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CONGRESSIONAL VOTING AND ECOLOGICAL ISSUES

By Leonard G. Ritt and John M. Ostheimer***

There is no doubt that concern for environmental quality has grown among the American public with unprecedented speed.¹ Correspondingly, much of this concern has been translated into an impressive array of legislative proposals ranging from the far-reaching National Environmental Policy Act of 1970 to resolutions calling for the protection of ocean mammals. Nevertheless, political scientists have differed in their assessments of the ways in which Congress has responded to environmental problems.

Most of the judgments made in this area, however, have been based upon detailed case studies which emphasize the politics of the moment. Such case studies and issue-specific analyses can be very useful. They remind us that a congressman's response to a given piece of legislation may depend upon many factors, not the least of which is the importance of the legislation at hand; e.g., he may vote in one way on a highway beautification act and in another way on a billion dollar water pollution bill. Nevertheless, there is room for comprehensive studies which look for more general categories of behavior and so rise above particular political situations. Although some case studies describe those members of Congress who have been receptive to environmental issues, there has not been an overall analysis of the systematic bases of congressional support for, and opposition to, environmental legislation. Drawing upon a recently published set of indicators, the present study explores this area.

I. METHODOLOGY

In 1970, the Washington-based League of Conservation Voters (LCV) issued the first of its annual evaluations of congressmen. These ratings were based upon a percentage score of "environmentally correct" votes on those bills which were judged by the LCV to be the best indicators of environmental commitment among the lawmakers.² There are of course limitations surrounding the use of roll-call vote ratings. After surveying the congressional vote-rating

scene, the *Ripon Forum* concluded, "[n]either virtue nor wisdom nor courage can be adequately scored on a percentage basis."³ The chairwoman of the LCV, Marion Edey, has also cautioned against placing too much faith in the ratings of even her own organization. Nevertheless, the LCV ratings were considered appropriate for three reasons: (1) they are "hard data" subject to empirical analysis; (2) they allow the researcher to view each legislator's behavior over a wide variety of issues; and (3) they are considered to be important by the various groups which rate congressmen, regardless of any warnings that they themselves may give. For example, the Ripon Society issued the warning quoted above in the preface to its own rating system; and it is well known that in the environmental field, such groups as Environmental Action and LCV use ratings as rationales for political action on behalf of environmentally-oriented candidates.⁴

Congressmen have traditionally been rated along "liberal-conservative" dimensions by the AFL-CIO's Committee on Political Education (COPE), the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), and the Americans for Constitutional Action (ACA). Newer ratings on environmental, consumer, farmer, business, and student concerns add to the impression that congressmen will now be evaluated by a growing variety of interest groups. This alone makes ratings significant for political scientists.⁵

We have chosen to study only the House of Representatives, as its record on environmental legislation has been particularly ambivalent. In many respects, the House has recently become the *bete noir* of conservationists. This was especially so after the ordeal of the Water Pollution Control Bill in the spring of 1972. Land use, toxic chemicals, pesticides control and noise pollution bills have all faced tougher sledding in the House than in the Senate. On the other hand, ocean dumping and strip mining legislation fared much better in the House. These considerations, plus the fact that relatively compact and homogeneous districts allow the analyst to explore more closely compelling constituency interests, prompted us to focus our attention on the lower chamber.

In looking for those congressmen who would be most ecologically inclined, we took our cues from the large number of surveys which have recently been conducted in this area. We wished to determine, in other words, whether or not mass attitude patterns are reflected in the voting behavior of the political elite. Accordingly, *our major hypothesis was that those districts which contained the most environmentally aware sectors of the population would be represented*

by the most environmentally aware congressmen.

