



Turning Questions Into Answers.

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MEMORANDUM

TO: THE NATURE CONSERVANCY/ TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND

FROM: LORI WEIGEL
PUBLIC OPINION STRATEGIES

JOHN FAIRBANK AND DAVID METZ
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RE: KEY FINDINGS FROM A NATIONAL VOTER SURVEY ON CONSERVATION

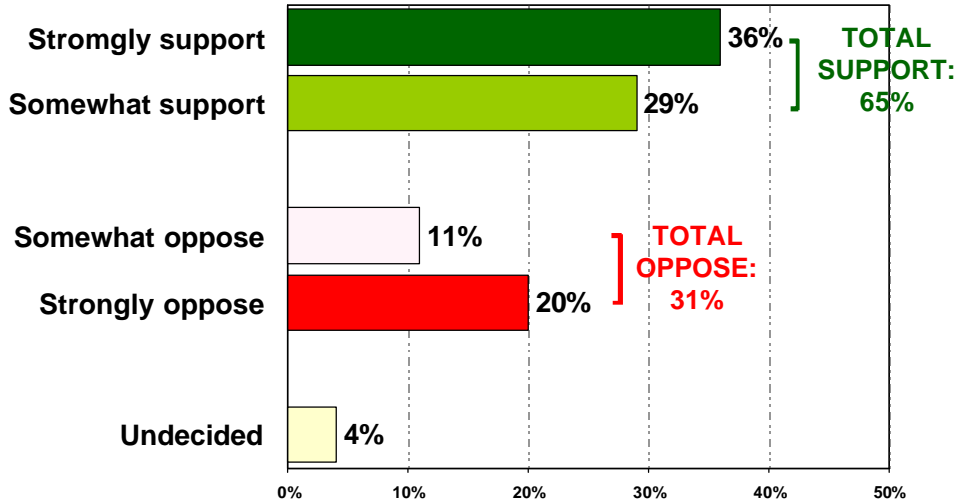
DATE: APRIL 19, 2004

The findings of our just-completed national voter survey show that ***the conservation of land, air, and water remain extremely critical issues for voters across the country.*** The survey results show that solid majorities of all key voter subgroups favor increasing taxes to fund conservation programs in their area, suggesting that conservation-related ballot measures are poised to once again fare well in the 2004 elections. Moreover, the results also make clear that voters nationwide are widely dissatisfied with the work done by all levels of government to protect land, air and water, and are taking a keen look at candidates' records on those issues in this election year.

Funding Conservation

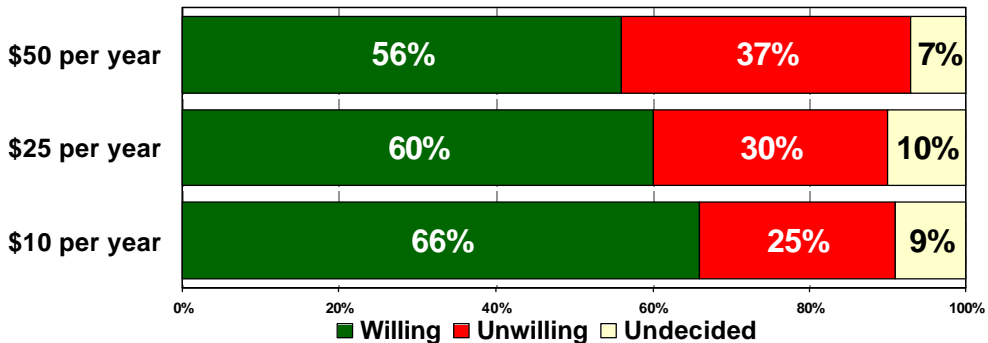
At a time when the economy regularly tops voters' list of concerns, 65% of the nation's voters indicate support for a "small increase in taxes" to fund state and local government programs to purchase land to "protect water quality, natural areas, lakes rivers or beaches, neighborhood parks and wildlife habitat" (as shown in the graph on the following page). A majority of voters in every single region of the country (including 66% in Western states outside California) and of all key voter groups express support. This includes a solid majority of Democrats (76%) and Independents (65%), and even Republican voters (57%), who are generally much more resistant to proposals to increase taxes. Moreover, the increasingly sought-after voter group of Latinos is even MORE likely to support conservation funding measures (77% support) than are other segments of the electorate.

“Suppose that these programs through which your state or local government would purchase land to protect water quality; natural areas; lakes, rivers or beaches; neighborhood parks; and wildlife habitat required a small increase in taxes. In that case, would you support or oppose these programs?”



As shown below, the levels of funding that voters define as a “small increase” in their taxes would equate to significant boosts to most state and local conservation programs. Fully 56% say they would personally be willing to pay fifty dollars more in taxes per year (including 50% of GOP voters, 55% of voters in the West outside of California, and 61% of Latinos). There is predictably more support for smaller amounts of tax increases (60% willing to pay 25 dollars per year and 66% willing to pay 10 dollars per year).

“Would you be willing to pay _____ more in taxes to fund these types of programs to protect water quality; natural areas; lakes, rivers or beaches; neighborhood parks; and wildlife habitat in your areas?”



