



## Public's political attitudes to environment are complex, says study

**Individuals' willingness to pay (WTP)** for environmental improvements is influenced by political affiliation. However, the picture is more complex than previous studies suggest according to new research, which concludes that *how* an environmental programme is delivered, i.e. by private companies or by the government, is more important for right-wing voters than for left-leaning voters.

**Recent surveys** in the UK and the United States have indicated that individuals on the right of the political spectrum are less supportive of government initiatives to protect and enhance the environment than those further on the left. This suggests that right-leaning voters are less willing to pay for publically-provided environmental services and environmental actions, such as programmes to reduce fossil fuel use.

However, three new surveys in the UK have looked at whether the same attitudes exist if such services are provided privately rather than publically, and have revealed some interesting results. There was no effort to have commonality across the three surveys and each respondent only saw the survey he or she answered. The surveys were limited to participants living in and around the city of Norwich, East Anglia.

First, the researchers conducted a simple survey in the UK. They asked 843 people about their political persuasions and how much they would be willing to pay for a government programme to reduce phosphate in nearby rivers and lakes, which leads to excess plant growth, eutrophication of the rivers and lakes and reduced aquatic biodiversity.

Confirming results from previous studies, they found that WTP varied between £131.73 (€161.08) and £186.91 (€228.57) per year. Individuals who vote for the left-wing Green party were more willing to pay the highest amounts, with those who vote for the Conservatives, a right-wing party, more willing to pay the lowest.

A second survey investigated a different scenario and found that there was no difference between a total of 504 left- and right-leaning individuals in terms of their WTP for a government initiative to improve the quality of tap water delivered to homes (between £86 and £93 per year, (€104-112)). Similarly to the previous scenario, the service was publically delivered, i.e. through the government, but this time it provided personal benefits to residents.

The third survey added a more complex line of questioning. In total, 244 participants were asked about their WTP for improvements to water quality, either by installing water softening units in individuals' homes (privately provided), or centrally at the waterworks (publically provided). On average, right-leaning voters were willing to pay around £15 (€18) more per year for the service if it is privately provided than if it is publically provided.

These results suggest that it is not so simple as to say that left-leaning individuals are more environmentally responsible and therefore, willing to pay more for environmental improvement measures, as previous studies have indicated. In fact, right-leaning individuals are equally willing to pay for environmental improvement, when the service is privately provided rather than through the government. This seems to reflect a confidence in market solutions rather than in the government, but not a lack of environmental responsibility *per se*.

The fact that public provision may be a negative factor for individuals on the right of the political spectrum should be considered in cost-benefit analyses of environmental policies, say the researchers, since preferences for the mechanism of delivery rather than the value of the benefit itself may influence the results and recommendations. Further research that acknowledges such complexities will be more valuable for analysis and policy-making purposes.

**Source:** Dupont, D. & Bateman, I.J. (2012). Political affiliation and willingness to pay: An examination of the nature of benefits and means of provision. *Ecological Economics*. 75; 43-51

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