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Earth Day 2021: Public opinion on and action on climate change

Globally the public ask: "What is the plan to tackle climate change?"

London, 22th April 2021 — A new global study by Ipsos, conducted online among adults across 30 markets between February 19 and March 5, 2021 shows that a Global Market Average of only 31% agree their government has a clear plan in place for how government, businesses and people themselves are going to work together to tackle climate change. A third, 34%, disagree.

2021 is a 'Super Year' for international environmental policy, with major deals in process on climate, biodiversity, food and oceans. Yet despite their high interest and concern about the environment, low public awareness of the plans suggests they could be more effectively included and engaged to be part of the solution.

All nations included in our research have signed the Paris Agreement and almost all have submitted and published initial Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) – or plans to tackle climate change. These are due to be updated in 2021, and pushing for these plans to be more ambitious will be a major focus of COP26 in Glasgow.

At the same time, people feel the burden of responsibility, with 72% agreeing that if ordinary people do not act now to combat climate change they will be failing future generations. 68% globally say that if companies do not act to combat climate change then they are failing their employees and customers, and 65% globally believe that if their government does not combat climate change then it is failing citizens.

Among the top findings are:

- A Global Market Average of only 31% believe their market has a clear plan in place for how government, businesses and people themselves are going to work together to tackle climate change. Belief that government has a clear plan in place is highest in Saudi Arabia (64%), China (61%) and India (58%) and lowest in the United States (18%) and Japan (16%). Note that polling took place after Joe Biden returned the US to the Paris climate accord on 20th January 2020.
- Markets which have made legally binding commitments to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions by a specific date do not have higher levels of public agreement that their government has a clear plan. The Global Market Average agreement is 31%, but is no better in Great Britain (28%), France (24%) and Hungary (24%) when all these markets have committed to reaching net zero by 2050. In Sweden, where there is a legally binding agreement to reach net zero by 2045, only 23% of the public agree their government has a clear plan.

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- In a year of urgently competing priorities, Global Market Average agreement that if their market's government does not act now, it will be failing its citizens has fallen just 3 percentage points to 65%, from when it was asked in 2020 (68% agreed), just before the WHO declared Coronavirus a pandemic, on March 12th 2020. Agreement is highest in Chile (84%), South Africa (83%) and Colombia (82%), and lowest in Russia (42%) and Saudi Arabia (38%).
- Opinions are however divided on whether tackling climate change should, or should not be a priority in the economic recovery from Covid-19. A Global Market Average of 36% agree climate change should not be a priority in the economic recovery, while 35% disagree. Agreement climate change should not be a priority is highest in India (52%), and lowest in Colombia (28%)
- COVID-19 and actions to control its spread have restricted the public's ability or willingness to behave in several ways which have a relatively high environmental impact, such as air travel, car travel, and shopping for fun rather than from necessity. Some ask if, once restrictions are removed, these behaviours will revert to less sustainable lifestyles than before the pandemic. But this research suggests that in the main, the public do not expect this to happen.
- There is evidence that behaviours have changed due to the pandemic, and that some if not all of these changes are likely to endure once all restrictions are removed. For example, 39% expect to be doing more to avoid food waste once restrictions are removed, than they were before the pandemic. Around a third expect to travel more on foot or by bike, rather than by car (34%) and a similar proportion expect they will more often buy only what they really need instead of shopping for fun (also 34%). Three in ten (31%) say they will be working from home rather than commuting more than they were before the pandemic.
- A Global Market Average of 69% agree that 'I understand what action I need to take to play my part in tackling climate change.' Yet Ipsos Perils of Perception research shows that this isn't always the case. We underestimate high-impact actions such as becoming vegetarian and taking flights, and overestimate lower-impact actions such as avoiding excess packaging. While all these actions can make a difference, understanding their relative impact is also vital.

Potential for further behaviour change over the coming year?

- Despite 2021 being a 'super year' for political climate action, there is no evidence that the public intend to accelerate their own climate change action compared with previous years. Expectation of making pro-environmental changes over the coming year has changed very little since just before the WHO declared the coronavirus pandemic on 12th March 2020, and remains in line with levels seen in 2014.

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- When asked about what changes they are likely to make in order to combat climate change over the next year, avoiding excess packaging is still the most popular change, with a Global Market Average of 59% expecting to make this change over the coming year (vs 57% in 2020). The public show least intention to change on higher impact actions such as dietary changes (39% say they are likely to reduce dairy consumption, compared with 44% who say it is unlikely, and 43% say they are likely to eat less meat), and avoiding flights (45% say they are likely to do this over the next year), though there have been small increases in expectation to change on these measures since 2020.
- The proportion who feel they are already taking as much action as they can is similar to before the full implications of the COVID-19 pandemic hit in early 2020.

Methodology

These are the results of a 30-market survey conducted by Ipsos on its Global Advisor online platform. Ipsos interviewed a total of 21,011 adults aged 18-74 in the United States, Canada, Hong Kong, Israel, Malaysia, South Africa, and Turkey, and 16-74 in 24 other markets between Friday, February 19 and Friday, March 5, 2021.

The sample consists of approximately 1,000 individuals in each of Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, mainland China, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, Spain, and the U.S., and 500 individuals in each of Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Hong Kong, Hungary, India, Malaysia, Mexico, the Netherlands, Peru, Poland, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, South Korea, Sweden, Switzerland and Turkey.

The samples in Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Poland, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the U.S. can be taken as representative of their general adult population under the age of 75.

The samples in Brazil, Chile, mainland China, Colombia, Hong Kong, India, Malaysia, Mexico, Peru, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and Turkey are more urban, more educated, and/or more affluent than the general population. The survey results for these markets should be viewed as reflecting the views of the more “connected” segment of their population.

The data is weighted so that each market’s sample composition best reflects the demographic profile of the adult population according to the most recent census data.

“The Global Market Average” reflects the average result for all the markets and markets where the survey was conducted. It has not been adjusted to the population size of each market or market and is not intended to suggest a total result.

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Where results do not sum to 100 or the 'difference' appears to be +/-1 more/less than the actual, this may be due to rounding, multiple responses, or the exclusion of "don't know" or not stated responses.

The precision of Ipsos online polls is calculated using a credibility interval with a poll of 1,000 accurate to +/- 3.5 percentage points and of 500 accurate to +/- 5.0 percentage points. For more information on Ipsos' use of credibility intervals, please visit the Ipsos website.

The publication of these findings abides by local rules and regulations.

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