



Public Opinion Research & Strategy



PUBLIC OPINION STRATEGIES

TO: Interested Parties
FROM: Lori Weigel, Public Opinion Strategies
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RE: Western Voters Say Congressional Candidates' Stand on Conservation Issues Can Sway Their Vote; Close Connection to Public Lands Translates into "Anger" Over Last Fall's Closed During the Shutdown and Enhanced Protections; Planning and Balance Key Goals for Use of these Lands
DATE: February 13, 2014

The fourth annual Conservation in the West Poll sponsored by Colorado College's State of the Rockies Project demonstrates that candidates' positions on conservation issues can sway voters - either for or against that candidate. In the bipartisan survey of voters in six interior Western states by the research team of Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (D) and Public Opinion Strategies (R), voters are far more likely to show support for candidates who seek to protect natural areas and public lands while proceeding with energy development.

These Western voters are frequent visitors to public lands, who were "annoyed" and "angry" after the government shut-down triggered closure of public lands last fall as the vast majority say it affected the economy of communities in their state. That close connection to public lands may be at the root of Western voters' strong support for public policies that protect public lands, including an intense rejection of the sale of public lands for the purpose of reducing the federal deficit; broad conceptual support for master leasing plans, even after hearing criticisms of it; and a continued desire to ensure that certain areas of value be permanently protected from resource extraction.

Specifically, the survey found that:

- Entering the 2014 election year, Westerners tell us that a candidates' position on conservation issues can sway them - either for or against that candidate. In fact, fewer than one-in-five typically say that a candidate's position would make "no difference" in their vote decision. A number of pro-conservation stands by a candidate are warmly received by voters, with significant pluralities indicating they would be much more likely to vote for a candidate who espouses these views. In addition, voters continue to look for energy development in their states as the following chart indicates:

Candidate Positions
Ranked By % Much More Likely to Vote for that Candidate

Summary of Candidate Positions	% Much More Likely	% Total More Likely
<i>A candidate who wants to promote more use of renewable energy - like wind and solar power</i>	44%	72%
<i>A candidate who wants to reduce government red tape so that there can be more oil and gas development in your state</i>	35%	54%
<i>A candidate who supports enhancing protections for some public lands like national forests</i>	33%	69%
<i>A candidate who wants to continue tax incentives for land owners who willingly agree to keep their land as working farms, forests or in a natural state</i>	32%	68%
<i>A candidate who votes to increase funding for agencies like the U.S. Forest Service</i>	22%	58%

Typically, a position that reached 30 percent more likely or greater is one that can be considered effective. Key swing voter groups – in particular suburban women, young voters, and Latinos – consistently are most impressed by a candidate who takes a pro-conservation stand.

It is worth noting that the greatest partisan divide is over reducing red tape to foster more oil and gas development, as 73 percent of GOP voters, 54 percent of independents and 33 percent of Democrats say they would be more likely to support that candidate – a 40 point partisan divide that exceeds any other issue position.

- **Conversely, voters have a negative reaction to a candidate who advocates for selling off public lands, decreasing funding for natural resource agencies, or votes to stop support for renewable energy.** As the graph on the next page depicts, the most intense reaction is against a candidate who wants to sell public lands in order to help reduce the budget deficit.

Candidate Positions
Ranked By % Much Less Likely to Vote for that Candidate

Summary of Candidate Positions	% Much Less Likely	% Total Less Likely
<i>A candidate who supports selling public lands like national forests to reduce the budget deficit</i>	52%	72%
<i>A candidate who votes to reduce funding for agencies like the U.S. Forest Service</i>	37%	67%
<i>A candidate who voted to stop taxpayer support for solar and wind energy companies</i>	32%	54%

Majorities of virtually all key sub-groups and voters in every state indicate that the sale of public lands would make them less likely to support a candidate for Congress, and the intensity of their response is high as well.

In fact, the vast majority of voters advocate for exactly the opposite – 83 percent say that “funding for national parks, national forests and other public lands should not be cut, as it provides a big return for a small investment.” Voters clearly reject a penny wise but pound foolish approach to public lands.

- **Voters’ strong connection to public lands likely underlies their responses to candidates’ positions on issues that affect these places.** Throughout this year’s survey and previous years’ data, we have consistently seen repeated examples of the strong connection voters in this region have with the outdoors broadly and with public lands specifically. For example:
 - 95 percent in the region say they have visited public lands in the last year, with one-in-five reporting that they have gone 20 or more times;
 - Two-in-five voters regionally are sportsmen (63 percent in Montana and 67 percent in Wyoming) and they are by far the most frequent visitors to public lands with 32 percent saying they have visited 20 or more times in the last year;
 - More than two-thirds (68 percent) would recommend a visiting friend from out of state see something in the outdoors, such as a national park, rather than an attraction in a city or town like a museum or shopping (14 percent);
 - Three-quarters (74 percent) of survey respondents in 2013 told us that public lands “help to attract high quality employers and good jobs” to their state; and
 - 91 percent told us in 2012 and in 2013 that “our national parks, forests, monuments, and wildlife areas are an essential part” of their state’s economy.

