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For First Time, Majority of Americans Say Climate Change a Critical Threat

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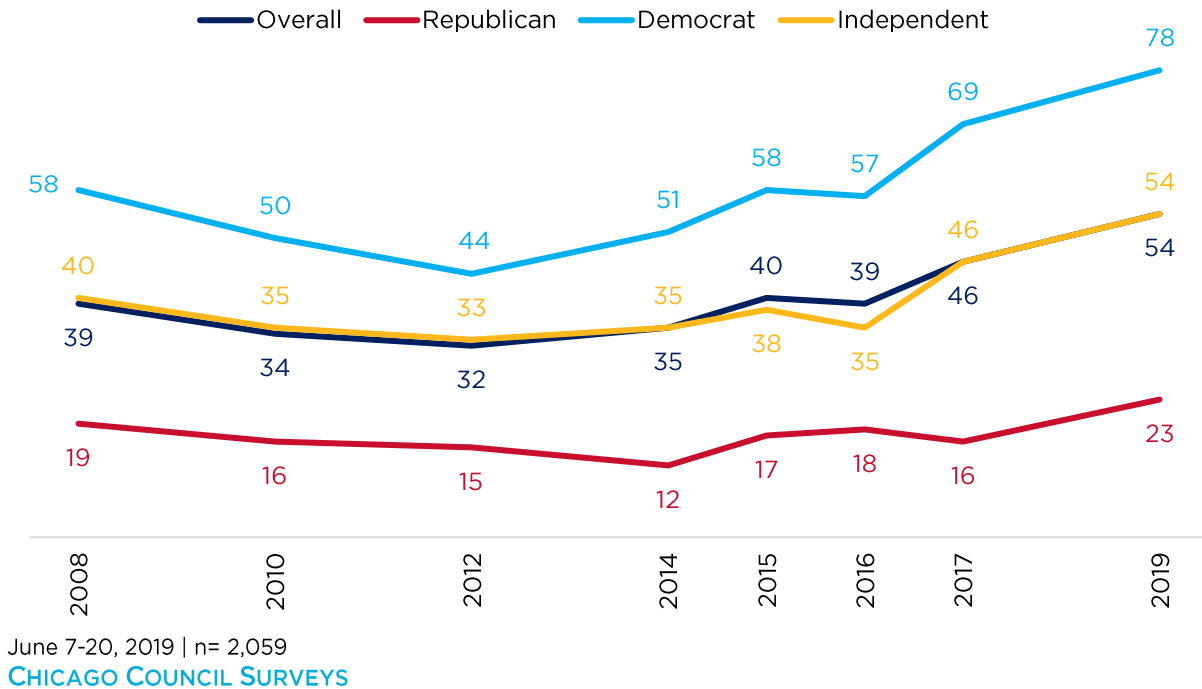
While the Democratic presidential candidates argue about how aggressive the Democratic nominee's climate policies should be, there is no doubt that climate change will be an important agenda item for the Democratic primaries. A new Chicago Council Survey of the US public shows that Democrats name climate change as the most critical foreign policy threat facing the country, also for the first time. And a growing majority of Democrats say that immediate action is needed, even if the costs are significant. While the partisan difference in threat perceptions of climate change is wider than ever, Republicans have also grown more convinced that climate change is a problem that needs to be addressed.

Concern Increases among Democrats and Independents

For the first time since the question was asked in 2008, an overall majority of Americans (54%) consider climate change a critical threat. This shift is due in large part to increases in threat perceptions among Democrats (78% critical threat), who rate climate change a top foreign policy threat on par with cyberattacks against US computer systems (77%) and above international terrorism (69%). Independents have also grown more concerned (54% critical threat). By contrast, only 23 percent of Republicans say climate change is a critical threat, up slightly from 2017.

