

The Arctic in U.S. National Identity (2015)

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Introduction

In October and November 2015, the Arctic Studio conducted a series of online surveys to explore the role of the Arctic in U.S. national identity. Little information exists on American attitudes toward the Arctic and our project was intended only to develop preliminary data. We hope this work serves as a starting point for more robust research and as a useful estimate in the absence of definitive studies.

We found that Americans have relatively low attachment to the Arctic. On scale from 1 to 7, with higher numbers indicating stronger disposition toward the Arctic, Americans on average registered only slightly over 3, well below the scale midpoint. Americans rated the Arctic more highly on economic and security importance, with average ratings a bit over 4, just above the scale midpoint. In most surveys, men and older individuals showed greater affinity for the Arctic.

We also conducted a series of comparative surveys and found that Americans had greater affinity for the Rocky Mountains, Great Plains, and Pacific than the Arctic. Canadians had much higher affinity for the Arctic than did Americans, who registered only a little higher than the non-Arctic British in judging their country an Arctic nation with strong Arctic interests.

Our last three surveys asked about Americans' travel to Alaska and their impressions of the region. We found that about 15% of Americans have been to the Alaska, but more than 24% of those aged 55 or older have travelled to the state. Americans also reported overwhelmingly

that their first thoughts when thinking about the Arctic or Alaska are of cold, ice, and snow.

Survey Methods

We conducted our surveys with Google Consumer Survey, a market-research tool. We asked each question as a separate survey to minimize priming effects, which might have led to higher ratings, and to lower unit costs, allowing for larger sample sizes.

Surveys were presented in one of two ways. Most respondents (86%) encountered the survey as a survey-wall on news (63%) or reference (13%) web sites. A survey-wall presents users with part of a web page and requires the user to answer the survey before displaying the rest of the page. Many users choose not to continue to the full article and our surveys had response rates of 10% to 15%. A minority of respondents (14%) encountered the survey through the Google Opinion Rewards smartphone app. In this context, the user has downloaded the app and signed up to take surveys.

Complete data sets for survey results are available on the Arctic

Studio web site and further details of survey methodology is available on request.

Survey Questions, 2015

1. How important is the Arctic to your identity as an American?
2. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? 'The United States is an Arctic Nation with broad and fundamental interests in the Arctic Region.'
3. How important is the Arctic to the U.S. economy?
4. How important is the Arctic to U.S. national security?
5. Have you ever been to Alaska?
6. What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of the Arctic?
7. What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of Alaska?

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Importance of the Arctic in National Identity

In October 2015, the Arctic Studio surveyed 2,000 Americans to ask, “How important is the Arctic to your identity as an American?” Responses were collected on a scale from 1 (Not important) to 7 (Very important) and Google provided inferred demographic information for most respondents. To compare American attachment to the Arctic, we also surveyed three separate sets of 500 Americans to pose the same question about other geographic regions of the United States.

Most Americans ascribed a low importance to the Arctic in relation to their national identity. The overall average response was 3.03 and more than half of respondents (52.0%) answered with a score of 1 or 2, characterizing very low or no importance for the Arctic in these individuals’ national identities.

Men (average 3.12) were slightly more likely to attribute importance to the Arctic than women (2.85). Likewise, younger (age 18-24; average 3.33) and older (age 65 and older; average 3.22) Americans were more likely to indicate an Arctic importance than individuals in middle ages (ages 25-64; averages from 2.80 to 2.93). Almost no differences in rating were associated with urban density or income. Across every demographic subgroup, average ratings were below the scale midpoint of 4.0. Figure 1 shows average responses by age.

