ENVIRONMENT: TOP TIER VOTING ISSUE

Environmental issues are in the top tier of voter concerns— and voters prefer candidates who support the environment

The following are some key findings from a national survey commissioned by the League of Conservation Voters Education Fund and conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Research, Inc. Interviews were conducted by telephone with 1,750 likely November voters, February 6-13, 2000. The results are weighted to nationally represent 1,000 likely voters[1].

Executive Summary

- **Environmental issues, especially clean air and clean water, are now top priorities for voters and rank near the top of their concerns.** Nearly three-fourths, 71 percent, are very concerned about clean air and water in the future, putting that issue among education, crime/drugs, health care, Social Security and Medicare as major concerns.

- **Voters reject a tradeoff between the environment and a strong economy** by an overwhelming 71 to 22 percent margin.

- **Voters are five times more likely to support candidates who are strong environmentalists** (78 percent) versus candidates who support less government regulation on business (15 percent).

- **Voters are looking for stronger action from government on the environment.** Three-quarters (77 percent) want either stronger enforcement of current laws or stronger laws. This support for greater governmental involvement cuts across partisan and ideological boundaries. While voters generally give government mixed reviews on the environment, their concerns are based largely on a desire for more, not less action. Voters who believe the government does not generally do the right thing place a higher priority on the environment and want stronger action to protect the environment.

[1] A nationwide, representative sample of 1000 respondents was supplemented with the following regional oversamples: 192 respondents in the New England region, 53 respondents in the Middle Atlantic region, 44 respondents in the Southeastern region, 7 respondents in the Great Lakes region, 197 respondents in the Northwestern region, 111 respondents in the Southwestern region, and 146 respondents in the Western region. The data were weighted by region, gender, age, marital status, education, and race to ensure the sample is an accurate reflection of the population. The sample size with this weight applied is 1000 cases.

- **The environment has a direct link to people's lives and, when connected to their health and well-being, it is particularly powerful as a voting issue.** Concern about the environment is fueled to a large extent by its effect on both everyday quality of life and health (30 percent) and on the future (19 percent). Voters feel strongly about these issues, and they are important considerations in their voting decisions (64 percent).

- **Candidates who are strong environmentalists are viewed as embodying some positive qualities that are very important in the current political debate.** Overwhelming majorities believe a strong environmentalist shares their values (72 percent), has the right priorities (70 percent), is responsible (68 percent), cares about children (74 percent), and is on their side (66 percent).

- **Concern about environmental issues – and consideration of these issues when casting a ballot – cuts across party lines.** Democrats (74 percent), Republicans (63 percent) and Independents (74 percent) share concerns about clean air and water issues. Additionally, 72 percent of Democrats, 55 percent of Republicans and 66 percent of Independents will incorporate this concern into their voting decision.

- **Specific environmental concerns correspond to voters' focus on the environment as a quality of life issue.** Regardless of political affiliation, the specific issues that most concern voters are those that impact everyday life and health, such as clean drinking water (81 percent) and clean air (80 percent).

- **Candidates' positions on quality of life environmental issues affect voter support.** Voters are more willing to put their support behind candidates who support efforts to address specific environmental concerns, such as clean water enforcement (82 percent more likely to support) and both open space and wilderness (77 percent). Opposition to these types of efforts is likely to raise doubts about a candidate.

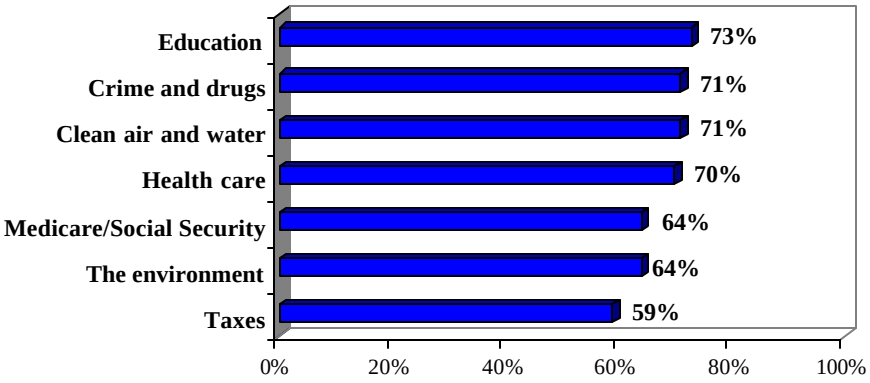
- **Overwhelming majorities believe that the companies or organizations that break environmental laws and pollute should bear the cost of enforcing laws.** An overwhelming 92 percent of voters agree that polluters should pay fines to help pay for law enforcement and 88 percent believe that polluters should pay higher fees for business and dumping permits.

