Do Americans Care about the Environment? A Republican Perspective

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I know you’re probably here just to see if I actually have horns on my head! I may be one of maybe five or six Republicans in New Haven these days, but I am, in fact, fairly normal. I do appreciate the fact that you’re here, because at least I know we share a commitment to what I would call the greater issues matrix — the greater public policy agenda that is informing the American populace, if not the American electorate, those being two very different things. I would imagine most people in this room are as strange as I am, meaning that you actually are politically involved somehow. And that does makes us “strange,” because less than 50 percent of the country even bothers to exercise their constitutional right to vote — a remarkable fact when you consider, especially for women, that in the span of 100 years we’ve gone from busting the barriers with the suffragist movement to basically having to drag people kicking and screaming to the polls to cast a ballot.

Earlier today I had some meetings in Trenton for the Republican State Committee of New Jersey. One of the candidates was asking people to sign a petition so he would have enough signatures to run for office in the upcoming Congressional elections. The amazing thing was that the people who were signing the petition were sharing stories about how, when you try to get a petition signed in their neighborhood, it’s often the people who are the loudest complainers, who have the most to say, the ones who roll their eyes when you approach them, who, when you get them to sign a petition, are not registered to vote. Not even registered, let alone participating. It seems that is an appropriate context in which to cast the discussion today.
DO VOTERS CARE ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT?

When you ask me “Do voters still care about the environment?” my answer is “Yes – of course we do.” I will answer that with data, I will answer that with cultural examples, I will answer that with additional questions. But in the broader perspective it is clear that yes, Americans are “concerned” about the environment.

When you boil it down to voters, we must draw a distinction. I must emphasize this because I think that far too often in today’s political and public policy arenas, very few people are making the distinction between “what Americans think” and “how voters behave.” Sometimes these are apples and oranges.

The greatest evidence we have that people care about the environment is that many of their actions suggest that they do. It’s not that people will be rushing to the polls anytime soon based solely on environmental concerns. That is not true. But if you just take a look at our culture right now, you see that there’s been a complete assimilation of environmental concerns in our lifestyles.

For example, at the grocery store they ask you, “Paper or plastic?” That didn’t exist 20 years ago. Recycling bins are ubiquitous, including in office buildings, and local municipalities have mandates that force you to recycle. Look at the type of packaging that is used, that is allowed to be used, according to EPA and other regulators. Even the voluntary emissions standards that are going into effect in different states, such as Governor Pataki’s program in New York, provide evidence of responses to popular and practical environmental considerations within the culture.

The greatest piece of evidence I have that people “care about the environment” derives from the largest class of non-voters – kids under the age of 18 who can’t even vote yet. The environment is being taught to them in the public school curriculum. When I was a kid (not that long ago, but long enough ago), I would come home and say, “Mom, I want to do the Rice Bowl program or the dance-athon or the
walkathon for charity.” Today the kids come home and say, “I want you to drive me to Jiffy Lube so we can recycle motor oil. I want to collect all the Diet Coke cans from the neighborhood. I want to participate in the Adopt-a-Highway or the Clean-a-Park program.” And if you turn on the cartoons on a random Saturday morning, you’ll see Captain Planet. Or you’ll see Eco-Man, who can destroy his enemies, recycle them, and then destroy them again – all in one half-hour. The most high-tech cartoon that we had on as kids was “The Jetsons” with Elroy and Astro the dog. That just shows you that there’s a real difference in our culture now with respect to the awareness of the environment.

Why is that important? Because I’d be the first to say that some in Washington are so full of themselves that they fail to realize the proper order: politics is meant to respond to culture, not the other way around. I think that the natural sequence of events has been perverted and turned on its head many times and in many ways. Politicians should take account of the way we live our lives or what we need or what we desire, and respond to that politically. Sometimes that means getting out of the way; sometimes that means passing a piece of legislation or placing an issue before the voters on the ballot in an initiative and referendum state. But it doesn’t mean passing laws and then saying, “Go ahead and alter your behavior.” So if you assess the culture, you’ll find that, even if we don’t realize it, the environment has moved its way not just into our consciousness, but also into our everyday practices.

Still, the difference between things that people care about concerning the environment and their voting patterns on issues concerning the environment is huge. On the matter of the environment, it’s a larger gap between interest and engagement – between agreement and intensity – than on most other issues.

