



American Voters Place a High Priority On Environmental Protections, Despite Concerns About Energy and the Economy

American voters place a high priority on strong environmental protections. Americans are unwilling to compromise on existing environmental regulations in spite of uncertainty about energy and the economy in general according to a national survey conducted May 21-23. Voters reject the notion that we must sacrifice a strong economy in order to have a clean environment. When forced to choose, many still favor the environmental position regardless of the economic counter-argument.

Support for environmental protections extends to the energy debate and President Bush's energy plan. A majority say that energy represents a "serious problem, but not a crisis." Bush's approval on both energy and the environment is low with just one-in-three voters giving him credit for a good job on each. Equal numbers support and oppose his energy plan (35 percent apiece), when no specific details are mentioned. When briefly described, Bush's plan still fails to achieve support from a majority of voters, and opposition gains a slight edge (48 percent to 44 percent).

The voting public wants an energy plan that does more than increase production of old fuels – oil and coal – and strongly endorses measures aimed at enhancing conservation, efficiency and the development of newer, cleaner renewable fuels. Large majorities prefer plans that emphasize these qualities.

As demonstrated in previous research and again in this study, issues involving clean air and clean water energize the electorate on the environment. Notably, lowering arsenic levels in drinking water and reducing carbon dioxide emissions garner significant support, even when voters are confronted with economic counter-arguments.

The following are key findings from a nationwide telephone survey conducted on behalf of the League of Conservation Voters (LCV) Education Fund. Greenberg-Quinlan Research, Inc., a Democratic polling firm, and The Tarrance Group, Inc., a Republican polling firm, were commissioned by the LCV Education Fund to conduct a survey of 1,000 likely voters across the country. The margin of error for a random sample of this type is +/-3.1% in 95 out of 100 cases. Interviews were conducted on May 21 - 23, 2001.



Key Findings

- A large plurality, 43 percent, believe the environment has worsened over the past few years, compared to 34 percent who say things have stayed the same and just 20 percent who believe it has improved.
- Sixty-nine (69) percent of voters support either stronger environmental laws or stricter enforcement of existing laws.
- Bush's approval on the environment and energy policy remains low with just 33 and 32 percent respectively who say he has done an excellent or good job on those two issues.
- Without receiving any details, voters give Bush's energy plan 35 percent support and 35 percent opposition initially. When the Bush plan is described, support grows to 44 percent and opposition to 48 percent, opposition gaining a 4 point edge.
- The public wants an energy plan that places a priority on conservation, efficiency and the development of newer, cleaner renewable fuels. When contrasted with a focus on more production, the alternative plans prevail by margins of 15-19 percentage points.
- Significant majorities oppose oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (62 percent), the Great Lakes (60 percent) and the Rocky Mountains (55 percent).
- The public broadly supports strict limits on arsenic in drinking water (62-26 percent) and reductions in carbon dioxide emissions that cause global warming (57-29 percent), even when contrasted with strong pro-economic messages.

The following is a more detailed analysis of the survey findings.



Broad Support for Strong Environmental Protections Despite Economic Uncertainty

The public is unwilling to sacrifice environmental protections despite growing uncertainty about the economy and the energy situation. Although a plurality believes the economy will worsen in the coming years (35 percent), the public wants more, not less, funding for environmental protections and stricter, not less strict, enforcement of environmental laws.

Voter concern is not confined simply to the economy — as 43 percent say the environment is now worse than it was five years ago, and just 20 percent say it has improved. Most notably, younger voters are among the most pessimistic about the environment, along with Independents and Democrats.

Despite concern about both the economy and the environment, voters reject the notion by a double-digit margin that we must streamline environmental regulations to get our economy back on its feet. Almost half of all voters (49 percent) oppose the concept that environmental regulations should be streamlined in order to maintain a strong economy and create jobs, while 38 percent say the opposite.

(49%) The economy and jobs are top priorities, but we cannot afford to sacrifice clean air and water, and we must maintain strong environmental regulations.

