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Voting Trends in the United States:

Exploring the Environmental Lobby's Resonance Among Voters

The environmental movement in the United States has typically focused its resources on public education, legislative lobbying and litigation. However, the movement's success in the latter two is highly dependent on the quality and character of elected officials. Successful public education on behalf of the environment translates into greater environmentalist electoral success.

This paper discusses national trends that impact and influence the environmental lobby's ability to achieve favorable electoral results, and the manner in which the lobby has responded to those trends. Overall, the American public is receptive to environmentalism, but the political realm is crowded with many competing interests, and the environmental lobby has not yet found a reliable means of influencing electoral politics for the benefit of its policy preferences.

Republican Voters

The majority of all Republicans support some kind of federal environmental spending, either status quo or increased spending. The majority of all self-identified conservatives also support some kind of environmental spending. A visible gap in preferences regarding the amount of federal environmental spending exists between strongly and less strongly self-identified Republicans and this gap appears to have increased in the more polarized political world after 1994.

Support for decreased environmental spending spikes significantly between strong Republicans and all other groups. The difference between weak Republicans and strong

Republicans is about 10 percentage points. These differences between strong Republicans and all other groups including weak Republicans indicate that support for decreased environmental spending and the Republicans as the party to handle pollution are highly partisan opinions.

From 1988 to 1992 40-50% of strong Republicans supported increased federal spending on the environment, while the vast majority of the remaining strong Republicans supported the status quo. After 1994, independent leaning Republicans and weak Republicans increased their support for decreased environmental spending by roughly 10 percentage points each, bringing each group to 12-13% support for decreased spending. Strong Republicans, however, moved from about 2-8% to roughly 23% support for decreased environmental spending. Again, these changes indicate the highly partisan nature of support for decreased environmental spending. The “Republican Revolution” of 1994 brought a much more Conservative flavor to the Republican Party. Strong Republicans would be more likely to toe the party line on issues like environmental spending, and post-1994, the Republican Party line was arguably more anti-environmentalist. This willingness among strong Republicans to carry the party line on environmental issues may be partly responsible for the widening gap between some groups of traditional Republicans.

Republicans showed their strongest support for environmental spending in 1988, the year after President Reagan signed the Montreal Protocol. Here again, a sign that strong Republicans may be following party cues more than individual preferences on environmental issues. The nation as a whole was more supportive of environmental spending in 1988 than in most years, but even strong Republicans were over 50% in their support for increased environmental spending.

Strong Republicans are more likely than weak Republicans to view the Republican Party as better able to deal with problems associated with pollution. It is interesting to note that the relative differences between strong and weak Republicans who view the Republican Party as best able to deal with the problem of pollution, decreases after 1994. In 1990, strong Republicans were much more likely than weak Republicans to stand by their party and its ability to handle the problem of pollution. In 1994 and 1998, strong Republicans are still more supportive of their party’s stance on pollution, but the

difference between strong and weak Republicans is smaller. Strong Republicans are about 12-15 percentage points more likely in 1994 and 1998 than in 1990 to support Democrats as the party best suited to deal with pollution¹. This change may represent the concern among a portion of traditionally strong Republicans, that their party had grown too extreme on issues not necessarily politically liberal or conservative. Republicans for Environmental Protection (REP) formed in 1995 over the concern that the 1994 revolution had produced a party leadership that was more hostile to environmental issues than the traditional Republican base and the public at large.

The change among strong Republicans' attitudes towards their party's handling of pollution indicates that people are making party policy evaluations independent of their partisan attachments.

Strong Democrats are 20-30% more likely to support their party's ability to handle pollution than strong Republicans are to support their party's ability on the issue. Independents are 30-40% more likely than members of all other groups to believe that both parties are equally equipped to handle pollution. This level was highest in 1990 with over 80% of independents finding both parties equally suited to handle pollution. Democrats were a distant second choice and only led Republicans by 7 percentage points. By 1994, equal support for both parties among independents had fallen to 70%, with Democrats leading Republicans for second place by 18%². Again, here is another possible consequence of the Republican Revolution.

