

Is There a Climate “Spiral of Silence” in America?

Most Americans say global warming is personally important to them,
but don’t talk or hear about it much.

Our surveys have repeatedly shown that most Americans are interested in the issue of global warming and consider it personally important. Our studies, however, have also shown that for most Americans, climate change is not a common topic of conversation or something they hear about much in their daily lives. This suggests that there is a climate change “spiral of silence”¹, in which even people who care about the issue, shy away from discussing it because they so infrequently hear other people talking about it – reinforcing the spiral.

Here we use data from our most recent national survey to explore this concept. As you’ll see below, we find that **more than half of those who are *interested* in global warming or think the issue is *important* “rarely” or “never” talk about it with family and friends (57% and 54% respectively).**

So we pose the question to you: Do you think there a spiral of silence about climate change in America? Do you find yourself or others you know hesitant to talk about it? If so, why?

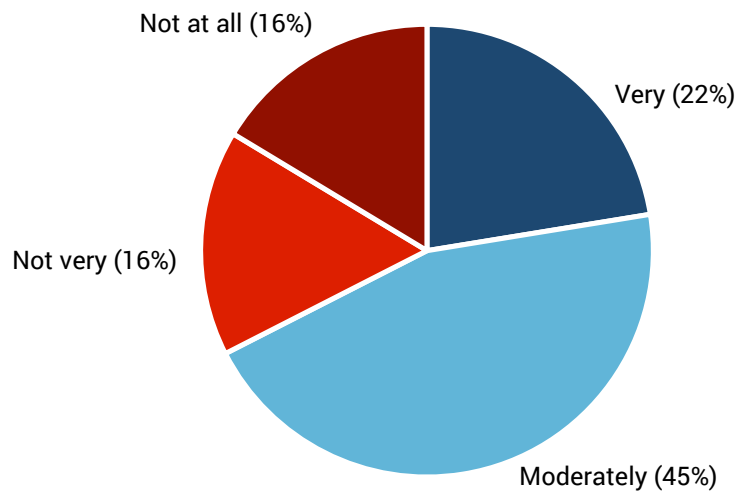
Please share your answers via Twitter to [@YaleClimateComm](https://twitter.com/YaleClimateComm) and [@Mason4C](https://twitter.com/Mason4C), using the hashtag [#climatesilence](https://twitter.com/#!/climatesilence), or on our Facebook pages: [Yale Program on Climate Change Communication](https://www.facebook.com/YaleProgramonClimateChangeCommunication) and [George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication](https://www.facebook.com/GeorgeMasonUniversityCenterforClimateChangeCommunication). Let’s talk about it!

¹ Noelle-Neumann, E. (1993). *The spiral of silence: Public opinion -- our social skin, 2nd Edition*. University of Chicago Press. Chicago, IL.

1. Americans are interested in global warming

The majority of Americans are interested in the issue of global warming. Two in three Americans are either "very" (22%) or "moderately" (45%) interested. Only about one in three is "not very" (16%) or "not at all" (16%) interested in it.

Two in Three Americans Are Moderately or Very Interested in Global Warming



[Interested]. How strongly do you feel each of the following emotions when you think about the issue of global warming?

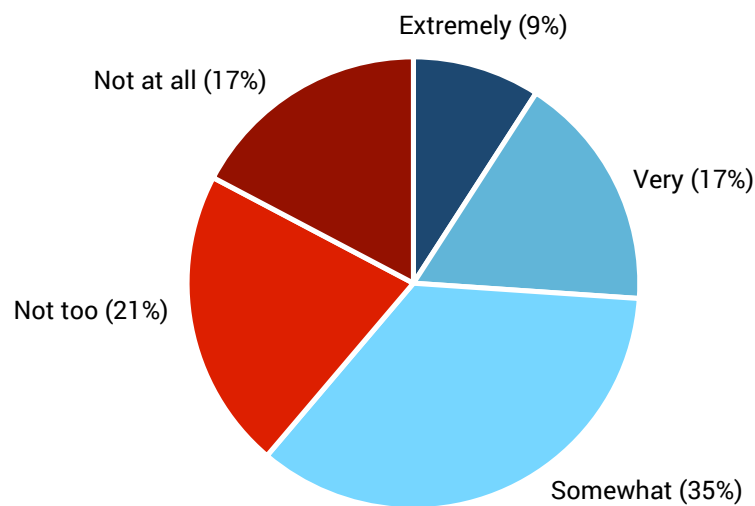
Base: Americans 18+ (n=1,204). March, 2016



