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Examining the determinants of public environmental concern: Evidence from national public surveys

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 October 2013
Received in revised form
21 February 2014
Accepted 22 February 2014
Available online 22 March 2014

Keywords:

Environmental concern
Environmental policy
New Ecological Paradigm (NEP)
Political ideology
socio-demographics
United States

ABSTRACT

Early research showed that citizens' environmental concern in the United States was linked to three individual-level factors: socio-demographic variables, political orientations, and personal beliefs or worldviews about human-nature relations. Given many changes in the American society over the last several decades, one important, yet unanswered question is whether these factors still drive public environmental concern in the United States today, and if so, to what extent. This study, drawing from extant theoretical and empirical studies, aims to reinvestigate the determinants of citizens' environmental concern by employing three national public surveys conducted in 2004, 2007, and 2013. Our data analyses confirm and expand the findings of previous research on the significance and importance of political ideology, fundamental beliefs about human-nature relations, and certain socioeconomic factors such as gender and race in explaining citizens' environmental concern. More specifically, political liberals, people with higher New Ecological Paradigm values, females, and Non-Whites tend to be more concerned about environmental problems than their counterparts are. Our data analyses also reveal some interesting findings when compared to many previous studies: first, our data indicate a positive relationship between age and environmental concern, suggesting that older people in the United States are more concerned about the environment than younger adults; second, unlike most past research showing a positive Education-Environmental Concern relationship, our study suggests that education level seems to have little effect in explaining citizens' environmental concern measured in this study. Key implications for environmental policymaking and recommendations for future research are discussed in the conclusion.

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1. Introduction and Rationale

Understanding individual citizens' environmental concern (EC) and various underlying factors is one of the key necessary

conditions to make sound public policy and promote citizens' engagement in proenvironment behaviors. Over the last several decades, a large body of literature has examined various driving forces of individual citizens' EC in the United

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2014.02.006>

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States and around the world. Numerous studies have found that among many other factors, the level of citizens' EC are frequently associated with individuals' socio-demographic characteristics (for examples, see Van Liere and Dunlap, 1980; Ester and Van Der Meer, 1982; Stern et al., 1983; Arcury and Christianson, 1990; Jones and Dunlap, 1992; Howell and Laska, 1992; Guth et al., 1995; Eckberg and Blocker, 1996; Dietz et al., 2007; McCright and Dunlap, 2011b; Clements, 2012), political orientations (see for examples, Dunlap, 1975; Van Liere and Dunlap, 1981; Stern et al., 1983; Howell and Laska, 1992; Gamba and Oskamp, 1994; Dietz et al., 1998; Dunlap et al., 2001; Olofsson and Ohman, 2006; Dietz et al., 2007; Wood and Vedlitz, 2007; Clements, 2012), and variations in people's ecological value and belief systems (Dunlap and Van Liere, 1978, 1984; Stern et al., 1995; Dalton et al., 1999; Pierce et al., 1999; Dunlap et al., 2000; Clements, 2012).

The extant studies have greatly contributed to our understanding of what factors affect citizens' EC. However, there are some gaps in the EC literature. First, most of the best empirical findings from previous EC studies were derived from public survey data collected in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, and very few nation-wide empirical studies have been conducted to re-examine the bases of individuals' EC by employing the polling data collected in recent years. Over the last several decades, many aspects of American society, culture, and demographic composition have changed. It is reasonable to ask if the social, political, and belief-system bases of individuals' EC have also changed and if the key empirical findings from those studies are still valid in the new millennium. While these important questions cannot be answered without new empirical data, some studies imply that such changes might have occurred. For instance, nearly all previous studies found that younger people or younger generations were more concerned about the environment than older people or older cohorts. However, a recent study by Twenge et al. (2012) finds significant generational differences. They show that the younger Millennials, or Me Generation (born after 1982), are more concerned about materialistic values and less interested in caring about others and saving the environment when compared to Baby Boomers (born 1946–1961) and to Generation Xers (born 1962–1981) at the same age. In another study on citizens' support for climate change policies, Dietz et al. (2007) find that younger people express less support for climate change mitigation policies than older adults do. These studies, in addition to other recent studies on historical shifts and declining trends in youth's environmental attitudes and behaviors (for example, see Wray-Lake et al., 2010), suggest that there may be some underlying changes in society and some of the findings derived from past EC studies probably need to be re-examined.

Second, many scholars note that there are varying, mixed, and somewhat inconsistent or conflicting research findings in each area of the EC literature. One possible cause of this, as pointed out by Dunlap and Jones (2002) and Klineberg et al. (1998), is that the concept *environmental concern* has been defined unclearly and measured differently across studies. As a complex concept, EC refers to “the degree to which people are aware of problems regarding the environment and support efforts to solve them and/or indicate a willingness to contribute personally to their solution” (Dunlap and Jones,

2002, p. 485). This definition correctly indicates that EC is a very broad concept covering a wide range of phenomena with multiple aspects and multiple dimensions (see also Xiao and Dunlap, 2007; Alibeli and White, 2011). To avoid ambiguity in concept definition and variations or errors in variable measurement, Dunlap and Jones suggest that researchers “need to think clearly at the outset about what aspects or facets of environmental concern they want to measure, and then carefully conceptualize them prior to attempting to measure them” (Dunlap and Jones, 2002, p. 515).

The extant EC research is also limited in several other aspects. For instance, most existing studies rely on a snapshot analysis derived from one single public survey, and the findings typically cannot be compared and cross-validated due to the absence of comparable surveys/datasets across time. Moreover, many previous studies primarily focused on citizens' concern about certain environmental issues that were highly salient several decades ago (e.g., air and water pollution). In recent years, some new environmental issues such as global warming and climate change have emerged and started to draw public attention. While it is important to continue examining the driving forces of citizens' concern about air and water pollutions, it is also important to investigate how these driving factors affect the levels of citizens' concern about the newly emerged environmental issues.

In this study, we attempt to fill some of the gaps in the EC literature and make a few contributions. First, we employ US national public survey data to re-examine several key individual-level sources of citizens' EC identified in previous EC literature and to analyze whether and how these sources affect people's concern about the environment in recent years. In doing so, we focus on three possible sources that were frequently examined in the EC literature: individuals' socio-demographic characteristics (such as gender, age, race, education, and income), respondents' political ideology, and their beliefs and values about the fundamental relations between human and the environment. Second, following the suggestions of Dunlap and Jones (2002) and others, we attempt to focus on one specific aspect of the broad *environmental concern* concept: the perceived seriousness of certain environmental problems facing the United States. This focus allows us to reduce the ambiguity in concept definition; it also allows future comparisons between our study and other research using similar EC definition and measurement. Third, we attempt to measure people's EC for both long-existing environmental issues (e.g., pollution) and newly emerged environmental problems (e.g., global warming and climate change); we also consider three levels of abstractness–concreteness when measuring citizens' concern for different environmental objects. Fourth, we use datasets derived from three nation-wide public surveys, conducted in 2004, 2007, and 2013, respectively. Using data from these surveys conducted in the past decade allows us to cross-examine the findings from multiple representative samples and to make relatively more generalized observations over time.

In the following sections, we first review the main findings of existing EC studies on three individual-level driving forces: sociodemographics, political ideology, and belief/value system about human-nature relations. We then introduce our

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