

Trust, Media Habits, and Misperceptions Shape Public Understanding of Climate Change

Americans Underestimate How Much Others Care About Climate Change

Most Americans are concerned about climate change, but they don't think most others share that concern. That quiet misunderstanding is one of the biggest barriers to climate action in the United States. This report explores how trust in information, media consumption patterns, and perceptions of others shape how people think about climate change. The findings point to a striking paradox: **while many Americans trust the information they encounter and are concerned about climate change, they believe others are far less concerned and less able to recognize accurate information.**

Where Trust in Information Is Higher, Climate Concern Is Too

Americans who trust the information they see or hear about national issues are far more likely to be concerned about climate change. Nationally, 68% of Americans say they are personally concerned about climate change. **Among those who express “a great deal” or “a fair amount” of trust in information about major national issues, climate concern rises to nearly 8 in 10.**

This connection works both ways. While 63% of Americans nationally say they trust the information they encounter about major national issues, trust is higher among those who are “very” or “somewhat” concerned about climate change. Within this group, 73% say they trust the information they see or hear.

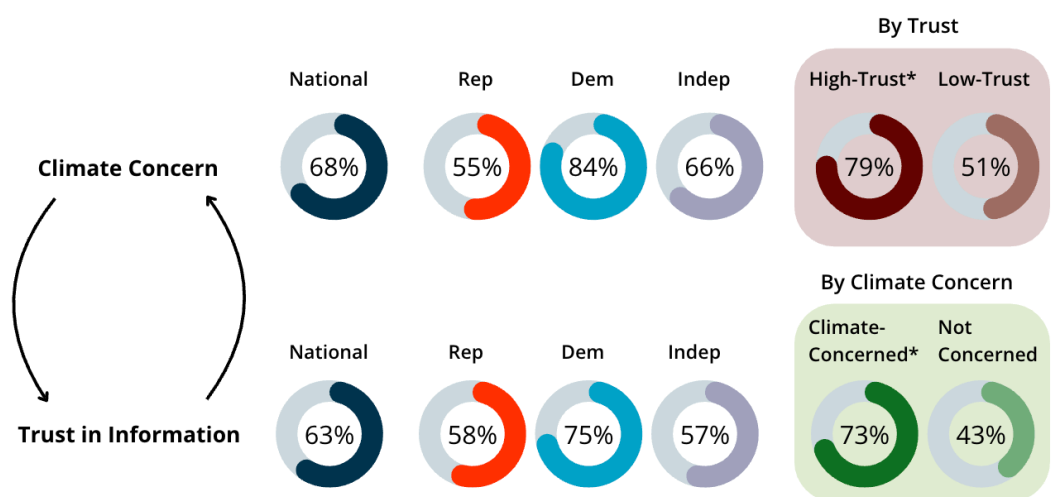
The results suggest a **reinforcing loop** where personal concern and trust in information go hand in hand. The figure below illustrates these national patterns, along with a breakdown by political party.

Americans who trust the information they see or hear are far more likely to be personally concerned about climate change — and concerned Americans report higher trust.

Q: How personally concerned are you about climate change?

Q: How much do you trust the information you see or hear about major national issues today?

Showing total for “Very Concerned” and “Somewhat concerned”. And showing total for “A great deal” and “A fair amount”. 1,037 national respondents. +/- 3% margin of error.



*Higher climate concern among high-trust respondents (“a great deal” or “a fair amount” of trust).

*Higher trust in information among climate-concerned respondents (“very” or “somewhat” concerned).