Most people who tell you that they’re concerned about tax reform have it as part of their consideration in their issues matrix when they go to the polls. People talk to you about marriage or abortion or stem cell research or the Second Amendment – the more hot-button issues.
If they are more “raised eyebrows” than “shrugged shoulders” about it, chances are they consider these issues when they go to the ballot box. But the environment is something different.

In our poll, we asked people “Which of the following describes you best on the matter of the environment?” (responses are rotated to prevent bias):

• I am an active environmentalist;
• I am concerned about the environment, but not active;
• I am not concerned about the environment, and not active.

Sixty-nine percent of Americans voluntarily place themselves in the category of “concerned but not active.” I think that’s such a more important and fairer question to ask than just saying, “Do you care about the environment?”

When you ask a question like, “Do you support or oppose protecting the environment?” you see that 85 percent of Americans support protecting the environment. Eighty-five percent of Americans support improving public education; 90 percent of Americans support making sure that seniors are fed and clothed – I mean, who are the other 10 percent? Who doesn’t like these things? Who doesn’t like world peace and chocolate-chip cookies and protecting the environment? Who doesn’t like cuddly blankets in the wintertime or improving the quality of public education? That’s just feel-good phraseology. That does nothing to probe the underlying ideology. What it does is mistake intensity for what is just passive and polite agreement. If I throw a feel-good phrase in front of you – “protect the environment” – you can just nod your head in agreement. We all would. Very few people would not. I actually wouldn’t want to meet the 15 percent who said that they don’t agree with that!

But what do we really mean by saying “I’m for protecting the environment?” You can have everybody in there – from somebody who says, “The environment is the only issue I vote on, the only thing I care
about, the only thing I examine in the candidate’s references. It’s the only thing I listen for in debates; it’s the only thing I am mindful of when they choose their running mates and they make their speeches. It’s all I care about; it’s all I donate to.” And you can have people who just say, “Yeah, I think protecting the environment is a good idea. I mean, after all, I put my bottles out differently from my cans.” They’re two very different people. And so this feel-good phraseology does nothing to probe the gradations of viewpoints that one person or that one voter can have. You can agree that the environment is important – but are you gonna crawl across broken glass? Are you gonna bleed all the way to the polls, based on that issue? So the best poll questions are the ones that force you to choose, that don’t make you shop at some Soviet Safeway where there are no choices on the shelf. They actually force you to choose between three or four things that matter to you.

When open-ended questions ask, “What’s the most important issue facing the country today that you yourself are most concerned about?” or, asked a different way, “What’s the most important issue that influences your vote?” or “What’s your most important priority for the President and the Congress or the next President and the next Congress?” in those contexts, you see why the environment gets a grand total of two, three, sometimes a whopping four percent. Sometimes the take for the environment is the margin of error of the entire poll! That doesn’t mean people don’t care about the environment. But when a question is presented in an open-ended fashion, it is human nature to gravitate toward the thing that we need immediately. That affects not our larger orbit, so to speak, but the little circle around us called our lives.

In the late ’90s, the “SHE” cluster of issues dominated – Social Security, Healthcare, Education – because there was peace and prosperity. Now the “SHE” cluster of issues has given way to the “WE” cluster of issues: War and Economy.
The main reason that people don’t run to the ballot box because of the environment is a matter of pure competition; there are so many issues out there. What’s more, the environment stands alone as the one where Americans tell pollsters they believe there have been measurable improvements over the last three decades, and I would say they’re correct.

Seventy-three percent of Americans recently said that they were either “very” or “somewhat” satisfied with the general state of the environment. Now, in a different media-sponsored poll, 82 percent of those surveyed said that the environment would be “extremely,” “very,” or “somewhat” important to their vote this year. That’s fine, too. Those two do not conflict. That’s because those are two very different questions. Many people ask, “Can’t you [a pollster] just ask the question you want? Isn’t one of the questions biased?” There’s nothing biased about these questions, but they’re probing different values in your mind, and different levels of intensity.

One question is asking how satisfied you are — “Are you satisfied with the state of the environment?” — and you say, “Yes.” The other question asks, “How important is the environment to how you vote?” and we’re saying, “Oh, it’s so important.” This is because we like free Q-tips in this country if you’re handing them out. Everything’s “important” to us until you tell us what the cost is — whether in time, money or hassle — or if you tell us that if you choose A, you have to give up B, or maybe even B and C and D. Then we start to say that A doesn’t look so good anymore. The most legitimate polling questions are the ones that respect Americans’ intelligence rather than try to foist opinions on them and then test them two weeks later as though they’re testing their opinion. (There are lots of polls out there that are creating public opinion instead of measuring it. Trust me.)

