

## Republicans and Democrats in Different Worlds on Climate Change

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On October 31, world leaders and climate experts will gather in Glasgow, Scotland, for the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference, also known as COP26. These meetings represent a much-anticipated opportunity for countries to coordinate action to decelerate climate change and mitigate its devastating effects. While US President Joseph Biden has vowed to make climate issues a priority for his administration, his ability to deliver in Glasgow will depend in large part on politics at home. The [2021 Chicago Council Survey](#) data indicate that the administration will grapple with significant partisan divisions not only in Congress but also among the American public. Along with immigration, climate change is consistently one of the most starkly polarizing American foreign policy issues.

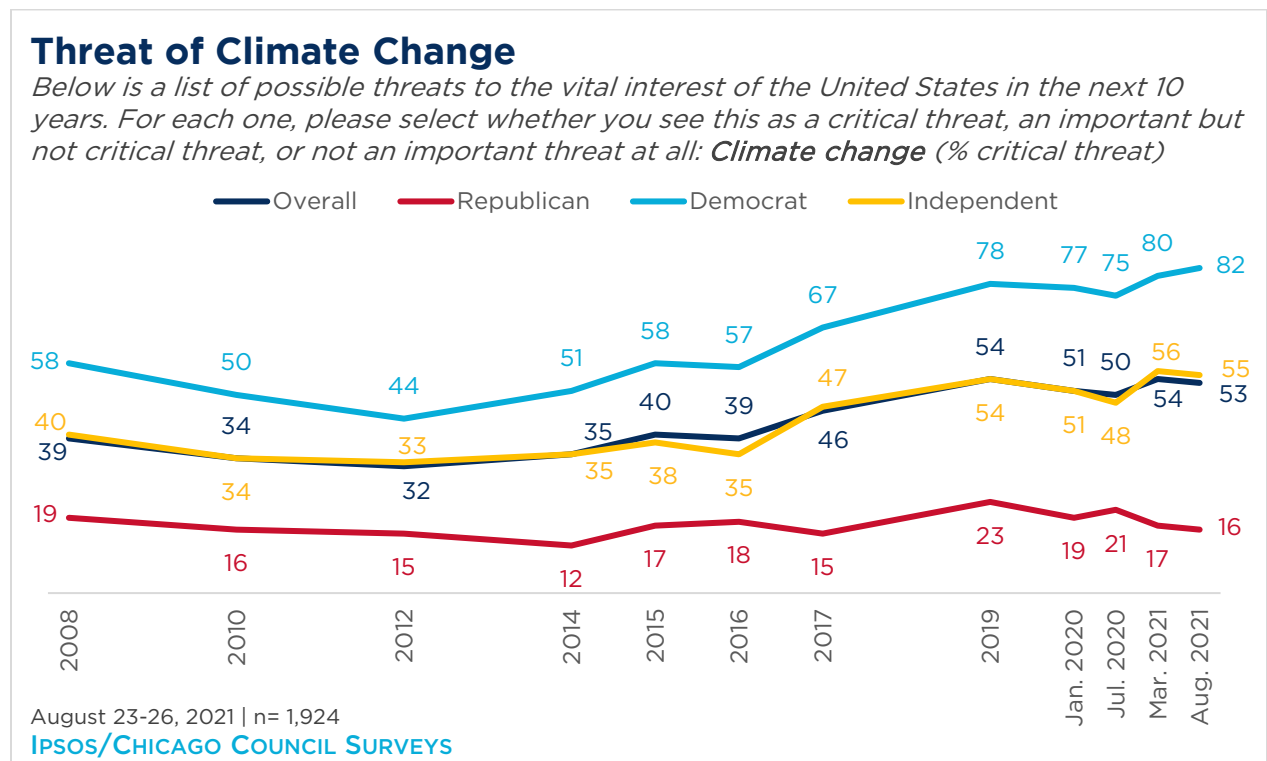
### Key Findings

- Large majorities of Democrats think the United States should play a leading role on limiting climate change (81%) and consider it to be a critical threat (82%).
- By contrast, only 31 percent of Republicans support a leading US role on limiting climate change, and just 16 percent consider it a critical threat.
- Gallup polling shows that seven in ten Democrats and Democratic-leaning Independents (71%) place a higher priority on protecting the environment than on economic growth. Nearly as many Republicans and Republican-leaning independents (68%) emphasize economic growth over environmental protection.
- Both partisan groups are less likely to favor protecting the environment than they were before the COVID-19 pandemic took its toll on the US economy.