The Democrats

The Democrats are more supportive of increased environmental spending than Republicans for all years from 1988 to 2000. Strong liberals are also more supportive of increased environmental spending than Conservatives. Independents who lean Democrat are always the most supportive of all scale groups, for increased environmental spending.

¹ Sapiro, Virginia, Steven J. Rosenstone, and the National Election Studies. 1948-2000 Cumulative Data File [dataset]. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies [producer and distributor], 2001.

² Sapiro, Virginia, Steven J. Rosenstone, and the National Election Studies. 1948-2000 Cumulative Data File [dataset]. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies [producer and distributor], 2001.

This signal may be an indication that Independents who lean Democrat are actually leaning from the left, rather than from the middle towards the left.

As the party most often responsible for publicly championing environmentalist objectives, environmentalist lobbyists must be aware of the structural obstacles unique to the Democratic Party. Often, though there is no intrinsic need for it, labor is a major obstacle for environmentalists when seeking party support for their objectives. Organized labor's campaign contributions as well as soft money contributions and its ability to organize GOTV and education projects dwarf the environmental lobby in scale and historical success. Environmentalist policy preferences that run contrary to those of the unions are likely to face an uphill battle within the party³.

Demographic Preferences

Only small differences in environmental spending preferences were expected between demographic groups, since support among the general public for increased environmental spending is quite often near 50%, which leaves little room for extreme differences between groups to develop. Overall, a respondent's preference for level of federal environmental spending showed little correlation to the respondent's demographic group for race, gender, income level, frequency of church attendance, or region. Some differences can be seen in a few years, but overall the differences are neither terribly consistent nor significant⁴.

Preferences Based on Education

The more years an individual spends in school, the more likely s/he is to support increased environmental spending. For some years, support for increased spending is virtually indistinguishable between groups of education levels. Generally, however, individuals with advanced degrees are the most likely to support increased spending on

³ Bandow, Doug. "Interest Group Misfire." Copley News Service. Feb 25, 1997. cato.org/dailys/2-25-97.html. Accessed 12/5/03.

⁴ Sapiro, Virginia, Steven J. Rosenstone, and the National Election Studies. 1948-2000 Cumulative Data File [dataset]. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies [producer and distributor], 2001.

the environment. This trend is good for environmental organizations, since voter turn-out is highly correlated with level of education.

Preferences Based on Age

The young are far more likely to support increased federal environmental spending than the aged. With the exception of 1988, the 17-24 year olds were always the most supportive of the increased spending option, and the 25-34 year olds usually expressed relatively similar preferences. Between years, the young more reliably supported increased environmental spending than the aged. On average, 17-24 year old respondents were about 20% more supportive than 65-74 and 75-99 year olds of increased environmental spending. Environmental organizations should consider increased GOTV efforts among the young.

Local vs. National Assessments

An individual's assessment of his/her local environmental quality is an important determinant of his/her likelihood to support increased environmental spending. According to the 1995 NES pilot study report, people who approve of their local air quality are less likely to support increased federal expenditures on behalf of the environment than people with negative assessments. Evaluations of national air quality have no impact on an individual's likelihood to support environmental spending.

About a third of respondents preferred that the federal government be the level of government most involved in dealing with environmental problems. The rest of those surveyed preferred that the state or local governments deal with environmental problems⁵.

These results seem to agree with the findings of James Stimson's policy mood measure, which found that through the 1990's there was a steady decline in the public's support for government intervention. The policy mood of the nation moves up and down and may partly be a response to the perceived policy mood of the president (public policy

⁵ Berinsky, Adam and Steven Rosenstone "Evaluation of Environmental Policy Items on the 1995 NES Pilot Study. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies, 2001.

mood is less liberal in years when a Democrat is president and more liberal when a Republican is president). The opposition of some Republicans to federal regulation of the environment may be an attempt to key in on the public's supposed aversion to federal government intervention⁶.

Jerry Taylor of the Cato Institute suggests that voters approve of "environmentalism" in general but are more often than not, hostile to the environmental lobby's policy agenda. The reason is that voters don't think that centralizing money, power, and authority in government bureaucracies is the best way to protect the environment⁷.

