

2008

# Public opinion and the introduction of congressional environmental legislation, 1973-2002

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Public Opinion and the Introduction of Congressional Environmental Legislation,

1973-2002

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Masters of Arts  
Department of Sociology  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

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Date of Approval:  
October 15, 2008

Keywords: Environmental Concern, Democracy, Environmental Law, Congressional  
Representation, Congressional Action

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## Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Research Questions	1
Chapter 2: A Review of the Literature	4
Public Opinion	4
Effect of Public Opinion/Democracy Theory	5
Critical Theory's Analysis of Public Opinion	8
Interest Group Theory	11
Congressional Action	13
Environmental Concern	14
Chapter 3: Methodology	16
Chapter 4: Findings	21
Race	22
Class	23
Chapter 5: Discussion	27
Chapter 6: Research Limitations and Implications	33
Bibliography	36
Appendices	39
Appendix 1: Table 1	39
Appendix 2: Table 2	41

## List of Tables

### Table 1

GSS, Public Attitudes Toward Spending on Environmental Policy;  
Correlations Between Percent Who Believe Too Little is Spent on  
Environmental Protection and Number of Environmental Bills  
Proposed in 10 Areas

39

### Table 2

GSS, Public Attitudes Toward Spending on Environmental Policy;  
Correlation Between Percent Who Believe About the Right Amount  
is Spent on Environmental Protection and Number of Environmental  
Proposed in 10 Areas

41

**Public Opinion And The Introduction Of Congressional Environmental Legislation,**

**1973-2002**

**Gene Jarvis**

**ABSTRACT**

This study examines the relationship between public opinion about the environment and the introduction of congressional legislation on environmental issues. Using public opinion data gathered by the General Social Survey from 1977 to 2002, this work examines correlations between how the public views the environment in each and the number of bills introduced in the U.S. House and Senate addressing environmental issues. The findings indicate that there is a correlation between overall concern felt in the public and congressional action on certain aspects of environmental protection. The results also highlight the potentially disturbing finding that the race and economic class of a respondent play a role in the level of correlation between respondents' concern for the environment and congressional action on environmental issues.

## **Chapter 1 Introduction**

When U.S. government officials act, they are often influenced by a variety of factors and interests. These influences may come from the ideas and beliefs of politicians themselves, be exerted by the public whom these officials represent, or be influences from lobbyists, campaign contributors, governmental agencies, or other invested parties. In a democratic government, elected government officials are expected to legislate in a manner that reflects the views of the citizens who elect them and whom they arguably serve. But how reflexive is governmental policy in relation to the views of the citizens it serves? To examine this connection, this work explores the overlap of public opinion and legislative action in one area: environmental law and regulation by the United States Congress. Exploring environmental issues and congressional action is also of particular interest given the importance of this legislation to business. Environmental issues are one area of American politics where individual citizens and corporations are nearly always at odds, so this work may also offer insight to determine if Congress is serving the public's interest or if corporations are able to limit congressional action even in the face of increased public support for environmental protection.

### *Research Questions*

This study seeks to determine whether a rise in public concern for environmental issues correlates with the rate of initial proposal of environmental legislation in Congress. This will be accomplished by using the General Social Survey (GSS), a well-established and respected national survey from the University of Chicago, to measure public concern

and the number of environmental laws passed along with the number of environmental issues introduced in the U. S. House of Representatives and U. S. Senate to measure legislative action. The number of bills introduced was found by searching the database of congressional action provided by the U.S. Governmental Printing Office ([www.gpo.gov](http://www.gpo.gov)).

The passage of environmental laws was not used as a measure of congressional action because of the relatively few numbers of laws passed each year that focus on the environment. The failure of such laws to pass could be attributed to any number of factors including; partisan politics, number of bills introduced in a year, or congressional focus on other issues. Despite the low number of laws passed by Congress regarding environmental issues, Congress does take some action in the form of the introduction of bills designed to protect various aspects of the environment. It is on congressional action in the form of the introduction of these bills that this study will focus.

Further, this work will examine how the opinions about environmental issues of various self-identified racial groups and self-identified social classes are correlated with the proposal of congressional legislation. If the results of this study show that the opinions of Americans, or certain groups of Americans, are not positively correlated with congressional action, it could point to a disturbing and anti-democratic trend in governance. In addition, if the results of this study show that the opinions of certain Americans have a greater correlation with congressional action, it could point to a disturbing bias in how the public is represented in our democracy, with some groups being heard (or reflecting congressional action) more than others. Should this study show that the opinions of all Americans positively correlate with actions taken by Congress,

Americans will have reason to believe that the democratic process is working well, at least in terms of environmental legislation.



