

new york minute

ISSUE NUMBER 50/MAY 2012

The Tension Between Economic Growth & Environmental Values

By Robin Blakely-Armitage, Cornell University

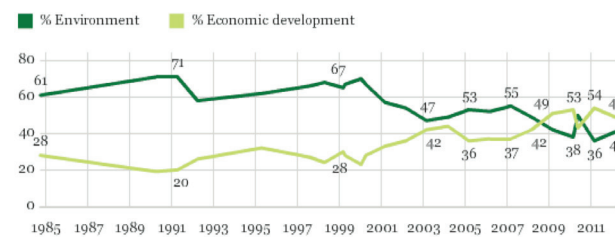
What is the Issue?

Economic growth and environmental protection are important issues facing the U.S. and the larger global community. However, these two topics are often pitted against each other, framing prospective policy decisions as a *choice* of one over the other. Some people view actions taken in order to protect the environment as constraining economic productivity, while others see some modes of economic production as particularly destructive to the environment. The following *New York Minute* compares and contrasts survey findings for the nation and New York State, and illustrates how opinions on the two issues can vary whether they are viewed as general trade-offs or framed in specific contexts.

Which is more important?

Since the mid-1980s the Gallup Poll has been asking Americans which they feel should be given more priority, the environment or the economy. In 2009, for the first time in more than twenty-five years, Americans indicated they favored economic growth over environmental protection (see Figure 1), a significant shift that is likely a result of the major economic recession the country has been experiencing since 2008.

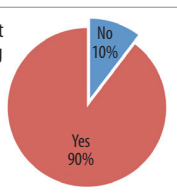
Figure 1: With which one of these statements about the environment and the economy do you most agree – protection of the environment should be given priority, even at the risk of curbing economic growth (or) economic growth should be given priority, even if the environment suffers to some extent?



Source: Gallup Poll (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/153515/Americans-Prioritize-Economic-Growth-Environment.aspx>)

In 2011, CaRDI asked upstate New Yorkers “Given the current fiscal challenges facing New York State, do you believe state and local governments should be committed to protecting long-term environmental values? (2011 *State of Upstate* (SOUS) survey)” An overwhelming majority of upstate New Yorkers (90%) answered yes to this question (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Given the current economic challenges facing NYS, do you believe state and local governments should be committed to protecting long-term environmental values?

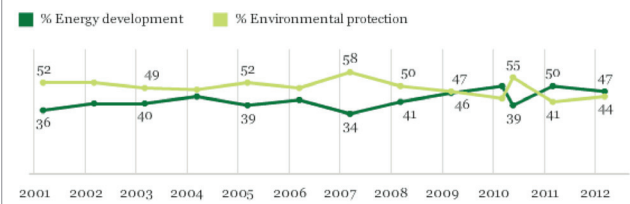


Source: 2011 CaRDI SOUS Survey

While at first glance the results of these two questions may seem to contradict each other, the question in Figure 1 is worded in such a manner that it forces the respondent to *choose* between the

two options, while the question in Figure 2 uses the struggling economy as the *context* within which opinions about long-term environmental protection can be measured. Another trade-off question posed by Gallup asks whether people favor protecting the environment or developing U.S. energy supplies. Figure 3 shows that while Americans have displayed a preference for protecting the environment in the past, in recent years this preference has evaporated and the two issues are virtually tied.

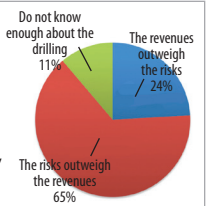
Figure 3: With which one of these statements about the environment and energy production do you most agree – protection of the environment should be given priority, even at the risk of limiting the amount of energy supplies which the U.S. produces, (or) development of U.S. energy supplies – such as oil, gas and coal – should be given priority, even if the environment suffers to some extent?



Source: Gallup Poll (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/153404/Americans-Split-Energy-Environment-Trade-Off.aspx>)

To examine this issue in a particular context, we look at a specific type of energy development, natural gas drilling in upstate New York. Many supporters of natural gas drilling point to the potential economic benefits to individual land owners, communities, and the state, while others are concerned with negative environmental impacts such as compromised water quality. In our SOUS survey, we asked whether the risks to water quality outweigh the revenues, or the whether the revenues outweighed the risks. Almost two-thirds (65%) of respondents indicated that the risks to water quality outweigh the revenues from natural gas drilling in NYS (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Which statement best reflects your opinion about water quality and natural gas drilling in New York State? The risks outweigh the revenues, the revenues outweigh the risks, or I do not know enough about the drilling.



Source: 2011 CaRDI SOUS Survey

Conclusion

In the current recession, general concern over protecting the environment has wavered when positioned as a choice versus economic growth and jobs. However, people are much more likely to favor protecting the environment over economic benefits when given a specific example of how the environment might be adversely affected. This suggests that in these years of extreme fiscal stress those seeking to protect the environment will need to provide concrete examples of adverse environmental effects in order to garner support.