Understanding and Saliency

Much of the environmental legislating that goes on in Congress can be kept out of the public eye where it might otherwise be viewed unfavorably. For example, in the 1995 pilot study report on environmental policy questions, two questions were asked, "The estimated cost of anti-pollution equipment on a new car is fifteen hundred dollars. Do you think this is worth paying in order to protect the environment, or would you rather see the price reduced if the car pollutes more?" and "What about if adding more anti-pollution equipment costing an additional fifteen hundred dollars, could make the car pollute even less? Do you think that would be worth paying in order to protect the environment, or would you rather not see the price increased to make the car pollute less" 51% said it was worth paying the \$3000. 31.8% of respondents would pay at least the extra \$1,500. Only 17.3% would not pay any extra money⁸. In that very same year, Congress adopted Section 320 of Public Law 106-346, which prohibits the Department of Transportation from strengthening fuel-economy standards for light trucks and sport-utility vehicles. Congress has approved 320 in every subsequent year since 1995, despite

⁶ Samples, John and Basham, Patrick. "Election 2002 and the Problems of American Democracy." Policy Analysis. The Cato Institute. Washington, D.C. No 451: Sept 5, 2002.

⁷ Taylor, Jerry. "The Green Emperor Has No Clothes." *Washington Times*. Dec 24, 1996. cato.org/research/articles/taylor-961224.html. Accessed 11/15/03.

⁸ Berinsky, Adam and Steven Rosenstone "Evaluation of Environmental Policy Items on the 1995 NES Pilot Study. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies, 2001.

lobbying efforts by the Sierra Club and other environmental organizations. The auto industry provided the inertia behind the adoption of this seemingly innocuous portion of public law. High levels of support among the public for increased effort on the part of the federal government to reduce air pollution and the expressed willingness of individuals to put their pocketbooks where their support lies, would seem to negate any possibility that the general public would support Section 320. Voters, however, are not likely to be aware nor base their votes on this kind of political maneuvering which is where much of environmental policy is actually legislated. Beth Sullivan of the LCV comments, “candidates can read polls- they know that 75-80% of Americans support clean water and public lands. Every candidate said they were good on the environment- the devil is in the details.” If a policy issue is not highly salient among voters, getting voters to recognize and act on such special-interest pandering as Section 320 is next to impossible. Furthermore, even if voters do recognize what they consider to be the “gutting” of environmental legislation, Jerry Taylor of the Cato Institute argues that they will not automatically dismiss a legislator for this reason⁹. In other words, environmental legislation is not a highly salient issue among the voting public.

This issue of saliency is one of the environmental lobby’s most common criticisms for expecting pro-environmental legislative and electoral results. While the majority of Americans express support for environmental protection and federal spending for those protections, that support may not make it into a voter’s vote decision. Only 8% of Bush/Clinton voters mentioned the environment or pollution as the most important problem¹⁰. Regarding the 2002 election, League of Conservation Voters Education Fund Director Beth Sullivan commented that, “environmental issues were overshadowed by issues of national security, especially at the federal level¹¹.”

However, it is important to remember that for roughly 8% of the population, the environment is a highly salient issue. Miller and Shanks’ research found that abortion,

⁹ Taylor, Jerry. “The Green Emperor Has No Clothes.” Washington Times. Dec 24, 1996. cato.org/research/articles/taylor-961224.html. Accessed 11/15/03.

¹⁰ Miller, Warren E., and J. Merril Shanks. 1996. The New American Voter. Cambridge: Harvard UP, pg. 327.

¹¹ Hunter, Natasha. “Grim Returns for Green Lobby.” Nov 6, 2002. tompaine.com/feature2.cfm/ID/6692. Accessed 11/15/03.

when other policy preferences were taken into account, could not be considered a salient issue- only 19% of Clinton/Bush voters mentioned abortion as a reason for liking/disliking one of the candidates. Of this 19% though, Miller and Shanks found that the issue of abortion did have a substantial impact on vote choice¹².

