

Public Attitudes on the Environment

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Introduction

Researchers at the Harry S Truman School of Public Affairs at the University of Missouri have recently completed a national survey of 1,000 adults on attitudes about the environment. The survey asked respondents about their level of concern for the environment and about their preferences for government action to address a wide set of environmental issues. The survey was administered as part of the 2007 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), a 10,000 person survey conducted through the collaborative efforts of a consortium of universities.¹ The 2007 CCES was administered in November 2007 by Polimetrix, an internet survey firm located in Palo Alto, California.²

Public Concern about the Environment

The first series of questions in the survey asked the respondents to characterize their overall level of concern about the environment. These questions provide a general indicator of public perceptions about the importance of environmental issues and environmental quality. The first question asked:

How would you characterize your overall level of concern for the environment? Would you say you are not concerned, a little concerned, somewhat concerned, very concerned, or haven't you thought much about this?

A large majority of Americans indicate that they are either somewhat concerned (32 percent) or very concerned

about the environment (38 percent). Twenty-one percent of the respondents indicate that they are a little concerned about the environment while only 7 percent said they are not concerned at all.

Another way to gauge the public's concern for the environment is to ask them to assess the quality of the environment. Environmental problems, of course, vary in scale from local land use and pollution issues to global problems such as climate change and tropical rainforest loss. Because the public's attitude may vary by these different geographical scales, the 2007 CCES asked respondents to separately assess the quality of the environment globally, nationally, and in their local community. For each, we asked respondents to rate the quality of the environment on a scale from very bad to very good.

Table 1 presents the distribution of responses. Considering first the global environment, 56 percent of the American public perceives the quality of the global environment to be bad, with 13 percent viewing it as very bad. Perceptions of the national environment are almost evenly split with 53 percent indicating that it is fairly or very good and 47 percent indicating that is fairly or very bad. With respect to assessments of the quality of the environment at the community level, 73 percent of the American public views it as being fairly or very good, and only 27 percent as fairly or very bad. The pattern of the responses indicates that perceptions of environmental quality improve from the global to the national to the local geographical scale.

Table 1. Public Assessment of the Quality of the Environment

	Very Good	Fairly Good	Fairly Bad	Very Bad
Global Environment	5.3%	38.2%	43.4%	13.1%
National Environment	11.1	41.9	37.1	9.9
Local Community Environment	16.8	56.0	22.8	4.4

* This policy report is based on analysis described in more detail in the accompanying IPP Working Paper, which can be found at <http://truman.missouri.edu/ipp>

¹ More information about the CCES project can be found at <http://web.mit.edu/polisci/portl/cces/index.html>.

² Polimetrix uses a national matched-random sampling method in which participants are selected to reflect the national adult population. Although this method reduces potential sampling error, we use weights to guard against potential biases and to assure that the sample is nationally-representative.



Public Attitudes about Environmental Issues

The 2007 CCES survey included a battery of questions about environmental issues. Specifically, respondents were asked to think about the role of government in addressing twelve issues: 1) protecting community drinking water sources; 2) reducing urban air pollution issues like smog; 3) preserving natural areas near where I live; 4) managing urban sprawl; 5) reducing pollution of the nation's rivers, lakes, and ecosystems; 6) reducing national air pollution problems like acid rain; 7) maintaining national parks; 8) preserving national forests and other federally-protected areas; 9) reducing emissions that contribute to global warming; 10) preventing damage to the earth's ozone layer; 11) preventing loss of the world's tropical rain forests; and 12) protecting the world's plant and animal species from extinction. The wording of the question was as follows:

Thinking about _____, how much effort do you think the government should put into addressing this issue?