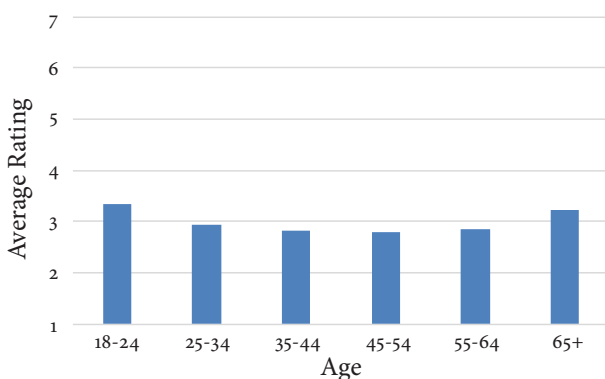


Figure 1. “How important is the Arctic to your identity as an American?” United States responses by age.

Alaskans assigned by far the highest average importance rating in the survey: 5.67. Wyoming (4.43), Delaware (3.95), and South Dakota (3.92) also rated the Arctic’s importance substantially above the national aver-

age, although the small sample size of the survey in these states suggests the results may not be reliable. Among bigger states, Florida (3.57), New York (3.37), Texas (3.20), and California (3.19) all rated the importance of the Arctic at least slightly higher than the national average. Figure 2 shows average responses by state.

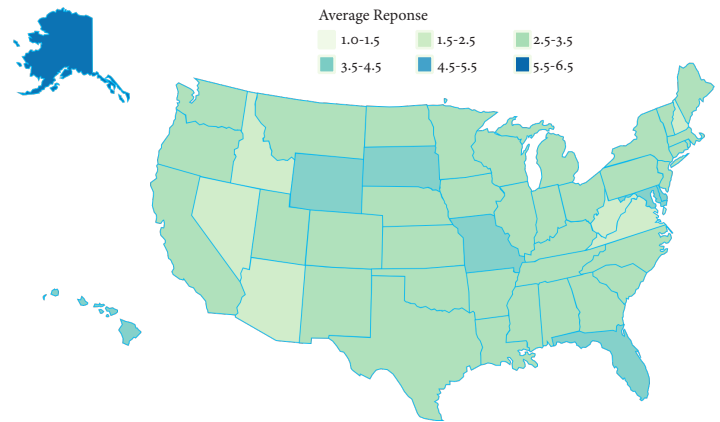


Figure 2. “How important is the Arctic to your identity as an American?” United States responses by state.

For comparison, we also surveyed three sets of 500 Americans with the same question in relation to the Great Plains, Rocky Mountains, and Gulf of Mexico. These alternatives represent other transnational regions with American components that, like the Arctic, are largely defined by their physical geography. Overall, Americans rated the Rocky Mountains (average 3.84) and Great Plains (3.48) more important to their national identity than the Arctic, but the Gulf of Mexico (2.82) slightly less so.

However, respondents in states located partly within one of these geographic regions on average rated that feature as more important to their national identity than respondents in other states. For the Arctic, Alaskans rated the importance of the region higher (average 5.67) than did respondents in others states (3.02). While not as pronounced, a similar pattern held for the other regions. Respondents in Rocky Mountain states on average rated the importance of the Rockies higher (4.01) than did respondents in other states (3.78). Likewise, respondents in the Great Plains states rated the plains higher (3.58) than respondents in other states (3.46) and respondents in Gulf states rated the Gulf of Mexico higher (3.17) than respondents in other states (2.77). Figure 3 summarizes

regional responses.

Unfortunately, the low sample sizes for the regionally comparative surveys do not permit a meaningful evaluation of demographic differences. However, combining the Rocky Mountain, Great Plains, and Gulf of Mexico survey responses – for a total of 1,500 responses – did not reveal any clear demographic response patterns comparable to the Arctic survey. The differences between men and women, and different age groups, were all much smaller than for the Arctic.

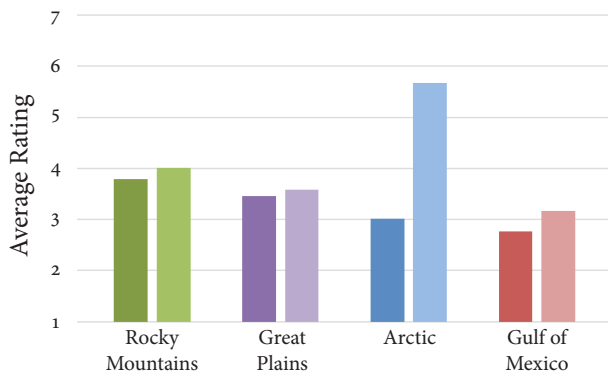


Figure 3. “How important is the _____ to your identity as an American?” United States responses. Left/right bars represent states outside/inside the region.