(38%) Our top priority should be to maintain a strong economy, and we should streamline environmental regulations to help businesses grow and create jobs for the future.

Note that independent voters surpass both Republicans and Democrats in their desire to maintain regulations, as shown in the table below.

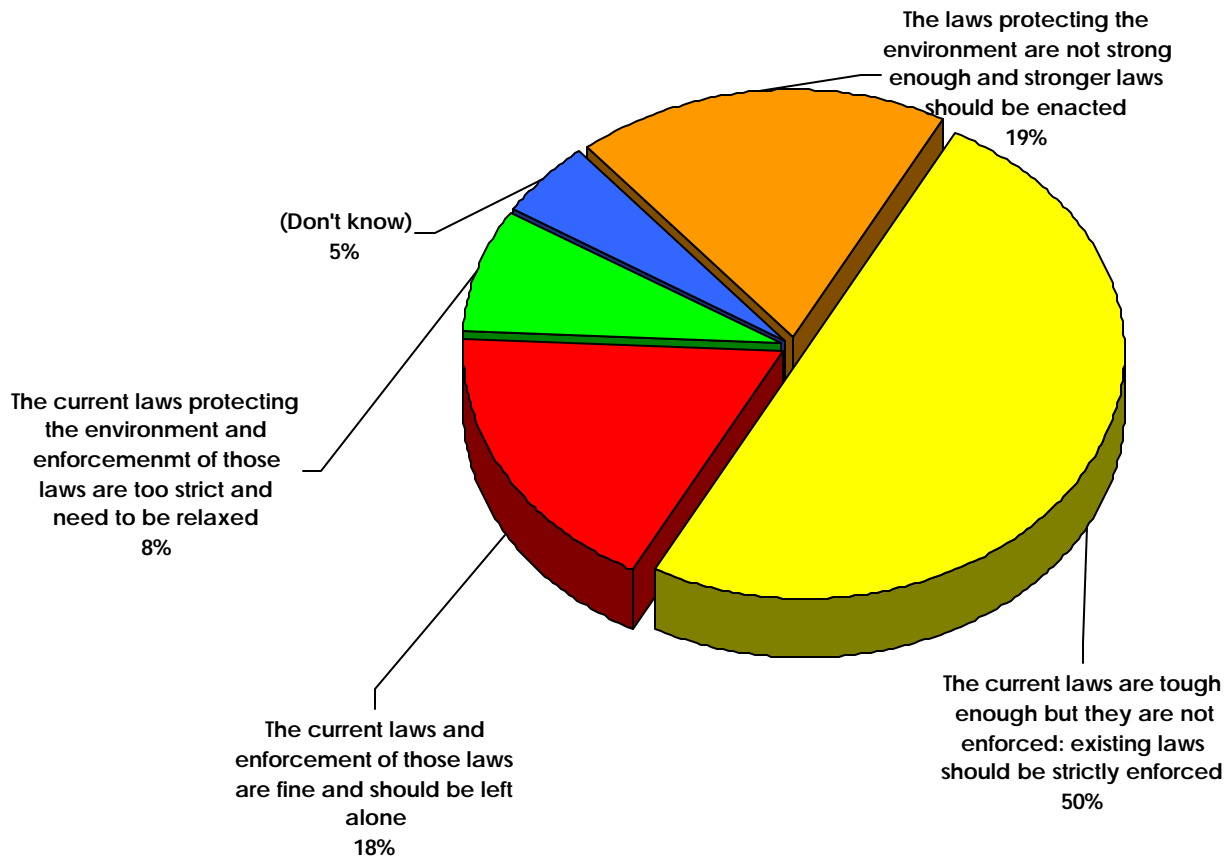
Partisan Differences on Environment versus Economy				
	Total	Democrats	Independents	Republicans
Environment	49	54	58	37
Economy	38	35	30	48



A Deep Desire for Strict Enforcement of Environmental Laws

By a resounding margin, voters believe that environmental laws should either be strengthened or, at the minimum, more strictly enforced. The overwhelming majority, 69 percent, supports either tougher laws or stricter enforcement of existing laws, while just 26 percent are willing to leave the laws as they are or weaken them.

