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RE: Key Findings from a Survey of Voters in Five Western States

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This survey of 2200 voters throughout five Western states (Colorado, Montana, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming) was conducted by the bipartisan research team of Lori Weigel at Public Opinion Strategies (R) and David Metz of Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (D) in order to examine Western voters' attitudes toward a range of conservation and environmental issues. The survey explored how views of conservation relate to perceptions of state government, budget issues, and the economy in each state. The survey was designed to create a benchmark assessment of core beliefs and broad values that relate to conservation, although a handful of current policy questions and trade-offs were explored as well.

The results of the survey demonstrate that Western voters share broad values when it comes to the environment, despite differing views of state government, budgets, and state leadership. While the full report provides more detailed information by state, the overall key findings from the survey include...

- Voters in these five states are more likely to point to something related to the outdoors – be it mountains, wide open spaces, public lands, clean air, or other natural features -- as the thing they like most about living in their particular state or the West more broadly. This is followed closely by their ability to participate in outdoor recreational activities.
- Nearly nine-in-ten (88%) say they would prefer spending a day outdoors to spending a day in a city.
- Voters in these five states attach a great deal of importance to having clean water, clean air, natural areas and wildlife as a fundamental ingredient in the good quality of life in their state (87% extremely or very important). Two-thirds of these Western voters view those things as an aspect of life that is fragile and needs to be cared for and protected (69%), rather than as an enduring feature of life that is unlikely to change (26%).
- This underlying sense of guarding a fragile yet important part of their lives appears to play a role in how Western voters respond to a range of environmental issues. Two-thirds believe the current laws protecting land, air and water should be strengthened, or at least better enforced (66% combined, 18% strengthened, 48% better enforced).

- Even when provided with an economic rationale for reducing some of these standards on major employers such as agriculture and construction, three-quarters of Western voters believe the current “protections for land, air and water that apply to major industries” should be maintained (77%). Only 18% would opt to reduce them in order to “improve the state economy and generate jobs as quickly as possible.” That said, two-in-five (40%) blame “too many” environmental regulations for costing their state jobs.
- Voters in these five states tend to reject the concept that the economy and the environment are in conflict with one another. They overwhelmingly believe that “we can protect land and water and have a strong economy with good jobs at the same time, without having to choose one over the other” (77%). Fewer than one-in-five (19%) agree more with a statement that “sometimes protections for land and water and a strong economy are in conflict and we must choose one over the other.”
- One area where voters see the potential for job growth is increasing the use of renewable energy sources, as two-thirds (67%) perceives this to be a job creator for their state. Only 12% think this would cost their state jobs.
- Overall, Western voters indicate more positive impressions of solar and wind power as energy sources than they do for coal or oil. However, this is one area where there is a notable exception: Wyoming residents are generally positive toward *all* energy sources tested.
- Across all five states, though, voters indicate that they would dramatically increase the amount of their state’s electricity needs being produced by renewable sources. The average percentage they indicate that should come from renewable sources is 65%.
- Voters in this region reject the idea that renewable energy sources are “too unreliable to be a significant part of our energy supply” (34% agree, 65% disagree).
- A majority in every state says it is “time to start replacing coal with other energy sources like wind and solar power” (70% agree, 28% disagree).
- Once informed of the actual proportion of electricity generation coming from renewable sources in their state, a majority (54%) say they would be willing to pay at least ten dollars more per month to increase the use of renewable energy in generating electricity in their state. Fully 88% indicate a willingness to pay something more each month for this purpose.
- Air quality ranks as a top tier environmental concern in all of these states – 32% volunteer air pollution related issue just edging out water quality concerns (30%) in an open-ended question where respondents could volunteer anything as the most important environmental problem facing their state. Air quality is an especially high concern in Utah, where a majority of 52% volunteered the issue as the most pressing environmental concern in the state. Climate change and global warming, on the other hand, rank below 11 other issues as an environmental problem facing their state.
- Global warming is the most politicized issue tested in the survey, with attitudes about whether to take action on global warming varying dramatically along party lines. Overall, 48% choose a viewpoint that includes taking action, while 51% choose a viewpoint that could be classified as at least skeptical of taking action on global warming.

- Voters are solidly in support of the EPA “requiring reductions in carbon emissions from sources like power plants, cars and factories in an effort to reduce global warming,” with 67% supporting this policy and 30% opposed. Our past research would lead us to surmise that voters see auxiliary benefits to addressing carbon emissions and a broader benefit to air quality from such a policy.
- The political landscape in which voters are reacting to these issues is one of a unique combination of skepticism and optimism, which varies from state to state. Montana, Wyoming and Utah voters are more positive about the direction of their state (56%, 71% and 68% headed in right direction, respectively). Coloradans and New Mexicans are evenly divided over how things are going in their states (48% and 49% headed in right direction, respectively).
- New Mexicans are the most likely to think their state government is run by a few big interests (59% in New Mexico) and are least trusting of state government (only 33% of New Mexicans trust their state government always or most of the time – 12 points lower than Western voters overall). Yet New Mexicans express a great deal of confidence and optimism in Governor Martinez. More than three-in-five voters (61%) choose “optimistic” or “confident” as the feelings they have about the job she will do in office, slightly higher than the positive sentiment hovering around new Governors in Colorado (53%) and Wyoming (58%).
- While many of these states are more financially sound than their neighbors, budget deficits (87% serious problem) and cuts in funding to state parks and environmental protections (77% serious problem) are still viewed as serious problems.
- One of the most resounding affirmative responses in the survey is agreement that “even with state budget problems, we should still find the money to protect” their state’s land, air and water. Fully 84% of Western voters agree with this view, with four-in-five in every state agreeing.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

From January 23-27 2011, Public Opinion Strategies and FM3, a bi-partisan polling team, completed 2200 telephone interviews among a randomly selected sample of 600 registered voters throughout the state of Colorado, and 400 registered voters each in Montana, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming, respectively. The margin of overall sampling error is +/- 2.08% at the 95% confidence interval for the total sample; +/- 4.0% in Colorado; and +/- 4.9% each for Montana, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming. For results based on other subgroups, the margin of sampling error will differ.

The “total” numbers for the entire Western region represent numbers that have been statistically weighted to reflect each state’s true share of the regional electorate. Interviews within each state were distributed proportionally by geographic region. Quotas were set for some key demographic variables, and each sample is demographically representative of the electorate for that state.

Interviews were conducted on traditional land line (N=1696) and on cell phones (N=504). A Spanish interviewing option was provided to all respondents.

Percentages may not always add to 100, due to rounding or the opportunity to offer multiple choices. Values less than 0.5% are indicated by an asterisk (*). “DNR” indicates that a response was not read to respondents, but rather was volunteered.

The survey was written and analyzed by Lori Weigel, partner with Public Opinion Strategies, and David Metz, partner with Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates. Additional project support was provided by Rebecca Kramer, Trip Mullen, and Scott Foster. The survey is being presented in collaboration with the Colorado College “State of the Rockies” project.

Additional questions about the survey methodology or results may be directed to David Metz, partner with Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates: (510) 451-9521 or dave@fm3research.com ; or Lori Weigel, partner with Public Opinion Strategies: (303) 433-4424 or lori@pos.org.