

The Public Opinion of Environmentalism and How it Relates to Governmental Practices

A Research Paper submitted to the Department of Engineering and Society

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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Introduction

On October 11th, 2018, Hurricane Michael (at the time it was an extratropical cyclone) passed over Virginia, USA. I remember the winds, the rain, and school being closed that day. Just a day earlier on October 10, 2018, Hurricane Michael had reached landfall in the panhandle of Florida as a Category 5 hurricane. At the time, my grandfather was staying an hour outside of Panama City. His house was thankfully only slightly damaged, but his aunt's and another family friend had their houses completely destroyed. The destruction that was left in the wake of this hurricane, until recently, went unparalleled in Florida.

The reason I bring up this story is because environmentalism is a large social issue that we as a society value, but there is a discrepancy between what people have said versus what has happened. Statistical data shows that people all over the United States of America are aware and affected by climate change and the lack/disapproval of solutions to the problem. However, since the early start of systematic efforts to combat environmental issues in the 1870s, the issues have continued to increase in severity. I conducted research to find the cause of this lack of care for the environment. I argue that while Americans believe that the federal government is responsible for combating environmental issues, the disconnect lies in that throughout time, there has never been a consensus that combating environmental issues is the most important thing that the government should be improving, and that there is a preconceived notion that there is a tradeoff between the economy and environmentalism, meaning that when you help the environment you hurt the economy and vice versa.

Background

With the increase of extreme weather events, Americans are seeing the impact now more than ever. Although it didn't start here. Since before the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970, people have noticed the impact we, as a collective people, have on the environment. There are many things that can be impacted by us in the environment. These include global climate, air quality, and water quality, to name a few. Out of all of these, the changing global climate is the most well-known issue. There are regulations in many areas of society which attempt to limit the impact we have on climate. We, typically, do this by estimating the amount of carbon that anyone or anything produces. The carbon that is produced is expelled into the atmosphere where it mixes with other gasses such as methane, water vapor, ozone, and nitrous oxide to absorb energy from the sunlight that shines on Earth. This is called the Greenhouse Effect, and these gases are called greenhouse gasses. As time has progressed larger portions of the population have become more educated on the topic, but there wasn't proof of global warming until 1938. From my personal experiences, I believe that people generally believe in global warming and think that the environment needs to be protected.

As big of an issue as it seems now, the problem appears to not be going away. Even in 2023, the majority of energy produced in the USA uses crude oil, coal, or natural gas, all of which contribute to the increase of greenhouse gasses and climate change. Right now, we are seeing the effects of climate change more than we have ever seen in recorded history. Most recently, we've seen the increasing severity of natural disasters such as hurricanes Helene in Florida. In the past two years, South America and Africa have suffered devastating flooding. In poorer countries, these events are not so easily dealt with as they are in the U.S. As a developed nation, we can do a lot to help the environment—and yet we don't. We are reaching the critical

point where the average global temperature cannot be reversed. The implemented policy appears to not really put any pressure on companies or the government to help protect the environment. In this paper, I explore this contradiction: if people really do support protecting the environment, why haven't we taken necessary action?

Methods

For this research, I performed a Meta-Analysis and Discourse Analysis and collected data from a variety of sources that questioned people about the environment. This includes searching “environmental polls” on Google scholar and Google, as well as using Gallup polling data through the UVA Library. The data I collected consists of multiple polls from Gallup, Pew Research Center, Cambridge, and Yale. Many polls/questions break down the population into groups that are organized by age, political affiliation, gender, etc., although some of them do not. I tried to acquire data that would give a good picture of what the general public believes in aggregate. This data does not include participation in environmentalism, only the support or opposition in the questions presented. I will be looking at this data through three general time periods: the late 1900s leading into 2000, 2000-2010, and then 2010-present. I’m basing my logic on the idea of correlation from *The Handbook of Science and Technology Studies* in the chapter titled STS as Methods. I will compare the time periods to find trends in the ideology of the public.

