Water Sustainability and Climate
In the Yahara Watershed
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON

RESEARCH BRIEF

Public support for water policy is driven more by people's beliefs about government than their self-interests

Summary

Clean water consistently ranks high as a public priority, and people's support for policy tools to protect water quality may be driven more strongly by their beliefs about how helpful government is to society than their self-interest. To ensure broad public support for water quality policies, policymakers should consider the differing worldviews of their constituents in policy design.

Background

People consistently rank clean water high as a priority, but society lacks consensus as to whether and how government should improve and protect water quality. Given the influence of public opinion on policy implementation, understanding the factors that drive public support for water policies can inform policy development. Support for policy can depend in part on how it works – for example, "carrot" policies reward water protection with incentives, and "stick" policies use regulations and taxes to restrict polluting behavior. Other factors may play a role, such as self-interest, or a "how will this affect me" perspective, and a person's beliefs about how society should be organized, also called their cultural worldview.

This study sought to tease out what factors were the strongest predictors of support for water policies to inform and, perhaps, improve the use of policy to achieve clean water. Its study region was Dane County, Wisconsin, where the public desire for clean water comes into conflict with agriculture and urban land use, important economic drivers for the region that also create nutrient pollution.

Research Design

In 2015, the researchers mailed surveys to 2200 randomly sampled urban and rural residents of Dane County, oversampling rural residents to ensure their views were adequately represented. They received over 1100 completed surveys, for a response rate of 52%. Respondents were demographically representative of the region, with a slightly higher response rate from older white males. The survey measured support for nonpoint pollution control options, perceived water quality, concern about runoff, self-interest, and cultural worldview.

Findings

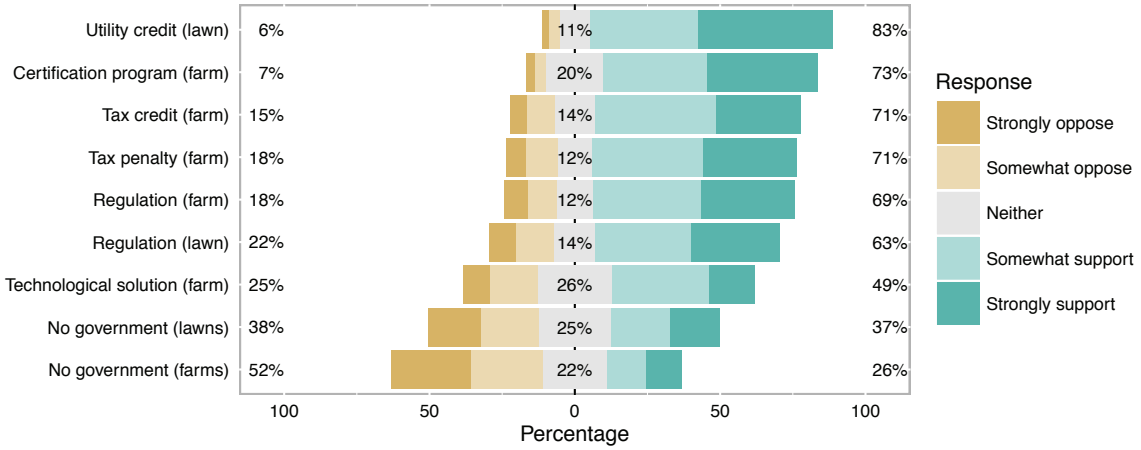
Support for water policies

Most respondents supported some sort of governmental role in improving water quality, with an overall preference for "carrot" policies that incentivize clean water behaviors over "stick" policies that punish behaviors harmful to water quality. For example, 83 percent of respondents said they would support rewarding urban property owners with incentives like utility bill credits to prevent runoff from their lawns and 71 percent would back tax credits for farmers to reduce runoff from their land. Meanwhile, the percentage of people who said they would support regulating runoff was 63 percent for lawns and 69 percent for farms. Relying on only voluntary actions by farmers without government involvement was the least popular, with 52% of respondents opposing and 26% in support.

Concern for water quality influenced respondents' support for water policies. The more people were concerned about water quality and nutrient runoff, the more supportive they were of policies to protect water quality and the more opposed they were to a "no government" approach.

Influence of cultural worldview versus self-interest

Overall, cultural worldviews were the strongest predictor of policy support, stronger even than self-interest, which is commonly but incorrectly assumed to drive policy support. The study measured worldviews on a scale of "communitarian" to "individualist." People with a communitarian worldview value a social order that puts the needs of the collective first, while individualists fear restrictions to



Respondents generally support some sort of government intervention to protect water quality and oppose relying on only voluntary action. They also preferred carrot policies to stick policies.

autonomy, like regulations, and expect people to fend for themselves. Overall, communitarians were more supportive of water policies and individualists were more strongly opposed to them.

While not a primary determinant overall, self-interest did play a role for some survey respondents. People working in agriculture were more likely to support relying on voluntary action to prevent nutrient runoff from farms without government intervention. This is in contrast to the opposition by half of all respondents to a reliance on voluntary actions by farmers. Moreover, farmers and other agricultural workers were more likely to oppose taxing farm runoff but support urban lawn regulation, while lawn owners tended to oppose urban lawn regulation.

Implications

The results indicate people do see value in the role of government to protect water quality, which suggests regulatory rollbacks may be met with public disapproval in some places. The question of how to go about using policy is where disagreements can surface. Elevating the use of carrot policies may garner broader public support than employing stick policies. For example, agricultural certification programs are popular options to incentivize water protection. While farmer participation is voluntary in these programs, governments can play a role by supporting private certification programs or implementing public ones.

When designing policies to improve and protect water quality, policymakers should take the worldviews of their constituents into account. While Dane County is a relatively liberal area of Wisconsin, the lessons learned through this research can inform efforts in more politically diverse regions. Regardless of the proportions of individualists and communitarians, the preferences associated with these worldviews can inform policy design. For example, policies that appeal to individual autonomy or make the business case for clean water may be effective at garnering more support from individualists. Overall, this research points to viable opportunities for employing various policy options to achieve or protect clean water and align with public values.

Cover photo: Jeff Miller/UW-Madison

Source

Rissman, A.R., P.A. Kohl, and C.B. Wardropper. "Public support for carrot, stick, and no-government water quality policies. *Environmental Science and Policy* 76 (2017): 82-89. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2017.04.012

Research sponsor

This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under grant DEB-1038759. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in the material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

Water Sustainability and Climate Project

The Water Sustainability and Climate Project (WSC) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison is an integrated effort to understand how water and the many other benefits people derive from nature could change over time. The five-year project (2011–2016) focused on the Yahara Watershed in southern Wisconsin and funded by the National Science Foundation. Visit wsc.limnology.wisc.edu.