

# The Arctic in U.S. National Identity (2017)

Zachary D. Hamilla  
Executive Director, The Arctic Studio

NOVEMBER 8, 2018

## Overview

In October and December 2017, the Arctic Studio conducted a series of online surveys to explore the role of the Arctic in U.S. public consciousness. These surveys replicated questions from our previous survey in late 2015, but with larger sample sizes and novel comparative context. Little information exists on American attitudes toward the Arctic and our ongoing project is intended to provide basic data and track changes over time.

We found that Americans on average continue mildly to disagree with the canonical assertion of U.S. Arctic identity and interests as articulated in government policy. On a scale from 1 to 7, with higher numbers indicating stronger agreement, Americans' average rating was 3.51, up slightly from 3.16 in 2015, but still below the scale midpoint. A plurality of respondents (27%) answered with a score of one, indicating the strongest disagreement. Men and older individuals showed greater inclination to agree with the assertion of Arctic identity and interests than women or younger respondents, a pattern also observed in 2015. No region of the country showed particularly greater inclination to agree or disagree, except Alaskans showed substantially greater agreement.

We also conducted a series of comparative surveys and found that Canadians, with an average rating of 4.87, had a much greater sense of being an Arctic nation than did Americans. American respondents, however, did register somewhat higher agreement than British and Australians in judging their country an Arctic nation with strong Arctic interests. In a separate comparative survey, Americans indicated a stronger sense of being a Pacific nation than an Arctic one.

Our last three surveys asked Americans, Canadians,

and British respondents to share in a free-response format whatever first came to mind when thinking about the Arctic. People in all three countries overwhelmingly responded with thoughts of cold, ice, and snow. These three environmental features collectively accounted for 60-70% of responses in each country, similar to the U.S. share in 2015. Bears and climate change were the next most common responses in all three countries, followed by a diverse array of other minor responses.

## Survey Methods

We conducted our surveys with Google Survey, an online market-research tool. We asked each question as

---

### Survey Questions, 2017

1. 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.'
  2. What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of the Arctic?
- 

a separate survey to minimize priming effects, which might have led to higher ratings, and in order to lower unit costs, allowing for larger sample sizes. However, this approach limited our ability to discern correlations in the data other than demographic patterns.

Most respondents (80%) encountered our questions as survey-walls on news web sites. A survey-wall presents users with part of a web page, such as the first few paragraphs of a news article, and requires the user to answer the survey before displaying the rest of the page. Other users encountered the survey as a survey-wall on Reference (5%), Arts & Entertainment (3%), or unspecified Other (12%) websites.

Complete data for all our surveys is available on the Arctic Studio web site and further details of survey methodology are available on request.

---

*This study was funded by the Arctic Studio. The original study on which it builds was funded through Kickstarter by an array of backers.*

### Agreement with National Policy Statement

In October 2017, the Arctic Studio surveyed 4,002 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 Barak Obama. The statement was also very similar to an earlier 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 canonical assertion of U.S. Arctic identity and interests. The present survey question was also identical to the question we posed in a survey in October 2015; neither survey indicated that the statement was derived from government policy.

The overall average response was 3.51, up somewhat from 3.16 in 2015, but still indicating disagreement with the assertion of Arctic identity and interests. Moreover, 27 percent of respondents – a plurality – answered with a score of 1, indicating full disagreement with the policy statement. In contrast, only 16 percent of respondents assigned a score of 7, indicating full agreement.

Men (average 3.63) were slightly more likely to agree with the policy statement than women (3.30). This gap is similar in magnitude to the gender gap observed in 2015. Nevertheless, agreement for both men and women was higher in 2017 than 2015, by 0.38 and 0.34 points, respectively. Older respondents were also progressively more likely to agree with the policy statement. Every age group under 45 years had an average response score under 3.40, while every age group over 45 years had an average response score above 3.50; the oldest age group – 65 and older – had an average response score of 4.05. Results by age also showed the same pattern of across-the-board increase in agreement (or decrease in disagreement) compared to our previous survey in 2015; all age groups showed increases between 0.28 and 0.45 points. Figure 1 shows average responses by age.