The poll data universally suggest that those who are relatively wealthy, better educated and work in white collar occupations are more likely to support environmental legislation.⁶ No unanimous verdict emerges on such variables as degree of urbanization or race, although it has been suggested that "the poor, the black, and those with only a grade-school education have been least likely to care about improving environmental quality."⁷ We hypothesized that those districts composed of higher proportions of white collar workers and more expensive homes (the best indicator of district wealth at the time of the study) would send more ecologically inclined congressmen to Washington.⁸

We had further reason to assume that geography would be an important factor. In their summary of environmental attitudes, Trop and Roos point to far lower levels of concern among Southern respondents, while Erskine concludes that "Easterners are the most concerned about air pollution, Southerners the least."⁹ Consequently, we expected the congressmen representing these areas to mirror their constituents' views. Furthermore, we were interested in exploring whether or not the mountain state ties to extractive industries would give that region an anti-environmental predisposition.

Given what is known about the distribution of partisanship, we expected Republicans to be more concerned about the environment: they tend to be drawn from the higher status portions of American society, and are far more numerous in the non-Southern sections of the country. In fact, none of the national surveys we encountered discussed the role of partisanship, although political scientists have found that Democrats and Republicans differ on a wide variety of issues.¹⁰ Researchers in Boulder, Colorado discovered that Democrats and high status people tended to be more concerned about environmental issues. The apparent contradiction is probably due in part to the fact that Boulder is not a typical American community because the University of Colorado is located there; i.e., many university people would tend to be Democratic and environmentally aware. Because controls were not employed in the Boulder study it was impossible to establish the relative impact of each of these variables. Consequently, we were particularly anxious to explore the role of party affiliation in congressional voting, especially since party remains "the single most important factor in roll call voting."¹¹ We hypothesized that there would be a relationship between Republican party affiliation and environmentally-oriented voting performance in Congress.

Closely related to partisanship is ideology. In their study of the 1964 Wilderness Act, Mercure and Ross contrasted the bill's proponents who were "liberal-urban," to the opposition designated "conservative and western."¹² Similarly, Tognacci, *et. al.* generalized that "persons holding a more liberal sociopolitical outlook are more concerned about environmental issues than are more conservatively oriented individuals."¹³ We arrayed congressmen along a number of liberal-conservative continua using measures devised by various interests groups. For the more traditional kinds of economic liberalism, the scores of the AFL-CIO's COPE and the National Farmers Union (NFU) were used. In order to examine middle class, "style issue" liberalism, we employed the scores of the League of Women Voters (LWV) and the Consumer Federation of America (CFA).¹⁴ As an overall ideological indicator, we used Congressional Quarterly's Conservative Coalition Opposition Score.¹⁵ Congressmen who scored high on each of these scales should have also ranked high on the LCV scores.

Finally, the survey literature shows that younger people are more ecologically aware than older people. Although we were unable to obtain data on the age distributions of district populations, information was available on congressmen's ages. We therefore looked at the relationship between this variable and environmental voting, hypothesizing that younger congressmen would be more ecologically aware than older congressmen.

II. FINDINGS

It would appear from Table I that congressmen's environmental voting patterns do coincide with views in their constituencies. Ecology minded congressmen tend to come from relatively well-to-do metropolitan districts in the East with higher proportions of white collar workers. It is curious, however, that one demographic variable does not fit this pattern — those persons of recent foreign stock showed the strongest support toward the environment ($G = .66$). None of the surveys we examined had explored the role of ethnicity or religion (foreign stock is a good proxy variable for Catholicism) in mass attitudes toward environmental problems, so this strong relationship surprised us. It is, of course, quite obvious that all of these variables are interrelated and reflect to a large degree the Eastern metropolitan origins of environmentally aware congressmen. Furthermore, Northern Democrats (who, as we shall see below, score quite high on the environmental voting score) tend to represent those districts where second and third generation Ameri-

cans are concentrated. This suggested to us that the strong relationship might be spurious. Surprisingly, when we controlled for party and examined only those districts represented by Republicans, the relationship between ethnicity and environmental voting remained strong ($G = .50$).