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

Environment is a Top Tier Concern

The environment is in the top tier of issues that concern voters. When asked to rate their level of concern about a variety of issues in the future, 71 percent of voters indicate that they are extremely or very concerned about clean air and water issues, placing these issues on par with education (73 percent), crime and drugs (71 percent), health care (70 percent), and Social Security and Medicare (64 percent). Clean air and water are a particular concern for voters in the West and also for younger women. Both groups rate clean air and water as their number two concern after education (76 percent for each).

Extremely/Very Concerned About Issues in the Future
Percent Responding[1]



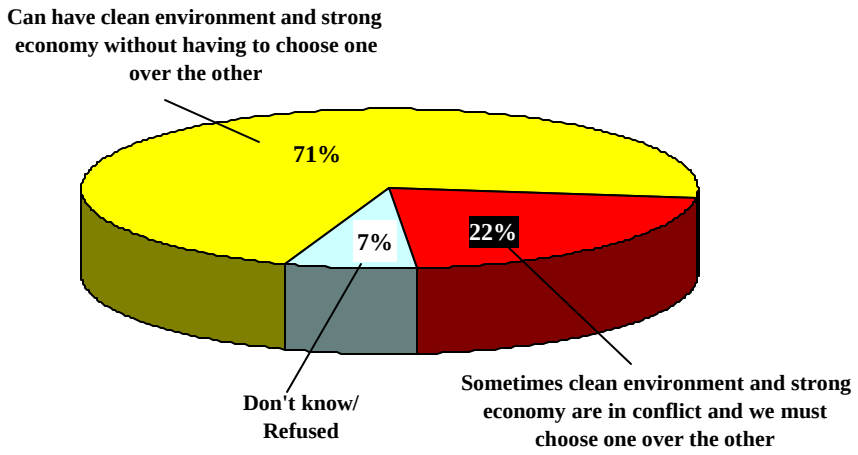
[1] Percent rating issues 8, 9, or 10 on a 0-10 scale, where 10 = extremely concerned, 5 = somewhat concerned, 0 = not concerned

Voters Reject a Trade-off Between a Clean Environment and a Strong Economy

The high level of concern about the environment, coupled with the current economic situation, has created an atmosphere where voters are unwilling to accept a trade-off between a clean environment and a strong economy. A large majority of voters (71 percent) reject the notion that a clean environment and a strong economy are mutually exclusive, compared to 22 percent who feel that a choice between the economy and the environment sometimes must be made.

This feeling that a clean environment and strong economy can – and must – co-exist is consistently high across all regions of the country, with a slight elevation in the Mid-Atlantic (75 percent).

Clean Environment vs. Strong Economy



Voters Are Ready to Take Political Action on the Environment

The high level of concern about environmental issues is rooted in the clear connection voters make between the environment and their everyday lives. On an open-ended basis, two key themes emerge as the reason for the importance of the environment – quality of life (mentioned by 30 percent) and the future (19 percent). Voters are drawn to candidates whose positions reflect a shared concern about these issues, and express doubts about candidates who show an unwillingness to take a stand against them.

Nearly two-thirds of voters (65 percent) characterize environmental and clean air and water issues as important to their voting decision, and 28 percent see these issues as very important. While consideration of environmental issues in the voting decision is high across all regions of the country, it is particularly elevated in the Southeast, where 70 percent characterize environmental and clean air and water issues as important to their voting decision.

Voters show a readiness to vote on the basis of environmental issues. When asked to choose between a candidate who is a strong environmentalist and one who favors reducing government regulation on business, a large majority (78 percent) gives their support to the environmentalist, and nearly half (46 percent) report that they would support this candidate strongly.

Pro-Environment Position Boosts Candidates' Images

Without any other information, voters will view pro-environment candidates as embodying a number of qualities that are very important in today's political debate. Voters were given the following information about two imaginary candidates:

Candidate A is a strong environmentalist
Candidate B supports less government regulation on business.

Huge majorities believe pro-environment candidates share their values (72 percent), care about children (74 percent), and have the right priorities (70 percent). Additionally, about two-thirds see pro-environment candidates as responsible (68 percent), on their side (66 percent), and trustworthy (65 percent). As the next table illustrates, pro-environment candidates enjoy dramatic advantages on all of these qualities over candidates calling for less government regulation on businesses.

