

WHAT DO AMERICANS REALLY THINK ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT?

By Everett C. Ladd

Polling on environmental issues — now getting renewed attention as part of the Earth Day observance — gives us a vivid reminder that poll results can as readily confuse as clarify.

For a quarter-century, much survey research on environmental issues has proceeded at least implicitly from the assumption that the public sees tension between its economic interests and nonmaterialistic environmental commitments. But this notion has been amply contradicted by historical experience. As the US has grown wealthier, Americans have come to expect more in virtually all areas of their material existence. Calls for cleaner air and water, more parklands, the preservation of wildlife, etc. are part of a general progression.

Environmentalism was much stronger at the time of Theodore Roosevelt early in this century than it had been 50-70 years earlier. Environmental devastation had in many regards reached its most severe levels in the mid-19th century — with massive deforestation and the destruction of wildlife — but that poorer farming society couldn't see any alternative. Later industrialization produced its own environmental problems, but it also created the resources that encouraged demands for conservation.

Despite this experience, contemporary polling on environmental matters often pushes the public to choose between economic well-being and an attractive environment. Last December, for instance, the Los Angeles Times poll asked respondents whether they favore protecting the environment “even if that means som people will lose their jobs and government will have to spend a great deal of money,” or favored jobs and an expanding economy “even if that means some destruction of the environment.”

In fact, every time it has been given a chance the public says that with proper effort the US can avoid so unpalatable a choice. Last December, Opinion Dynamics put the matter this way: “Some people say that...to protect the environment we are going to have to make sacrifices and accept a lower standard of living, [while others say] that we can have both continued economic growth and a cleaner environment.” About two-thirds associated themselves with the latter view.

Americans' commitment to the environment is genuine and substantial. And, just as we expect to pay for good housing and medical care, so we're prepared to pay for clean air and water. Yet polls continue to “discover” the latter, as though it's somehow surprising.

The public is not prepared, however, to pay any price for greater environmental protection. The New York Times recently reported that its latest poll found that “74% said that protecting the environment is so important that requirements and standards cannot be too high, and environmental improvements must be made regardless of cost.” The

JOBS v. ENVIRONMENT		-- OR --	DO BOTH	
<p>Are you in favor of protecting the environment even if that means some people will lose their jobs and the government will have to spend a great deal of money....or are you in favor of providing more jobs and expanding the economy even if that means some destruction of the environment?</p>			<p>Some people say that in order to protect the environment we are going to have to make sacrifices and accept a lower standard of living. Other people say that we can have both continued economic growth and a cleaner environment. ...which do you think is more likely to be true?</p>	
Environment	65%		Have both	64%
Both (vol.)	5%		Accept slower	
Economy	29%		economic growth	36%
<p>Source: Survey by the Los Angeles Times, December 16-20, 1989.</p>			<p>Source: Survey by Opinion Dynamics Corporation, December 12-18, 1989.</p>	

POLLUTION'S WORSE		-- BUT --	SOME PROGRESS	
Now for the country as a whole — is pollution a serious problem that's getting worse, or a problem, but one that is not so serious, or not much of a problem?			How much progress have we made in dealing with environmental problems in this country over the last 20 years ...a great deal...only some...or hardly any...?	
Getting worse	86%		Great deal	14%
Not so serious	11%		Only some	64%
Not much of a problem	3%		Hardly any	21%
Source: Survey by CBS News/ New York Times, March 30-April 2, 1990.			Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization, April 5-8, 1990.	

Times failed to report other data which make clear that this response must be understood not literally but as a symbolic commitment to a goal.

When, last October, Gallup asked, "Would you be willing to pay \$200 more taxes each year to increase federal spending for reducing air pollution?," 71% said no. In December 1989, Opinion Dynamics found a majority opposed to a 25 cent a gallon gas tax "that would be used to control pollution." On the other hand, the latter survey found 76% saying they might be willing "to pay an extra \$50 in taxes" to solve air pollution problems.

Poll reporting often errs by suggesting that public opinion on environmental matters is single-dimensional, or that poll findings on each dimension of what is in fact a complex mix of perceptions and values should be read as though it stood alone. In a recent release of a Connecticut Poll conducted, I should acknowledge, by an organization I direct, it was reported that the Connecticut public is deeply troubled because it sees environmental problems actually worsening. The New York Times offered the same assessment in an Earth Day poll story: "Eighty-four percent of Americans say pollution is a serious national problem that is getting worse...." If, in fact, the public believes the country is still going downhill environmentally, after 20 years of major effort and heavy expenditures, that's political dynamite.