## Chapter 2 A Review of the Literature

### *Public Opinion*

In order to discuss the role of public opinion in American politics, it is important to first discuss how this study defines and uses public opinion. For the purpose of this study, public opinion is measured using the General Social Survey. While public opinion research is common in academe as well as the government and private spheres, what has constituted “public opinion” has been interpreted differently. Herbst and Carey offer two images of how public opinion was generated before the mass media age. Susan Herbst (1991) describes the formation of public opinion in the salons and coffeehouses of the 18<sup>th</sup> century stating, “nearly all participants were involved in a reciprocal communication process where they spoke, listened, and spoke again. There was no final word, no final opinion expressed (p. 233).” As Carey (1995) describes, public opinion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century referred to the opinion developed by the public, in public places. People would gather together and discuss events of the time, developing a common understanding of an issues if not an agreed upon opinion of what should be done in response to an issue.

Given our current mass mediated culture, such scenes would be unusual today, and reflecting the change in culture, public opinion has come to be understood differently. In the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, public opinion has come to refer to a statistical average of many individual opinions. Public opinion is most often reported in the media as the results of large-scale polling. Bourdieu (1979) stated that this form of public expression, where pollsters select the questions and possible responses for public

discourse, is a unique characteristic of modernity. Other researchers examining the idea of public opinion in modernity have pointed out that citizens and public life have transformed through factors such as a division of interest, withdrawal from civic engagement, and a distrust of the media, into a populace that, according to Carey (1992), have less influence on policy than in previous generations. If this is the case, and citizens' opinion does not directly affect government, the results of this study should show a Congress that acts relatively independently of expressed public opinion.

Others counter the argument of reduced citizen influence saying that public opinion has been shown to have an effect on political action, some going so far as to say it is a "one-to-one effect," meaning a strong feeling in the public is met by meaningful congressional action on a particular issue (Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson 2002; Erikson, Wright and McIver 1993). Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002) found that when public opinion demanded more fiscal accountability from elected officials and politicians, Republicans responded with the GOP's "contract with America"(Erikson, Wright, and McIver, 1993). Following this line of academic research, this study focuses on the correlation between concern felt in the public as calculated by the GSS national survey and congressional action conceptualized as the number of bills introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate.

#### *Effect of Public Opinion/Democracy Theory*

With the understanding of public opinion detailed above, it is necessary to address the possible importance of the publics' views of an issue. If a positive correlation can be established showing when public concern for the environment increases, Congress passes or considers more environmentally positive legislation, this supports the idea that the

public and their elected representatives are, at least to some extent, concentrating on the same issues. A negative correlation would be found if, when public concern for the environment increases, congressional action does not increase. This could show that members of Congress are either unaware of public support for more congressional action or are unconcerned with public sentiment in the area of environmental protection. The effects of public opinion on various issues have been studied in other academic research utilizing democracy theory.

Previous research debates the effect of public opinion on congressional action. Classic democratic theory holds that central to an elected government is the idea that elected officials represent their constituency by introducing and supporting legislation on issues the public is concerned about. In support of this theory, some researchers have found a strong positive correlation between the views of the public and the actions of the government (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson, 2002; Erikson, Wright, and McIver, 1993). These researchers have found that the government does listen to the public's concerns and acts accordingly.

Others have disagreed; claiming the effect of public opinion is minimal on congressional action in most instances (Domhoff, 1998; 2002; Manza and Cook, 2002 as cited in Burstein, 2006). If the results of this study show a disconnect between public opinion and congressional action in relation to environmental issues, it will lend credence to these critics of classic democratic theory. Other researchers have focused on who specifically holds political power. DeLeon and Naff (2004) found that racial minorities and the economically disadvantaged have less political influence than whites and upper class Americans. Other researchers point out that issues of sample selection and

sampling bias by researchers conducting the polls lead to misleading results making it difficult for elected officials to understand how the public they represent feel about certain issues (Page, 2002; Burstein, 2006).

Central aspects of democracy, according to democratic theory, include broad participation by the public in the democratic process and free-flowing discussion of ideas in the public sphere (Herbst, 1991). Herbst challenges both these fundamental ideas of democratic theory when discussing the public opinion poll. She points out that public opinion polls such as the General Social Survey lack broad participation (Herbst, 1991). Due to the use of statistical tools, pollsters can extrapolate the opinion of the nation from a random sample of the population, therefore most Americans are not asked about or forced to reflect on their opinions by pollsters. Herbst also points out that these surveys do not allow for the free-flowing discussion of ideas. The survey limits the questions the respondents are asked and the responses they can give, therefore perhaps revealing more about researchers, as opposed to citizens. Herbst analyses these limitations using Weber's theory of rationalization, pointing out that polls are organized in a top-down manner by the researchers, therefore encouraging a more structured opinion expression than would be ideal in determining the true feelings of the public. Weber felt that rationalization was leading to more structured forms of expression. In the case of public opinion, more structure determining how the public views an issue leads to less opportunity for people to express their true feelings on a topic. It is beyond the scope of this study to determine how public opinion surveys themselves affect the formation of public opinion as described by Herbst (1991), rather this work will, like previous

academic research, attempt to determine if the perceived “general will” of the people is reflected in the actions of elected officials.

