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Public opinion and climate
change

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Public opinion and climate change

Abstract:

Sociological studies which focus on the views of society on climate change are essential to ensure the acceptance of the necessary measures on the issue. Through these studies, it is possible to know the degree of compromise that society is willing to assume taking into account that part of the commitments acquired at the international level can have a direct impact on their daily lives.

Keywords:

Climate change, Global Warming, Public Opinion.

The importance of public opinion in the fight against climate change

2015 is a critical year in the fight against climate change, for in December will take place the twenty-first meeting among the States parties of the Convention on Climate Change (COP21) in Paris. It would be desirable that a new legal agreement would emerge from this meeting that substitute the Kyoto Protocol and that would reflect the changes occurred in the world economy since 1997, like the economic crisis, the disaster in Fukushima or the rise of emerging economies.

The European Union, in accordance with its solidarity principle, has played the role of world leader in the fight against climate change so far. It intends to maintain this position during the COP21, but from the perspective of environmental sustainability, economic competitiveness and energy security. On his part, President Obama wants to oust the EU from this leadership position, driving the United States towards achieving a greater compromise on the international level through the promotion of renewable energies and sustainable growth.

Both for the EU and the United States it is very important to gain society's support in order to implement these policies related to climate change. During the last years it has been highlighted that climate change is no longer an issue strictly affecting the environment. It is now an economic and security problem, closely related to the energy sector, main emitter of greenhouse gases (GHG). This is why one of the principal requirements of the environmental policies should be to not affect economic competitiveness and to not negatively affect the price of the energy consumed by citizens.

Therefore, a great part of the success of the efforts made against climate change lies in getting to know the degree of commitment that society is willing to assume. One must consider that part of the commitments assumed on the international level may have a direct impact of people's daily life; for instance, energy efficiency measures or the changes in dietary habits¹. This is why it is essential to undertake sociological studies oriented towards knowing more about the society's opinion on climate change, in order to guarantee widespread acceptance of the necessary measures.

¹ The livestock industry is one of the main GHGs emitters and a great water resources consumer.

Human influence on climate change: a scientific matter

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports, as well as the majority of the scientific community, state that it is “*extremely likely*”² that the increased emission of greenhouse gases from human activity is the cause behind global warming.

However, there is a certain discrepancy between the evidence presented in these reports and public opinion in relation to the causes of climate change and global warming³. An example of these discrepancies can be found in the report carried out by Pew Research Center which states that in the USA 87% of the members of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) confirm the influence of human activity on global warming. Nevertheless, this percentage hardly reaches 50% when society in general is asked. Otherwise, only 3% of the American scientific community claims that there is no solid evidence to give credit to climate change, against the 23% from society in general⁴.

This divergence does not only correspond to issues related to climate change, but it is also present in other scientific topics. For instance, the safety of transgenic food, where this divergence is even greater: 88% of the scientific community believes it is safe to consume these products, while only 37% of the population agrees with such statement⁵. Consequently, it is safe to assume that there is a gap between the opinion of the scientific community and of society as a whole. This is probably due to the fact that scientific topics are spread through specialised media, while society

² In the 5th IPCC report, it is stated that “extremely likely” is equal to a greater value than the range “very likely 90–100%”. The report is available at <http://www.ipcc.ch/>.

³ Climate change and global warming are different concepts, even if they are sometimes used indistinctly. Climate change is a significant and lasting change in global or local trends. Global warming is the increase in the Earth’s temperature since the end of the 19th century. (<http://cambioclimaticoglobal.com/>)

⁴ <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/01/29/public-and-scientists-views-on-science-and-society/>

⁵ <http://www.geneticliteracyproject.org/2015/01/29/pewaaas-study-scientific-consensus-on-gmo-safety-stronger-than-for-global-warming/>

generally accesses information through mass media⁶, where these issues coalesce with ideological and political concerns.

In the case of Spain, a study about the presentation of climate change in the media notes that most journalists do not include scientific concepts in their articles and stories about the causes and consequences of climate change⁷.

However, despite the lack of scientific information on the media, the majority of the world's population believes that human activity is the cause behind climate change. According to the study Global Trends from 2004 carried out by IPSOS⁸, this statement is not homogeneous geographically speaking. At the top end we find China, where 93% of its population agrees with the statement above. On the lowest end we find the US, with just 54%, as can be drawn from Table 1 below.

