



Fading Green

By Steven F. Hayward

According to conventional wisdom and public opinion polls, the environment is a wedge issue strongly favoring Democrats over Republicans. Yet there is little evidence that the issue figured significantly in recent elections. Probing into opinion surveys on the environment suggests that despite vigorous public supports for environmental protection, the environment is a decisive issue for only a tiny segment of the electorate.

The inimitable Dick Morris, who predicted a Democratic sweep the weekend before the November election, now argues that Democrats should push environmental issues as a means of regaining the political initiative. He contends that Al Gore would have won the 2000 presidential election if he had pushed environmental issues harder. Morris, the architect of Bill Clinton's political revival following the 1994 election, offers political perceptions that should not be dismissed lightly. But it is far from clear that the environment has such power.

Morris is merely following conventional wisdom that the environment is an albatross for Republicans. A typically splashy media analysis appeared in *USA Today* in July: "Some See Environment as GOP Weakness."¹ Public opinion polls show that Democrats hold a huge advantage over Republicans as the party best able to protect the environment—often as high as three to one.²

But the environment seems to play an indiscernible role in the outcome of national elections. In the recent midterm election, the Sierra Club and the League of Conservation Voters spent

heavily on independent ads regarding issues in several hotly contested Senate races (especially against John Sununu in New Hampshire), and lost in nearly every case.³ The League of Conservation Voters is famous for its dirty dozen hit list; this year five of the twelve candidates on that list lost, but only two were in close races (John Thune in South Dakota, and Rep. George Gekas in Pennsylvania).⁴ Dirty dozen honorees who won Senate races include Sununu, Saxby Chambliss, Jim Talent, and incumbent Wayne Allard. Meanwhile, three of the LCV's sixteen environmental champions were defeated, including two incumbents (Max Cleland in the Senate and Bill Luther in the House). Eighteen other LCV-endorsed candidates—including one House incumbent (Connie Morella)—lost.

The Sierra Club fared little better. It endorsed nineteen Senate candidates: seven won, but only one of the seven (Tim Johnson in South Dakota) ran in a contested race. The club's record in close contests was one for six. In the House the Sierra Club primarily endorsed safe incumbents; six club-endorsed incumbents lost, while four of its endorsed challengers won.⁵

This year's ballot listed few major environment-related initiatives. The most high-profile environmental ballot initiative in the nation—Oregon's proposal to require labeling of genetically modified foods—was crushed 70 percent to 30. The defeat continues a trend evident in the past several election cycles. Previous high-profile environmental ballot measures—starting with California's "big green" initiative in 1990 and several forest and land conservation measures throughout the country in the past decade—were heavy

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losers. Environmentalists have nearly abandoned sponsoring ambitious statewide initiatives.

The one exception to the national trend is measures on local land planning and conservation. The Trust for Public Land tallied 188 conservation measures appearing on the ballot in thirty-four states; 139 of those measures passed (74 percent), with a commitment of \$2.9 billion, primarily in bond funds.⁶ The secret to success seems to be the local focus; more parkland and open space in one's backyard is popular. But at the same time several local antigrowth initiatives in California failed, even in areas such as Marin and Sonoma Counties, typically hotbeds of antigrowth sentiment.

Inside the Surveys

Understanding how the environment cuts at the ballot box requires a closer look at opinion surveys. Although Democrats enjoy a great advantage on the issue, the environment has low salience along voters. In open-ended surveys, not even 5 percent of voters typically call the environment the most important or decisive issue determining their vote. Republicans lose few votes among those respondents; most are likely Democratic voters already. Exit polls in the 2000 presidential election found that 9 percent of voters identified the environment as the most important issue, up from the usual 3 to 5 percent. Vice President Gore's well-known identification with the environment may have raised the salience of the issue slightly. Among voters who identified the environment as the most important issue, Gore beat Bush 76 percent to 12. In 2002 pre-election surveys only 2 percent of voters selected the environment as the most important issue.

On the surface the salience of the environment would seem to aid Democratic candidates. Yet a strange thing happens in elections when more voters do say that the environment is the most important issue to them: Republican candidates often do better. A 1990 exit poll found that an unusually high number of respondents—21 percent—considered the environment one of the two most important issues; those voters split 55 percent for Democrats, 44 percent for Republicans.⁷ One hypothesis to explain the unusual result: when more voters choose the environment as the most important issue, that segment of the electorate captures a more normal distribution of voter opinion (in other words, more Republicans). And sometimes the same phenomenon appears even if the number of environmentally minded voters does not appreciably increase. November

2002 polls from Florida found that the 4 percent of voters who rated the environment as the most important issue favored challenger Bill McBride above Governor Jeb Bush 43 percent to 50 percent of the vote.⁸

