

Is Public Support for Environmental Protection Decreasing? An Analysis of U.S. and New Jersey Data

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Telephone surveys made of 800–1,000 randomly selected residents of the United States and New Jersey in 2003 show a sharp decline in support for antipollution regulations, although pollution remains a major concern. This drop in support is associated with slowing of the economy, fear of terrorism, and other competing priorities. The leading proponents of maintaining strong environmental regulations are relatively affluent mainstream white Americans. Despite this recent drop in support, overt attempts to weaken the basic regulations are likely to face stiff opposition unless there is an obvious economic downturn or increasing terrorism that causes a larger proportion of the public to feel that weakening environmental regulations will increase jobs and security. **Key words:** age, environmental laws and regulations, perception, polls, public support, race/ethnicity, trends. *Environ Health Perspect* 112:121–125 (2004). doi:10.1289/ehp.6648 available via <http://dx.doi.org/> [Online 12 November 2003]

The first Earth Day was celebrated on 22 April 1970; this event arguably marked the beginning of U.S. society's call for more control of pollution through laws and environmental science (Mowrey and Redmond 1993). A lot has happened in the United States since 1970, especially since 2001. The unprecedented economic growth of the middle and late 1990s slowed in early 2001, and terrorist attacks occurred in September 2001. Health care costs have continued to rise much more rapidly than other costs, and other domestic problems, such as drug addiction, are ongoing concerns. We should anticipate some shift away from worrying about the environment to more immediate issues of jobs, national security, drug abuse, and how to pay for health care. But how much of a shift in priorities has occurred? Is the public still willing to support the legal and administrative structures that reduced emissions and improved environmental quality? Also, who continues to support the laws that are at the core of U.S. environmental policy? Who does not?

In this article, I use national and New Jersey polling data to answer these questions, and I comment on the significance of the observations for environmental health policy and practice. The Gallup Organization (Princeton, NJ) provided summaries of many of their national surveys and performed some special tabulations for me. The Gallup polls I used were from 1984 through 2003. Some of the more intricate statistical analyses were performed with data from New Jersey using SPSS, version 8 software (SPSS, Chicago, IL). The Star-Ledger/Eagleton Poll (New Brunswick, NJ), which has been collecting data similar to Gallup's since 1977, shared their raw data (Eagleton Poll Archive 2003). All the polls collected from 800 to 1,000 samples using random-digit telephone surveys that followed standard public opinion polling protocols.

The focus on New Jersey is important because, with regard to environmental programs and trends, I consider New Jersey to be a sentinel for the rest of the United States. Along with California, Florida, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, and Oregon, New Jersey's environmental programs have been considered among the strongest in the United States (Conservation Foundation 1984; Duerksen 1983; Greenberg et al. 1991; Pendergrass 2001). Several factors have contributed to New Jersey's interest in environmental programs; for example, *a*) the state is the most the most affluent and the most urbanized in the United States, so people cannot easily move away from pollution; *b*) New Jersey has a history of high cancer mortality rates; and *c*) the legacy of smokestack industries located along its urban-industrial spine have led to many Superfund sites and great concern about hazardous waste management (Greenberg et al. 1991; Mason et al. 1975). Collectively, these factors combine to make New Jersey a place where we would expect strong support for environmental protection.

Yet, New Jersey's economy is changing. The vast majority of the smokestack industries have closed, replaced by white collar information- and technology-driven businesses (Hughes and Seneca 2000). Also, the public is aware of the state's efforts to clean-up its industrial legacy (Greenberg and Amer 1989). Perhaps the public feels less threatened by environmental hazards than it did during the 1970s and early 1980s when candidates for office suggested that environmental protection was the most important public policy issue in New Jersey (Greenberg and Amer 1989). Moreover, the New Jersey economy, like many across the United States, has slowed since 2001, and a multibillion dollar state budget shortfall is constantly being presented

in the media. Residents may be distracted from focusing on environmental protection.