This problem for environmentalism in electoral politics may not be unique to environmentalism itself. Such hot-button issues as race related policies and abortion have been found to have no significant effects on elections, when other policy preferences are taken into account. Miller and Shanks also find in their research that the only economic issue that has a significant impact on voting is unemployment.¹³ However, to conclude from this research that virtually all of the major policy issues facing Americans are without impact on elections, would be a hasty judgement.

Assessing the saliency and impact of environmental policy issues on a presidential election is beyond my ability to confidently test. Instead, I looked for signs that environmental preferences had the potential to impact elections by changing vote-share. For the presidential elections of 1988, 1992, 1996, and 2000 the average positions regarding support for increased federal environmental spending of weak/strong Democrats, Independents/Independent-lean Republicans, and weak/strong Republicans were graphed relative to each other. Independent-lean Democrats were dropped from this analysis because this group always exhibited the highest level of support for increased environmental expenditures and greatly skewed the averages. Also, Republicans would be most concerned about losing vote share among Independents/ Independent lean-Republicans than Independent-lean Democrats, because the former is more often the pool from which Republicans can successfully draw swing votes.

The difference in environmental policy preference between the Republicans and Independents increased by similar percentages between 1988 and 1992 and between 1992 and 1996. In these same years the policy preferences between Independents and Democrats increased after the 1988 election and decreased after the 1992 election.

¹² Miller, Warren E., and J. Merril Shanks. 1996. The New American Voter. Cambridge: Harvard UP, pgs. 366.

¹³ Miller, Warren E., and J. Merril Shanks. 1996. The New American Voter. Cambridge: Harvard UP, pgs. 346-347.

Differences between Independents leaning Democrat and Democrats decreased after the 1988 election and increased after 1992. In 1992, Clinton defeated the sitting President Bush I and in 1996 Clinton was re-elected. If the differences in environmental spending preferences between Independents and partisans were important, the increasing divide between Republican partisans and Independents would seem to be the more important trend.

In 1992, Clinton's victory over the incumbent president may largely have been due to the failing economy, however he did not manage to win an outright majority of the popular vote, and his percentage of the popular vote was only about 6 points greater than Bush's share. Clinton's popular vote share is less than the percentage of NES respondents who cited the environment or pollution as the most important issue. Clinton had to win the Electoral College, however, which meant winning swing voters in swing states. In Ohio, Clinton's margin of victory was less than 2%, in Wisconsin it was less than 5%, Tennessee was also less than 5% (despite native Tennessean Gore being on the ticket), and Michigan was about 7%¹⁴. The American voters did not express overwhelming confidence in Clinton's ability to better handle the economy than Bush. Independent swing voters may have been persuaded by actual policy preferences. Particularly after 1994, Independents and Republican leaners may have felt abandoned by the more extreme policies of the Republican Revolution, and as such, disinclined to support a Republican challenger to Clinton.

The economy was also doing quite well prior to the 2000 election. Gore had been a part of the Administration, but actively worked to separate himself from Clinton, due to various scandals. Neither Gore nor Bush II was likely to benefit much from the strong economy. The difference between Independents/Republican leaners and Republicans was still relatively high. The difference between Democrats and Independents/Republican leaners increased from 1996 to 2000 by 6.4%, which is more than the environmental spending preference difference between Republicans and Independents/leaners before the 1992 Bush loss. In both the 1992 and 2000 election, neither major party candidate was able to offer the voters a solid economic incentive at the polling booth. In 1992, the Republican Party appears to have not been offering environmental policy incentives to its

¹⁴ <http://www.multied.com/elections/1992state.html>. Accessed 12/7/03.

swing voters. In 2000, Gore was not able to capitalize on the Independents/Republican leaners disaffected by the still high environmental policy difference between them and the general Republican Party. With no incentive to vote Democratic, Republican leaners, at least, might as well vote with the Republican Party, where they feel more comfortable or find other policy incentives.

Proximity to a candidate on environmental preferences may also simply improve the overall impression a voter has of the candidate, and in this manner increase the likelihood that the voter will vote for that particular candidate. The 1995 Pilot Study Report found that proximity to Clinton on the “regulation vs. burden on business tradeoff” question contributed 12 points to overall Clinton evaluations (which is statistically significant and controlled for general proximity to Clinton as well as some projection effects)¹⁵. NES data has shown that overall close voter proximity to a candidate on an environmental issue means that the candidate has exhibited a pro-environmental position on that issue.