Findings & Analysis

First, I will start with the 1980s. When asked about the quality of the environment at the time of the poll compared to five years earlier, comparing the opinions of 1983 to 1990, there was a significant increase from 34% to 55% in the percentage of people that said that the quality of the environment was slightly, somewhat, or very much worse, as seen in Fig. 1 (Dunlap,

1987). Although, this increase didn't start until 1988, with the percentage of 1987 at 32% and 1988 at 46% (Dunlap, 1987). I found a second paper that dealt with polling the public opinion on environmental issues, specifically in relation to the opinions on how the government can respond to these issues. This paper looked at the public opinion on various environmental topics between 1973-1986. The researchers asked: "Some people say that the progress of this nation depends on an adequate supply of energy, and we have to have it even though it means taking some risks with the environment. Others say the important thing is the environment, and that it is better to risk not having enough energy than to risk spoiling our environment. Are you more on the side of adequate energy or more on the side of protecting the environment?" The public opinion was fairly split, but generally the percentage in support of protecting the environment increased as time went on. This trend continues for the majority of the questions asked. This also starts the trend of some questions putting the environment and the economy against each other. The only outlier is the question regarding the spending on the environment. When asked about it, the public opinion in 1973 was that 63% said that the spending was too little (Dunlap, 1987). This was the highest the percentage was through 1973-1986. The percentage dipped from 1974-1977, then started increasing to level out at 58% from 1984-1986. The general trend from this time period is that people were becoming more passionate about the environment as time went on.

5. *Cambridge*: Do you think the overall quality of the environment around here is very much better than it was 5 years ago, somewhat better than it was 5 years ago, slightly better than it was 5 years ago, slightly worse, somewhat worse, or very much worse than it was 5 years ago? (Percent)

	7/83	7/84	7/86	7/87	7/88	7/89	7/90
Very much, somewhat, slightly <i>better</i>	37	39	37	41	32	28	31
About the same/don't know (volunteered)	30	28	31	27	21	23	13
Slightly, somewhat, very much <i>worse</i>	34	33	32	32	46	49	55

Figure 1: Data concerning a question from Cambridge asking about the quality of the environment over 5 years

Looking into the later 1900s in the Clinton Administration, I did not find any polls concerning public opinion, but I found a paper which discusses the impact Clinton had on the environment. Clinton made big promises, “pledging to make [the] government ‘the greenest in history’” (Nie, 1997). The paper claims that many environmental interest groups were unhappy with the 1995 Emergency Salvage Timber Logging Sale Program, which allowed the expansion of salvage timber sales, by exempting the salvage sales from public challenges under the current environmental laws, being added to the 1995 Budget Rescissions Bill after it “included a \$17.1 billion cut in federal spending, \$5.4 billion for disaster relief in California and Oklahoma, and the setting aside of some Jordanian debt” (Nie, 1997). The bill also allowed harvesting of dead, burned, or diseased logs without subject to environmental policies at the time. Environmental groups labeled this as “logging without laws.” (Nie, 1997). Before the bill was signed Clinton had a quite good reputation with environmental groups, especially after the 1994 congressional turnabout where Clinton actively opposed anti-environmental interests from the 104th congress. Before this, Clinton had not gained the respect of activists. He was earning a “‘C+’ at best” (Nie, 1997). While Clinton had big claims for the environment his main concern in his campaign was the inherited “Bush economy.” This trend of allowing economic success to trump the needs of other areas of focus for the current administration will continue up to present day. The economy is never stated to be more important than the environment, but it appears that way from the approach where economic and social issues continue to be the lead focuses of many administrations to come.

Continuing down the timeline into the 2000s, I found some polls from Gallup concerning the environmental policy of the Bush administration. The vast majority of the population believed that the environmental policy during this era was either kept the same or weakened.

