Public Views Unchanged by Unusual Weather

President Bush's mention in his State of the Union Message of the "serious challenge of global climate change" was directed at an American public many of whom remain lukewarm about the importance of the issue. The unusual weather affecting the nation this winter may have reinforced the widely held view that the phenomenon of rising temperatures is real (77% of Americans believe that), but the public continues to be deeply divided over both its cause and what to do about it. But there is considerably less agreement over its cause, with about half (47%) saying that human activity, such as the burning of fossil fuels, is mostly to blame for the earth getting warmer.

Moreover, there are indications that most Americans do not regard global warming as a top-tier issue. In Pew's annual list of policy priorities for the president and Congress, global warming ranked fourth-lowest of 23 items tested, with only about four-in-ten (38%) rating it a top priority. A survey last year by the Pew Global Attitudes Project showed that the public's relatively low level of concern about global warming sets the U.S. apart from other countries. That survey found that only 19% of Americans who had heard of global warming expressed a great deal of personal concern about the issue. Among the 15 countries surveyed, only the Chinese expressed a comparably low level of concern (20%).

The latest national survey by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, conducted Jan. 10-15 among 1,708 Americans, finds a majority (55%) saying that global warming is a problem that requires immediate government action. But the percentage of Americans expressing this view has declined a bit since August, when 61% felt global warming was a problem that required an immediate government response.

The survey finds deep differences between Republicans and Democrats -- and within both political parties -- over virtually every issue related to global warming. These disagreements extend even to the question of whether the earth is getting warmer. Just 54% of conservative Republicans say there is solid evidence that average temperatures have been getting warmer over the past few decades; by contrast, more than three-quarters of both moderate and liberal Republicans and independents (78% each), and even higher percentages of Democrats, believe the earth has been getting warmer.