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Lawrence Hamilton, professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire, is available to discuss how politics, knowledge, and weather influence personal beliefs about climate change, and how local factors such as unemployment and population growth influence views about the value of conservation and regulation.

According to Hamilton, across major science organizations, national academies, and scientific reviews there is a broad consensus about climate change, and agreement on certain key observations such as the global increase in CO2 levels and the decline of Arctic ice. In his research, he has turned some of those key observations into questions on public opinion surveys to map out which facts have reached public awareness.

“People who agree with the scientific consensus that climate change is happening now, caused mainly by human activities, are more likely to know what the term ‘greenhouse effect’ means. They also are more likely to give accurate answers to questions about whether, in recent decades, the late-summer area of Arctic sea ice has decreased, CO2 levels in the air have increased, melting land or sea ice could have greater effects on sea level, and volcanoes or human activities released more CO2,” Hamilton says.

However, the pattern of wrong answers on these questions is interesting.

“Some wrong answers, such as ‘Arctic ice increased,’ appear to simply reflect a lack of knowledge. But other wrong answers promoted by various Internet and political writers, such as ‘Arctic ice declined, then recovered,’ seem to reflect people’s political identification and general beliefs about climate change,” Hamilton says.

When it comes to the influence of local factors, Hamilton has found that people in rural areas with high unemployment rates are less likely to support conservation efforts and restrictive environmental regulations.

“Economic pressures help to understand why, in spite of the devastation caused by the BP oil spill, many residents of the Gulf Coast oppose a moratorium on off-shore drilling,” he said. “People living
in areas with high unemployment rates may perceive environmental rules as a threat to their economic livelihood."

Looking at other factors that influence views on conservation, Hamilton says that classic patterns show that Republicans, older respondents, and those who frequently attend religious services are less likely to favor conservation for future generations. Women, nonminority, and better-educated respondents are more likely to favor conservation. Similar to views on conservation, the researchers confirmed previous research that shows environmental regulations are supported more by younger, better educated, and less Republican respondents.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 12,200 undergraduate and 2,300 graduate students.

PHOTO
Lawrence Hamilton, professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire.
http://www.unh.edu/news/img/hamilton.jpg

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UNH Experts available for comment:

- Lawrence Hamilton