In addition to studies regarding the general correlation of public opinion and government action, some studies have charted the correlation for particular issues. Several researchers have found that the actions of Congress are in direct relation to public opinion in the area of civil rights (Brustein and Monaghan, 1985; Carmines and Stimson, 1989; and Weissberg, 1978) and women’s rights (Costain and Majstorovic, 1994). Using regression and other advanced statistical techniques academic study on these issues has supported that the change in public opinion led to congressional action. This work adds to public opinion research following in the vein of past research on public opinion in U.S. democracy by examining if congressional action is correlated with public concern on the issue of environmental protection. If environmental protection is similar to the issues described above, a shift in public opinion should be positively correlated with action from public officials.

#### *Critical Theory’s Analysis of Public Opinion*

Where democratic theory examines the link between public opinion and legislative action, critical theory questions the meaning of the expression “personal opinion” in a mass society. While there has been a substantial amount of social research done using public opinion data, there are many social theorists who question the independent nature of public opinion. Those researchers feel it is impossible for the public to form an objective opinion in modern society (Swingewood, 2000). Critical theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1972) suggest that we live in a “mass society” in which public opinion is influenced on a societal level through mass media and

the powerful elite, therefore, public opinion is entirely reflective of the elements of the mass society to which individuals are exposed. In this society the autonomous individual disappears and opinion becomes uniform (Swingewood, 2000).

Critical theorists argue that the mass media and powerful elite give the public the information they want them to have. For example, the results of opinion polls are made public when the polls show an issue in the light desired for interested parties. If a poll showed that a large number of people feel that televised news broadcasts are biased, it would be unlikely that the results of that survey would be discussed on televised news broadcasts. Similarly, many polls are only conducted when someone in a position of power and resources commissions the research. Before groups like the Sierra Club and Greenpeace commissioned studies in an attempt to raise awareness on environmental issues, very little work was done on the environment. Researchers looking for a certain outcome could also conduct a poll with questions designed to illicit desired responses. This in turn increases public support for the issues important to those already in a position of power (Lewis, 2001). It is also possible that mass media influences public opinion as a result of covering congressional issues. As Congress takes on an issue, the news media covers the congressional action, and that coverage affects the way an issue is viewed by the public. In this scenario, it is the action taken by the Congress that affects public opinion instead of public opinion affecting the actions of congress. Also a possibility is that the media highlights an issue and then Congress and the public each get interested in it in time.

C. Wright Mills (1956) illustrated that most Americans are coerced into believing they have some level of power in modern society, but in reality it is the power elite that

are in control. He stated, "Most Americans still believed the ebb and flow of public opinion guided political affairs. . . But now we must recognize this description as a set of images out of a fairy tale. . . They are not adequate even as an approximate model of how the American system of power works (1956, p. 300)." Mills (1959) also warns against what he refers to as "abstracted empiricism," empirical work that neglects the social context surrounding it. From Mills' perspective public opinion surveys ask simple, scripted questions at one point in time giving the respondents little time to think about their answers. Research subjects are often asked to give an answer from a short list of possible choices with no chance to elaborate on their feelings. Even if a study has been well-designed and conducted, the results of the study are often then presented by the mass media in a simplified form that does not necessarily represent the complexity of the issue being studied. For instance, a survey study on a complex issue such as abortion could be presented on a news broadcast as simply as "a new study finds a majority of Americans are opposed to abortion." What would likely be missing from the report is information regarding such factors as: specific questions asked, answers provided, time allowed to take survey, whether the survey was taken privately or with a pollster, and the sample used. The fact that the results of survey research can be influenced by so many aspects of the study's design is another aspect of this type of research that critical theorists critique.

Critical theory questions if the polls are measuring what they intend to measure and if the opinions expressed are accurate reflections of the values of the respondents. Despite these concerns voiced by academics, public opinion polling is widely used by politicians, especially in campaign years. Therefore, it stands to reason that however

accurate opinion polls are, politicians view them as valuable tools; and as such, using such a poll in this study should be an effective way to determine if a correlation exists between expressed public concern and congressional action even if it can not be claimed that there is a causal relationship.

### *Interest Group Theory*

Where critical theory questions the validity of the public opinion polls, interest group theory dismisses the idea that Congress is truly concerned with the feelings of the public. Other researchers (see Burstein, 2006) have suggested that public opinion has a more substantial effect on congressional legislation regarding “high profile” issues especially important to the public, while issues of “low visibility” are more likely to be influenced by lobbyists or campaign contributions made by individuals or corporations with a stake in the outcome (Drope and Hansen, 2004; Morton and Cameron, 1992; Wright, 1990). The high profile issues are things that public hears a lot about, such as gay marriage or illegal immigration, but these issues may not be as important to the daily lives of most Americans as the low visibility issues, such as health care or corporate corruption on which public opinion has little effect. It is not to say that high profile issues are completely unimportant or lower profile issues go completely unnoticed, but interest group theorists argue many of the issues that have a large affect on peoples’ lives are affected only minimally by public opinion. These researchers find that politicians may placate their constituents on some issues. However, when lobbyists or campaign contributors have a large stake in the outcome, they have much more influence over elected representatives than voters (Drope and Hansen, 2004; Morton and Cameron, 1992; Wright, 1990).



