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The 2035 Initiative | Research Policy Brief

Residents of small-island states want an "all-hands-on-deck" approach to addressing the climate crisis

The first comprehensive survey of small-island states and territories finds residents are deeply worried about climate change and want action by all governments, including their own

Based on Mildenberger, M., Constantino S., Mahdavi, P., Bergquist, P., De Roche, G., Franzblau, E., Martinez-Alvarez, C., and Sturm, I. (2025). How publics in small-island states view climate change and international responses to it. PNAS. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2415324122

The Policy Problem

Climate-vulnerable countries and territories around the world have been systematically excluded from public opinion surveys that ask about climate change. A recent comprehensive review of all cross-national climate opinion data (consisting of over 100 surveys of 3.5 million respondents across 164 countries) found that 30 countries and 50 subnational units have never been included in systematic cross-national public opinion samples. Nearly all missing countries are small-island states in the Pacific and Indian Oceans and nearly all missing subnational units are either Arctic or desert regions. As a result, the very places that are most at risk of climate change are also the places whose opinions about the climate crisis have been the least considered. The preferences and perceptions of publics in these threatened small-island states and territories are critical for developing successful climate adaptation and resilience efforts in vulnerable regions and for playing a pivotal role in international climate governance.

Key Findings and Proposed Solutions:

- We found near-universal acceptance of human-caused climate change, ranging from a low of 89% in Anguilla to 100% in Marshall Islands, Turks and Caicos.
- Large majorities in every country or territory we surveyed were worried about their personal vulnerability to climate impacts, including extreme weather, sea-level rise, and coastal erosion.
- Climate-vulnerable residents perceive that residents of rich countries will also be impacted by climate change, seeing the problem as universal not particularly severe for their countries
- Respondents generally favor an "all-hands-on-deck" approach to the climate crisis, with responsibility for solving climate change falling on major historical and present emitters, as well as former colonial powers and home-country governments.

What We Found

Publics in small-island states and territories indicate a near-universal acceptance of human-caused climate change (ranging from 89% to 100%) and high levels of concern about climate-linked environmental threats—including extreme weather events, sea-level rise, coastal erosion and, to a lesser extent, drinking water contamination. Unlike survey respondents in the global North - who often feel that the global South is more climate-vulnerable - small-island respondents believe that other communities and countries are as vulnerable to climate impacts as themselves. In addition, we did not find evidence that small-island residents have preferences that are structured along the lines of the common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR) framework, which portrays the largest historical emitters as the most responsible for addressing climate change. Instead, given the urgency of the climate crisis, we found that small-island residents support an "all-hands-on-deck" approach where publics also assign high responsibility for solving climate change to former colonial powers and their home country governments, even relative to these countries' greenhouse gas contributions. Providing information about relative greenhouse gas emissions contributions does little to shift respondents toward a view of proportional responsibility.

What We Did

We used Facebook advertising to quota sample the public in every small-island state and territory worldwide in June and July 2022. We created a Facebook advertising "campaign" for each country or territory in our sample, and then created individual "ad sets" for every quota defined for that geography. Facebook allows users to target specific gender, ages, and regions for advertisements. Ads were delivered in one of five languages, depending on the most common spoken language in each territory or country (English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch). Clicking on the ads directed respondents to the survey on Qualtrics. The survey was divided loosely into five module blocks. Block 1 addressed individuals' perceptions of future well-being and topics of migration generally. Block 2 addressed experiences with extreme weather broadly. Block 3 addressed climate change attitudes, including questions of attributing extreme weather experiences to climate variables. Block 4 asked questions about experiences with climate adaptation policies, and perceptions of the actors responsible for managing these policies. Block 5 asked questions about global climate politics, including questions related to responsibility for financing climate adaptation projects. This section also queried respondents on the types of financial or legal supports that would help them navigate future environmental changes. Block 6 asked questions about displacement and migration, including questions about attitudes toward receiving migrants from other countries and relocating to other countries.