Environmentalists sometimes worry that if their policy initiatives are seen to as to harsh on business and therefore jobs and the economy, people will be hostile towards these initiatives. Most data indicates that such a concern, at least as it pertains to the public’s attitude, is unwarranted. In the 1995 NES Pilot Study, 57.7% of respondents favor protecting the environment, even if doing so costs jobs. 51.9% strongly feel that tougher regulations are needed on business in order to protect the environment; only 22.3% strongly feel that environmental regulations are too great a burden on business¹⁶.

The impact of environmental regulations on jobs and business is probably more of a problem for environmentalist objectives when both the interest groups of labor and business align and convince elected officials within the Democratic and Republican Parties to not support the full environmentalist objective.

¹⁵ Berinsky, Adam and Steven Rosenstone “Evaluation of Environmental Policy Items on the 1995 NES Pilot Study. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies, 2001.

¹⁶ Berinsky, Adam and Steven Rosenstone “Evaluation of Environmental Policy Items on the 1995 NES Pilot Study. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies, 2001.

The Environment as a Campaign Issue

The 1996 and 2002 Colorado senate race between Wayne Allard (R) and Tom Strickland (D), were very close elections and an election in which the environment as an issue could likely have had an impact on the outcome. The issue of the environment would have allowed Strickland to exploit Allard's weaknesses as a candidate, had the issue been successfully incorporated into the Strickland campaign.

The booming population in Colorado provided two big advantages for Strickland. First due to the fast-growing population about 25% of voters had never before seen either candidates' name on the ballot prior to 2002. As such, Allard, in the 2002 match-up, did not have some of the name recognition benefits generally associated with incumbency¹⁷. Pollster Floyd Ciruli, referred to Allard's lack of incumbent name recognition, as the candidate's biggest problem¹⁸.

Secondly, growth in the suburbs around Denver had produced many Independent and Republican leaning voters who may have been attracted to Strickland's moderate Democratic stance and positions on education and the environment. The population boom in suburbs fueled a backlash against suburban sprawl and pollution. Strickland courted these voters. Strickland also used ads portraying Allard as extremist on issues like education and abortion¹⁹.

Both candidates wanted to be seen as the moderate and Allard's legislative history leant itself to Strickland's attempts to portray him as an extremist. Pollster Ciruli believed the election in 2002 was less likely to be decided on policies and more likely to be decided on voter perceptions of the candidates. The candidates seemed to be of the same opinion and as such, went after issues with broad appeal²⁰.

¹⁷ Driscoll, Patrick. "Orgy of Negativity has many voters disgusted." *USA Today*.
[Usatoday.com/news/Washington/2002-10-21-colorado-usat](http://usatoday.com/news/Washington/2002-10-21-colorado-usat)
Accessed 12/3/03

¹⁸ "Battle for the Senate." *Pbs.org/newshour/bb/congress/july-dec02/Colorado*. Accessed 12/3/03

¹⁹ "Colorado Up For Grabs." *PBS Online NewsHour*. Oct 15, 1996. Accessed 12/3/03.
pbs.org/newshour/bb/election/October/96/Colorado_race_10-15.html

²⁰ "Battle for the Senate." *Pbs.org/newshour/bb/congress/july-dec02/Colorado*. Accessed 12/3/03

During one 2002 debate, both Strickland and Allard referred to the environment in their opening remarks, even though none of the questions involved environmental issues. Strickland referred to Colorado inspiring “America the Beautiful” and broad support for preserving environment. Allard referred to specifics such as carrying legislation for San Dunes National Monument, Spanish Peaks Wilderness Area, and co-sponsoring legislation to eliminate hazardous waste sites in Colorado²¹. Fairly general overtures to pro-environmentalist sentiments likely helped the candidates project ‘good-guy’ images.