Table 1. Human activity is the cause behind climate change.....			
	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	n/a
China	93	5	3
Argentina	84	9	6
Italy	84	13	3
Spain	82	12	6
Turkey	80	15	5
France	80	15	5
India	80	16	5
Brazil	79	13	9
Belgium	78	14	8

⁶<http://talkingclimate.org/guides/climate-change-scepticism-and-the-media/>

⁷http://www.kas.de/upload/dokumente/2014/12/Climate_Report/Spain.pdf

⁸<http://www.ipsosglobaltrends.com/environment.html>

South Korea	77	19	4
South Africa	76	20	4
Sweden	74	18	8
Germany	72	21	8
Canada	71	22	8
Japan	70	18	12
Poland	68	22	10
Russia	67	24	9
Australia	64	25	11
United Kingdom	64	24	12
USA	54	32	14

Source: prepared by the author with data obtained from:
<http://www.ipsosglobaltrends.com/environment.html>

The respondents' political ideology may also influence the perception of the causes behind climate change and the degree of concern it generates. In this regard, it is interesting to take a look at the cases of the EU and the United States. In the latter, climate change is an issue of debate and even political confrontation between Democrats and Republicans. These discrepancies are reflected on the opinion expressed by the respondents of a study made by GALLUP⁹, as shown in Figure 1.

⁹ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/168617/global-warming-climate-change-difference.aspx>

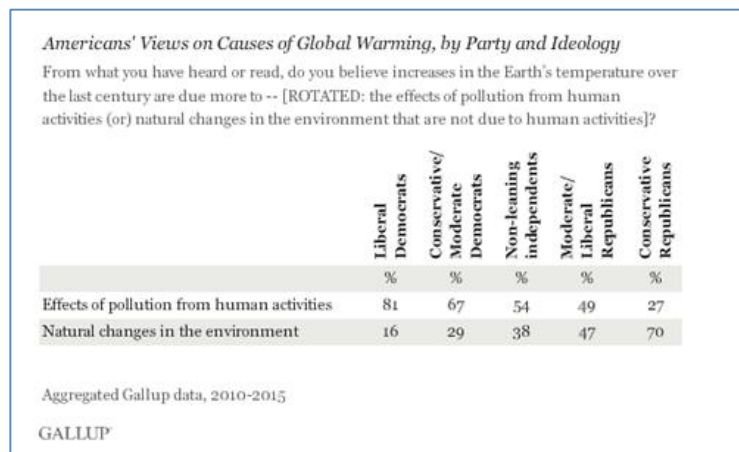


Figure 1. Source: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/168617/global-warming-climate-change-difference.aspx>

This relation with political ideology also appears in a study carried out by the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research (Table 2), which gathers that the majority of the American population believes that climate change is a political issue, as well as an environmental and scientific problem¹⁰.

Table 2. Climate change is a matter of.....		
	YES (%)	NO (%)
Environment	82	9
Science	76	12
Politics	56	31
Social Justice	51	25
Morality	39	43
Poverty.	17	64
Religion	9	74

Source: prepared by the author with data collected from a report written by Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research,
http://www.apnorc.org/PDFs/PopeGlobalWarming/July_Omnibus_Topline_Environment_FINAL.pdf

¹⁰http://www.apnorc.org/PDFs/PopeGlobalWarming/July_Omnibus_Topline_Environment_FINAL.pdf

Regarding American public opinion, left-wing citizens show a greater interest in climate change. These ideological differences are particularly relevant in the UK, where 49% of the people interested in climate change are of a left-wing ideology, while 30% are of a right-wing ideology. This trend is repeated in Italy, France and Spain¹¹.

The perception of climate change also presents racial and generational strands. In the United States, 70% of the Hispanic community believes that climate change is caused by human activity, against 56% of the Afro-American community and 44% of the Caucasians¹². Regarding age, this same survey highlights that 60% of the respondents aged between 18 and 29 years consider that global warming is due to human causes, while only 48% of the respondents aged 50 to 64 believed so.

Climate change as a source of concern

With regards to the perception of climate change as a matter of concern for society, results show that it is not a relevant issue in the US or the EU. American's priorities are the economy (80%), employment (74%) and terrorism (73%). Ultimately we may find global warming (29%) and international trade (28%)¹³. European concerns follow a similar trend¹⁴. Their priorities are: employment (45%), the economic situation (24%), immigration (18%) and social and health security (16%). Issues like the environment, climate change and energy are ranked second to last with barely 7%.

Global public opinion's perception of climate change as a threat is different compared to other threats. For example, American population places it sixth in this ranking, right behind ISIS, Iran's nuclear program, cyber attacks, global economic instability or the tensions between Russia and its neighbours. On the contrary, Europeans place