Changes in Support for Environmental Regulations, 2000–2003

The assumption that during the last few years public support for environmental laws has decreased is borne out by the national and New Jersey data. For more than two decades Gallup and the Eagleton pollsters have asked if protection of the environment should be given priority even at the risk of curbing economic growth, or vice versa. In March 2003, 47% of respondents to the national Gallup polls said environmental laws should be given priority even at the risk of curbing economic growth (Gallup Organization 2003). This proportion represents a decline from 54% in March 2002; 57% in March 2001; and 70% in January 2000. The 47% recorded in March 2003 is the lowest proportion in a Gallup poll (Gallup Organization 2003). Although the 23% decline between 2000 and 2003 is the largest on record, double-digit changes have been seen before, most notably between 1990 and 1992. In 1990, 71% of respondents chose environmental protection rather than economic growth as a priority (Gallup Organization 2003); the national unemployment rate in 1990 was 5.6%. In 1992, when the unemployment rate was 7.5% (New Jersey Department of Labor 2003), 58% chose the environment.

In New Jersey, the polls also show a drop in support for prioritizing environment over economy from 71% in 2000 to 63% in 2003 (Eagleton Poll Archive 2003). In fact, 63% was not the lowest support for choosing environment over economy. In February 1984, the environment was chosen by 49% of the respondent population, and in July 1977 only

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46% chose to prioritize the environment. These low rates of environmental support also correspond with economic distress in New Jersey. Unemployment rates were close to 10% during the late 1970s and 8% in the early 1980s (New Jersey Department of Labor 2003). These swings in public support are associated not only with economic and national security concerns but they also reflect more broadly an overall sense of distress about the nation. For example, Gallup asks many times each year about American's satisfaction with the nation. During 1999–2003, a drop in satisfaction paralleled a drop in support for environmental protection. In 1999, 56% reported being satisfied and 66% chose environment rather than economy as their priority (Gallup Organization 2003; Saad 2003). A year later, overall satisfaction rose to 59% and support for the environmental laws rose from 66 to 69%. However, the events of 2001 show a reversal. During 2001–2003, overall satisfaction declined to 51, 49, and 41%, respectively, and support for an environmental priority fell to 57, 54, and 47%, respectively. Clearly, there has been a negative national mood swing, and less support for environmental protection has been one manifestation of it.

The 2000–2003 Changes in Context

Prior to Earth Day, President Richard Nixon said to Congress that “pollution may well become the major concern of the American people in the decade of the 70s” (Mitchell 1978). There was good evidence to support his assertion. During 1973–1978, annual surveys were conducted that asked if the federal government was spending “too little” on 11 different policy issues (Mitchell 1978). Regarding environmental protection, an average of 52% responded that too little was being spent on environment. The only higher proportions in these surveys were for crime (64%), health (55%), and drugs (55%). Environmental protection was considered a higher priority for additional funding by U.S. respondents during the 1970s than was education, rebuilding cities, national defense, addressing racial problems, welfare, exploring outer space, and foreign aid. In 1978, Mitchell (1978) concluded that

Eight years after Earth Day, the [environmental] movement continues to enjoy strong and quite widely dispersed support.

Baxter (1990) carefully reviewed many of the 1980s surveys and reported continuing strong support for environmental protection, albeit the relative position of environmental protection slipped compared to other problems such as crime, health care, and others. This observation is appropriate for the 1990s (Gillespie 1999; Saad and Dunlap 2000).

Despite the decrease in support during 2000–2003, and the relative slippage since the mid-1980s, the environment clearly is on the American public's radar. In March 2003, when Gallup asked how much people worry about the environment and 10 other issues (Saad 2003), 34% said that they worried a “great deal” about the “quality of the environment.” This was a higher proportion than reported for race relations and availability and affordability of energy. Of the other 10 issues, 8 had higher levels of public concern than environment, including the economy, jobs, fear of terrorism, health care, crime and violence, drug use, illegal immigration, and hunger and homelessness. The bad news is that the environment has slipped relative to other issues; the good news is that 34% of respondents said that they worry a “great deal” and another 34% worry “a fair amount” about the environment. Only one-third were not concerned.