The U.S public expresses strong support for increased government effort across the diverse set of issues asked about in the survey. Large majorities support either a lot more or a little bit more government effort to address all of the issues. Moreover, for half of the issues, a third or more of the sample indicate that they want the government to put forth a lot more effort. The percentages of the public expressing a desire for the government to reduce its environmental protection effort is strikingly small, and represents less than 10 percent of the sample for each of the non-global scale issues. In Table 2, we rank the environmental issues by the mean level of response for each, where "A lot more" is coded 2, "A little bit more" is coded 1, "About the same" is coded 0, "A little bit less" is coded -1, and "A lot less" is coded -2. Positive values thus indicate that the public would like the government to put more government effort into addressing the issue. The means and standard deviations are presented in the last column of the table. Considering the mean scores, the issue that the public indicates the most support for further government action is protecting community drinking water, followed in order by reducing pollution of U.S. rivers, lakes, and ecosystems, and reducing urban air pollution. The least support is for preserving natural areas near where the respondent resides, managing urban sprawl, and protecting biodiversity across the world. There are several interesting patterns in these responses. First, the U.S. public is particularly concerned about local and national pollution issues. The top three issues

(and four of the top five) for which the public wants government to take action are pollution issues at the local or national level. Of particular note here is that, even though a majority of the public believes that the quality of the local and national environment is fairly or very good, they still would like to see more government effort to address problems at this geographical scale. The middle group of issues consist of three national and three global problems, including global warming, which the public places as the eighth most important issue. This is somewhat surprising given the media attention that this issue has recently received, and reflects the division of opinion about the severity (or mere existence) of climate change. In addition, even though the public rated the quality of the global environment as lagging behind that of the national and local environment, on average, it is less enthusiastic about further government action to address global issues. Last, at the bottom of the rankings are three resource preservation issues, including those that can be categorized as global-level or local-level problems.

Explaining Public Attitudes on the Environment

Social scientists have consistently found that younger, better-educated, and politically liberal individuals are more likely to have stronger concerns about the environment. We analyzed these and other individual-level attributes to determine the factors that explain the distribution of responses presented in Table 2. To facilitate this analysis, we constructed an environmental issues index using the responses to the twelve questions, by summing the responses. The scale, therefore, ranges from -24 to 24, where higher values represent greater support for additional government action to protect the environment. (The mean value on the scale is 8.9, with a standard deviation of 11.4).³

The personal attributes with the strongest relationship with environmental attitudes are political party identification and political ideology.⁴ As a first look, the data presented in Figure 1 represent the average score on the environmental issues scale, comparing the public according first to their party identification and second to their political ideology. Democrats and political liberals clearly express more desire for government action to address environmental problems. The average score on the scale is 14.5 for Democrats and 17.0 for liberals. Republicans and ideological conservatives are much less enthusiastic about government taking additional action to deal with the twelve environmental issues asked about in the survey, with average scores of 2.5 and 1.4, respectively. Not unexpectedly, political Independents

³ The Cronbach alpha indicates a reliability coefficient of .96 for the responses, indicating that the responses to the twelve questions can be combined into a single scale.

⁴ This conclusion is based on the results of regression analysis of a set of personal attributes commonly found to be related to environmental concern, including age, gender, race, education, church attendance, urban or rural residence, party identification, and political ideology. Regression results are described in the accompanying IPP Working Paper.



