



Public Opinion on the Environment

by *Everett Carl Ladd and Karlyn Bowman*

Large majorities of Americans are deeply committed to a safe and healthful environment, say the authors, and polling data indicate significant endorsement of Democratic stewardship. Yet an evolution in environmental attitudes and devolution in environmental politics foretell challenges for both political parties.

Aspate of recent news stories would seem to suggest that the Republicans in Congress, properly chastened, have backed away from an aggressive environmental agenda that was seen by most Americans as extreme. The description of the GOP retreat may be accurate. The change in public attitudes, however, occurred not within the past two years, but earlier—at a point when the need for a healthy environment became a settled issue in American consciousness.

Settlement of an Issue

In the late 1960s and early 1970s the idea that we should make a substantial commitment to the environment was not widely shared. Today it is. Large majorities of Americans across all classes and social groups are deeply committed to a safe and healthful environment. As is the case for most areas involving health, Americans want the federal government to play a substantial role. When we as a society agree on ends, we tend to leave the means by which those ends can be accomplished to our elected representatives. People want to clean up toxic waste sites; most don't have a clue about the pros and cons of the legislation to reauthorize Superfund. We believe costs should be taken into account when considering environmental legislation; we aren't knowledgeable about what precisely tradeoffs should be.

The transformation of the environment from an issue of limited concern to one of universal concern is complete, and, today, survey after survey shows that most Americans have turned their attention to other things.

In January 1996 Roper Starch Worldwide repeated a question the polling firm began asking in 1974 concerning the problems most troubling to Americans. In the new asking, 12 percent of those polled said pollution of air and water was one of the things they were most concerned about. This finding was very much in line with responses throughout the 1990s. Nearly four times as many (47 percent) said they were concerned about crime and lawlessness.

Also in January 1996, Princeton Survey Research Associates gave people a list of fifteen national problems and asked them to choose the most important ones. The environment ranked fourteenth. (See the table on the next page.)

CBS and the *New York Times* asked Americans in an open-ended survey in late May about the most important problems facing the country, and the environment did not make the list. Two percent volunteered in response to a separate question in the poll that the environment was a problem in their communities, but again the issue ranked far behind issues such as crime.

Democratic Party Hegemony

A “settled” issue like the environment can return to national prominence if people feel their political leaders are not mindful of their concerns. For instance, in the early 1980s, many people felt two of President Reagan’s appointees, Interior Secretary James Watt and EPA Administrator Anne Gorsuch Burford, did not share their commitment to the environment, so the issue had national intensity again.

Relative Importance of National Problems, January 1996

	Most important ^a	Important ^b	Less Important ^c	DK/R ^d
Crime and drugs	78	20	2	2
Children’s welfare ^e	73	23	3	1
Public education	69	27	3	1
Government spending ^f	64	28	6	2
Low moral, ethical standards	59	33	8	3
Government/political system	56	33	8	3
Poverty, homelessness	54	37	8	1
Welfare system	52	35	9	4
Unemployment, jobs	51	38	10	1
High taxes	42	43	14	1
Standard of living	42	46	11	1
Race relations	39	46	14	1
Excessive government regulation	38	28	19	3
Environmental problems	36	47	16	1
Illegal immigration	35	41	22	2

Notes: Exact wording of categories of importance was: a One of the most important b Important, but not most important c Not too important d Didn’t know or refused to answer

e Indicates concern of insufficient attention and guidance for children f Includes federal deficit

Source: Princeton Survey Research Associates (for Knight-Ridder News Services), January 1996.

Whether people will view the Republican congressional leadership this way in November remains to be seen. Democrats are generally more favorably disposed than Republicans to federal oversight activities, and they have done a better job than Republicans in talking about Washington’s responsibility for environmental protection. This is a partial explanation for national Democratic strength on the issue. But polling data collected recently show no significant change in Democrats’ margins on handling the environment.

In a mid-March Gallup poll, 62 percent of those surveyed approved of the job Bill Clinton was doing handling the environment. The President performed more impressively on this issue than any of the other nine issues the pollster tested. On each of the seven occasions Gallup has posed the question since 1993, Clinton has received similar high ratings. In January 1993, for example, 60 percent approved of the job he would do.

Pollsters also ask which party is better able to handle the environment. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, neither party had a clear advantage, but since then, Democrats have maintained a significant lead. The May NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll, for one, gives the Democrats a 28 point advantage over the GOP (45 to 17 percent) on the issue. But that number has changed hardly at all over the past four years. The Democrats’ lead over the GOP on handling the environment is typically so large that substantial numbers of Republicans agree about the superiority of Democratic stewardship of the environment.

