



Understanding Rural Attitudes Toward the Environment and Conservation in America

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Executive Summary

Rural Americans matter—a lot—to the fate of U.S. environmental policy. Not only do farmers, ranchers, and forest owners manage huge portions of American lands and watersheds, but rural voters also have an outsized impact on national policy. While rural Americans express support for natural resource conservation, they and their elected officials often voice less support for existing federal environmental policies and laws. Congressional action on a variety of environmental issues has been impeded by opposition from rural stakeholders.

Why do rural voters and their representatives often oppose environmental regulations? What accounts for this apparent rural/urban divide on attitudes toward environmental policy? Are there alternative policies, communications strategies, or, more broadly, ways to engage rural voters and constituencies that might bridge the urban/rural divide on the environment? This study seeks to answer these questions.

Broadly, our study suggests that the urban/rural divide on the environment is not a function of how much rural voters care about the environment. Nor is it a function of how knowledgeable they are—rural voters appear relatively sophisticated about environmental issues. We do find that voters from rural America are more likely to view where they live as being an important part of how they define themselves which in turn shapes their views, including on environmental policy. Attitudes about the government are a clear dividing line between rural and urban/suburban voters, particularly regarding differences in the level of trust toward the federal government. Views toward climate change are polarized across the urban/rural divide with rural voters being more skeptical of both the science of and governmental response to climate change. Our study suggests, however, that there are opportunities to engage rural voters on climate change and environmental policies generally.

Acknowledgements

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What We Did

This study was led by the Duke Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions (NIEPS) with assistance from Hart Research Associates, New Bridge Strategy, the University of Rhode Island, and the University of Wyoming. In late 2017 and 2018, we conducted four in-person focus groups with rural voters in North Carolina. In 2019, we expanded the focus group research into the western United States using both telephone and online focus groups.¹ In August 2019, we conducted a nationwide telephone survey of voters that included 1,005 rural voters and 606 urban/suburban voters. We also conducted in-depth interviews with 36 rural stakeholder leaders from across the country, including leaders in county government, agriculture, forestry, business, labor, and conservation districts. These interviews included leaders in the African American landowner community and tribal governments.

In addition, we conducted two other smaller studies. First, the University of Wyoming conducted interviews, a focus group, and a survey of rural voters in that state around attitudes toward wildlife migration and associated conservation policies. Second, in partnership with Environmental Defense Fund, we interviewed rural stakeholders in North Carolina regarding their attitudes on climate change, flooding and other extreme weather, and associated policies. Both studies are included in the Appendix.

What We Found

- (1) **The rural/urban divide is real but it's not a divide around who cares more for the environment.** There is indeed a rural/urban divide on the environment. Being from rural America influences how voters view the environment and environmental policy. Interestingly, rural Americans value environmental protection about the same as urban/suburban Americans, though there are differences in which specific environmental issues are most important. Clean water is the highest priority across all voters, but rural voters place higher emphasis on farmland conservation and less priority on climate change than their urban/suburban counterparts.
- (2) **Rural Americans share several core values and strong place identity that shapes their perspectives on environmental conservation.** Values such as community, environmental stewardship and a strong connection to nature inform how rural Americans view issues of environmental conservation. Rural Americans also tend to have a stronger place identity than urban/suburban Americans.
- (3) **Attitudes toward government are a fundamental driver of the urban/rural divide on the environment.** While rural voters often acknowledge the need for regulation related to the environment, they tend to be more skeptical of government policies, particularly federal policies, than urban/suburban voters. Even rural voters from traditionally pro-regulation demographics such as Democrats, younger, or highly educated voters are more likely to be skeptical of government intervention than

¹ In late 2019, we conducted a focus group and survey of rural voters in the upper Midwest focused on climate change that we briefly draw on in the climate change portion of this report but will fully describe in a future publication.

urban/suburban voters from the same groups. Views toward government are not only driven by party affiliation; being from rural America in general is associated with skepticism of government regulation.

- (4) **For rural voters, it is not a contradiction to consider yourself pro-environment and yet oppose or have strong reservations about existing environmental policies.** For example, rural voters voiced strong support for clean water, but raised concerns about the impact of Clean Water Act policies on rural constituencies such as farmers. In focus groups, we repeatedly heard voters voice strong support for conservation and environmental protection in the abstract, but then raise concerns for the impacts and/or efficacy of environmental policies.
- (5) **The urban/rural divide on the environment is not a function of lack of knowledge about the environment or related policies.** In focus groups, we found many rural voters to be relatively knowledgeable on environmental policies and relatively sophisticated on associated trade-offs.
- (6) **Rural voters have a preference for policies that are overseen by state or local government and that allow for collaboration with rural voters and stakeholders.** Rural voters feel a deep connection to the fate of the environment and want to have a say in managing local resources. The preference for state government involvement in environmental policy is shared by urban/suburban voters, though not as strongly as among rural voters.
- (7) **The issue of climate change is highly polarized among rural voters and there is less support for government action than among urban/suburban voters.** Rural voters from more pro-environment demographics (younger, highly educated, and rating the environment as important) are more muted in their support for action of climate change than urban/suburban voters with similar demographics and attitudes. We found that even perceptions of extreme weather are polarized along a partisan divide and across the urban/rural divide. Further, we found some rural leaders reticent to discuss climate change within their communities due to the polarization of the issue.
- (8) **Rural reluctance to accept the science around climate change may be based on concerns about regulations.** Conversations with rural leaders and voters suggested a link between belief in climate change and negative experiences with or perceptions of negative impacts of existing environmental laws and regulations. Many rural Americans from interviews and focus groups worried that climate policy will leave them out of the conversation and increase hardships in rural communities.
- (9) **Rural voters place less trust in environmental and conservation groups relative to other sources of information on the environment.** The most trusted sources of environmental information among rural voters are scientists and local farmers/ranchers, while environmental advocacy groups were the least likely to be chosen as a top trusted source by rural survey participants. However, some rural stakeholders differentiate between environmental groups (seen as combative) and conservation groups (seen as collaborative), describing more positive associations with the latter.

(10) Rural voters respond to messages about environmental policies that emphasize moral responsibility, acting on behalf of future generations and clean water.

Interestingly, messages about the government's role in regulating corporations also resonated with rural voters, suggesting that they see corporations as at least partially responsible for environmental protection and conservation. Rural skepticism that corporations will live up to that responsibility is at least as great as their reservations about government.

What We Recommend

We offer the following recommendations based on this study:

- **There is no quick fix.** The urban/rural divide on the environment is not a messaging problem that will be solved with better talking points. Bridging the urban/rural divide on the environment will require engagement and new partnerships with rural stakeholders, rethinking the design of environmental policies, and new communication strategies.
- **Engage.** Environmentalists, conservation groups, and policymakers should engage with rural voters and rural stakeholders in developing environmental policies that impact rural communities.
- **Build state and local partnerships into policy.** Policy strategies that partner with states and local government are likely to be more popular with rural voters.
- **Collaborate.** Policies that allow for collaboration with rural constituencies are more likely to be popular among rural voters.
- **Create pathways for science to reach rural communities.** Policymakers should focus on bolstering scientific outreach through universities, cooperative extension, and new ways to connect rural America to the nation's top scientists.
- **Messengers matter.** Policymakers, environmentalists, conservation groups, and others should consider engaging more with local rural stakeholders, including farmers and ranchers, cooperative extension, and others in their local area to convey information about environmental policies.
- **Climate change.** Climate policies that allow for state and local partnerships, position rural stakeholders as part of the solution, and leverage rural voters' interest in clean water, farmland conservation, and other rural priorities are likely to be more popular among rural voters.
- **Economics.** Among forest and farmland conservation, renewable energy development, and incentives for conservation-oriented farming practices, there are ample opportunities to connect environmental policy priorities and rural economies in a way that rural residents will appreciate and support.
- **Who will defend environmental policy?** Environmentalists and many rural voters both voice skepticism about governmental environmental policy. Given that cynicism toward the government is a significant barrier to rural support for environmental policy,

environmental advocates should consider strategies that find credible voices in rural communities who can point to successful policy interventions—ones that work for both rural communities and the environment—as a way to diminish skepticism toward the government’s actions on the environment.

INTRODUCTION

Though rural portions of the United States account for roughly 97 percent of the country’s land area, only an estimated 19 percent of Americans live there (US Census Bureau 2017). Yet, rural Americans have an outsized impact on conservation of natural resources and environmental policy. Conservation of ecosystems, water, and wildlife, production of energy—renewable and nonrenewable—and many other natural resource issues depend on the actions taken by rural residents, particularly farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners. Rural residents also have an outsized political voice in national environmental policy thanks to representation of rural states in the U.S. Senate.

Rural Americans are not monolithic. There is substantial diversity—racial, ethnic, socioeconomic—among U.S. rural populations. Still, some evidence has found that rural attitudes toward environmental issues are different than those of urban populations (Lutz et al. 1999; Safford et al. 2012; Yu 2014). While rural Americans express support for natural resource conservation and often have close personal and occupational ties to the natural environment, they (and their elected representatives) often exhibit less support for existing environmental protection policies and laws (Hochschild 2016; Salka 2001). Rural constituent groups—farm groups, forestry interests, rural county officials, and others—tend to be skeptical of pro-environmental policies (Clayton 2015) and have in recent years led the push to limit the expansion of major federal environmental policies.

Yet, some academic researchers have found a high level of concern about the environment among farmers and other rural Americans (Reeve and Black 1993), and that this concern is increasing (Reeve 2001). In a 2008 study, over a third of rural respondents reported that environmental rules have been good for their community, compared to only 13 percent that reported a negative effect. Due to their close connection to the natural world, many rural Americans have a deep sense of natural resource stewardship and a conservation ethic. But political trends suggest a general rural opposition to traditional environmental conservation policies. Until now, there has been a lack of comprehensive studies or polling on rural public opinion on the environment and natural resource conservation. Clearly the difference between environmental attitudes and policy support among rural Americans deserves more attention.

This project seeks to document and understand the environmental attitudes, policy preferences, and values that drive these attitudes among rural voters in the United States. The core objective of this project is to understand the disconnect between what appears to be a strong stewardship ethic among rural Americans and an aversion to traditional environmental policies. We hope that by systematically documenting the values, identities, and attitudes of rural Americans, this project can provide guidance to policymakers, environmental organizations, and others involved in natural resource management on how to better engage rural communities in designing and implementing effective environmental protection policies.

METHODS

This project seeks to answer several key questions about rural Americans attitudes on the environment and environmental policy:

- To what extent do rural Americans prioritize environmental conservation, particularly in relation to other issues and concerns, and in comparison to urban and suburban voters?
- What core values and identities inform rural attitudes toward environmental protection?
- How do attitudes toward the government shape environmental policy preferences?
- What are the perceptions of environmental organizations and the environmental movement in rural America?
- What sources do rural Americans most trust for environmental information among rural Americans?
- What language resonates when speaking with rural voters about the environment?
- How do rural Americans understand and experience the realities of climate change, and how does this inform their views on federal climate policy?

To answer these questions, we undertook three types of research from 2017–2019: focus groups, interviews with rural leaders, and a national survey. The project began with qualitative data collection through focus groups and interviews across the United States. We began the study with four pilot focus groups across North Carolina in late 2017 and the summer of 2018. We then continued with additional focus groups with voters in the Intermountain West region in early summer 2019. We conducted telephone focus groups in Colorado, Montana, New Mexico, Nevada, and Wyoming, with an extended online focus group incorporating voters from Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, and Wyoming. A total of 89 rural voters participated in the focus groups, recruited from rural zip codes across these states. We conducted this research in partnership with the bipartisan research team of Hart Research Associates and New Bridge Strategy. (In late 2019, we also conducted a focus group with 18 rural voters in the upper Midwest focused on climate change that we briefly draw on in the climate change portion of this report but will fully describe on in a future publication.)

