

Globe warms for all political stripes

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Global warming should not be a partisan issue. After all, everyone in our society generates greenhouse gas emissions and everyone will be affected by climate change.

Yet global warming remains a politically divisive issue.

I recently found out how true this is when I participated in a meeting with pollsters engaged in national survey research on global warming. One recent national household survey by George Mason University found that people with different political beliefs have different perceptions of global warming.

The group surveyed 12,000 adults and 1,000 children and found that most American adults see climate change as a serious problem that threatens future generations and all life on Earth. Only 14 percent do not believe it is a problem. Roughly 7 of 10 children felt personally threatened by global warming.

Democrats, however, were much more likely than Republicans to perceive global warming as a serious danger. About twice as many people who usually vote Republican are uncertain about whether humans are causing global warming.

In total, Democrats were about three times more likely than Republicans to see global warming as having high risks and high chances of resolution, while Republicans were more likely to see the issue as having low risk and low chances of successful resolution.

My guess is that similar patterns exist in Lane County. This may explain why some elected officials and executives believe they have the political support to openly address global warming, while others do not. There are almost twice as many registered Democrats in Eugene, for example, as there are Republicans, while the balance is much closer in Springfield.

The George Mason University survey also found that Democrats were personally engaged in more activities to protect the climate compared to Republicans. However, on average they only performed about one more action, which tended to be either voting for candidates based on their environmental records or donating to environmental organizations.

When it comes to other more common activities — such as conserving energy at home, recycling, buying more energy-efficient appliances and using less gasoline — there was almost no difference between the political groups.

Even more, on average the survey found that Democrats were willing to try only about one more of these new behaviors than Republicans. And up to half of the people who were not currently engaged in one of the actions said they were willing to give it a try. The actions these people were most willing to engage in include buying products with

less packaging, avoiding products produced by companies with poor environmental records, and in general purchasing less stuff.

The pollsters concluded that, although there was a clear partisan divide, when it came to actual actions to protect the environment people across the political spectrum were very similar.

What does this mean? One implication could be that many Republicans and Democrats get their information from sources that have opposing views about the science of global warming. If true, this schism must be quickly overcome.

Few credible scientists today deny that the Earth is warming. After all, warming can be seen from instrument measurements as well as direct observation of melting glaciers and ice sheets.

Scientists have also found that solar variability, volcanic activity and other natural events cannot account for the current warming. In fact, during the past two decades of the most rapid warming, all solar indicators have been declining. This indicates that recent warming would have been even greater without solar effects. The bottom line is that the human emission of greenhouse gasses is the primary cause of today's warming.

The sooner we all get beyond partisan divides and understand this, the faster the discussion can move to the questions we should be debating, which relate to how best to resolve the problem.

This leads to my second conclusion about partisan differences. Although Republicans may be skeptical about the science of global warming, they care about the environment as much as Democrats. But many Republicans believe government should have a more limited role in resolving problems such as global warming.

Unfortunately, voluntary actions and market-based solutions alone, although important, cannot resolve global warming.

Nichols Stern, the former chief economist of the World Bank, called global warming the greatest market failure in history. Caps on emissions; carbon taxes; tough vehicle, building and appliance standards; and other government policies will be necessary to resolve the problem.

Let's hope we bridge the partisan divide quickly. The window of opportunity to resolve global warming without huge impacts and costs is rapidly closing.

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