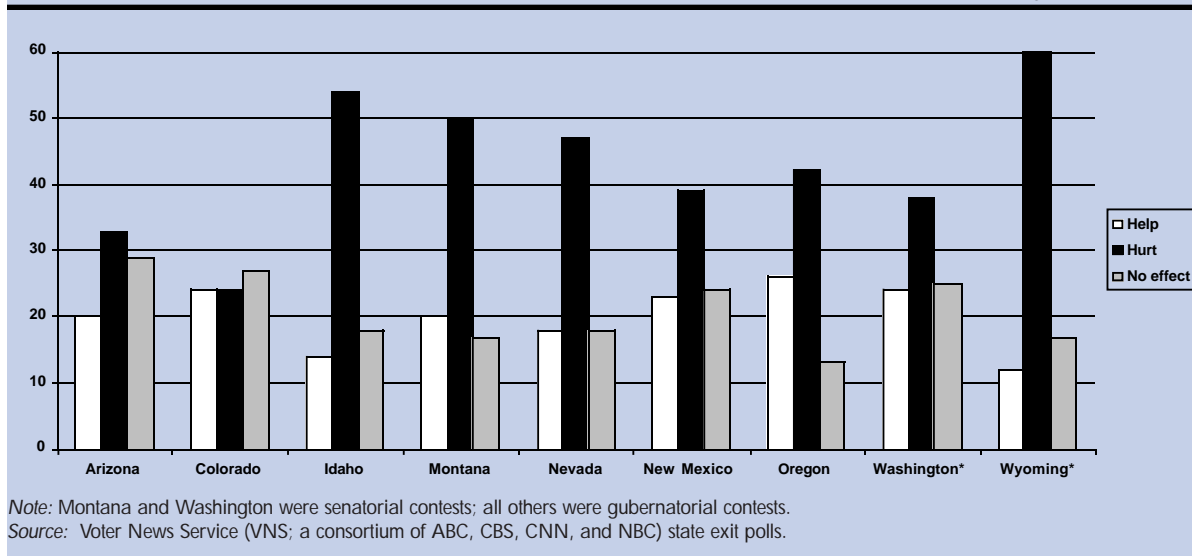
Democratic hegemony on the issue in national surveys doesn’t tell us much about the power the environment has had in national elections. In 1984, 1988, and 1992, 4, 10, and 5 percent, respectively, said the environment was the most important issue to them in casting their ballots. (See the table on the next page.) At the national level, then, the issue is not significant for most voters. Still, in each of these elections, this small group citing the environment has voted overwhelmingly Democratic. But even these data do not present a complete picture. They fail to capture an evolution in environmental attitudes and a devolution in environmental politics that will present challenges to both parties.

Thinking Globally, Voting Locally

As the environment has declined in national intensity, it has become more potent politically at the state and local levels where people are dealing with hard choices involving competing interests. We saw evidence of this transformation in elections in 1994 and again this year.

On election day in 1994, voters in nine western states were asked by the exit polling consortium of the four networks whether the Clinton administration’s land use and environmental policies had hurt, helped, or had no effect on their states. Majorities of voters in

Effects of Clinton's Land Use and Natural Resources Policies: Voter Opinion in Nine Western States, Election Day, 1994



eight of the nine states indicated that the policies had hurt their states. They voted decisively for Republican candidates. (See the chart above.)

In the Oregon special Senate election this year, 12 percent of people who indicated to the same polling consortium that they voted said the environment was the most important issue in casting their votes. They voted overwhelmingly (72 percent) for Ron Wyden, the Democrat. But a close reading of the election poll shows that “the environment” was defined as Republican candidate Gordon Smith’s record in the state legislature as well as his company’s environmental performance. Eighty eight percent had heard about an environmental issue “concerning the company owned by [Republican] Gordon Smith.” While 51 percent said this had no effect on their vote, 4 times as many said that this knowledge had made them less (26 percent) rather than more (6 percent) likely to vote for Smith. Not surprisingly, Wyden won the “less likely” group by a huge margin. Strong pluralities said that the Clinton agenda and, separately, the Republican agenda had no impact on their vote.

In this new political atmosphere where state and local environmental issues have assumed primary importance, the political repercussions of the issue are less predictable. What is clear from the survey data is that no significant transformation of environmental attitudes appears to have taken place nationally since November 1994.

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The Environment As a Voting Issue: Exit Polls, 1982–1992 (selected years)

Year	Exit pollster	Most important issue ^a	%	How the voters voted			
				Voter category	%	Opposite category	%
1982	CBS/ <i>NY Times</i>	Unemployment	38	Democratic	68	Republican	33
		<i>Environment</i>	3				
1984	<i>LA Times</i>	Government spending	22	Mondale	75	Reagan	25
		<i>Environment</i>	4				
1988	CBS/ <i>NY Times</i>	Helping middle class	25	Dukakais	66	Bush	34
		<i>Environment</i>	10				
1990	VRS ^b	Education	26	Democratic	55	Republican	44
		<i>Environment</i>	21				
1992	VNS ^c	Economy/jobs	12	Clinton	72	Bush	14
		<i>Environment</i>	5				

Notes:
^a As compared with the environment
^b Voter Research and Surveys
^c Voter News Service
 Sources: Surveys from the organizations listed above.