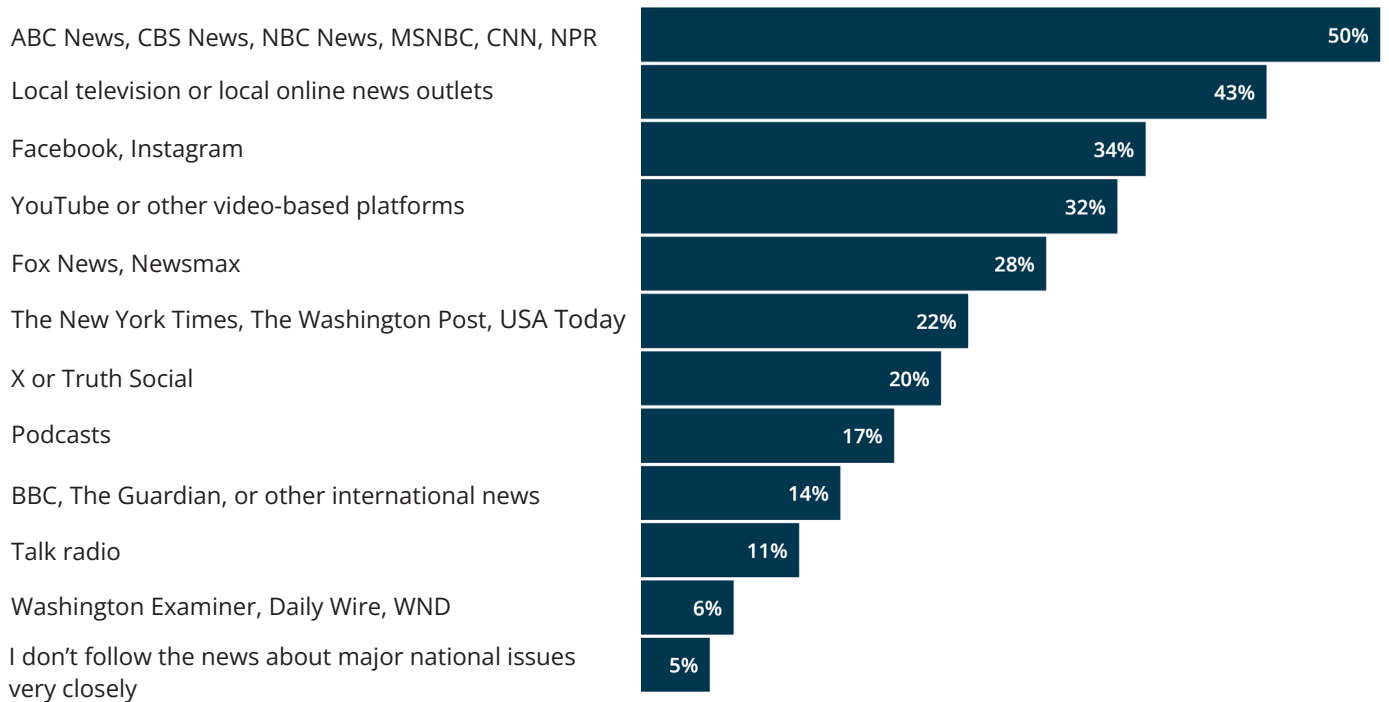
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Mainstream Media Remains Most Relied On

Nationally, half of Americans rely most on established media outlets — including ABC News, CBS News, NBC News, MSNBC, CNN, and NPR — for news or information about major national issues. 43% rely on local news sources. Social media also plays a significant role, with 34% relying on Facebook or Instagram and 32% turning to YouTube or other video-based platforms.

From TV to social media, Americans get their news from a mix of sources.

Q: Which of the following do you rely on most for news or information about major national issues? Select all that apply.



1,037 national respondents. +/- 3% margin of error.

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Notable trends¹:

- **The top three most-relied-on news sources also dominate among high-trust, climate-concerned Americans.** Mainstream national media, local news, and social media remain the most relied-on sources for news among Americans who both have higher trust in information they see or hear about major national issues and are very or somewhat concerned about climate change.
- **Partisan differences shape which news outlets rise to the top.** The top three news source categories nationally remain consistent for Democrats and Independents. Among Republicans, Fox News and Newsmax lead (44%), followed by local news (40%). Still, a sizable share of Republicans (40%) also rely on national outlets such as ABC News, CBS News, NBC News, MSNBC, CNN, and NPR.

¹ See [toplines](#) for full data on how most relied on sources for news vary across key groups.

- **Younger adults rely more heavily on social platforms for news.** Among 18–24-year-olds, Facebook and Instagram are most relied on (54%), followed closely by YouTube and other video platforms (51%). Strikingly, while reliance on X or Truth Social remains relatively low nationally and across parties (20–21%), younger adults are more likely to use these platforms: 32% of those ages 18–24 and 37% of those ages 25–34 rely on X or Truth Social for news.

