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# Political polarization on support for government spending on environmental protection in the USA, 1974–2012



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 15 June 2013

Revised 2 May 2014

Accepted 25 June 2014

Available online 5 July 2014

### Keywords:

Environmental concern

Political polarization

US General Social Survey

Public opinion

Ordered logistic regression

## ABSTRACT

Since the early 1990s, the American conservative movement has become increasingly hostile toward environmental protection and Congressional Republicans have become increasingly anti-environmental in their voting records. Party sorting theory holds that such political polarization among elites will likely extend to the general public. Analyzing General Social Survey data from 1974 to 2012, we examine whether political polarization has occurred on support for government spending on environmental protection over this time period in the US general public. We find that there has been significant partisan and ideological polarization on support for environmental spending since 1992—consistent with the expectations of party sorting theory. This political polarization on environmental concern in the general public will likely endure save for political convergence on environmental concern among elites in the near future. Such polarization likely will inhibit the further development and implementation of environmental policy and the diffusion of environmentally friendly behaviors.

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## 1. Introduction

Many proponents and observers of environmentalism in the early 1970s characterized protecting environmental quality as a politically consensual issue (Dunlap and Gale, 1974). This was reaffirmed by the considerable bipartisan support among political elites for much of the nation's landmark environmental legislation passed during the Republican Nixon administration (Layzer, 2012, pp. 33–41).<sup>1</sup> Further, some early studies found little if any ideological or partisan differences in environmental concern among members of the US general public (e.g., Buttel and Flinn, 1974).

Yet, by the late 1970s and continuing to the present, political elites such as members of Congress diverged significantly in their support for environmental protection (e.g., Kamieniecki, 1995; Gershtenson et al., 2006). Also, numerous studies since the mid-1970s have found a significant divide in environmental concern between liberals/Democrats and conservatives/Republican within the US general public (see studies reviewed in Dunlap et al., 2001). Interestingly though, while there were fluctuations over this time period, the political divide on environmental issues in the American public by the beginning of the 1990s was comparable to that in the mid-1970s (Jones and Dunlap, 1992). This may partially reflect the continuing

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<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the support was stronger from Democratic members of congress (Dunlap and Allen, 1976).

popularity of environmentalism during this period, as signified by the widely celebrated 20th Earth Day in 1990 (Dunlap and Mertig, 1992).

The early 1990s saw a noticeable shift in the American conservative movement's position on environmental issues, even though it had been critical of environmental regulations since the 1970s (Dunlap et al., 2001; Layzer, 2012; McCright and Dunlap, 2011). After the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union, the conservative movement replaced the "Red Scare" with a new "Green Scare" and became increasingly hostile toward environmental protection (Jacques et al., 2008). In response to the international environmental community successfully placing global environmental problems such as anthropogenic climate change, ozone depletion, and biodiversity loss on the international policy agenda (most notably via the 1992 Rio Earth Summit), and fearful of the Clinton-Gore Administration's likely receptivity to that agenda, conservative foundations, think tanks, and leaders mobilized to challenge the legitimacy of these problems and thus undercut the need for government action to deal with them (Jacques et al., 2008).

This was most clearly manifested in the years immediately after the 1995 Republican takeover of Congress during which key Republicans challenged environmental science and policy (e.g., Brown, 1997)—especially on the problem of anthropogenic climate change (e.g., Demeritt, 2006; McCright and Dunlap, 2003). The subsequent George W. Bush administration continued these attacks on environmental science and policy by appointing conservative activists with strong anti-environmental orientations throughout the executive branch (e.g., McCright and Dunlap, 2010). Most recently, the conservative movement's anti-environmental efforts, supplemented by increased lobbying from industry, have escalated in response to the Obama administration's receptivity to environmental science and policy (e.g., Goodell, 2010). With the Tea Party pulling the Republican Party farther to the Right, congressional attacks on environmental regulations have become ever more common (Committee on Energy and Commerce Minority Staff, 2011).

Of all environmental issues, anthropogenic global warming (AGW) has become the most conflictual, as it poses a serious challenge to fossil fuels-based economic growth by generating calls for sweeping regulations to control greenhouse gas emissions (e.g., Begley, 2007; McCright and Dunlap, 2010; Oreskes and Conway, 2010). Consequently, it is not surprising that Guber (2013)—analyzing data from Gallup polls in 1990, 2000, and 2010—finds increasing ideological and partisan divergence in the US public's level of "worry" about global warming (and to a lesser degree, five other environmental problems) each decade, especially from 2000 to 2010. Similarly, McCright and Dunlap (2011) report statistically significant ideological and partisan polarization on several measures of AGW views among Americans with data from annual Gallup polls from 2001 to 2010. That is, the views about AGW expressed by liberals and Democrats on one side and conservatives and Republicans on the other increasingly diverged since 1990, most strikingly since 2000 (also see Hamilton, 2011).

Both Guber (2013) and McCright and Dunlap (2011) claim that such political polarization—or increasing divergence over time—is consistent with party sorting theory (e.g., Fiorina and Abrams, 2008; Layman et al., 2006), whereby party activists and ideological leaders drive polarization among political elites and this process sends cues to voters that party positions are changing. As Baldassarri and Gelman (2008:408) explain, "since parties are more polarized, they are now better at sorting individuals along ideological lines."

Since 1970, the League of Conservation Voters has tracked votes on bills related to key environmental issues (ranging from air and water quality to wildlife and forest conservation to climate change) and has calculated an environmental voting score for each member of the US Senate and House of Representatives. Briefly, a member's score, which can range from 0 to 100, is the number of pro-environment votes cast divided by the total number of votes on key environmental issues. Fig. 1

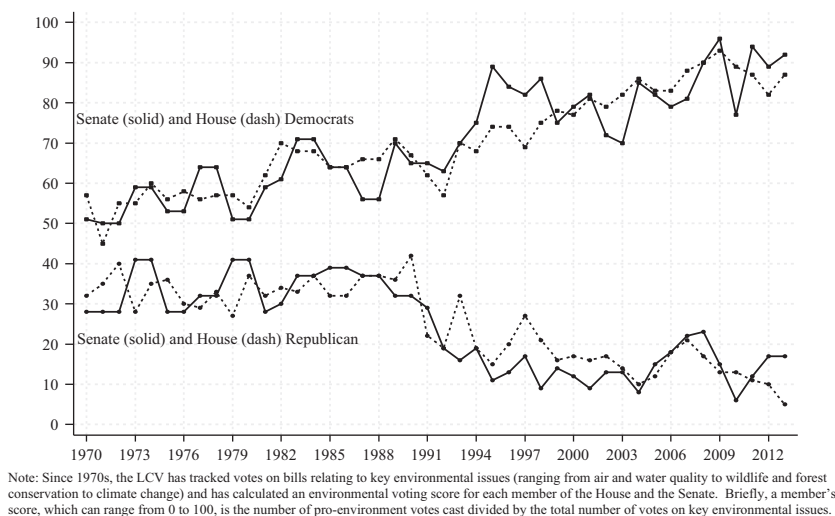


Fig. 1. Average league of conservation voters environmental voting score for democrats and republicans in congress, 1970–2013.

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