



The relationships of political ideology and party affiliation with environmental concern: A meta-analysis



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ABSTRACT

This study reports the results of two meta-analyses investigating the relationships between environmental concern and both political party affiliation and political ideology. Political party affiliation was found to have a substantial association with environmental concern ($\rho = 0.22$), as was political ideology ($\rho = 0.27$). Both relationships could also be corrected for error of measurement and restriction in range, yielding corrected effect sizes of $\rho' = 0.30$ and $\rho' = 0.67$, respectively. There was no evidence that coded study variables moderated the relationship with political ideology. Conversely, the analyses demonstrated strong evidence that the relationship with political affiliation was moderated by the year in which the study was conducted, as well as some evidence that education level was an additional moderator. Altogether, the results also suggest that the strengthening relationship between political affiliation and environmental concern is due primarily to partisan sorting, rather than to issue polarization on environmental issues.

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1. Introduction

The issue of environmental concern has garnered and sustained scholarly interest over the past half century, propelling research in sociology (e.g., Van Liere & Dunlap, 1981), psychology (e.g., Schultz, 2001), political science (e.g., Guth, Green, Kellstedt, & Smidt, 1995), anthropology (e.g., Arcury & Christianson, 1990), and communication (e.g., Zhao, 2012), among others. The definition of environmental concern varies somewhat across the literature, but most authors are consistent in using the term to refer to attitudes about environmental issues or perceptions that such issues are important. For example, Schultz (2001) defines environmental concern as the degree to which people worry about the consequences of environmental problems for themselves, other people, and the biosphere. Similarly, Fransson and Gärling (1999, p. 370) characterize environmental concern as “an attitude towards facts, one’s own behaviour, or others’ behaviour with consequences for the environment.” Other authors also see environmental concern as synonymous with a broader pro-environmental worldview (see Dunlap & Van Liere, 1978; Dunlap, Van Liere, Mertig, & Jones, 2000).

Some of the earliest work on environmental concern was

conducted in the mid-1950s and early 1960s, when authors began to document escalating levels of public awareness of and concern about air pollution (see De Groot, 1967; for a review). Subsequently, research has followed two primary trajectories. First, a substantial body of work has examined the consequences of environmental concern, namely environmentally-friendly behaviors and behavioral intentions. An example of such work is Minton and Rose’s (1997) study of consumer behavior, which found environmental concern to be a positive predictor of recycling and choosing to buy environmentally friendly products. Second, a large corpus has been devoted to uncovering determinants of environmental concern, many of the most thoroughly explored of which are sociodemographic variables. For example, Van Liere and Dunlap (1980) review numerous studies investigating age, social class, urban or rural residence, political variables, and sex. Other studies have also focused on the impact of variables such as religiosity (Guth et al., 1995) and race (Arp, 1994).

Of these correlates, political factors are a particularly interesting case. Generally, research has investigated two political variables: *political party affiliation* and *political ideology*. Political party affiliation refers to the major political party with which someone generally identifies. Political ideology, conversely, describes where someone falls on the spectrum of political beliefs, ranging from strongly conservative to strongly liberal. Many authors measure political ideology with a single item, although others favor more

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nuanced measures that address both economic and social political ideology. For example, [Buttel and Flinn \(1978\)](#) and [Constantini and Hanf \(1972\)](#) quantify ideology based on scales that capture attitudes toward both laissez faire policies and the welfare state.

There are several reasons why party affiliation and ideology deserve further investigation. First, the literature on the association between party affiliation and environmental concern has evolved substantially over the course of the last half-century. In the early 1970s, there was optimism that environmentalism might serve as a nonpartisan issue, uniting Democrats and Republicans (see [Dunlap, 1975](#); [Dunlap, 2008](#)). [Ogden \(1971, p. 246\)](#), for example, asserted that both parties were “certain to favor quality environment, to oppose pollution, to support conservation, and to admit the need to control population.”

Early studies, however, cast doubt on this consensus hypothesis. Several studies conducted from the 1970s to the 1990s (e.g., [Arp, 1994](#); [Dunlap, 1975](#); [Guth et al., 1995](#); [Tognacci, Weigel, Wideen, & Vernon, 1972](#)) revealed evidence that Democrats tended to be more concerned about the environment than Republicans, suggesting that there was in fact a partisan divide. In addition, a number of authors advanced theoretical arguments as to why political consensus on environmental concern was unlikely. [Dunlap \(1975\)](#), for example, suggested that environmental regulations are typically opposed by business and industry, require government intervention, and involve drastic and innovative action, all of which are unlikely to make them appealing to Republicans. In other words, it was logical to expect that more Democrats than Republicans would embrace pro-environmental principles, not that both parties would agree on this issue.