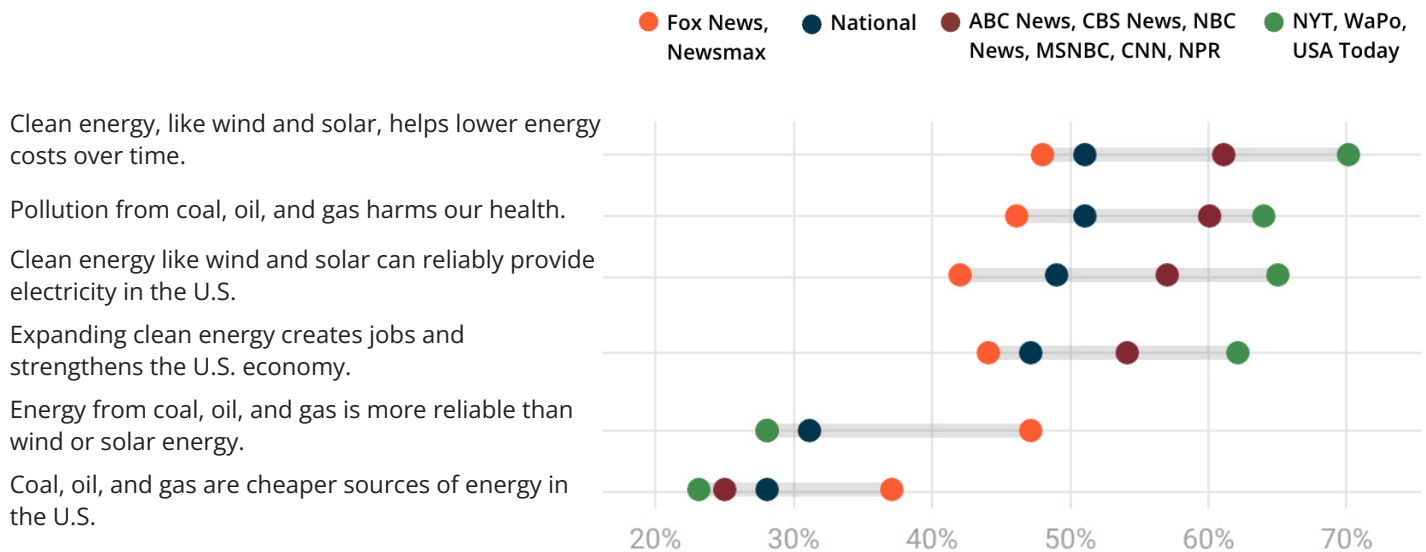
Media Sources Heavily Influence Energy Perceptions

Zeroing in on the role of trust and media in shaping climate information, ecoAmerica asked Americans about the accuracy of commonly made statements about energy. Overall, only about half of Americans nationwide believe the following statements are accurate: clean energy lowers energy costs, provides reliable electricity, creates jobs, strengthens the economy, and that pollution from coal, oil, and gas harms human health.

Notably, **trust in these statements varies sharply by media consumption**, as shown in the figure below.² Americans who rely on mainstream news sources are far more likely — by margins reaching up to 70% — to believe in clean energy’s economic benefits and reliability than those who rely on Fox News and Newsmax (entities that often oppose climate action and noted above as the most relied-upon sources for Republicans). Conversely, **Fox News and Newsmax audiences are the most likely to believe statements portraying coal, oil, and gas as more reliable and cheaper energy sources.** These patterns underscore the powerful role news sources play in shaping public perceptions of climate and clean energy.

Where Americans get their news shapes what they believe about energy.

Q: Which of the following statements about energy do you believe are accurate? Select all that apply.



Each dot represents the share of Americans, by news source and nationally, who believe the statement is accurate. 1,037 national respondents. +/- 3% margin of error.

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² See [toplines](#) for full data across all news sources surveyed.