Another set of Gallup polls found that 52% of respondents rated the quality of the environment as “fair” or “poor,” and 54% said it is “getting worse.” These were slightly higher proportions than in 2001 (Carroll 2002). Furthermore, only 17% said that they “have a great deal of optimism” that environmental problems will be under control in the next 20 years. These proportions have not changed much since 1990.

The importance that the public attaches to environmental health elements of environmental protection is noteworthy. When asked about what problems they worried about a “great deal,” at the top of the list, 57% of respondents identified “pollution of drinking water” (Gallup Organization 2003; Saad 2003). This proportion has declined from between 65 and 72% during the 1990s. But only 18% report “no” or “little concern” about drinking water quality. In addition to drinking water quality, the surveys show that the majority of Americans are concerned about river, lake, land, and air pollution, all of which they perceive as directly impacting health. The proportion expressing great concern about acid rain and global warming was less than 30%. In short, within the set of environmental problems, 25 years of data show that Americans focus on the most immediate threats they perceive and relegate to a lower priority those they believe to be far away in space and time.

Overall, these surveys make a strong case that a high unemployment rate shifts the balance toward the economic side of the environment–economy see-saw. Episodic events, such as the Exxon Valdez spill, the Bhopal chemical release, the Three-Mile Island accident, and others appear to jog the public into higher concern about the environment, but only in the short term.

Supporters of Environmental Protection

I used New Jersey data (Eagleton Poll Archive 2003) because they were available, and I used Gallup data (Gallup Organization 2003; Saad 2003) as a back-up. As expected, those who are greatly concerned about environmental threats to their health and their family's would be less willing to sacrifice environmental regulations in order to create more jobs (Table 1). Indeed, Crabtree (2003) argues that degree of concern about environmental contamination is the only good predictor of support for environmental protection.

Demographic characteristics of environmental supporters have changed during the last 25 years. In the 1970s surveys, the strongest supporters of environmental protection over the economy (70%) were 18–24 years of age

Table 1. Factors associated with public support for maintaining strong environmental regulations in New Jersey, May 2003 (*n* = 1,001).^a

| Variable | Percent choosing antipollution laws |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| All respondents | 63 |
| Sex | |
| Male | 65 |
| Female | 61 |
| Age (years) | |
| 18–29 | 59 |
| 30–49 | 64 |
| 50–64 | 65 |
| ≥ 65 | 56 |
| Political party affiliation | |
| Democrat | 70 |
| Republican | 57 |
| Independent | 63 |
| Political philosophy | |
| Liberal | 71 |
| Conservative | 57 |
| In between | 63 |
| Education | |
| Graduated college | 76 |
| Graduated high school but not college | 63 |
| Did not graduate college or high school | 46 |
| Race/ethnicity | |
| White | 68 |
| Black | 49 |
| Hispanic/Latino | 42 |
| Asian | 38 |
| Income | |
| < \$35,000 | 52 |
| \$35,000–\$69,999 | 64 |
| \$70,000–\$100,000 | 70 |
| ≥ \$100,000 | 71 |
| Water pollution problem | |
| Very serious | 73 |
| Somewhat or not too serious | 59 |
| Seriousness of New Jersey environmental problems | |
| Very | 73 |
| Somewhat | 66 |
| Not too serious | 41 |

^aBased on the responses of 1,001 residents to the following question: “If you had to choose between maintaining strict antipollution laws or relaxing these laws to create more jobs in New Jersey, which would you choose?” (Eagleton Poll Archive 2003). Each association was statistically significant at *p* < 0.01 using a *t*-test or one-way analysis of variance.

(Mitchell 1978). Support decreased with age, until it was only 31% among those ≥ 65 years of age (Mitchell 1978). Other studies from the 1970s and 1980s also reported stronger support for environmental protection among younger Americans than among older ones (MacManus 1996; Van Liere and Dunlap 1980). However, the youthful population of 2003 did not grow up with the amplified media coverage of burning rivers and smog-covered streets, nor did they live with frequent reports of legal and political fights that characterized the days when the major environmental laws were passed. Hence, we should not be surprised to find that the youth of 1975–1985, who are now 40–60 years old, are more supportive of environmental laws than today's 18- to 29-year-olds (Table 1).

