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Voting Preferences and the Environment in the American Electorate

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Despite evidence of a growing environmental consensus in the United States, students of electoral politics have long debated the political significance of environmentalism by noting the near absence of this issue from national political campaigns. Unfortunately, with only limited survey data available in the past, the few studies to address environmental voting did more to report a deficiency than to explain why it should be the case. In this study I use 1996 National Election Study (NES) data to examine the impact of environmental concern on attitudes toward American political parties and their candidates. Data results on issue positions and proximities confirm that while environmental issues represent a strength of the Democratic ticket, those issues seldom shape individual vote preferences for three reasons: (1) low issue salience; (2) small perceived differences between candidates on matters of environmental policy; and (3) the tendency of environmental concern to cut across traditional (and more powerful) cleavages, including partisan identification.

Keywords environmental attitudes, issue salience, partisan identification, political parties, U.S. elections, voting

> In democracies, the "bottom line" for judging the strength of public opinion is the impact of that opinion on the electoral process. (Riley E. Dunlap, 1989, 130)

Despite evidence of a growing environmental consensus in the United States, students of electoral politics have long questioned the political significance of environmentalism by noting the near absence of those issues from national political campaigns (Mitchell 1984; Dunlap 1987; Dunlap 1991). While the environment has been defended as a pivotal issue by some, particularly in state and local elections (Lake 1983; Udall 1987), the unwillingness of American voters to cast ballots for candidates at the national level on the basis of their environmental records or positions seems clear. In fact, the failure of environmental issues at the polls was so striking in the 1980s through early 1990s that some scholars and political pundits seemed ready to dismiss the environment as a political "paper tiger," long on talk, but short on action (Taylor 1992; Zaller 1992).[1]

Expectation and conventional wisdom aside, however, there has been remarkably little systematic study of environmental preferences as an influence on electoral choice. Indeed, with only limited survey data available, the few studies to address

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environmental voting in the United States have done more to report a deficiency than to explain why it should be the case (Mitchell 1984; Dunlap 1987; Dunlap 1991).[2] With recent additions to the National Election Study and recent shifts in the partisan balance in Congress, there is a dual incentive now to revisit and reconsider the political consequences of environmental concern.

For example, with a Republican-led legislature scaling back wildlife protection and pollution control laws since 1994, poll watchers in increasing number in the popular press have predicted that the environment will emerge as a potent political weapon for Democrats, in particular one that can be used as a "wedge" issue to attract young, socially moderate voters away from the Republican party (Kriz 1995; Kriz 1996; Garland 1996; Borosage and Greenberg 1997; St. Clair 1997; Bedard 1998). Using a new series of variables introduced in the 1996 National Election Study (NES), this study tests the potential of that claim by measuring the impact of environmental issues on attitudes toward American political parties and their candidates.

In confirming that environmental issues seldom shape individual vote preferences, NES data are valuable nevertheless in helping to identify the reasons why. Results demonstrate that in contrast to other social, economic, and political concerns, environmental issues are comparatively weak in national electoral politics because of three factors: (1) low issue salience; (2) small perceived differences between candidates on matters of environmental policy; and (3) the tendency of environmental concerns to cut across traditional (and more powerful) cleavages, including partisan identification. Consequently, while the environment might be an important "swing" issue for Independents—those voters less weighted by the anchor of partisanship—the potential for partisan defection among Republican identifiers remains low.

Theory and Background

As Carmines and Stimson (1980, 79) aptly pointed out, "the study of issue voting is infused with normative considerations." Voters who cast ballots based on their policy preferences relative to those of party candidates are often assumed to make decisions that are more rational, wise, and sophisticated (Downs 1957; Nie et al. 1976; Margolis 1977). Likewise, issue voting would seem to ensure an active link between the views of citizens and those of elected officials in a way that ultimately enhances popular sovereignty and collective responsibility. In fact, on issues where that electoral link fails to materialize, we might expect a similar disconnect in Congress. Environmental issues provide a prime example.

In writing on the impact of environmental issues in presidential campaigns, Shabecoff (1992, 73–74) summed up a weak environmental record bluntly. So far, he said,

> environmentalism has had remarkably little impact on electoral politics, particularly at the national level. Although people might care a great deal about the environment, they have not, at least in the past, voted for candidates largely because of environmental records or positions.