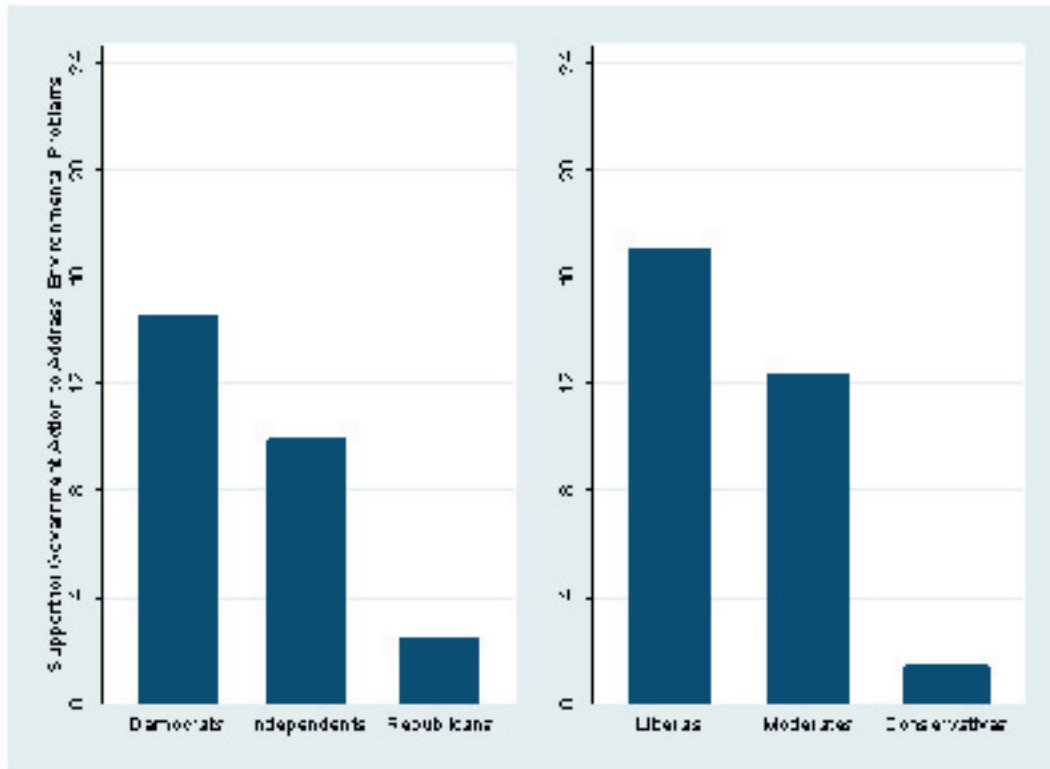
Table 2. Public Attitudes about Government Effort to Address Environmental Issues

Thinking about *Environmental Issue X*, how much effort do you think the government should put into addressing this issue?

Environmental Issues	A Lot More (2)	A Little Bit More (1)	About the Same (0)	A Little Bit Less (-1)	A Lot Less (-2)	Mean (SD)
Protecting community drinking water	40%	31%	26%	1%	1%	1.07 (0.92)
Reducing pollution of the nation's river's, lakes and ecosystems	40	29	26	3	3	0.99 (1.02)
Reducing urban air pollution issues like smog	36	28	27	4	4	0.89 (1.06)
Preserving national forests and other federally-protected areas	29	30	31	6	4	0.74 (1.07)
Reducing national air pollution problems like acid rain	32	28	28	6	6	0.73 (1.15)
Preventing loss of the world's tropical rain forests	36	23	26	5	10	0.72 (1.27)
Maintaining national parks	25	29	41	2	3	0.71 (0.96)
Reducing emissions that contribute to global warming	38	23	21	5	13	0.70 (1.36)
Preserving damage to the earth's ozone layer	35	23	25	5	11	0.66 (1.31)
Preserving natural areas near where I live	24	29	39	3	4	0.65 (1.02)
Managing urban sprawl	25	28	34	4	8	0.56 (1.15)
Protecting the world's plant and animal species from extinction	27	26	29	7	10	0.54 (1.24)



Figure 1. Party Identification, Political Ideology, and Support for Government Action to Address Environmental Problems



Note: Scale ranges from -24 to 24. Higher values represent greater support for additional government action to address environmental problems.

and ideological moderates fall in between, although their average scores on the scale are considerably closer to the Democrats and ideological liberals.⁵

The data presented in Figure 1 clearly illustrate the relationships between individual's political attributes and their environmental attitudes. Considering the averages, however, may disguise differences in attitudes within these categories; in other words, the opinions of Democrats and Republicans may vary. The data presented in Figure 2 display the full distribution of responses, comparing the scores on the environmental issues scale between Republicans and Democrats and ideological conservative and liberals.

The figure shows that Republicans and ideological conservatives are well-distributed across the entire

range of the scale, with many expressing a desire for less government effort to address environmental problems, and many a desire for more government effort. In contrast, very few Democrats and ideological liberals indicate that they would prefer the government to put forth less effort to address the environmental issues asked about in the survey. These data reinforce the stark differences in the public's environmental attitudes, depending on individual's political leanings.