TABLE I

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ENVIRONMENTAL VOTING AND PARTISANSHIP, IDEOLOGY, AND CONSTITUENCY CHARACTERISTICS ^a

ENVIRONMENTAL VOTING SCORE					
CHARACTERISTIC		High N=128	Medium N=157	Low N=139	
I. <u>Constituency Variables</u>					
Foreign Stock (%)	H.	53	29	07	G= .66 ^b
	M.	38	47	28	
	L.	09	24	64	
Median Home Value	H.	45	26	12	G= .45
	M.	36	40	32	
	L.	20	34	56	
Metropolitan (%)	H.	72	51	32	G= .43
	M.	16	27	32	
	L.	11	22	35	
White Collar (%)	H.	41	36	21	G= .32
	M.	38	33	27	
	L.	22	31	53	
Black (%)	H.	21	08	25	G= -.10
	M.	28	30	32	
	L.	51	61	42	
II. <u>Age of Congressmen</u>					
Young		31	19	15	G= .32
Middle Aged		54	55	46	
Older		15	26	39	
III. <u>Region</u>					
Industrial & New England		66	45	24	
Pacific Coast		14	13	09	
Great Plains		09	14	02	
South & Border		10	22	62	
Rocky Mountain		02	07	03	

TABLE I (cont'd)

ENVIRONMENTAL VOTING SCORE					
CHARACTERISTIC		High	Medium	Low	
<u>IV. Partisanship</u>					
Democrat		78	45	57	
Republican		22	54	43	G= .26
<u>V. Political Ideology</u>					
Conservative Coalition Opposition					
Score	H.	80	18	0	
	M.	17	39	18	
	L.	03	43	82	G= .88
COPE Score					
	H.	66	27	13	
	M.	24	30	29	
	L.	10	43	58	G= .59
LWV Score					
	H.	56	23	07	
	M.	36	42	19	
	L.	08	34	73	G= .71
CFA Score					
	H.	73	30	04	
	M.	21	34	26	
	L.	06	36	71	G= .77
NFU Score					
	H.	60	25	09	
	M.	34	37	48	
	L.	06	38	44	G= .57
+					

^a Due to vacancies, deaths, and incomplete data, the total number of Congressmen analyzed is 424.

^b The "G" in this and following tables refers to the Goodman-Kruskal Gamma summary statistic.

⁺ Using a X² Test, it was found that all relationships are significant at the .001 level.

The fact that many ethnic groups are Catholic suggested that religion might have an effect on mass environmental attitudes.¹⁶ Using the National Opinion Research Center's *Spring 1973 General Social Survey*,¹⁷ which asked a nationwide sample whether or not they thought the U.S. was spending "too much," "too little", or "enough" money to improve and protect the environment, we found that religion did indeed have an effect. Although a majority of all groups thought we were spending too little, 60 percent of the Protestants, 69 percent of the Catholics and 78 percent of the Jews fell into this category. This relationship persisted even when education, income, and region were held constant. Congressmen who represented Catholic and Jewish ethnic groups and favored environmental legis-

lation were certainly not contradicting the wishes of their constituents.

The constituency variable which showed the weakest relationship to the environment was race. At first glance, the slight negative relationship between percent black in a district and congressional voting seems to confirm the position of those more militant black politicians who argue "the nation's concern with the environment has done what George Wallace has been unable to do: distract the nation from the human problems of black and brown Americans."¹⁸ These results, however, are partly a function of measurement technique. The cut-off point for a high proportion of blacks in a district was 25 percent, which tends to lump together white Southern and black Northern congressmen, and as the data show, the South sends many non-ecology minded congressmen to Washington. Using a cut-off point of 50 percent black and examining only Northern urban districts creates a different impression. The scores range from a low LCV rating of 47 to a high of 93, with a mean score of 70. On the whole, percent black in a district *per se* seems unrelated to environmental voting, and black congressmen themselves are divided on this issue.

We noted above that the most environmentally aware congressmen are Northern Democrats. The overall relationship between partisanship and environmental voting is muted by the fact that Northern and Southern Democrats are split on the issue. Table II describes the distributions by party, controlling for region. In the Northeastern, Great Plains, and Pacific states the partisan division is quite obvious. In the South, however, a regional preference for economic development rather than conservation overpowers partisanship. Majorities of Southern Democrats and Republicans are much less likely to support environmental issues, although it should be noted that Southern Republicans do show a slightly greater environmental orientation.

