

# An Enduring Concern

By Riley E. Dunlap

Many issues vie for a prominent place on America's social and political agenda, but few succeed in attaining one. Even fewer manage to stay there for decades. Since bursting onto the scene with the celebration of our nation's first "Earth Day" in 1970, it is clear that the environment has become one of these select few.

In 1973, the National Opinion Research Center began asking national samples if they thought our nation was spending too much, too little or about the right amount on improving and protecting the environment, and has

continued to do so regularly in each General Social Survey. From the outset, Americans have been far more likely to say too little rather than too much, with the pro-environment response enjoying a 54-percentage point advantage in 1973 (see Figure 1). The gap narrowed throughout the 1970s, reaching a low of 33 points in 1980.

However, the Reagan administration's perceived assault on environmental regulations triggered a reversal of the decline, and growing majorities responded "too little" throughout the 1980s. By 1990 more spending en-

joyed a commanding 67-point advantage over reduced spending. The '90s brought a significant decline, then a modest recovery in support for environmental spending, and by 2000 this position was ahead by 55 points.

A fairly similar trend emerges with an item the Roper organization began using in 1973 that focuses clearly on the role of government by asking respondents if they thought environmental protection laws and regulations had gone too far, not far enough, or struck about the right balance. As shown in Figure 2,



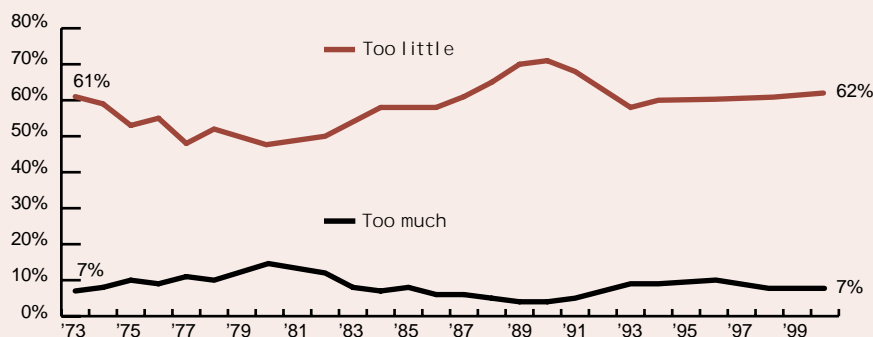
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*Riley E. Dunlap recently resigned as Boeing Distinguished Professor of Environmental Sociology at Washington State University to accept the Donner Professorship at Åbo Akademi (the Swedish-speaking university) in Turku, Finland. This article extends his analysis of public opinion on the environment through the early 1990s reported in the 1995 edition of *Environmental Politics and Policy*, edited by James P. Lester.*

Figure 1  
**Willing to Invest**

**Question:**

...[A]re we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on improving and protecting the environment?



Source: Surveys by National Opinion Research Center-General Social Survey, latest that of February 1-June 25, 2000.

	Too little	Too much
1973	61%	7%
1974	59	8
1975	53	10
1976	55	9
1977	48	11
1978	52	10
1980	48	15
1982	50	12
1983	54	8
1984	58	7
1985	58	8
1986	58	6
1987	61	6
1988	65	5
1989	70	4
1990	71	4
1991	68	5
1993	58	9
1994	60	9
1996	60	10
1998	61	7
2000	62	7

Americans have always been more likely to think environmental laws and regulations haven't gone far enough than that they have gone too far, although support for stronger laws enjoyed only a small to modest advantage until the early 1980s.

However, by 1983 tougher laws held a strong plurality over weaker ones, and when Roper next used the item in 1989, support had become the majority view. After peaking in 1992, the gap narrowed considerably—in 2001 it stood at 23 percentage points.

