

Congressional rift over environment influences public

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American citizens are increasingly divided over the issue of environmental protection and seem to be taking their cue primarily from Congress, finds new research led by a Michigan State University scholar.

The gap between conservatives who oppose [environmental protection](#) and liberals who support it has risen drastically in the past 20 years, a trend seen among lawmakers, activists and – as the study indicates – the general public as well, said sociologist Aaron M. McCright.

The findings echo a June 12 Pew Research Center poll showing that, in general, Republicans and Democrats are more divided long ideological lines than at any point in the past two decades.

When it comes to the environment, McCright, reporting in the journal *Social Science Research*, said the "enormous degree" of polarization has serious implications.

"The situation does not bode well for our nation's ability to deal effectively with the wide range of environmental problems – from local toxics to [global climate change](#) – we currently face," said McCright, associate professor in MSU's Lyman Briggs College and Department of Sociology.

McCright and colleagues examined an annual national survey from 1974 to 2012 that included a question on environmental spending. According to the survey, which included more than 47,000 total respondents, the

divide over environmental protection among citizens who consider themselves conservatives and liberals started growing particularly wide in 1992.

That coincides with the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union. Following that historic event, McCright said, the conservative movement replaced the "Red Scare" with the "Green Scare" and became increasingly hostile toward environmental protection.

McCright said the trend has been amplified by the Tea Party pulling the Republican Party even further to the right.

In 1990, the study found, about 75 percent of self-identified Democrats and Republicans alike in the general public believed the United States spent too little on environmental protection. By 2012, a gulf had formed between party followers, with 68 percent of Democrats believing the country spent too little on the environment, contrasted with only 40 percent of Republicans.

The trend roughly follows the environmental-protection voting patterns of Congress.

"This political polarization," McCright said, "is unlikely to reverse course without noticeable convergence in support of environmental protection among policymakers, with prominent conservatives becoming less anti-environmental in their public statements and voting records."

Provided by Michigan State University

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