In the Rocky Mountain states, Republicans and Democrats cluster in the middle range of environmental scores. This suggests ambivalent attitudes on the issue, probably generated by cross pressuring between developmental and conservation interests. Mayhew found that between 1947 and 1962, both national and Western Democrats tended to support developmental policies—public works projects, subsidies, etc.¹⁹ He added that Western Republicans tended to support them, but the national Republican party was *not* sympathetic. Schneier, on the other hand, has argued that between 1944 and 1964 Democrats, on the whole, tended to be more conservation minded.²⁰

TABLE II
PARTISANSHIP AND ENVIRONMENTAL VOTING, CONTROLLING FOR REGION

ENVIRONMENTAL VOTING SCORE (In Percentages)	REGIONS									
	Northeast and Industrial		Great Plains		South and Border		Pacific		Rocky Mountain	
	Dem. N=96	Rep. N=91	Dem. N=15	Rep. N=22	Dem. N=100	Rep. N=31	Dem. N=31	Rep. N=21	Dem. N=8	Rep. N=9
HIGH	64	25	60	14	12	0	52	10	25	0
MEDIUM	31	44	40	73	19	45	39	43	50	79
LOW	5	31	0	14	69	55	10	48	25	22
	G=	.67	G=	.83	G=	-.16	G=	.77	G=	.30

These apparently contradictory findings stem, in part, from the issues chosen by each of these authors and the analytical techniques employed. Our data support Schneier's contention that *nationally* the Democratic party *has* become more ecologically concerned, but it is also quite clear that Western Democrats have not always followed suit, due in part to the needs of their harsh, water-poor region.

The importance of partisanship can be seen in another way: of the 114 congressional districts with median home values of \$20,000 or more, 50 were represented by Republicans and 64 by Democrats. Given the survey findings, one would have expected these districts to be represented by congressmen who scored high on environmental voting. In fact, 67 percent of these Democrats scored high, in contrast to 28 percent of the Republicans.

Of all the relationships in Table I, the strongest are between ideology and environmental commitment. Political liberals are clearly the most prominent supporters of environmental initiatives. This statement is true for both parties and for all ideological indicators. In the Northeast, Great Plains, and Pacific Coast states party and ideology are closely intertwined, and both show equally strong correlations with environmental voting. But in Southern, Border, and Rocky Mountain states, where the effects of party are unclear, ideology strongly relates to environmental voting ($G = .78$ and 1.0 respectively, as opposed to $-.16$ and $.30$ for party). Within these regions, party cues are apparently less useful guides to congressmen than are their more general philosophical positions.

One other interesting feature of Table I is that the correlations between LCV ratings and Consumer Federation of America (CFA) and League of Women Voters (LWV) scores are higher than those between the LCV rating and NFU and COPE scores. COPE and NFU tend to be concerned with "bread and butter" issues. The potential conflict between these kinds of issues and environmental interests is well known: note, for example, the SST controversy. CFA and LWV interests, on the other hand, reflect a different kind of liberalism—a middle class "style issue" pattern, and the data show that congressmen who are "style issue liberals" are more likely to be environmentally aware than those who are "economic issue" liberals.