A foremost researcher in interest group theory is William Domhoff. Domhoff has written several articles and books arguing that the effect of public opinion on governmental action is minimal (1967, 1983). Domhoff found that political action is determined by those he refers to as “income producers” like large corporations and banks rather than individual citizens or even citizens’ groups. He states that the “power elite” are the controllers of governmental agenda (1967, 1990). If Domhoff is correct, results of this study could show that public opinion has little effect on congressional action. If the results of this study show that the upper class respondents have more effect on congressional action, it could illustrate the influence the “power elite” have in our democracy.

A lack of correlation would show that public opinion is being ignored or contradicted in congressional action, and interest group theory could be an explanation of why. While there are no hard and fast rules to determine if an issue is high or low profile, environmental issues have historically only received large amounts of media attention in the wake of environmental disasters. In recent years that trend has been changing with more coverage of environmental issues and more people becoming concerned about the environment, but this study focuses on the years from 1973 – 2002 before the environment became a higher profile issue.

It would be naïve to think that both public opinion and congressional action are not affected by many influences not studied in this work. Could a media event such as the Exxon Valdez oil spill simultaneously spur congressional action and inflame public opinion? Yes. A correlation between these two variables cannot be interpreted to mean that one variable affected or caused the other. The correlation may be a spurious one,

shaped entirely by a third variable such as media coverage. While outside variables cannot be controlled for, their existence does not invalidate the results of studies such as this one. As stated above, this work only seeks to determine if public opinion and congressional action are correlated. While unexamined factors may affect both public opinion and congressional action, the results of this study are valuable to social research in that it is important to know if public opinion and congressional action are correlated regardless of why they might be correlated, and if they are correlated, how strong is the correlation.

### *Congressional Action*

All bills introduced in Congress must go through several steps before they become law. A bill must be drafted and sponsored by a senator or representative, be introduced, go to the appropriate committee or subcommittee to be reported and released to the floor for a full debate. Because the same bill might be sent to committee more than once, or a bill may never make it to the floor for a full debate, it is on the initial introduction of bills that this work will focus. Each bill is introduced once in the House and once in the Senate, but not all bills are introduced in both the House and Senate. If a bill is introduced in both, that shows that it has received more attention, and therefore, for the purposes of this study each introduction will be counted.

### *Environmental Concern*

While previous research on the effects of public opinion on environmental policy has been lacking, there have been several studies done on the demographic characteristics of those who are environmentally concerned. In 1993 the GSS contained a special

section of questions that allowed researchers to draw conclusions about respondents' views of the environment.

Many studies have found that race plays a role in a person's view of the environment, finding that minorities are much less sympathetic to environmental concerns than are whites (Taylor, 1989; Kellert, 1984; Mitchell, 1980). Other research has pointed out that this may only appear to be the case because of a narrow definition of the environment. When many Americans think of the environment, they think of shrinking forests containing endangered species or melting polar ice caps. Many minorities in this country face much different environmental issues in their daily lives. There has been a great deal of academic work establishing that hazardous waste sites, garbage dumps, and many other types of toxic dangers are disproportionately located in poor and minority neighborhoods (Bullard & Wright, 1986; Boer et al., 1997; Zimmerman, 1993). Because of this proximity to environmental hazards, the phrase "environmental protection" could hold very different meanings for minority respondents than their white counterparts.

Given the results of this previous research, this study seeks to determine how the opinions of racial minorities and economically disadvantaged people correlate with congressional action on various aspects of environmental protection. If the results of this study show no correlation between these groups and congressional action on environmental problems, it could support the theorists who argue that these groups' voices are being ignored. On the other hand, if the findings show a correlation between these people's opinions and specific aspects of environmental protection that affect them

more directly, it could be an indication of elected officials addressing issues that minority groups and the economically disadvantaged face in their everyday lives.

The issue of class in relation to environmental concern has received much less attention than race in academic research. Uyeki and Holland (2000) using the result of the 1993 GSS found that lower class individuals were more likely to hold pro-environment attitudes than their upper class counterparts. However, Zhang, Anwar, Jinyang, and Neil (2007) found that people who earned more than \$75,000 per year were more likely to take pro-environmental actions. This study will focus less on how concerned one class of respondents is in relation to other classes, and more on how an increase in concern in each class is correlated with congressional action in the form of the introduction of bills on protecting the environment.

### **Chapter 3 Methodology**

For this work the General Social Survey (GSS) was used to measure public attitudes toward the environment. The GSS has been conducted across the nation annually from 1973 to 1994 and every two years since 1994. It is a national survey out of the University of Chicago that is conducted via phone, lasts approximately 90 minutes, covers a wide range of issues, and collects demographic information from participants. Because of its broad focus and collection of demographic information, it allows for correlation between opinion and demographic characteristics. It is widely used both privately and academically in many fields, especially the social sciences. This research uses 1973 to 2002 survey data, a total of 25 different surveys.

Each GSS survey between 1973 and 2002 has asked Americans how they felt about national spending on improving and protecting the environment. Interviewers asked respondents the following question:

We are faced with many problems in the country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I'm going to name some of these problems, and for each one I'd like you to tell me whether you think we're spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount.