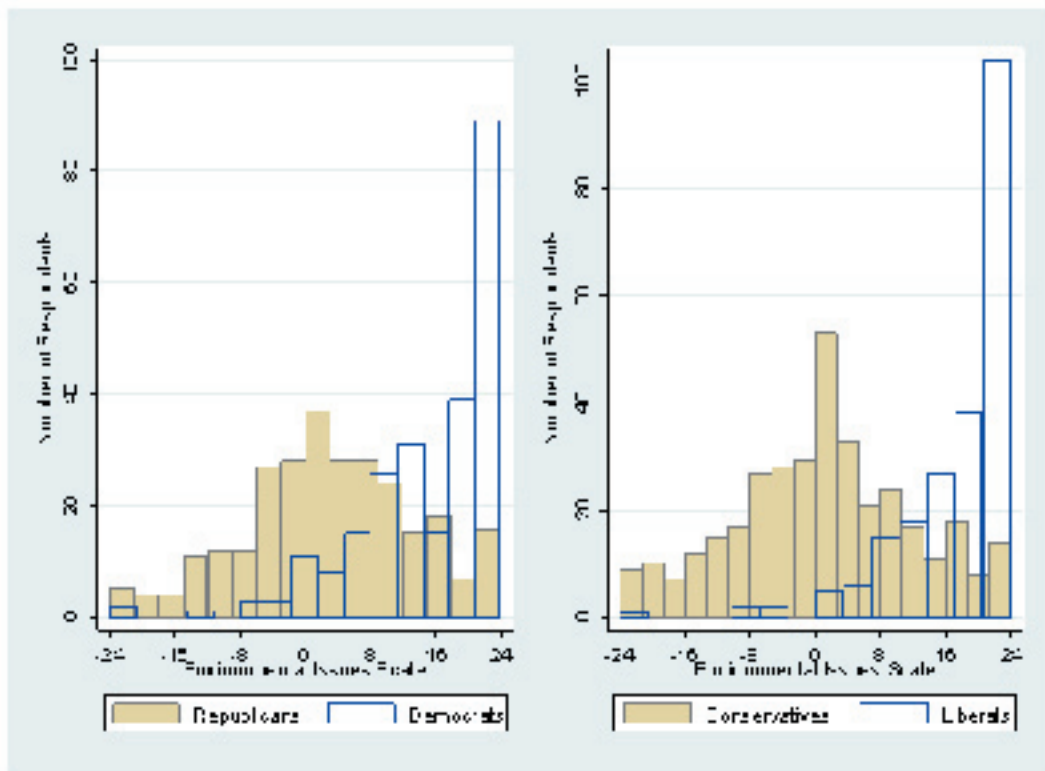
Conclusion

The results summarized here reveal several important features of U.S. public opinion on the environment. First, a strong majority of the public expresses general concern about the environment. Second, in terms of its assessment of environmental quality, the public on

⁵ The strength of the relationships between party identification and political ideology and support for further government action to address environmental issues holds across different groupings of the environmental issues. The results are remarkably similar when pollution issues and resource preservation issues are considered separately, and when environmental issues are broken down by geographical scale into local-, national-, and global-level problems.



Figure 2. Distribution of Environmental Attitudes, by Party Identification and Political Ideology



average thinks that the local environment is in better shape than that of the national environment, and that environmental quality is poorest at the global level. Third, asked which environmental issues it would like to see the government address, the public expresses the most desire to see action taken toward local and national pollution issues. The public is more divided about the level of government effort that should be directed to climate change. Last, the best predictor of an individual's environmental preferences is his or her political attitudes. Democrats and ideological liberal members of the public are much more likely to indicate that additional government effort is desired to address environmental problems than are Republicans and ideological conservatives.

Author Biography

Dr. David Konisky is a Policy Research Scholar at the Institute of Public Policy, and an Assistant Professor at the Harry S Truman School of Public Affairs.

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