The consequences of that deficiency are clear, at least according to some scholars. Votes on environmental issues in Congress tend to split along a strong partisan divide, despite a growing environmental consensus in the mass public that cuts across party lines (Cooley and Wandesforde-Smith 1970; Dunlap and Gale 1974; Dunlap and Allen 1976; Calvert 1979). While some find that congressional roll call votes are consistent with voter demands (Snyder 1996), others insist that environmental policies are virtually

unaffected by constituents' environmental preferences (Dunlap and Allen 1976). If true, according to Lake (1983, 230–231), the latter suggests a troublesome "gap between the policy preferences of the electorate and the actions of elected representatives."

Unfortunately, the consequences of lacking a substantial "green" vote have drawn more attention than its causes. Why might environmental issues falter in national electoral politics? Academic literature published within the field of political science outlines at least three possibilities, all of which will be examined empirically in this article using survey data.

Issue Salience

First, perhaps environmental issues fail to influence individual vote preferences because those concerns lack a needed degree of intensity or personal importance to voters. Zaller (1992) noted this very possibility in arguing that the weak impact of the environment on candidate evaluations in the 1991 NES Pilot Study might have been an "artifact" of low salience during a year understandably dominated by foreign policy concerns surrounding the Persian Gulf War. Zaller's conclusion suggests, then, that environmental issues might indeed generate a stronger political punch if and when Americans become convinced that the nation's environment is in crisis. Several recent articles in the popular press that report the public's growing dissatisfaction with the environmental priorities of Republican leaders in Congress follow this same logic (Kriz 1995; Kriz 1996).

Empirical evidence on issue salience among scholars, however, is decidedly mixed. Schuman and Presser (1981) argued that the intensity with which attitudes are held conditions behavioral intention and that voters who consider an issue to be "important" are more likely to translate their convictions into political action. Still, Rabinowitz et al. (1982, 53, 57) found that "salience plays a substantial but not overwhelming role in determining candidate evaluations" and that it "cannot be deemed the sole or even the dominant factor" in understanding vote preferences. Other factors must be considered as well.

Perception of Party Differences on Issues

A second possible explanation in the literature recognizes that the likelihood of an issue vote depends on the ability of citizens to distinguish between the policy positions of candidates.[3] For example, in *The American Voter*, Campbell et al. (1960) noted that for issue positions to influence individual vote preferences, several cumulative conditions must be met. The first condition is largely cognitive: The voter must be aware of the existence of an issue like the environment and must have formed an opinion about it. Not surprisingly, some minimal intensity of feeling (or salience) defines the second condition. Equally important, however, is the third—that is, the voter's ability to discriminate accurately between the policy positions of the two parties and/or their candidates. Without the latter, wrote Campbell and his colleagues (1960, 179), the issue can have "no meaningful bearing on partisan choice."

Given a low degree of voter interest and even lower levels of political knowledge and information, Campbell et al. (1960) found that most voters fail to perceive party differences, even on important matters of public policy. A number of scholars have contradicted this basic finding, arguing that issues increase in power when candidates actively articulate their policy alternatives, as during the Vietnam War (Page and Brody 1972; Pomper 1972; Pomper 1975; Nie et al. 1976), but the basic point remains. Clarity

about political issues depends upon clarity of choice. If voters perceive little difference between candidates on matters of environmental policy, they may be left to decide based on other issues or considerations.[4]

Partisan Loyalty

A third and final reason why environmental issues rarely impact vote preferences may be the elemental power of partisanship and its ability to condition which candidate voters see as most capable of handling environmental problems. For example, Peffley et al. (1987) found that judgments of party competence—central to the logic of issue voting—appear to change slowly in response to new information, and are clearly constrained by prior beliefs and long-standing partisan loyalties. That logic has a clear implication here. Voting "green" often demands that loyal Republicans cross party lines to vote for liberal political candidates or strict regulatory policies, decisions they may be reluctant to make on principled grounds.

Data Analysis

For the first time, in 1996 the National Election Study devoted an extensive battery of questions to environmental issues (Rosenstone et al. 1998). The goal, as one pair of scholars put it, was to "embed the study of the environment in the broader context of national politics and to unpack the political consequences of the environment on the ways that citizens evaluate candidates and make vote choices in national elections" (Berinksy and Rosenstone 1996). By including measures that tap perceptions of environmental quality, the placement of candidates along seven-point issue scales, the ability of parties and their candidates to handle environmental problems, and the general importance of environmental issues to voters, it is a dataset ideally suited to the issues raised here.