The overwhelming majority of voters believe they saw a vivid example of the economic centrality of public lands last fall. Fully 85 percent of Western voters say that “the closing of national parks and public lands to visitors and recreation during the recent government shutdown hurt small businesses and the economy of communities in” their state.



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- **In fact, the closure of public lands last fall left many voters feeling annoyed and angry.** As the following graph illustrates, voters tended to point to negative emotions as best describing how they felt about the closure of public lands that happened as a consequence of the government shutdown.

Emotions Regarding Closure of Public Lands in Rank Order

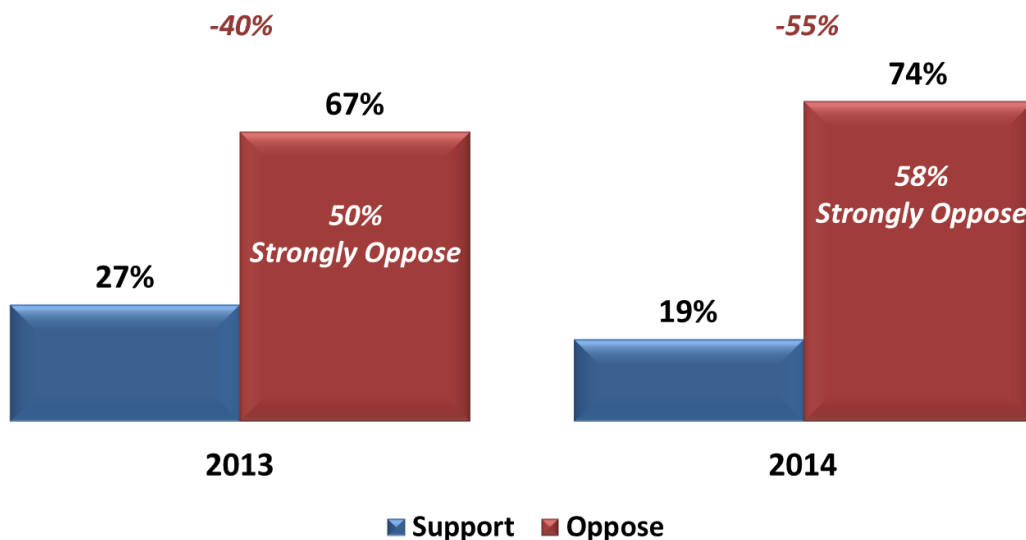
“And when you think about the federal government shutdown last year, which of the following best describes how you felt about the subsequent closing of public lands like national parks, national forests, and hunting and outdoor recreation areas? Were you...”

		%
	Annoyed	29%
	Angry	27%
	Concerned	19%
	Upset	14%
	Indifferent	9%
	Happy	1%

- **Voters’ opposition to the sale of public lands has subsequently gone up in the last year, as three-quarters (74 percent) now reject this idea.** The graph illustrates the increasingly strong opposition this proposal engenders. Notably 64 percent of Republicans, 74 percent of independents, and 85 percent of Democrats oppose this idea.

Views of Sale of Public Lands

“Some Members of Congress have proposed selling off some public lands, such as National Forest land or Bureau of Land Management areas, as a way to help reduce the budget deficit. Would you support or oppose the sale of public lands?”



- **Master Leasing Plans are a positively received concept among voters in every single state, as a way to balance competing uses on BLM lands.** The new tool of MLPs was introduced to voters in the survey with the following brief description:

“The Bureau of Land Management is responsible for balancing oil and gas drilling, fish and wildlife habitat protection, and recreational uses on millions of acres of public lands. In areas where there could be future disagreements over the best use of the land, the agency is using a new tool, called a Master Leasing Plan. Before any oil or gas drilling is considered, the Master Leasing Plan would map out specific areas appropriate for oil and gas drilling, and create protections where needed for wildlife, water and historic sites. Oil and gas companies, local governments, local businesses environmental organizations, and the public will be able to provide input in the design of the plan.”