Despite these findings, some politicians continue to question the costs of environmental programs. Although it states an extreme view that “continuing environmental improvements must be made regardless of cost,” an item used sporadically in CBS News/*New York Times* polls since 1981 has received majority agreement since 1983 (see Figure 3). At that time, the gap between agree and disagree was 24 percentage points. It grew quickly and peaked in 1989 at 56 points, and then declined throughout the 1990s, experiencing a modest increase in 2001,

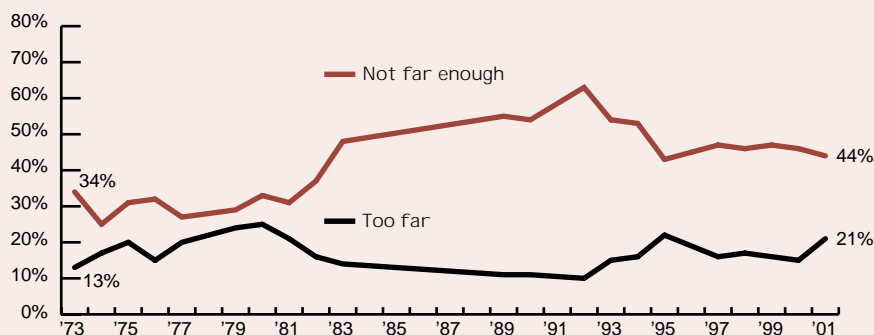
and then dropping to only 17 points in the most recent (January 2002) poll, taken after last year's terrorist attacks.

A final trend item, used only once in the 1980s, has yielded similar results, as Gallup has consistently found majorities of Americans saying priority should be given to environmental protection over economic growth (see Figure 4). The sizable 33-point advantage protection had over growth in 1984 grew substantially and peaked in 1990 at 52 points. It quickly declined, only to rebound in the late '90s before the

Figure 2  
**Tipping the Scales**

**Question:**

...At the present time, do you think environmental protection laws and regulations have gone too far, or not far enough, or have struck about the right balance?



Source: Surveys by the Roper Organization, latest that of September 2001.

	Not far enough	Too far
1973	34%	13%
1974	25	17
1975	31	20
1976	32	15
1977	27	20
1979	29	24
1980	33	25
1981	31	21
1982	37	16
1983	48	14
1989	55	11
1990	54	11
1992	63	10
1993	54	15
1994	53	16
1995	43	22
1996	45	19
1997	47	16
1998	46	17
1999	47	16
2000	46	15
2001	44	21

recent (post-9/11) substantial decline to only 18 points in 2002.

Taken together, the results for these four trend items yield a relatively consistent picture of the broad contours of public support for environmental protection over the past two to three decades, and the pattern is especially consistent for the past decade.

Majorities have generally expressed support for environmental protection by endorsing more spending, opposing

appears to be worsening. An endless variety of new problems, ranging from local toxic contamination and urban sprawl to global threats such as ozone depletion and climate change, have emerged and blended together to create a sense of continual deterioration.

Consider, for example, findings from a March 2002 Gallup poll. Slightly over half (52%) of the sample rated our environment as only fair or poor versus excellent or good (47%), and 54% felt it was getting worse while 40% thought it was getting better. Only 27% be-

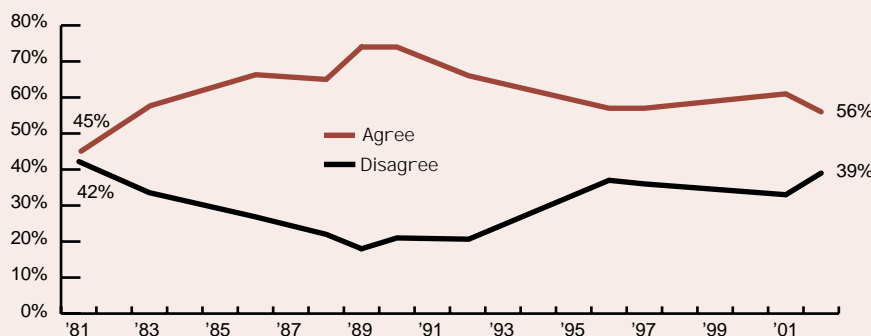
and activists—has likely played a key role in generating sustained public support for continued environmental protection. Nonetheless, we have seen substantial variation, ranging from weak to strong majorities, in levels of support over the years. What seems to account for these fluctuations?