As a fairly conservative, party-line Republican who had been targeted by numerous environmentalist organizations, Allard's best chance to prevent vote-share loss due to environmental issues, was to deflate Strickland’s environmentalist image. Doing so would not only have the benefit of deterring increased voter turn-out of strong environmentalists and preventing the loss of swing voters, it would also increase voters’ negative impressions of Strickland if he was to be found inflating his environmentalism.

Republican ads argued that Strickland’s firm lobbied to build a medical waste incinerator in Denver as well as making other attacks on Strickland’s environmental reliability²².

Allard also criticized Strickland for failing to file criminal charges as a U.S. attorney, against the top official of a company that owned the Summitville gold mine, the site of one of Colorado’s worst environmental disasters. Allard’s campaign manager accused Strickland of “lying” about his record as a U.S. attorney. The Denver Post, however, wrote that Strickland reopened the criminal investigation into the Summitville case after his predecessor had closed it. The \$27.5 million settlement b/n the U.S. Justice Dept and the co was approved by Gov. Bill Owens (R), one of Allard’s strongest supporters. Allard’s ads nonetheless made a dent on Strickland’s image²³.

²¹ *Allard/Strickland Senate Debate. Oct. 4, 2002.*

rmpbs.org/campaign2002/debate_as.html#ads. Accessed 12/3/03

²² *“Colorado Up For Grabs.” PBS Online NewsHour. Oct 15,1996. Accessed 12/3/03.*
pbs.org/newshour/bb/election/October/96/Colorado_race_10-15.html

²³ *“A Big Fight for a Small Pocket of Voters in Colorado.” Nov 4, 2002. Online NewsHour. Pbs.org/newshour/vote2002/races/co. Accessed 12/3/03*

Strickland's biggest mistake was in hesitating to fully sell a pro-environment image. For example, Green Nature referred to Allard's largely anti-environment voting record and Bush's policies including the appointment of Gale Norton as Secretary of the Interior as possibly increasing environmentalist voter turnout in favor of Strickland²⁴. After Allard's portrayal of Strickland as a D.C. insider due to his "lawyer-lobbyist" occupation, Strickland, likely as an attempt to keep himself planted in the perceived ideological middle of environmentalism, pointed out that Gale Norton was also a former lawyer-lobbyist in his firm²⁵. Such an admission and other areas of environmentalism where Strickland appeared to be waffling only aided Allard's attempts to convince strong environmentalists that Strickland wasn't worth the trip to the voting booth.

Libertarian Rick Stanley may also have siphoned off some Strickland support. Stanley was polling around 3% of the vote with Allard and Strickland relatively even throughout much of the campaign. Due to some of his more extreme views, analysts were unsure from whom Stanley was siphoning off votes.

Stanley did demand in his campaign that polluters cease their polluting activities immediately and face judicial penalties including restitution requiring them to pay for clean-up instead of using tax dollars to pay for clean-up. Such policies were probably very attractive to a number of environmentalist voters²⁶. If perceived anti-environmentalism in Allard was going to increase environmentalist voter turnout, Strickland would have needed a much stronger pro-environment stance to stem his loss of environmentalist voters to Stanley.

Al Gore's problem in 2000 was similar. Environmental policy difference between Democrats and environmentalists appeared to be relatively low, but these environmentalists had an even closer option in the form of Ralph Nader.

²⁴ *Election 2002 and the Environment: Colorado Senate Race.*
Greennature.com/article780.html. Accessed 12/3/03

²⁵ "Orgy of Negativity has many voters disgusted." *USA Today.*
Usatoday.com/news/Washington/2002-10-21-colorado-usat
Accessed 12/3/03

²⁶ *Election 2002 and the Environment: Colorado Senate Race.*
Greennature.com/article780.html. Accessed 12/3/03

How Environmental Organizations Participate in Elections

Environmental organizations such as the League of Conservation Voters were very active in the Allard/Strickland campaign, as well as numerous other campaigns across the country.

Campaign Contributions

Between 1990 and 2002 environmental organizations usually contributed \$1-2 million to candidates and parties each election. The vast majority of these contributions went to Democratic candidates. Contributions to Republican candidates are relatively non-existent²⁷, despite the claims of the two biggest environmental organizations with PACs, the LCV and the Sierra Club, to be non-partisan.