Climate Change as a Threat

Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interest of the United States in the next 10 years. For each one, please select whether you see this as a critical threat, an important but not critical threat, or not an important threat at all: **Climate change** (% critical threat)



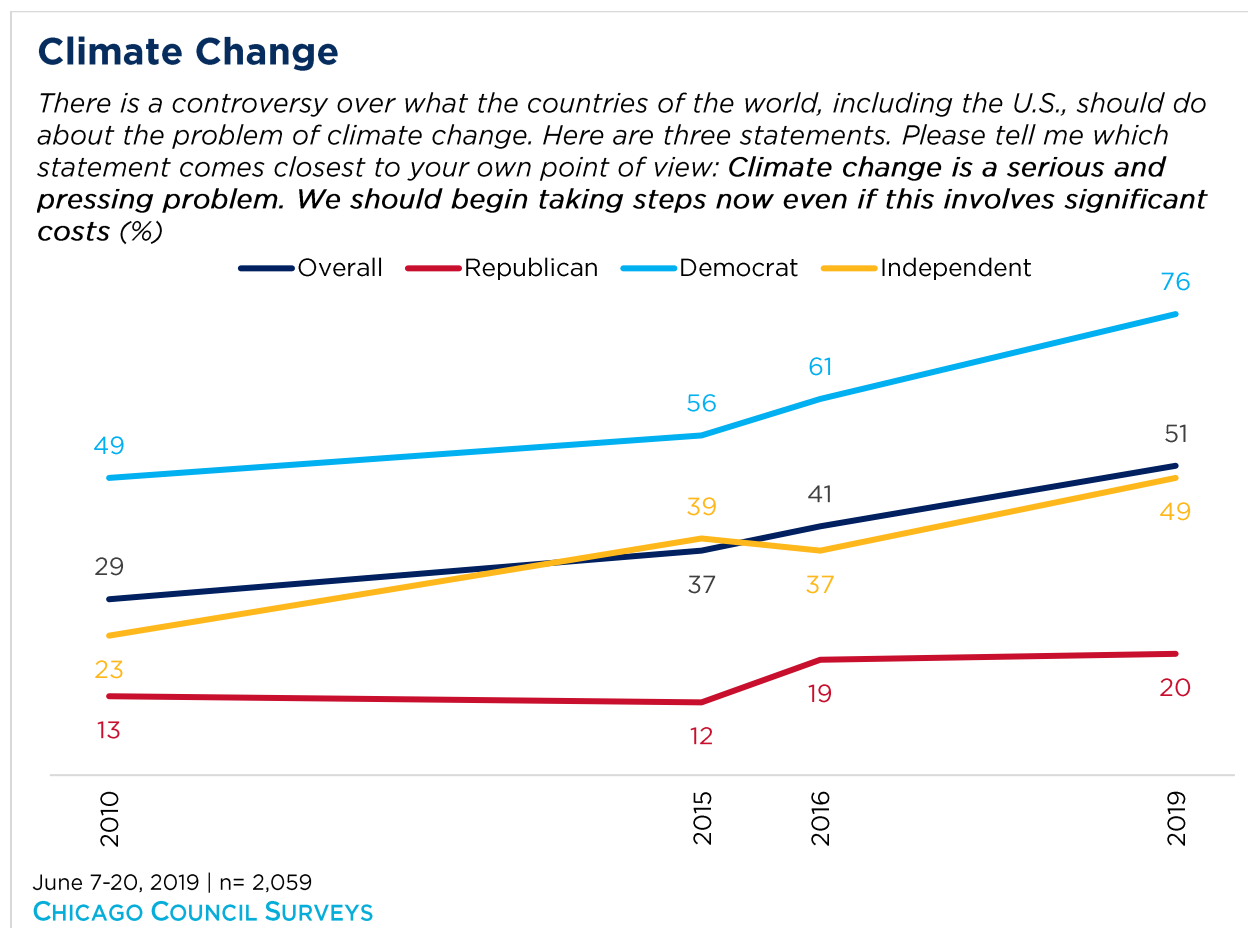
At 55 percentage points, the difference between Republicans and Democrats on the threat of climate change is at its widest in Council survey history.

Majority of Democrats, Half of Independents Say Immediate Action Needed

Asked about how measured a response to take to address climate change, a bare majority of the overall public (51%, up 10 percentage points from 2016) agrees that climate change is a serious and pressing problem and immediate steps should be taken even if they involve significant costs. Nearly a third (31%, down from 38% in 2016) agree that the effects of climate change will be gradual “so we can deal with the problem gradually by taking steps that are low in cost.” Seventeen percent of Americans select a third option, questioning whether climate change is really a problem and agree that “we should not take any steps that would have economic costs” (see Appendix for full trend results).