Agreement with National Policy Statement

In October 2015, the Arctic Studio surveyed 2,000 Americans to ask, “How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? ‘The United States is an Arctic Nation with broad and fundamental interests in the Arctic Region.’” Responses were collected on a scale from 1 (Disagree) to 7 (Agree) and Google provided inferred demographic information for most respondents.

The statement was taken directly from the 2010 U.S. *National Security Strategy* and had been repeated verbatim in the 2013 U.S. *National Strategy for the Arctic Region*, both signed by President Barack Obama. The statement was also very similar to the assertion in the 2009 National Security Presidential Directive 66, *Arctic Region Policy*, signed by President George W. Bush, which stated, “The United States is an Arctic nation, with varied and compelling interests in that region.” Our survey was meant to gauge Americans’ agreement with this repeated assertion of U.S. policy.

Most Americans expressed low agreement with the government’s assertion of Arctic identity and interests. The overall average response was 3.16 and more than 40 percent of respondents assigned a score of 1 or 2, indicating relatively strong disagreement with the statement.

Results by gender were similar to the previous question, which had inquired directly about the Arctic in self-perceived national identity. Men (average 3.25) were more likely to agree with the statement than women (2.96). However, response patterns for age and income were slightly different compared with the national identity survey. Older respondents were progressively more likely to agree more strongly with the policy statement. Conversely, individuals with greater income were slightly less likely to agree with the statement than poorer individuals. Once again, across every demographic subgroup, average ratings were well below the scale midpoint of 4.0. Figure 4 shows average responses by age and Figure 5 shows average responses by income.

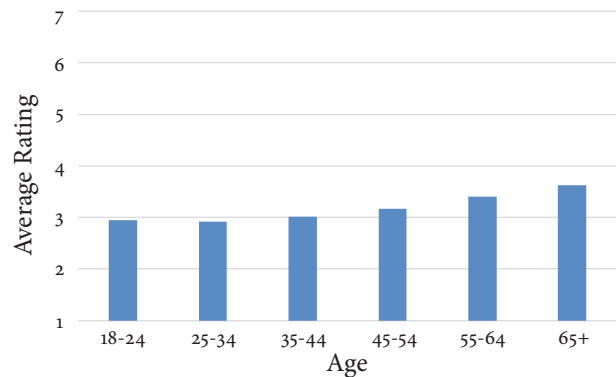


Figure 4. “How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? ‘The United States is an Arctic Nation with broad and fundamental interests in the Arctic Region.’” United States responses by age.

Alaskans lagged significantly behind other respondents in their agreement with the policy statement, with an average response of just 2.8. There is thus an apparent discrepancy between Alaskans’ high rating on our question about the importance of the Arctic in individual national identity and their assessment of the importance of the Arctic to the United States from a policy perspective. However, this discrepancy could be accounted for if Alaskan respondents hold the Arctic as important themselves, but believe that America as a whole does not feel the same way.

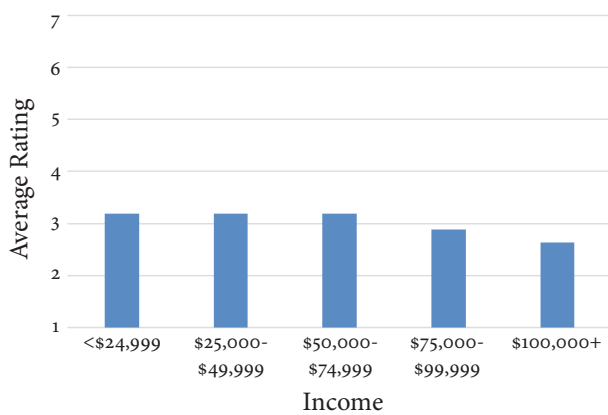


Figure 5. “How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? ‘The United States is an Arctic Nation with broad and fundamental interests in the Arctic Region.’” United States responses by income.