2. Global warming is personally important to a majority of Americans

The majority of Americans also say global warming is important to them personally. Six in ten say the issue is “extremely” (9%), “very” (17%), or “moderately” (35%) important to them. Fewer Americans – about four in ten – say global warming is “not too” (21%) or “not at all” (17%) important to them personally.

Six in Ten Americans Say the Issue of Global Warming is At Least Somewhat Important to Them Personally



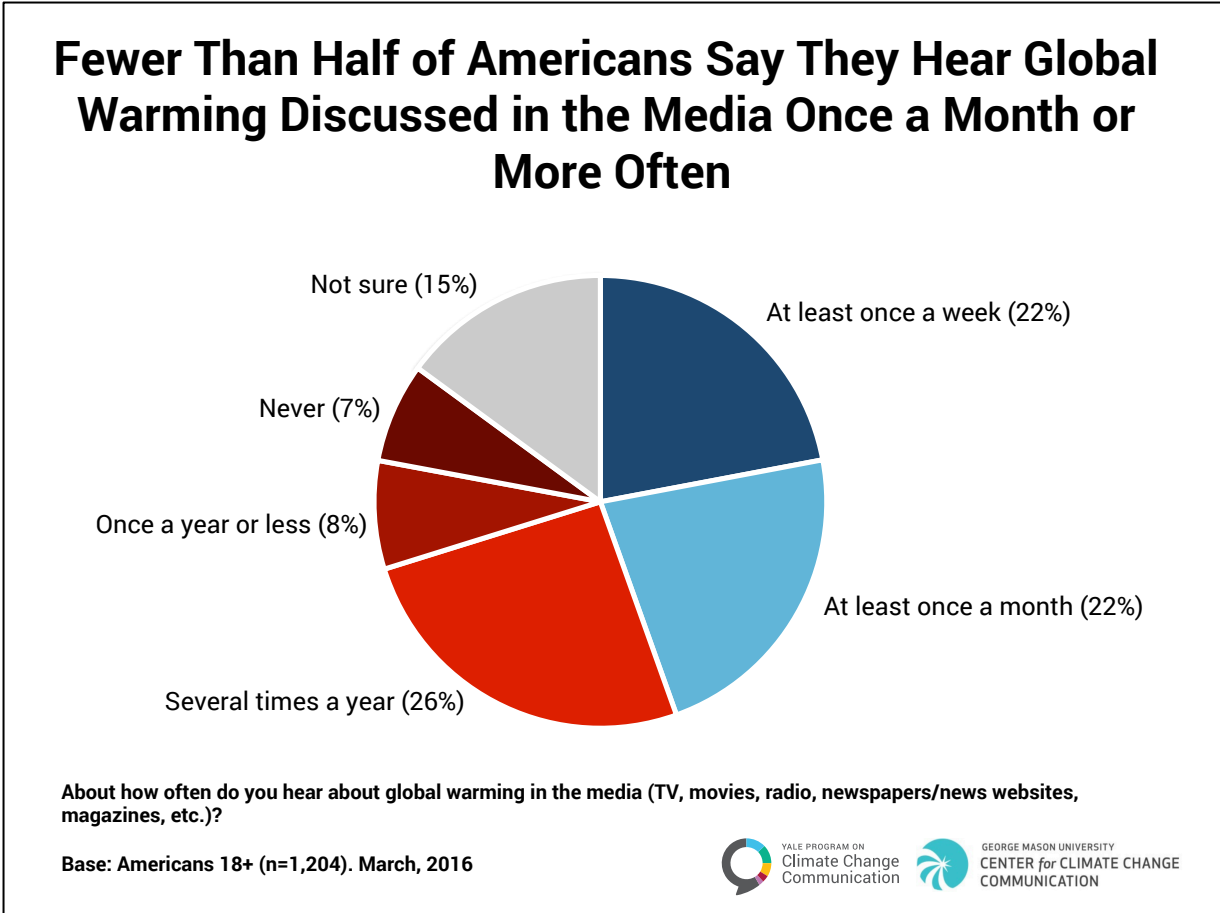
How important is the issue of global warming to you personally?