“Now let me read you four statements about the environment and please tell me which comes closest to your own view.”



This desire for stricter enforcement of environmental regulations coincides with a readiness to provide more government funding to ensure that these laws are enforced. When confronted with a choice between more funding to enforce environmental laws and maintaining existing funding, the public supports more funding, 42 to 31 percent. Again, Democrats and Independents support more funding while Republicans tend to be satisfied with existing levels of funding.



Bush Has Not Convinced the Public on Energy and the Environment

President Bush’s claim that the country is in the middle of an energy crisis has yet to convince the vast majority of voters, and many do not embrace his plan. Without any information, the electorate is evenly divided on his plan, with 35 percent both for and against it. A description of the Bush plan moves more voters against his plan than moves them for it. Voters send a clear message that the plan they will support includes more emphasis on conservation, efficiency and renewable energy sources.

The public believes the energy situation is not a crisis, but it is a serious problem, and perhaps most startling is the depth of these impressions. At the outset of the survey, just 19 percent believed the country is in an energy crisis and 52 percent believe the energy situation is a serious problem. When asked later in the survey, after a long series of questions on the energy situation, the results are nearly identical, as noted in the table below.

Energy Situation Today (comparison of responses in this survey)				
	Crisis	Serious Problem	Problem, Not serious	Not a Problem
Initial Ask	19	52	22	5
Post-Information Ask	20	52	22	5

President Bush enters the debate on energy and the environment with little credibility on either issue. Just one-third of the electorate gives Bush credit for doing a good job on the environment or energy policy - low ratings for a president this early in his term.

Bush Job Approval on Environment and Energy			
	Excellent/ Good	Fair/ Poor	Difference
The Environment	33	60	-27
Energy Policy	32	61	-29



Bush receives very low marks on his policies concerning energy and the environment not only from Democrats, but also among Independents and younger voters, while Republicans give him higher marks, but not overwhelmingly positive reviews.

Partisan Differences on Bush Job Approval (Percent Responding Excellent/Good)				
	<i>Total</i>	Democrats	Independents	Republicans
The Environment	33	12	26	63
Energy Policy	32	11	23	63

Questions about Bush on energy policy produce a decidedly mixed reaction to his energy plan, about which a large number of voters have not made a decision. Equal percentages support and oppose his plan (35 percent apiece) while nearly as many, 30 percent, are uncertain at this point.

Yet, when the Bush plan is explained to voters, opposition grows more than support and the public opposes his plan by a 48-44 percent margin. The Bush plan as briefly described to voters in this survey contained the following four points:

- Increase production by allowing drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge
- Build 1,000 new plants in the next twenty years
- Streamline licensing process and relax environmental standards for power plants
- Offer tax incentives for people who buy energy-efficient cars

Most noteworthy is the shift toward opposition to Bush’s plan by Independents, who oppose it by 20 percentage points after this neutral description of the plan. Not surprisingly, Democrats move away from the plan while more Republicans embrace it.



Public Prefers Plan that Emphasizes Conservation, Efficiency and Renewable, Clean Energy Sources

Voters presented with detailed alternatives to the Bush plan are likely to opt for the alternatives. Simply put, voters want more of a balance than the Bush plan presents, and they strongly prefer a greater emphasis on efficiency, the development of clean energy sources and conservation.

In the course of this survey, three alternatives to the basic Bush plan were presented and, in each case, voters support the alternative plan to Bush's plan by margins of at least 15 percentage points. Again, Democrats and Independents overwhelmingly favor the alternative plans while Republicans generally stand by Bush on each of the three arguments.