Highest agreement came from the few respondents in Washington, DC (average 5.11), perhaps because of a greater awareness or broader concept of national interests and foreign affairs for residents of the nation’s capital compared to other regions. Hawaii (4.50) and New Hampshire (4.33) also showed relatively high rates of agreement. However, the number of respondents in all of these locations was very low, so the ratings hold little reliability. Among bigger states, which had somewhat more respondents, Florida (3.34) and Pennsylvania (3.28) were the only states with an average strength of agreement above the national average; California (3.15), Texas (3.11), New York (3.09), and Illinois (3.06) all fell slightly below the national average.

The Arctic Studio also conducted two pairs of comparison surveys in November and December 2015. First, we surveyed two sets of 500 Americans to pose the same question with the policy statement rephrased to focus on the Pacific or Africa. Thus, for example, in the case of Africa the question took the form, “How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? “The United States is an African Nation with broad and fundamental interests in the African Region.” We selected the Pacific as another ocean area in which the U.S. is present and has widely recognized interests. We selected Africa as a deliberate contrast: while the U.S. may have interests in Africa, for most people the U.S. is clearly not an “African Nation.”

Americans had expressed limited agreement with

the Arctic form of the policy statement, with an average rating of 3.16. In contrast, Americans expressed substantially more agreement when the statement was focused on the Pacific, with an average rating of 3.91 (and 4.11 among respondents in states bordering the Pacific Ocean). As expected, Americans also expressed considerably less agreement when the statement was focused on Africa, with an average rating of 2.11.

Second, we surveyed sets of 500 Canadians and 500 British, using the original form of the question, but with “United States” replaced with the corresponding country name for the survey respondents. Canada is an Arctic nation generally regarded as having a strong Arctic national consciousness. United Kingdom is not an Arctic state, although it has a long history of Arctic exploration and scientific research. Canadians indeed rated their country and its interests in the Arctic higher than did Americans. Canadian respondents averaged 4.32 in rating their agreement, the highest headline average indicator of Arctic affinity in any of our surveys. British rated their agreement lower, with an average of 2.93. However, given that the United States and Canada are in fact Arctic nations and Britain is not, it may be surprising that U.S. respondents’ ratings were closer to those of the non-Arctic British than the Canadians. Figure 6 summarizes the comparative results.

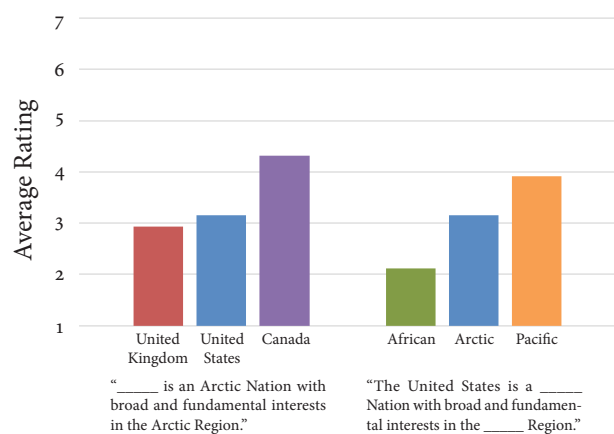


Figure 6. “How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement?....” Comparative responses.

Economic and Security Importance of the Arctic

In November 2015, the Arctic Studio surveyed two sets of 1,000 Americans to ask, “How important is the Arctic to the U.S. economy?” and “How important is the Arctic to U.S. national security?” Responses were collected on a scale from 1 (Not important) to 7 (Very important) and Google provided inferred demographic information for most respondents.