ENVIRONMENTAL PHRASEOLOGY VS. IDEOLOGY

The polling questions that respect you are the questions on the environment that allow you to make choices the way that you do in your daily lives. I don’t think I’ve ever met a single one of you before,
but I guarantee that whatever you are wearing right now is not the only thing in your closet. I guarantee it. So you chose to wear today’s clothes to the exclusion of everything else. Even if your eyes were closed and the lights were out, you chose to wear it because your hands went *here* (motioning up) instead of *there* (motioning down).

If you’re going to your favorite restaurant tonight, they’ll say “Oh good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Smith.” After they seat you, they don’t say, “Here’s your table and here’s your dinner.” They hand you a menu of options. And if you’ve been in a restaurant anytime in the last 10 years, you see that these menus of options look like the Manhattan phonebook. You try to get through them and make a tough decision. The dialogue goes something like this:

My husband will say to me, “What are you going to have?”

And I will respond, “Well, what are you going to have?”

He will say something like, “Well, I was thinking about the salmon.”

And I will say, “I’ll have the filet.”

“Well, that was my second choice,” my husband will say.

“Okay, well, why don’t you get the one and I’ll get the other and we’ll share a little,” I’ll respond.

He’ll say, “Okay. Do you want an appetizer?”

“I don’t know, because I may want dessert,” I’ll say.

“Well, if you want the Grand Marnier soufflé you have to order it now because it takes 35 minutes,” he’ll say.

It’s the most stressful part of the day! And just when you’ve got it all situated, here comes the waiter who announces, “In addition to our usual menu, we have 17 specials today – just for aperitif!”

That’s great. That’s America. Those are choices. We are a country of many options: what to wear, what to eat, where to go, what to say, or do or not to do – so why should poll questions say to you, “Support or Oppose?” “Agree/Disagree?” “Yes/No?” and make you nod your head like that red cockatoo that so many people are trying to save? That makes no sense.
So the best questions on the environment are actually the ones that don’t ask you if you care about the environment. Because what happens with questions like that is what happened to campaign finance reform. That law just came out of polls. That is a bipartisan piece of legislation, which is now law, passed by a Republican House, a Democratic Senate, signed into law by a Republican president, and it came from polls, polls, polls. They asked, “Do you support campaign finance reform?” And we, the American people, said, “Oh, yeah! Campaign finance reform? Delicious!” It turns out no one really knows what this thing called “campaign finance reform” IS. That includes the lawyers and some judges who preside on the courts.

It’s not to say that people are factually ignorant. To demonstrate that the public is starved for basic information about the terms, phrases, words, and the so-called issues that are swirling all about them, a couple of knowledge questions in the poll never hurt. There’s a huge difference between saying, “I’m for campaign finance reform” and determining individual priorities. To do this we use a question like, “Which of the following are the most important to you and your family? Pick three issues that are most important to you in this year’s election.” When the choices are “reform the campaign finance laws,” “provide a prescription drug benefit for seniors,” “protect natural resources and the environment,” “improve quality of air and water,” “preserve social security,” “allow young people to put some of their Social Security money in personal accounts,” or “fight the war on terror,” you can get very different responses.

In this context, campaign finance reform calls to mind the Sesame Street song in a list: “one of these things does not belong here, one of these things is not the same . . . ” It gets 80 percent when it stands alone, because all you did was ask people to nod their head like bobblehead dolls. But when you ask, “Okay, but what’s most important to you?” it falters and almost fades.

Ladies and gentlemen, policy is being made all across this country based on polls that ask Americans to respond to feel-good phraseology rather than probing underlying ideology. The environment is no exception.
PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF REPUBLICANS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

What we have also found in polling is that the environment has now become almost a theme and a proxy more than just an issue. In the 1990s, I had written a document called, “Ignoring the Environment Would Be Hazardous to Republican Health.” My argument was that of all issues where the two parties can claim one advantage over the other (this is certainly pre-9/11) the environment has persisted as an issue where the Democratic Party generally – and the Democratic Congress specifically – claims primacy and enhanced credibility over Republicans in terms public perceptions regarding which party is better able to handle the issue.