The public rejects a plan that emphasizes production from old energy sources – oil and coal – without an equal emphasis on efficiency, cleaner sources of energy, and conservation. When presented with an alternative calling for a balanced plan that emphasizes efficiency and conservation and protects the environment, voters favor it over Bush's plan by 16 percentage points, 54 to 38 percent. When faced with the choice of which to make the top priority – efficiency or production – voters opt for efficiency by a 50-27 percent margin.

At the same time, the public has doubts as to who benefits most from Bush's energy plan, big oil companies or American families. A majority readily agrees with a plan that puts families ahead of oil companies. The alternative, as tested, is noted below, along with the response.

The Bush plan Statement:

The Bush administration says we are suffering from an energy crisis in this country and we must increase domestic production of traditional energy sources, like oil, gas and coal, wherever it is available. We must reduce our dependence on foreign oil while taking measures to protect the environment. At the same time, we must encourage cleaner, more efficient energy use and build new nuclear plants.

Response A (Receives 54% to 34% against the Bush plan):

Others say we need a plan that balances efficiency and conservation with increased energy production without harming the environment. Conservation and efficiency are important, and we should explore cleaner sources of energy and provide financial incentives so businesses, government and individuals conserve energy. We should drill for oil, but not in places like the Alaskan Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, as Bush has proposed.



Response B (Receives 53% to 35% against the Bush plan):

Others say Bush's plan will not provide any additional energy for years and does nothing to bring down utility or gas prices. We should first put a cap on oil and gas prices to protect consumers. We should combine production with conservation by increasing the production of clean sources of energy while providing incentives to conserve and use energy more efficiently.

Response C (Receives 52% to 37% against the Bush plan):

Others say we need an energy plan that puts families first, not big oil and power companies. Bush's plan rewards the same oil companies that are raising gas prices by allowing them to skirt some environmental protections against drilling in national parks and forests. He will allow power plants to ignore some environmental laws to build more dirty plants quickly. We need a plan that encourages the production of clean, efficient energy and encourages conservation.

Renewable energy sources are definitely part of the equation for voters, who largely reject the notion that these energy sources are not ready to provide energy. The public believes by a wide margin that we should focus on renewable energy sources now and move away from a reliance on oil and coal.

Now let me read you two statements about energy sources. Please tell me which statements come closer to your own view.

(34%) Some people say renewable energy sources such as wind, solar, and other new technologies offer hope for America's energy future, but they currently supply only a small fraction of our energy needs. We are years away from a time when they will fulfill our energy needs. Until then, we must rely on current energy sources such as oil and coal to meet our needs.

(53%) Others say, we need to focus on renewable energy sources such as wind, solar, and other new technologies to meet America's energy needs. It's time to move away from our reliance on energy sources from the past like oil and coal and invest in newer, cleaner, and smarter energy sources.

Most notably, Independents and younger voters, along with Democrats, are particularly supportive of making the development of renewable sources of energy such as solar and wind part of the solution to our growing energy needs.

