U.S. News: Obama Climate Push Faces a Lukewarm Public

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Abstract: Mr. Leiserowitz said research shows that presenting climate change as a public-health issue resonates more than framing it as an environmental issue, which invokes images of melting ice at the North Pole.

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Full text: The White House rollout of a climate-change report this week was aimed squarely at showing the public that inaction affects people directly, covering everything from extreme weather to seasonal allergies. But left unanswered is the question of whether a broad public-relations push -- which features President Barack Obama chatting with TV meteorologists including NBC's Al Roker -- will be enough to make Americans care. Mr. Obama has argued for urgency, which he is expected to do again in a speech Friday. Facing dim prospects for legislation on Capitol Hill, the president is asking people to pressure Washington to act on climate change.

"The most important thing that people can do is say to their elected representatives: This is important. You need to pay attention to it," Mr. Obama told the NBC affiliate in Miami.

But a raft of polls shows that the president faces a steep challenge. While most people say there is evidence that the Earth is warming, climate change consistently ranks near the bottom when voters are asked to assess public-policy priorities. Voters have said that they want the president and Congress to focus first on other issues. In a Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll in January, 27% of respondents said addressing climate change should be an absolute priority this year, with 41% saying that it could be delayed until next year and 29% saying it shouldn't be pursued.

During the past five years, Pew Research Center polls have shown little movement on the issue. In 2009, 30% of respondents said dealing with global warming should be a top priority; this year, 29% rated it a priority. Many GOP lawmakers are critical of the White House's emphasis, saying that new energy regulations will cost businesses more. In interviews this week, the president said some needed measures will come at a cost, but the price of doing nothing will be far more significant.

Polls show a sharp difference in the way Republicans and Democrats view the issue. In the January WSJ/NBC poll, 40% of Democrats said addressing climate change should be an absolute priority, compared with 14% of Republicans. With the midterms approaching, climate change is likely to resonate more with the president's base. The same poll found 44% of Obama voters described the issue as an absolute priority; 7% of Mitt Romney voters shared that view.

Anthony Leiserowitz, director of the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication, said that between 2005 and 2007, many polls showed a greater level of concern. Climate change began to lose traction in 2008 as the recession set in, he said.

The new assessment lays out effects beyond weather, warning that climate change could make people sick. A changing climate can result in more illnesses being transmitted by food, water, and disease-carriers such as mosquitoes, the report said. More pollution can trigger more asthma attacks. And higher temperatures can mean more pollen -- and more days of allergies.

Mr. Leiserowitz said research shows that presenting climate change as a public-health issue resonates more than framing it as an environmental issue, which invokes images of melting ice at the North Pole. "That seems distant," he said. "None of us lives. . .next to a melting glacier."
On Tuesday, Sen. Lindsey Graham (R., S.C.), said the administration should focus more on the Ukraine conflict. "The heat that I'm worried about right now is the heat from the world blowing up," said Mr. Graham, who has worked on bipartisan climate legislation in the past. "The whole world's on fire. I think we got our priorities a little misplaced here."

Chris Lehane, a Democratic strategist and adviser to billionaire Tom Steyer, who is spending millions to make climate change a top-tier issue, said Mr. Obama is right to show people that it hits them where they live. He pointed to skyrocketing flood insurance rates in Florida, forest fires in the West, rising asthma rates in several cities and effects on agriculture in the Midwest.

"The extinction of butterflies is a serious problem, but that's not necessarily what's going to move someone to vote or move someone to call up their elected representative," Mr. Lehane said. "These are issues that are literally in people's backyards."

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Amy Harder and Alicia Mundy contributed to this article.

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