The NES is uniquely valuable for one additional reason. With parallel instrumentation across many measures, the study allows for direct comparison between environmental issues and other social, economic, and political concerns, including abortion, defense, education, and so on. The extent to which environmental attitudes are similar to (or different from) opinions on other issues may also help us to understand its electoral potential.

On Environmental Issues, Most Voters Side With the Democratic Party and Its Candidates, but That Preference Ultimately Has Little Bearing on Presidential Evaluations

First and foremost, 1996 NES data are unambiguous on one point. By all accounts and measures, the environment is a strong issue for the Democratic party and its candidates. As Table 1 indicates, although respondents have some tendency to see their own party as best able to handle the "problem of pollution and the environment," a significant number of Republicans—35% of weak identifiers and 27% of strong—believe that the Democratic party would do a "better job" in that area nevertheless.

Interestingly enough, data that follow in Table 2 demonstrate that among Republicans alone, the perceived strength of the Democratic party on environmental policy outranks *all* other issues used on the NES questionnaire. Respondents were asked to rate party competence on a range of social and economic problems, including poverty, health care, welfare, crime, foreign affairs, and the budget deficit. While few Republican identifiers placed greater relative faith with the Democrats in "handling the nation's

TABLE 1 Party Performance on Pollution and the Environment: "Which do you think would do a better job of handling the problem of pollution and the environment—the Democrats, the Republicans, or wouldn't there be any difference between them?" (v960403)

	Percent responding		
Partisan identification	Democratic Party	No difference	Republican Party
Strong Democrat	71.8%	24.7%	3.5%
Weak Democrat	48.3	46.6	5.1
Independent-Democrat	51.4	43.9	4.7
Independent	29.1	57.0	13.9
Independent-Republican	28.1	53.7	18.3
Weak Republican	35.0	47.0	18.0
Strong Republican	27.0	40.5	32.4

Note: Number of cases = 842. Chi-square = 134.5 ($p = .001$). Degrees of freedom = 12. Gamma = 0.400. From National Election Study, 1996 (ICPSR 6896).

TABLE 2 Democratic Party Strengths Among Republican Voters

Variable	Issue	Percentage of Republicans who believe the Democratic Party would do a better job
v960403	Handling the problem of pollution and the environment	31.1%
v960401	Handling the problem of poverty	23.5
v960399	Making health care more affordable	20.1
v960400	Reforming the welfare system	9.5
v960398	Handling foreign affairs	7.0
v960402	Handling the budget deficit	6.5
v960404	Dealing with the crime problem	6.1
v960397	Handling the nation's economy	4.3
v960408	Keeping out of war	3.9

Note: All questions were asked of random half-samples, leading to relatively small sample sizes ranging from 228 to 231 respondents. All"Republicans" self-identified as such in v960420. No Independent "leaners" were included in this category. From National Election Study, 1996 (ICPSR 6896).

economy" or "keeping out of war," 31% sided with the Democrats on the environment. Both of these comparative factors—across issues and among partisan groups—suggest that the potential for vote defection on environmental issues might well exceed other policy arenas.

An entirely different (and more realistic) picture emerges, however, when environmental issues are added into a fully specified model of presidential evaluations. Using thermometer scales tapping respondents' feelings about Bill Clinton and Bob Dole as dependent variables, environmental preferences all but disappear among a sea of competing influences, including controls for partisan identification and political ideology. Despite more stable foreign policies and a strong national economy in 1996, ordinary least squares (OLS) regression results reported in Table 3 largely confirm