It is important to note that pro-environment candidates are not necessarily seen as big spenders. In fact, voters are more likely to attribute this characteristic to candidates who favor reducing government regulation on business (47 percent) than pro-environment candidates (38 percent).

The relatively low attribution of extreme ideological positions to either candidate (i.e., too liberal, too conservative) is further evidence of how environmental concerns cut across party and ideological lines.

Describes Candidates Very Well/Well

	Environment	Less Reg. On Business	Difference
Cares about children	74	42	+32
Shares your values	72	33	+39
Has the right priorities	70	35	+35
Responsible	68	37	+31
On your side	66	31	+35
Trustworthy	65	32	+33
Too close to special interests	42	45	-3
Big spender	38	47	-9
Too liberal	37	32	+5
Too conservative	36	35	+1

Importantly, key swing voter groups, such as younger women, Independents, and moderate/conservative Democrats, are even more likely than the general electorate to credit pro-environment candidates with sharing their values, being trustworthy, being on their side, and being responsible.

Ratings of pro-environment candidates on these important characteristics are high across the country, but are particularly elevated among voters in the West.

Describes Strong Pro-Environment Candidates Very Well/Well

	Total	Younger Women	Independents	Moderate/ Conservative Democrats	West
Shares your values	72	79	77	79	77
Trustworthy	65	72	68	70	71
On your side	66	74	70	71	74
Responsible	68	71	72	71	76

Environmental Issues Cut Across Partisan Lines

Concern about environmental issues and importance of these issues to the voting decision is high across party lines. While these issues have the greatest salience among Democrats and Independents, a majority of Republicans also indicate strong concern and consideration of environmental issues.

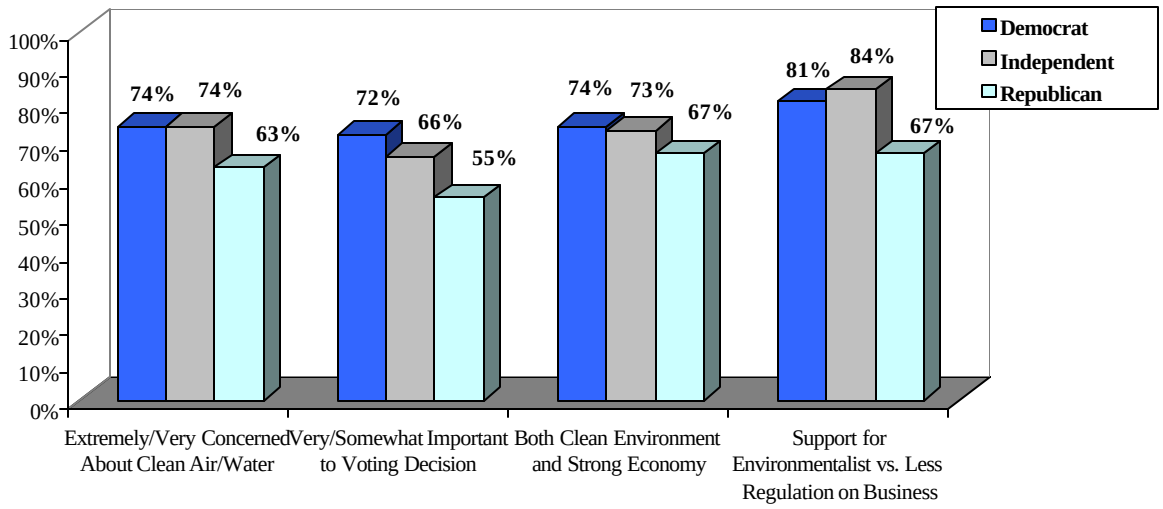
Three-quarters of Democrats (74 percent) and Independents (74 percent) and nearly two-thirds of Republicans (63 percent) indicate high levels of concern about clean air and clean water issues. Each of these partisan groups place clean air and water in their top tier of concerns along with education, crime, and health care (and among Republicans, taxes).

While Democrats are most likely to consider clean air and clean water issues when making a voting decision (72 percent), two-thirds of Independents (66 percent) and more than half of Republicans (55 percent) indicate that these issues figure prominently in their deliberations.

Large majorities of all three groups believe that we do not have to choose between a clean environment and a strong economy. Three-quarters of Democrats and Independents reject this trade-off (74 percent and 73 percent, respectively), as do two-thirds of Republicans (67 percent).

