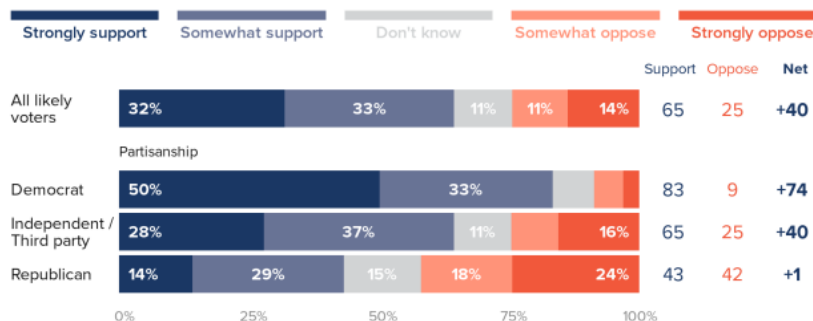
This clear majority support for a carbon tax has been a consistent finding in polls this year, refuting the old conventional wisdom that the idea can't catch hold in the United States even as it has been implemented by major economies across the globe. Surveys conducted by Climate Nexus, Yale, and George Mason in [June](#) and [September](#) both found that 64% of Americans supported “requiring fossil fuel companies to pay a tax on their carbon pollution” as a way to pay for new infrastructure legislation, with less than three in ten opposed to the idea.

Polling by Data for Progress has further demonstrated the broad support for “polluters pay” policies. [In July, they found](#) that over three-quarters of Americans (77%) believe that fossil fuel companies have “a lot” or “some” responsibility to address climate change and just under two-thirds (65%) support assessing a \$500 billion fee on major fossil fuel companies along the lines of the Polluters Pay Climate Fund proposal in Congress.

### A Majority of Voters Support a \$500 Billion Polluter Fee Proposal

Some lawmakers have proposed a new bill to impose a \$500 billion fee on major fossil fuel companies as partial compensation for the damages caused by these companies' emissions that have contributed to climate change. Collected over the next ten years, companies would pay their share of this fee based on the scale of their emissions. For example, large fossil fuel companies like Exxon, BP, Shell, and Chevron would likely pay between \$5 to \$6 billion each year.

Would you support or oppose this bill?



July 16–19, 2021 survey of 1,169 likely voters

ISSUES

DATA FOR PROGRESS

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Chart from [Data for Progress, Jul. 2021](#)