### Climate Change: Are Americans Concerned?

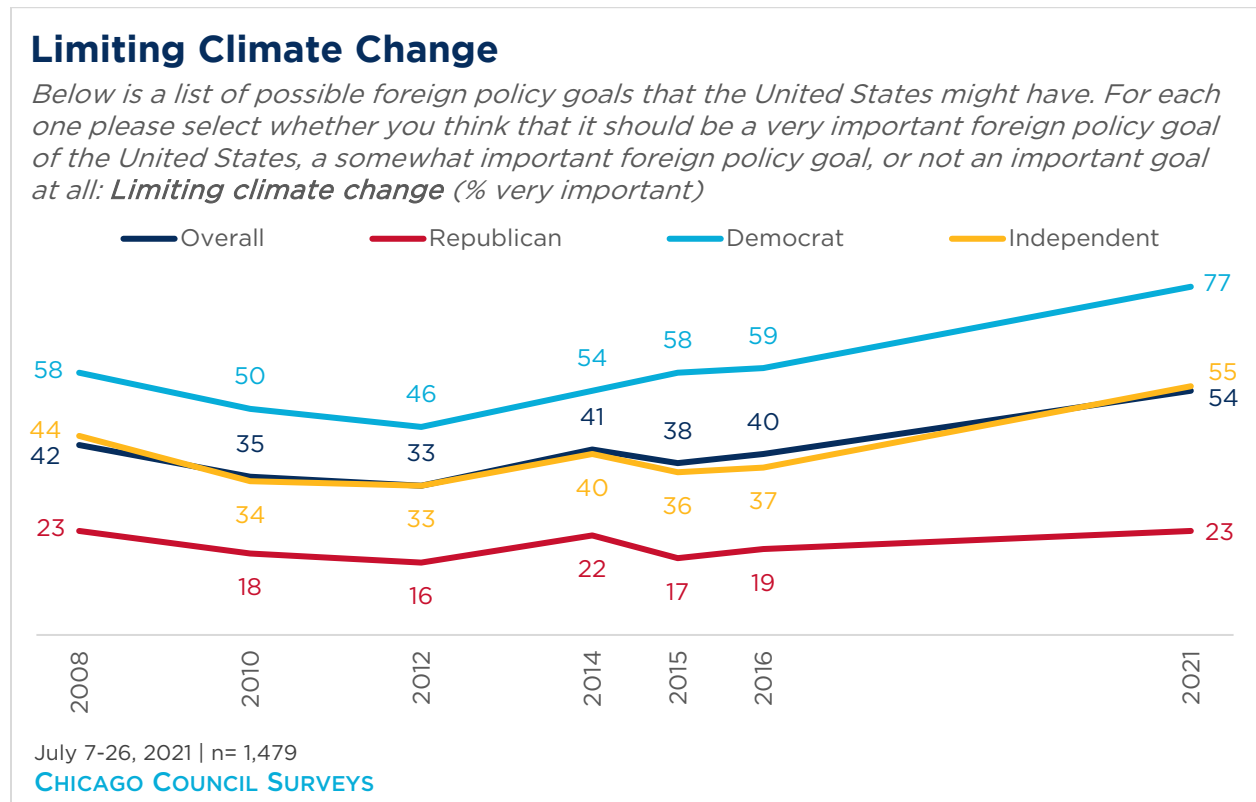
The Biden administration has [committed](#) to “a whole-of-government approach to put climate change at the center of our domestic, national security and foreign policy.” It has already taken a number of important steps to counter climate change, including rejoining the Paris climate agreement, canceling the permit for the Keystone XL pipeline, pledging to double climate aid to developing nations, and rolling back a number of Trump-era policies deemed harmful by environmentalists.

American public concern about climate change has been slowly and steadily growing over the past decade. Since 2019, Chicago Council Surveys have consistently found that a narrow majority of Americans view climate change as a critical threat to the United States. While climate change is increasingly seen as a critical threat, it is also becoming an increasingly partisan issue. In particular, Democrats and Independents have become more concerned about the threat of climate change over time, while Republicans’ limited sense of threat from climate change has not shifted much over the past decade.