Throughout the administration, starting in 2003 and ending in 2008, only a maximum of 9% of people believed that the environmental policy was strengthened, in the year 2003. This value reached as low as 5% in the years 2005 and 2006 (Gallup Analytical, 2005-2024). Gallup asked people how much they were worried about the environment between 2005-2024. Between the years 2001-2009, the majority of Americans worried about the environment either “a great deal” or “a fair amount” (Gallup, 2025). There seems to be a trend concerning the policy that an administration puts through, it appears to have a neutral or negative response. The proposed solutions to their concerns are either received with neutral or negative opinions. Although, environmental policy was not the focus of Bush’s campaign, in fact Bush’s campaign didn’t have a focus. Once he entered office it seemed like there was no one problem bigger than all the rest. Bush is famous for the No Child Left Behind Act, so again there is a distinct focus on social issues.

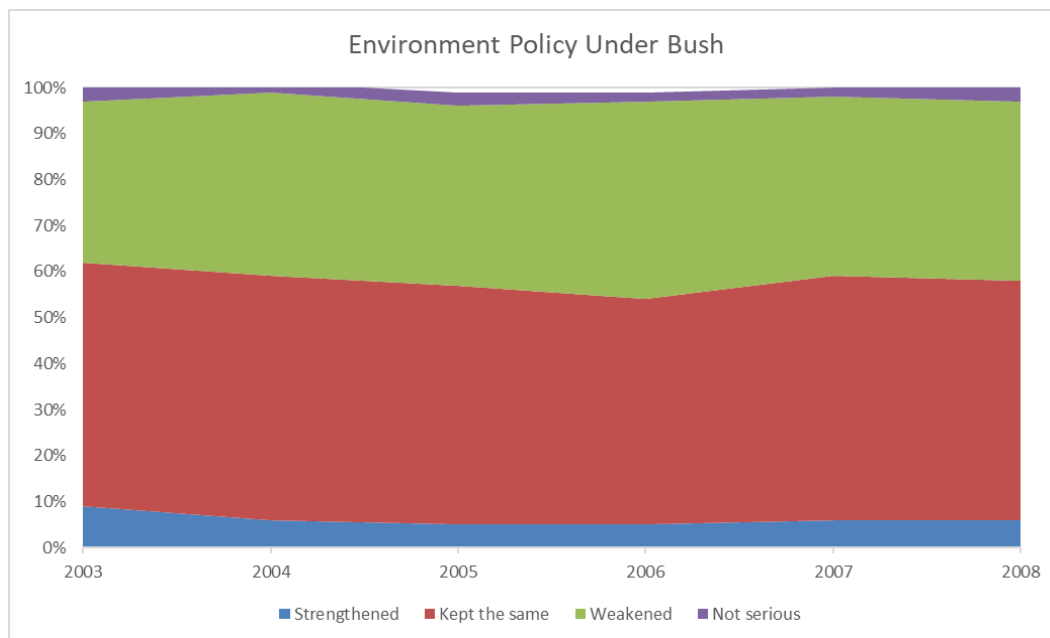


Figure 2: Stacked area of how people felt about the environmental policy enacted during the Bush Administration

Now getting into the most recent opinions, in the same Gallup poll about how much people are worried about the environment, a staggering almost 50% of the polling population described that they worried about the environment “a great deal” between the years 2016-2022 (Gallup 2024). Gallup found that Biden’s highest approval rating was dealing with the environment, being 46% (Gallup, 2024). This still doesn’t reach majority approval, but Gallup noted that it is probably dragged down due to his low job approval ratings. People also feel that they have been the most educated about the environment during Biden’s administration. More than 80% of people feel that they are either “very well educated” or “fairly well educated” about global warming. It seems that, generally, people are worried about the environment the most when a Republican is in office. Fig 3. visually represents the approval of spending on environmental issues from the Bush administration to the Biden administration.