It is often argued that ecological issues appeal in particular to the young, and poll data do show this group to be more willing than others to expend resources for cleaning up the environment. The data in Table I confirm this, but the relationship is weak. Given the fact that ideology had proved to be such an important variable, we

TABLE III
 IDEOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL VOTING, CONTROLLING FOR AGE

ENVIRONMENTAL VOTING SCORE	AGE OF CONGRESSMEN								
	YOUNGER			MIDDLE AGED			OLDER		
	Lib. N=34	Mod. N=20	Cons. N=37	Lib. N=78	Mod. N=49	Cons. N=92	Lib. N=18	Mod. N=39	Cons. N=57
HIGH	88	45	3	77	14	2	67	15	2
MEDIUM	12	45	46	23	63	40	33	54	25
LOW	0	10	51	0	22	58	0	31	74
	G = .92			G = .89			G = .83		

examined the relationship between ideology and environmental voting, controlling for age. (Table III). Although there is some slight tendency for the percent scoring high to decline as one goes from the youngest to the oldest categories, the effect of ideology is still quite powerful. In other words, the fact that the norms of seniority tend to elevate older men to positions of power in Congress does not, in and of itself, mean that environmental legislation will suffer. By the same token, the election of younger congressmen does not necessarily mean that those concerned with this type of legislation will, of necessity, benefit from their presence.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has sought to identify the stable bases of support for and opposition to environmental legislation in Congress. Most analyses in this area have utilized the case study method, and consequently focused upon individual bills. The present research has explored congressmen's environmental commitment over a broad range of issues as measured by the League of Conservation Voters. Our major hypothesis, that those districts containing the most environmentally aware sectors of the population would be represented by the most environmentally aware congressmen, was only partially borne out by the data. Of much greater significance than district characteristics in explaining environmental voting were partisanship and ideology. Political liberals in both parties, but liberal Democrats in particular, were the strongest supporters of environmental legislation. There is an apparent paradox here: liberal congressmen tend to represent districts containing disproportionate numbers of people who seem to be the *least* environmentally concerned in response to survey questions. Part of the explanation is that these people do not perceive environmental issues in the same way as wealthier, more educated people do; consequently the salience of the environmental issue is low. They are not offended when their congressman's liberalism leads to strong environmental voting because this sector of the public accepts a strong economic role for government as a general principle. Conversely, those who respond more positively on surveys are more aware of the environmental problems than are the poorer, less educated respondents. But their "concern" as manifested in answers to survey questions, is not translated into *their* congressman's environmental voting; too frequently environmental controls and cleanup require governmental intervention that is distasteful to those representatives.

Contrary to the early expectations of environmentalists, this issue

has not been "above politics." It involves federal governmental expenditures of sizeable proportions and consequently has given rise to those same antagonisms which have separated Democrats and Republicans over the last forty years. The hope that there could be non-partisan solutions to the environmental crisis would seem to be most unrealistic.



FOOTNOTES

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¹Erskine, M., *The Polls: Pollution and Its Costs*, 36 PUBLIC OPINION Q. 120 (Spring 1972). Results of the 1972 Gallup Poll confirm Erskine's findings. NATIONAL WILDLIFE, at 18, April/May 1972.

²The 1971 LCV ratings, upon which this study is based, included such bills as HR 19318 (Family Planning and Population Research; JH Res 468 (Yates amendment on prototype SST); HR 8190 (Termination of SST and rapid transit for District of Columbia); HR 11932 (DC metro); HR 9270 (Stream channelization); HR 9388 (Disposal of atomic wastes); HR 10090 (Amchitka nuclear blast); HR 19909 (St. John River Dam); HR 10367 (Alaskan public lands); and HR 10729 (Pesticide controls). League of Conservation Voters, *HOW YOUR CONGRESSMEN VOTED ON CRITICAL ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES* (1972).

³RIPON FORUM, at 13, (March 1970).

⁴The LCV reported with pride that in November, 1970, 16 of the 20 candidates receiving their support won their elections.

⁵A rank order correlation of Kraft's measure of environmental salience among 58 congressmen (members of the five subcommittees most related to the issues) with the same congressmen's LCV ratings on floor votes, produces a Spearman's Rho. of .57.

⁶Trop C. and L. Roos, Jr., *Public Opinion and the Environment*, in L. Roos, Jr., (ed.), *THE POLITICS OF ECOSUICIDE*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971); Tognacci, L., et al., *Environmental Quality: How Universal is Public Concern?*, 74 ENVIRONMENT AND BEHAVIOR, 83-5 (March 1972). This study was conducted in Boulder, Colorado. Winham, G., *Attitudes on Pollution and Growth in Hamilton*, 15 CANADIAN JOURNAL OF POLITICAL SCIENCE 401 (Sept. 1972).