We continued the qualitative research through 36 in-depth interviews with rural stakeholder leaders from across the country. The purpose of these interviews was to gain the perspective of a broader array of rural communities, including the views of communities that actively manage natural resources. Stakeholders included rural elected county officials (2), agricultural stakeholder leaders (20), forestry stakeholder leaders (6), rural business and labor stakeholders (2), leaders of rural conservation districts (2), African American landowner group leaders (2), and representatives from Native American tribes (2). Interviewees spanned the country, with representation from the Northeast, Northwest, Midwest, Southeast, and Western states.

The final step in the data collection involved a large, nationally representative telephone survey of urban, rural, and suburban Americans. The national survey included 1,611 registered voters nationwide, including an oversample of 800 voters from rural zip codes across seven regions:

East, South, Midwest, Plains, Rocky Mountains, Southwest, and Pacific (total rural respondents = 1,005).² Surveys were conducted by telephone from August 6–15, 2019, with margins of error of +/- 3.4 percentage points nationwide. This quantitative survey allowed us to compare attitudes toward environment and conservation across rural and urban/suburban Americans. (We also conducted an online survey of upper Midwestern voters in late 2019 that is briefly touched upon in the climate change section of this report and will be fully detailed in a subsequent report.)

Our study shows that rural Americans think differently about the environment and environmental policy than do urban and suburban Americans, even when you correct for political party or other demographic factors. The sections below present the main themes identified across the various research stages. First, we discuss findings about core rural values and shared identities, and how these inform environmental attitudes in ways that differ from Americans in more urban settings. Next, we describe findings about general rural attitudes toward and concern about the environment, including the most important environmental issues to rural Americans. The next section presents our findings about rural attitudes toward government regulation of the environment. We then describe findings regarding how rural Americans receive and accept information about environmental issues, including who they trust for information, and attitudes toward environmental organizations. The final section focuses on rural attitudes toward climate change and climate policy. We conclude with a discussion of our findings and specific recommendations for engaging rural Americans on the environment.

SHARED RURAL VALUES AND IDENTITIES INFORM ENVIRONMENTAL ATTITUDES

“There is this stewardship ethic, this conservation ethic, that’s been passed down from generation to generation ... we certainly feel like we’re just stewards of what we have right now. The land is not ours, we’re just borrowing it, and we’re responsible for it right now until we can pass it to the next generation.”

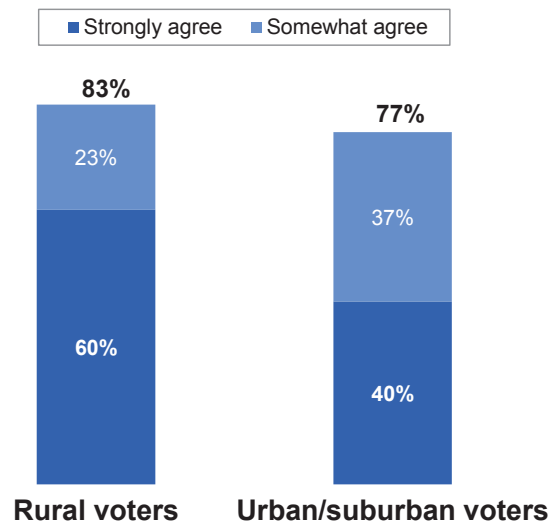
—Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, Georgia

Being from rural parts of the country shapes the way rural Americans think about themselves and the environment and differentiates them from their urban and suburban counterparts. While this rootedness is in some ways physical (43 percent of rural survey respondents live in the area that they grew up in, compared to 31 percent of urban and suburban respondents), rural respondents also tend to self-identify with the place that they live more than urban respondents. Survey data show a highly significant correlation between living in a rural area and a strong place identity: 60 percent of rural respondents strongly agreed that where they live is an important part of who they are, compared to just 40 percent of urban and suburban respondents (Figure 1).

²The poll was conducted in the 48 contiguous states. Hawaii and Alaska were not included.

Figure 1: Evidence of Place Identity among Rural and Urban Voters

I feel like the area that I live in is an important part of who I am.



This strong sense of rural place identity was consistent across genders, age groups (although slightly higher among older respondents), and partisanship. Having a household member involved in agriculture or forestry increased place identity even more, with 67 percent of these households strongly agreeing that where they live is an important part of who they are. In a regression analysis controlling for several factors (including gender, having a household member involved in agriculture, living in the place where you grew up, age, education, and political ideology), living in a rural area was a highly significant predictor of place identity: Compared to living in an urban or suburban area, living in a rural area increased the average place identity score by 11 percent.

Recognizing the importance of place identity to rural Americans is key to understanding rural environmental attitudes because research has found correlations between place identity and support for environmental protection policies (Budruk et al. 2009; Devine-Wright 2009; Hinds and Sparks 2008; Stedman 2002). In the following section, we explore some of the values that underpin the shared rural identity documented in the survey data and discuss how these shared rural values translate into unique environmental attitudes in the rural communities represented in our qualitative data.

RURAL AMERICANS TEND TO EXHIBIT A COMMON SET OF SHARED VALUES

Rural identities are shaped by shared values across rural communities. In the focus groups and interviews, we asked respondents to identify values that they believed were core to individuals living in rural communities. The most commonly cited values were a strong sense of community and reliance on your neighbors, an appreciation for and dependency on nature, and a sense of heritage, legacy and stewardship of the land.

Community Matters in Rural America

Across the board, almost all respondents described a strong commitment to their community as a value that defines rural Americans. Because rural Americans are more isolated from many resources available in cities, in both focus groups and interviews, they described themselves as relying on their neighbors for support more than people in urban areas. “Rural America still relies on its neighbors and we know who our neighbors are, and we still know that if something goes wrong, we go next door,” (Forestry Stakeholder Leader, California). This connection to their community further emphasizes the importance of place identity among rural Americans: “There’s just that sense of place and sense of belonging, a sense of neighborhood. We just know each other,” (Conservation Stakeholder Leader, Idaho). In focus groups and interviews, rural participants described feeling that their neighbors will support them in times of need, creating what they perceive as deeper connections to their community than people in urban areas tend to experience: “I just think there’s way more connection than when I was right in the city, and, you know, I maybe didn’t even know who lived a block away, whether one could ask them for help, or, you know, if they would watch out for anything,” (Focus Group Participant, Montana).

Rural Americans Tend to Have a Strong Connection to Nature and the Environment

Building on this place identity, rural participants also emphasized the strong connection they feel to the natural world. Most rural interviewees and focus group participants described choosing to live in rural areas specifically because of the direct interaction with the outdoors: “There’s just an appreciation for the outdoors. It’s just fun to go outside every day,” (Conservation Stakeholder Leader, Idaho). Rural participants described not only valuing and appreciating natural resources, but noted that many rural Americans depend on it for many aspects of their daily lives. This is a key difference that rural participants identified between urban and rural Americans. “All of these folks depend on their own private wells to supply their household and their family, whereas people in the city ... as long as the tap turns on and water comes out, maybe they don’t give it a thought,” (Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, Illinois).

This perceived closer tie to nature and the outdoors shapes how rural Americans view environmental issues. As one interviewee said, “I think rural people are much more tuned in ... I think urban people are probably tuned in [to environmental issues] philosophically, but they don’t deal with pumping water out of the well, having clean drinking water is not a big issue in Chicago probably, but down here, the majority—the rural people still have wells and we do have a rural water system ... I think rural people have a whole lot better understanding of our environment, of the ecosystem, of how things complement each other,” (Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, Illinois).

Legacy and Stewardship Motivate Environmental Protection

Finally, rural respondents consistently identified a strong sense of heritage, legacy, and stewardship of their environment: “Farmers are a lot more stewardship and conservation-minded than the average urban person would probably know,” (Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, Illinois). For many rural Americans, particularly those involved in agriculture and forestry, their land has been passed down through generations, and they feel highly invested in maintaining its health

Conservation vs. Preservation

When considering how these values inform environmental attitudes differently between rural and urban Americans, one strong differentiation we heard from interview and focus group participants is on the perspective of environmental conservation versus environmental preservation. The fact that rural Americans, especially those in agriculture and forestry, rely on the environment for their livelihoods translates into an environmental protection perspective focused on conserving resources so that they can continue to be used far into the future. Meanwhile, rural participants feel that the priority of urban Americans is environmental preservation and protection, preventing the actual use of environmental resources. “My observation is that city folks tend to be more preservationist and just want things to stay pristine and never change and all that. As people who live in rural areas tend to use these resources more, they see them as more of a utilitarian type of thing. Not to the point of abusing the resource, but of using it,” (Focus Group Participant, North Carolina).

One rural respondent described how he believed rural and urban Americans have completely different thoughts when looking at land: “I think when a farmer looks at a field, they look at the potential for a crop, to grow something and make a living, whereas an urbanite might look at that same field and think of open space maybe for recreation needs,” (Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, Illinois). Rural participants in the focus groups also brought up differences in views about wildlife and hunting between rural and urban individuals. Speaking about urbanites, one participant in North Carolina said: “They might think, ‘We don’t want to shoot anything,’ or, ‘We don’t want to kill anything.’ But the reality is that sometimes this wildlife can cause problems with the way that we live, too many deer cause fatalities in cars. There are ways to manage the population responsibly.”

and abundance: “If you have that heritage, that piece of you, and how you have been part of it from the day you were born ‘til today, it means a lot to you. It is an heirloom. It gives you hope that it will always continue to be an heirloom,” (Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, Illinois).

Rural stakeholders also expressed how the nature of their work requires them to consider the longer-term implications of everything they do, more so than professions in urban/suburban areas. “If you look at the Fortune 500, their horizon is the next quarter ... reporting to stockholders. Whereas we consistently, implicitly and explicit[ly], make decisions based on generational lifespans. I think that the best way to look at the environment and resources is by that long of a time period. We’re talking about how if my niece and nephew come back, what do we want this soil health to be? What do we want our animal welfare practice to be? What do we want the sustainability of our farm to be?” (Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, Missouri).

This sense of legacy and stewardship directly informs a prioritization to protect the environment: “I’ve got two young daughters and the last thing I would do is something on my farm that would harm them ... I’ve got that mentality for my kids, for the environment that I’m in, for the end consumer that I’m producing for,” (Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, Illinois). Many of the rural participants we interviewed felt this sense of stewardship differentiated them from urbanites—rural respondents felt personal responsibility for their surroundings and their environment, and recognized the importance of a healthy environment for their livelihoods. This also translated into high levels of respect for personal property, another value that the rural respondents thought differentiated them from their urban counterparts: “The care of the land, of the farm, is really high up in their value chain as well. You see a lot more respect for property in rural areas than you do in more urban areas,” (Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, Minnesota). In the eyes of our

rural respondents, they recognize and highly value their property and the land that they manage, which in turn translates into close care and an intention to protect the environment and the land so that it will continue to offer abundant resources.

COMPARING RURAL AND URBAN/SUBURBAN ATTITUDES ON THE ENVIRONMENT

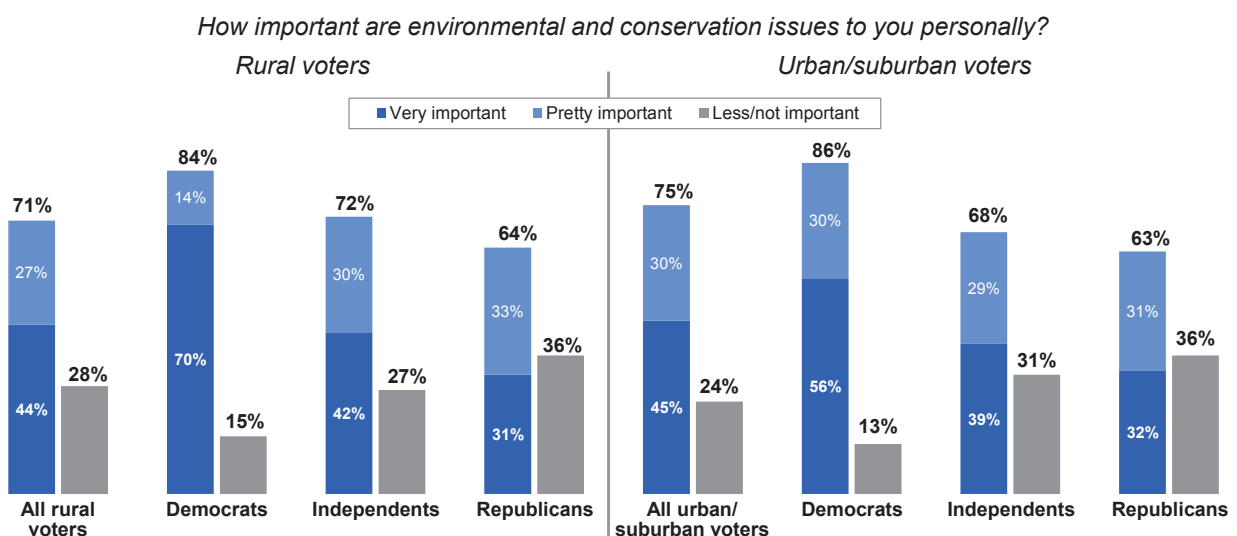
“I think that [rural Americans] are very concerned about their environment. However, they’re also very tired of urban areas telling them how to live their lives.”