Among the problems named by the interviewer, "Improving and protecting the environment" was the second issue to which participants were asked to respond.

Previous research (Hanley Schlapfer and Spurgeon, 2003) has shown that a person's willingness to spend money is a much stronger indicator of preference or

support for an issue than simply asking if they support an issue. Respondents are more likely to say they support an issue if there is no financial obligation. If they are asked if they are willing to spend money on an issue, that shows a willingness to sacrifice in order to make gains in an area. The willingness to spend money shows a commitment to an issue. Therefore, a person's feelings on spending too much, too little, or the right amount on environmental protection is an appropriate measure of general environmental concern felt by members U.S. society.

It must be pointed out that it may be possible that using this question as a representation of minority opinion could lead to less than ideal data. It is possible that the specific environmental issues minority Americans and Americans of a low social class face are issues that would benefit less from more spending and benefit more from government intervention. If the largest environmental issue faced by a respondent is a toxic waste dump in their neighborhood, it is possible that the respondent might feel that more money would not help the situation, but governmental intervention might be more appropriate. However, there are many types of environmental issues faced by minority and lower class Americans that could be helped by a financial investment made by the government, even on the issue described above. It seems likely that a respondent facing such an issue would understand that even governmental intervention requires a substantial financial investment on the part of the government, and the respondent would most likely answer that they feel more needs to be spent on protecting and improving the environment.

Using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS), crosstabulations were run with this data using the column variable of year asked. This showed the percentage

of people that gave each possible response for each year the question was asked. The number of laws on any issues passed by Congress in a given year is significant, and many of these laws have small items included that deal with certain aspects of environmental protection. However, legislation that contains major protection for the environment is rare. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, since the GSS began collecting data in 1973, there have been only twenty environmental laws passed by Congress that the EPA considers to be “major” environmental protection laws, and from 1990 to the date of this work there have been no major environmental protection laws passed (<http://www.epa.gov/lawsregs/laws/index.html>).

Due to the low number of laws passed each year, this work is examining the number of bills dealing with environmental issues introduced to both congressional bodies in a given year. In order to determine the number of bills debated each year, a search was conducted of the U.S. Government Printing Office website ([gpoaccess.gov](http://gpoaccess.gov)) for each year between 1983 and 2002 for bills containing environmental key words. The database on this site allowed me to search all bills introduced in both the House and Senate for keywords. For each of the results, the GPO provides the number of bills as well as a brief description of the bill with the search term highlighted. This allowed me to verify that the bill was in fact focusing on an environmental issue. For example, when the search term “waste” was entered, several bills containing “waste” as a key word addressed issues such as governmental spending waste or the wasting of manpower in the Department of Justice. Bills such as these were not included in this study.

To find the broad environmental bills the terms “environmental protection” and “pollution” were searched. To find bills relating to narrower environmental issues, a

search was conducted for bills containing the following terms: climate, wildlife, forests, toxic, hazardous, garbage, trash, waste, land conservation, water conservation, renewable energy, energy efficiency, energy conservation. These terms were chosen by entering the broader terms of “environmental protection” and “pollution” into the popular search engine Ask.com and clicking on a link to expand the search. The above terms were all listed as ways to expand the search while keeping on topic. Due to the small number of bills on certain issues and the closely related nature of some of the terms, the following categories of bills were created: climate, wildlife, forests, toxic/hazardous, garbage/trash/waste, land conservation, water conservation, renewable energy/energy efficiency/energy conservation. Bivariate correlations on all data were then compiled in order to determine a positive or negative relationship for each variable in relation to public views on the environment provided by the GSS.

Examining the views of respondents based on race and class will allow me to scrutinize whether congressional action is more in tune with the environmental concerns of citizens based on race and/or class. If the results of this study show that congressional action is more positively correlated with the opinions of white respondents as some researchers (DeLeon and Naff 2004) would suggest, it would be important because in a democracy all citizens are considered equal and therefore their opinions should be considered equal by their representatives. If certain groups of people are being ignored on an issue it would undermine one of the founding concepts of our democracy, that all people are created equal.

In order to examine the correlation of a person’s race on congressional action, the responses to the question on environmental concern were filtered by the race of the



respondent into the categories of White, Black, and Other. These are the only categories used by the GSS to racially identify respondents. This allowed for the examination of correlation between white concern for the environment and the introduction of bills dealing with environmental issues compared with minority concern for the environment and the introduction of bills dealing with environmental issues. Because of the low numbers of respondents classified as “Black” and “Other” these categories were combined into one “Minority” category.

Similarly, filtering the respondents to the question on environmental concern by income controlled for class. The GSS asked respondents to identify themselves by income as upper class, middle class, working class, and lower class. This provided the opportunity to examine if the economic background of those concerned with the environment is correlated with congressional action. With this information it becomes possible to examine whether the opinions of upper class respondents, or what critical theorists might refer to as powerful elites, are correlated with congressional action more positively than the opinions of other groups.

