



The Arctic in U.S. National Identity (2019)

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Overview

In October-December 2019, the Arctic Studio conducted a series of online surveys to explore the role of the Arctic in U.S. public consciousness. This year's surveys followed similar surveys in 2015 and 2017. Little information exists on American attitudes toward the Arctic and our ongoing project is intended to provide basic data and track changes over time in U.S. Arctic sentiment.

We found that Americans continue to mildly disagree with the assertion that the United States is an Arctic nation with broad and fundamental interests in the region. On a scale from 1 to 7, with higher numbers indicating stronger agreement, Americans' average rating was 3.40, down slightly from 3.51 in 2017. A plurality of respondents (29%) answered with a score of one, indicating the strongest disagreement. As in previous years, men and older Americans showed greater inclination to agree with the combined assertion of Arctic identity and interests than women or younger respondents. Asking separately about Arctic identity and interests this year revealed stronger disagreement with an Arctic identity, but a slight inclination to agree with the existence of American interests in the region.

Americans also continue to associate the Arctic primarily with cold, snow, and ice. These environmental features together accounted for 69.6% of responses when Americans were asked in a free-response format for whatever first comes to mind when thinking about the Arctic. This figure represents nearly the same proportion as in 2015 and 2017. However, there has been a slight increase in Americans' association of climate change with the Arctic. The proportion of responses mentioning climate

change rose from 3.3% in 2015 to 6.6% in 2017 and 7.2% in 2019. The larger sample size of this year's free-response survey also for the first time allowed us to undertake demographic and geographic analysis. However, we found no substantial differences in Americans' associations with the Arctic based on gender, age, or region.

We also asked for associations with Alaska and found that while Americans dominantly associate Alaska with cold, snow, and ice, they also associate a greater diversity of other concepts with the state than with the Arctic. In particular, Americans more readily associate animals and wilderness with Alaska than with the Arctic.

Survey Questions, 2019

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. How important is the Arctic to your thinking of yourself as an American?
 3. When you think about the Arctic, what is the first thing that comes to mind?
 4. When you think about Alaska, what is the first thing that comes to mind?
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Survey Methods

We conduct our surveys using Google Survey, an online market-research tool. We ask each question as a separate survey to minimize priming effects, which might lead to higher ratings, and for lower unit costs, which allows larger sample sizes. However, this approach limits our ability to discern correlations in the data other than demographic patterns.

Most respondents (89%) encountered this year's surveys as

survey walls on news web sites. A survey wall presents users with part of a web page, such as the first paragraphs of a news article, and asks users to answer the survey before displaying the rest of the page. Other users encountered the survey as a survey wall on other web sites.

Complete raw results for all our surveys are available on the Arctic Studio web site and further detail on our survey and analytic methodology is 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 2019, the Arctic Studio surveyed 2,003 Americans to ask, “How much do you agree or disagree? ‘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 similar to an 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.” More recently, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo asserted in May 2019 the “most fundamental principle” in U.S. Arctic policy was that “the United States is an Arctic nation.” The following month, the Department of Defense’s 2019 update to its *Arctic Strategy* repeated the same phrase.

Our survey was meant to gauge Americans’ agreement with this canonical assertion of U.S. Arctic identity and interests. The present question was also identical to the question we posed in surveys in October 2015 and October 2017. None of these surveys indicated that the statement was derived from government policy.

The overall average response in 2019 was 3.40, down slightly from 3.51 in 2017, indicating overdisagreement with the assertion of Arctic identity and interests. Moreover, 29 percent of respondents – a plurality – answered with a score of 1, indicating full disagreement with the policy statement. In contrast, only 13 percent of respondents assigned a score of 7, indicating full agreement.

Men (average 3.62) were somewhat more likely than (3.11) to agree with the policy statement. This difference was slightly greater than the gender gap observed in 2017, a change due primarily to a decline in women’s agreement with the statement: men’s overall average was virtually unchanged while women’s average fell 0.19 points between 2017 and 2019. Figure 1 shows the change in average response over time by gender.

