

# Southerners are less trusting, but trust is a factor in environmental cooperation, study shows

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Southerners are generally not as trusting as people who live in other parts of the country, but trusting people are more likely to cooperate in recycling, buying green products and conserving water, a new Baylor University study shows.

"A lot of researchers have reported [trust](#) as kind of a cure-all for protecting the environment through [cooperation](#). Southerners are just as willing, but less trusting," said lead author Kyle Irwin, Ph.D., an assistant professor in Baylor's College of Arts & Sciences.

"The question our study raised was that if trust isn't a catalyst for environmental cooperation for Southerners, what is?"

The study, published in *The Sociological Quarterly*, was based on analysis of a data sample of 650 respondents—238 of them Southerners—from the 2010 General Social Survey, Irwin said. \*("The South" as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau includes 16 states listed below and Washington D.C.)

Previous studies by other researchers have shown that trust is important in working together to protect the environment, but the study by Irwin and co-researcher Nick Berigan, Ph.D., a visiting assistant professor at East Tennessee State University, is the first to look at cultural factors, Irwin said.

"Southerners are relatively close-knit and interact within small and dense networks," he said. "Social spheres often overlap: People that work together may go to church together, attend sports events for their kids. This type of network often produces a lot of solidarity and trust within the 'in group,' but distrust toward outsiders."

Compared to Southerners, non-Southerners have a large number of weak and transient friendships. Social networks in the non-South are considered individualistic, and that promotes trust of people who might be considered outsiders, he said.

"There's been a slew of research on the relationship between trust and environmental protection," Irwin said. "The more trust people have, the more willing they are to make sacrifices to hold up their end to solve problems."

Southerners' cooperation in pro-environment efforts does not hinge on trust as much as non-Southerners' cooperation does.

The new study measured trust with the question of "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?" Among Southern respondents, 24.9 percent of respondents trusted others; 38.7 of non-Southern respondents did so.

The study shows that political views and education are associated with cooperation in the South, with Democrats more willing to make cuts in living standards and more educated people more willing to pay higher taxes to help protect the environment. Also in the South, confidence in the government was associated with greater willingness to pay higher taxes.

Irwin said that further study is needed to draw firm conclusions, but the

research suggests that pro-environmental efforts in the South might target Republicans by assuring them that long-term benefits of conservation outweigh short-term costs and are consistent with their values, rather than mandated by those with liberal political views.

**More information:** \*States listed as Southern by the U.S. Census Bureau include Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia.

Provided by Baylor University

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