Most Americans ascribed greater importance to the Arctic in this context than in the context of their national identity or agreement with the policy statement in previous questions. The overall average responses were 4.17 (economy) and 4.43 (national security), both registering above the scale midpoint of 4.0. Possibly, Americans rate regions or issues higher in importance when presented with implied relevance to the economy or national security, but we did not conduct comparative surveys to determine whether this was the case.

Women (average (4.35)) were slightly more likely to attribute importance to the Arctic in the U.S. economy than were men (3.12), but men (4.51) were slightly more likely to attribute importance to the Arctic in national security compared to women (4.41). However, these differences were relatively minor. There were similarly minor differences in responses by urban density and income. However, older Americans were progressively more likely to attribute importance to the Arctic in both economic and national security terms. Figure 7 shows national security importance ratings by age.

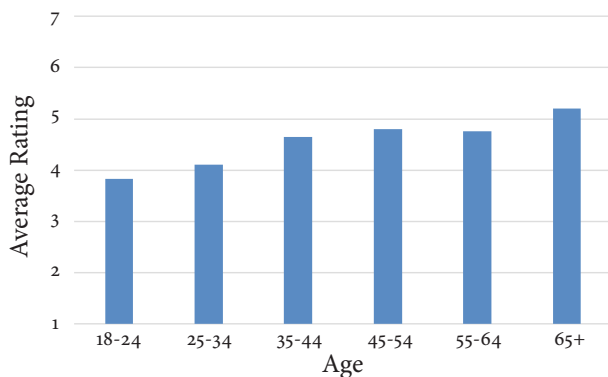


Figure 7. “How important is the Arctic to U.S. national security?” United States responses by age.

Combining the results from the questions about the Arctic’s economic and national security importance showed a greater geographic diversity in responses than for the previous question on national identity. There were some similarities: Alaska (average 5.29) and Wyoming (5.57) showed very high ratings in both national identity and economic/security surveys, and Florida (4.58) showed the highest rating among big states in both survey sets. However, again, very small sample sizes in some states reduce the reliability of geographic analysis. Figure 8 shows average responses by state.

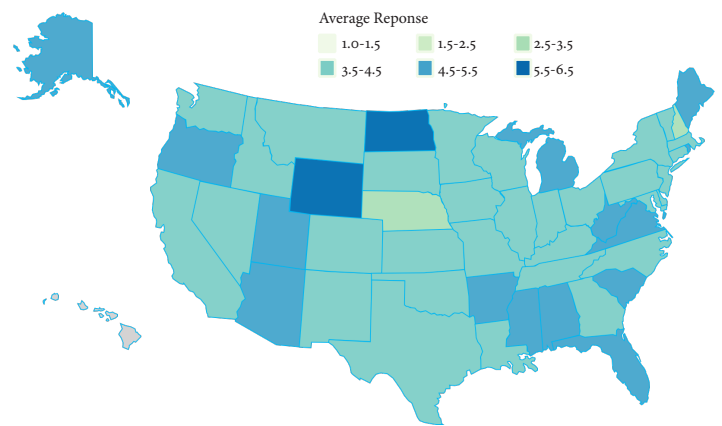


Figure 8. “How important is the Arctic to U.S. national security?” and “How important is the Arctic to the U.S. economy?” United States responses by state.

Experience in Alaska

In November 2015, the Arctic Studio surveyed 2,000 Americans to ask, “Have you ever been to Alaska?” Responses were collected as “Yes” or “No,” and Google provided inferred demographic information for most respondents. For comparison, we also surveyed 500 Canadians to ask, “Have you ever been to Yukon, Northwest Territories, or Nunavut?” These questions were designed to gauge respondents’ extent of direct experience with the Arctic in their own country.

Most Americans lack domestic experience with the Arctic. In our survey, just 15.1% said they had visited Alaska. More men (17.1% “Yes”) than women (12.5%) indicated that they had been to Alaska, perhaps reflecting the gendered patterns of seasonal and migrant employment in some Alaskan industries. Individuals in rural (16.3%) and suburban (16.6%) areas also indicated

more travel to Alaska than those in urban (12.8%) areas. Americans in Western states (19.3%) were more likely to have been to Alaska than respondents in the Midwest (11.7%), Northeast (14.3%) or South (15.5%).