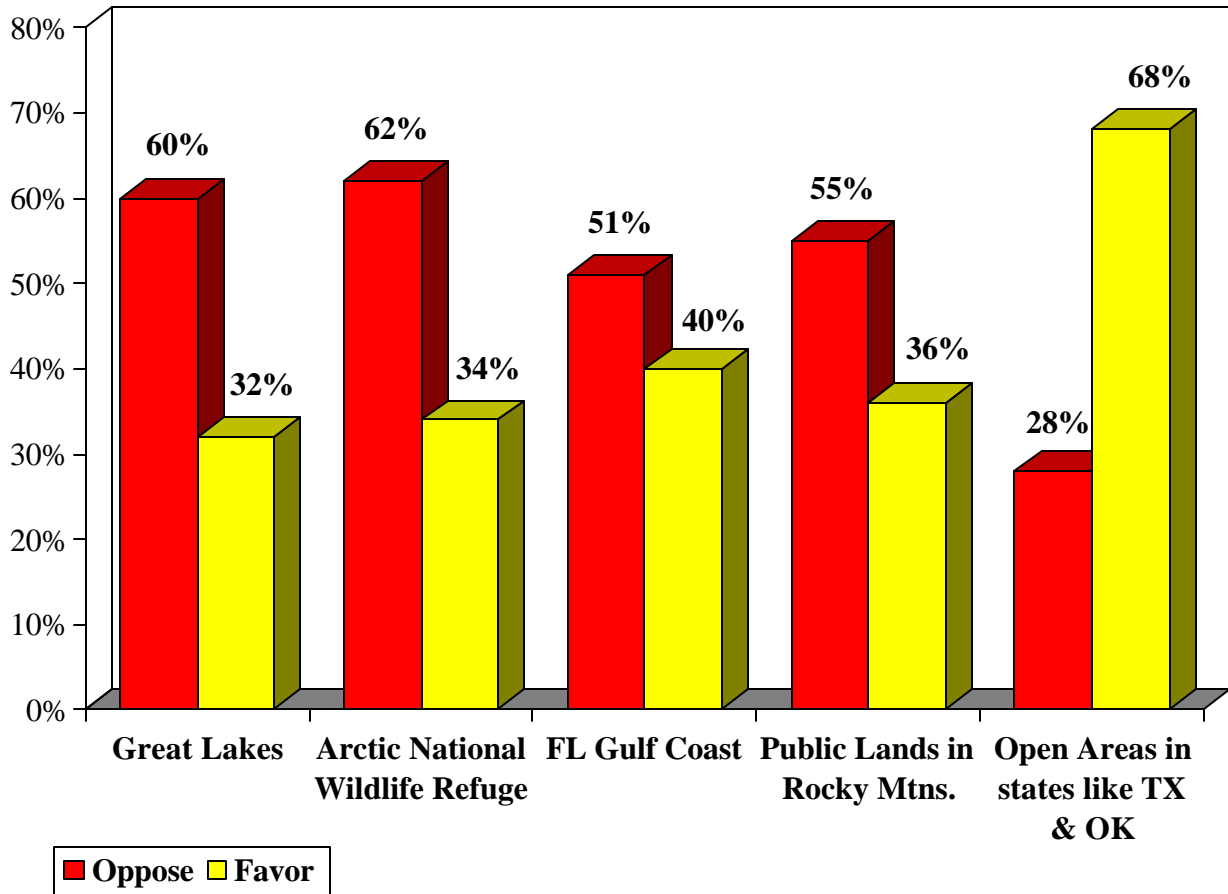


Broad Opposition to Drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the Rockies and the Great Lakes

The public recognizes the need to drill for oil, as we have for generations, but there is strong support for tough limitations on where drilling takes place. Large majorities reject the notion of drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the Great Lakes and the Rocky Mountains, and a slight majority opposes drilling along Florida's Gulf Coast.

Voters are more supportive of drilling for oil in open areas of the plains states with sparse populations, such as Texas and Oklahoma.

The following graph illustrates voter opinion on drilling in each location:





Public Unwilling to Yield on Carbon Emissions and Arsenic in Drinking Water

The broad support for an emphasis on the environment as part of an energy policy carries over to two other issues tested in this survey – arsenic in drinking water and carbon dioxide emissions. On each issue, voters prefer the strong pro-environment position by huge margins.

The public prefers a position of immediately reducing the amount of arsenic in water to the 10 percent standard adopted by the World Health Organization. The pro-environment position is chosen over the Bush proposal of waiting for further study on the issue by an overwhelming margin, 62-26 percent. Majorities of Democrats, Independents and a plurality of Republicans favor the pro-environment position on arsenic.

The results are similar on the issue of carbon dioxide emissions, even when contrasted with a strong pro-economic message supporting the Bush position. A majority of voters (57 percent) favors a position of reducing carbon dioxide emissions that cause global warming, while 32 percent support the Bush position in opposing reduced emissions until our nation's energy woes are over.