—Forestry Stakeholder Leader, New York

A critical question of this research is to understand the level of support for environmental and conservation issues and whether rural voters value environmental conservation to the same extent as urban/suburban voters. If rural voters are less supportive of environmental protection, then that might explain why voting patterns are different across legislative representatives from rural versus urban and suburban districts.

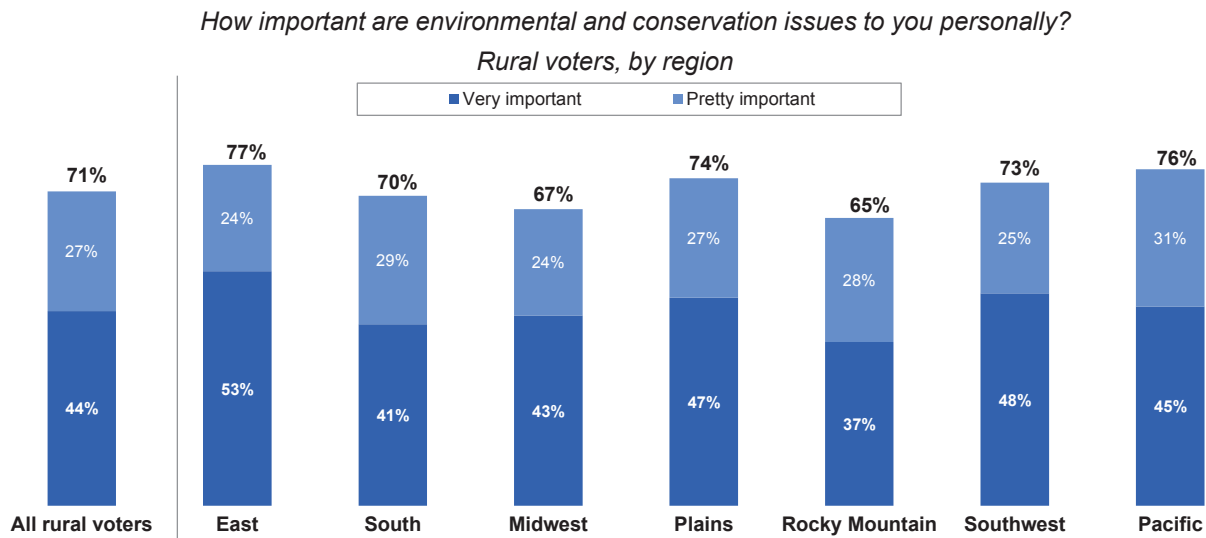
As part of our national survey, we asked voters: “How important are environmental and conservation issues to you personally?” Both urban/suburban and rural voters reported similar levels of environmental importance, with 71 percent of rural voters and 75 percent of urban/suburban voters reporting that the environment and conservation were very or somewhat important to them personally (Figure 2). In regression analyses controlling for partisanship, there was no significant difference in the level of importance of environmental issues between rural and urban/suburban voters. While Democrats were more likely than Independents and Republicans to say that environmental and conservation issues were important to them, majorities of both groups still reported that these issues are important. There was no major difference in partisan attitudes between rural and urban/suburban voters on this question.

Figure 2: Importance of Environmental and Conservation Issues to Survey Respondents



One of the goals of this study was to understand how rural environmental attitudes vary across regions, since most prior studies of rural attitudes have focused on specific geographies. When looking at the importance of environmental issues by region, we found relatively little difference in rural voters’ prioritization of these issues, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Importance of Environmental and Conservation Issues to Rural Voters by Region

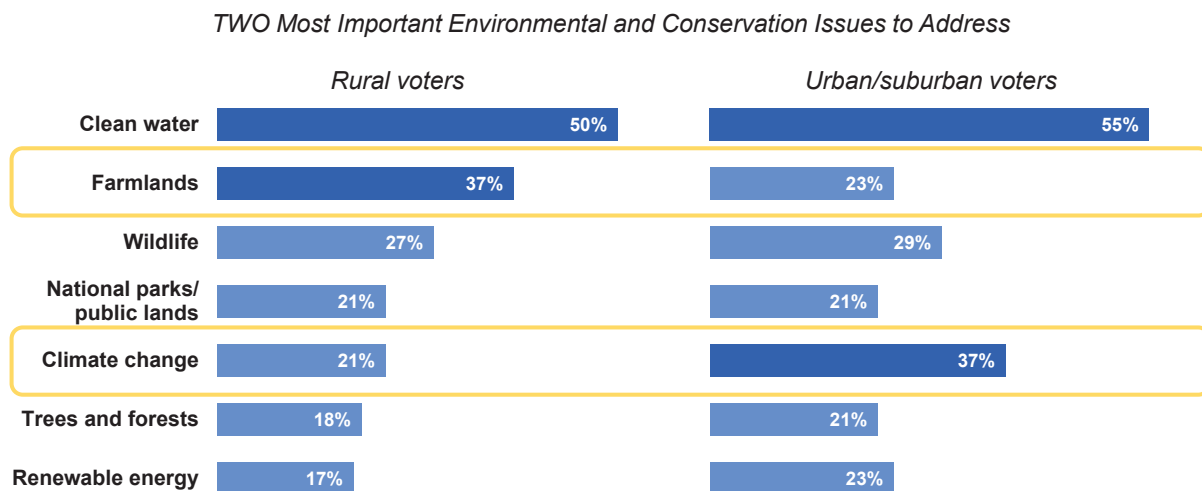


In the interviews, rural stakeholder leaders often cited environmental protection and conservation as vitally important to the integrity of agricultural communities, affirming that environmental issues are of equal or higher importance than other issues. “Our entire community’s foundation is built on the environment and natural resources,” (Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, Georgia). This prioritization did vary to some degree based on the profession of the rural individuals, with agricultural communities consistently noting high levels of concern for the environment: “The way I look at it is, anybody who is truly in production agriculture is active and [conservation] is what they do. Those of us that are doing it, it’s because it’s what we do and it’s what we’re supposed to be doing,” (Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, Oklahoma). Others reported more ambivalence in their communities: “I think it has a lot to do with your economic situation,” reported a forestry stakeholder leader in Vermont. “For some people, it’s the top priority and for other people, it’s not a priority. It depends on the individual,” (Tribal Stakeholder Leader, Maine). Individual determinants of environmental concern tended to be rooted in political attitudes, age, and how closely the individual’s profession relied on the land.

Top Environmental Concerns Vary Across Urban and Rural Voters in Important Ways

There are important differences concerning which environmental and conservation issues are most important to rural versus urban/suburban voters. As evident in Figure 4, rural and urban/suburban voters placed the highest priority on clean water when asked which environmental/conservation issues are most important to them. But, beyond that, there were some notable differences. In particular, rural voters were less likely to prioritize climate change and placed much more emphasis on protecting farmland than their urban counterparts (37 percent of rural respondents said protecting farmland was important compared with 22 percent of urban and suburban respondents) (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Most Important Environmental Issues among Rural and Urban/Suburban Voters



Evidence from the focus groups suggests that rural voters prioritize local environmental issues that have an immediate impact on them. When asked to consider what environmental issues were most important, protecting clean air and clean water consistently rose to the top. Other issues that directly impacted these communities on a daily basis, such as protecting farmland, soil health and managing wildlife, were also common responses, while broader issues such as climate change were less commonly identified.

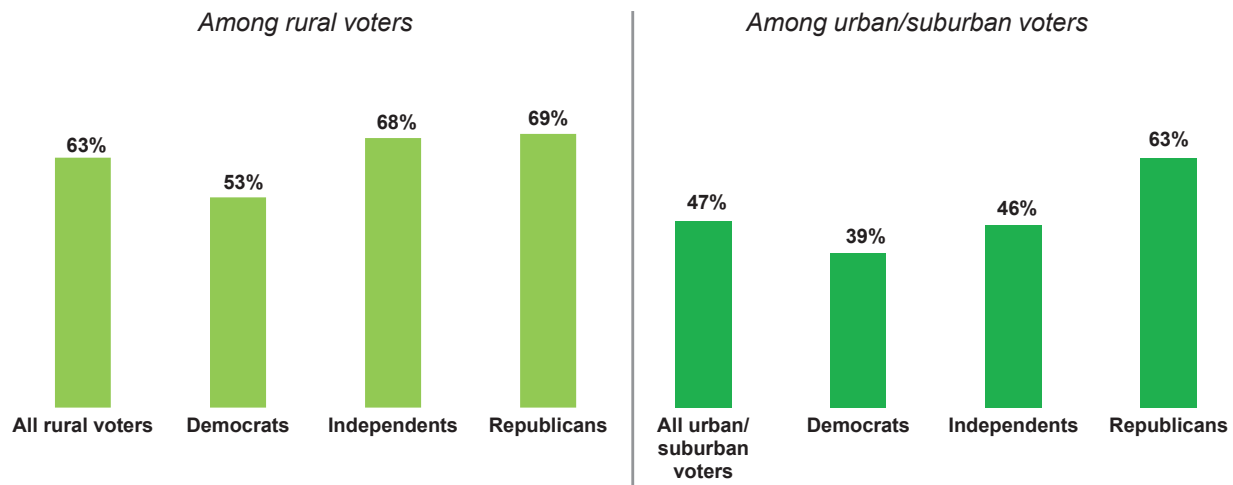
Rural Americans Don't Feel They Get Adequate Credit for Protecting the Environment

Many of the rural stakeholder leaders and focus group participants felt that rural Americans' actions to protect environmental resources were ignored by people in urban areas. Instead, they frequently reported feeling misunderstood by non-rural Americans, particularly regarding their impact on the environment. "I think there's a lot of pride and a lot of activity at the local level, and there's a desire to let people know that they're out here and that they're trying, but sometimes I think they don't feel like a lot of people [in urban areas] care," (Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, Illinois). In other cases, farmers felt villainized when it comes to their impact on the environment: "They're very upset, by the way that some of these environmentalists portray a farmer. That makes it seem like they're an evil force. That they should be basically put out of business," (Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, Illinois).