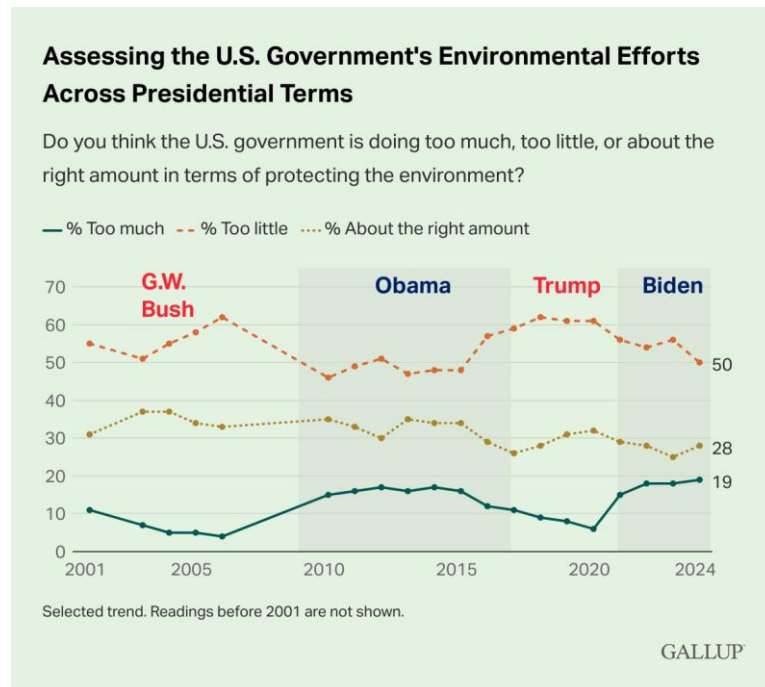


Figure 3: Graph showing the percentages of how the population feels about the presidents spending on the environment

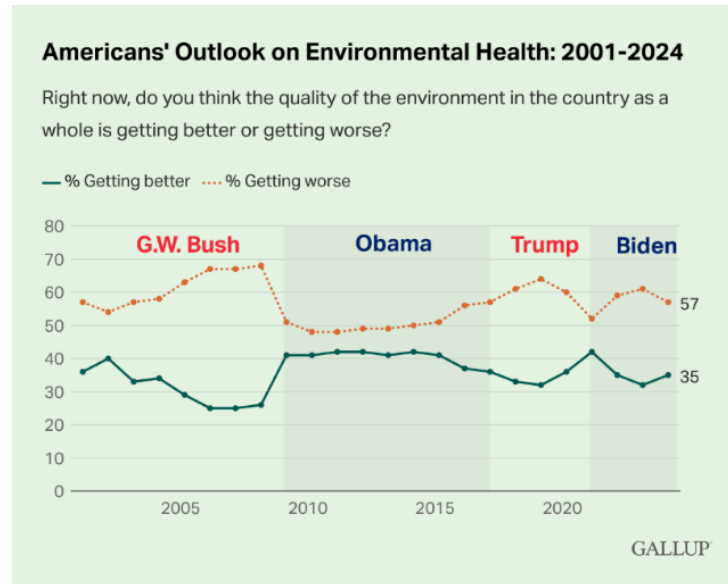
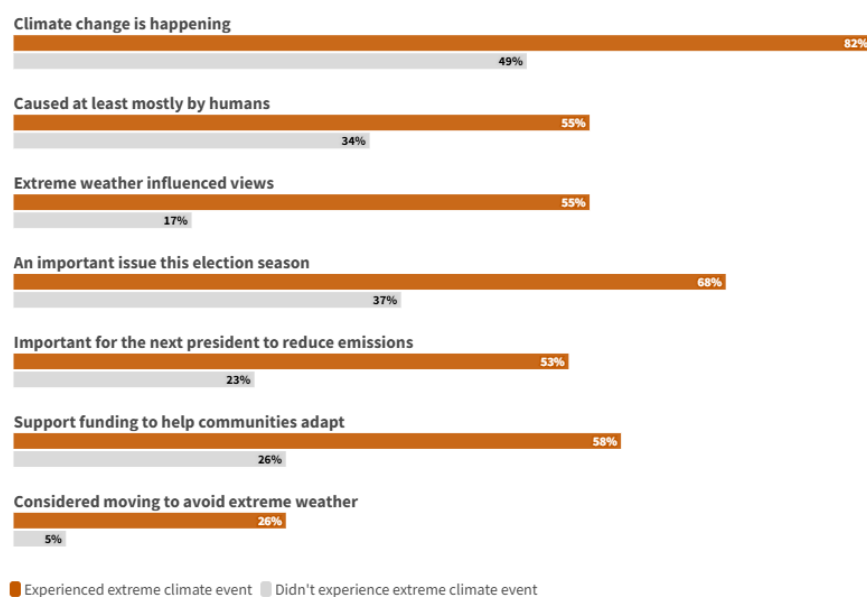