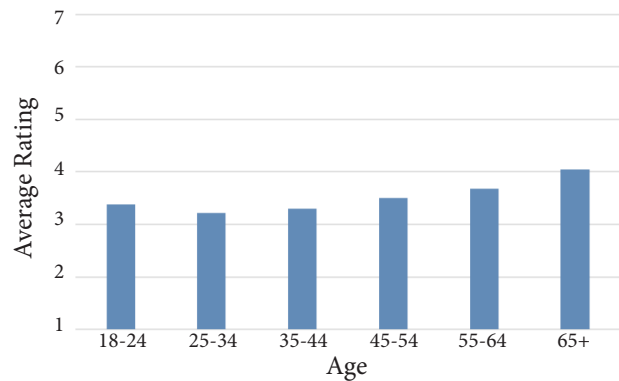


Figure 1. “How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? ‘The United States is an Arctic Nation with broad and fundamental interests in the Arctic Region.’” United States responses by age, 2017.

Alaska showed the highest average agreement with the statement of Arctic identity and interests (5.77). Hawaii (4.50) and Utah (4.02) were the only other states to show overall agreement, although the magnitude of their agreement was slight. Nearly all other states showed slight disagreement with the statement, registering average scores between 3 and 4. Rhode Island (2.73) and the District of Columbia (2.83) were the only areas with average scores below that range. However, the number of respondents from states with smaller populations was low. Only fifteen states had more than 100 respondents. Hawaii (16 respondents) and Rhode Island (11) may have been outliers due to their especially low response count. Of states with more than 100 respondents, North Carolina (3.84) had the highest score and Ohio (3.05) the lowest. Figure 2 shows average responses by state.

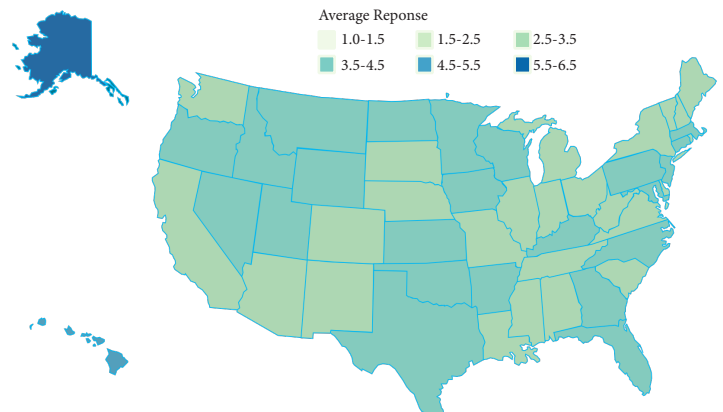


Figure 2. “How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? ‘The United States is an Arctic Nation with broad and fundamental interests in the Arctic Region.’” United States responses by state, 2017.

The Arctic Studio also conducted two sets of smaller surveys to provide comparative context for our results. First, we surveyed two groups of roughly 500 Americans to pose the same question as above 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 an ocean area in which the U.S. is clearly 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.” We had also used the Pacific and African comparatives in our 2015 survey.

As noted, Americans in 2017 expressed slight overall disagreement with the original, Arctic form of the policy statement, with an average rating of 3.51. In contrast, Americans expressed greater average agreement when the statement was focused on the Pacific, with an average rating of 4.01 (up slightly from 3.91 in 2015). As expected, Americans also expressed strong disagreement when the statement was focused on Africa, with an average rating of 2.08 (similar to 2.11 in 2015).

Second, we surveyed groups of roughly 500 Canadian, Australian, and British respondents, using the Arctic form of the question, but with “United States” replaced by the corresponding country of 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. Australia is not an Arctic state, but has significant interests and history in the Antarctic region. Our 2015 survey also included Canada and United Kingdom as comparisons.

Canadians expressed strong agreement that theirs was an Arctic nation with significant interests in the region. Canada’s national average rating was 4.87, higher than any U.S. demographic group or state bar Alaska, and 0.50 points higher than Canada’s own average two years earlier. Like United States respondents, older Canadians and men expressed stronger support for the policy statement. The average response for Canadians older than 45 years was 5.40, compared to 4.50 for those 18 to 44 years old. Canadian men had an average response of 4.94, compared to 4.67 for Canadian women.