While the survey data suggests that both urban and rural voters give rural communities credit for their role in protecting the environment, urban voters tended to acknowledge this role less than rural voters. Sixty-three percent of rural respondents thought that rural communities did a lot or a fair amount to protect the environment, compared to just 47 percent of urban and suburban respondents. This perception does seem to depend on partisanship: urban/suburban and rural Republicans were much more likely than their Democratic and (in the case of urban/suburban) Independent counterparts to think that rural Americans significantly contribute to environmental protection (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Perceptions of Actions to Protect the Environment

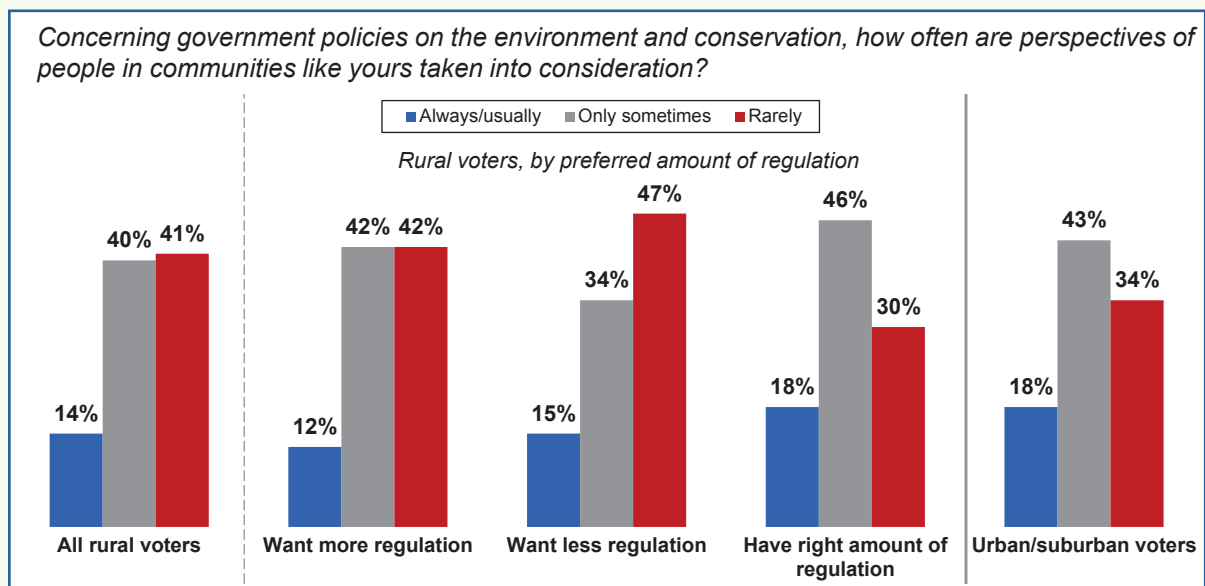
Americans who live in rural areas do **A LOT OR A FAIR AMOUNT** to protect and conserve the environment



Contributing but Not Feeling Heard

A key to engaging more rural communities in environmental policymaking may be to provide venues and communication channels for these Americans to contribute to the policymaking process. Unfortunately, data suggests that most rural Americans do not feel that current environmental policy processes adequately consider their communities' views and needs. Among rural survey respondents, 41 percent reported feeling that their perspectives are rarely taken into account in government policies around conservation and the environment, while an additional 40 percent of rural respondents felt that their perspectives are only sometimes being taken into account. This is compared to 34 percent of non-rural respondents that felt left out of the policymaking conversation (Figure 6). Preferences on environmental regulation also seemed to influence rural perspectives on whether their views were taken into account. Among rural voters who want less regulation, 47 percent felt that their perspectives are rarely taken in to account on environmental policy.

Figure 6: Are Perspectives on the Environment Taken into Account?



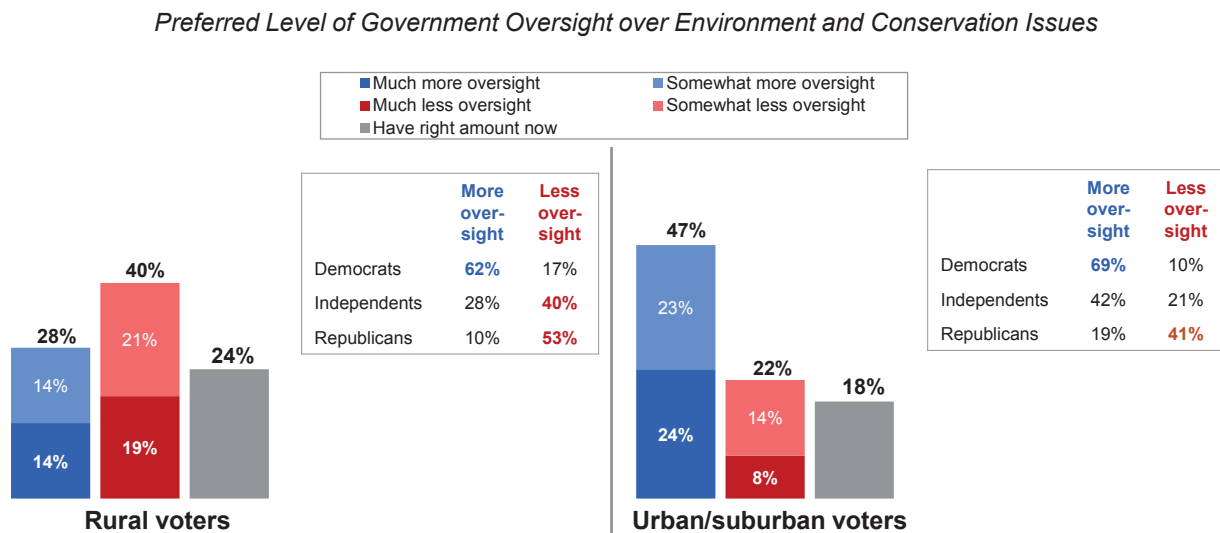
RURAL VOTERS ARE SKEPTICAL OF THE GOVERNMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL REGULATIONS

“Governments have little incentive to be efficient or do things right. We can vote out politicians, but we can’t fire the government. They just get in the way or make things difficult for no reason. They are incapable of making changes quickly if something isn’t working or is actually making things worse.”

—Focus Group Participant, Wyoming

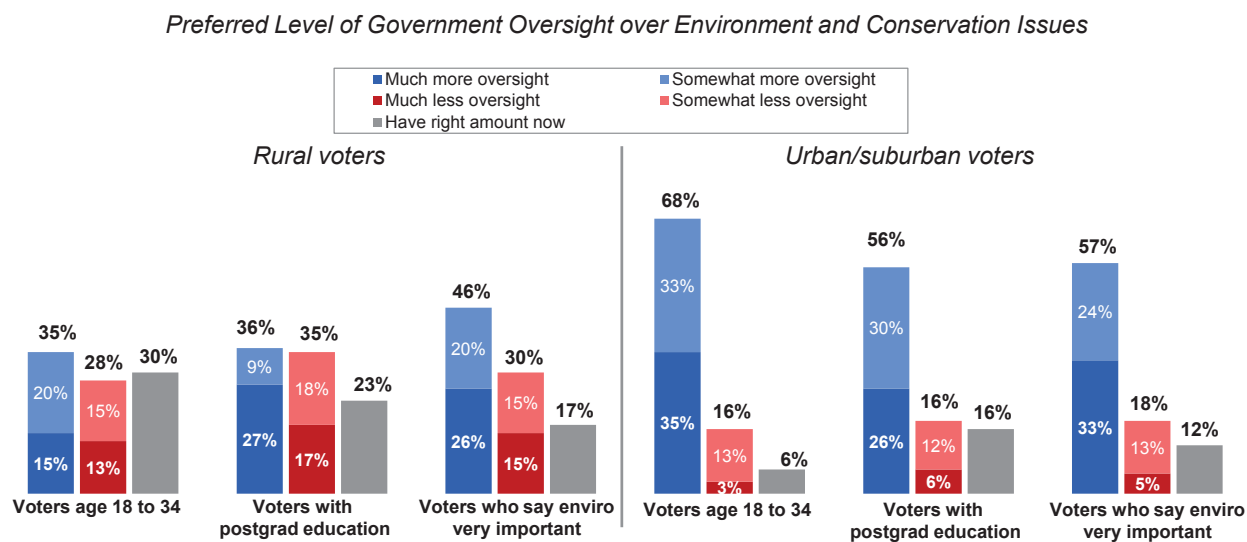
As noted above, for the most part, the rural/urban divide on the environment isn’t a function of the voters’ prioritization of environmental and conservation issues. What’s clear from our research is that attitudes about the government are central to understanding the differences among American voters on environmental issues. Indeed, attitudes toward government regulation are a key cleavage point, especially across the urban/rural divide. Rural respondents were much more likely to prefer less government oversight of environment and conservation issues compared to urban and suburban voters (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Preferred Level of Government Oversight among Rural and Urban Voters



While expected partisan cleavages existed in both groups (with Democrats more supportive of government regulation and Republicans generally more opposed), demographic groups that tend to be pro-regulation were less supportive of regulation than their urban/suburban counterparts. For example, voters age 18–34, those with postgraduate education, and those who say that the environment is very important to them all showed high levels of support for increased government oversight among urban and suburban voters (68 percent, 56 percent, and 57 percent, respectively). However, those same demographic groups in rural areas showed little to no preference for increased government oversight of the environment (35 percent, 36 percent, and 46 percent, respectively) (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Preferred Level of Government Oversight by Demographic Groups

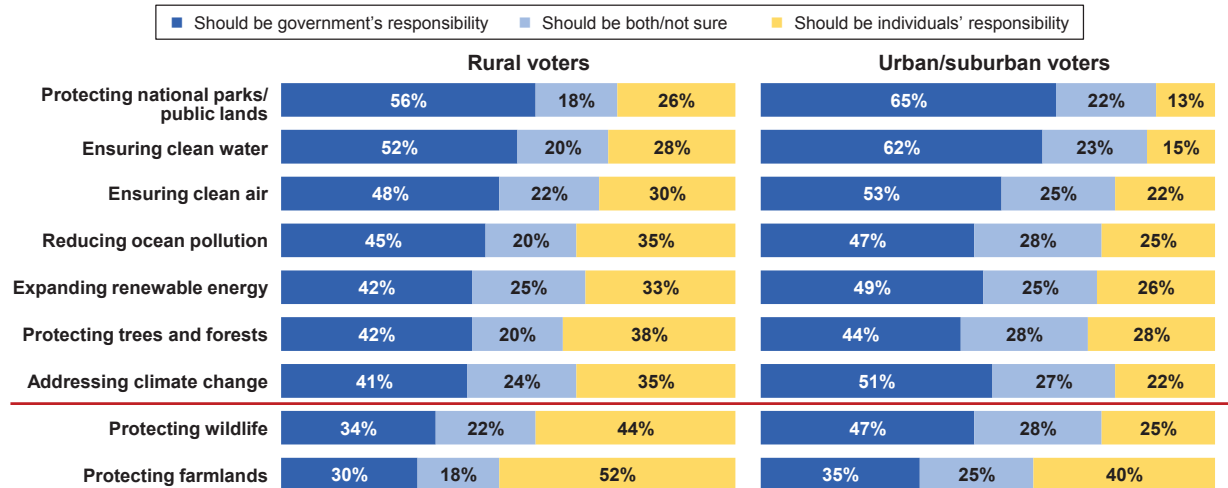


Evidence from the interviews and focus groups suggests that among many rural voters there is a strong distrust of government. Participants frequently described not feeling represented in politics, and a sense that politicians are primarily out to make money and grab power: “I think there’s just too much greed in government ... Whether you’re Republican or Democrat, if you serve in office, it’s for you and not for the people,” (Forestry Stakeholder Leader, North Carolina). This distrust and negative perception was also extended to environmental regulations. Many participants described the federal government as favoring “one size fits all” kind of policies which are viewed as overly bureaucratic and theoretical. Participants described policies that did not seem to consider the needs of rural communities in environmental policymaking, creating potentially unnecessary hardships: “I think we have a lot of our local farmers ... that are not allowed to use some of the chemicals that a lot of the other countries are using. [The prohibited chemicals] are not as harmful [as what we use], but because of local interest groups and lobbyists, they have made those chemicals against the law,” (Focus Group Participant, North Carolina). Participants also frequently cited concerns about the costs of policies and the ineffective use of tax money in the government: “Look at what government oversight has done to health insurance and the public-school system and the welfare system and every other government run program that has serious issues and that I highly doubt will ever be fixed. I feel like more government intrusion on issues such as clean air, climate change, etc., would just cause higher taxes and cost the working people in America more money with very little benefit,” (Focus Group Participant, Idaho).