Older respondents were progressively more likely to agree with the policy statement, the same age pattern observed in 2015 and 2017. In 2019, every age group under 45

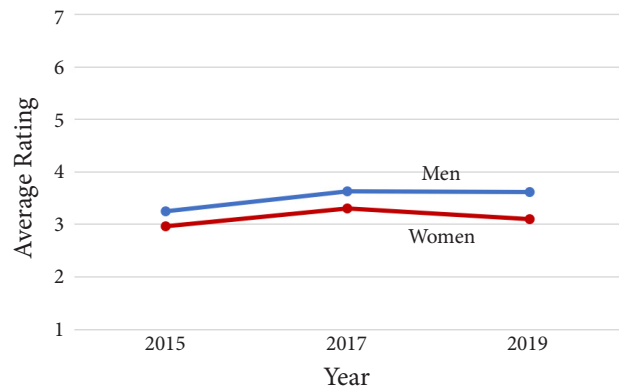


Figure 1. “How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? ‘The United States is an Arctic Nation with broad and fundamental interests in the Arctic Region.’” United States responses, 2015-2019.

years old had an average response score under 3.30, while every age group over 45 years had an average score above 3.44. The oldest age group – 65 and older – had an average response score of 3.83, down from 4.05 in 2017 but still higher than any other age group in 2019. The youngest group – ages 18 to 24 – had the most substantial decline in agreement, falling from 3.39 in 2017 to 2.61 in 2019. Much of the fall in agreement (or increase in disagreement) between 2017 and 2019 was therefore attributable to the oldest and youngest age groups. Responses from individuals ages 25 to 44 were mostly unchanged. Figure 2 shows average responses by age.

Alaska showed the highest average agreement with the assertion of Arctic identity and interests (5.25). Hawaii (4.22) and Kansas (4.05) were the only other states to show overall agreement, although the magnitude of their agreement was slight. Hawaii also showed overall

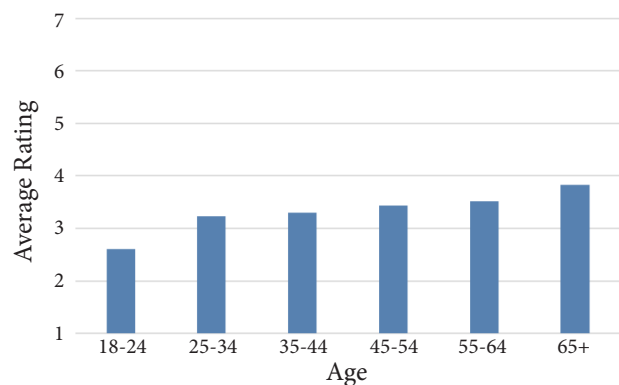


Figure 2. “How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? ‘The United States is an Arctic Nation with broad and fundamental interests in the Arctic Region.’” United States responses by age, 2019.

agreement in 2015 (4.50) and 2017 (4.50). Nearly every other state showed small-to-moderate disagreement with the statement, registering average scores between 3 and 4. A handful of states registered stronger disagreement, with scores between 2 and 3. However, small numbers of respondents in most states limit the reliability of state-level averages.

The Arctic Studio also conducted two sets of smaller surveys to provide context and further conceptual clarity for our results. First, we surveyed groups of roughly 500 Canadian and British respondents with the same statement of Arctic identity and interests as applied to their countries. Canada is an Arctic nation generally regarded as having a strong Arctic national consciousness. The United Kingdom is not an Arctic state, although it has a

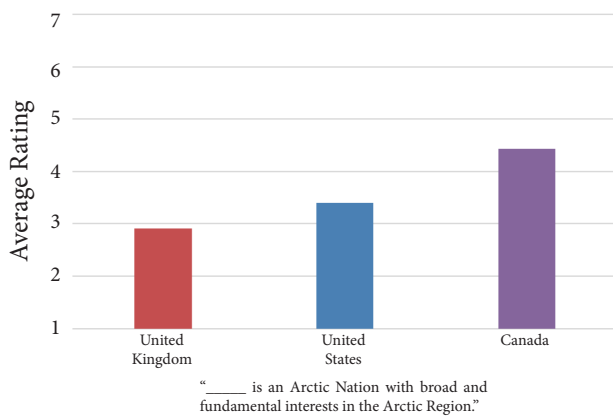


Figure 3. “How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement?....” Comparative responses, 2019.

long history of Arctic exploration and scientific research. Our 2015 and 2017 surveys also included Canada and the United Kingdom as comparisons. Figure 3 shows average responses by country.

Canadians continued to express overall agreement that theirs is an Arctic nation. Canada’s national average rating was 4.43, down from 4.87 in 2017, but still higher than any U.S. demographic group or state bar Alaska. Like U.S. respondents, older Canadians and men expressed stronger support for the policy statement, a pattern also observed in 2017. British respondents averaged 2.90, indicating relatively strong overall disagreement. British respondents, however, showed an inverse demographic pattern from American and Canadian respondents, with younger British respondents and women indicating less disagreement than their older and male counterparts.