## Chapter 4 Findings

The Pearson correlation showed a significant relationship between the public's views on environmental spending and the number of bills introduced in the House and Senate addressing several environmental issues. As more respondents stated that they were in favor of more government spending on environmental protection, the introduction of bills in the following categories showed a significant positive relationship; wildlife (.632\*)<sup>1</sup>, toxic or hazardous materials (.701\*\*), garbage, trash, or waste (.630\*), overall environmental protection (.597\*), and total environmental laws (.659\*\*). Stated another way, as the public felt more needed to be done to protect the environment, the introduction of bills addressing the above issues was higher.

As the GSS showed more Americans felt the government was spending about the right amount on environmental protection, bills under the same search terms that showed a significant positive relationship when public opinion was in favor of spending more, now showed a significant negative relationship; wildlife (-.708\*\*), toxic or hazardous materials (-.597\*), garbage, trash, or waste (-.643\*\*), overall environmental protection (-.608\*), and total environmental laws (-.673\*\*). So, as the public expressed more satisfaction with what was being done to protect the environment, the introduction of bills dealing with these issues showed a significant decrease. These findings seem to support classic democratic theorists who feel public opinion is a driver of congressional action.

### *Race*

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<sup>1</sup> \* signals significance at the .05 level

\*\* signals significance at the .01 level

With regard to race, the correlation matrix shows significant positive relationships between the number of whites feeling that the government is spending too little on the environment and congressional debate on the topics of wildlife (.620\*), toxic or hazardous materials (.729\*\*), garbage, trash, or waste (.618\*), and environmental protection (.602\*), as well as the total number of laws debated (.668\*\*). So, as white respondents felt more concern about environmental issues, a correlation with increased introduction of legislation on the above issues was found.

As the proportion whites who felt the government was spending about the right amount on environmental protection increased, the results show a negative relationship with the introduction of bills on the topics of toxic or hazardous waste (-.631\*), garbage, trash, or waste (-.643\*), and environmental protection (-.638\*), as well as the number of total laws debated (-.707\*\*). So as whites showed higher levels of satisfaction with governmental spending on environmental issues, a negative correlation was found with the introduction of bills on these issues.

The number of whites who felt the government was spending too much on environmental protection was significantly negatively correlated only with laws introduced on the topic of toxic or hazardous waste (-.669\*\*). This finding seems to suggest that the richest people are seeing their concerns largely ignored by their congressional representatives. This idea will be explored below in the discussion section.

The results for respondents that identify themselves as white reflect the results of the overall population. As more whites felt that more needed to be done to protect the environment, the results show a positive relationship with the number of bills introduced on environmental issues. Interestingly, the views of black respondents and respondents

categorized as other showed no significant correlation with any of the categories of bills introduced. This result seems to lend credence to the social researchers that claim the views of minority Americans are being overlooked. This idea will be elaborated on further in the discussion section of this work.

### *Class*

With regard to economic class, as respondents who identified themselves as lower class felt the government was spending too little on environmental protection, there was a significant positive correlation with the introduction of bills addressing the issues concerning wildlife (.533\*), garbage, trash, or waste (.647\*\*), and environmental protection (.580\*), as well as the total number of laws debated (.728\*\*). At times when the number of respondents identified as lower class felt more needed to be done to protect the environment was higher, the findings show a positive relationship with the number of bills introduced on these issues.

When lower class respondents felt the government was spending about the right amount on protection of the environment, there was a significant negative correlation with the number of bills introduced on issues of pollution (-.514\*) and garbage, trash, or waste (-.524\*), as well as the total number of bills introduced (-.633\*). At times when the number of lower class respondents that stated they were more satisfied with governmental spending on protecting the environment increased, the number of bills introduced in Congress showed a significantly negative relationship.

The results for working class respondents showed that at times when the working class felt the government was spending too little on environmental protection there was a positive correlation with the number of bills introduced on the topics of wildlife (.647\*),

toxic or hazardous materials (.656\*\*), garbage, trash, or waste (.589\*), and environmental protection (.515\*), as well as the total number of bills introduced (.637\*). Again, at times when concern among working class respondents for more environmental protection was high, the number of bills introduced on the above topics showed a positive relationship.

At times when working class respondents felt about the right amount was being spent on environmental protection there was a significantly negative correlation with the introduction of bills on the issues of wildlife (-.767\*\*), toxic or hazardous materials (-.516\*), and garbage, trash, or waste (-.517\*), as well as the total number of bills introduced (-.649\*\*). So as working class respondents felt enough was being spent on protecting the environment, congressional action on environmental legislation was lower. These results will be examined in relation to interest group theory in the discussion section below.

Moving up in income from working class to middle class, at times when the number of respondents identified by the GSS as middle class felt the government was spending too little on protecting and improving the environment was higher, there was significant positive correlation with the introduction of bills on issues of wildlife (.559\*), toxic or hazardous materials (.670\*\*), garbage, trash, or waste (.574\*), and environmental protection (.578\*), as well as the number of total of bills introduced (.584\*). Here we see again that when the number of people who feel that more needs to be done to protect the environment increases, in this case those identified as middle class, more congressional action occurs on these environmental issues.