To understand whether these attitudes toward government regulation of the environment varied based on issue, we asked survey respondents whether they believed several environmental protection goals should be the responsibility of the government or of individuals (Figure 9). Among both urban/suburban and rural voters, the majority of respondents believed that protecting national parks and public lands should be the government’s responsibility, followed closely by ensuring clean water and clean air. This response was consistent even among Republicans and Independents, who generally reported opposition to increased government regulation of the environment. Notably, rural voters in

particular believed that it should be the individuals' responsibility to protect wildlife and farmlands—two issues where rural Americans often feel the government oversteps its regulatory boundaries.

Figure 9: Preference for Government Regulation vs. Individual Responsibility by Environmental Issue



State vs. Federal Regulations

While there was support for government intervention in several conservation and environmental issues among rural voters, there was a general preference for state or local governance among rural voters. (Notably, as shown in Figure 10 below, urban and suburban voters also preferred local government, though to a smaller degree.) Participants in the focus groups and interviews felt that their communities knew best what environmental protection looks like in their area, and they resented government regulations as imposing unnecessary rules on communities that already care about the issues in question: “People who live in the area are the best people that know what works and what doesn’t,” (Focus Group Participant, Utah). Regarding environmental policies, we heard that their frustration is not about protecting the environment, something they feel that they do already, but instead about being told by an external institution how to do something they are already doing. “I think the biggest frustration [is] ... the people that try and regulate things aren’t the people involved in the day to day, so they think they know what’s good or best but they’re not having people that are actually part of what they’re trying to regulate in the conversation,” (Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, Illinois).

When environmental regulation is necessary, rural participants viewed state and local governments as more in touch with the needs of local communities and natural resources. “The United States is a very big country with a lot of different kinds of topography, different kinds of soils, different kinds of water issues. Much of what happens [in federal policy] is very much a one size fits all, which actually is the one size may not actually fit anyone,” (Local Government Stakeholder Leader, California). Government regulations were often viewed as being out of step with the needs of rural communities, as one interview respondent commented: “We have to find productive solutions that benefit all, and government doesn’t do that well because they’re hiring people with degrees, which is fine. They’re studying things and they’ve never had to feed a family based on those studies from the ground,” (Forestry Stakeholder Leader, Washington).

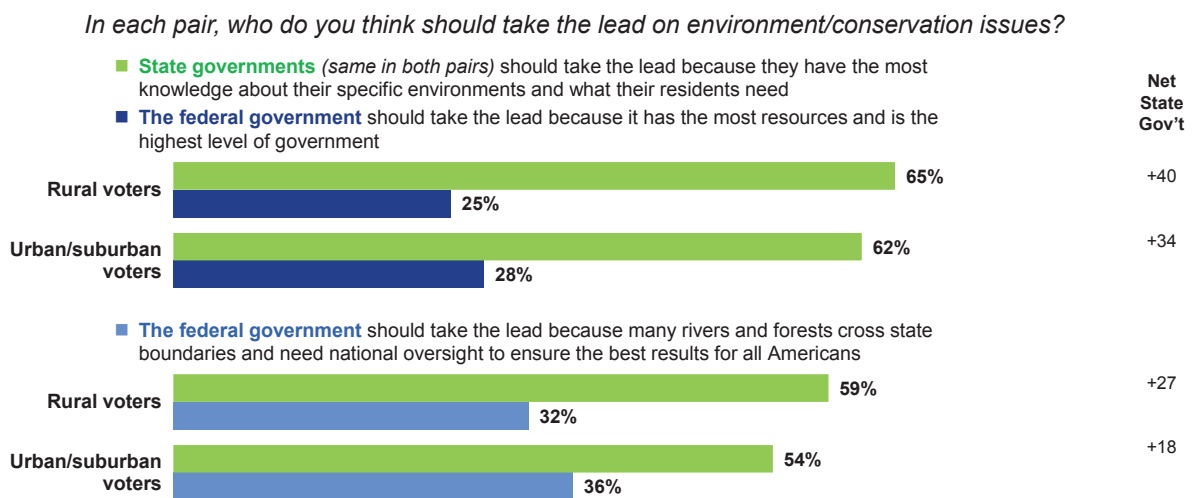
Collaborative and Incentive-Based Governance

In our interviews and focus groups, participants frequently described a preference for collaborative and incentive-based governance. This was not only because these programs allowed communities to tailor policies to local needs, but it also gave agency to local, rural knowledge of environmental issues. Rural communities viewed themselves as “more aware of environmental issues and how to fix them on every acre that we farm than probably anybody in a cubicle or office ... It’s not to say that we don’t want some input or guidance, but when you put a policy or a procedure together, come talk to us before you make it the rule,” (Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, Illinois).

Rural communities also felt that local governance provided better access for their voices to be heard: “I’d say there’s overall sentiment that our members would like to work as close to home as possible because then they have a more likelihood for a seat at the table and an actual relationship to explain themselves,” (Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, Illinois). Despite the preference for state governance, many rural respondents also presented the caveat that while state policies may be nimbler to meet local needs, the state often has limited financial resources.

The survey tested two different ways of framing federal environmental policymaking, the first justifying federal policies because the federal government has the most resources and is the highest level of government, and the second justifying federal policies because natural resources cross state boundaries. Both rural and urban voters preferred state government over the federal government when it comes to environmental policymaking, but the framing did matter (Figure 10). When framed to emphasize the federal government as having the most resources and being the highest level of governance, rural voters preferred state governance by a difference of 40 percentage points. However, when the justification for federal governance was framed as necessary due to the cross-boundary nature of environmental resources, this preference for state governance dropped to just 27 percentage points among rural voters. This suggests that rural voters may be more accepting of federal environmental governance when reminded about the need to manage resources spanning multiple jurisdictions.

Figure 10: Preference for Federal Regulation Is Impacted by Framing

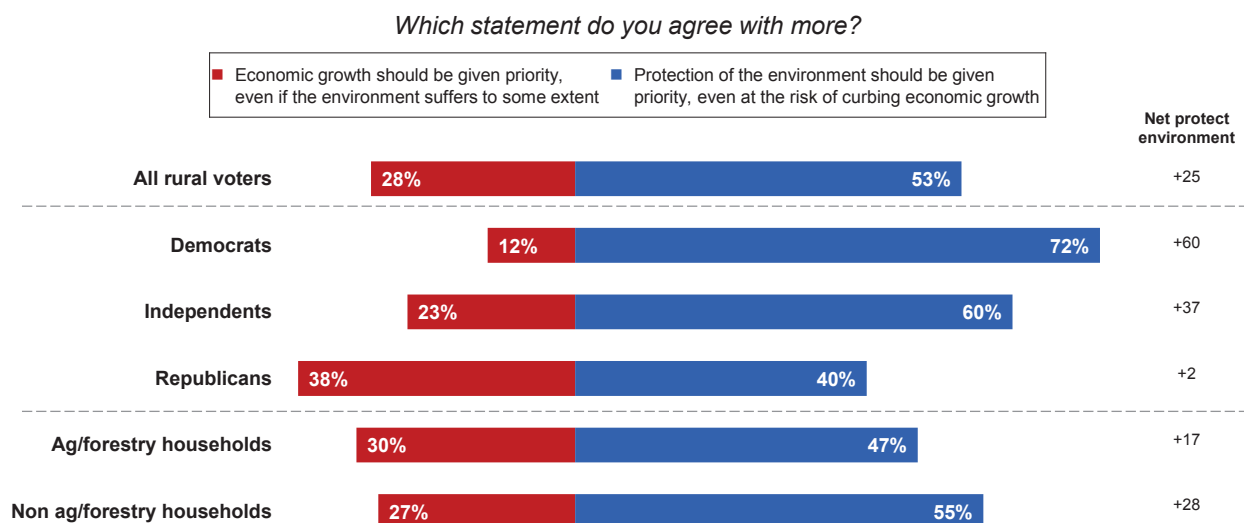


Rural Voters See Environmental Protection and a Strong Economy as Compatible

We examined whether one potential reason that rural voters might be more skeptical of environmental policies is that they see a trade-off between environmental protection and economic prosperity. We asked rural leaders about their thoughts on the trade-off between the environment and the economy and found that they believe environmental protection and economic prosperity in fact go hand in hand. “[W]e wouldn’t be able to do what we do without the environment. I also think it’s really important in managing these resources and optimizing these resources is part of any economic venture. I don’t think we can be at the point where we’re taking more than nature can give. We have to work with the resilience of the ecosystem,” (Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, Georgia). The consensus in the focus groups was murkier, with respondents split on whether they see a trade-off between environmental protection and economic prosperity. Generally, focus group participants were concerned about stagnant growth in rural communities though several pointed out the connection between tourism, agriculture, and outdoor recreation and a clean environment.

But many rural leaders stated that for those such as farmers and ranchers who are engaged directly with the environment, conserving the environment was financially smart. For example, one interviewee said, “if we don’t take care of the resources that we have, I’m not going to be able to continue farming where I live,” (Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, Washington). In the survey, we asked voters whether environmental protection should be prioritized over economic prosperity (Figure 11). A majority of rural voters preferred protecting the environment over economic growth, although this perspective was more common among Democrats (72 percent) than among Republicans (40 percent) (respondents could also select “both” or “not sure”—these responses are shown in Figure 11). Attitudes were fairly similar between households involved in agriculture/forestry and those not involved in agriculture/forestry.

Figure 11: Trade-Off between Environmental Protection and Economic Growth



Sophisticated View of Environmental Issues

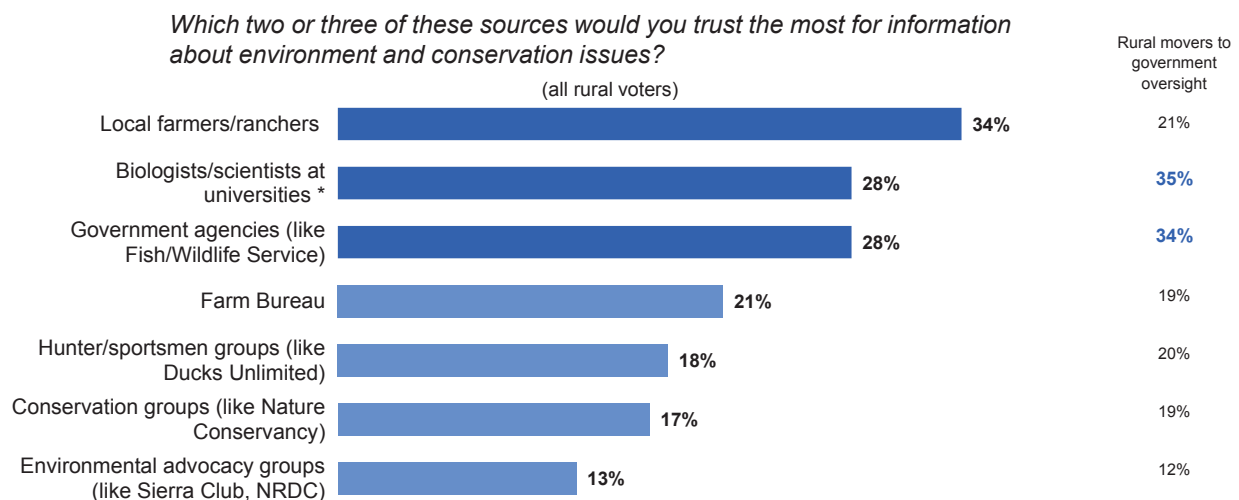
Some might ask whether rural Americans' ambivalence toward environmental regulation is due to a lack of understanding of the relevant environmental and policy issues. To the contrary, in our focus groups, we found many rural voters have quite a sophisticated understanding of environmental and conservation issues, and they understand the need to balance environmental protection with economic wellbeing. For example, focus group participants in Nevada were quite knowledgeable on water policy in that arid state. Similarly in Montana, focus group participants were quite familiar with the challenges of wildfire and forest management.

