RELIGION AND THE ENVIRONMENT: POLLS SHOW STRONG BACKING FOR ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION ACROSS RELIGIOUS GROUPS

In contrast to abortion, gay marriage and other hot-button cultural issues, which divide most religious groups in the United States, there is a fairly strong consensus across faith traditions on environmental policy, according to recent polls sponsored by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. Nevertheless, conservative Christians and some minorities are not quite as supportive of environmental regulations as are others.

As Table 1 shows, by a two-to-one margin (55% to 27%) respondents back strong regulations to protect the environment. Furthermore, the level of support is quite deep. Respondents in this survey were asked whether they favored stronger environmental regulations "even if they cost jobs or result in higher prices."

Backing for the environment cuts across virtually every religious group, from white Evangelicals to Jews. Moreover, as Table 2 indicates, that support has

Table 1. Percent favoring stronger environmental regulation

	% Pop.	% Agree	% No Op	% Disagree
ENTIRE SAMPLE	100	55	18	27
Evangelical Protestant	26	52	17	31
Traditionalist Evangelical	*13*	*52*	*14*	*34*
Centrist Evangelical	*11*	*52*	*18*	*30*
Modernist Evangelical	*3*	*57*	*21*	*22*
Mainline Protestant	16	61	19	20
Traditionalist Mainline	*4*	*62*	*15*	*23*
Centrist Mainline	*7*	*56*	*20*	*24*
Modernist Mainline	*5*	*66*	*20*	*14*
Latino Protestants	3	43	24	33
Black Protestants	10	39	22	39
Catholic	18	60	18	22
Traditionalist Catholic	*4*	*53*	*21*	*26*
Centrist Catholic	*8*	*59*	*18*	*23*
Modernist Catholic	*5*	*69*	*15*	*16*
Latino Catholic	5	47	17	36
Other Christian	3	58	21	21
Other Faiths	3	62	18	20
Jewish	2	67	13	20
Unaffiliated	16	56	20	24
Unaffiliated Believers	*5*	*46*	*20*	*34*
Secular	*8*	*59*	*18*	*23*
Atheist, Agnostic	*3*	*66*	*23*	*11*

Source: Fourth National Survey of Religion and Politics, Bliss Institute, University of Akron, March-May 2004

remained strong through the last few presidential election cycles. A major exception to this generally strong pro-environment orientation is Black Protestants, who are evenly divided on the issue. Support among African Americans for environmental regulations is the lowest of any group, and in fact has declined slightly since 1992. Although a plurality of Latino Catholics (47%) and Latino Protestants (43%) favor laws to protect the environment, support in these communities also is significantly lower than for the population at large. The more tepid level of support in all three minority groups may reflect a greater preoccupation with more immediate economic and social welfare concerns, possibly including a fear that more stringent environmental regulations could jeopardize jobs.

Table 2. Percent agree, strict environmental regulations

	2004	2000	1996	1992	1992-2004 Net Change
ENTIRE SAMPLE	55%	52%	54%	54%	+1%
Evangelical Protestant	52	45	50	50	+2
Mainline Protestant	61	59	57	57	+4
Black Protestant	39	43	43	43	- 4
Catholic	60	54	56	56	+4
Latino Catholic	47	51	50	50	- 3
Jews	67	66	71	71	- 4
Unaffiliated	56	55	60	60	- 4

Source: Fourth National Survey of Religion and Politics, Bliss Institute, University of Akron, March-May 2004

It is also interesting to note that traditionalists (those who are more orthodox or observant) within the nation's three largest faith groups – Evangelical Protestants, Mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics – are less supportive of environmental regulations than their centrist and modernist coreligionists. Modernist Christians, along with Jewish and secular Americans, give stronger backing to the environment. The gap between traditionalist and modernists in the Roman Catholic community is particularly wide – a whopping 16 percentage points. [For a complete explanation of the beliefs and behavior measures used to classify respondents into the three groups, see page 7 of the "American Religious Landscape and Politics, 2004" survey, posted at http://pewforum.org.]

Table 3. The religious landscape and issue priorities

	Economic, Welfare Issues	Foreign Policy	Cultural Issues	Political Process
Evangelical Protestant	**35%**	**30**	**29**	**6**
Traditionalist Evangelical	*27*	*27*	*40*	*6*
Centrist Evangelical	*40*	*32*	*22*	*6*
Modernist Evangelical	*55*	*29*	*11*	*5*
Mainline Protestant	**46%**	**33**	**13**	**8**
Traditionalist Mainline	*38*	*34*	*22*	*6*
Centrist Mainline	*50*	*35*	*9*	*6*
Modernist Mainline	*46*	*30*	*11*	*13*
Catholic	**47%**	**31**	**15**	**7**
Traditionalist Catholic	*39*	*29*	*25*	*7*
Centrist Catholic	*51*	*29*	*14*	*6*
Modernist Catholic	*50*	*35*	*6*	*9*

Source: Fourth National Survey of Religion and Politics, Bliss Institute, University of Akron, March-May 2004

As Table 3 illustrates, the traditionalist-modernist gap on environmental policy is just one piece of a much greater divide over public policy priorities. Generally, traditionalists give greater weight to cultural issues like abortion and gay marriage; modernists tend to focus more on economic and social welfare issues, such as government programs to help the poor.

The Environment as a Priority

A good way to judge the intensity of peoples' views on issues is to look at their voting priorities. As Table 4 shows, slightly more than 50 percent of voters consider the environment to be a very important issue when they go to the polls. The figures again are largely the same across the

Table 4. In making your decision about who to vote for, will the issue of the environment be very important?

TOTAL	53%
Total Protestant	48
Evangelical	*48*
Non-Evangelical	*49*
Catholic (Non-Hispanic)	48
Secular	57
Church Attendance:	
Weekly or more	*50*
Monthly or less	*53*
Seldom/Never	*56*

Source: GOP the Religion-Friendly Party, Pew Research Center for the People and the Press and Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, August 2004

religious spectrum, with roughly half of voters in each major religious group seeing it as a very important issue during elections. A similar distribution occurs when the survey sample is broken down by frequency of church attendance. In both cases, secular and non-church going respondents give the issue a slightly higher priority than everyone else.

Table 5. Priorities for religious voters

	All	Mainline Protestant	White Evangelical	White Catholic	Religious Commitment		
					High	Average	Low
The economy	76%	74%	70%	76%	74%	79%	75%
Terrorism	74	75	77	72	76	75	72
Health Care	70	69	68	67	70	73	67
Education	69	65	64	56	70	69	68
Environment	**53**	**49**	**48**	**48**	**51**	**57**	**52**
Abortion	46	33	60	38	61	38	37
Gay marriage	33	23	52	23	51	25	22

Source: GOP the Religion-Friendly Party, Pew Research Center for the People and the Press and Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, August 2004

For most Americans, then, protecting the environment is an important issue. But as Table 5 shows, it is not as important an issue as some other policy concerns. Issues like terrorism, the economy, health care and education are much more important to voters across the religious spectrum. For all but white Evangelicals, however, the environment rates higher than cultural issues such as abortion and gay marriage.