Despite its theoretical underpinnings, however, this political hypothesis (cf. [Van Liere & Dunlap, 1980](#)) also failed to find consistent support. Several studies reported a null relationship between party affiliation and concern (e.g., [Buttel & Johnson, 1977](#); [Dillman & Christenson, 1972](#); [Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1981](#)), and a few others actually found that Republicans had higher levels of concern than Democrats ([Barnett, 1970](#); [Buttel & Flinn, 1974](#), for low education group). Due to these conflicting findings, a number of early authors concluded that party affiliation was “not a crucial variable in explaining environmental concern” ([Van Liere & Dunlap, 1980, p. 191](#)) and that it had “no major relationship” ([Buttel & Flinn, 1978, p. 30](#)) with environmental attitudes.

More recently, however, the prevailing opinion in the literature has changed. Few authors now disagree that partisanship has an important association with environmental attitudes, pointing to what they see as evidence of a “widening gap” ([Dunlap & McCright, 2008, p. 27](#)) between Democrats and Republicans on environmental issues, particularly on the topic of climate change ([Guber, 2013](#); [McCright & Dunlap, 2011](#); [McCright, 2011](#)). Indeed, studies conducted in more recent decades consistently find positive and statistically significant relationships between party affiliation and environmental concern (e.g., [Czech & Borkhataria, 2001](#); [Deemer, 2009](#); [Rainey, 2008](#)), with few, if any, studies reporting null or negative effect sizes.

In sum, the literature on the relationship between political affiliation and environmental concern has clearly shifted from one of skepticism and dismissal to one of confident acceptance over time. What remains unclear is the reason for this shift. A systematic investigation of these findings is necessary to examine whether there has been a change in the relationship itself or if there are other factors, like changes in methodology or interpretation, that account for the transition.

Second, although some authors have treated party affiliation and political ideology as interchangeable (e.g., [Longo & Baker, 2014](#)), the literature suggests that there is good reason to examine their relationships with environmental concern

separately. Specifically, the conflicting findings and historical skepticism evident in the literature on party affiliation are absent from the literature on political ideology. Instead, authors consistently find that liberalism is positively and statistically significantly related to environmental concern (e.g., [Buttel & Flinn, 1978](#); [Constantini & Hanf, 1972](#); [Dillman & Christenson, 1972](#); [Van Liere & Dunlap, 1980](#)). A few studies have reported null relationships between political ideology and concern (e.g., [Arp, 1994](#); [Klineberg, McKeever, & Rothenbach, 1998](#); [Ray, 1980](#)), but findings of negative relationships are rare or nonexistent. As a result, both early (e.g., [Buttel & Flinn, 1976](#)) and contemporary (e.g., [Schuldt & Roh, 2014](#)) authors have acknowledged the importance of political ideology in explaining environmental attitudes.

Altogether, this consideration of the literature on the relationships of political ideology and party affiliation with environmental concern indicates that there are several issues that warrant examination with a meta-analysis. Specifically, greater clarification is needed of the role of party affiliation, including the true effect size, whether or not it has changed over time (as the literature appears to suggest), and the source of the conflicting findings among early studies. It would also be beneficial to clarify whether or not the relationship of environmental concern with political ideology differs from the relationship with party affiliation and if the findings on political ideology are as consistent as they appear to be.

A meta-analysis also provides the opportunity to investigate possible moderators of the relationship between political variables—either political ideology, party affiliation, or both—and environmental concern. Specifically, there are three major threads of research in the literature suggesting that level of education, the measure of environmental concern used, and the year of data collection may be important moderators of these relationships.

1.1. Education

By itself, education is consistently found to be a positive predictor of environmental concern (e.g., [Arcury & Christianson, 1990](#); [Buttel & Flinn, 1974](#); [Tognacci et al., 1972](#); see [Van Liere & Dunlap, 1980](#), for a review), but the picture becomes more complicated when the association is broken down by political party affiliation and political ideology.

The idea that education might moderate the relationship between political variables and environmental concern was first introduced by [Buttel and Flinn \(1978\)](#), who felt non-additivity might account for inconsistent findings on sociodemographic variables in the literature. Indeed, the results of [Buttel and Flinn's](#) study revealed that among Republicans, party affiliation and concern were correlated only $r = -0.08$ when educational attainment was low, but $r = -0.27$ when it was high. Among Democrats, on the other hand, party affiliation and concern were correlated only $r = 0.06$ among the less educated group, but $r = 0.28$ among the more educated one. In sum, the relationship between environmental concern and political affiliation was stronger in the more educated group than the less educated group, suggesting that there was a moderating effect of education.

More recently, the same pattern has been uncovered by researchers examining concern about climate change. For example, [McCright and Dunlap \(2011\)](#) report that “the effects of educational attainment ... on beliefs about climate science and personal concern about global warming are *positive* for liberals and Democrats, but are *weaker or negative* for conservatives and Republicans,” (p. 175, emphasis original). In other words, as educational attainment increases, attitudes on climate change tend to diverge, producing a larger effect size for party affiliation or ideology. Similar findings have also been reported by several others (see [McCright, 2011](#), for a review).

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