More than three-in-five in every single state indicates support for this new tool, and support is virtually the same among Republicans (65 percent) as with independents (64 percent) or Democrats (61 percent). Even more impressive is that voters are more likely to side with advocates for MLPs than critics after hearing competing viewpoints:

After Hearing Competing Viewpoints, Voters Side with Supporters of Master Leasing Plans:

Those who support master leasing plans say that some places are appropriate for drilling, but on some public lands drilling could negatively affect our rivers, wildlife, or opportunities for hunting, fishing, and outdoor recreation. These plans will resolve conflicts in advance so that wildlife habitat, air quality and water quality are protected, and leasing can move forward in appropriate areas with fewer delays.

62%

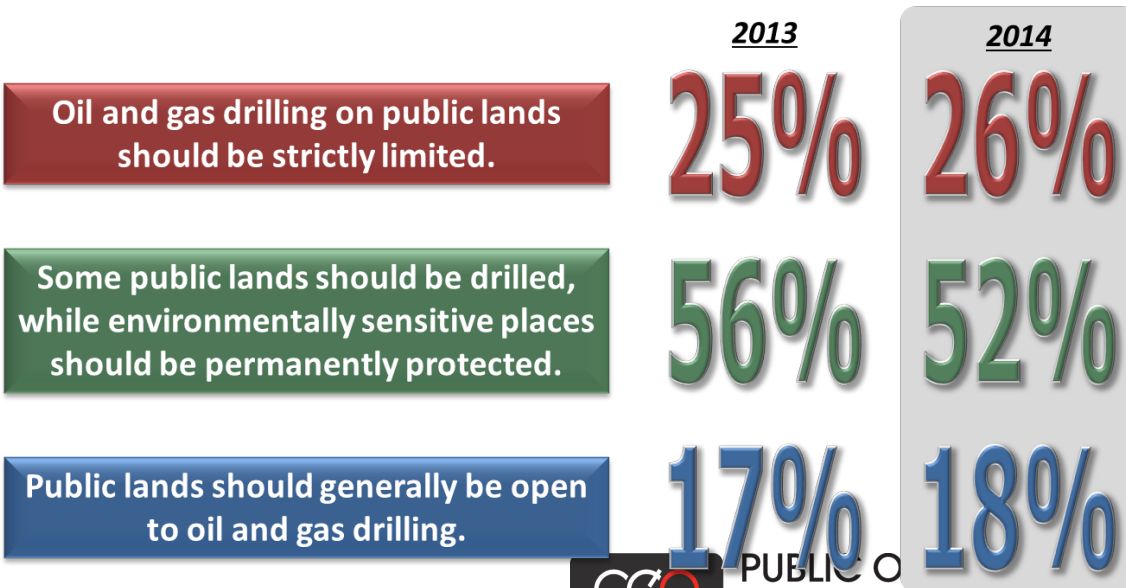
Those who oppose master leasing plans say that the government already takes years planning for whether or not oil and gas drilling can occur in specific sites. Master leasing plans are yet another layer of red tape that will slow down responsible energy production on public lands, making it take even longer for oil and gas companies to develop our country's energy resources.

25%

- **More broadly, the survey clearly indicates that voters continue to believe that voters want to protect natural areas and public lands while proceeding with energy development.** A majority opts for drilling in some places with other places permanently off limits for this type of industrial activity, while one-in-four say drilling should be strictly limited. This is nearly the same as one year ago.

Views of Oil and Gas Development on Public Lands

“The federal government allows oil and gas drilling to take place on public lands, like some national forest land, wildlife refuges, and bureau of land management areas. Which of the following comes closest to your point of view?”



Overall, it is clear that Western voters' strong connection to public lands coupled with the experience of the closures of those lands late last year translates into intense reactions to candidates' positions on conservation issues. Whether it is the sale of public lands which is uniformly a negative for voters, or support for renewable energy policies which voters embrace, voters clearly differentiate in how they view a candidate based on these positions if they are brought to their attention. These views extend to specific policy decisions, with a continued desire to ensure a balanced, planned approach to the various competing uses of public lands.

The complete results by state as well as more in-depth analysis of the survey findings can be viewed at (<http://www.coloradocollege.edu/StateoftheRockies/ConservationintheWest/>).

ⁱ **Methodology:** From January 7-13, 2014, the bi-partisan research team of Public Opinion Strategies (R) and Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (D) completed 2,400 telephone interviews with 400 registered voters in each of 6 states: Arizona, Colorado, Montana, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming. Interviews were conducted on landlines and cell phones and the option for Spanish language interviewing was offered to all qualified respondents. The margin of overall sampling error is + 2.9% at the 95% confidence interval for the total sample; and + 4.9% for each state. The total numbers have been statistically weighted to reflect the true geographic distribution of voters throughout the region. Interviews within each state were distributed proportionally by region and each sample is demographically representative of their electorate. Some percentages may sum to more than 100 percent due to rounding.