For comparison, a frequent opponent of environmentalist agendas, the oil/gas sector, gives most of its campaign contributions to Republican candidates. However, even this sector's relatively low levels of Democratic contributions outpace environmentalist campaign giving. Oil/gas PACs typically gave Democrats over \$5 million²⁸.

Issue Advocacy

Whether environmental organizations simply do not have the money to compete with business and labor by direct giving, or environmentalists have traditionally enjoyed more legislative/electoral success by appealing directly to voters, the brunt of Environmental campaign dollars is increasingly finding its way into the area of issue advocacy.

The LCV spent \$340,000 on its "Vote Environment" campaign in Columbus, Washington D.C., Austin, Nashville, etc. T.V. ads aired with the message "who we elect matters" and "vote environment." National ads on select cable stations also aired in other cities. These ads were part of a \$7.4 million national advertising, polling, and grassroots public education effort urging candidates to address environmental issues and voters to think about candidates' environmental positions²⁹.

²⁷ "Environment: Long-Term Contribution Trends."

www.opensecrets.org/industries/indus.asp?Ind=Q11. Accessed 12/8/03.

²⁸ "Oil and Gas: Long-Term Contribution Trends."

<http://www.opensecrets.org/industries/indus.asp?Ind=E01> Accessed 12/8/03.

²⁹ Lcveducation.org/Programs/Programs.cfm?ID=149&c=24&Type=s

Accessed 12/2/03.

The Sierra Club planned to spend at least \$2 million on House and Senate races in nine different states. The ads began by noting that a particular state “treasures” some combination of “spacious skies,” “wilderness,” “clean air,” or “clean water.” A narrator with a local accent referenced the local candidate and his/her voting record on ANWR, clean water or some other environmental issue³⁰.

Ground Troops

Environmental organizations also have highly effective volunteer and staff troops. This arsenal of people not only reaches voters and candidates and attempts to ignite discussion about their policy objectives, but it is also a form of an in-kind campaign contribution. 500 Sierra Club volunteers worked with voter education projects to reach 1.3 million voters directly by knocking on doors, distributing literature, and phone calling. The Sierra Club political committee made 216 House and Senate endorsements, reached 1.8 million voters and sent 35 staff to work on various campaigns³¹.

GOTV

Perhaps one of the environmental lobby’s most important campaign endeavors is summarized by the LCV “Vote Environment” project: “to encourage environmentalists to vote and to encourage citizens to vote for the environment³².” The first part of this slogan is important because NES study data shows that people who identify themselves as environmentalists are more likely to support increased government spending on the environment, more likely to support increased government efforts on behalf of the environment and they are more likely to take the pro-environmental position on the jobs/standard of living and business regulation tradeoff questions³³.

The LCV GOTV effort included, a Martin Sheen automated phone call to 220,150 voters in 12 states, a Coretta Scott King radio ad played in Atlanta to encourage black

³⁰ Ambinder, Marc. “Environmental Politics are Local: Sierra Club Launches Targeted Political Campaign.” *Washington*. June 24, 2002. ABCNEWS.

³¹ Valtin, Tom. “After the Election: A More Visible Battlefield” Nov 6, 2002. *Sieraclub.org/scoop/midterm_election.asp*. Accessed 12/3/03

³² *Lcveducation.org/Programs/ProgramsList.cfm?c=23*. Accessed 12/2/03.

³³ Berinsky, Adam and Steven Rosenstone “Evaluation of Environmental Policy Items on the 1995 NES Pilot Study. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies, 2001.

women to “vote environment,” 865,000 mailed educational pieces and reminders to vote to members of environmental groups who are infrequent voters, 375,000 voter participation mailers to members of the Save Our Environment coalition, voter education materials sent to Latino and Native American voters in New Mexico and Arizona, and automated phone calls to 8,000 Georgia households from Atlanta mayor Shirley Franklin encouraging them to “vote environment”³⁴.