My entire argument was that when you juxtapose that presumption on the part of many in the electorate with what’s going on in the culture – with kids coming home with the environment and their environmental concerns in their book bags – then the Republican Party needs a response. Speaking as a Republican strategist, right now many Republican governors and a number of local Republican office holders (city council members, mayors, and municipal chairs) are doing more for the environmental concerns of their constituents than you hear on a grander scale nationally or internationally.

That makes some sense because, for many Americans, the “environment” is a proxy for development, overdevelopment, and open space preservation. When people talk about development – we’ve actually teased that out in a state like New Jersey, to find out if voters mean commercial development, residential development, or retail development – we found that commercial development and retail development are looked upon very differently by people, something I would not have thought of unless we had tested it qualitatively in focus groups and one-on-one interviews. It turns out that if you ask them, “Do you care about sprawl, or overdevelopment?” it’s almost an insult; of course, they have some concern. Ask them specifically what they’re concerned about, and you will find that among people who say that they support mass transit, they really mean they think that you should take it. The car is a symbol of freedom and mobility. So if you take mass transportation, there will be less traffic and congestion for me and of course that’s a great idea. And it’s an idea where some people are willing to put their money because mass transit is a fabulous
idea in which they will never partake personally. So something like mass transit is an issue that also needs three or four good questions to be fully understood through polling data.

We also find that residential development is something that must be teased out in a couple of different questions. In the past, people believed that the solution for overdevelopment, residentially, was to build more high-density houses. But there are counties in this country where people just don’t want to hear that. Do you know why? Because they’ve figured out that you’re saving space by creating high-density housing – but then you’re inviting that many more people to sit on the roads, to clog up the highways, to deplete the resources, to be with them on the bike paths and in the parks. They’ve figured out that by mandating that single-family homes be on a larger lot, you gave up a little more property but you can control and plan the people who can actually live in the county. Very curious what’s going on, and it’s nothing that you’ll ever read about in the national newspapers, it’s nothing you’ll ever hear out of a candidate for president’s mouth. Are you kidding? Who’s going to throw money at them for saying that? Yet most people are concerned about environmental issues closer to home.

In my view, many environmentalists really missed a tremendous opportunity over the last two and a half years to lay down a little bit of their pride and ego, and a ton of their self-interest, and get involved in homeland security and international global security. There’s a tremendous role for environmental activists to play in these arenas, since the number one environmental concern for people is drinking water and the number two concern is air quality. This demands a higher level of engagement among so-called “first responders” and those individuals and organizations who can somehow elevate awareness and action in ensuring that our air and water supplies are protected from acts of terrorism.
Second from last on the list of environmental concerns according to polls is global warming. The fact is you had the U.S. Senate voting on the Kyoto Protocol 95-to-0, including John Kerry and Ted Kennedy as part of that 95. Here in Connecticut, Democratic Senators Chris Dodd and Joe Lieberman were a part of the 95. Everybody you can imagine. Strom Thurmond was a part of the 95. Ninety-five to zero. Well if it’s 95 to 0, it doesn’t show it was a winning issue – it shows that it was a lack of priority. People are telling you drinking water and air quality are their top priority. That is truer now after 9/11. Americans are scared about contamination of the air supply, of the food supply, and of the water supply. These are real concerns for people. And yet they often communicate that in a non-environmental fashion.

The environment is also a proxy for compassion – and I don’t say that because it’s a word that the President uses. If you go back to my document in the ’90s, when many Republicans had no idea who George Bush or Karl Rove were, you will see that that word was in there then, too. It’s the whole idea that you can show that you care about something that literally is common and usual. Just showing up and giving some voice and visibility to the environment enhances your credibility as someone who cares about something other than the traditional matrix of issues . . . tax reform, education, campaign finance reform, and Social Security . . . . This is something bigger than that and it really enhances the trust factor if you can say it and mean it. People look at you and they believe that you’re comfortable in your own skin in conveying the message.

We’ve got good examples of local government agencies doing what is right on the environment. I’ll give you a great example, because they’re in the news often these days at the Supreme Court level, but also in the Florida newspapers on a daily basis. In Florida, the South Florida Water Management District represents 16 counties. One of their major tasks is the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Project. It is the largest project of its kind in the entire world. It is a multi-billion dollar project that’s meant to restore the Everglades. It is mandated by Congress. It is a federal and state partnership – the Army Corps of Engineers is involved, the Congress is involved, and the state government of Florida is involved. The list of partners goes on and on, and it’s been through several different ideologically inclined administrations in Florida and the Congress. The project has been able to
reduce phosphorus levels by more than 25 percent more than people had anticipated. That is so significant because what was being demanded was far less than that.