Base: Americans 18+ (n=1,204). March, 2016



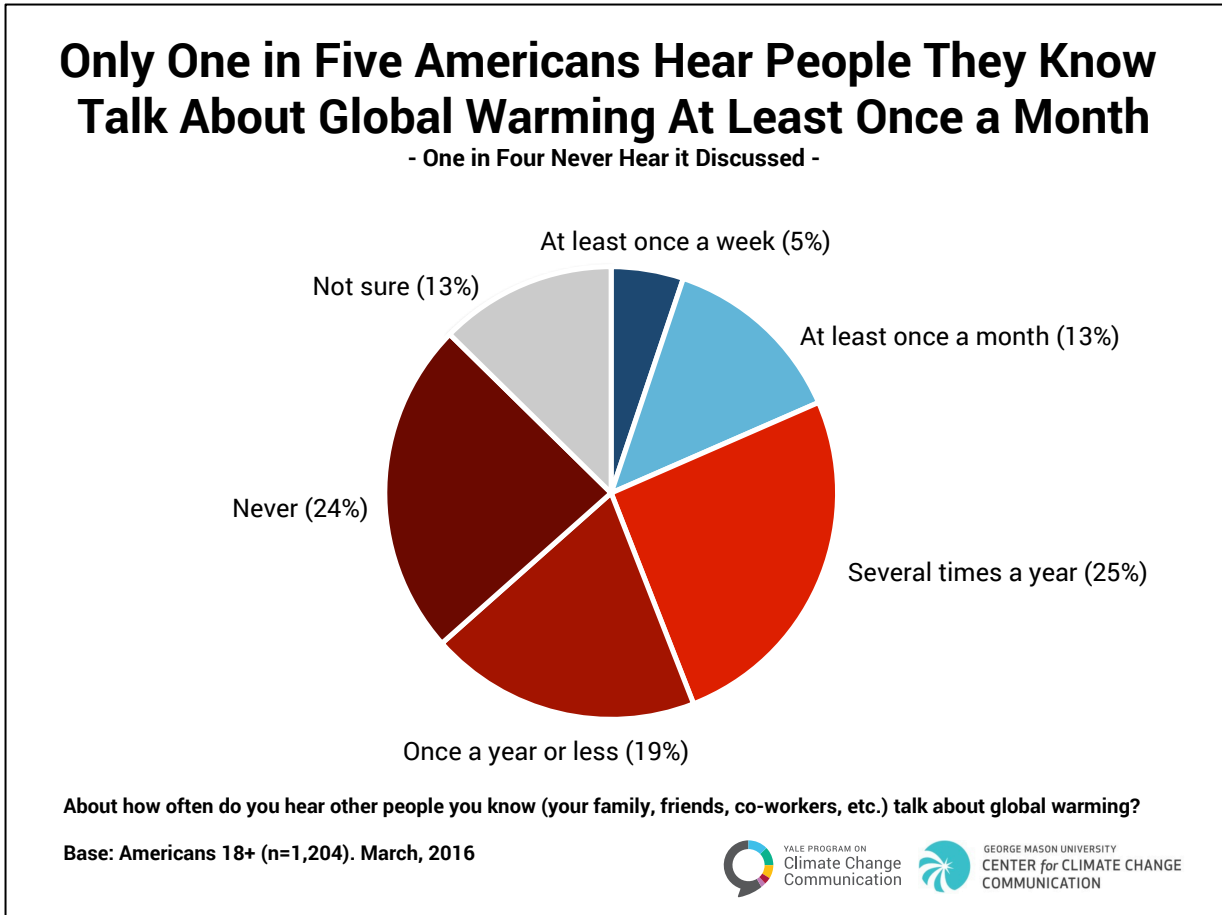
3. Americans don’t hear about global warming frequently in the media

Fewer than half of Americans say they hear global warming discussed in the media (TV, movies, radio, newspapers/news websites, magazines, etc.) “at least once a week” (22%) or even “at least once a month” (22%). One in four Americans (26%) say they hear about the topic in the media “several times a year,” while 30% say “once a year or less,” “never,” or “not sure.”