Cognitive Dissonance

The environment is not a more potent election issue in part because younger people tend to be more fervent about environmentalism and their turnout at the polls is low. Opinion surveys over twenty years consistently find that the intensity of environmental concern declines with age.⁹ Further, conflicting results from surveys of public attitudes on the environment show a high degree of cognitive dissonance about environmental policy. The Gallup poll asks whether respondents agree with the statement "protection of the environment should be given priority even at the risk of curbing economic growth"; the Wirthlin Group asks if "environmental standards cannot be too high, and continuing environmental improvements must be made regardless of cost." Gallup's question receives 70 percent agreement, while Wirthlin's version of the same question receives 66 percent assent. Wirthlin also asks whether respondents agree that "economic growth should be sacrificed for environmental quality." Usually only about 15 percent agree with that proposition, even though the statement slightly rewords the question eliciting 60–70 percent agreement.

The conflicting public attitudes about differently worded questions indicate that the environment is an issue like civil rights, where polls show strong support for affirmative action alongside strong opposition to quotas. In other words the general direction of public policy enjoys strong support, but the public does not clearly perceive the exact policy that should be followed. In that respect, environmentalism, like civil rights, is a mature issue with some immature characteristics at the margin—not a surprising situation for an issue of relatively recent provenance.

The environment has been a political issue for only about thirty years. Neither Richard Nixon nor Hubert Humphrey talked about the environment in the 1968 presidential campaign; at that time green power still meant the Irish vote. The Gallup poll did not think that the environment was a worthwhile subject for surveys until 1965. Its early polls generated ho-hum results. Gallup's first poll on the environment found that only 28 percent considered air pollution a serious

problem (a Harris poll at that same time reported a majority against higher taxes and higher consumer prices to pay for environmental cleanup), while only 35 percent thought that water pollution was a serious problem. Today those responses typically exceed 80 percent. By 1969, those numbers had risen to 69 and 74 percent.¹⁰

The issue of the environment might actually cut against Democrats. Could Al Gore be more fully associated with environmental enthusiasm than he was in 2000? But without the public reaction to the Kyoto protocol, he would be president today. In 2000 Gore lost West Virginia, which nearly always votes Democratic in presidential elections (Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton carried the state twice; even Michael Dukakis carried West Virginia in 1988) because the normally Democratic voters in coal-mining communities voted in droves for George W. Bush: they knew that Gore meant to put them out of business. In an election ending in a tie, any of a dozen issues might have turned a state a different way and changed the outcome. But an old progrowth, pro-union Democrat such as Hubert Humphrey or John F. Kennedy would hardly have embraced a policy that threatened the livelihood of so many unionized voters. Could the flamboyant Morris be playing the role of agent provocateur, goading the Democrats down a dead-end road?

Notes

1. July 23 2002, p. 4A. The article featured a photo of Adam Waalkes, a midlevel Microsoft executive, standing in front of his 4,800-square-foot suburban home on a golf course and saying that when it comes to the environment, he sometimes wonders about being a Republican. The irony was lost on *USA Today* and

Waalkes: from a conventional environmental viewpoint, 4,800-square-foot suburban homes are a principal enemy of the environment.

2. See Karlyn H. Bowman, "The Politics of the Environment," AEI Studies in Public Opinion, October 16, 2002, available at www.aei.org/ps/psbowman14.pdf.

3. Sununu was an especially important target for environmentalists because he wrote the language in the House energy bill to open the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge to oil exploration.

4. Arkansas Senator Tim Hutchinson was also on the LCV dirty dozen list, but the environment did not seem to play a role in his defeat. The LCV's list can be found at www.lcv.org/campaigns/keyraces/race__30169.asp.

5. The Sierra Club's political endorsements can be found at www.sierraclub.org/endorsements/.

6. The Trust for Public Land tally can be seen at www.tpl.org/tier3_cd.cfm?content_item_id=10925&folder_id=186.

7. One possible reason for the better than expected Republican showing is that President George H. W. Bush signed the Clean Air Act revisions in 1990.

8. By contrast, in the New Jersey Senate race, 5 percent of voters said the environment was the most important issue, with Democrat Frank Lautenberg receiving 81 percent to Doug Forrester's 8 percent. In Florida Governor Bush was strongly associated with the effort to ban offshore oil drilling and plans to restore the Everglades, while in New Jersey Forrester received criticism for his attacks on the Superfund.

9. Polls from 1980 through 2000 find that about 70 percent of twenty to twenty-nine year olds agree with the statement that the government spends too little for the environment; the number declines steadily as the age group rises, to below 50 percent among people sixty-five and older.

10. S. Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman, *Environmental Cancer: A Political Disease?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 9.