ENVIRONMENT AS A THEME

In the end, I think the environment fits very nicely into what many Americans are looking for now in themes rather than in issues. In describing these broader themes, we refer to it as FAST, the "FAST track" – Fairness, Affordability, Security, Truth in Advertising. These are the four themes that, through tons of research, qualitative and quantitative, we’ve arrived at as being the ones that people care about.

With respect to "fairness" – fairness has replaced equality as a core governing value in this country – you hear far less about “equal” than you do about “fair” – which is being applied to reasonable environmental considerations where property rates concerns are being balanced along with ecosystem concerns. Fairness is also favored in the non-environmental arena in ideas about legal integration, school choice, across-the-board tax relief or the flat tax.

The second theme is “affordability.” That takes into account kitchen-table economic considerations. People often say, “How affordable is it to us?” That also means affordable in terms of time, hassle factor, and (of course) money, for example, the affordability of quality education, alternative education, college education, graduate school education and the affordability of retirement when you choose to. Not just the affordability of saving for a rainy day, but the affordability for providing for a sunny day now – not having to sock away every penny but being able to enjoy your money now. The affordability component of these themes is being applied by more and more local governments and by more and more voters (if not Americans) to their calculation of whether a particular regulation or recommendation makes sense. They are no longer willing to write a blank check to fund something that sounds good or is “for the kids” or is “for the birds” – which is why, I think, you’re seeing a halt to many of what was a very crisp, energetic, muscular passage of multiple pieces of legislative initiatives over the last decade or two decades.

You see, people now say, “When you put a price tag on it” or “You tell me it’s going to Peter, not Paul, and I like Paul better” or “Paul is
my program,” then they take a step back. I think part of that, too, is
that Americans are more sophisticated than they’ve ever been. They’re
stakeholders; they’re part of the ownership class. The majority of
Americans own their own home – and that includes every racial and
ethnic group in this country. That is an amazing thing – it’s the new
American dream personified. You have an increase in home ownership
and those people have a tremendous sensitivity to regulation policy
and environmental concerns. So the affordability touches into con-
cerns of the environment.

The “S” part of the FAST track – security – is certainly the most
prominent and dominant theme in this entire matrix. But you hear so
many people talk about security day in and day out, and they’re
usually talking about the war on terror or the rebuilding of Iraq or
homeland security. Of course it starts with international and
homeland security, but the discussion goes much further. Security to
people is also the security to allow things to stay the way you know
them to be, want them, and expect that they will remain. That’s
security to people. I would call it status quo or “static-ism,” but we like
to say “security” as Americans and it means that we still love change
and revolution, but what we enjoy is our own respective versions of
the status quo. Security allows us to have things that are very placid
and very normal and very expected in a world that is filled with
insecurity and inconsistency.

Security and balance are also very important to the environment.
The fact is that inertia is a very powerful force unless it is overtaken by
friction – and that’s why so many Americans politically will just sort
of shrug their shoulders or flick their wrists and say, “I don’t know” or
“I don’t care” or “Whatever.” As an aside, every time Bob Dole ended a
sentence with “whatever,” when he ran for President in 1996, I’m
thinking, if he can just make that his campaign slogan, he might get
somewhere. Because the rest of the country is saying “Whatever.” But
it just didn’t fly when you had the candidate of the party ending sen-
tences with “Whatever.”

The whole matter of converting the somewhat interested
into the very engaged is a really tough row to hoe on the
environment because it means asking people to do some-
thing about it, to actualize their frustration. And if people feel the way that 69 percent of them report, “very” or “some-
what” satisfied with the environment, it’s difficult enough to get them to run to the ballot box out of fear, frustration, anger, or protest to make a change or ignite a revolution. And it’s very difficult to get people to go to the ballot box when they think something’s going well just to pull the lever as a way of saying “Atta, boy. Keep going with that.”

The final theme is Truth in Advertising. I think the “T” part of these themes that are so important to Americans are all issues of the environment. The truth has really taken a beating on the matter of environmental debate in the last several years. Everybody has very subjective scientific standards and they roll out their own experts and academics to support them empirically. We have shoddy polling numbers and sketchy economic numbers being put out there to scare people.