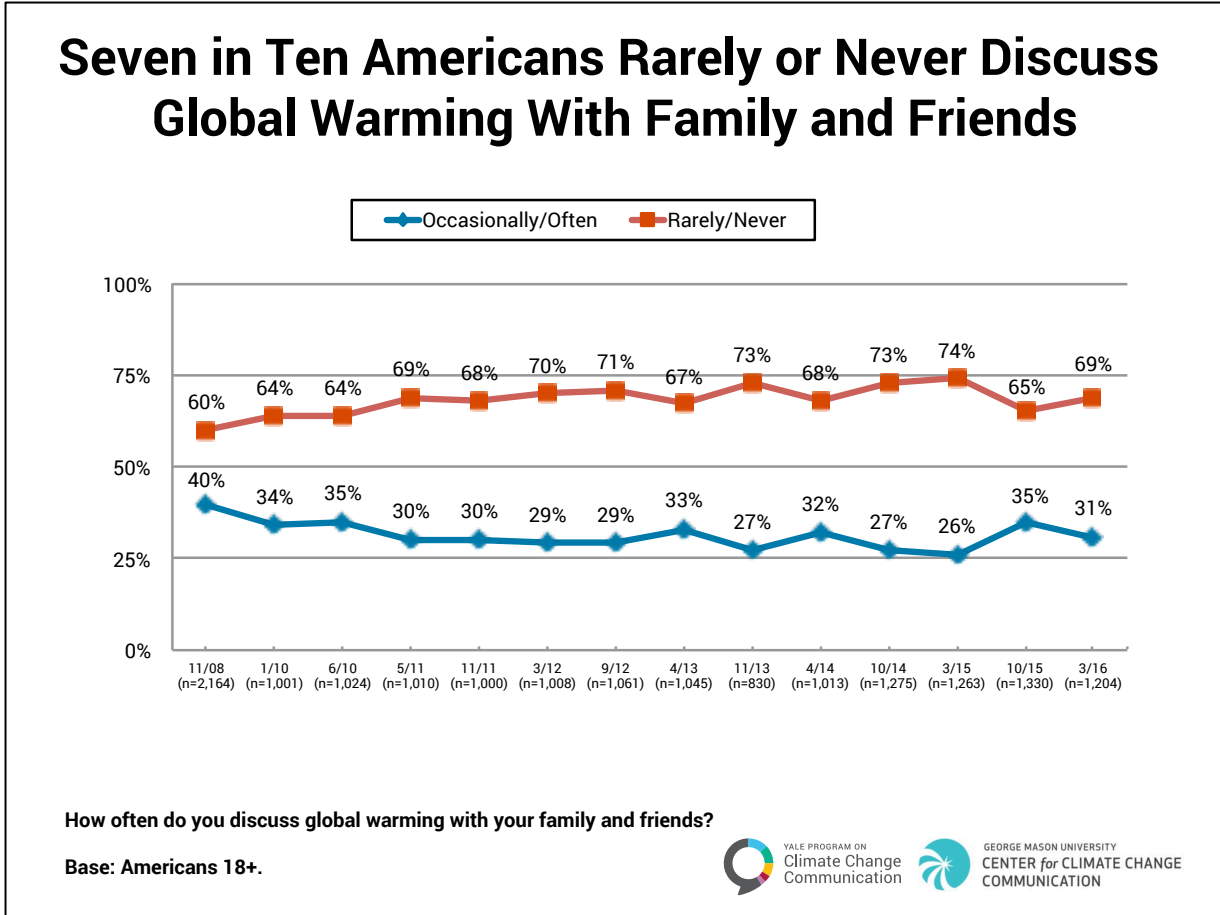
4. Americans don’t often hear global warming discussed

Nearly seven in ten Americans (68%) hear other people they know discussing global warming only “several times a year” or less often, and one in four (24%) “never” hear people they know discussing it. Fewer than one in five (18%) hear people they know discussing global warming at least once a month.