Reflecting their greater sense of urgency over the issue, three in four Democrats believe that climate change is a pressing issue and we should take steps now regardless of cost (76%, up from 61% in 2016). Eighteen percent of Democrats believe instead that the effects of climate change will be gradual and should be addressed in a measured way with low cost. Very few Democrats (6%) question whether climate change is really a problem.

Independents have also grown more supportive of taking immediate action on climate change (49%, up from 37% in 2016). Slightly fewer Independents now (35%) than in 2016 (42%) prefer taking gradual steps, and 15 percent question whether climate change is really a problem (19% in 2016).



Republicans Have Grown More Convinced that the Issue Needs to Be Addressed

While President Trump has rolled back many of the Obama administration’s climate initiatives, including withdrawing from the Paris agreement, there is a small but growing group of [Republicans, conservatives, and libertarians](#) pushing for action on climate change. This includes such GOP stalwarts former secretaries of state James Baker and George Shultz, who back [a carbon tax](#), as well as Henry Paulson, a former secretary of the treasury.

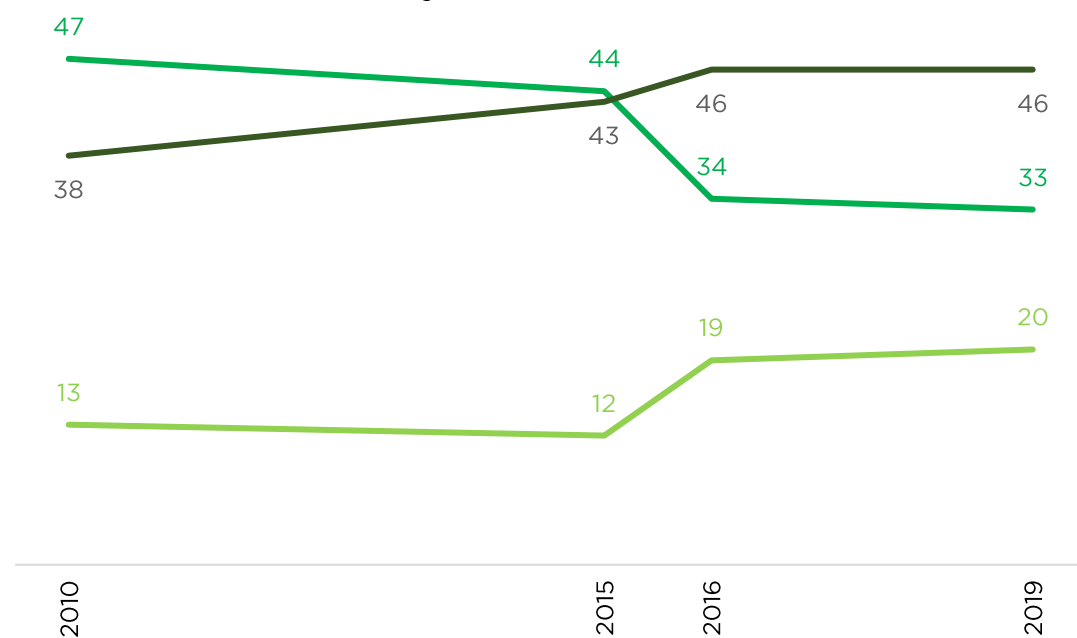
Despite the low percentage of Republicans considering climate change a critical threat in the Chicago Council poll, there are signs that their views may also be shifting, though slowly. Fewer Republicans now (33%) than in 2010 (47%) question the idea that climate change is really a problem. Instead, a growing majority of Republicans consider it a problem that should be addressed, though more say it

should be addressed gradually with low costs (46%) than right away with potentially significant costs (20%).

Republicans on Climate Change

There is a controversy over what the countries of the world, including the U.S., should do about the problem of climate change. Here are three statements. Please tell me which statement comes closest to your own point of view: (% Republicans)

- Until we are sure that climate change is really a problem we should not take any steps that would have economic costs
- The problem of climate change should be addressed but its effects will be gradual so we can deal with the problem gradually by taking steps that are low in cost
- Climate change is a serious and pressing problem and we should try taking steps now even if this involves significant costs