Americans don’t like being scared right now. They just don’t like it. I would say that to anyone who’s trying to scare them about the war. I would say that about anyone trying to scare them about the environment. We aren’t going to buy it this time because the world around us is depressing enough. We don’t need politicians to tell us, “You have to be ready about this or we could all die tomorrow,” or “Don’t drink that water.” Instead, talk about something that’s speaking to the culture such as bottled water. You pay more for a gallon of bottled water than you do for a gallon of gas, although that could change. (But you could not have told people 15 years ago that you were going to pay money to buy something that you could get for free, like water. And we get it now; it’s just our way as Americans.)

I would say that maybe the greatest evidence that politicians believe that voters don’t care about the environment is that if you just pick up ten different direct-mail pieces, or if you just randomly watch, scan or even peruse 15 TV ads of candidates at any level, you’d be really hard-pressed to find environmental concerns mentioned in the first two or three things that they say. But listen more closely. They may not use the word “environment,” but they are saying “open-space preservation” or “reducing traffic and congestion” or “improving infrastructure
concerns.” Or they are saying, “making it easier for people to live in this county and want to live here” to enhance the quality of life. That’s all environment just said in a different way.

On this matter of how much the environment is being talked about, when I debated former EPA Administrator Browner on National Public Radio, I told her that I was glad that she’s running a 527 now. I think that any of these groups that are quasi-advocacy should be out there saying, “We’re an advocacy group,” therefore “We think George W. Bush should win” or “We think George W. Bush should lose” – whatever it is.

I did ask – and I would ask – why is the environment so conspicuous by its absence in what the Democrats have talked about this year? You get a little bit of nibbling here and there, you get them once in a while standing by a tree, saying “I’m doing something useful,” but not to the extent – never to the extent – that you hear those candidates talking about things like the war, or health care, or Social Security. It is never discussed to that extent. And they all have good pollsters. I know all of their pollsters. They are quality, wonderful professionals at their craft, albeit on the other side of the aisle. But they must be seeing something in their polls, something that dissuades them from talking about the environment.

I actually think it’s a very ripe time if the Republican Party wants to take advantage of the fact that the Democratic Party is taking for granted its primacy of position and credibility on the environment as the party that is trusted most. It would be a very good time for the Republican party to swoop in there and try to pick off some voters and property owners who may be “gettable,” particularly through its governors.

INDEPENDENTS: THE VOTERS TO WATCH

The thing about the environment is that it has the potential to have tri-partisan support. It really is one of those areas – unlike abortion, guns, gay marriage, or even tax reform – where a reasonable common-sense policy about environmental concerns is able to magnetically attract Republicans, Democrats, and Independents.
And those Independents. The Independents are not the tens of thousands of people I’ve interviewed who say, “I’m for the person, not the party.” I politely think to myself, “They’re not even voting. Next?” For years they were people who weren’t registered to vote when you asked them to sign a petition. Those are the people basically complaining about something at the cocktail parties — or the modern equivalent, the cappuccino counters. They’re the ones sitting on their butts at home in a chat room online emailing about everything that’s wrong with the world and Western civilization and all of a sudden they say, “Ooh, boy. It’s Wednesday, November 5. Was the election yesterday?” And they miss it completely.

Today, that’s not as true. There are a vast number of Americans — millions and millions of Americans — who don’t just call themselves Independents because they don’t know much about politics. These are people who have thought carefully about it. These are people who have decided to declare their independence from both political parties and their candidates, who have decided not to pledge their allegiance to either one. Instead, they have even gone to the city registrar or city hall or voter registrar and have either registered as an independent for the first time, or have actually changed a registration to independent or unaffiliated. For years, New Jersey and Massachusetts were the only two states that had a majority of independent or unaffiliated voters. There are now a dozen states that can claim close to a majority if not a plurality of unaffiliated independent voters.

The largest number of independents are young voters. Everybody runs around and says young voters are apathetic and angry and over-educated and underemployed and wearing goatees and on their scooters and sipping lattes. That’s just not true, and you ought to remind them. Because it is a conscientious decision in today’s day and age to go and register as an independent and to mean it. It actually means that you’re withholding judgment. What’s the empirical evidence we have for that?