⁷Trop and Roos, *id.* at 53; *see also* Erskine, *supra* n. 1, at 124. Contrast their findings with the Gallup Poll cited in NATIONAL WILDLIFE, at 18, (April/May 1972).

⁸All demographic data, except median home value, are taken from Barone, M., G. Ujifusa and D. Matthews, THE ALMANAC OF AMERICAN POLITICS (Boston: Gambit, Inc., 1972). The information on median home value is found in the various state volumes of CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT DATA (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1972). The mode of analysis employed in this study is quite common. *See*, for example, Froman, L., CONGRESSMEN AND THEIR CONSTITUENCIES (Chicago: Rand McNally and Co., 1963); Rieselbach, L., THE ROOTS OF ISOLATIONISM (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1966); Sannon, W., PARTY CONSTITUENCY AND CONGRESSIONAL VOTING (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968); Clausen, A.R., HOW CONGRESSMEN DECIDE: A POLICY FOCUS (New York: St. Martins Press, 1973); Jones, E.T., *Congressional Voting on Keynesian Legislation, 1945-1964*, 21 WESTERN POLITICAL Q. 240-51 (June 1968); Heighberger, N., *Representatives' Constituency and National Security*, 26 WESTERN POLITICAL Q. 224-35, (June 1973).

⁹Trop and Roos, *supra* n. 6, at 53, 59; Erskine, *supra* n. 1, at 120.

¹⁰Pomper, G.M., *From Confusion to Clarity: Issues and American Voters, 1956-1968*, 66 AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE REV. 214-28 (June 1972).

¹¹Schneier, E.V., PARTY AND CONSTITUENCY: PRESSURES ON CONGRESS, at 239, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970).

¹²Mercure, D.V. Jr., and W. M. Ross, *The Wilderness Act: A Product of Congressional Compromise*, in Cooley and Wandesford-Smith, (eds.), CONGRESS AND THE ENVIRONMENT (Seattle: U. of Wash. Press, 1970).

¹³Tognacci, *supra* n. 6, at 81.

¹⁴The classic distinction between position (economic) and style issues is found in Berelson B., Lazarsfeld and W. M. McPhee, VOTING (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954). For further elaboration, *see*, Wilson, J.Q., THE AMATEUR DEMOCRAT (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) and Lipset, S.M., POLITICAL MAN, at chs. 4, 5, 7, (New York: Doubleday, 1960).

¹⁵Sources of the various ideological scores are: *Conservative Coalition Opposition Score*, CONGRESSIONAL QUARTERLY WEEKLY REPORT, 30:78-9, (Jan. 15, 1972); *COPE Score*, AFL-CIO NEWS, (Jan. 22, 1972); *NFU Score*, NATIONAL FARMERS UNION NEWSLETTER (April 21, 1972); *CFA Score, 1971 Voting Records*, CONSUMER FEDER-

ATION OF AMERICA (1972); *LWV Scores, Political Accountability Ratings*, League of Women Voters Publication No. 507, (1972).

¹⁶Most general studies in this area contrast Christianity with other world religions. For example, *see*, SCIENCE, 10:1203-7, (March 1967); AMERICA, 124:308, (Mar. 27, 1971).

¹⁷(Chicago; National Opinion Research Center, 1973) The question (64B) is found in the codebook, at 51.

¹⁸Mayor Richard Hatcher of Gary, Indiana, quoted in TIME (Aug. 3, 1970). Two analyses of the black viewpoint are found in YALE ALUMNI MAGAZINE, at 61-2; (May, 1970); and THE NATION, 208:535-7, (April 28, 1969).

¹⁹Mayhew, D., PARTY LOYALTY AMONG CONGRESSMEN, at ch. 5, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966).

²⁰Schneier, *supra* n. 11, at 103.