Regarding sex, the literature focusing on the 1970s and 1980s showed that females were more concerned than males about the environment (Blocker and Eckberg 1989; Bord and O'Connor 1997). Much has changed for American women during the last 30 years: Notably, > 60% of women are now in the labor force compared with 43% in 1970 (U.S. Census Bureau 2001), and poverty has increasingly become associated with women. Hence, the state of the economy and jobs should have become a more overriding concern for women. Table 1 shows that male–female differences in prioritization are negligible, and indeed men are slightly more supportive of environmental legislation.

Whites have been reported to be stronger supporters of environmental protection than black Americans (Van Liere and Dunlap 1980). This assertion has been challenged, claiming that African Americans are less concerned about some environmental problems but highly concerned about problems in their neighborhoods (Greenberg and Schneider 1996; Lake 1983). Although too little is

known about the environmental concerns of Asian Americans and Latino/Hispanic Americans to hypothesize their views about environmental protection versus economic growth, cross-cultural studies suggest there could be marked differences (Kouabenan 1998; Sokolowska and Tyszka 1995; Vaughan and Nordenstam 1991). Nevertheless, I expected whites to be more supportive of environmental regulations than their counterparts, and as Table 1 shows, they were.

Political identification with the Democratic Party and a liberal philosophy were associated with support of environmental protection 25 years ago (Mitchell 1978; Van Liere and Dunlap 1980). Regarding socioeconomic status, the literature showed that more-affluent people are more likely to be supportive, with exceptions based on specific issues associated with support of environmental protection (Jones and Dunlap 1992; Van Liere and Dunlap 1980). Table 1 shows the expectations to be true, that is, Democratic Party affiliation, a self-claimed liberal political philosophy, and higher income were identified as characteristics associated with support of environmental laws in 2003.

These bivariate associations, while suggestive, do not indicate the relative importance of the predictor variables. Table 2 presents a forward stepwise binary logistic regression of the choice between maintaining strict environmental regulations or not. All variables that improved the model by $p < 0.01$ or more were included. The strongest correlate, by far, was concern about environmental problems in New Jersey. Yet, demographic characteristics were also significant predictors, including education, race/ethnicity, willingness to raise taxes rather than to cut services, Democratic Party identification, and male sex.

I investigated two of the relationships in Tables 1 and 2 in greater depth because they

have substantial importance for environmental health. Regarding age, in New Jersey in 1977, 62% of the 18- to 29-year-old population and only 25% of those ≥ 50 years of age prioritized environmental laws over jobs (Eagleton Poll Archive 2003). Twenty-six years later, the youngest age group was slightly less supportive than it had been in 1977. The big change is increasing support in the older age groups, including the ≥ 65 -year group. In essence, support for environmental protection has spread across age groups.

The race/ethnicity results show major differences in New Jersey (Eagleton Poll Archive 2003). In 2003, 2000, 1987, 1984, and other years as well, surveys show that white/non-white differences in support for environmental protection were as substantial as those reported for 2003. However, confounding by income is possible; that is, poorer people choose economy over environment because they are the first to lose jobs during an economic slowdown. The New Jersey data (Eagleton Poll Archive 2003) were divided into two groups: one at $\geq \$75,000$ a year and one $< \$75,000$. In the $< \$75,000$ group, there remained a notable difference between white respondents and their Latino/Hispanic, black, and Asian counterparts. Among the more-affluent populations, there remains a difference, but not a statistically significant one, between whites and both Latino/Hispanic and black respondents. These calculations were made with a lower income break and continued to show white versus non-white differences. Even after controlling for income, a statistically significant difference remained for Asian Americans who had a much lower probability of supporting environmental laws.

Because of the importance of this finding, the Gallup Organization did parallel computations with their 2000–2003 survey data (Gallup Organization 2003). Their findings were different from my results for New Jersey. White versus non-white differences in support for environmental laws were negligible, whether the income break was set at \$50,000 or \$30,000. In other words, the national and New Jersey results are different. These contradictory findings deserve a follow-up study with sample size stratified by racial/ethnic group to provide a larger sample of minority populations.