Second, we divided the official policy statement into its two main conceptual components to ask in separate surveys about being an Arctic nation and having Arctic national interests. As Mathieu Landriault observed, the official statement is “a double-barrelled question, dealing with very different elements at the same time.”¹ Our first additional question therefore asked 1,000 Americans “How much do you agree or disagree? ‘The United States is an Arctic Nation.’” Responses were again collected on a scale from 1 (Disagree) to 7 (Agree). The overall average response was 2.54 and nearly half of respondents indicated full disagreement by selecting 1 on the scale. Moreover, in a reversal of the pattern observed for the original policy statement, older respondents expressed greater disagreement than younger respondents. There was little difference by gender, although men (2.60) expressed slightly less disagreement than women (2.50).

Our second additional question, derived from the other half of the policy statement, asked 1,000 Americans “How much do you agree or disagree? ‘The United States has broad and fundamental interests in the Arctic Region.’” Here, Americans showed overall agreement, with an average rating of 4.31 and older respondents progressively more likely to agree than younger ones. Men (4.42) were more likely to agree than women (4.18), although both groups’ averages indicate overall agreement. For further comparison, we also surveyed 500 Americans to ask the extent to which they agreed that “The United States has broad and fundamental interests in the Middle East.” That survey showed a slightly higher overall agreement of 4.55 and a similar pattern of agreement increasing with age. These comparative surveys suggest that Americans may be readier to assert geographic interests than geographic identity.

Importance of the Arctic in Being American

In 2015, the Arctic Studio had surveyed just under 2,000 Americans to ask, “How important is the Arctic to your identity as an American?” We collected responses on a scale from 1 (Not important) to 7 (Very important). The overall average was 3.03, with women (2.85) reporting a somewhat lower importance than men (3.12). We did not repeat this survey question in 2017.

¹ Mathieu Landriault, “How should we measure Arctic identity?” Eye on the Arctic (blog), November 21, 2018, <https://www.rcinet.ca/eye-on-the-arctic/2018/11/21/arctic-identity-poll-survey-national-interest-usa-america-politics-studio>.

In November 2019, we surveyed four independent samples of roughly 1,000 Americans each to ask directly again about the Arctic in American identity. Each of these four surveys used slightly different phrasing to ask about the importance of the Arctic in respondents' concept of being American. Each question began with the phrase, "How important is the Arctic to your..." and ended with one of four variations:

- (1) ... identity as an American?
- (2) ... thinking of yourself as an American?
- (3) ... sense of being an American?
- (4) ... feeling like an American?

The first version of the question was identical to the question we posed in 2015. The other three variations were intended to access the same idea through conceptually similar language. All versions of the question appeared as continuous sentences and did not include ellipses.

No version of the question elicited an average response above the scale midpoint. The strongest rating was associated with "... thinking of yourself as an American," which registered an overall average of 3.54. The weakest assessment of importance was associated with the original phrasing, "... identity as an American," which had an average response of 3.14. Figure 4 shows the average ratings for each form of the question.

Gender gaps were mostly very small, with a 0.05 point or smaller difference between men and women's averages in three of the four versions of the question. The gender gap was greater for the phrasing, "... sense of being American," for which women's average rating exceeded men's by 0.41 points. However, in all forms of

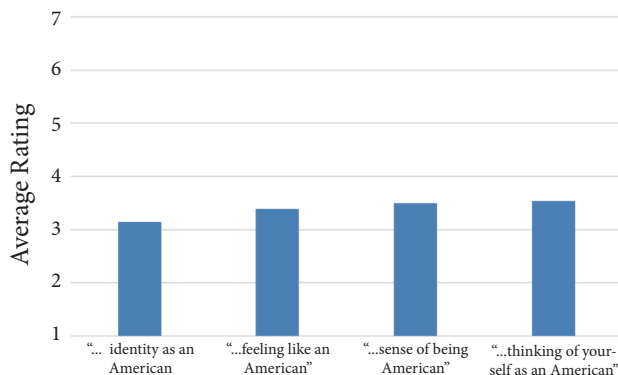


Figure 4. "How important is the Arctic to your..." United States responses, 2019.

