

**PUBLIC OPINION  
STRATEGIES**

TO: The Nature Conservancy

FROM: Lori Weigel  
Public Opinion Strategies

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RE: American Voters View Conservation as Patriotic, and Strengthening on the Economy;  
Broad Support for Current Conservation Legislation

DATE: July 2, 2012

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A recent national survey of voters<sup>1</sup> conducted by the bipartisan research team of Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (D) and Public Opinion Strategies (R) approaching the 4<sup>th</sup> of July holiday indicates a new expression of patriotism – conservation of the nation’s natural resources. From Tea Party Republicans to liberal Democrats, overwhelming majorities of Americans of *all* political persuasions believe that “conserving the country’s natural resources – land, air and water – is patriotic.”

And while denigrating the federal government has become something of a national pastime, three-quarters of the U.S. electorate says that “one of the things our government does best” is protecting its “history and natural beauty through national parks, forests and other public lands.” No wonder, then, that voters are more than three times as likely to say they would prefer to go on vacation this summer in a national park or other public lands, rather than in a major American city.

But this conservation ethic expressed by survey respondents is not a momentary burst of holiday enthusiasm; rather, **voters’ broad support for conservation generally extends to specific policy decisions, such as funding the Land and Water Conservation Fund.** Moreover, three-quarters (74 percent) of American voters say that even with federal budget problems, funding for conservation should *not* be cut. Many voters even are willing to reach into their own pockets to fund conservation,

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<sup>1</sup> **Methodology:** From June 16-19, 2012, FM3 and POS completed 800 telephone interviews with registered voters nationally who are likely to cast ballots in the 2012 election. Interviews were conducted on landlines and cell phones. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is +/-3.46 percent; margins of sampling error for subgroups within the sample will be larger. Some percentages may sum to more than 100 percent due to rounding.

with 83 percent – including more than seven-in-ten voters across the political spectrum – willing to pay more in taxes to fund protection of land, water and wildlife habitat in their area.

This support for conservation likely stems from some widely-shared beliefs among the electorate: that public lands contribute to quality of life in their states; that children not spending enough time in nature is a serious problem; and that protections for land, water and wildlife have a *positive* economic impact and are not in conflict with the goal of having a strong economy.

Among the survey’s specific findings are the following:

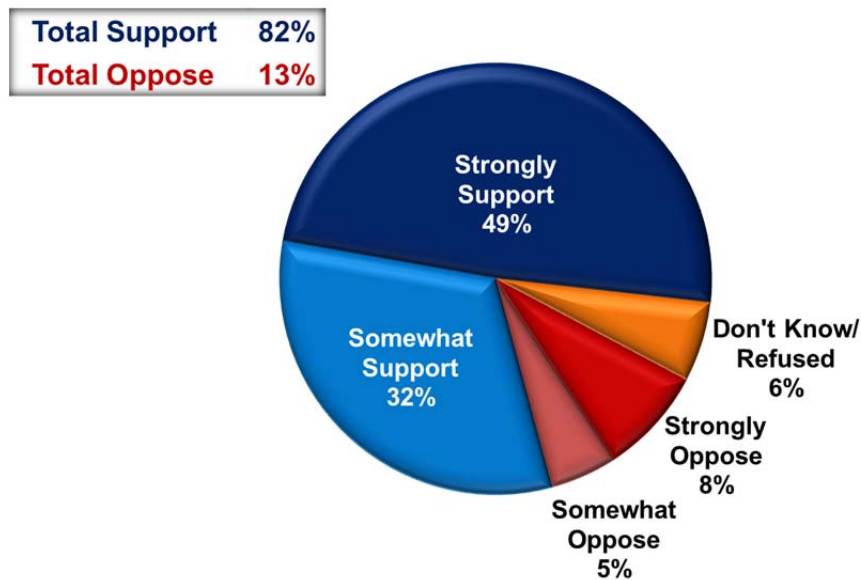
- **On the eve of the national Independence Day holiday, more than four-in-five American voters say that “conserving our country’s natural resources - our land, air and water - is patriotic.”** This sentiment is one that bridges every partisan, regional, and demographic division. For example, agreement that conservation is patriotic is high among...
  - *Democrats (89 percent agree conservation is patriotic), Independents (79 percent) and Republicans (79 percent), including Tea Party Republicans (79 percent);*
  - *Voters who are undecided and up for grabs in the presidential election (93 percent) and those in the eight most contested “battleground” states (83 percent);*
  - *The youngest voters under age 35 (84 percent) and voters age 65 and older (83 percent);*
  - *Urban residents (79 percent), suburbanites (85 percent) and rural residents (82 percent);*
  - *Hunters (79 percent), anglers (80 percent), and bird and wildlife watchers (82 percent);*
  - *Hikers (80 percent), mountain bikers (78 percent), and ATV users (77 percent); and*
  - *More than seven-in-ten voters in every region of the country agree that conservation is patriotic.*
- **Three-quarters of the electorate believes that public lands are one of the things government “does best.”** Even focusing in on the role of government at a time of heightened cynicism about government as an institution, voters overwhelmingly say that public lands are evidence of an area of positive federal contribution. Fully 77 percent agree that “One of the things our government does best is to protect and preserve our national history and natural beauty through national parks, forests, and other public lands.” with 39 percent strongly in agreement. Only one-in-five disagree with this view. Three-quarters of Republicans (76 percent), nearly the same number of Democrats (70 percent) and the vast majority of Independents (82 percent) agree with this view.
- **In fact, Americans express a strong preference to spend their summer vacations on public lands such as some of the iconic national parks.** Three times as many voters say they would prefer a vacation this summer in “a national park or other public lands like the Grand Canyon or Great Smoky Mountains” (70 percent), or “a large American city like New York or San Francisco” (21 percent). Americans of every age and region of the country, and irrespective of whether they engage in outdoor recreation or not, are more likely to prefer enjoying some time off on public lands<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Respondents were asked this question early in the survey, prior to a more fulsome inquiry into their views on conservation policies or related issues.