British and Australians rated clear overall disagreement with the policy statement, yielding average responses of 2.81 and 2.95, respectively. British women (3.06) gave greater agreement than British men (2.65), as did respondents in Scotland (3.19) compared to England (2.84), but no other patterns emerged from the British or Australian data. However, the low number of respondents in our foreign surveys limits the reliability of demographic analysis in these cases. Figure 3 summarizes the overall comparative results.

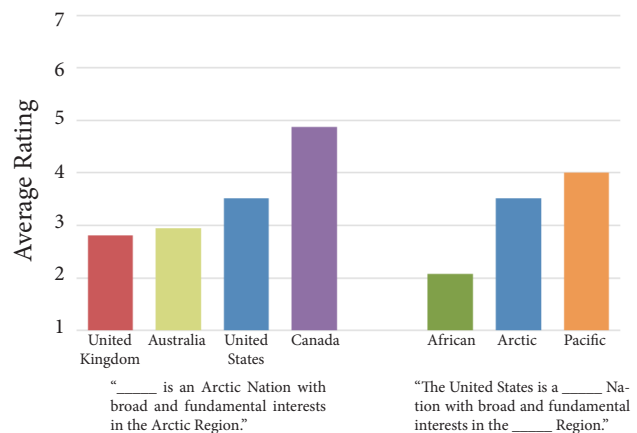


Figure 3. “How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement?....” Comparative responses.

### Free Association with the Arctic

In December 2017, the Arctic Studio surveyed 1,000 Americans to ask, “When you think about the Arctic, what is the first thing that comes to mind?” For comparison, we also surveyed 1,000 Canadian and 1,001 British respondents using the same question. We had conducted the same survey for the United States in November 2015. Responses were collected in free-response format. We aggregated similar responses (e.g., “cold,” “too cold,” “coldness,” “cold air,” “freezing cold,” and others were grouped simply as “Cold”). For the American sample, we discarded 3.3% of responses as nonsense, not serious, or incomplete (e.g., “a c,” “adfad,” “ive,” “no,” “the”). We discarded 3.7% of the Canadian sample and 3.6% of the British sample for the same reason.

When asked for their first thoughts about the Arctic, Americans, Canadians, and British overwhelmingly responded with cold, ice, and snow. These three closely related Arctic environmental features together accounted for 67.8% of United States responses, down marginally

from 70.6% in 2015. British (66.0%) and Canadian (61.0%) respondents showed similar inclination to think first of cold, ice, and snow when thinking of the Arctic.