Support for pro-environment candidates versus candidates who support less government regulation on business follow similar patterns. More than four in five Democrats (81 percent) and Independents (84 percent) would give their support to pro-environment candidates, and two-thirds of Republicans (67 percent) report that they would do the same.

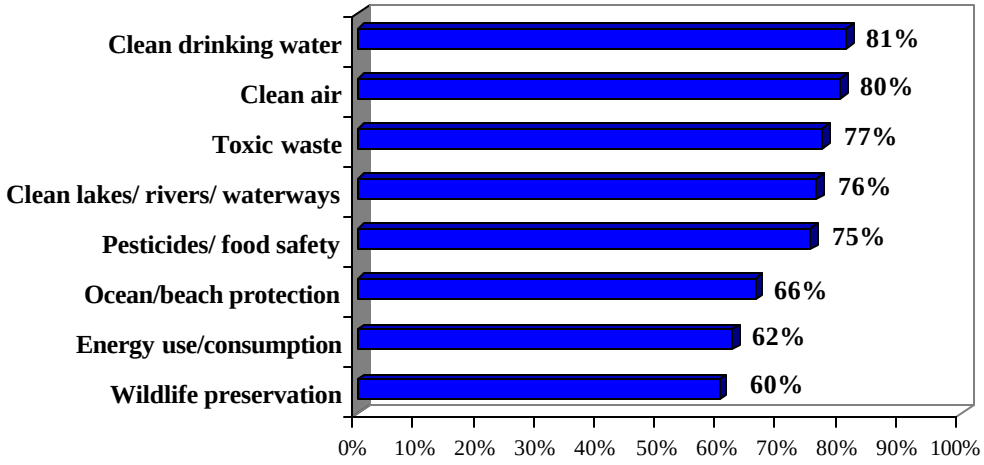
Concern About and Importance of The Environment/Clean Air and Water



ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUE SPECIFICS

The connection between the environment and everyday quality of life is further evidenced in the level of concern voters have about specific environmental issues. The most salient issues are those that affect everyday quality of life and have immediate implications for the health and safety of their families. Large majorities of voters indicate extreme concern about clean drinking water (81 percent), clean air (80 percent), toxic waste (77 percent), clean waterways (76 percent), and food safety (75 percent). The importance of these issues is constant across demographic groups and party affiliation.

Extremely/Very Concerned About Environmental Issues
Percent Responding[1]



[1] Percent rating issues 8, 9, or 10 on a 0-10 scale, where 10 = extremely concerned, 5 = somewhat concerned, 0 = not concerned

Respondents in every region ranked either clean water or clean air as the environmental issue that concerned them most. A number of regional distinctions arise in concern about specific environmental issues. Voters in New England have greater sensitivity to issues pertaining to pesticides and food safety (80 percent) and wildlife protection (66 percent), while those in the Southeast and Southwest report a higher level of concern about energy use and consumption (69 percent and 66 percent, respectively). Several issues are elevated among voters in the West, including clean drinking water (86 percent), clean air (84 percent), toxic waste (81 percent), clean waterways (81 percent), and ocean/beach protection (70 percent).

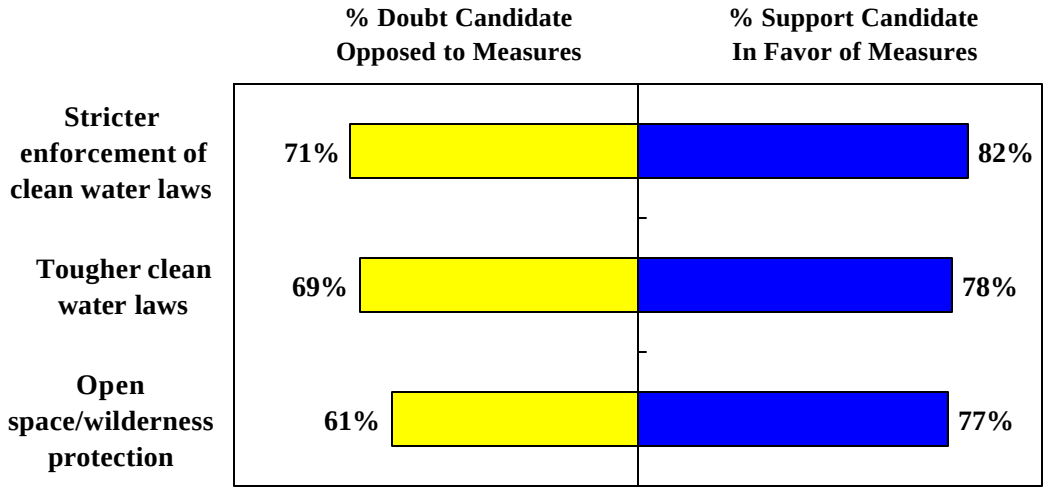
Specific Environmental Positions Affect Voters' Willingness to Support Candidates

