

New study shows rural westerners strongly support environmental protections

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Rural voters in the American West have a strong commitment to environmental protections and conservation, according to a new study led by researchers at the University of Wyoming, Duke University and the University of Rhode Island.

This finding holds true even when protections may negatively impact economic growth, although voters expressed serious reservations about governmental oversight.

The study analyzed data collected through a poll of over 1,800 voters nationwide as well as findings from focus groups with voters in eight Western states. Researchers compared the attitudes of rural and urban voters to understand differences and common ground in environmental policy preferences.

The study's results were recently published in a report, titled "Attitudes of Rural Westerners on the Environment and Conservation." The report's co-authors are Robert Bonnie, executive in residence in the Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions at Duke University; Drew Bennett, the MacMillan Professor of Practice in the UW Haub School of Environment and Natural Resources; Emily Pechar Diamond, an assistant professor of communication studies at the University of Rhode Island; and Elizabeth Rowe, a Master of Environmental Management degree candidate in the Nicholas School of the Environment at Duke University.

Polling data show urban and rural voters generally agreed about the importance of protecting the environment, with 73 percent of rural Western voters and 75 percent of urban or suburban voters saying environmental and conservation issues were very or pretty important to them personally.

However, urban and rural voters were divided when asked about their attitudes regarding the role of government regulation to protect the environment, with only 25 percent of rural Western voters agreeing that there needs to be more governmental oversight versus 43 percent of urban voters.

"These results demonstrate that there is broad support for [environmental protections](#) and conservation in the rural West and nationally," Bennett says. "The urban/rural divide we hear about is not a divide over who cares more about the environment, but about the federal government's role and effectiveness of oversight."

Notably, rural Western voters are more likely to support U.S. action on [climate change](#) than rural voters nationally.

"Climate change is a polarizing issue in rural America, but there is a path forward that can win rural support," says Bonnie, the project's lead investigator. "Our study shows that engagement and collaboration with rural stakeholders will be important to winning over rural support."

While the authors admit there is no quick fix to bridging the urban/rural divide, they recommend [natural resource](#) agencies, environmentalists and conservation groups engage more with rural communities impacted by environmental policies. The authors also suggest that environmental policies are more likely to gain support in the West when there are local partnerships and opportunities for collaboration with rural stakeholders.

"Rural Westerners have a strong attachment to where they live and are motivated to conserve their local environments for future generations," Bennett adds. "A key finding from this research is that rural stakeholders want to ensure they have a voice in helping to shape environmental policies that impact their communities."

More information: Attitudes of Rural Westerners on the Environment and Conservation. [nicholasinstitute.duke.edu/pub ... ent-and-conservation](https://nicholasinstitute.duke.edu/publications/attitudes-of-rural-westerners-on-the-environment-and-conservation)

Provided by University of Wyoming

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