In the most recent Chicago Council Surveys, climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic have consistently vied for the top spot on Democrats’ lists of threats to the country. In an August 23–26, 2021, [Chicago Council-Ipsos Survey](#), 82 percent of Democrats identify climate change as a critical threat to the United States. By contrast, only 16 percent of Republicans classify climate change as a critical threat; they are more likely to be concerned about international terrorism and large numbers of immigrants and refugees coming to the United States.

These divisions are also evident in public priorities for US foreign policy. According to the 2021 Chicago Council Survey, over half of Americans (54%) now see limiting climate change as a very important foreign policy goal for the United States, and 27 percent see it as somewhat important. Democrats (77%) and Independents (55%) are far more likely to identify limiting climate change as a very important foreign policy goal, and this sentiment has risen substantially among these groups since the question was last asked in 2016. By contrast, about a quarter (23%) of Republicans see this as a very important foreign policy goal.

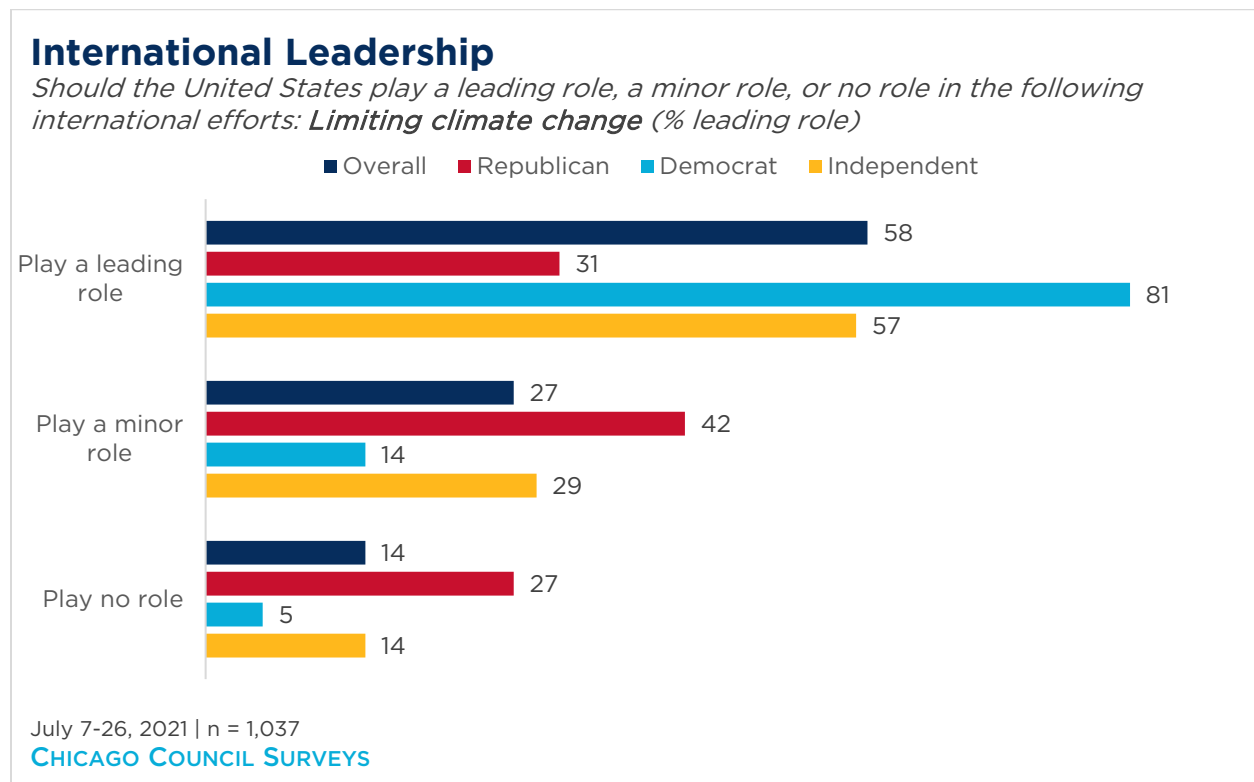


## COP26 Outlook: Democrats Want US to Lead on Climate

The COP26 conference will be one of President Biden’s first opportunities to signal the international role that the United States will play in addressing climate change. Data from the 2021 Chicago Council Survey show that 58 percent of Americans want the United States to take a leading role in the international effort to limit climate change (27% minor role, 14% no role). Again here, partisan divisions tell a more complicated story. Eight in 10 Democrats (81%) and nearly six in 10 Independents (57%) want the United States to play a leading role, but only three in 10 Republicans (31%) agree. If the United States fails to take the lead on this issue, fewer than one in five Americans (19%) think it is very likely another country or organization will do so.