Figure 4: Graph showing the percentages of the population opinions about the current state of the environment in different administrations

I started digging into the differences of opinions based on political affiliation. What I have found is that the Republican population is much more focused on social and economic issues and, according to the Pew Research Center, 56% of Republican-leaning individuals believe that environmental policy hurts the economy (Tyson & Kennedy, 2024). Pew Research Center also found that 51% of adults felt suspicious of groups pushing for action on climate change and that 75% of Republicans held this view (Tyson & Kennedy, 2024). In addition, Republicans are less likely to believe that climate change is affecting their local communities, about 41% (Tyson & Kennedy, 2024). Republicans also believe that the human impact towards climate change is much less. 44% say that “human activity, such as the burning of fossil fuels, contributes to global climate change” (Tyson & Kennedy, 2024). Democrats and Republicans agree on the fact that they believe large businesses are doing too little to help reduce the effects of climate change. More people are in support of protecting the environment now than there have ever been, but it seems that individuals don't want to take part in helping the environment in any

ways they can. The overall percentage of the likelihood that an American would purchase an electric vehicle is 41% (EPIC, 2024). When asked how much people are willing to pay for a carbon fee, the majority of people would only pay \$1 (EPIC, 2024). When asked if they supported tax credits for using electric vehicles the overall support was around 38% (EPIC, 2024). The public opinion polls show that clearly people are in support of the environment, but they don't believe that a solution is good enough from the proposed solutions.

Beliefs of those who have experienced extreme climate events



Source: EPIC-AP/NORC Public Opinion Poll • Note: In the 2024 poll, respondents were asked: In the past 12 months, has your local community experienced each of the following, or not? [Unusually hot or cold days; Severe storms, including hurricanes; Flooding; Droughts and water shortages; Wildfires; Poor air quality]. The 2023 poll asked a slightly different question: In the past 12 months, has your local community experienced an extreme weather event such as a hurricane, drought, flood, unusual heat or cold, or wildfires, or not?

Figure 5: Graph comparing the opinions of those who have experienced extreme climate events vs. those who have not.

From Fig. 5, we can see that 68% of people who have dealt with an extreme climate event believe that this was an important issue for the election season, yet it seems that through the exit polls for the 2024 election that the most important issues facing the country are economic issues and immigration issues (Tyson & Kennedy 2024). The environment was the fifth most important issue facing the country. Gallup found that the percentage of people who

volunteered the environment or pollution as the most important problem facing the country was low, with the highest percentage between May of 1989 to November of 1990 at 8% in April of 1990. Cambridge asked a similar question: What do you think are the two most important problems facing the United States today? The percentage of people who volunteered the environment as either their first or second answer was similar to what Gallup found, except they found much higher percentages during the entirety of 1990 with the highest percentage of 23% in June of 1990 (Dunlap 1987). This is not just an issue within the present, but throughout the past 50 years. It seems that the disconnect arises when it comes to what the public thinks the most important issue is that the federal government should focus on.

