

Why is the Climate Majority Silent?

Blame pluralistic ignorance — and college students

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Researchers tend to use the resources that are closest to hand. This means that research psychologists, who tend to be employed by colleges, do a disproportionate amount of their work on the minds of the thousands of students who surround them. It makes sense — the students are right there, and their participation can usually be purchased with pizza.

As a consequence, we know a great deal about the psychology of college students. And one thing we see repeated over and over in the research is that they misperceive the beliefs and actions of their peers.

For example, the average college student [believes](#) that they drink less than the norm — they assume everybody else is out there consuming alcohol at a much higher rate than they actually are. A student is also likely to [overestimate](#) the degree to which others cheat on assignments and underestimate the degree to which their peers study for exams. [Student-athletes](#) tend to believe that other

athletes aren't as invested in academics as they are. The average student also believes that most other students are more likely to [shoplift](#) and are [richer](#) than they really are.

These mistaken beliefs can have perverse effects. If you mistakenly think that everybody else is out there partying and cheating rather than studying, you might be tempted to conform to what you *think* your peers are like — even if most of them really are studying hard and drinking in moderation. If you don't give in to these temptations, you're likely to feel lonely and naive for being responsible while everyone else is apparently out there living it up.

It's easy to see why college students might misperceive the behavior of their peers. Some of these mistaken beliefs, like the assumption that everybody else is richer than they are, might stem from the way people shape their appearances to conform to social norms. Others, like the belief that everybody's partying, likely come from the fact that the loudest and most visible people are probably talking about their drunken Saturday nights while the ones who stayed home and studied are keeping that fact to themselves. Fear of missing out is also a major factor here — students tend to believe that, somewhere out there, others are living more exciting lives than they really are.

Okay, you might say, college students don't understand the world around them — what else is new? But this phenomenon — in which individuals mistakenly think that their beliefs are in the minority — is definitely not confined to undergraduates.

It's called pluralistic ignorance, and it's one of the big reasons why we're not taking action on climate change.

Every year, when I study climate change with my students, we spend some time looking at the [Yale Climate Opinion Maps](#), which provide a snapshot of public opinion about climate change in America. My students — who have signed up for a course about environmental issues and are therefore pretty likely to care about climate change — are generally surprised to find out how much the rest of the country agrees with them.

My students tend to enter the course thinking that the country is split 50–50 on whether climate change is real and that most Americans don't support climate action. But Yale's latest [survey](#), released on March 13, reveals that most Americans think climate change is real and that it is bad:

- 72% of Americans accept that “global warming is happening”

- 59% (a majority in every state except for North Dakota, Montana, Arkansas, Louisiana, Kentucky, and West Virginia) think it is “caused mostly by human activities”
- 63% are “worried about global warming” and believe it will “harm people in the U.S.”

And surprisingly large percentages of Americans support serious and aggressive policies to combat climate change:

- 66% support a transition to “100% clean energy by 2050”
- 76% want the government to fund research in renewable energy
- 75% want tax rebates for electric vehicles and solar panels
- 67% want a carbon tax on fossil fuel companies
- 60% think Congress “should do more to address global warming”
- 68% think corporations “should do more to address global warming”

If comfortable majorities of Americans both accept the reality of global warming and support a wide variety of efforts to combat it, why do my climate-conscious students think that they’re in the minority? It’s another case of pluralistic ignorance.

It turns out that my students aren’t alone in their mistaken beliefs about public support for climate action. A 2022 study by [Gregg Sparkman, Nathan Geiger, and Elke U. Weber](#) found that:

“80–90% of Americans underestimate the prevalence of support for major climate change mitigation policies and climate concern. While 66–80% of Americans support these policies, Americans estimate the prevalence to only be between 37–43% on average.”

The study’s authors provide several possible explanations for Americans’ pluralistic ignorance about climate solutions. People may be misled by the media, which overrepresents the number of climate deniers and makes it appear as if conservatives are monolithically against climate action when in fact many of them are open to it. They also note that the levels of misperception are larger in Republican states, meaning that people may underestimate the desire for climate action because of “local norms.” Unsurprisingly, people who consume mostly conservative media also tend to underestimate the desire for climate action.

There are two findings in the Yale climate opinion surveys that always [stand out](#) to me: though large majorities of Americans care about climate change, only 36% of us discuss global warming on a regular basis and 28% report hearing about it in the news each week.

Like the student who doesn't want to talk about how they spent their Saturday studying, Americans don't want to talk about the existential risks from climate change, and for many of the same reasons: they think it'll be boring, or a downer, or expose them as a nerd who cares too much. Better to keep our worries about climate change to ourselves.

[Cynthia McPherson Frantz](#), a professor of psychology and environmental studies, explains why this makes it hard to mitigate climate change:

“Currently, worrying about climate change is something people are largely doing in the privacy of their own minds. Based on... the recent work of others on pluralistic ignorance, it becomes clear that we are locked in a self-fulfilling spiral of silence. People believe that others are not concerned — or that they are even skeptical of climate change — which encourages them to refrain from discussing it with others. The lack of public discussion reinforces the norm that others are not concerned and hampers the likelihood of collective organization to address climate change. Misconceptions take on an even larger significance when we remember that those in positions of power are people too. Any misconceptions on their part influence how they behave, i.e., their willingness to support aggressive policies, make bold statements in their public outreach, or create “balanced” media coverage of climate change.”

Just as the student who believes that “everybody cheats” may be more tempted to cheat themselves, Americans who believe that “nobody but me cares about climate change” are more likely to bury their concern about climate change and act as if it doesn't exist.

Our pluralistic ignorance around climate change creates a series of self-fulfilling prophecies. We don't believe that anybody wants to talk about climate change, so we don't bring it up in conversation. The media assumes that nobody's interested, so they don't cover it much. Because we're not hearing about climate change, we presume that few people share our views on it. Wrongly convinced that nobody wants to do anything about environmental problems, we don't bother to pressure our leaders or push for solutions. Not hearing much from their constituents, politicians assume that nobody wants progress on climate change.

Cynthia McPherson Frantz talks about creating a sense of “collective efficacy” in which we stop these cycles of misunderstanding and demonstrate to each other that it’s possible to do something about climate change. Perhaps we need to deal with our misaligned social and psychological systems before we can feel empowered to heal our environmental systems.