Implications for Environmental Health

How meaningful are the changes observed during the last 25 years, especially the last 3 years, and what are their implications? I comment first on policy implications and then on implications for environmental health professionals. With regard to policy implications, the late 1970s were the halcyon days of the movement for environmental protection. The

Table 2. Binary logistic regression of preferences about maintaining strict environmental laws, New Jersey, 2003.^a

| Variable | Parameter estimate | SE | Improvement χ^2 | OR (95% CL) |
|--|--------------------|------|----------------------|-------------------|
| Seriousness of environmental problems (1 = very serious; 0 = not very serious) | 0.65 | 0.10 | 53.3 | 1.91 (1.57, 2.33) |
| Respondent graduated from college (1 = yes; 0 = no) | 0.80 | 0.16 | 35.8 | 2.22 (1.64, 3.02) |
| Respondent identifies as white (1 = yes; 0 = no) | 0.86 | 0.16 | 26.3 | 2.36 (1.72, 3.24) |
| Respondent would raise taxes to keep state services (1 = yes; 0 = no) | 0.53 | 0.16 | 11.3 | 1.70 (1.25, 2.31) |
| Respondent identifies as Latino/Hispanic (1 = yes; 0 = no) | -0.94 | 0.25 | 12.6 | 0.39 (0.24, 0.64) |
| Respondent self identifies as Democrat party affiliate (1 = yes; 0 = no) | 0.52 | 0.16 | 9.0 | 1.68 (1.22, 2.31) |
| Respondent is male (1 = yes; 0 = no) | 0.38 | 0.14 | 7.0 | 1.46 (1.10, 1.94) |
| Constant | -1.45 | 0.21 | | |

Abbreviations: CL, confidence limits; OR, odds ratio.

^aBased on responses given 24 April–4 May 2003 (Eagleton Poll Archive 2003). All variables in the model were significant predictors at $p < 0.01$; Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.22$.

media provided extensive coverage, rallies were common, and there was spiritual-like moral fervor about environmental protection. Today, only events such as the Exxon Valdez oil spill lead to a media blitz about the environment. In addition, the abundant jobs and relatively safe international political environment of the 1990s have been replaced by fear of terrorism, a stagnant economy, increasing health care costs, drug abuse, and other domestic concerns. Americans have a lot to worry about.

An important finding of these surveys is that middle-age white, college-educated males are the strongest supporters of not weakening the environment regulations. This group is the core of the American political mainstream that elected officials cannot afford to upset. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that elected officials would risk a frontal attack against the environmental regulatory structure. A less risky approach for elected officials to avoid the wrath of voters is to weaken the structure by reducing the budgets of key programs.

I do not have special access to the current administration's views on the environment, especially given the change in the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) leadership. If the current federal administration builds policy around national polls, then water and air quality will be relatively immune to weakening because they have been the public's major concern for three decades. If the administration continues to emphasize economic growth and national security, then we can expect federal funds to be redirected to programs that are popular with business, local government officials, and citizens groups, but also have an environmental justice link, such as the brownfields remediation program, and rebuilding the public health infrastructure to improve the response to crisis events (e.g., terrorist actions) and chronic needs (e.g., immunizations, screening for lead poisoning, etc.).

In contrast, environmental protection programs with potential long-term consequences, such as control of greenhouse gases, acid rain, and endangered species, are particularly vulnerable to political attack because they have the least public support and are portrayed by some as barriers to U.S. economic growth. A follow-up study should systematically scan state and local laws and policies for evidence of changes as a result of declining public support.

The challenges to environmental health professionals are to help build public trust for what we do and to respond to changing priorities that may be driven more by politics than by science. More specifically, with regard to trust, the challenge is to relate to current mainstream Americans and to the growing minority population. Maintaining and trying to expand support among the mainstream middle-aged, affluent, educated, and largely European-American populations is critical.