The importance of the environment to the voting decision spills over to specific environmental issues, particularly those that have a direct impact on quality of life and health. Voters report increased support for candidates and officials who have taken a stand on these quality of life environmental issues, and an elevated level of doubt about candidates who actively oppose pro-environment measures.

Clean water emerges as the issue most likely to rally support or raise doubts about candidates, both in terms of enforcement of current regulations and the passage of new laws. A large majority of voters are more likely to support candidates who support stricter enforcement of clean water laws (82 percent), while 71 percent report serious doubts about candidates who oppose stricter enforcement. Additionally, 78 percent of voters report increased likelihood to support candidates who support passage of tougher clean water laws, while 69 percent have serious doubts about candidates opposing these laws.

Likewise, open space and wilderness preservation resonate strongly with voters. More than three-quarters (77 percent) are more likely to support a candidate in favor of these types of measures, and 61 percent have very serious doubts about a candidate who opposes them.

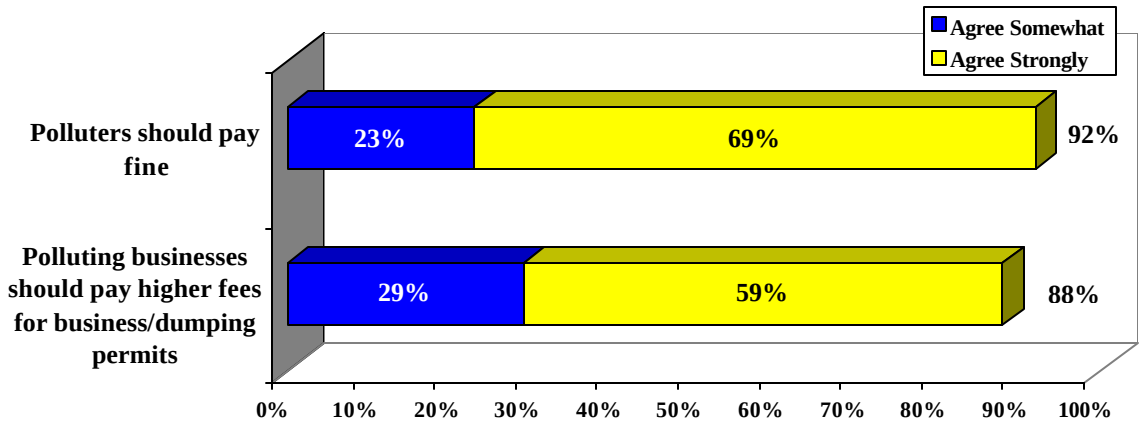
Effect of Environmental Positions on Candidate Support



Polluters Should Fund Enforcement Efforts

An overwhelming majority of voters feels that businesses violating environmental laws should be held *financially* accountable for their practices, and help defray the costs of enforcement, either in the form of fines for offenses (92 percent) or higher fees for business or dumping permits (88 percent).

Who Should Pay for Environmental Law Enforcement



Voters Demand Stronger Action From the Government

Voters are looking for the government to take a stronger role in environmental regulation. More than three-quarters (77 percent) support increased government involvement, either in the form of stricter regulations or stronger enforcement of current laws.

Interestingly, this call for greater governmental involvement in environmental regulation cuts across partisan and ideological lines. While Democrats are most likely to favor increased government involvement (82 percent) – particularly liberal Democrats (87 percent) – more than two-thirds of Republicans (69 percent) also agree that stronger environmental laws or enforcement are needed. Liberal or moderate Republicans are in greater agreement with this position (78 percent), although 64 percent of conservative Republicans also feel the necessity for stronger governmental involvement in environmental issues.

Voters are not satisfied with government's performance on the environment. Just a bare plurality, 42 percent, believes government does the right thing on the environment, and nearly as many, 39 percent, think they generally do the wrong thing. In fact, voters who think government generally does the wrong thing are the strongest advocates for stricter laws and stronger enforcement; therefore, much of this dissatisfaction is based on a call for more action.