The number of those in the middle class who felt about the right amount was being spent was significantly negatively correlated with the introduction of bills on issues of wildlife (-.550\*), toxic or hazardous materials (-.556\*), garbage, trash, or waste (.620\*), and environmental protection (-.542\*), as well as the total number of bills introduced (-.549\*). Mirroring the previous results, we see again with the middle class respondents that as the number of people who state that they are more satisfied with what is being done to protect the environment, the amount of legislation introduced in Congress is significantly lower. However, the results from the people identified as upper class break this trend.

The views of those identified themselves as upper class showed a significantly positive relationship with the number of bills being introduced in only one category, toxic or hazardous materials (.551\*), and the number who felt about the right amount was being spent was negatively related (-.561\*) on the same topic. Here we see that when the number of upper class respondents felt more needed to be spent to protect the environment was higher, more bills dealing only with toxic or hazardous materials received congressional attention, and when the number of upper class respondents felt spending on environmental issues was about right, congressional action on this topic was significantly lower. All of the previous economic categories showed significant positive correlation with bills addressing the issues of wildlife, garbage trash or waste, environmental protection, and the total number of bills introduced. Lower, working, and middle class respondents also showed negative correlations with the introduction of bills on the topics of garbage trash or waste as well as the total number of bills introduced.

The facts that the upper class respondents did not share these correlations are surprising results, which will be discussed in the following discussion section.

The overarching theme that emerges from these results shows that for those identified as lower class, working class, and middle class, as the number of people that felt the government should be doing more to protect the environment (as evidenced by their feeling that the government was not spending enough on environmental concerns), the number of bills addressing environmental issues introduced by Congress was positively related. Conversely, when the feeling was that enough was being done to protect the environment (as evidenced by their appraisal that the government was spending enough about the right amount on environmental issues) congressional action slowed on these issues. Again this seems to support classic democratic theorists who feel that public opinion influences congressional action. However, this trend did not hold for the upper class respondents where data yielded only two significant relationships: a positive correlation between too little spending and the introduction of bills dealing with toxic or hazardous materials and a negative correlation between the right amount of spending and the introduction of bills addressing toxic or hazardous materials.

## **Chapter 5 Discussion**

This section will focus on how the results of this study compare with the theories of democracy described in earlier chapters. The significant positive relationship between public support for more government spending to protect the environment and number of environmental bills introduced in Congress seems to support the hypothesis that public opinion does have an effect on legislative action (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson, 2002; Erikson, Wright, and McIver, 1993), at least to the point of introducing new legislation if not to the extent of passing new and/or meaningful laws. At times when the public feels like more needs to be done to protect the environment, Congress responds with the introduction of new bills on environmental issues. Of course, as stated above, this correlation could be the result of factors this study could not control for such as the affect of media influences on a mass society. This limitation will be discussed further below.

It is also worth noting that only four of the ten categories of bills examined showed a significant correlation with public concern. The fact that some of these categories had small average N's might explain the lack of significant findings, but one category where that explanation does not hold is the category of bills addressing pollution. The average N for pollution bills introduced each year was 33, the second highest average for the categories studied. The fact that almost no significant correlations were found in relation to pollution could point to these issues being influenced by factors other than public opinion. Without further study it is only speculation, but it could be that vested interests such as large corporations are exerting political influence to limit



congressional action on this issue. Pollution is one area where the interests of big business are in direct opposition to the public interest. The fact that public opinion is not significantly correlated with congressional action on this topic is quite troubling.

The fact that the number of new significant laws protecting the environment was too small to be statistically useful for this study lends credence to theorists like Domhoff (1967, 1990, 2002), Manza and Cook (2002 as cited in Burstein 2006) and others who feel that Congress acts independently of public opinion. These theorists could use the results of this study to support their assertion that Congress may pay lip service to public opinion, in this case through the introduction of bills, but when the time comes to make meaningful change public opinion holds little or no sway. While the number of bills introduced rises and falls with popular support for environmental spending, the number of major environmental laws that are passed is small enough to be insignificant.

Though major laws are rarely passed, it is interesting to see how race and class influence the topics of congressional action. The fact that whites were the only racial group that showed any significant correlation between their concern for the environment and action on a congressional level could confirm the views of many critical and conflict theorists who feel that the opinions and needs of those outside of the dominant racial group are ignored. This is especially important given that this study specifically examines issues that those working in the environmental justice movement identify as important to minorities such as toxic and hazardous waste and pollution. That congressional action on these issues in particular showed no significant correlation with the feelings of minority respondents supports the argument of those working within the environmental justice movement that the voices of minorities are consistently ignored.

The environmental justice academics might point out that, as discussed above, minority Americans' view the environment in different terms than their white counterparts. Therefore, when they are asked in a survey if they feel the government spends too little, too much, or about the right amount on environmental protection, they might view the question differently, and give an answer based on a different understanding of the question compared to the understanding a white respondent might have from the same question. Respondents that live in an urban environment could have a very different concept of environmental protection than respondents living in a more suburban or rural environment.

