

A place to bridge the environmental divide

Americans understand the importance of protecting our most valuable assets. We change the oil in our cars every 3,000 miles. We install security systems to guard our homes and property. We load the latest antivirus software on our computers.

We know that doing these things will cost us less than paying for the consequences if we don't.

Yet many of us, voters and policymakers alike, are generally not inclined to take a similarly far-sighted approach to protecting our environment, which provides us with the most essential assets of all: clean air, safe water and a global climate that sustains an astonishing array of life, including our own.

To plumb this paradox, the Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions commissioned a new national survey by Peter Hart and Bill McInturff to examine how voters' views on the environment affect—or don't affect—their voting, and why.

The findings—which were shared with more than 400 decision makers from science, industry, government and nonprofit groups at the Institute's recent inaugural summit—underscore the challenge we face in changing the political climate on environmental issues.

But they also reveal a valuable opportunity for progress.

Seventy-nine percent of voters said they supported "stronger national standards to protect our land, air and water." Yet only 22 percent said environmental concerns were major factors in how they voted in any recent election.

The reasons for this disconnect were diverse, but common threads emerged. Most voters believe stronger environmental standards are likely to lead to higher taxes and fewer jobs. They view the threats posed

by environmental problems as distant and diffuse, and unlikely to harm them personally. They're skeptical of the special interest groups who currently dominate the policy debate.

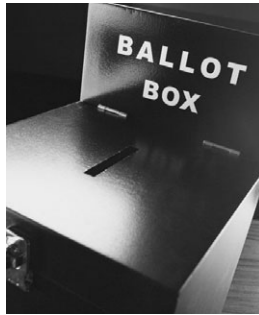
Of all sources, universities were viewed as the most credible and the least likely to have hidden agendas.

These findings will guide the Nicholas Institute as we work to build public and political consensus for environmental progress—based not on political spin or doomsday scenarios, but on objective analyses of policy options and the tradeoffs they entail.

Taken together, they represent a call to action, a call that was echoed at our inaugural summit by decision makers from all sides of the issues.

By serving as a place where governments, industry, citizens and media can turn for unbiased information and analysis and innovative, practical ideas, the Nicholas Institute will raise the level of the policy debate and help voters and policymakers understand that "environmental issues are neither Republican nor Democrat—they're American issues," as James Rogers of Cinergy Corp. noted at the summit.

Keynote speaker Russell Train, chairman emeritus of the World Wildlife Fund and former EPA head under Presidents Nixon and Ford, summed it up best when he said: "An institution dedicated to finding solutions—what a radical idea.... It is an idea whose time has come, and then some."



Environmental Summit Webcast

You can still view the Nicholas Institute summit by putting www.nicholas.duke.edu/summitcast in your Web browser.

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