The explanation most commonly offered is economic conditions, as it is widely assumed that Americans are more willing to support environmental protection during good economic times. Indeed, in a 1995 article in

Figure 3  
**Worth the Cost**

**Question:**

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: Surveys by CBS News/*New York Times*, latest that of January 21-24, 2002.

weaker laws and regulations, and choosing environmental protection over economic growth. That such views are expressed after more than three decades of substantial government action and spending on the environment is impressive and demonstrates that environmental quality has become an enduring concern of Americans.

Why has environment survived on the nation's agenda when most issues enjoy only a short stay? The most likely reason is that despite progress in cleaning up air and water pollution in recent decades, the condition of the environment still

lied we had made a great deal of progress in dealing with environmental problems in the past few decades, while 60% said we had made only some progress and 12% hardly any progress at all. Finally, only 17% had a great deal of optimism that we would have our environmental problems well under control in twenty years, less than the 21% who had hardly any (61% expressed some optimism).

In short, a neverending supply of environmental problems—publicized by media, with encouragement from environmental scientists

*Social Science Quarterly*, Euel Elliott, James L. Regens and Barry J. Seldon demonstrated a relationship between support for additional spending on environmental protection, as measured by the NORC item, and per capita income. We can see the effect of deteriorating economic conditions in both the NORC and Roper results in the late 1970s.

Elliott, Regens and Seldon also documented a significant impact of changes in media coverage (as measured by the number of stories published in *The New York Times*) on support for envi-

ronmental protection, another widely viewed influence on public concern. The significance of media attention, stimulated by the mobilization activities of environmentalists, is apparent in the unprecedented peak in support for environmental protection around the time of the highly visible twentieth Earth Day celebration in 1990, when the economy was certainly not strong.

While these factors both undoubtedly contribute to the ups and downs of public support for environmental protection, however, another seldom receives due credit. Years ago, polling pioneer Burns Roper explained the discrepancy between Americans' high level of concern and their modest levels of personal action on behalf of the environment by arguing that the public sees environmental problems as "institutional," caused primarily by industry and requiring government action for solution, and is skeptical of the efficacy of voluntary individual behavior.

His argument can be extended to help account for variations in support for

environmental protection. Because Americans expect their government to protect the environment, its perceived performance in this regard (especially at the federal level) has a significant effect on the level of concern.

When it becomes apparent that the federal government is not committed to environmental protection, Americans tend to become more concerned, and they express their concern not only to pollsters but via political actions, like contacting officials and contributing to environmental organizations. Conversely, and counterintuitively, when Americans are confident their leaders are committed to environmental protection, their level of personal responsibility declines, and so do their expressions of support.

The long-term trends demonstrate this effect. The Carter administration was seen as exceptionally pro-environment due to its appointment of visible activists in high-level positions, and environmental concern declined considerably from 1977 through 1980.

Then the Reagan administration (especially in its first term) was viewed as staunchly anti-environmental, and by 1982 public support for protection reversed course and began a steady upward climb that continued (bolstered by increasing media attention to environmental issues) through the early 1990s.

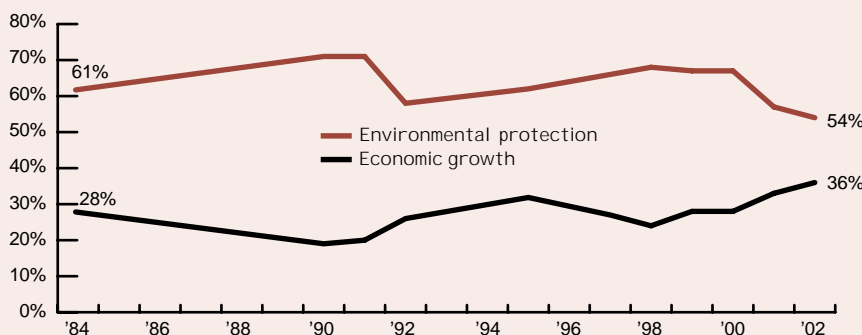
The inauguration of the Clinton administration, with Vice President Al Gore the most visible pro-environmental politician in our nation's history, was followed by a downturn in concern documented in all four items, despite good economic conditions. Finally, the Republican takeover of Congress in 1995 led to a flood of anti-environmental initiatives that eventually attracted considerable media attention, and a modest upturn occurred by the end of the decade.

