

Poll shows bipartisanship support for protecting NJ's environment, but polarization on climate change

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If there's one thing New Jersey Republicans and Democrats agree on, it's the importance of protecting the environment, according to research commissioned by the New Jersey League of Conservation Voters.

But some "partisan polarization" on climate change was reported.

"While we in New Jersey are lucky to have bipartisan support for the environment, it's not shared widely among the population when you start to talk about climate change," said Ed Potosnak, NJLCV's executive director. "Right away, people go to their blue and red hats. That was a learning opportunity for us, and also a flag for us to see how we can talk about these issues and get through that first line of defense."

Partisanship notwithstanding, 78% of the respondents "indicate that addressing climate change is important to them," Ben Lazarus, who conducted the poll, wrote in a memo.

The NJLCV paid \$39,000 to TargetSmart, a Washington, D.C.-based firm, to ask 1,040 voters in New Jersey whether they cared about things such as clean drinking water, clean rivers and streams, and clean oil and gas pipelines, i.e., ones that don't leak.

"Nearly all voters agree that even during the COVID-19 pandemic, we have a moral obligation to take care of our natural environment (91% agree) and need to take care of our natural environment for the sake of our children and grandchildren (94% agree)," Lazarus wrote.

Nowhere, Lazarus and Potosnak claim, did the poll find any special lack of interest in conservation, even in rural areas.

Quite the contrary: "Folks who live in rural areas are the most likely to say that they would cut other stuff (from a budget) rather than conservation," Lazarus said.

But while 49% of those polled said they would agree to paying a hypothetical \$20 annual tax increase "to conserve land, water and wildlife," 45% said they would not.

The Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling at Rutgers University, following a study of attitudes toward climate change, found a similar reluctance in New Jerseyans to fund conservation efforts last year, noting:

“In general, New Jerseyans are supportive of government doing more (to mitigate climate change) but not at the expense of paying more,” and “New Jerseyans appear to be unwilling to pay extra to make infrastructure more weather-resistant.”

Given the NJLCV’s mission to influence legislation, elect political candidates supportive of environmental protections and hold public officials accountable, wording for some poll questions begged responses favorable to conservationism.

A sampling of the questions included:

- “Would you prefer New Jersey state government cut other items in the budget (due to the pandemic-caused shortfall), or make large cuts to conservation and environmental protection priorities?”

- “We should take care of our natural environment for the sake of our children and grandchildren.” (Agree/Disagree)

- We should invest in “projects that improve and restore our environment, while providing good-paying jobs.” (Agree/Disagree).

Two political figures in South Jersey, on opposite ends of the spectrum, underscored the bipartisan accord and environmental awareness highlighted in the poll.

“We do our best to stay informed regarding environmental issues and concerns,” Lacey Township Mayor Steve Kennis, a Republican, wrote in an email. The township recently received state endorsement of its plan to “incorporate resiliency and sustainability measures” to future building projects, he noted.

“Personally, I attend (on Zoom) most of the (New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection) sea level rise updates and webinars,” Kennis wrote. “Since a large portion of Lacey rests on the bay, we’ve begun to look at ordinance changes regarding bulkhead heights.”

“The environment is very closely related to the health of the community,” said Jackson, mayor of West Cape May from 2001-05.

Local governments too amenable to housing and commercial development may boost tax revenues, only to spend much of the money on the additional police, fire, sanitation and other services new development demands, Jackson said. Moreover, he said, flooding may become more extreme and frequent.

“It’s easy to clear trees, but it’s not always wise,” Jackson said.

The poll conducted Oct. 1 through 12 bore a margin of error of plus or minus 4%.