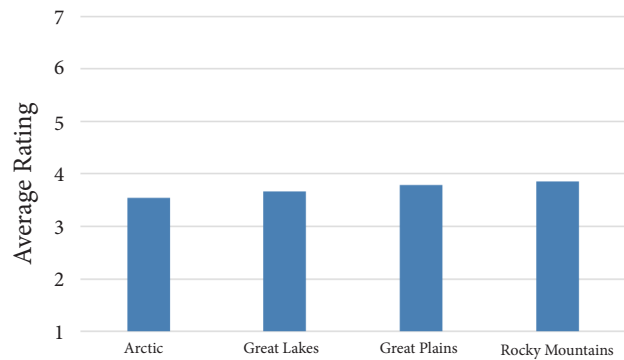


Figure 5. "How important [is/are] the ___ to your thinking of yourself as an American?" United States responses, 2019.

the question, both men and women's averages remained below the scale midpoint.

To set these results in comparative geographic perspective, we also surveyed three groups of approximately 500 Americans each to ask how important other geographic regions are to "thinking of yourself as an American." We selected the Great Plains, Great Lakes, and Rocky Mountains as geographic comparisons. All three additional regions also elicited average ratings below the scale midpoint, with the Rocky Mountains scoring highest (3.85) and the Arctic remaining lowest (3.54).

In all four geographic variants, older respondents reported slightly higher importance than younger respondents. Although sample sizes were too small for definitive conclusions, respondents in each respective geographic region – the Great Plains, Great Lakes, and Rocky Mountains – also appear to have rated their respective geographic feature more important than did people in other regions. Figure 5 shows average ratings by geographic comparison.

Free Association with the Arctic

In December 2019, the Arctic Studio surveyed 4,015 Americans to ask, "When you think about the Arctic, what is the first thing that comes to mind?" We posed the same question to smaller samples in 2015 and 2017. Responses were collected in free-response format. We aggregated similar responses (e.g., "cold," "cold weather," "freezing," "sub-zero climate," and others were grouped simply as "Cold") and discarded 1.3% of responses as nonsense or inattentive filler, a slightly lower discard rate than past waves of the survey.

When asked for their first thoughts about the Arctic, Americans overwhelmingly respond with cold, ice, and snow. These three closely related Arctic environmental features accounted for 69.6% of responses in 2019, similar to their proportion in 2015 (70.6%) and 2017 (67.8%). However, in 2019, for the first time, slightly more respondents associated the Arctic with Climate Change (7.2%) than Snow (7.1%), an increase in Climate Change association compared to both 2015 (3.3%) and 2017 (6.6%). As in past survey waves, the next most significant response categories were Bears (6.5%), mostly polars bears, and Penguins (2.2%).

An array of other responses did not fit into categories that crossed the 2% threshold. This miscellaneous group included mentioning the Arctic, the Arctic Circle, or the North Pole (1.5%); animals other than bears and penguins (1.2%), including foxes (0.2%) and fish (0.2%); specific locations (0.8%), including Alaska (0.3%); and beauty (0.5%); as well as an array of other responses. Five respondents (0.1%) mentioned the indigenous peoples of the region. Figure 6 shows this year's responses and Figure 7 shows the pattern of responses over time.

The larger sample size in this year's survey for the first time allowed for basic demographic analysis. Nevertheless, there were no substantial differences in responses based on gender or age. When prompted to think about the Arctic, men and women were equally likely to respond with the dominant themes of cold, ice, and snow. Women were slightly more likely than men to mention bears and penguins, and slightly less likely to mention climate change, but these differences were small.

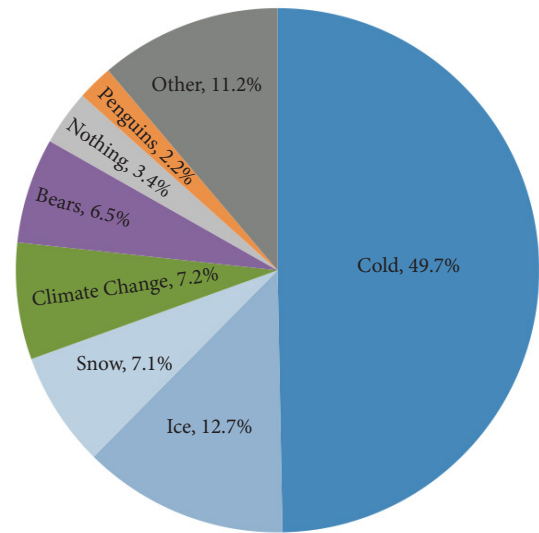


Figure 6. "When you think about the Arctic, what is the first thing that comes to mind?" United States responses, 2019.