Voters see a number of critical reasons to support programs to buy land and protect it from development. Among the goals of land conservation programs that voters are most likely to rank

as “very important” are to protect quality of life (70% very important), to protect working farms and ranches (63%), to protect natural areas (62%), and to create parks and places where children can play safely (59%). Most importantly, the survey substantiates one of the things we heard in focus groups throughout the West – **voters closely link land conservation with protecting water.** No matter how it is expressed, voters prioritize water as a critical reason to purchase and protect land: vast majorities of those polled see it as “very important” to buy land to protect drinking water quality (84%); improve the water quality in our lakes, streams and rivers (75%); protect lakes, rivers and streams (72%); and protect watersheds (66%). Moreover, Latinos rate every single reason for conserving land as being more important than other voters do.

Land, Air, Water and Votes

While voters say they are willing to put their money where their mouth is in order to support conservation, will they pull a lever in November based on their concerns about land, air and water? The survey results show that the answer is a resounding “yes” – **nearly eight in ten voters (79%) say that in making a voting decision, issues involving water quality, natural areas, lakes, rivers or beaches, neighborhood parks and wildlife habitat are “very” or “somewhat” important.** In the 17 battleground states most likely to be competitive in this November’s election, the proportion is nearly identical – 77% say that conservation issues will be “very” or “somewhat” important in their voting decisions. An overwhelming 83% of Latinos and 84% of Western voters say the same.

For most of these voters, claims about the importance of conservation in voting decisions are more than lip service. Large numbers of voters have factored in a candidate’s stand on the environment in their vote decisions before; **more than four in ten voters nationally indicate they have “voted for candidates because of their support for the environment.”** Again, significant numbers of voters in all areas of the country and representing all key voter groups say the environment has been a factor in their past vote decisions, including:

- ✓ 50% of Democrats
- ✓ 47% of Latinos
- ✓ 41% of self-described moderates
- ✓ 39% of Independents
- ✓ and even 36% of Republicans – including 42 percent of GOP women

Clearly, the survey data indicates that there is still some divide between the “red” and “blue” states on issues related to land, air, and water. But candidates need to keep in mind the changing face of voters who are prioritizing conservation issues in the vote decisions. **Fully 73% of the national electorate says they consider themselves to be an “environmentalist” and even more consider themselves to be a “conservationist” (81%).** Even groups not traditionally perceived as “environmentalists” say they consider themselves to be just that, including over two-thirds (67%) of Latinos and 72% of Westerners (outside of California).

Growth Has Grown as an Issue

Much of the political context for land conservation over the last decade, particularly in the West, has been determined by the rapid growth of towns and cities booming during good economic times. In 1999, when the economy was at its peak, a national survey showed that 35% of voters said that their community was growing too fast, while 25% said it was growing too slowly – a ratio of about 1.4 to one. Today, despite a more mixed economic picture in many areas of the country, that ratio has increased dramatically: 39 percent now say their community is growing “too fast” while just 12 percent say it is growing “too slowly” – a ratio of more than three-to-one. Latino voters and voters in the West outside of California are also more likely to say their community is growing too fast (47% and 40%, respectively). In addition, voters today are four times more likely to view their community as having “too little” protected open space or land that cannot be developed (36%) as opposed to “too much” (9%), while another 46% say it has the right amount.

Clearly, much of these attitudes depend on the type of community voters live in. Suburban voters – often a critical swing voter group (remember “soccer moms”?) – are more likely to express concerns about growth in their local community. A plurality of 47% of suburbanites say growth is happening too fast (compared to six percent who think it is happening too slowly) and the same number (47%) say there is too little open space in their community (compared to 43% who say there is the right amount).

While voters remain concerned about the impact of growth and the protection of open space, they are not confident that government is doing enough to address these issues. **Voters are decidedly mixed in their evaluation of government’s performance in protecting land and water**, with decreasing confidence the higher the level of government they are asked to evaluate (as shown in the table below). Clearly, the priority voters place on the protection of land and water in their voting decisions, combined with their ambivalence about government’s performance on these issues to date, could have a dramatic impact in this year’s elections.

“How good of a job do you feel the _____ is doing at protecting water quality; natural areas; lakes, rivers or beaches; neighborhood parks; and wildlife habitat; an excellent job, a good job, only a fair job, or a poor job, or don’t you have an opinion on this?” (Split Sample)

<i>Level of Government</i>	<i>Excellent/Good</i>	<i>Fair/Poor</i>
Local government	48%	46%
State government	46%	48%
Federal government	26%	66%

Again, suburbanites are less satisfied with their local government than other voters (only 34% rate their local government as doing an “excellent” or “good” job), although there is no such distinction based on where voters live in views at the state or federal level.

Conclusion

Overall, the survey results make clear that voters continue to view the conservation of land and water as critical to their quality of life. That concern about conservation will continue to make itself felt in voters’ support for ballot measures and candidates who will provide funding or take action to protect land and water in their communities.

Methodology: From April 3 to 12, 2004, Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin & Associates (D) and Public Opinion Strategies (R) conducted telephone interviews with 1,500 registered voters likely to cast ballots in November 2004. The interviews included a national sample of 800 voters (with a margin of sampling error of +/-3.5 percent), an oversample of 500 voters in the western United States (specifically Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming, with a regional margin of error of +/- 4.4%), and 200 additional interviews with Latino voters in Arizona, California, Colorado, and New Mexico. References to “Battleground states” are to the 17 states generally viewed as pivotal in the 2004 elections (Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Iowa, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin). The research also included a set of six focus groups with swing voters in Washington, Colorado and New Mexico.