

Conservative governments protect more land while socialists and nationalists label more species as 'threatened'

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The dire state of biodiversity across the globe suggests that not all governments are willing to act decisively to protect nature. Why is that

the case, and is a country's political ideology a factor?

Political ideology is a set of beliefs used as the fundamental basis for [political decisions](#). Each country sits somewhere along a [spectrum](#) that spans conservative, nationalist and socialist ideologies (among others). This may vary, based on what party is in power at the time.

Our [latest paper](#) studied the political ideology of governments in 165 nations. We then examined the country's threatened species numbers and its "protected estate"—land set aside for [national parks](#) and reserves.

We found that conservative ideology increases the likelihood of having more protected areas. Socialist and nationalist ideologies increase the number of threatened animals. This suggests that political ideologies on either the left or right may affect biodiversity.

Politics playing out in decision-making

The political ideology of a government influences its actions in different ways.

Conservative ideology promotes the value of traditional institutions and practices. It is strongly linked to capitalism and letting market forces operate freely. Under this way of thinking, nature is largely valued in economic terms.

A conservative government may promote protected areas for their economic value—because these create opportunities for money-making ventures such as ecotourism or biodiversity offsetting schemes.

Payments for [ecosystem services](#) have flourished in socially conservative countries such as [Brazil](#).

Socialist ideology advocates that property and resources should be owned by the community as a whole. Socialist governments are more likely to take a human-centered approach, emphasizing the value of nature to people. This may include cultural value, human health benefits and intergenerational equity.

But socialist governments often improve the conditions of their people through industrial development and heavy use of natural resources. This might explain why these countries tend to have high numbers of threatened species. They also face challenges in establishing and maintaining effective protected areas.

Nationalist ideology involves support for one's own nation and its interests. It connects to nature by linking [individual species](#) and places with [national identity](#) and territorial security.

Nationalism often emphasizes individuals and autonomy. The United States is considered strongly nationalist. For example, it [rejected the UN Convention on Biological Diversity](#) because it did not meet with its national objectives.

Global environmental issues often require diplomatic and economic cooperation between nations through sharing responsibility, knowledge and resources. So nationalist governments may be less likely to participate in cross-border conservation actions such as [Peace Parks](#).

With all this in mind, we wanted to know whether a nation's political ideology and biodiversity outcomes were linked.

What we did

First, we examined the [total number of threatened animals](#) per country, compared with the overall number of animals. Next, we checked what

proportion of a country's land and inland water was [protected](#).

Then we classified the [ideology of national governments](#) as either nationalist, conservative or socialist. We chose to focus on these three ideologies in keeping with the literature from previous research. Recognizing that government decisions typically take about 15 years to flow through to environmental outcomes, we took data on national governments from 2005–09.

The ideologies followed by any given nation are not mutually exclusive—one country can have elements of them all. The information in the ideology database is based on the opinions of several experts. Their opinions can differ. So our models included results for all three ideologies at once.

Australia, for example, scored higher for conservatism and nationalism than socialism. China, on the other hand, was strongly socialist, slightly nationalist, and not conservative at all.

We also considered other important factors, such as how strongly a country was viewed as democratic, the degree of inequality, and the size of the economy.

Finally, we ran a series of computer models. One, on threatened animals, measured the physical threat to biodiversity. The other, on protected areas, measured national commitment to reducing biodiversity loss.

What we found

Nationalist

We found that the number of threatened species increased in countries where nationalism is prevalent—but, surprisingly, protected areas were

unaffected. New Zealand, Malaysia and Sri Lanka are considered strongly nationalistic.

Marketing conservation to nationalist governments and societies might focus on the importance of national natural heritage values. For example, the US is proud of its [bald eagle](#), while New Zealand is synonymous with kiwis.

National sporting teams often take on the names of iconic wildlife, such as the Australian Wallabies or the [Indomitable Lions](#) of Cameroon.

Socialist

Prominent socialist ideology was related to significantly more threatened species, and slightly more protected areas. China and Belarus, for example, were classed as socialist. So their protected area networks suffer from problems historically leveled at socialist regimes, such as poor planning and enforcement, which often leads to less than ideal [conservation outcomes](#).

Conservative

Conservative ideology was the most strongly associated with increased protected area estate. However, the numbers of threatened species also increased under these governments.

In our study, Australia's political ideology was mixed but scored higher for conservatism and nationalism compared with socialism. So we found that Australia's approach to conservation actions tends to sit in the center of available options. The proportion of threatened species is still high (more than 12% of Australia's species are threatened).

In Australia, shades of nationalism can be seen in promoting individual iconic [species](#) such as koalas. And conservatism in the use of [offsetting](#) to "balance" the impacts of developments.

What this means

Our work builds on previous research that found fair and transparent [governance](#), [inequality](#) between rich and poor, and the strength of a country's [democracy](#) are important in explaining conservation success.

Indeed, our research also found stronger democracies, where elections are widely viewed as free and transparent, had more protected areas. But as we outline above, national political ideology also has an influence. By understanding this, we hope conservation advocates can tailor their messages to target the value systems of a government to improve conservation outcomes.

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