Americans Doubt the Public Can Tell Fact From Fiction on Climate Change

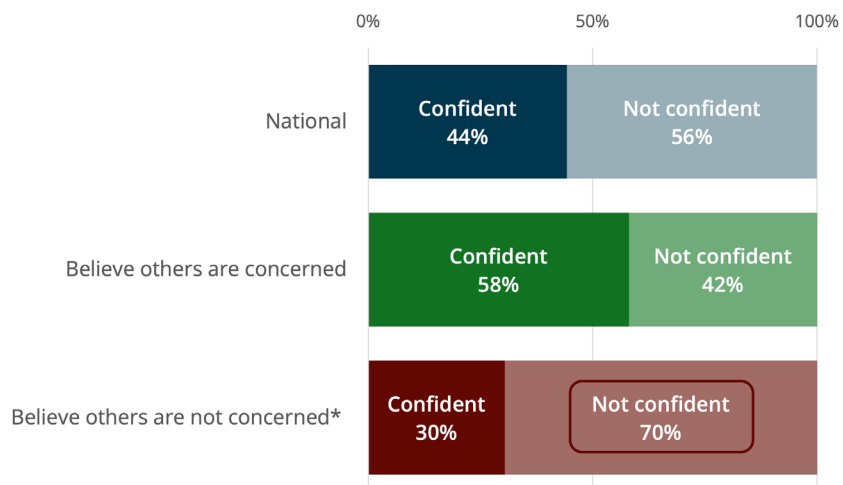
Even though many Americans trust the information they see or hear on major national issues (see p.1), they have low confidence in other people’s ability to recognize climate misinformation. Many Americans (56%) say they are not confident that people in the U.S. can tell whether information about climate change is true or false.

This skepticism is closely tied to how Americans view others’ concern about climate change. **Those who believe that others around them are “a little” or “not at all” concerned about climate change are far more likely to doubt others’ ability to distinguish fact from fiction.** 70% of Americans who perceive that other people have low climate concern say they lack confidence in the public’s ability to recognize climate misinformation. These findings reflect broader distrust about the climate information environment, where perceived lack of concern about climate change aligns with doubts about others’ ability to distinguish accurate information from misinformation.

A majority of Americans who think others aren’t concerned about climate change doubt the public can identify climate misinformation.

Q: How confident are you that most people in the U.S. can tell the difference between true and false information about climate change?

Showing total for “Very confident” and “Somewhat confident”. And showing total for “Not very confident” and “Not confident at all”. 1,037 national respondents. +/- 3% margin of error.



*Confidence in the public’s ability to identify climate misinformation is shown by perceptions of others’ climate concern. Those who believe others are not concerned (“a little” or “not at all” concerned) are much more likely to lack confidence.

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Most Americans Are Concerned, But Many Don’t Realize It

While nearly 7 in 10 Americans (68%) say they are personally concerned about climate change, only half believe that others around them share that concern. This perception gap, referred to as **hidden consensus** or **pluralistic ignorance**, widens among those who are “very” concerned: 36% say they are personally “very” concerned about climate change, but only 13% believe others are, a 23-point gap.

Respondents were invited to share reasons why they believe others around them are less concerned about climate change. Analysis of their *open-ended responses* reveals six main themes (drivers):