In another focus group, we asked participants about efforts to extend the reach of the Clean Water Act to cover more wetlands and riparian areas. "I have mixed feelings because it could be good for water conservation; but may be bad for the development of housing and farming, which is needed in order to live. I would think that making compromises would be important," (Focus Group Participant, Arizona). "I have concerns about the government's ability to design a program with enough flexibility to accommodate situations already in play," (Focus Group Participant, Idaho). Despite what one may think about the Clean Water Act, these are fairly nuanced views of the challenges of regulating "waters of the U.S." under the law.

RURAL AMERICANS TRUST SCIENTISTS AND FARMERS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL INFORMATION, AND PLACE LESS TRUST IN ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

The survey asked rural respondents who they most trusted to receive information about environmental issues. Rural voters placed the greatest amount of trust in local farmers/ranchers, followed closely by scientists and government agencies. Environmental advocacy groups were the least likely to be chosen as a top trusted source by rural survey participants. Conservation groups were also somewhat trusted, although among rural interviewees and focus groups participants there was a distinct difference between conservation groups and environmental groups, discussed further in the next section. Figure 12 shows the ranking of which sources rural voters trust most on environmental issues.

Figure 12: Trusted Sources of Environmental Information



* no difference in results for "biologists and scientists at universities" and "biologists and scientists at universities in your state"

Participants in the focus groups emphasized a preference for receiving information directly from scientists: “I’d gravitate towards the scientists because I think that they’d be more fact-based. I like to see data,” (Focus Group Participant, North Carolina). Across the board, rural voters in the focus groups recognized the value of scientific information and generally viewed scientists as unbiased. Given the common narrative about a growing distrust in science in the United States, this finding was somewhat surprising.

However, when we asked focus group and interview participants what sources of information on the environment they most often access or receive, hardly any mentioned scientists. “I don’t have ready access to how a scientist from an institute, university, or how the government feels about the environment,” (Focus Group Participant, North Carolina). This suggests a potential gap and an opportunity in rural America—there is a desire to hear more scientific and environmental information directly from scientists, who these voters claim to trust on this issue.

It is also worth noting, particularly given broad distrust of government generally among rural voters, that “government agencies” ranks third among the most trusted sources of environmental information in Figure 12. Similarly, in focus groups, we found a measure of trust for government agencies such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Forest Service among rural voters. We suspect that some of these voters might have more favorable opinions toward federal natural resources agencies with a state or local presence.

If not from scientists, where do rural Americans get information about environmental issues? Agricultural leaders whom we interviewed stated that a common source of environmental information in rural communities tended to be the Farm Bureau and county cooperative extensions. “A lot of times [our information] is from the Farm Bureau. They put a weekly farm newspaper that does an excellent job of highlighting issues, no matter what the topic, on a very real-time basis,” (Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, Illinois). According to our interviews, a key to the high levels of trust in these organizations is that they are embedded in the rural communities, have relationships with community members, and are viewed as authorities on local environmental issues. “In Wyoming, our people, for the most part, have a close working relationship with our cooperative extension people. [They are] located in the communities and in turn work with the researchers at our university,” (Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, Wyoming). Another stakeholder leader in Illinois described a similar trust in groups that are on the ground in rural areas: “I think that they feel comfortable talking to ... groups with whom they associate. Whether that’s a local county Farm Bureau, or local Soil and Water, [they prefer] somewhere where they can go and get access to [local information],” (Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, Illinois). In rural areas where government and science resources are lacking on the ground, some participants also discussed receiving information about environmental issues from trade organizations or the manufacturers/distributors of farm supplies and fertilizers, although interviewees noted that there tends to be less trust in these sources.

Attitudes Toward Environmental Organizations Are Mixed

While rural Americans placed immense value on environmental stewardship in interviews and focus groups, many rural voters expressed at least some ambivalence about environmental organizations and environmental advocates. Focus group participants were evenly split between positive and negative sentiments toward environmental groups, as opposed to interview participants who generally had negative views of environmental groups. Interview participants were more likely to draw on direct experiences with these groups and had more robust firsthand knowledge of how these groups operate within rural communities. Further, as noted above, environmental groups were cited less often by rural voters when asked who they trust when receiving information on environmental issues.

While rural attitudes toward environmental groups appear mixed, insight from the interviews suggests a distinction between attitudes toward different types of environmental groups. On the one hand, rural interviewees discussed “conservation groups,” whom they viewed as being engaged with the community and working toward solutions. They compared this to “environmental groups,” which were described by several participants as litigious and interested in using conflict for fundraising purposes. Conservation groups were described “as those who are interested in working collaboratively on the land ... Those groups that really put their time and resources on the ground,” (Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, Wyoming). Stakeholder leaders often described rural residents as highly pragmatic, often balancing environmental protection with economic concerns. Therefore, these conservation-minded groups were perceived more favorably, because they balance their own conservation agendas with the needs of rural communities. These groups were contrasted with what were often described as “activist” environmental groups: “At the other end of the spectrum are those groups that promote an environmental agenda and are most active through litigation and policy challenges and those groups, frankly, I don’t even attempt to work with because I don’t think we can work together,” (Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, Wyoming).

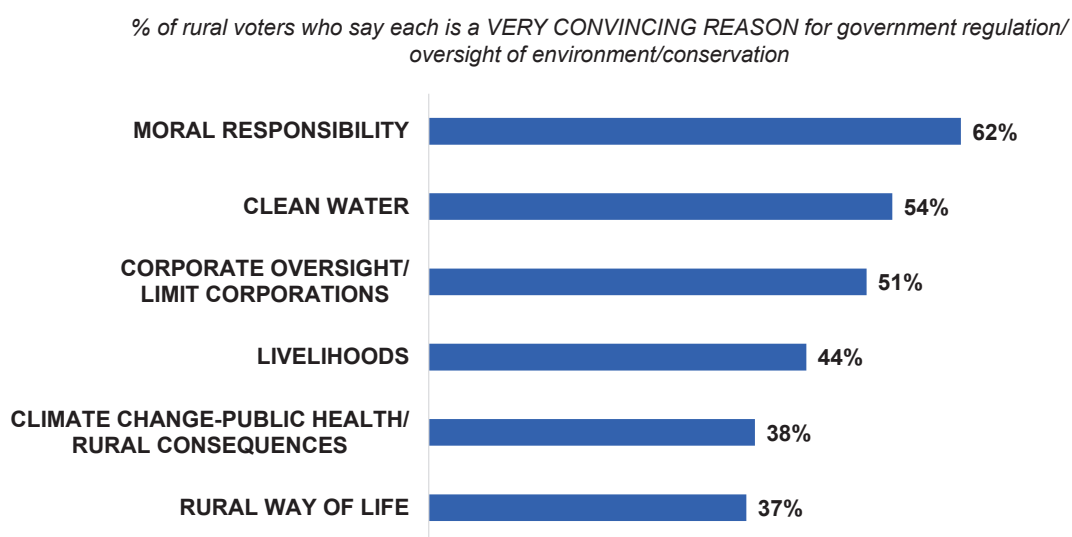
Distrust between rural residents and environmental organizations was a consistent theme from our rural interviews and focus groups. Some rural voters disassociated themselves from environmentalists: “You wouldn’t associate any of us ‘normal people’ as being an environmentalist,” (Focus Group Participant, North Carolina). Despite this attitude from some participants, many stakeholder leaders expressed optimism that rural communities and environmental organizations can build trust as long as both groups remain open to talking with one another. “I think there’s times where we find that good mix of things that we can agree on and work forward. Then we also find times or maybe we don’t agree but I think as long as we’re having discussions and respectful of each other’s outlook, that it usually can work,” (Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, Illinois).

ENVIRONMENTAL MESSAGES ON MORAL RESPONSIBILITY RESONATE MOST WITH RURAL AUDIENCES

In addition to understanding the role that trusted messengers play in engaging rural communities, we also tested how the content and framing of environmental messages resonated with rural audiences. In the national survey, we tested eight different ways of framing the motivation for environmental policies: (1) protecting the environment to ensure clean water (*Clean Water*), (2) protecting the environment because we have a moral obligation to future generations (*Moral Responsibility*), (3) protecting the environment to provide oversight over corporations (*Corporate Oversight*), (4) protecting the environment to keep corporations accountable (*Limit Corporations*) (messages 3 and 4 were combined due to minimal differences in response to the messages), (5) addressing climate change to promote public health (*Climate Public Health*), (6) addressing climate change to protect rural communities (*Climate Rural Consequences*), (7) protecting the environment to ensure the continuation of rural livelihoods and nature-based occupations (*Livelihoods*), and (8) protecting the environment to maintain the rural way of life (*Rural Way of Life*) (full message frames included in Appendix C). Figure 13 shows the percent of rural voters that found each frame a “very convincing” reason to pursue environmental policies.

Among rural voters, the most compelling message frame was the need to protect the environment for future generations (*Moral Responsibility*), with 62 percent of rural voters finding this a very convincing reason to have environmental policies. This was closely followed by the need to maintain clean water (*Clean Water*) (54 percent), and the need for the government to provide corporate oversight (51 percent). The least convincing message among rural voters was the need for government environmental regulations to maintain the rural way of life (which only 37 percent of rural voters found to be a very convincing reason to have environmental regulations).

Figure 13: Frame Effectiveness among Rural Voters



CLIMATE CHANGE IS POLARIZING FOR RURAL VOTERS BUT OPPORTUNITIES EXIST FOR ENGAGEMENT

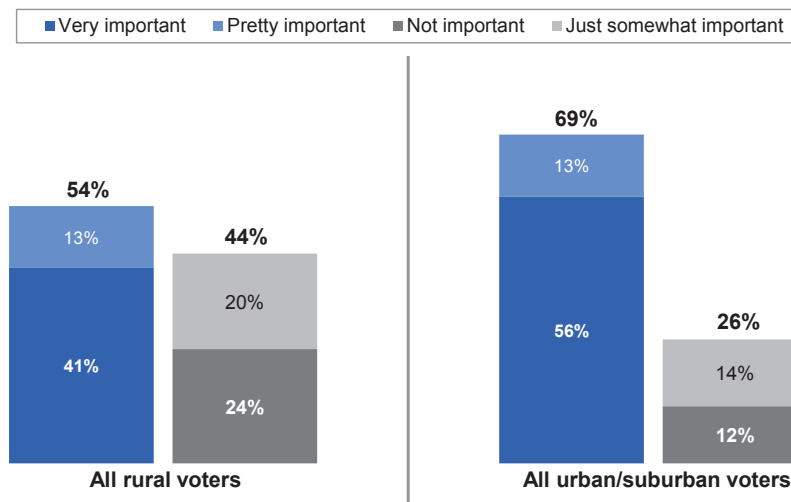
“I think the government needs to figure out a better way to have a conversation about [climate change], because the way they’re doing it is just fragmenting us.”

—Local Government Stakeholder Leader, Oregon

Attitudes toward climate change among rural Americans are polarized and complex, but there are opportunities to engage them in climate policy solutions. Replicating national trends, survey data showed that policy attitudes toward climate change are closely associated with partisanship. However, living in a rural area is also significantly associated with a lower likelihood of thinking that taking policy action on climate change is important (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Importance of U.S. Climate Action among Rural and Urban Voters

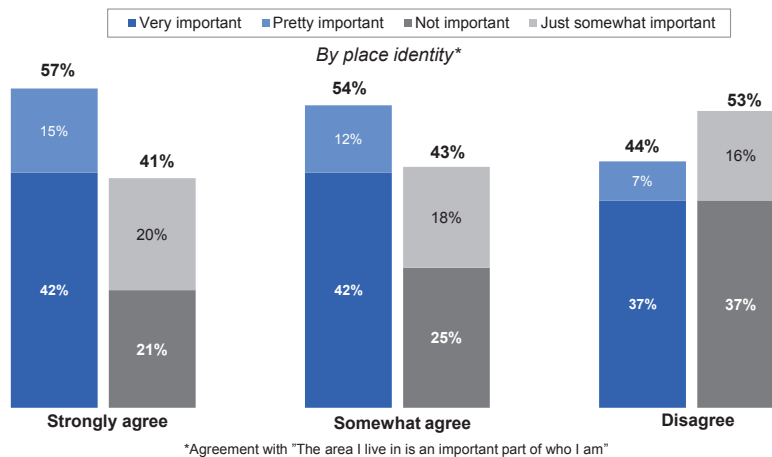
How important is it that the United States take action to reduce climate change?