Older individuals (ages 55-64, 21.8%; ages 65 and older, 28.0%) were more likely to have been to Alaska than their younger counterparts (ages 18-54, 9.8% to 14.3%). Experience accrues with age, but retiree travel, especially in the form of Alaskan cruises, might also account for some of the spike in travel by older Americans. Figure 9 shows experience in Alaska by age.

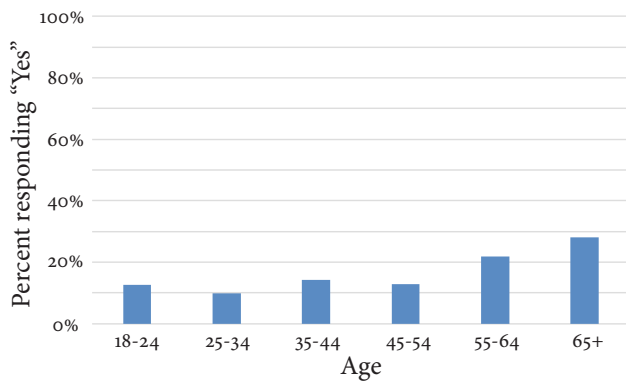


Figure 9. "Have you ever been to Alaska?" United States responses by age.

For comparison, the Arctic Studio also surveyed 500 Canadians to ask about their experience in Canada's three northern territories. Overall, 18.3% of Canadians said they had ever been to Yukon, Northwest Territories, or Nunavut. Men (22.6%) were more likely to answer positively than women (14.6%), perhaps for similar reasons as in the United States. Likewise, Canadians in British Columbia (25.8%) and the Prairie Provinces (28.1%) were more likely to have been to the Canadian North than those from Ontario (13.8%), Quebec (10.7%), or Newfoundland and the Maritimes (9.1%).

Free Association with Alaska and the Arctic

In November 2015, the Arctic Studio surveyed two sets of 1,000 Americans to ask, "When you think about the Arctic, what is the first thing that comes to mind?" and "When you think of Alaska, what is the first thing that comes to mind?" Responses were collected in a free-response format. We aggregated similar responses (e.g.,

"cold," "too cold," "coldness," "cold air," "freezing cold," and others were aggregated as simply "Cold"). In the Arctic survey, we discarded 6% of responses as nonsense or not serious (e.g., "h," "dd," "g," "title," "cheese," "meh," "nop," etc.). We discarded 4.3% of responses on the Alaska survey for the same reason.

When asked for their first impressions when prompted to think about the Arctic, Americans overwhelmingly responded with cold, ice, and snow, which together accounted for over 70% of all responses. Polar bears (6.7%), climate change (5.4%), and penguins (2.7%) were the only other answers to account for more than two percent of total responses. About 70 other responses accounted for the remaining 14.7% of total responses. These included the color white, oil, glaciers, the North Pole, the ocean, northerliness, foxes, fish, beauty, wind, solitude, and death, among many others. Figure 10 shows free-responses to the Arctic.

Open-ended responses when prompted to think about Alaska were somewhat more diverse. Cold, snow, and ice together still accounted for a majority of responses (54.9%), but seven other answers also accounted for at least two percent of total responses and 108 other responses also appeared in smaller numbers. The responses of fish, bears, beauty, wilderness, other wildlife, Sarah Palin, and oil each registered above two percent of total responses. Other wildlife included both

