

Building environmental policy on America's support for a clean environment

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Listening to some politicians on the campaign trail, it's easy to assume that most Americans are against protecting the environment and that government should simply let the market regulate itself. For decades the Gallup poll has posed a question about the false trade-off between economic growth and environmental protection.

Even though the question is flawed, it indicates that, with few exceptions, the public has prioritized environmental quality over growing the economy for decades. From 1985 to 2000, about 60-70% favored environmental protection and 30% favored [economic growth](#). From 2011 to 2013, a small majority favored economic development, but since 2016, a majority has again favored environmental protection.

In the most recent poll in early 2023, 52% favored protecting the environment to 42% who favored economic growth. In the same poll, about 56% of the public responded that the government was doing too little to protect the environment and 18% thought it was doing too much. Gallup also reported that 60% of Americans believed that global warming has already begun compared to 12% who think it will never happen.

Similarly, a recent high-quality survey by the [Pew Research Center](#) found in a "survey of 10,329 U.S. adults conducted May 30 to June 4, 2023...[that] 74% of Americans say they support the country's participation in international efforts to reduce the effects of climate change...67% of U.S. adults prioritize the development of alternative energy sources such as wind, solar and hydrogen power over increasing the production of fossil fuel energy sources."

"By sizable margins, Americans support a number of specific policy proposals aimed at reducing the effects of climate change through targeting [greenhouse gas emissions](#) and carbon in the atmosphere...Overwhelming majorities support planting about a trillion trees around the world to absorb carbon emissions (89%) and requiring oil and gas companies to seal methane gas leaks from oil wells (85%)...76% favor providing a tax credit to businesses that develop carbon capture technologies and 70% support taxing corporations based on their carbon emissions...61% favor requiring power plants to eliminate all [carbon emissions](#) by the year 2040."

While the public favored taking steps to develop renewable energy, they opposed efforts to ban all fossil fuels and the internal combustion engine. The survey also found that Republicans tended to be more positive about fossil fuels, while Democrats favored renewable energy. Young people are more concerned about the environment than [older people](#), and their concern is growing.

According to the March 2023 [Harvard Youth Poll](#) of over 2,000 18–29-year-olds, conducted by the Kennedy School of Government's Institute of Politics, 50% of respondents believed that "government should do more to curb climate change, even at the expense of economic growth." This 50% result should be compared to the 29% who favored enhanced [climate policy](#) back in 2013.

Americans understand the dangers of environmental pollution but are deeply suspicious of public policies that compel changes in the behavior of the broad public. My view of this is that regulatory rules and standards are required, but the methods of achieving those standards should focus on positive incentives rather than negative disincentives.

People should be motivated to protect the environment, not forced to do so. The strategy of shaming individuals or institutions for degrading the environment is not as effective as policies that reward actions that protect the environment. There is also a tendency of many environmental advocates to term [environmental damage](#) an "[existential threat](#)" when, for some people, there are more immediate threats to existence, such as homelessness, hunger, drug addiction, or threats of gang violence.

A sense of perspective is needed. Is global warming more of a danger than nuclear terror? Humankind faces many dangers, and the public faces competing demands for their attention and support.

Despite majority support for environmental protection, Republican

support for the environment trends lower than the support of Democrats. Coupled with unrepresentative elements of our political system like gerrymandering, the electoral college, and the U.S. Senate and its filibuster rule, overwhelming public opinion majorities are often required to impact public policy.

Anti-environmental views, while often cloaked in the language of freedom and the glory of the market, are typically reflections of short-term economic interests flexing their political muscle. They are also common in Republican primary campaigns in deep red states where disinformation about environmental policy or renewable energy technology and economics is far too common.

And yet the widespread concern in America's culture for the wellness and health of family and friends leads to a focus on fitness and diet and directly to demands for [clean water](#), air, and food free of toxics. The goal is not a pristine environment, but one that enables people to remain healthy. Some people who oppose environmental protection see it as a luxury item or as peripheral to the goal of producing and accumulating wealth.

Early efforts at environmental protection required that we retrofit cars with catalytic converters or place stack scrubbers on [power plants](#). This reduced pollution but added cost. In the 1970s, the connection of air pollution to public health was not yet understood, and most saw the environment as an aesthetic issue.

However, the connection of air pollution to asthma and lung cancer and toxic waste to cancer and other diseases transformed the environment from an aesthetic issue to an issue of public health. Technological innovations such as solar power, batteries, and electric vehicles enabled lower pollution to also become integral to product design, resulting in less pollution, better products, and lower rather than higher costs.

Many, although not all, understand the connection of environmental protection to economic growth. The trade-off question that Gallup has used for decades is a false trade-off. Pollution is a form of waste, and the impact of pollution is far from cost-free. Pollution is a drag on economic development, and a clean environment facilitates [economic development](#).

Pollution increases costs due to the economic impact of extreme weather events, the cost of health care, losses of production, elimination of valuable ecological services and a wide variety of additional costly impacts. The engineering field of industrial ecology demonstrates the cost advantages of closed-system production.

Careful consideration of environmental risk is one element of a sound analysis of financial risk. Economic development sometimes ignores environmental impact because polluters assume that someone else will pay the cost of clean-up. However, in a world of instant and inexpensive communication and widespread ease of observation, it has become relatively easy to connect environmental pollution to environmental impact and cost.

It is true that some corporations, such as the owners of petrochemical plants in Louisiana's Cancer Alley, use political influence to dodge responsibility for the costs of environmental clean-up and impact. I believe with exposure, companies are increasingly required to pay the costs of impact. More importantly, investors are starting to ask questions about the risk of incurring costs due to environmental impact. This, too, indicates that the trade-off between environmental protection and economic growth is losing credibility in financial markets.

Support for environmental protection is based on the health and economic costs of environmental pollution. The awareness of these costs has grown over the past several decades. The financial benefits of

pollution have proven to be short-term or even nonexistent. There is a part of our culture which insists that pollution must simply be tolerated for the economic benefits it brings.

Indoor air pollution is a case in point. When former NYC Mayor Mike Bloomberg proposed banning smoking from restaurants and bars, the owners of those establishments complained bitterly that he would put them out of business. Imagine their surprise when they found that business generally improved after the smoking ban. It turned out that a lot of people didn't enjoy the smoke in some establishments and either stayed home or took their business to places that banned smoking. The economic value of clean air was as clear as the air itself.

Despite the widespread support for environmental protection, many environmental initiatives are opposed politically. Some of this is due to our polarized political process and the ideological extremes it embodies. Some opposition results from the framing of issues by environmentalists and their tendency to define environmental policy debates as a battle between good and evil.

To develop a winning strategy promoting [environmental protection](#), we should look at our many success stories and seek to imitate them. Our air and water are cleaner today than they were when EPA was first empowered to set national environmental standards in the early 1970s. We accepted gradual improvement, provided federal subsidies, and focused on developing new technologies to improve [environmental quality](#). Policy was based on widely shared values.

We built our air [pollution](#) policy on a simple fact that I often repeat: Everyone likes to breathe—we sort of get used to it.

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