This call for US leadership is in line with the expectations of many in the international community, who have argued that it is the responsibility of the world’s largest

economies to lead on addressing climate change. Not only have large economies like the United States and China contributed more greenhouse gas emissions in recent years, but they will also be better able to absorb the costs of adopting climate-friendly policies without sacrificing critical economic growth. These conversations about differing responsibility and ability will certainly be revisited at COP26.

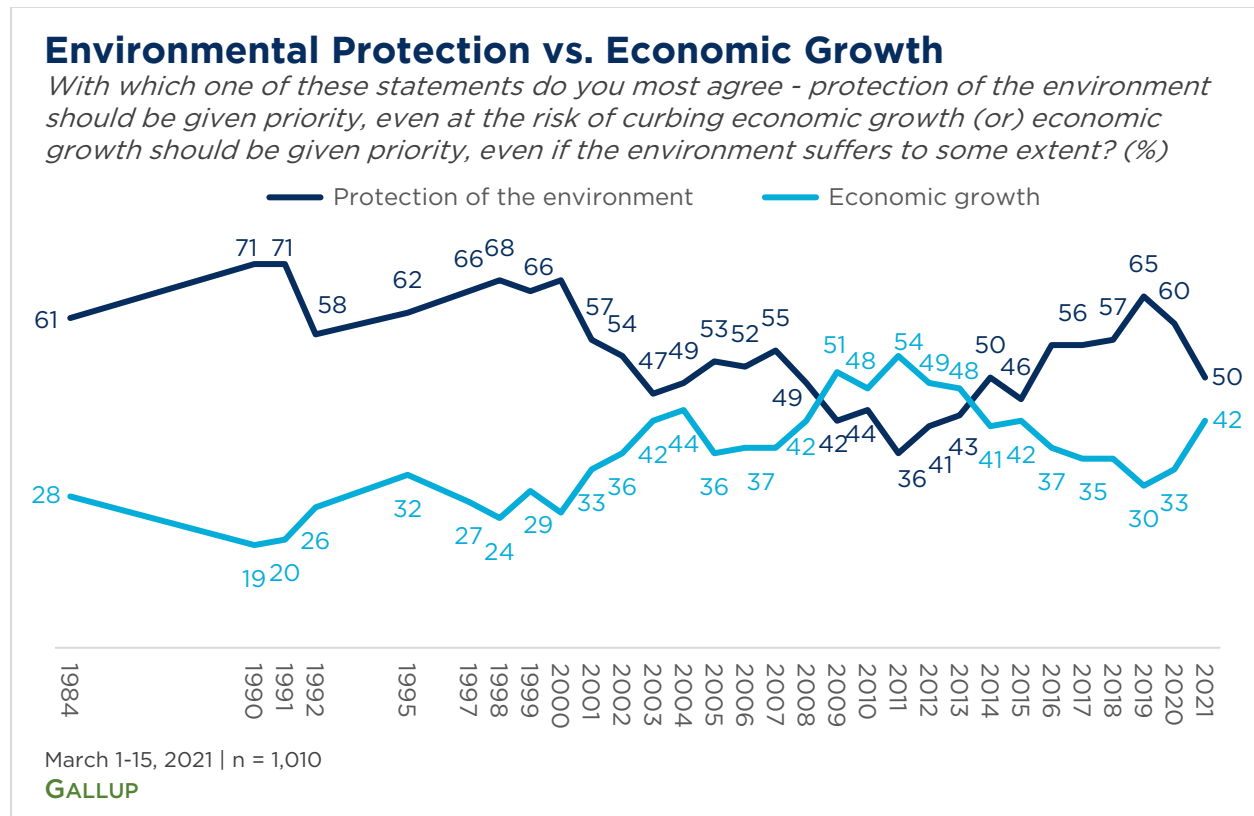


One of the main topics of conversation at the conference will be the Paris Agreement. The [predominant view](#) among climate scientists is that while the Paris Agreement represents an important start on international climate cooperation, the current commitments countries have made under the agreement are not nearly aggressive enough to prevent significant global warming in the coming decades. Nevertheless, most Americans support US participation in the agreement, with 64 percent overall in favor. But here, too, there are partisan differences, with 85 percent of Democrats, 66 percent of Independents, and just 37 percent of Republicans in support.