Through the data I've collected it appears that people are very vocal about their support for the environment, while progress towards protecting the environment is never the leading focus of any administration. This may come from the opinion on whether people think that global warming will affect them in their lifetime from Fig 5. There seems to be a notion in the eyes of the public that to protect the environment, parts of the economy must be sacrificed and that for the economy to flourish the environment can't be protected. Many of the questions asked by polls often include something equating to determining if the person would rather the environment suffer for the good of the American economy or have the economy suffer for the good of the environment. This dichotomy that the public has subscribed to limits the actual benefit the environment can provide for the economy. I believe the reason for this focus on social and economic issues to be that people believe that these have more immediate effects on us presently. Repeating the data in Fig 5., people do not believe that combating climate change will have an effect on their lives, but as seen in the graph, the trend is leading toward more people believing that this will affect them. It also appears that a large majority of people don't believe

that they will have to change the ways in which they live. They believe that the conveniences of modern society are too important and don't want to support transitioning into beneficial avenues.

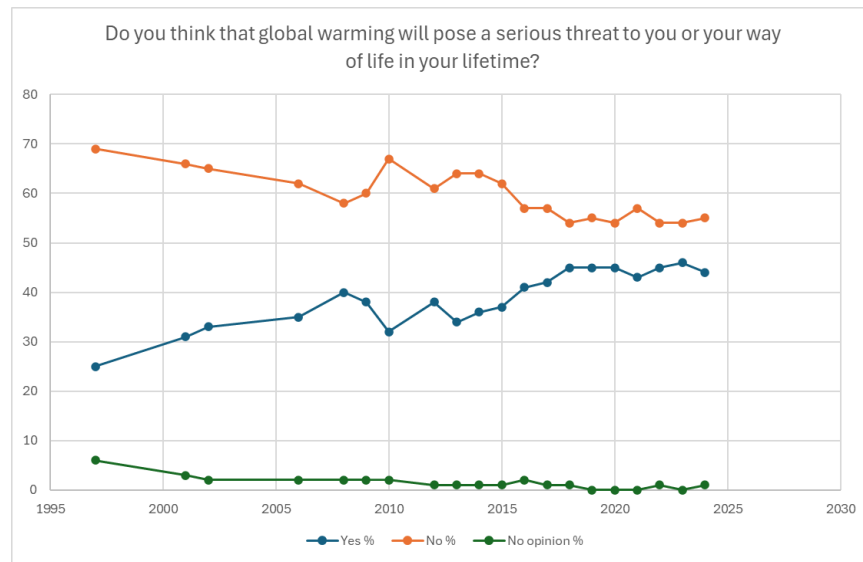


Figure 6: Graph showing the percentage for the opinion of people being affected by global warming

The University of Chicago, Epic, found that in 2024 support for a carbon tax that companies would pay based on the amount of carbon they emitted, only reached a 58% approval rate overall; 46% overall supported incentives for nuclear energy development; 44% overall for incentives for purchasing electric vehicles (EPIC 2024).

Conclusion

Comparing the ideologies of the public throughout time, we can start to understand the inherent biases towards economic and social issues. The general population is concerned about the environment, but they believe that there are much more pressing social and economic issues that require more immediate action. It would be disingenuous to say that those people are wrong, because social and economic issues are very important. The pressure for solving those issues cannot be understated, but it does shine a light on how almost all other issues get pushed aside.

The overall quality of the environment does not, generally, change within the months or days of the year, but throughout multiple years of cumulative impact. These more immediate issues seem much more imperative to solve, but eventually time will run out and we won't be able to save our planet. The current solutions that have been proposed do not meet the qualifications of the public. Some solutions could be to write some form of bipartisan policy in which we can make steps towards transitioning away from energy production that leaves our environment worse into some that can help relieve certain areas and allow regrowth to occur. Policy makers can also try to incorporate ways that can allow the economy to maybe not increase but remain stable so that the environment can get some focus. I believe that researching more data will show a much greater picture of environmentalism as a whole. I hope that my research can allow people to maybe rethink how focus is placed upon issues. Hopefully in the future we will find ways in which we can combat issues simultaneously so that we may continue to live on this planet we call home.

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