June 7-20, 2019 | n = 588

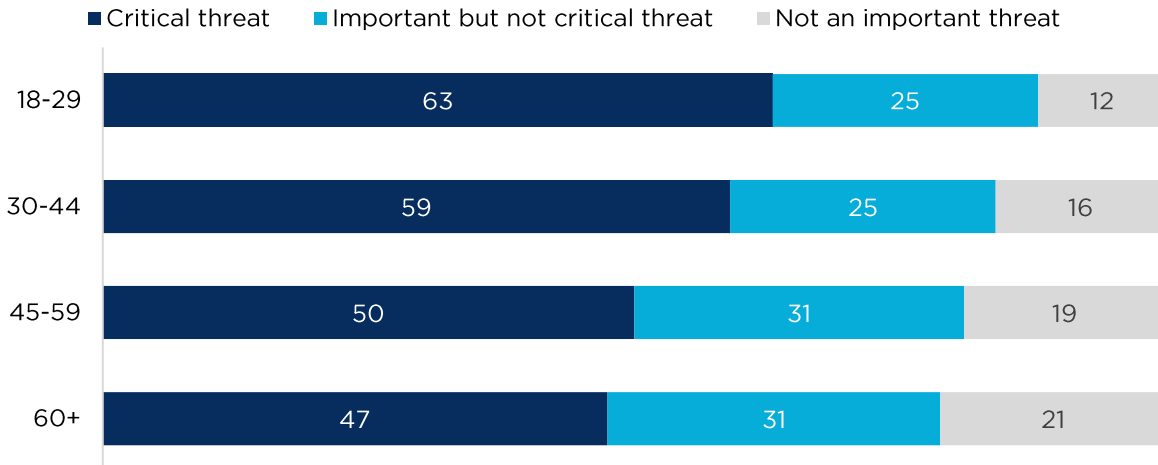
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Climate Change Not Just a Partisan Divide, Also a Generational One

Partisanship is not the only factor in attitudes toward climate change. Age also has a strong influence. Clear majorities of Americans under the age of 45 describe climate change as a critical threat, compared to about half among their elders. Those between the ages of 18 and 29 are especially keen to take action immediately (59%) versus about half among other age groups.

Climate Change Views Vary by Age

Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interest of the United States in the next 10 years. For each one, please select whether you see this as a critical threat, an important but not critical threat, or not an important threat at all: (%)



June 7-20, 2019 | n = 2,059
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Conclusion

Recent polls from [CBS](#), [Kaiser Family Foundation](#), and [Third Way](#) have also found that climate change is at the top of the list of issues Democrats say they want to hear presidential candidates talk about. The combined concern among Democratic voters and young Americans indicates that the issue of climate change will be a critical factor in electoral debates not just in 2020 but also in the years to follow.

Appendix

Q295. *There is a controversy over what the countries of the world, including the U.S., should do about the problem of climate change. Here are three statements. Please tell me which statement comes closest to your own point of view:*

% Until we are sure that climate change is really a problem, we should not take any steps that would have economic costs					
	Overall	Republican	Democrat	Independent/Other	R-D Gap
2010	26	47	12	25	35
2015	25	44	13	22	31
2016	19	34	7	20	27
2019	17	33	6	15	27
% The problem of climate change should be addressed but its effects will be gradual so we can deal with the problem gradually by taking steps that are low in cost					
	Overall	Republican	Democrat	Independent/Other	R-D Gap
2010	42	38	38	48	0
2015	36	43	30	38	13
2016	38	46	30	42	16
2019	31	46	18	35	28
% Climate change is a serious and pressing problem. We should begin taking steps now even if this involves significant costs					
	Overall	Republican	Democrat	Independent/Other	R-D Gap
2010	29	13	49	23	-36
2015	37	12	56	39	-44
2016	41	19	61	37	-42
2019	51	20	76	49	-56

Methodology

The analysis in this report is based on data from the 2019 Chicago Council Survey of the American public on foreign policy, a project of the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy. The 2019 Chicago Council Survey was conducted June 7-20, 2019 by IPSOS using their large-scale nationwide online research panel, KnowledgePanel, among a weighted national sample of 2,059 adults, 18 years of age or older, living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is ± 2.3 , including a design effect of 1.1607. The margin of error is higher for partisan subgroups or for partial-sample items.

Partisan identification is based on respondents' answer to a standard partisan self-identification question: "Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?"

The 2019 Chicago Council Survey is made possible by the generous support of the Crown family and the Korea Foundation.

About the Chicago Council on Global Affairs

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