Conclusion

The environmental lobby’s electoral strategy to date has generally involved supporting Democratic candidates with both direct contribution and issue advocacy dollars on a national scale. The largest environmental organizations with the most money and the well-trained political operatives have chosen to focus on the federal government and federal elected officials. Environmental organizations try to reach consensus on the elected officials and policies that they support. In other words, environmentalists have been trying to define for themselves, a national campaign.

Environmentalists’ strategy of directly appealing to potential voters in targeted areas is a good strategy. Democratic candidates are more likely than Republicans to talk about environmental issues, but due to the structural obstacles within the party and the perceived lack of saliency, environmental organizations will need to continue reaching out to the voters, if they want to raise the intensity of environmental debate in elections.

Additionally, environmental GOTV efforts should be a top priority and these efforts should target young voters. Young voters are a hugely untapped resource for populist sing-issue advocacy groups. Low voter turnout among younger individuals should not be a daunting obstacle to environmentalist GOTV campaigns. Level of education is one of the most positively correlated demographic factors when it comes to likelihood to vote, and the majority of the well-educated youth is conveniently clustered in university settings.

The reliable support for increased environmental spending among the young may also indicate the saliency of the issue for young voters. Since so few people are willing to support decreased spending, status quo spending becomes the defacto option for those

³⁴ Lcveducation.org/Programs/ProgramsList.cfm?c=23. Accessed 12/2/03.

respondents who are ambivalent to environmentalism, but are not anti-federal spending ideologues. Status quo spending support show a positive correlation with age which may indicate ambivalence among the old, but the young show a definite preference for increased spending. GOTV efforts targeting the young would be even more successful in aiding environmental electoral strategies, if environmentalism is truly more salient an issue among the young, than among other age groups.

The focus on federal officials and policies, as opposed to state or local equivalents, has been the consensus among environmentalists as the best allocation of limited resources. While I think a great deal of environmental issues could be more efficiently resolved by focusing resources on state governments, the current environmentalist federal strategy has two main political flaws. The first is that environmentalists try to persuade voters to support or reject a candidate based on that candidate's position on national or global issues. While that strategy may help bring out strongly self-identified environmentalist voters (which is important), swing voters would more likely be swayed by a candidate's local environmental policies. National environmental campaigns need to be more locally tailored to highlight local environmental degradation and a candidate's policies regarding that degradation.

The second flaw is that the public policy mood regarding federal intervention is ever-changing. Some years the public will simply be more hostile towards federal regulations. Republicans are under pressure from their party's special interest groups to reduce industry's federal environmental obligations. In years when the public is less supportive of the federal government, Republicans have a much easier time dismantling environmental legislation and selling that kind of policy to the public.

Environmentalists are also trying to incorporate a national campaign strategy into the major political party that is not currently organizing itself around a national campaign. Democratic candidates are elected based on incumbency and their own individualized campaigns. If environmentalists are going to maintain the Democrats as their party of choice, then again, they need to better tailor their election campaigning to local areas.

For environmentalists to succeed in raising the intensity of environmental debate over the long-term, they need to better target the Republican Party. If Republicans persist in running nationalized campaigns, then they will eventually need to reconsider issues like the environment that enjoy broad based public support. However, the Republican Party reconsideration of its environmental strategy will only be favorable to environmentalists if Democratic opponents force the issue. Environmentalists need to make sure that Democratic candidates clearly highlight environmental messages, so that these candidates' pro-environmentalist images are not undermined by their opponents, as was the case in the Allard/Strickland senate race. In swing states and districts, Republicans should be forced to develop pro-environment positions of their own, rather than simply deflating the positions of their Democratic opponents.

Targeting the Republican Party in this manner will have a positive feedback impact on the Democratic Party as well. More pro-environment Republican opponents will force the Democrats to intensify their environmental support in order to maintain their populist base. A polarized Republican Party is dangerous for the environmental agenda because it forces populist, strategic swing voters to vote Democratic. In this kind of a political world, the Democrats will not need the issue of the environment in order to fight for swing votes. Environmentalists, while they will likely achieve most of their legislative success by aiding Democratic electoral victories, must not ignore the Republican Party.

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