- **Voters express near unanimity that public lands are an essential part of the quality of life in their state.** Fully 87 percent agree – 59 percent strongly agree – that “our state and national parks, forests monuments, and wildlife areas are an essential part of my state’s quality of life.”
- **They also consider children not spending enough time in nature as a problem.** Half of the electorate (50 percent) says that “kids not spending enough time outdoors and in nature” is an extremely or very serious problem, climbing to 82 percent who consider it to be at least a somewhat serious problem.
- **Voters’ broad support for conservation generally extends to specific policy decisions, such as funding the Land and Water Conservation Fund.** More than four-in-five American voters (82 percent) support ensuring that a “portion of federal offshore drilling fees already being paid by oil and gas companies is dedicated to the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which was created by Congress so that these fees could be used for conserving natural areas, wildlife, and clean water and providing access to outdoor recreation throughout the country.” Only 13 percent of the electorate is opposed, as shown below.

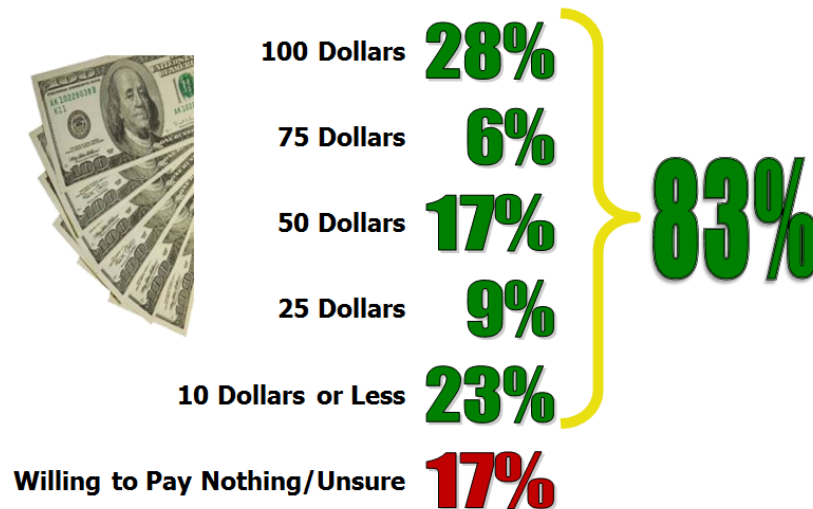
**Support for Ensuring Funding for Land and Water Conservation Fund**



Support for continued federal investments in the Land and Water Conservation Fund is supported by voters from all major segments of the electorate, including:

- ✓ 92% of Democrats, 77% of independents, and 74% of Republicans – as well as 72% of Tea Party voters;
- ✓ 85% of voters who are either undecided or not definitive in their vote decision for President at this time;