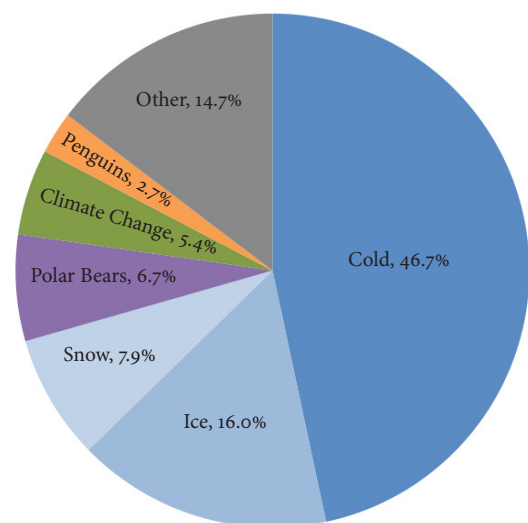


Figure 10. "When you think about the Arctic, what is the first thing that comes to mind?" United States responses.

generic mentions of wildlife as well as specific types, such as moose, eagles, crab, elk, and others. Beauty and wilderness included only explicit mentions of those concepts or closely related terms (e.g., “majestic” for beauty and “pristine” and “untouched” for wilderness). In addition, many specific landscape terms appeared in smaller numbers (e.g., mentions of forests, mountains, and open spaces). Figure 11 shows free-responses to Alaska.

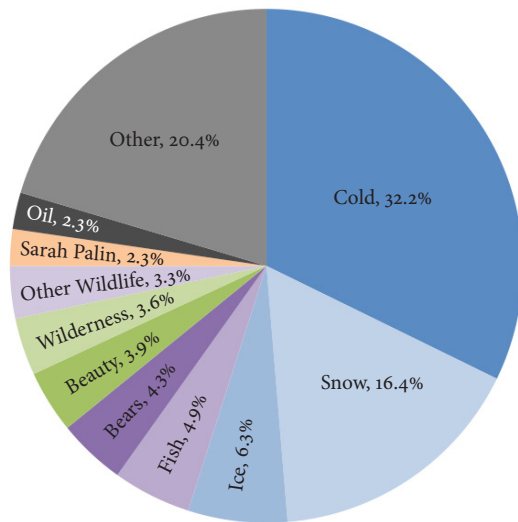


Figure 11. “When you think about Alaska, what is the first thing that comes to mind?” United States responses.

Conclusions

The most significant limitation of the present research was the small sample size of our surveys. Insofar as these surveys were intended only to be exploratory, and given the dearth of existing research, we hope they have still provided value. However, future research should replicate these findings with larger sample sets. In particular, larger surveys could provide more reliable data with respect to regional and demographic variation among respondents. Larger sample sizes in the comparative surveys could also provide a better sense of the Arctic’s position relative to other aspects of American identity and in contrast to foreign counterparts.

Our surveys also represent only a snapshot in time. Americans’ Arctic disposition could shift seasonally or over years as policy priorities and news stories shape public opinion. Future research could usefully include re-

curring periodic surveys to measure longitudinal changes in American national identity in relation to the Arctic.

Finally, our surveys asked directly about the Arctic, but a more oblique approach might better represent true American sentiments. For example, a future survey might usefully ask respondents to rank multiple potential aspects of identity or national interest, or employ more free-response questions.

About the Arctic Studio

The Arctic Studio organizes and conducts original research and analysis on Arctic politics, economics, and security to enhance the quality of decision making by governments and other organizations interested in the region. We also create materials for classroom use to facilitate Arctic education. Our research is intended to add unique value by filling intellectual needs that are minimally addressed by existing scholarship or other organizations. The Arctic Studio as an organization does not recommend specific policy positions. Contributing authors may advocate for specific policies, but these recommendations reflect only the views of the individual contributor.

About the Author

Mr. Hamilla is Executive Director of the Arctic Studio. He is also an Adjunct Professor of Political Science at Portland State University and other colleges in Oregon. In 2015, he was appointed as an advisor to the U.S. Arctic Research Commission. He previously served as Principal Analyst for the Arctic at the U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence from 2009 to 2014 and taught courses in Arctic security at the U.S. Naval War College in 2013-2014. Mr. Hamilla holds a Master’s degree in International Studies from the University of Denver and a Bachelor’s degree in History from Vassar College. Views and opinions expressed by the author do not represent the policies or positions of the U.S. Government and are the sole responsibility of the author.