There were also no substantial differences in response pattern by age, although older respondents were slightly more likely to provide answers that clustered into one of the larger response categories, while younger people were more likely to give unique or less frequently occurring responses. Figure 8 shows responses by age.

The data also showed minimal differences in responses by geographic region. Of four standard American regions – Midwest, Northeast, South (including Texas), and West – only the western region showed a somewhat distinctive response pattern. When prompted to think about the Arctic, respondents in western states were a little less likely to respond with Cold (42.4%) and a little

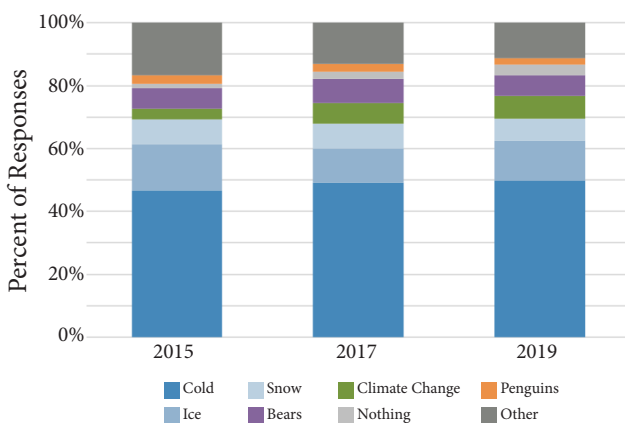


Figure 7. "When you think about the Arctic, what is the first thing that comes to mind?" United States responses, 2015-2019.

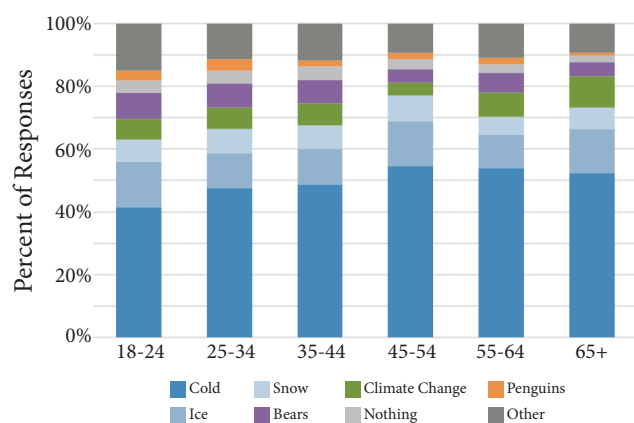


Figure 8. "When you think about the Arctic, what is the first thing that comes to mind?" United States responses by age, 2019.

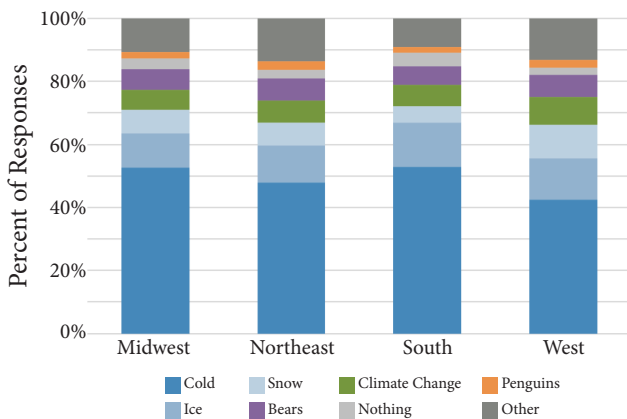


Figure 9. “When you think about the Arctic, what is the first thing that comes to mind?” United States responses by region, 2019.

more likely to respond with Snow (10.5%) than those in other regions. Likewise, they were more likely to mention Climate Change (8.9%) than people elsewhere. Figure 9 shows responses by American region.

In addition to asking about the Arctic, in December 2019 the Arctic Studio also conducted a separate survey of 1,017 Americans to ask, “When you think about Alaska, what is the first thing that comes to mind?” We posed the same question in 2015, but had omitted it in our 2017 surveys. Responses were collected in free-response format and we aggregated similar responses as described above. We discarded 13 responses (1.3%) as nonsense or inattentive filler.