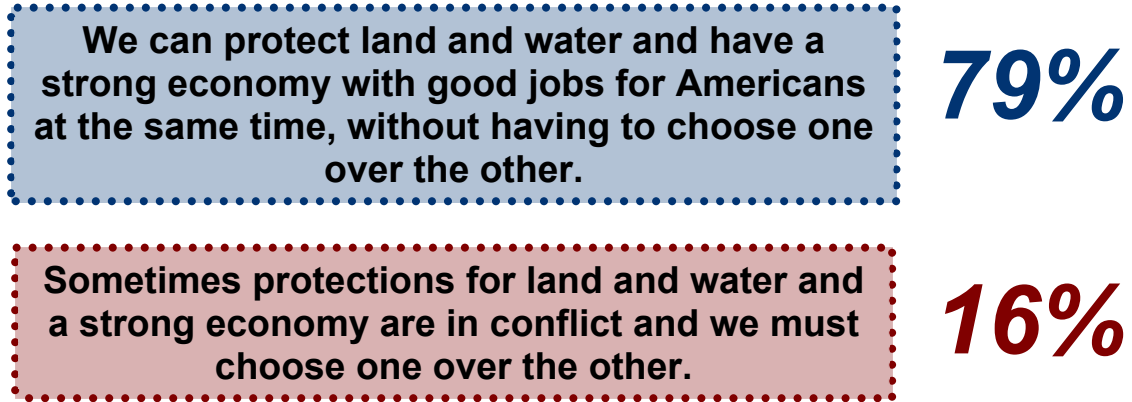
- ✓ 79% of men and 84% of women;
  - ✓ 81% of Latinos, 82% of whites, and 86% of African Americans;
  - ✓ 76% of hunters, 78% of anglers, and 72% of off-road vehicle users;
  - ✓ 83% of urban voters, 79% of suburbanites, and 83% of small town/rural residents; and
  - ✓ At least 75% of voters in each region of the country.
- **Three-quarters say that even with federal budget problems, funding for conservation should *not* be cut.** Fully 74 percent agree that “even with federal budget problems, funding to safeguard land, air and water should not be cut,” including a majority of voters across the partisan spectrum and two-thirds or greater in every region of the country.
  - **Voters are willing to put their money where their mouth is; fully 83 percent are willing to pay additional taxes to protect American land, water and wildlife.** As shown below, when provided with a range of dollar amounts to pay in increased taxes, the vast majority of voters are willing to pay some amount more, including 72 percent of Tea Party Republicans, 73 percent of self-described conservatives, 88 percent of moderates, and 94 percent of self-described liberals.



- **Underlying some of this support and willingness to pay is a sense that there are economic benefits to conservation.** Voters are twice as likely to say that protections for land, air, water and wildlife have a *positive* impact on jobs (41 percent), than a negative impact (17 percent), or little impact one way or the other (33 percent). More voters view conservation as having a positive impact than a negative impact in every region of the country, including in the Western U.S. where there are significant holdings of public lands (and where 43 percent see a positive economic impact, versus just 21 percent negative). Fully 52 percent of voters who are undecided in their vote for President indicate that protections for land, air and water are positive for the economy as well.

- **In fact, the overwhelming majority of American voters rejects the notion that protecting our environment is at odds with a strong economy.** While voters express a high degree of concern about the economy (80 percent characterize it as an extremely or very serious problem in their area), they do not view strengthening the economy as being in conflict with conservation. As shown in the next graph, more than three-quarters of voters (79%) believe we can protect land and water and have a strong economy at the same time, while only 16 percent believe that those concerns are even “sometimes” in conflict.

#### Relationship Between the Environment and the Economy



This is consistent with the views of voters three years ago (76% have both; 19% sometimes in conflict and must choose in 2009), and holds true with virtually all demographic sub-groups. The view that conservation and a strong economy are compatible is also predominant among the middle of the electorate which is undecided or not definitive in their vote decision for President, as 84 percent of these “swing” voters sides with the idea that we should not have to choose the economy over the environment.

**Overall, it is clear that conservation is an issue that unites, rather than divides, the American people.** Whether it is a general sense of patriotism and pride in national parks, or support for several very specific federal policies, the survey finds a great deal in common among Americans regarding their views on conservation.