Majority of Floridians recognize climate change as a threat, FAU poll says

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More than two-thirds of Florida adults consider climate change a threat to future generations and say state and local governments should do more to address it, according to a poll released Monday by Florida Atlantic University.

The poll found 67 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that climate change has "more concern about the well-being of future generations in Florida," according to a news release from the university. Just 28 percent said state, county and city governments were doing enough to address it.

While a Republican-Democrat split about climate change exists in Florida, it's not as pronounced as in the rest of the nation, said Colby Polony, director of the FAU Center for Environmental Studies, who led the effort.

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For example, he said, the poll found 42 percent of Republicans in Florida agreed that climate change was real and primarily caused by human activities. While that's lower than the 59 percent of independents and 79 percent of Democrats who agreed with that statement, he said it was significant that nearly half of Republicans considered human-caused climate change to be realistic.

"Nationally we tend to expect and see Republicans score much, much lower on that question than independents or Democrats," he said. "The results from the Florida survey show much less difference."

Other results of the survey:

- Sixty-eight percent support teaching about climate change in the schools.
- The numbers were higher for specific hazards associated with climate change. Fifty-five percent expressed a moderate or extreme concern about hurricanes getting stronger, 41 percent about rising temperatures and 39 percent about rising sea levels.
- Among younger Americans, the belief in the scientific consensus on climate change was higher. Sixty percent of those aged 18-24 believed that climate change was real and caused by human activities, while for those aged 35-44 the percentage was 40 percent and for those 45 or over it was 22 percent.

The poll of 1,120 Floridians was conducted by FAU's Center for Environmental Studies and Business and Economics Polling Initiative in the university's College of Business.

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The possible impact of climate change on next year's presidential election remains unclear in Florida, whose 102 electoral votes and evenly split electorate make the state a critical battleground.

The lines on the issue are likely to be fairly sharp between President Trump and his Democratic opponent.

Trump has dismissed climate change as a "hoax" invented by China, pledged to withdraw the United States from what he called the "job-killing" Paris agreement to limit greenhouse gases, and authorized a lawsuit to block part of California's climate-change reduction program. All the top candidates for the Democratic nomination consider climate change a reality that the United States needs to address.

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Whether the time can tip the balance in Florida remains unclear, although in a state with a recent history of election photo-finishes, any issue could make a difference.

"Historically, Floridians have usually gravitated toward three general issues, including education, the environment and crime," said Kerla Wagner, chairman of the political science department at FAU, who was not involved in the poll. "With that said, which issue comes to the top remains to be seen." Wagner said the environment matters to people. The question is whether the state's authorities are going to be the thing that drives their vote.

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