Among rural voters, attitudes toward climate change policy also seemed, to some degree, to be associated with place identity. Rural voters with a strong place identity were more likely to think that it is important that the United States take action to reduce climate change—57 percent, compared to only 44 percent that had a weak place identity (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Importance of U.S. Climate Action among Rural Voters Based on Level of Place Identity

RURAL VOTERS: How important is it that the United States take action to reduce climate change?

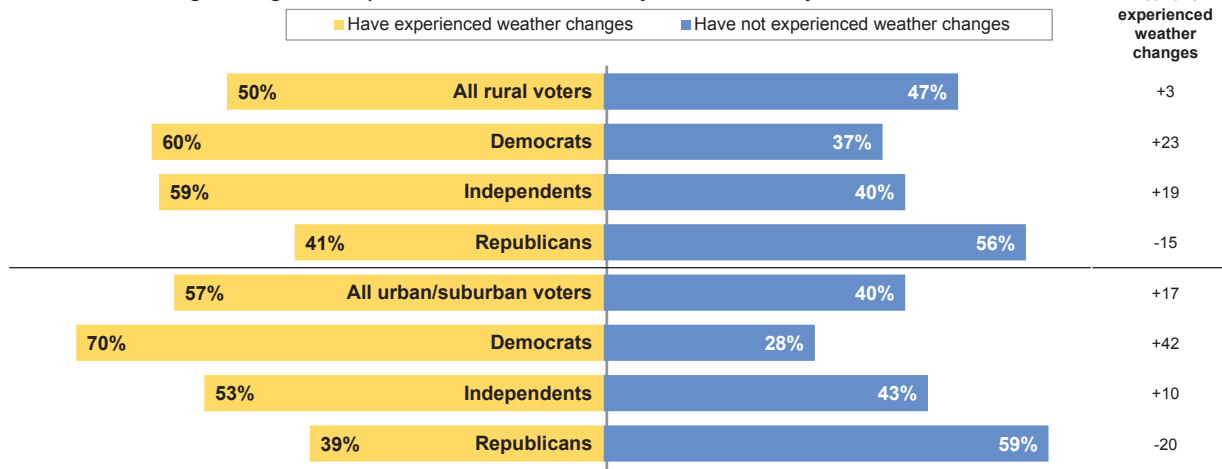


While beliefs in the causes of climate change are mixed, rural communities across the country are already experiencing the effects of a changing climate. In the interviews and focus groups, rural participants cited increases in extreme weather, such as longer droughts, colder freezes, more flooding, and increased wildfires as evidence of a changing climate.

However, rural voters in the survey were slightly less likely to report experiencing the effects of climate change than their urban counterparts. Indeed, notably, our survey shows that experience with extreme weather appears to be a partisan issue and one that exhibits a rural/urban divide (Figure 16). In the survey, 50 percent of rural respondents said they have seen the effects of climate change in their region, as compared to 59 percent of urban respondents. Democrats in both rural and urban areas reported experiencing weather changes at much higher rates than Republicans. Among rural voters, 60 percent of Democrats reported experiencing weather changes, compared to just 41 of Republicans.

Figure 16: Experience of Changing Weather Patterns among Rural and Urban Voters

Have you experienced weather changes such as increased hurricanes and flooding, droughts, higher temperatures, or wildfires in your community?



Interview and focus group participants also described a reticence among rural residents to openly discuss climate change. Even if they were concerned about it, they reported being unwilling to discuss it with community members because the issue is so politically polarizing. “Usually when I’m talking to groups of people that are primarily rural, agricultural, I’ll not downright say climate change. I’ll say something like climate variability or unpredictable weather patterns,” (Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, Georgia). When rural communities do discuss climate change, they tend to discuss its specific implications for agricultural communities and strategies for adaptation: “They might comment on the worst year they ever had, the toughest winter they ever had or the most mild one, but I think they talk about it mostly in terms of their operations, with their businesses being adaptable to that diversity of climate. We’ve always had to be adaptable to it. We’ve got new tools today. In some ways, even if the diversity is greater than it was, we may be better able to address it because we’ve got better tools to work with,” (Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, Wyoming).

Rural Residents Feel Isolated from Climate Policy Discussions

In addition to rural voters being reluctant to discuss climate change because of political polarization, they reported feeling like they were being isolated from the national policy debate on climate change. “I just don’t think they’re asked to be engaged enough. They see these folks in urban areas making these rules. Well-intended, but not actually thinking of some of the cost consequences to small rural communities,” (Local Government Stakeholder Leader, California).

Many also felt blamed for climate change when they felt that they have done the least to contribute to the problem. They viewed policy measures as directed at them while ignoring the impact of urban residents and large corporations. “Why should we get up off our tractors and our vehicles and go electric if everybody is going to cheat and get a leg up on us?” (Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, Illinois). Not only do rural voters believe they have done the least to contribute to the problem of climate change, but respondents felt that environmental groups were “coming after us, either wanting to take what we’ve got already or demand that we do better because the others aren’t,” (Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, Oklahoma).

Several rural participants also viewed climate policies as being centered on urban issues, such as public transportation and building efficiency, which often do not provide opportunities for rural communities to benefit. Several stakeholder leaders commented that major corporations or electric utilities had the capacity to absorb the cost of climate regulations, but worried about the burden to rural communities and felt this hardship is not addressed. “To the small farmer, the small business owner, it’s very tough, and it puts them out of business. This is where they turn off from understanding or wanting to listen to a climate discussion,” (Local Government Stakeholder Leader, California).

Rural Belief in Climate Change May Be Driven by Concerns about Regulation

As we have already noted, rural voters tend to have a more negative view of the federal government than voters in urban/suburban areas. This was evident in the survey, stakeholder interviews, and focus groups. In our interviews and focus groups, we also saw that many voters, while conceptually supportive of environmental protection, were often skeptical of current

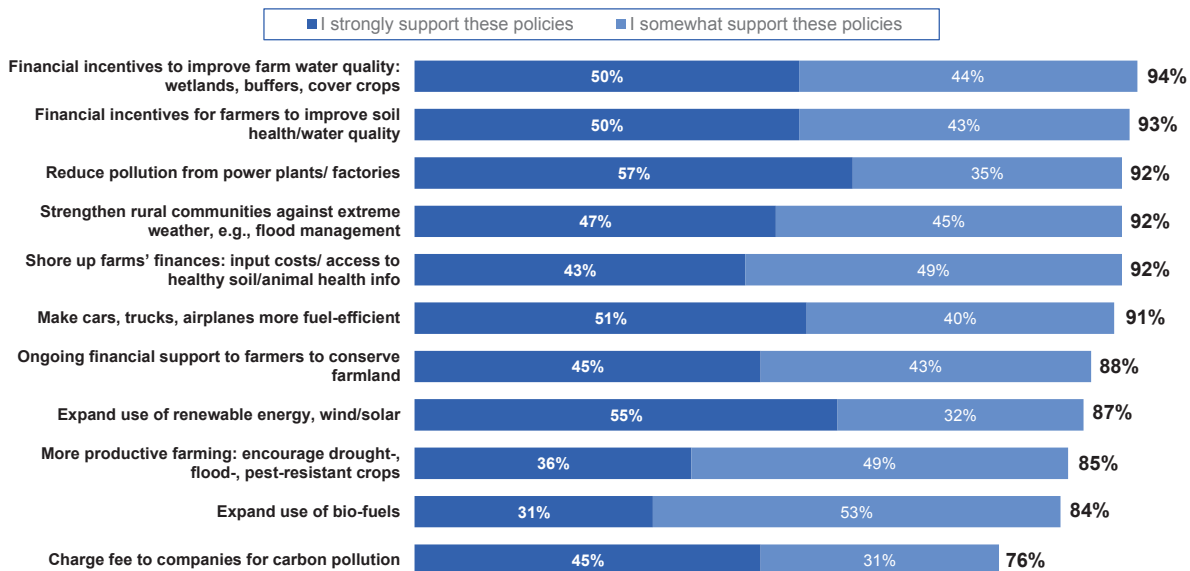
environmental policies. One of our hypotheses is that many rural voters have perceptions—or some cases, direct experience—with federal environmental laws and that those perceptions and/or experiences aren't positive. We believe this may be driving some of the reluctance to acknowledge the science and/or threats associated with climate change. A stakeholder leader commented on the reluctance of farmers within their community to openly discuss the issue of climate change, despite seeing the impacts first-hand: “I’m going to sit here and tell you that the climate is very different than it was when my dad was farming the ground. [But farmers] are almost hesitant to say it because they are afraid of the policy consequences once everybody admits it,” (Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, North Dakota). If this view is shared by many in rural America—as we believe it may be—then climate change denial may be linked to rural Americans’ negative views about the federal government and federal environmental policy.

Opportunities for Climate Change Policy in Rural America

While many rural residents viewed climate change as a natural cycle or a far-off problem, others recognized the opportunity for rural communities to benefit from federal or state climate change policies. However, many rural participants felt that policy conversations at present were far removed from them. As one interviewee said, “a bunch of people outside of our community ... are dictating the conversation so that concerns me. We need to be a part of the conversation so that we can be a part of the solution. I really believe we can be part of the solutions but not until we’re willing to get into the conversation,” (Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, Georgia). Some rural participants also recognized the immense contribution that they can make to climate change mitigation. “Our forest could contribute to addressing the greenhouse gas issues and increase the amount of carbon sequestration that forest lands could provide, but there has to be a mechanism, like perhaps a cap and trade legislation in Congress, that would [encourage us] to do that,” (Forestry Stakeholder Leader, Washington). Lastly, rural respondents told us they wanted rural communities to benefit from the technological changes and job creation that will be made for climate change policies: “[Rural Americans] have already been left behind in a lot of technological areas. This is another one where they just don’t want to get even further behind,” (Agricultural Stakeholder Leader, Minnesota).

In December 2019, we conducted a focus group and then online survey with rural voters in six upper midwestern states (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin). While we will report on findings from this effort in a second report, some data from that effort are relevant here. In particular, we asked rural voters about a series of policies that benefit the climate but that we described without reference to climate change (e.g., financial incentives to improve farm water quality, reduce pollution from factories, etc.). As Figure 17 shows, there was strong support for many of these policies. While references to climate change were polarizing to many rural voters, policies that protect the climate were not.

Figure 17: Support Among Midwestern Rural Voters for Environmental Policies That Also Protect the Climate but Aren't Labeled as Climate Policies



* Note: policies were not characterized in the question as being climate-related.

We also tested the effectiveness of messaging climate change in relation to farmers and agriculture. The upper Midwest survey asked half of the sample if “it is worth it for the government to spend money to address climate change” and the other half if “it is worth it for the government to spend money to help farmers and address climate change.” Sixty-three percent of rural voters supported the spending “money to address climate change” while 84 percent supported spending money to “help farmers and address climate change.” The link to agriculture—a critical rural land use in the region—dramatically increased rural support for climate policy that helps farmers.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This research offers several lessons for policymakers, conservation and environmental groups, government agencies, and others interested in environmental policy in rural America. The following list summarizes the implications of this research and suggestions for engaging rural voters, stakeholders, and communities in environmental policy making.

- (1) There is no quick fix. The urban/rural divide on the environment is not simply a messaging problem that will be solved with better strategies for how to communicate environmental policy to rural voters. Bridging the divide will require engagement with rural stakeholders and communities over many years, rethinking the design of environmental policies that impact rural America, partnering with farmers, scientists, and other rural stakeholders to provide information to rural voters, and focusing on communication strategies that appeal to and leverage rural Americans’ pride in rural values and moral desire to act on behalf of future generations.