TABLE 3 Influences on the Evaluation of Presidential Candidates

Independent Variables		Bill Clinton OLS slope estimate	Bill Clinton Standard error	Bob Dole OLS slope estimate	Bob Dole Standard error
Political variables					
v960420	Partisan identification	−6.53***	(0.42)	4.06***	(0.39)
v960365	Political ideology	−2.57***	(0.66)	2.79***	(0.63)
Issue positions					
v960523	Environment/economy	0.24	(0.49)	0.21	(0.46)
v960479	Government health insurance	−0.98*	(0.44)	0.77	(0.42)
v960483	Guaranteed job/standard of living	−0.51	(0.52)	0.10	(0.49)
v960450	Services/spending	2.56***	(0.54)	−0.96	(0.50)
v960487	Aid to blacks	0.03	(0.52)	−0.91	(0.49)
v960519	Reduce crime	−0.35	(0.39)	−0.12	(0.37)
v960543	Women's rights	−0.55	(0.45)	0.45	(0.43)
v960463	Defense spending	−0.40	(0.54)	1.18*	(0.51)
v960503	Abortion rights	1.06	(0.58)	−1.09	(0.55)
v960385	State of the nation's economy	−3.95***	(0.49)	1.26**	(0.46)
Demographic characteristics					
v960605	Age	0.00	(0.04)	0.11**	(0.04)
v960610	Education	−0.83	(0.47)	0.37	(0.44)
v960701	Income	−0.20	(0.13)	0.31*	(0.12)
v960066	Gender	−1.03	(1.33)	−0.24	(1.25)
v960067	Race	4.33	(2.35)	4.60*	(2.22)
Intercept		99.47	(6.38)	16.53	(6.00)
Mean feeling thermometer score		59.3		51.8	
Number of cases		891		888	
R^2		.609		.409	

Note: Preelection feeling thermometers for Bill Clinton (v960272) and Bob Dole (V960273) were used as dependent variables in these equations. All estimates were obtained using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. Standard errors appear in parentheses. Significance is indicated by $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$. From National Election Study, 1996 (ICPSR 6896).

Zaller's (1992) claim about the 1991 NES Pilot Study. He wrote that environmental preferences "carry relatively little political weight, in that they add little or nothing to our ability to explain important dependent variables, such as presidential evaluations."[5] The remaining analysis in this article is geared toward understanding why that is the case, focusing on the three theoretical explanations outlined earlier.

Comparatively Few Respondents Meet Necessary and Sufficient Conditions for Issue Voting on the Environment

Recall that a substantial body of literature in the field of political psychology posits issue voting as the end result of a cumulative process of conditions that citizens either

succeed (or fail) to meet (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960; Aldrich et al. 1989). If that is the case, perhaps environmental issues do not influence candidate evaluations because comparatively few respondents see differences between major party candidates on that issue or because those concerns fail to matter to them personally with enough intensity to motivate action.

This first suspicion is confirmed in Table 4. The average respondent is clearly more proximate to Bill Clinton on environmental issues. Still, in contrast to other issues where respondents align themselves and each presidential candidate along similar seven-point issue scales, smaller differences are perceived on both environmental items, the first measuring support for environmental policies that cost jobs or "otherwise reduce our standard of living" (1.08), and the second rating commitment to environmental regulations that place a burden on business (1.33).

The broader impact of this pattern can be seen in Table 5, where the percent of respondents meeting cumulative criteria for issue voting is lower on the environment, again relative to other issues and concerns. In all, fewer than 30% of those polled could place themselves on the issue scale and differentiate accurately between the respective policy positions of the candidates. That final tally also reflects the fact that fewer respondents considered the balance between environmental and economic goals to be of great importance to them.

In sum, the first two hypotheses—low issue salience and small perceived differences between candidates—find support here.

While the Environment Might be an Important "Swing" Issue for Some Independents, the Potential for Partisan Defection Among Republican Identifiers Remains Low

Third, perhaps environmental issues fail to impact voting preferences because of the tendency of those concerns to cut across traditional (and more powerful) cleavages, including partisan identification (Peffley et al. 1987). To answer that question, of course, demands that candidate and party effects be isolated from the impact of the issue itself. It is an undeniably difficult task. Still, in his study of abortion attitudes, Smith (1994) argued that issues can be disentangled successfully from other influences in cases where policy preferences and party loyalty are in conflict. In other words, if an issue is politically potent, voters with the same party identification but different extremes of opinion should display distinct voting patterns.

To see if this expectation holds true, Figure 1 plots the interaction of partisanship and environmental policy preferences in determining vote behavior. Here, a postelection measure of actual vote choice (recalled and self-reported by respondents) is operationalized as a dichotomous preference for Bill Clinton or Bob Dole, with probabilities calculated from bivariate logistic regressions run for each group of partisan identifiers.

