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Wonkbook: Will we now finally care about climate change?

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It's been more than 25 years now since James Hansen of NASA, [testifying before Congress](#), helped bring global warming (and climate change more generally) to the public forefront. And ever since then, scientists and scientific organizations have warned the public time and time again — in public appearances, on TV, in papers or even in assessment reports — that global warming is not only real but very likely human-caused.

Polls show that a [majority of Americans still say they accept climate change](#) as real (in some polls, a smaller percentage when asked if they think humans are to blame). But, if anything, the public's concern on the issue has waned over time, and climate change [now ranks near the bottom](#) on the list of issues Americans are concerned most about. And a powerful wing of the Republican Party now is highly skeptical, or flat-out denies, the overwhelming scientific consensus that humans are altering the climate, mainly by burning fossil fuels.

We've recently seen a number of climate change assessment reports — two by the [United Nations](#), one by the [American Association for the Advancement of Science](#) and now the National Climate Assessment — and each of them reaches the same conclusion: That time is running out to act to stave off harmful levels of global warming. And each of them has been summarily cast aside by Washington policymakers, in particular Congress.

There's no reason to think that [yesterday's release of the National Climate Assessment](#) will have an outcome that's any different. But this report does offer signs that scientists are rethinking how they communicate climate change to the public: The authors frame the report not just in terms of hypothetical future impacts, but in terms of concrete, tangible impacts that are occurring now. And the report tries to [use simpler, more general language](#). Climate change is a highly abstract issue, and its gradualness, complexity and lack of immediacy may explain why Americans simply aren't that moved by it (let alone why many are skeptical). The White House and scientists may not convince climate skeptics in Congress with this report, but maybe that's not the initial goal. Rather, they may hope to move the public-opinion needle, even if by just a bit. —
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