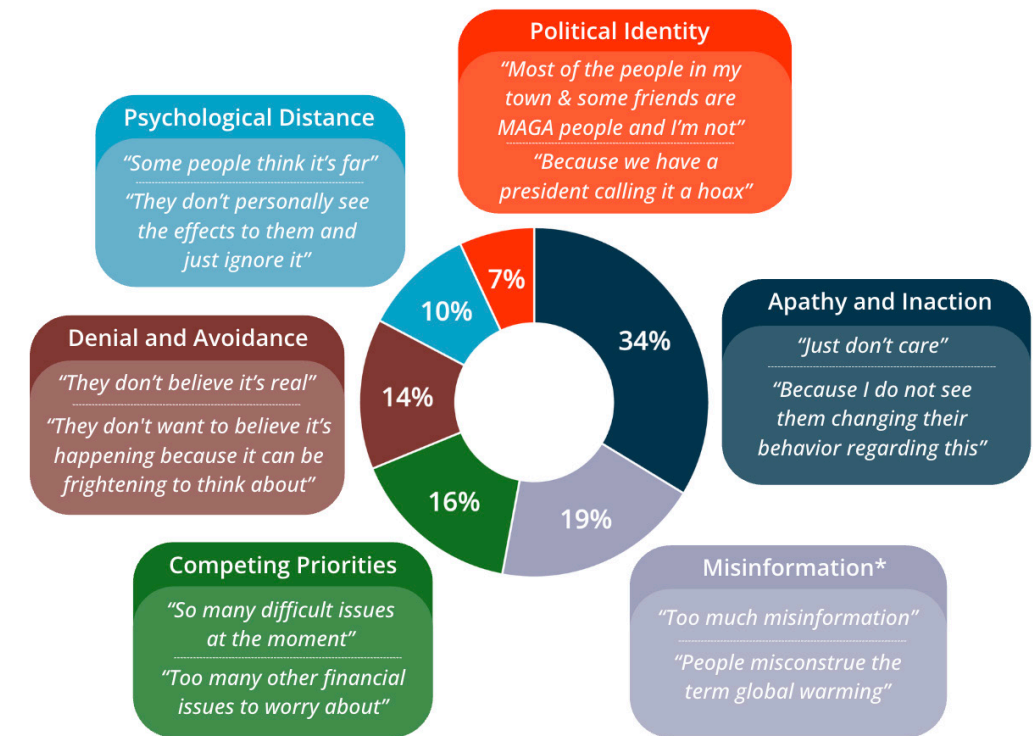
- **Apathy and Inaction (34%)** – A lack of visible action or discussion leads people to perceive others as indifferent to climate change, where they think others don’t care.
- **Misinformation and Understanding Gaps (19%)** – Misinformation, limited exposure, lack of knowledge, or reliance on untrusted sources is seen as shaping others’ views.
- **Competing Priorities (16%)** – Daily pressures such as finances, work, and other priorities are believed to crowd out attention to or the importance of climate change.
- **Denial and Avoidance (14%)** – Climate change is viewed as natural, exaggerated, or a hoax, leading some to dismiss it, while others avoid it because it feels inconvenient or unsettling.
- **Psychological Distance (10%)** – Impacts are seen as too distant or abstract to feel personally relevant.
- **Political Identity (7%)** – Partisan identity and political messaging are seen as bolstering skepticism and hampering climate concern.

Together, these findings illustrate a breadth of perceived public apathy — even as personal climate concern remains widespread.

Americans explain why they see others as less concerned about climate change.

Q: In your own words, why do you think other people around you may be more or less concerned about climate change than you are?

Showing open-ended responses for those who think others are less concerned than they are. 445 respondents. +/- 3% margin of error.



*Misinformation and Understanding Gaps

Closing Gaps To Unlock Climate Momentum

A majority of Americans trust the news they encounter and say they are personally concerned about climate change. Yet many underestimate how much others care and doubt the public's ability to navigate climate misinformation. The challenge is not a lack of concern, but a gap in trust and perception. This gap is known to create a spiral of silence, where people hesitate to step outside perceived social norms to engage. Making climate concern more visible, reinforcing credible information, and linking climate action to shared values and practical outcomes people care about can help rebuild shared understanding and unlock broader momentum for action.

Full data is available in the accompanying [toplines](#).

Methodology

ecoAmerica designed and administered this online survey, conducted from January 30 to February 3, 2026, using SurveyMonkey. The survey yielded a total of 1,037 complete adult responses and used the Census Bureau's American Community Survey to weigh the national general population and reflect the demographic composition of the US. The sample was drawn from an online panel, and respondents were screened to ensure they were 18 or older. The margin of error for the sample is +/-3%. When interpreting survey results, it is important to note that all sample surveys are subject to sampling error. Thus, the results of a survey may differ from those obtained if the entire population were 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 1,037 answered "Yes" to a particular question, we can be 95% confident that the true percentage lies within 3 points, ranging from 47% to 53%.

ecoAmerica conducted a qualitative thematic analysis of open-ended responses from a subset of respondents who reported that other people around them are less concerned about climate change than they are. Their responses were systematically coded into subthemes and then grouped into six overarching drivers that explain this perception gap.

Suggested Citation

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