- (2) Engage. Rural Americans care deeply about the health of the environment and are already actively engaged in conserving natural resources. However, rural communities often feel that environmental policies are being done to them, not with them. Environmentalists, conservation groups, and policymakers should engage with rural voters and rural stakeholders in developing environmental policies that impact rural communities. This kind of on-the-ground engagement will not only increase rural support for environmental policymaking, but it may also make these policies more effective by incorporating local knowledge.
- (3) Build state and local partnerships into policy. Policy strategies that partner with states and local government are likely to be more popular with rural voters. For example:
 - Climate policies that set strong national goals but provide states with flexibility in meeting those goals might draw more rural support.
 - Conservation projects on both public and private lands that provide resources for locally led solutions are more likely to draw rural support.
- (4) Collaborate. Policies that allow for collaboration with rural constituencies are more likely to be popular among rural voters. Many rural stakeholders described successful instances of collaborative governance where they have a seat at the policymaking table. Additionally, environmental groups that engage and collaborate with local rural communities may be more effective at achieving conservation goals.
- (5) Create pathways for science to reach rural communities. Rural communities have a hunger for accurate and accessible scientific information regarding environmental conservation, but often don't know how to access it. Trust in scientists is fairly high among rural Americans, but traditional pathways such as cooperative extension are losing funding and closing rural access to relevant scientific information. Policymakers should focus on bolstering these institutions and providing new ways to connect rural America to the nation's top scientists.
- (6) Messengers matter. Distrust of environmental and conservation groups among rural voters suggests that those groups should engage and partner with trusted sources of information such as farmers, scientists, and even some government agencies to deliver environmental science and other information. Additionally, rural stakeholders look to local farmers and ranchers, cooperative extensions, and even industry representatives in their local area for environmental information. Communicators should consider engaging more with these groups to convey information about environmental policies. Conversely, publicly attacking agricultural, forestry or similar stakeholders is likely to only deepen rural distrust of environmentalists.
- (7) Climate change. There is substantial skepticism around both climate science and policy among rural voters. Yet, rural voters and rural leaders want to be part of the solution. Climate policies that allow for state and local partnerships, that position rural stakeholders as part of the solution, and that leverage rural voters' interest in

clean water, farmland conservation, and other rural priorities are likely to be more popular among rural voters.

- (8) Who will defend government policy? A paradox of environmental policy is that environmentalists are often vociferous critics of governmental actions on the environment through litigation and media campaigns, while also advocating for new or expanded policies to protect the environment. So, while rural voters are skeptical of the government on environmental policy, the same can be said for environmentalists. We would not argue, of course, that environmental and conservation groups should not criticize policies that they disagree with. We would argue, however, that emphasizing successes may be a worthy strategy to build trust in environmental policies and agencies. An investment in finding voices in rural communities who can point to successful policy interventions—ones that work for both rural communities and the environment—might, over the long term, diminish skepticism toward the government’s actions on the environment that was so prevalent among rural voters in our study.

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APPENDIX A

Case Study: Rural Attitudes on Wildlife Migration in Wyoming

Big game migration corridors are a focus of conservation efforts in several western states. As part of this study, we conducted an in-depth case study on attitudes toward policies to conserve big-game migration corridors in Wyoming since the state has among the most developed policies in the country. A key part of the state's strategy is to officially designate migration corridors and consider management actions, analyze threats, and comment on energy and other projects that might impact migration in designated areas. By the end of 2019, the state had designated three corridors with two others under consideration.

For this case study, we used the same methods as the broader rural attitudes study: a focus group, survey, and stakeholder interviews. Through an online focus group of 18 registered voters, a telephone survey of 400 registered voters, and interviews with 18 landowners with property in designated corridors, we found that wildlife are very important to respondents' quality of life and are perceived to be important to the state's economy. Focus group participants identified migratory big game as among the most important species to Wyoming while 52 percent of survey respondents perceived the decline in big game populations as an extremely or very serious problem. Notably, when asking about the potential threats to wildlife, climate change was the most political polarizing with 77 percent of registered Democrats perceiving it as a major threat to migration while only 14 percent of Republicans had similar perceptions.

Respondents generally supported the concept of conserving migration corridors but support varied significantly among policy options and across political affiliations of respondents. Support was strongest for policies perceived to protect human safety and for voluntary actions. For instance, 64 percent of respondents strongly supported (86 percent strongly and somewhat supported) the construction of over- or underpasses to allow migrating animals to safely cross major highways. Focus group discussions showed that respondents perceived highway crossings as a "win-win" for wildlife and driver safety. Similarly, 54 percent of respondents strongly supported (85 percent strongly and somewhat supported) assisting landowners to voluntarily replace old fencing with more wildlife-friendly designs. Policies perceived to negatively impact the economy or result in new taxes had the lowest level of support. For example, only 36 percent of respondents strongly supported (66 percent strongly and somewhat supported) seasonal limits on drilling activity to mitigate impacts to migrating wildlife.

In interviews with landowners with property in designated corridors, we heard support for and opposition to formal designations of migration corridors. Although Wyoming's policies do not address management of private land, concerns focused primarily on the potential for land-use restrictions overtime or that designations could be used to challenge grazing leases on federal lands. Other landowners viewed the designations as opportunities to pursue funding for voluntary conservation actions aligned with their management goals, such as conservation easements or range improvements. Landowners frequently noted the importance of trust and relationships with state agency staff as influencing their level of support for policies and emphasized their desire for a seat at the table in developing conservation efforts in their areas.

Survey results showed that the most credible information sources on wildlife migration issues were the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, with 67 percent of respondents finding the agency to be “very believable,” and wildlife biologists from the University of Wyoming (54 percent very believable). Conservation organizations (22 percent very believable) ranked second from the bottom among the eight types of people and agencies we asked about with only oil and gas workers considered to be less credible on migration issues (15 percent very believable).

Findings from the migration corridor conservation case study highlight conclusions from the broader national study of rural attitudes toward the environment and conservation. In particular, the need to engage and collaborate with landowners and other stakeholders was underscored by Wyoming’s experience implementing its corridor conservation strategy. While state and university biologists were trusted sources of information on migration issues, some landowners felt that local insights were not incorporated or existing science on migration did not reflect their experiences on the landscape. Building support among landowners and other rural stakeholders for conservation of migration corridors will likely require collaborative approaches that minimize perceived regulatory burdens and supporting locally generated solutions.

APPENDIX B

Case Study: Rural Attitudes in Coastal North Carolina on Hurricane and Climate Resilience

In 2018, the Coastal Plain of North Carolina was decimated by Hurricane Florence, which brought some six feet of flooding to regions of Eastern North Carolina. Hurricane Florence made landfall as the region was still in recovery from Hurricane Matthew in 2016. While this region of North Carolina has experienced numerous hurricanes in the past, these two fierce storms heralded in a new wave of climate-related extreme weather events, and prompted North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper to define these storms as the “new normal” for North Carolina (Cooper 2019). In partnership with the Environmental Defense Fund, we conducted a series of interviews to understand if and how attitudes around issues of extreme weather, changing weather patterns, and climate change, are changing in rural Eastern North Carolina following the double hit of Hurricanes Matthew and Florence.

We conducted 22 interviews in targeted North Carolina counties with landowners, farmers, and small business owners that were impacted by storm-related damages for both Hurricanes Matthew and Florence. While not all respondents had experienced direct flooding on their property, all 22 respondents lived within counties that bore the brunt of the damage from these two storms, and therefore still experienced indirect damages.

We found there was an unexpected openness to discuss the issue of climate change and that respondents were likely to bring up the issue of climate change on their own. Nearly everyone interviewed cited a change in weather patterns, however the majority of respondents viewed this as a natural phenomenon. “I think everybody in the rural communities are very aware that the hurricanes are getting worse, and that we have to change how we think and what we do. Rural people live and die by the weather, and that makes a difference,” (Homeowner, Nash County, North Carolina). While most respondents were reluctant to view climate change as man-made problem, there was heightened recognition of the impacts of climate change in North Carolina as compared to interviews conducted as part of our national study. This recognition came both in response to thinking directly about the damages suffered from changes in weather patterns, and changes in daily weather patterns, including prolonged droughts, sporadic and intense rainfall, and changes in extreme temperatures.

While most respondents were wary of climate change mitigation policy, nearly all respondents were very open to discussing climate adaptation strategies. For these rural communities, there was a perceived disconnect between the needs of urban counties in Raleigh-Durham and the needs of Eastern North Carolina when it came to both recovering from extreme weather, but also to adapting to long-term changes. “If the livestock and the farming industry would leave or somehow be crippled, then everything else would tend to fold in behind it,” (Homeowner, Duplin County, North Carolina). This region of North Carolina is heavily dependent upon agriculture, and there was a general concern that if farmers cannot adapt to these changes, their counties will face greater economic upheaval, with these climate impacts multiplying economic and health concerns. “It would be really easy to say, ‘I lost my crop, so I quit,’ but they don’t. And

thank God that they don't, because they feed us," (Homeowner, Nash County, North Carolina). These communities expressed pride in their self-reliance and ability to respond quickly to storm damages, however this did not mean communities felt they could indefinitely recover from persistent storm damage. For one farmer, if they were hit with another hurricane within the next couple of years, "I would put up a for sale sign, and find something else to do," (Landowner, Pender County, North Carolina).

Many respondents did not have robust knowledge of what adaptation steps could be taken to prevent the impacts of changing weather patterns. However, there was evidence that farmers and landowners engaged in conservation measures, such as cover crops, forested buffers, and no-till practices, were more resilient to flooding damages from both hurricanes. There was a general desire to work with local environmental organizations and county extension offices to begin implementing more resilient agricultural measures. As in the national interviews, respondents were deeply proud of their conservation efforts, and desired to be viewed as a partner in mitigating and adapting to some of the worst effects of climate change, particularly in the face of intensifying hurricanes.

Citation

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APPENDIX C

Message Frames Tested in National Survey

CLEAN WATER	Nothing is more important than having clean water to drink. Wetlands, forests, and natural areas act as filters that pull chemicals out of our water supplies, helping to ensure a reliable supply of clean water. We need to conserve these natural areas or else more of our water supplies will be at risk.
MORAL RESPONSIBILITY	It is essential that we have conservation laws so that future generations can enjoy the outdoors and have clean air and water. Our lands, waters, and wildlife are part of America's heritage. We have a moral obligation to our children and grandchildren to pass along a safe, clean, and healthy natural world.
CORPORATE OVERSIGHT	Corporations are always under pressure to make more money. Many are tempted to cut corners to improve their bottom lines. Someone needs to keep an eye on corporations and set rules on pollution and other conservation issues to keep them accountable. Only the government has the resources to do this.
LIMIT CORPORATIONS	We need to protect our air, land, and water, against corporate greed. While some corporations are responsible, others will cut corners to improve their profits, including polluting our water and air. The only way to hold businesses accountable is for the government to provide oversight.
CLIMATE CHANGE—PUBLIC HEALTH	Climate change worsens severe health problems such as respiratory disease, heart attacks, and asthma attacks. Common sense policies will protect our health and reduce these health problems, especially among children. Cleaner air and water means healthier families and fewer premature deaths.
CLIMATE CHANGE—RURAL CONSEQUENCES	Climate change is affecting Americans across the country. A recent U.S. government report predicted more extreme weather, including massive storms, flooding, and drought that will make clean water scarcer and have serious effects on agricultural communities. We need to take action to lessen these severe effects of climate change.
LIVELIHOODS	Many families depend on natural areas for their livelihood. Generations have worked in jobs like ranching, farming, fishing, and timber. And outdoor recreation is another vital part of our economy. National Parks alone support many thousands of jobs in communities near the parks. Government protection of land, air, and water ensures that these jobs from farming to fishing guides and everything in between remain available.
RURAL WAY OF LIFE	Conservation is a staple of rural life. Many rural Americans grow their own food, hunt, fish, and live near their water source. If government does not conserve land and protect air and water against pollution, these key aspects of rural life will be threatened.

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