As a visual comparison of the slopes of each regression line makes clear, Republican identifiers were more likely to vote for Clinton when their position on the environment/economy scale favored environmental issues. Despite the role of partisanship in shaping and filtering political information, Republican voters were not blind to Clinton's environmental stance, especially when that issue was one they felt strongly about. Yet neither were voters especially inclined to cast ballots in the end that opposed their party simply because of environmental issues. The willingness of Democrats to vote for Clinton was entirely independent of environmental issues or positions. Meanwhile, Republicans who strongly supported the environment may have been more likely to vote for Clinton, but the true impact of environmental preferences on the vote clearly

TABLE 4 Mean Perceptions of Candidates on Seven-Point Issue Scales

Issue	Self	Bill Clinton	Bob Dole	Difference between candidates
Environmental issues				
Environment/economy	3.53	3.47	4.55	1.08
Environmental regulation	3.42	3.24	4.57	1.33
Other issues				
Government health insurance	3.97	2.86	5.08	2.22
Guaranteed job/standard of living	4.46	3.27	5.09	1.82
Services/spending	3.89	4.91	3.14	1.76
Aid to blacks	4.82	3.32	5.00	1.68
Reduce crime	4.46	3.70	5.10	1.40
Women's rights	2.25	2.18	3.38	1.20
Defense spending	4.02	3.95	4.65	0.70

Note: From National Election Study, 1996 (ICPSR 6896). Question wording on 7-point issue scales is as follows:

Environment/economy scale: "Some people think it is important to protect the environment even if it costs some jobs or otherwise reduces our standard of living. (Suppose these people are at one end of the scale, at point number 1.) Other people think that protecting the environment is not as important as maintaining jobs and our standard of living. (Suppose these people are at the other end of the scale, at point number 7.) And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between, at points 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6. Where would you place [yourself; Bill Clinton; Bob Dole] on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?" [v960523, v960526, v960529]

Environmental regulation scale: "Some people think we need much tougher government regulations on business in order to protect the environment. (Suppose these people are at one end of a scale, at point 1.) Others think that current regulations to protect the environment are already too much of a burden on business. (Suppose these people are at the other end of the scale, a point number 7.) And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between at points 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6. Where would you place [yourself; Bill Clinton; Bob Dole] on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?" [v960537, v960538, v960539]

Government health insurance scale: "There is much concern about the rapid rise in medical and hospital costs. Some people feel there should be a government insurance plan which would cover all medical and hospital expenses for everyone. (Suppose these people are at one end of a scale, at point 1). Others feel that all medical expenses should be paid by individuals and through private insurance plans like Blue Cross or some other company paid plans. (Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7). And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between at points 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6. Where would you place [yourself; Bill Clinton; Bob Dole] on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?" [v960479, v960480, v960481]

Guaranteed job/standard of living scale: "Some people feel the government in Washington should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living. (Suppose these people are at one end of a scale, at point 1.) Others think the government should just let each person get ahead on their own. (Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7.) And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between, at points 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6. Where would you place [yourself; Bill Clinton; Bob Dole] on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?" [v960483, v960484, v960485]

Services/spending scale: "Some people think the government should provide fewer services even in areas such as health and education in order to reduce spending. Suppose these people are at one end of a scale, at point [7]. Other people feel it is important for the government to provide many more services even if it means an increase in spending. Suppose these people are at the other end, at point [1]. And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between, at points 2, 3, 4, 5 or 6. Where would you place [yourself; Bill Clinton; Bob Dole] on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?" [v960450, v960453, v960455]

depends on intercepts—the starting points of individual voters. Simply put, Republicans were more predisposed against Clinton for other reasons. His environmental positions may have made him a somewhat more attractive candidate to proenvironmental Republicans, but in this case it appears not to have persuaded them to cross party lines.

It is important to note, however, that the environment may have been a crucial issue for some voters. Independents who prioritized environmental protection over the state of the economy were pushed toward casting a vote in favor of Clinton. In this sense, environmental concern may not supplant the deep anchor of partisanship, but for "swing" voters less attached to party, it may provide an important source of differentiation between candidates, if those policy differences are clearly articulated. In some elections and under some conditions, therefore, the electoral impact of environmentalism might be strong enough to cause a meaningful shift at the margins. In hoping that shift will be enough to "reshape the House and upset Republican hopes for the White House," Daniel J. Weiss, political director of the Sierra Club, noted that "nearly every race is a fight over 10–20 percent of the electorate," and so every vote at the margins counts (Kriz 1995, 2262).

