

The Politics of Fracking

Research shows perceived risk depends on ideology

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EXAMPLE OF A FRACKING INDUSTRIAL SITE USED FOR SHALE NATURAL GAS ENERGY DEVELOPMENT (SGD) IN RURAL PENNSYLVANIA. *PHOTO CREDIT: PETE*

STERN/FRACTRACKER ALLIANCE

What side of the “political aisle” a person identifies with could determine how they feel about shale natural gas energy development (SGD), or fracking, according to new research out of UNH that found political orientation can play a significant role in the perception of support and opposition around fracking on public and private lands.

“What was surprising to us was that it didn’t seem to matter much if a respondent was well versed in all of the pros or cons of fracking or if they had only heard of fracking once; respondents seemed to fall back on their political orientation when deciding if they support or oppose fracking.”

The [study](#), recently published in the journal Energy Research & Social Science, took a closer look at recreationists who frequently engaged in outdoor activities in and around Pennsylvania state forests. Researchers found that recreationists who identified themselves as conservative were significantly more likely than their moderate and liberal counterparts to support fracking on both public and private lands in Pennsylvania. Using a seven-point scale (1=strongly oppose; 7=strongly support), conservatives averaged 6.36 in favor of fracking on public lands, while liberals averaged 1.07. When asked about the risks associated with fracking on the same public and private lands, opposite results were found with liberals averaging 6.26, demonstrating a higher concern for risk, and conservatives averaging 1.47, or little concern about any risks.

“What was surprising to us was that it didn’t seem to matter much if a respondent was well versed in all of the pros or cons of fracking or if they had only heard of fracking once; respondents seemed to fall back on their political orientation when deciding if they support or oppose fracking,” said Michael Ferguson, assistant professor of recreation management and policy.

On-site face-to-face survey interviews were used to gather data from Pennsylvania state forest recreationists from June to September 2018. The overall sampling was conducted with recreationists who were predominantly local, educated, experienced and politically moderate. The overall results suggested relatively low support for SGD on Pennsylvania public lands, however once political ideology was integrated, political views proved to be a robust variable and surpassed perceived risk when predicting support for SGD.

“Recognizing that outdoor recreation is an increasingly critical component of the economy, lawmakers, natural resource managers and the SGD industry should consider recreationists as a legitimate, vocal and politically charged stakeholder within the SGD process,” said Ferguson. “From a policy perspective, each development phase of SGD could benefit from input from this constituency, especially as SGD companies attempt to gain public support.”

Contributing to these findings are Peter Newman, principal investigator and professor of recreation park and tourism management at The Pennsylvania State University; Myles Lynch, former doctoral student in recreation management and policy at UNH; Lauren Ferguson, lecturer in recreation management and policy at UNH; and Zachary Miller, assistant professor of environment and society at Utah State University.

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