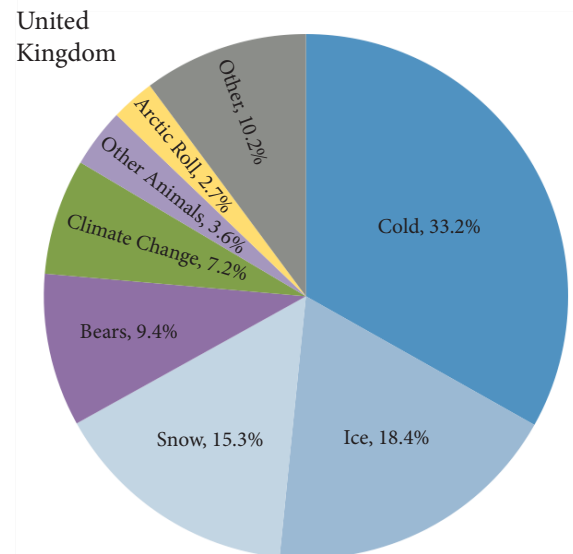
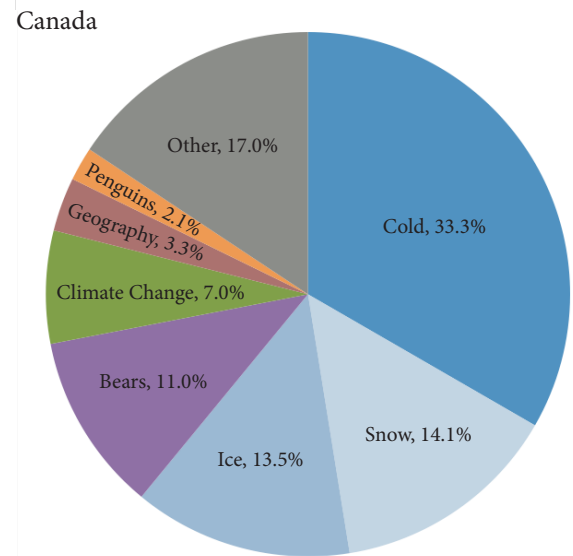
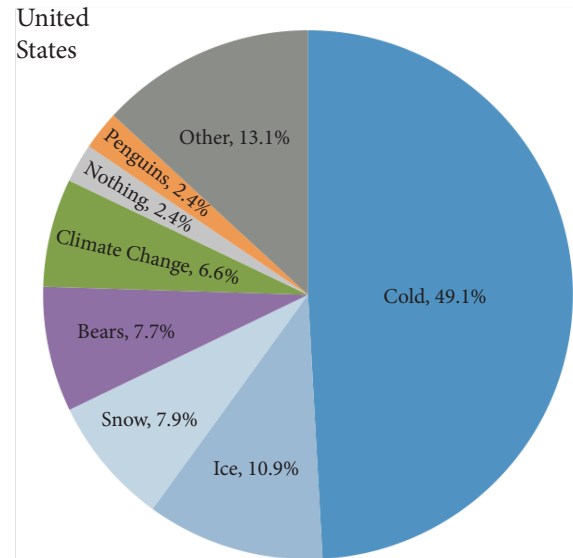
The next most significant response categories in all three countries were bears and climate change. Our Bears category includes mainly responses referring to polar bears, but also some responses mentioning bears generally. No respondent explicitly mentioned other species of bears. The Climate Change category included direct references to “climate change” and “global warming,” as well as presumed indicators of change such as “melting ice” and “starving polar bears.” These two categories had also been appreciable in our 2015 survey.

Only two other aggregate categories accounted for more than 2% of responses in each country. In the United States, 2.4% of respondents specifically stated that nothing came to mind, or they were not sure. In both the United States and Canada, more than 2% of respondents noted penguins as their first thought in response to the Arctic. Penguins had also appeared in a similar proportion of total respondents in the 2015 United States survey. In 2017, Canadians named a wide array of locations, including Baffin Island, Nunavut, the North Pole, and elsewhere. Eleven Canadian respondents (1.1%) said “Canada” was the first thing that came to mind when they thought of the Arctic. (No American respondents gave “United States” or anything similar as their response.) We aggregated the Canadian location responses as the Geography category. In Britain, 3.6% of respondents named an animal other than a bear, including some who named penguins, and 2.7% indicated that they thought first of the Arctic Roll, a British ice cream desert.

In each country, there were also an array of other responses that did not fit together into categories that crossed the 2% threshold. In the United States, this miscellaneous category included mentioning specific locations (1.5%), animals other than bears or penguins (1.2%), the ocean (0.9%), oil (0.8%), etc. Canadian and British responses showed similar diversity. Complete, individual responses are available on the Arctic Studio’s website. Figures 4-6 summarize the results.

**Conclusions**

The present surveys suggest a slight increase in U.S. sentiment on the Arctic between 2015 and 2017. This change could be the result of greater awareness of the region, for



Figures 4-6. “When you think about the Arctic, what is the first thing that comes to mind?”

example due to media reporting associated with the U.S. chairmanship of the Arctic Council. However, with only two data points, the apparent change could also be the result of natural year-to-year variability or an improvement in accuracy in 2017 due to our larger sample size. Future iterations of this research should be able to shed light on some of these possibilities.

Our comparative surveys also indicate that the texture of associations with the Arctic is similar in the United States, Canada, and United Kingdom. Future research might productively explore geographic variation in associations with the Arctic within countries and whether types of associations mediate the strength of affinity toward the region.

Finally, as in 2015, our surveys asked directly about the Arctic, but a more oblique approach might better represent natural American sentiments. For example, a future survey might usefully ask respondents to rank multiple possible aspects of identity or national interest, or employ more free-response questions, without prompting the Arctic as a subject.

### *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. He has been an appointed advisor to the U.S. Arctic Research Commission since 2015. 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.

### *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.