Given this historical context, the nation seemed ripe for a resurgence in concern when George W. Bush—strongly opposed by environmentalists who campaigned for Gore—assumed office, especially

Figure 4  
**Choice Is Clear**

**Question:**

With which one of these statements about the environment and the economy do you most agree—protection of the environment should be given priority, even at the risk of curbing economic growth, or economic growth should be given priority, even if the environment suffers to some extent?



Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization, latest that of March 4-7, 2002.

when his administration took a series of early actions that rivaled Reagan's assault on environmental programs two decades earlier.

Judging from the most recent Gallup and CBS News/*New York Times* polls, however, this clearly has not occurred. Last year's terrorist attacks caused national security to push virtually all other issues into the background and enabled a president who assumed office by the narrowest of margins to gain unprecedented levels of approval.

Despite major efforts by organized environmentalists, the Bush administration's environmental policies have yet to generate a discernible backlash among the public. This is not to say they have gone unnoticed. For example, a Harris/*Time*/CNN poll in July 2001 found President Bush's approval rating on the environment to be quite low relative to other policy areas, with 42% saying he was doing a good job of handling the environment and 46% a poor job. (His rating was lower only on energy policy.)

Further, majorities consistently oppose the administration's proposal to allow oil exploration in the Arctic National Wildlife Reserve, and such opposition is a resource to congressional Democrats in negotiations over a national energy policy. Nonetheless, there has been no evidence that the president's overall popularity has yet suffered as a result.

Public support for environmental protection lags when environmental issues are not prominent, and along with virtually all other is-

—including the economy—the environment has declined in prominence with the war on terrorism. Nonetheless, in view of the staying power of environmental issues for over three decades now, I think it is reasonable to assume that the Bush administration's

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policies will eventually stimulate an upturn in public support for environmental protection.

Perhaps more important, there is reason to believe environmental issues will play at least a moderately important role in the upcoming election.

For this to happen, three conditions must hold: first, environment must be a salient issue, one that is on the minds of voters; second, voters must perceive clear differences between candidates and parties; and third, voters must feel strongly enough about the environment to weigh it heavily when making their choices.

The second condition seems the most easily met at present, as over the past couple of decades the Republican Party has increasingly been seen as the “anti-environment” party. For example, a January 2002 ABC News/*Washington Post* poll found Democrats enjoying a two to one advantage over Republicans (59% versus 29%) as the political party Americans trusted to do a better job of protecting the environment.

In terms of the third condition, exit polls from the 2000 election suggest that a significant minority of voters

appears to care strongly enough about environmental issues to make them a major consideration when choosing among candidates. In the *Los Angeles Times* national exit poll, for example, the environment was chosen by 10% of the voters as one of the two most important issues in deciding how to vote, ranking seventh out of eleven issues—ahead of health care, Medicare and prescription drugs, the budget surplus, and foreign affairs.

While it would be unrealistic to expect environmental concerns to outweigh traditional partisan loyalties, they may easily affect the choices of independents and those with weak party ties.

To a considerable degree, then, it appears that the crucial factor is whether or not environmentalists and environment-friendly politicians can increase the salience of environmental issues, moving them back into the spotlight. While visible problems will provide a vehicle for doing so in many local and congressional races, the situation is more complex at the national level, pending the absence of a highly publicized environmental catastrophe.

The current priority on national security and a questionable economy poses a major hurdle to environmentalists, but the Bush administration and its congressional allies may make the task less onerous if they continue to push what is widely seen as an anti-environmental agenda. Americans have shown a long-term commitment to environmental protection, and this commitment is likely to be strengthened if the federal government is seen as not fulfilling its responsibilities in this regard.