Democrats Hoping to Use the Environmental Agenda to Attract "Swing" Voters Are Caught in a Catch-22

The news for environmentalists, however, is both good and bad. The potential for environmental issues to make a difference at the polls seems to lie with Independent voters who are less weighted by the anchor of partisanship. They are, however, the

TABLE 4 *Footnote Continued*

Aid to blacks scale: "Some people feel that the government in Washington should make every effort to improve the social and economic position of blacks. (Suppose these people are at one end of a scale, at point 1.) Others feel that the government should not make any special effort to help blacks because they should help themselves. (Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7) And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between, at points 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6. Where would you place [yourself; Bill Clinton; Bob Dole] on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?" [v960487, v960490, v960492]

Reduce crime scale: "Some people say that the best way to reduce crime is to address the social problems that cause crime, like bad schools, poverty and joblessness. (Suppose these people are at one end of a scale, at point 1.) Other people say the best way to reduce crime is to make sure that criminals are caught, convicted and punished. (Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7.) And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between at points 2, 3, 4, 5 or 6. Where would you place [yourself; Bill Clinton; Bob Dole] on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?" [v960519, v960520, v960521]

Women's rights scale: "Recently there was been a lot of talk about women's rights. Some people feel that women should have an equal role with men in running business, industry, and government. (Suppose these people are at one end of a scale, at point 1.) Others feel that a woman's place is in the home. (Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7.) And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between, at points 2, 3, 4, 5 or 6. Where would you place [yourself; Bill Clinton; Bob Dole] on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?" [v960543, v960544, v960545]

Defense spending scale: "Some people believe that we should spend much less money for defense. Suppose these people are at one end of a scale, at point 1. Others feel that defense spending should be greatly increased. Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7. And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between at points 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6. Where would you place [yourself; Bill Clinton; Bob Dole] on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?" [v960463, v960466, v960469]

TABLE 5 Percent of Respondents Meeting Various Criteria for Issue Voting

Criterion	Services/ spending	Abortion	Aid to blacks	Environment/ economy	Defense spending
Placed self on issue scale	85.5%	99.4%	91.1%	85.2%	86.4%
Placed self and both major-party presidential candidates on issue scale	79.9	80.9	78.6	75.1	76.8
Placed self and saw difference between major-party presidential candidates on issue scale	71.6	66.6	63.8	57.8	65.6
Placed self and saw Democratic presidential candidate Bill Clinton as more liberal than Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole on issue scale	61.8	57.9	57.2	46.0	45.4
Placed self and saw Democratic presidential candidate Bill Clinton as more liberal than Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole on an issue he/she thinks is "very" or "extremely" important	46.0	40.3	31.5	29.8[a]	29.1

Note: [a] This estimate drops further to 19.8% when only those who favor the environmental end of the scale are considered. From National Election Study, 1996 (ICPSR 6896).

group least likely to see important differences between the parties on matters of environmental policy, suggesting a Catch-22 of sorts (see again Table 1). Independents, too, are middle-of-the-road on most environmental issues and remain so in their general ideological views. "Green" candidates who promote policy differences from the top down might inspire swing voters to favor the Democratic party, but if seen as too liberal or too extreme, those proposals could well alienate the moderate voters they were designed to attract.

Discussion

In the end, if most Americans fail to act on their environmental preferences at the polls, at least at the national level, does that mean that the environment is of little consequence politically? To answer in the affirmative, despite the strong suggestion of environmental attitudes in the NES, would be premature for several reasons.

