

ENVIRONMENT

Study: Young Republicans leading the way when it comes to Florida's shifting views on climate change



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Floridians believe more in climate change today than they did just a few years ago, and a surprising segment of the population is leading the way.

Young Republicans are the top driving force in the Sunshine State when it comes to shifting beliefs in climate change, according to a study conducted by Colin Polsky of Florida Atlantic University.

"In Florida, an opinion somewhat resembling a consensus on climate change is emerging, and it's largely being driven by younger Republicans," Polsky said Friday during a climate summit held by the Coastal and Heartland National Estuary Partnership, or CHNEP. "You could argue that the younger Republicans are as close to the Democrat trends as they are to the older Republicans."

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Former Gov. Rick Scott's administration famously discouraged the use of the term "climate change." Scott, a Republican, is now a U.S. senator for Florida.

Polsky said it seems Floridians are more likely to believe in climate change today than they were less than a decade ago.

"When I moved here eight years ago from Massachusetts, it seemed like Floridians views of climate change might be different than parts of the rest of the country," Polsky said. "(But) Florida might be the first state that flips from being contrary to climate change to being more supportive of it, which might lead to a domino effect across the country."

Friday was the second day of the CHNEP's 2022 climate summit, and other topics included rising temperatures and sea levels, saltwater intrusion and climate adaptability.

Polsky surveyed between 1,000 and 1,400 people of various backgrounds to get an idea of what percentage of Floridians believe in climate change and whether or not there were differences in beliefs according to political party affiliations.

Turns out, there's not much disagreement between Democrats and Republicans when it comes to climate change here, Polsky's research shows.

"Close to nine out of 10 adult Floridians agree that climate change is happening, and that's a pretty big number," Polsky said. "In Florida we're still seeing a majority of adult respondents responding yes, that climate change is happening and it is human caused."

The questions in the survey were: is the climate changing; if it is changing, is it human-caused; should climate change be taught in K-12 schools; and is the state doing enough to prepare for a changing climate.

Overall, both parties support teaching climate change and resiliency in public schools.

"Old and young Democrats believed about the same but younger Republicans were much more likely to believe it was human caused than older Republicans," Polsky said.

Doris Cortese, who was not at the meeting, is the vice chair of the Republican Party of Lee County.

She said she believes Florida Republicans are committed to protecting the environment but that she's not so sure Polsky's results are accurate.

"Most young Republicans I know believe in environmental protection, doing what we can," Cortese said. "But I don't think they are sold on climate change and that humans are causing all the problems."

Polsky's survey also asked respondents if the state was doing enough to address climate change.

About 20% of the respondents who were Democrats said Florida is doing enough to protect the state. That number jumped to about 40% when it came to Republicans.

"So that means the majority of Floridians are interested in the state doing more," Polsky said.

Polsky said he plans to further break down the research in hopes of showing links to religious and cultural views as well as educational background.

"We should be able to characterize what Floridian's views are and really dig deep into the social reason for whatever is their stated position," he said.

Nikki Fried: 'Climate change is not just a theory or abstract idea'

Nikki Fried, Florida's commissioner for agriculture and consumer services, spoke live online to the group.

"Climate change is not just a theory or abstract idea," said Fried, a Democrat who is running for governor. "We live with the consequences every single day."

Fried said polluted air and water are threats to the environment, and that action needs to be taken in order to keep the planet inhabitable.

"This is one of the most urgent issues of our time and it's critical that we come together to protect our natural resources for future generations," Fried said. "We need to take decisive action. Doing nothing is no longer an option."

Carolina Maran, chief resiliency officer for the South Florida Water Management District, said climate change will bring more extreme wet and dry events to the state.

Storing more water on the landscape is important because that will help offset the major droughts that are expected.

"We know we have demands for water supply, the environment and our region as a whole in terms of the water we have available," Maran said. "Sometimes the available water is not there when we need it most. So during the dry season we do have to use water that was in storage during the wet season."

Water will be needed on the landscape to help recharge drinking water aquifers, which, in turn, helps combat saltwater intrusion.

"Definitely the movement (of saltwater) inland is something that we have been paying a lot of attention to," Maran said. "We need to be able to keep our freshwater water higher and store more water so we can reduce the risks during the dry season."

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