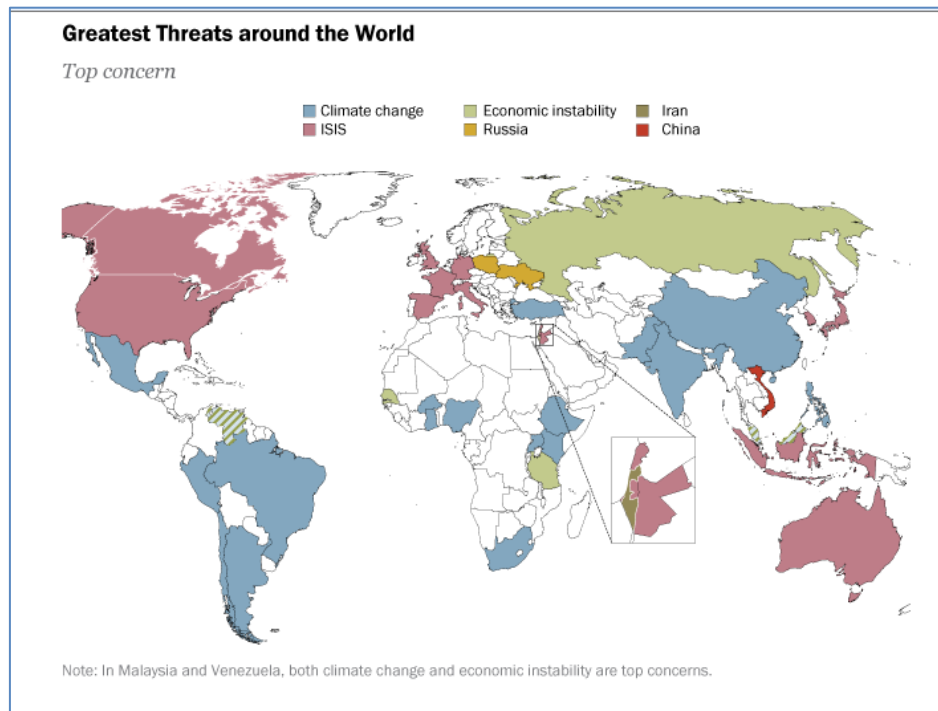
¹¹<http://www.pewglobal.org/2015/07/14/climate-change-seen-as-top-global-threat/>

¹²<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/09/23/most-americans-believe-in-climate-change-but-give-it-low-priority/>

¹³Ibid

¹⁴http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb82/eb82_first_en.pdf

climate change in second position, together with the threat from Iran's nuclear program and behind ISIS¹⁵.



Source: <http://www.pewglobal.org/2015/07/14/climate-change-seen-as-top-global-threat/>

In the case of Spain, climate change is depicted in its 2013 National Security Strategy ¹⁶ as a catalyst for risk and not as a threat itself. Global warming is an issue that concerns Spanish society, albeit for the consequences rather than the causes. 57% of the Spanish population believes it is given less importance than it deserves and only 9% believes it is given more importance¹⁷. Regarding global issues, climate

¹⁵<http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2015/07/Pew-Research-Center-Global-Threats-Report-FINAL-July-14-2015.pdf>

¹⁶http://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/documents/seguridad_1406connavegacionfinalaccesiblebpdf.pdf

¹⁷ Survey "La respuesta de la sociedad española ante el cambio climático. 2013". Fundación Mapfre. Available at: http://www.fundacionmapfre.org/fundacion/es_es/salud-prevencion/publicaciones-y-estudios/estudios/medio-ambiente/sociedad-espanola-cambio-climatico.jsp

change is ranked second to last from a list of ten threats. Regarding Spain's issues, it is ranked last¹⁸.

Perception of energy policies in the fight against climate change

According to the Eurobarometer survey in 2014¹⁹, 90% of Europeans believe that climate change is a fairly serious or very serious problem, and almost the same percentage of them agree that their governments should increase the use of renewable energies by 2030. In addition, 70% agrees with the statement that a decrease in fossil fuels imports could benefit the EU economically. 80% considers that the fight against climate change and the use of more efficient energy sources could boost the EU's economy and employment rates.

Regarding the US, 79% of its population believes in relation to the necessary energy supply policies, that the government should prioritise the development of alternative sources in order to combat climate change (solar, wind or hydrogen power). 75% agrees with the establishment of some sort of regulation to control the emission of greenhouse gases and 67% supports the idea that fossil fuels cause contamination and an increase in military expenses due to the participation in overseas missions²⁰.

For Europeans, the economic cost of climate change can be considered a great opportunity for industry, investigation and employment. However, part of the American population perceives climate change as a threat to economic growth, job destruction and the imposition of certain restriction to industrial development²¹.

¹⁸Ibid

¹⁹Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_409_en.pdf

²⁰<http://environment.yale.edu/climate-communication/files/Policy-Support-March-2012.pdf>

²¹<http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/26/section-7-global-warming-environment-and-energy/>

Conclusions

Society's perception plays a very important role in the fight against climate change, as the economic, social and geostrategic repercussions of global warming are of grave importance. This process has an impact on strategic sectors, like on the energy sector. It may also bring about changes in social behaviour, like the promotion of energy efficiency or changing eating habits. For this reason, all evidence of human influence on global warming must be sufficiently proven, as well as scientifically and socially endorsed. The media plays a vital role in the transmission of the message that "if human activity is the cause behind global warming, human activity is also part of the solution".

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