First, as survey data suggest, environmental issues can, for certain voters under certain conditions, influence voting preferences in high-profile national elections. For this reason, risk-averse politicians who promote their environmental positions may be doing so wisely. As Bosso (1994, 33) reasoned, "strong public concern does not

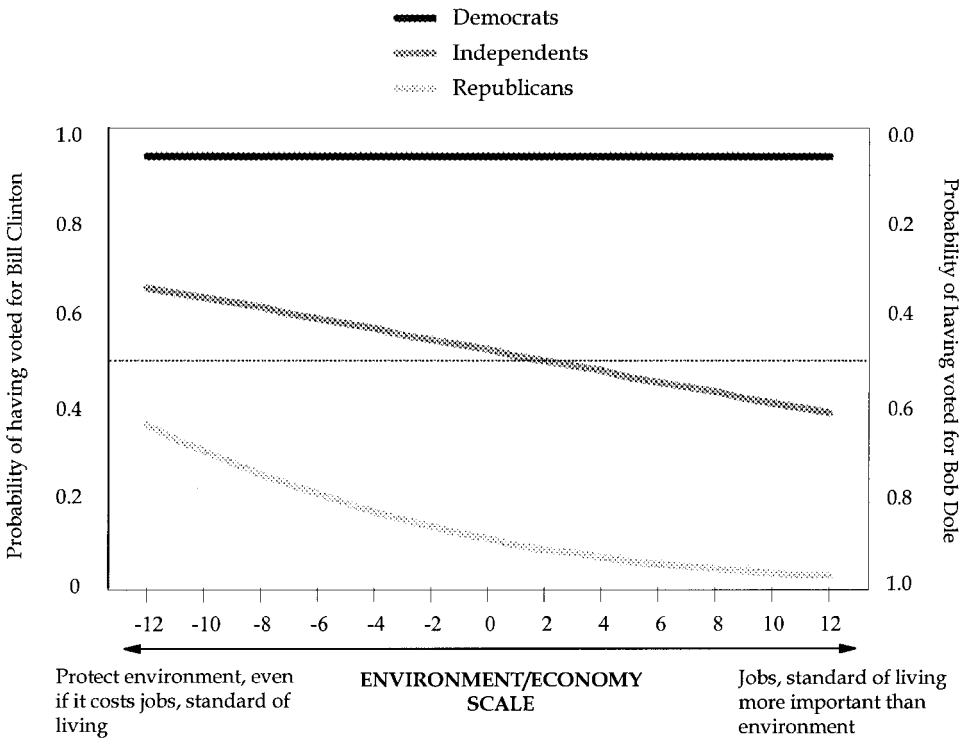

FIGURE 1 Partisanship and the environment in the 1996 presidential election. The lines plotted were calculated from separate bivariate logistic regressions run for each group of partisan identifiers. The dependent variable used in this analysis is a postelection measure of actual vote choice, self-reported by respondents in variable v961082. The independent variable, combining variables v960523 and v960525, reflects both the direction and intensity of respondents' preferences along the environment/economy scale.

translate automatically into policy responses. It translates only into opportunities for leadership that may or may not be exploited," a lesson that Democrats are just beginning to learn (Kriz 1995). In close races where victory is won at the margins, elite agenda setting by proenvironmental candidates might be successful in defining a unique environmental agenda and increasing the salience of environmental issues—both factors that should, according to data presented here, ultimately shape the likelihood of an environmental vote. But there is a danger here as well. As politicians and business leaders from both sides of the political fence learn to embrace the environmental issue as their own (Schneider 1990), the ability to "harness" latent public concern and provide leadership will become an increasingly important political and electoral skill. As Bragdon and Donovan (1990, 186) warned:

> If more candidates on both sides of the aisle tout environmental credentials, it may become more difficult for these groups to draw public distinctions between allies and adversaries. As long as candidates like George Bush can win while touting environmental credentials that were highly suspect in the environmental community, politicians may have little incentive to change their behavior.

In other words, given elections that invite environmental symbolism and the "greenwashing" of legislative records, proenvironmental candidates do not necessarily become proenvironmental legislators (Ridgeway 1998).

Second, criticism of environmental attitudes and their impact on vote preferences ignores other potential ways in which the environmental views of the electorate are represented. Environmental organizations such as the Sierra Club and the League of Conservation Voters often serve as active mediators between citizens and their elected representatives. By lobbying Congress directly and by contributing funds to the political campaigns of proenvironmental candidates, these groups may help to hold representatives responsible for their legislative actions when and if voters fail to do so (Mitchell 1990; Mitchell et al. 1992). To suppose, then, that elected officials cannot be held accountable for their environmental policies without a tangible electoral incentive underestimates the ability of environmental concerns to influence the public agenda in other ways. As Paige (1998, 16) put it:

> Without ever having elected a Green Party candidate to major public office or putting major components of their agenda on a ballot, environmentalists have succeeded—through agitation, litigation and cajoling friends in high places—in seizing the levers of power and bending the machinery of government to their will, turning the movement outside in.