## Potential Roadblocks

Despite these early actions on climate change, it seems the Biden administration will not be able to please everyone in the face of consistent partisan divides over the issue. [Gallup data](#) from March 1-15, 2021, show that a sizable majority of Democrats and Democratic-leaning Independents (80%) feel the government is doing too little to protect the environment (versus 27% of Republicans and Republican-leaning Independents). This frustration is apparent among Democrats on Capitol Hill as well.

In early October 2021, the House Progressive Caucus [refused to vote](#) on a bipartisan infrastructure bill deemed important by the Biden administration until there was action on a second, broader bill that included major climate protection measures.



Partisan debates about climate change in the United States are often framed as a zero-sum trade-off between environmental protection and economic growth and prosperity. For that reason, the economic shock of the COVID-19 pandemic may make US climate action more challenging. In a 2019 Chicago Council poll, American public support for taking steps to address climate change had grown to a bare majority (51%), “even if those steps would be economically costly.” This indicated a meaningful shift in the urgency and importance with which Americans were viewing the issue of climate change.

However, [Gallup polling](#) from about a year into the pandemic (March 1-15, 2021) finds that the percentage of Americans willing to prioritize the protection of the environment, “even at the risk of curbing economic growth,” has declined to 50 percent, down from a recent high in its polling of 65 percent in 2019. In this Gallup poll, two out of three Republicans and Republican-leaning Independents would prefer to prioritize economic growth, even if the environment has to suffer to some extent (68%), but fewer than a quarter of Democrats and Democratic-leaning Independents agree (23%). Among members of both parties, the preference for prioritizing the economy has become more popular in recent years. In 2019, half of Republicans and Republican leaners (54%) and a tenth of Democrats and Democratic

leaners (12%) favored prioritizing economic growth at the expense of the environment.

Following the 2008 financial crisis, there was a similar shift toward prioritizing economic growth over environmental protection. In that case, it took five years for a majority of the public to swing back in favor of environmental protections that could risk curbing economic growth. Based on this historical trend, it is reasonable to expect that public support for environmental protection measures may rebound as the economy begins to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it is unclear whether that shift will be big enough or soon enough for the Biden administration to push additional climate actions surrounding COP26.

## Conclusion

As Senate Democrats [struggle](#) to pass clean energy legislation and President Biden prepares to attend COP26, climate issues are taking center stage in the domestic and international political arenas. The United States has faced criticism for not making ambitious climate commitments that match the country's level of power, influence, and pollution in the world, and Biden will be looking to silence those critics in Glasgow. The data show that slim majorities of Americans see climate change as a critical threat, an important foreign policy goal, and an issue on which the United States should play a leading role. However, the partisan divides on those issues mean that climate action in the United States will likely continue to be incremental and politically fraught.

## Methodology

The 2021 Chicago Council Survey, a project of the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy, is the latest effort in a series of wide-ranging surveys on American attitudes toward US foreign policy. The 2021 Chicago Council Survey is made possible by the generous support of the Crown family and the Korea Foundation.

The survey was conducted from July 7–26, 2021, among a representative, probability-based national sample of 2,086 adults. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is +/- 2.33 percentage points, including a design effect of 1.1817. The margin of error is higher for partisan subgroups or for partial-sample items. Partisan identification is based on respondents' answer to a standard partisan self-identification question: "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?"

Additional results come from a Chicago Council and Ipsos poll conducted August 23–26, 2021. This poll is based on a nationally representative probability sample of 1,924 general-population adults 18 or older, with oversamples of veterans, active-duty military, and young adults 18 to 24. The margin of sampling error is +/- 2.5 percentage points, including a design effect of 1.29. The margin of error is higher for partisan subgroups or for partial-sample items.

Both surveys were conducted by Ipsos Public Affairs, a polling, social science, and market research firm in Palo Alto, California, using a randomly selected sample of Ipsos's large-scale nationwide research panel, KnowledgePanel® (KP). KnowledgePanel is the first and largest online research panel that is representative of the entire US population. Ipsos recruits panel members using address-based sampling (ABS) methods to ensure full coverage of all households in the nation.