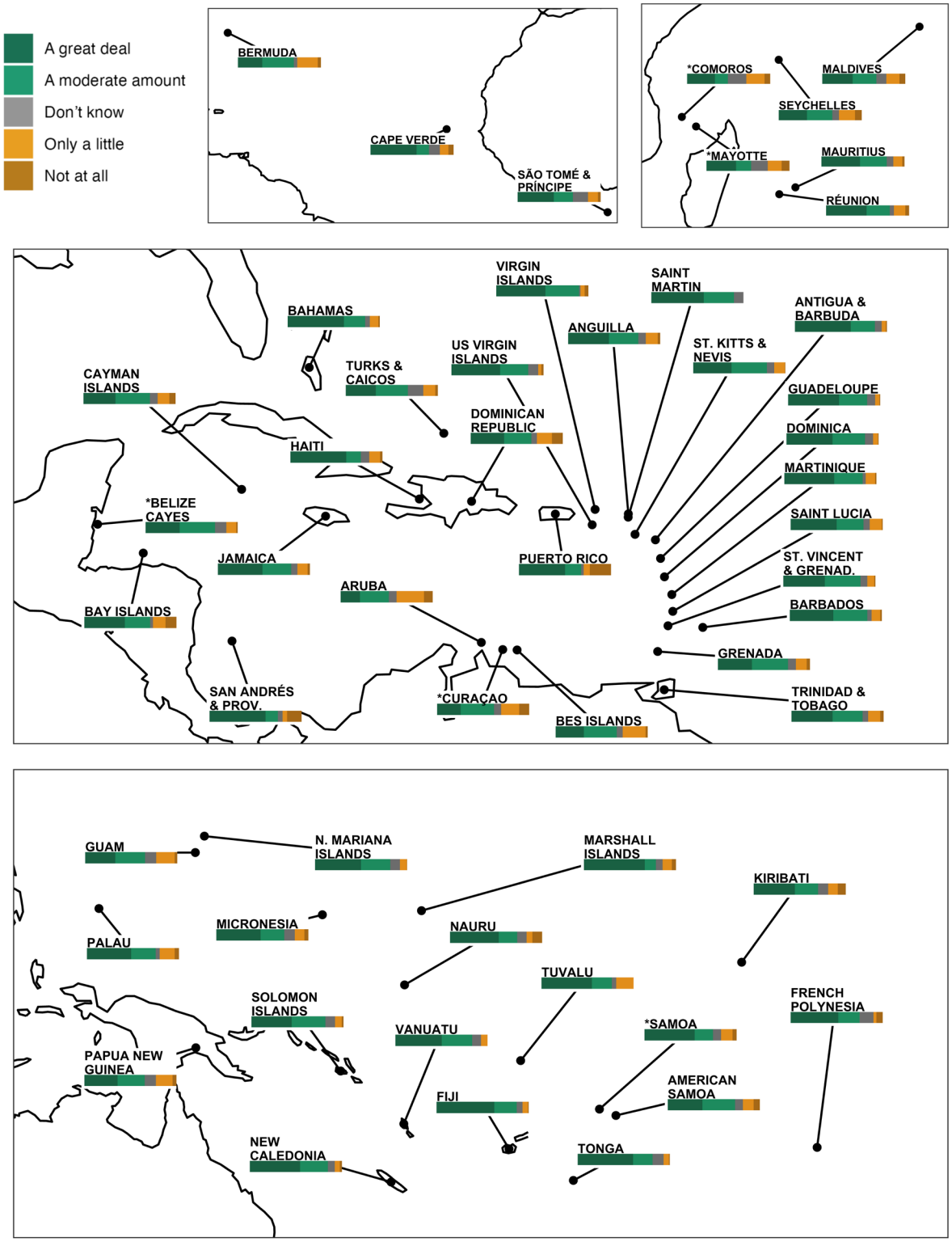


Fig. 1. Perceptions of vulnerability to extreme weather. Respondents were asked, "How much do you think extreme weather (like extreme heat, drought, severe storms, floods, hurricanes, or wildfires) will harm people in your community in the next 5 years?" Country/territory-level average responses are shown, with weights to adjust for age and gender imbalances in the samples.