5. Americans rarely discuss global warming with family and friends

About seven in ten Americans report that they “rarely” (36%) or “never” (32%) discuss global warming with family and friends, which has been trending slightly upward over the past eight years.



6. Many Americans who are interested in global warming or think it is important are not hearing or talking about it

Although the majority of Americans are interested in global warming and say it is important to them personally, many of those same people say they don’t hear about it in the media, from people they know, or from family and friends.

Specifically, among Americans who are *interested* in global warming or who say global warming is *important* to them personally, about half either hear about global warming in the media only several times a year or less often (40% and 39% respectively), or say they’re not sure how often they hear about it/gave no response (12% and 13% respectively). An even larger percentage – three in four who are *interested* in global warming or think it is *important* – hear other people they know talk about it only several times a year or less often (66% and 63% respectively) or say they’re not sure/gave no response (both 12%). Similarly, **more than half of those who are *interested* or think global warming is *important* “rarely” or “never” talk about it with family and friends (57% and 54% respectively).**

		Very/moderately <i>interested</i> in global warming (67% of Americans)	Global warming is extremely/ very/somewhat <i>important</i> (61% of Americans)
		%	%
Hear about global warming in the media...	Once a month or more	48	48
	Several times a year or less	40	39
	Not sure/No response	12	13
Hear other people you know talk about global warming...	Once a month or more	23	25
	Several times a year or less	66	63
	Not sure/No response	12	12
Discuss global warming with family and friends...	Often/Occasionally	43	46
	Rarely/Never	57	54

Base: Americans 18+ (n=1,204). March, 2016

Survey Method

This climate note is based on findings from a nationally representative survey – *Climate Change in the American Mind* – conducted by the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication. The research was funded by the 11th Hour Project, the Energy Foundation, the Grantham Foundation, and the MacArthur Foundation.

The sample was drawn from GfK’s KnowledgePanel[®], an online panel of members drawn using probability sampling methods. Prospective members are recruited using a combination of random digit dial and address-based sampling techniques that cover virtually all (non-institutional) resident phone numbers and addresses in the United States. Those contacted who would choose to join the panel but do not have access to the Internet are loaned computers and given Internet access so they may participate. The sample therefore includes a representative cross-section of American adults – irrespective of whether they have Internet access, use only a cell phone, etc. Key demographic variables were adjusted, post survey, to match US Census Bureau norms.

The survey instrument was designed by Anthony Leiserowitz, Geoff Feinberg, and Seth Rosenthal of Yale University, and Edward Maibach and Connie Roser-Renouf of George Mason University.

Sample details and margins of error

Data are based on a nationally representative survey of 1,204 American adults, aged 18 and older. The survey was conducted March 18–31, 2016. All questionnaires were self-administered by respondents in a web-based environment. The survey took, on average, about 26 minutes to complete. All samples are subject to some degree of sampling error – that is, statistical results obtained from a sample can be expected to differ somewhat from results that would be obtained if every member of the target population were interviewed. The margin of error for this survey, at the 95% confidence level, was plus or minus 3 percentage points.

Rounding error

For tabulation purposes, percentage points are rounded off to the nearest whole number. As a result, percentages in a given chart may total slightly higher or lower than 100%. Summed response categories (e.g., “very interested” + “moderately interested”) are also rounded.

Reference

Cite as: Maibach, E., Leiserowitz, A., Rosenthal, S., Roser-Renouf, C., & Cutler, M. (2016). *Is there a climate “spiral of silence” in America: March, 2016*. Yale University and George Mason University. New Haven, CT: Yale Program on Climate Change Communication.

To view the report on-line, click [here](#).