

On environment, Obama and scientists take hit in poll

Jon Cohen and Jennifer Agiesta, Washington Post, 12-18-09

As President Obama arrives in Copenhagen hoping to seal an elusive deal on climate change, his approval rating on dealing with global warming has crumbled at home and there is broad opposition to spending taxpayer money to encourage developing nations to curtail their energy use, according to a new Washington Post-ABC News poll.

There's also rising public doubt and growing political polarization about what scientists have to say on the environment, and a widespread perception that there is a lot of disagreement among scientists about whether global warming is happening.

But for all the challenges American policymakers have to overcome, nearly two-thirds of people surveyed say the federal government should regulate the release of greenhouse gases from sources like power plants, cars and factories in an effort to curb global warming. Last week the Environmental Protection Agency said it is putting together plans to control the emissions of six gases deemed dangerous to the environment and public.

Support for such a regulation is down 10 percentage points from June, but majorities of Americans remain supportive of such regulations even if they increased monthly bills, so long as they lower greenhouse gas levels. If energy bills jumped \$10 a month, 60 percent back new limits; at \$25 a month, it's 55 percent.

Most, however, oppose a widely floated proposal in which the United States and other industrialized countries would contribute \$10 billion a year to help developing countries pay for reducing the amount of greenhouse gases they release. Overall, 57 percent of those polled oppose this idea; 39 percent support it. Most Republicans (74 percent) and independents (58 percent) are against this proposal, while a small majority of Democrats (54 percent) are supportive.

At the same time, there's growing negativity toward the president's handling of the broader global warming issue. Around the 100-day mark of Obama's presidency, 61 percent approved of the way he was dealing with the issue. Approval slumped to 54 percent in June and to 45 percent in the new poll.

The drop in Obama's ratings has been driven by a steep slump among political independents, who went from 62 percent positive in April to 36 percent now.

Scientists themselves also come in for more negative assessments in the poll, with four in 10 Americans now saying that they place little or no trust in what scientists have to say about the environment. That's up significantly in recent years. About 58 percent of Republicans now put little or no faith in scientists on the subject, double the number saying so in April 2007. Over this time frame, distrust among independents bumped up from 24 to 40 percent, while Democrats changed only marginally. Among seniors, the number of skeptics more than doubled, to 51 percent.

The declining confidence comes when the administration is trying to get momentum for an international pact on climate change, leveraging broad consensus among scientists that global warming is a real threat that demands immediate action. Another obstacle, however, is that relatively few of those polled perceive such an accord.

In fact, more than six in 10 Americans see a lot of disagreement among scientists on the issue of global

warming. That's the view of nearly eight in 10 Republicans and about two-thirds of independents. A smaller majority of Democrats, 55 percent, see general agreement among the scientific community.

The poll was conducted by telephone Thursday through Sunday among a random national sample of 1,003 adults. Results from the full survey have a margin of sampling error of plus or minus three percentage points.