When asked for their first thoughts about Alaska, Americans mostly responded with cold, snow, and ice, although this association was weaker than for the Arctic. These three climate features accounted for 54.1% of responses to Alaska in 2019, nearly identical to the 54.9% registered for the same categories in 2015. However, this share of responses was substantially less than the 69.6% of respondents who named cold, snow, and ice when asked to think about the Arctic.

Americans more readily associate animals and wilderness with Alaska than with the Arctic. When asked to think about Alaska, 13.0% of respondents mentioned animals, mostly fish (6.3%), bears (3.0%), and moose (1.5%). In contrast, only 8.9% of respondents mentioned animals when asked to think about the Arctic. Similarly, 10.5% of respondents mentioned beauty (4.3%), mountains, (3.4%), or wilderness (2.8%) when asked to think about Alaska.

only 1.6% of respondents mentioned beauty, wilderness, or any other non-climate environmental feature (e.g., the ocean). Conversely, while 7.2% of respondents mentioned climate change when asked to think about the Arctic, only three respondents (0.3%) mentioned climate change in response to Alaska.

Americans also provided a diverse array of other responses when asked to think about Alaska, amounting to over 20% of total responses. These other responses included Alaska’s large size (1.4%) and mineral resources (1.4%), mostly oil and gold. Americans’ association of former governor and 2008 Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin with Alaska is slowly fading: 1.4% of respondents mentioned Palin as the first thing that came to mind when thinking about Alaska in 2019, down from 2.3% in 2015. A further 1.3% of respondents mentioned cruise tourism and 1.0% mentioned Alaska Natives, mainly in the form of “eskimos” and “igloos.” Figure 10 shows overall Alaska responses.

Conclusions

The present surveys suggest a slight decrease in U.S. Arctic affinity between 2017 and 2019, possibly as a reversion toward the long-term mean or a result of normal year-to-year oscillation. However, the change could also represent fading public memory following the greater attention paid to the Arctic during the U.S. chairmanship

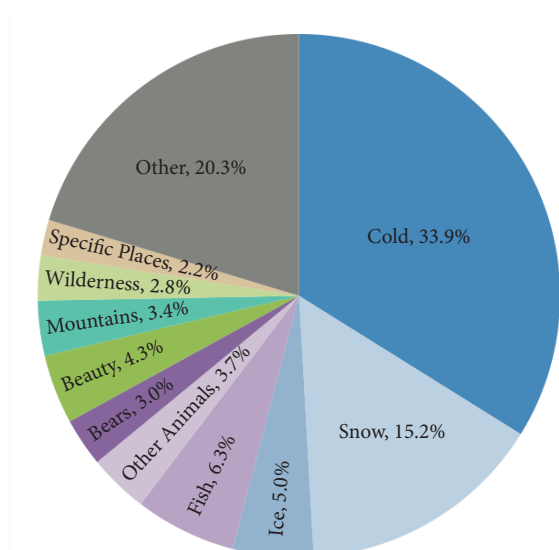


Figure 10. “When you think about Alaska, what is the first thing that comes to mind?” United States responses, 2019.

of the Arctic Council in 2015-2017. Nevertheless, while overall affinity has varied, the basic demographic pattern has remained mostly consistent over the past four years. Men and older Americans are generally more likely to endorse assertions of national Arctic identity and interests compared to women and younger Americans. American Arctic affinity has also remained consistently below the level endorsed by Canadians.

However, it remains unclear whether Americans are generally inclined to associate regional geography and geographic features with national identity. Some of our results suggest that Americans may be substantially more inclined to assert geographic interests than identity, and future research might usefully probe that question.

Moreover, the basic meaning Americans ascribe to statements of Arctic identity remains unclear. In evaluating assertions like, "The United States is an Arctic Nation," Americans might take the concept to refer to physical presence, climate similarity, cultural affinity, personal identity, historical involvement, or something else. The present surveys provide limited insight into how Americans understand these kinds of phrases and further research might usefully illuminate those notions. For example, a qualitative study of similar phrases deployed in American intellectual and popular culture might suggest ways of understanding those ideas, which could in turn help guide future surveys. Future surveys could also explore the potential meaning of these concepts. Our surveys this year posing questions about Arctic identity using only slightly varied language were a tentative step in that direction.

However, the main way our surveys have tried to explore Americans' concept of the Arctic is through free-response associations. As our results show, Americans consistently and overwhelmingly associate the Arctic with cold, snow, and ice. If these impressions do not overlap with people's conceptual associations with the United States or the idea of being American, it might be difficult for Americans to think of the country as an Arctic nation or one with an Arctic identity.

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.

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