

Media Relations

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UNH Research: On Environment, Republicans Closer to Independents Than Tea Party

DURHAM, N.H. – Environmentalists dispirited by the Republicans' dominance of the recent midterm elections can take heart: non-Tea Party Republicans' views on science and environmental issues are closer to those of Independents than to Tea Party supporters. That's the primary finding of new research by University of New Hampshire sociologists, published this week in the journal *Environmental Politics*.

"Across a range of science and environmental issues, non-Tea Party Republicans are more similar to Independents than they are to Tea Party supporters, and those divisions are surprisingly stable over the last four years," says UNH professor of sociology Lawrence Hamilton, first author of the paper, titled "A four-party view of US environmental concern."

While researchers – Hamilton a leader among them – have examined the interplay between education, political party and environmental concerns in recent years, this is the first study to separate out Tea Party supporters as a fourth party. Hamilton was surprised to find more significant divisions between Tea Party supporters and Republicans, and fewer divisions between non-Tea Party Republicans and Independents, on a range of questions about science and the environment.

The study also finds that Tea Party supporters with higher levels of education are less likely to trust scientists or accept scientific consensus on topics like evolution or climate change, which runs opposite to the positive effect education has on trust in science among Independents and Democrats.

Hamilton suggests that's because well-educated individuals actively acquire information, but they also choose their sources. Those who trust scientists are more influenced by research findings or major science organizations, but those who don't trust scientists know where to find alternative sources that better fit their beliefs. "People with more education could have greater awareness of their political leaders' and parties' positions, or take more initiative themselves to acquire information that reinforces their worldview," Hamilton says. "When it comes to climate change, for example, there are many excellent real science sources, but also many political or pseudo-science sources that sound convincing to some people."

The implications of these findings on politics, particularly within the Republican Party, are those that some pundits have already noted: "If you want to win the center, you should be closer to them than to either extreme," Hamilton says.

For scientists, the finding that non-Tea Party Republicans are more receptive to scientific findings is encouraging. Regarding the rejection of scientific results by others, however, "Public understanding is stalled," Hamilton says. "It's a bafflement to scientists, who are speaking as clearly as they can. But they're seeing that science communication gets caught up in a political spin cycle that can counter years of data with a few days of blogging."

Hamilton and co-author Kei Saito (a Ph.D. student in sociology at UNH) used data from 12 science, environment or climate questions asked on the Granite State Poll, conducted by the UNH Survey Center. Responses on national polls asking some of these same questions have been similar to those from New Hampshire, suggesting the New Hampshire results could provide a rough proxy. However, because the Granite State is more

secular, better educated and less racially diverse compared with some other regions, Hamilton notes that some party contrasts might even be stronger elsewhere.

Environmental questions on the Granite State Poll are supported by grants from the National Science Foundation, and by the Carsey School of Public Policy and Sustainability Institute at the University of New Hampshire. Sampling and interviews are conducted by the Survey Center at the University of New Hampshire.

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Lawrence Hamilton is available at Lawrence.hamilton@unh.edu or 603-862-1859. For a copy of the paper, "A four-party view of US environmental concern," contact either Hamilton or beth.potier@unh.edu. UNH Media Relations has an on-site ReadyCam broadcast studio available through VideoLink (617-340-4300) for television interviews and an ISDN line for radio interviews.

Media Contact: [Beth Potier](#) | 603-862-1566 | UNH Media Relations | [@unhnews](#) | [@unhscience](#)

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