About 13 to 15 percent of voters across the country are registered independents. That may not sound like a big number but it’s huge. It’s saying that we do have a third party movement in this country — we just don’t realize it. It’s why that 49-
49 nation, as it’s called, is so important. Because it’s not even 49-49. I try to tell people it’s actually 41-41, and the rest are these true independents. Not self-identified – but actualized, that is, having it on the actual voter registration card, and yet still believing in casting a vote. Independents in this country have a real chance in the next five to ten years of converting the environmental issue from a sleeper issue into one to be contended with.

We just have to feel like it appeals to our selfish stakeholding, appeals to the fact that we’re investors now, and appeals to the fact that we’re homeowners. We have to treat the environment as something that has something to do with our kids’ quality of education and public education or to do with the burdens of illegal immigration.

In other words, we have to tie it to something that is already connected to the heartstrings or the angry nerves of independents – either way.

These independents gave John McCain his victory in New Hampshire in 2000. They certainly gave Howard Dean a great start this year online, if not offline. They’re a huge force to be reckoned with. And given their age alone, it’s significant, because they will vote in more elections than anyone else who’s alive. I would argue that the connection between the age of the average registered independent and the cultural changes that I’m talking about with the cartoons, the Jiffy-Lube oil, the adopt-a-highway programs, the plastic or paper grocery bags and Captain Planet – those together mean that the environment (if this group wants) could be an issue such that five to ten years from now you’re not saying that voters don’t care about it – instead you’re asking which voters care about it, and “What does that mean?”
Q & A

Q: Many would say that there’s a problem in the Bush administration’s handling of environmental policies regarding “truth in advertising” (i.e. marketing environmental programs with catchy names that don’t always reflect the integrity of the policies). Do you think that voters care about this phenomenon?
A: That depends on how much they care about the issue. Healthy Forests, Clear Skies, everybody loves it, it’s wonderful stuff, it’s like if you say “Health Care Security.” President Clinton made an announcement about health care security in 1993 and everybody said “Wow.” It then took two months for people to say, “Oh, I meant for someone else. I like mine. I didn’t know it was going to cost that much!” So, people need to know how the issue connects to them in order for them to actually care about it and do any kind of research beyond it. The reason that more people vote on the American Idol finalists than in the presidential elections is because they care more about it. It’s entertaining, they see it on TV, and it’s easy to get on the phone and vote for them. If you want to vote for president, you have to register, you have to think about it weeks before the election to get your ballot if you’re out of state. I use this as an example because you might say that people look past it, but only if they care enough to. Only some will say, “What do you mean by healthy forests?”

Generally speaking, people have a presumptive distrust of anybody at the highest echelon, so for environmentalists who attack Republicans automatically, it’s looking as if no matter what we do, we aren’t going to mollify the environmentalists. There’s not one thing we could possibly do that would make them happy. Do you know how much money the Sierra Club gave the Republicans last year? Zero. That’s not bipartisan support.

Q: Do voters respond negatively to fear? For example, when scientists talk about the implications of global warming, are voters turned off by that message? How would you suggest that we convey that knowledge?
A: You have to put it in non-political terms. You need to try to sell a brand and a message, and you should not market it like a political message, because 50 percent of the country is not participating. If you do that then you can probably reach a fair number of people who otherwise don’t think of themselves as environmentalists. In terms of
fear, there are a lot of people out there who say, “I hate negative advertising.” Well, these are the same people, who when asked if they planned to watch Barbara Walters interview Monica Lewinsky, said, “Oh, no.” But then that program got the highest ratings in history. There are two ways to deliver a message – you either shock the conscience or you warm the heart, and I think that the environment has examples of both.

Q: We’ve talked a lot about swing states and states where the environment might come into play. From your polling work, are there states where that’s the case? If so, how would you advise the candidates about these states?

A: I agree that the environment is a “sleeper” issue. It could make or break the election in certain areas. That’s why it’s important to talk about locality. In 2000, Slade Gordon was running for re-election to the U.S. Senate in Washington State and Maria Cantwell beat him in a very tight race. It turned out that he carried every county except two of them, which were huge counties, and basically he lost it on the environment. The environment was a big issue.

There are certain areas of states where environment can be a key issue, not in whole states, but in parts of states. Everyone talks about blue states and red states, but my argument is that there are blue states that have red blobs and there are red states that have big blue stripes in them, and the trick is to fatten the strips or widen the blobs. You can do that with issues but you’re not going to win on the environment across the board. Environment differs from region to region – that’s why counties are important. In any state that has timber or mining or natural resources, it’s going to be important. In the really tight states like New Mexico, environment will be very important because it’s part of the lifestyle.