I am convinced that the mainstream population's knowledge of environmental management has not grown much beyond the largely technology-based laws of the 1970s and early 1980s. They are not fully aware of instances where the regulatory-based pollution laws have been successfully complemented by effective pollution prevention approaches. For example, most people do not know that many companies design their pharmaceuticals to reduce resource use and risk. Fundamentally, the public does not know that environmental protection has been a major player in driving the United States to modernize its economy and to redevelop its cities and older industrial suburbs. For example, when we polled New Jersey residents about their knowledge of brownfields (Greenberg et al. 2001), the vast majority did not know what a brownfield was; when we explained to them what it was, most thought it was an urban redevelopment program, not a program that was launched by the U.S. EPA to remediate sites to protect public health, and then to create jobs and property to generate tax dollars. The educated mainstream needs to better understand the evolution of environmental management in the United States because their lack of understanding creates credibility problems for environmental health scientists.

Paul Portney, President of Resources for the Future, contends that incentive-based regulations will become more common and that the shift away from national to state government control of regulations and programs will continue (Portney 2000). Some people may be able to understand the arguments for modifying command and control regulations, but many from the political mainstream will be skeptical about marketable permits, taxes on pollution, and other economic incentive-based approaches that attempt to reduce emissions at the front-end of production. We cannot afford to allow current supporters to perceive that government control over environmental management is being sacrificed to politics (Nye et al. 1997; Pew Research Center for People & the Press 1998). If this perception becomes widespread, I believe there will be a backlash by current supporters of environmental protection to implement the "precautionary principle," which in its most stringent forms could mean evoking environmental management strategies that could strangle our economy and hurt environmental health (Stewart 2002). Americans need to be convinced that the government is being vigilant about the water they drink, the air they breathe, and the land where they live and play. We must not reach a point where a vote in favor of environmental regulations by the political mainstream is explained by the fact that they public does not trust the stewards of its environment, which includes all of us.

We must also help build support among the growing black-, Latino-, and Asian-American populations. Perhaps the New Jersey data are not representative of the United States as a whole, and maybe there are no differences between white and other racial/ethnic groups in their support for environmental protection, but it would be a mistake to take for granted the support of the growing ethnic minorities in the United States. In 1990, black, Latino/Hispanic, and Asian Americans constituted 24% of the national population, and in 2000, they constituted 28%. The U.S. Bureau of the Census (1998) has estimated that these proportions will rapidly increase to 38% in 2025 and 47% in 2050. It is imperative that support from ethnic and racial minorities be cultivated because, by the middle of the century, these groups will make up $\geq 50\%$ of the population and will form a substantial part of the tax-paying labor force.

Individually and as part of organizations, all of us can help address the challenges: building trust for our work and responding to changing priorities. What we do collectively is exciting to people, but we need to be willing to tell our stories at schools and to public groups. We should also work within our organizations to provide educational opportunities for talented and interested youth. For example, the Society for Risk Analysis (McLean, VA) has been funded by the Exxon/Mobil Foundation (Houston, TX) to provide scholarships for talented college and graduate students to further their training, and to high school science teachers to develop curriculum modules for their classes that include risk analysis.

With regard to responding to changing priorities, the field of environmental health is being stretched in ways that meet today's political agendas, not the agenda that existed when the U.S. EPA was formed. One obvious pull is toward hazards associated with terrorist threats. Many of the required sampling, surveillance, and modeling protocols are extensions of what environmental health professionals began designing decades ago to measure plumes from electricity-generating stations and from automobiles. The new set of hazards challenge our capabilities of risk assessment and necessitate working with experts in national security and criminal justice who come from a very different professional culture than do most environmental health scientists.

A very different but equally challenging priority is the nexus of design and environmental health. Signified by the recent special issue of the *American Journal of Public Health*, "Design and Public Health" (American Public Health Association 2003), we will be called upon to work in conjunction with traffic engineers, city planners, social scientists, psychologists, and exercise physiologists on such

subjects as congestion, sprawl, “walkability” of neighborhoods, housing, environmental justice, obesity, social capital, and sustainable cities.

In conclusion, survey data show that support for environmental protection programs is not at a dangerous intersection; rather, it is on a path for the immediate future that goes up and down as economic, international, and other domestic circumstances change. I do not claim that personal efforts and organizational involvement are essential or that they have an immediate effect on public support for environmental protection, but these efforts are fundamental in building the next cohort of stewards of our environmental health.

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