Student Climate Strikes Raise Awareness, Understanding, Emotions

Across the globe, young people are following the lead of Greta Thunberg, Jamie Margolin and Zero Hour, and other youth activists, and taking to the streets to demand policymaker action on climate change.

From legal battles to coordinated strikes, over 4 million young people — across America and over 150 other countries — are making their demands known, and capturing the attention of the world in the process.

But are the youth climate strikers making a difference on climate action? ecoAmerica set out to find this answer in the latest American Climate Perspective Survey.

ecoAmerica’s American Climate Perspectives Survey found that in the short span of just a year of cohesive action amongst youth, the impacts on American awareness, understanding and emotion around their movement and about climate change are significant. A majority of Americans are aware of youth-led climate efforts and understand what they are asking for. And, as a result of youth-led efforts, they feel a range of emotions about climate action, including hope, motivation, and alarm.

But are the youth making a real impact on American support for climate action? It is too early to tell. Although ecoAmerica’s findings indicate strong momentum, more research is needed to understand if these youth-led strikes are turning any Americans away from climate action.

From Zero to 79: Youth Garner High Public Awareness in Under a Year

After only a year of organizing, young climate strikers have achieved an exceptional level of notoriety. 62% of Americans say they have heard of Greta Thunberg or the youth-led climate protests (79% including those who say they have heard of them “a little”).

How much have you heard of youth-activist Greta Thunberg or the youth-led protests taking place across the U.S. and internationally calling for climate action? 849 national respondents, % “A lot” “Some”, “A little”, “Not at all”

How much have you heard of Greta Thunberg or Youth-Led Climate Strikes?

- A lot: 30%
- Some: 32%
- A little: 17%
- Not at all: 20%

“I want the entirety of congress, in fact the whole US government, to remember the fear and despair that my generation lives with every day, and I want you to hold onto it. How do I even begin to convey to you what it feels like to know that within my lifetime the destruction that we have already seen from the climate crisis will only get worse?”

— Jamie Margolin, co-founder of Zero Hour
Americans Understand WHY Students Are Striking

As the youth climate strikes are garnering awareness, so are their demands. A high majority, four in five adult Americans (79%), say they understand what youth are striking for (why they are striking).

While there are variances of understanding across party lines, majorities in all parties (95% of Democrats, 76% of Independents, and 64% of Republicans) understand why the youth are striking. Notably, even 60% of those who identify as a Strong Republican understand the intentions of the youth climate strikes.

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the statement: I understand what youth-activists are striking for. 849 national respondents, % “Strongly” and “Somewhat” agree

79% Understand

21% Do not understand

Americans are Divided on IF Students Should Strike

Overall, more than one in three adults (35%) believe students should take time off from school to demand action on climate. Results across political affiliation; however, indicate stark differences in support for school strikes. A majority (68%) of self-identified “Strong Democrats” support student walk-outs calling for climate action. As for other political affiliations, 54% of Independents believe students should stay in school, as do a majority (73%) of “Strong Republicans.”

Should students take time off from school to demand action on climate change? 849 national respondents

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Are the Youth Making a Difference on Climate? Yes, No, and Not Sure.

Climate activists have been trying to move the public and policymakers on climate for decades. In a much shorter time period, the youth are already beginning to make an impact, however the results are mixed. More than one in three (35%) of Americans believe youth-led protests are moving America toward climate action. Slightly more (37%) believe they are not making a difference. Over a quarter of Americans (28%) are not sure whether the youth are making a difference.

Do you think the youth-led protests are making any difference in moving America to climate action? 849 national respondents

- Yes, making a difference: 35%
- No, not making a difference: 37%
- Not sure: 28%

Are the Youth Stoking American Emotions on Climate? YES!

Whether or not Americans believe the youth climate strikers are making a difference, one thing is for sure — the youth are stoking American emotion on climate.

Over three quarters of Americans (78%) indicated that the youth-led climate protests make them feel hopeful about climate action (including 28% ‘very hopeful’). About the same majority (77%) indicate the youth-led protests make them feel motivated (including 27% ‘very motivated’). Just over 7 in 10 (72%) feel alarmed (including 24% ‘very alarmed’). Of those Americans who reported that they believe the youth-led climate strikes are making a difference, 98% feel hopeful, 97% feel motivated, and 90% feel alarmed.

How do the youth-led climate protests make you feel about climate action? 849 national respondents

- Hopeful: 78% feel hopeful
- Motivated: 77% feel motivated
- Alarm: 72% feel alarm

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Full data is available in the accompanying toplines.

Methodology
ecoAmerica designed and administered this survey, which was conducted online October 14th, 2019 using Survey Monkey. The survey yielded a total of 849 adult responses. The sample was drawn from an online panel and the respondents were screened to ensure that they were over the age of 18. The margin of error for the sample is +/-3%. In interpreting the survey results, it is important to note that all sample surveys are subject to possible sampling error. Thus, the results of a survey may differ from the results that would be obtained if the entire population was interviewed. The size of the sampling error depends upon both the total number of respondents in the survey and the percentage distribution of the responses to a particular question. For example, if 50% of the respondents in a sample of 802 respondents answered, “Yes” to a particular question, we can be 95% confident that the true percentage would fall within 3 points, or range from 47% to 53%.

Suggested Citation

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