But all sorts of other poll data make clear that the above answers reflect more a general anxiety Americans seem always to feel about important institutions and values — including, along with the environment, work, religion, and the family — than the literal judgment that things are sliding. For example, a Gallup survey done two weeks ago found 77% saying the US has made some progress on environmental problems over the last 20 years, only 21% that it has made "hardly any progress at all."

Two such contradictory findings — 84% opining that pollution is getting worse, and 77% believing at least some progress is being made — should have set off loud alarms: Both can't be literally true.

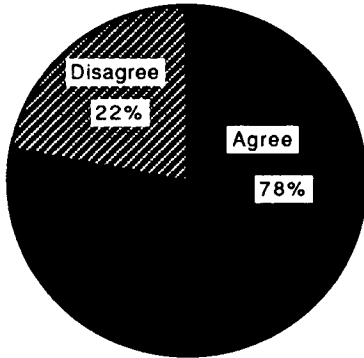
Many Americans are now doing things individually to improve the environment, such as recycling newspapers and bottles. They will support more governmental spending for this end. They want further progress on environmental matters and firmly reject counsels of complacency. But, a careful reading of available research shows, the public's commitments to environmentalism are hardly unlimited, or made without regard to competing values, or based on the mistaken notion that the substantial efforts of the past two decades have been a sham.

A shorter version of this piece was published in the Christian Science Monitor, April 20, 1990.

**SPENDING FOR THE ENVIRONMENT:
A MORE COMPLEX STORY**

Affirming the Goal

1.

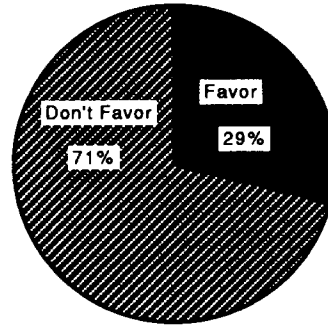


1. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Protecting the environment is so important that requirements and standards cannot be too high and continuing environmental improvements must be made REGARDLESS of cost.

Source: Survey by CBS News/
New York Times, March 30-April 2, 1990.

Balancing Contending Needs

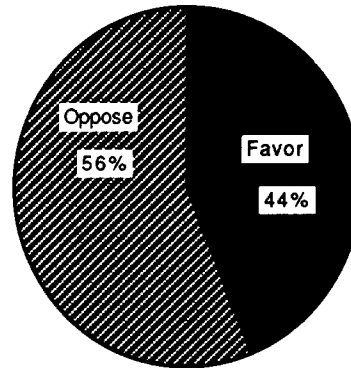
2.



2. ...Would you be willing to pay \$200 more in taxes each year to increase federal spending for... reducing air pollution?

Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization,
October 5-8, 1989.

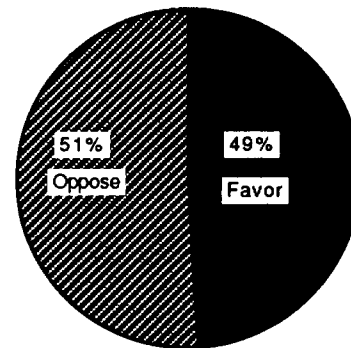
3.



3. ...[Would you] strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose each of these measures....A 25 cent per gallon gasoline tax that would be used to control pollution"

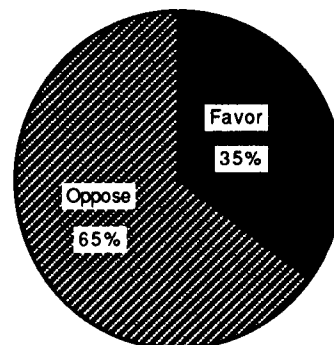
Source: Survey by Opinion Dynamics
Corporation, December 12-18, 1989.

4a.



4. Everyone wants a clean environment... but...at what cost or inconvenience.... [Would you] favor or oppose...a. A 20 cent per gallon increase in the price of gasoline for cleaner-burning alternative fuels

4b.



b. [Would you favor or oppose...]Close pollution producing factories which would result in the loss of jobs?

Source: Survey by NBC News/Wall
Street Journal, April 1990.