In the end, while the environment has been branded a political "paper tiger" by some (Taylor 1992), the failure of such issues to structure individual vote preferences in candidate elections is hardly surprising, nor is it a sweeping indictment of mass environmentalism. On the one hand, students of public opinion and voting behavior have long stressed the importance of psychological and attitudinal forces in shaping the vote, such as partisan identification and candidate evaluations (Campbell et al. 1960). If voters tend to "project" or "rationalize" their own environmental views vis-à-vis their preferred political party, however, party identification fails to provide any meaningful short-hand cue to aid in environmental voting. Moreover, given low levels of voter interest and knowledge on most political issues, many researchers have downplayed the importance of any policy preferences in shaping vote preferences (Campbell et al. 1960). True, Brody and Page (1972) and others find that issue voting increases when candidates articulate clear policy alternatives from which to choose, but this seems unlikely for all but the most controversial environmental issues. If a majority of voters are genuinely concerned about the environment, it stands to reason that few political candidates come out opposed, at least in principle and in rhetoric, to environmental policies (Schneider 1990). With little perceived difference between candidates on environmental issues, therefore, voters may be left to decide based on other issues or considerations.

Finally, given that environmental issues are seldom raised in presidential and congressional campaigns, criticism of its impact on voting preferences may also reflect a continuing misperception of the nature of national elections. As McCloskey (1987, 2) bluntly put it: "They are not plebiscites on this question." Perhaps, then, we would more fairly judge the environment's "bottom line" by looking to other political arenas (Dunlap 1989), such as ballot initiatives and referendums at the state and local level where environmental issues seem to enjoy greater salience and less competition for room on a crowded political agenda (Lake 1983; Guber 1995; Guber 1996; Kahn and Matsusaka 1997). In the final analysis, if a stronger and more direct "electoral

connection" can be found there, it suggests that the uphill political battle faced by environmentalists may be at least half won.

Notes

1. The reelection of Ronald Reagan in 1984 was, perhaps, the first presidential election to cast serious doubt on the electoral impact of environmentalism. With a meager environmental record, unrivaled attention to deregulation and economic growth, and controversial political appointees such as James Watt and Anne Burford, many environmentalists hoped the Reagan record would lead to political liability at the ballot box (Stanfield 1984). Even though polling evidence suggests that voters were both aware and disapproving of Reagan's record on the environment (Dunlap 1987), the issue affected his political success little in the end. In fact, Dunlap (1987, 34) "wonders if the electorate had somehow forgotten or forgiven Reagan's environmental misdeeds by late 1984" by awarding a landslide reelection.

2. In all fairness, it should be noted that both Mitchell (1984) and Dunlap (1987; 1991) suggested possible reasons for the weak electoral impact of environmentalism, with Mitchell stressing high public support for environmental goals in conjunction with low issue salience, and Dunlap emphasizing a "permissive consensus" that affords elected officials considerable flexibility and independence in pursuing environmental policies. Because of a lack of available data, however, neither was able to examine issue voting on the environment directly.

3. While there is some disagreement in the literature regarding the cognitive process of issue voting—"spatial" (Downs 1957; Enelow and Hinich 1984; Westholm 1997) or "directional" (Rabinowitz and Macdonald 1989; Macdonald et al. 1995; Macdonald et al. 1998)—both models require that voters perceive differences between the candidates on issues that matter to them.

4. In this sense, the environment may fail to influence individual vote preferences because it is a "valence" issue—that is, one on which nearly everyone agrees, either in practice or in rhetoric (Stokes 1963). Asked once about his thoughts on Earth Day, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-GA) quipped it was the day when "Republicans dress up in drag and pretend that they're environmentalists" (Kriz 1996).

5. The choice here of a candidate evaluation scale over a simple vote preference is consistent with recent trends in the field of political science, and, as Rabinowitz et al. (1982, 45) noted, "allow a range of response rather than being restricted to for or against." Zaller's (1992) model of environmental preferences in a 1991 NES Pilot Study report takes the same approach.

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