It could be argued that elected representatives from largely minority areas might have a better understanding of their constituents' views on environmental issues than a general survey could obtain. It would be interesting to see another researcher use the results of this study to examine how in touch elected representatives are with their constituency in regards to environmental issues.

As stated above, a critic of this study might argue that minority respondents might have a different view of the question asked in relation to money being the appropriate way to help environmental problems found in minority neighborhoods. For this criticism to be fair, one would have to assume that a minority respondent taking the GSS would consider money to be of little value in helping with their specific environmental issue. It would be interesting to see future research focus on how many people feel that money would not be helpful in solving some environmental issues. However, taken at face value, the results of this study seem to indicate that racial minorities hold less political power than their white counterparts, at least on the issue of environmental protection. A

study designed to gain an understanding of how politicians serve their unique constituencies could support these results or qualify them in various ways.

With regard to class, these findings show that it is the working and middle class respondents that showed the most significant correlation between their feelings of concern for environmental issues and the introduction of bills focused on environmental issues. Again, this would seem to confirm the views of scholars who feel that political action is driven to a large extent by public opinion. According to 2003 figures from the U.S. Census Bureau ([http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/income\\_wealth/002484.html](http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/income_wealth/002484.html)), 73.9% of Americans are working or middle class, so elected officials could be trying to respond to the feelings of their constituents.

Conversely, the same counterargument made in regard to race can be applied to the issue of class. The results of this study show an increase in the number of bills introduced on issues the public feels need addressing, but few major laws are passed regardless of public opinion. Other interest group theorists could argue that lobbyist and campaign contributors are ultimately having a larger effect because little significant legislation to protect the environment is being passed despite the desire from the public to see action from their elected officials.

However, as discussed above, many theorists would dismiss the idea of people's changing opinion affecting congressional action, even given these results. Critical theorists could point to the influence of our mass society, where media coverage could be affecting both public opinion and congressional action, or congressional action could be affecting media coverage, which is affecting public opinion. Domhoff (2005) argued that

income producers affect both public opinion and congressional action through public relations departments of large corporations and non-profit organizations whose only purpose is to spread influence. It would be interesting to see the results of this study tested in future research designed to study how individual opinions are formed on the issue of the environment, and how the opinions of elected officials are influenced.

Another interesting result of the statistical analysis was the fact that the respondents who identified themselves as upper class showed a significantly positive relationship with only the introduction of bills introduced on the topic of toxic or hazardous materials. This result seems to strengthen the argument of classic democratic theorists who argue that people are represented equally, and the fact that a relatively small number of wealthy people are not as powerful as the large number of people who are middle class or lower. However, there are a couple of possible reasons that could explain why this study produced these results, yet interest groups theorists such as Domhoff could still be correct. Firstly, it is a statistically small chance that a person Domhoff would refer to as “powerful elite” would be contacted by a GSS researcher, much less take the time to complete a 90-minute telephone interview. There is a good chance nobody that completed the survey is a member of the “power elite.”

Secondly, if the GSS did find power elite to take the survey, and if those people answered the questions honestly and openly, it is possible that the opinions held by these respondents are influenced differently than the average American. It is possible that instead of their opinion being driven by our mass mediated society; they are the people deciding what issues are covered by the mass media news, or they are the people responsible for the congressional agenda. Therefore, instead of their opinions being

influenced by the media or congressional action, the opinions of the power elite come first, and they then influence the media, larger public opinion, or congressional action. If Domhoff's views are correct, it is possible that the opinions of the power elite come first, then systems move to exert influence, and the opinions of power elites have moved on before a general survey could gather the information.

## **Chapter 6 Research Limitations and Implications**

Like all research, this study is not without its limitations, the first limitation being the data and statistical measure. This data allows for the discovery of correlations, but does not provide the opportunity to make claims about causality. It is impossible with this data to determine if public opinion is causing a change in congressional action; it is only possible to see how the two are correlated. It could be that one is affecting the other, or it could be that something else is affecting both. It would be interesting to see future researchers use the results of this study to develop a temporal study that could measure causality.

This data also limits what can be said about change over time. This study focuses on frequencies in one year, then the next, and then the next. It would be of interest to see how a change in opinion one year was related to congressional action in following years.

Future avenues of research on this topic could also focus on comparing the data from this study with the political party affiliation of the representatives involved with bringing environmental issues to the congressional floor, or the political affiliation of the respondents to the survey. Other research could focus on some combination of the two. It would be interesting to know if elected officials are more likely to introduce legislation based on their constituents' (same party affiliation) views. It would also be interesting to know if a congressperson was more or less likely to sponsor environmental legislation if they were up for reelection within a specific time period.

Using the results of this study, it would be interesting to see future research done on why there is such a large difference between the correlation of white Americans' views on the environment and congressional action compared to the correlation of minority Americans' views and congressional action and if that difference can be attributed to a differing understanding of terms and questions used in the survey. This could possibly be accomplished using a more in-depth qualitative study.

While not without its limitations, this study does have important implications. According to the results described above, there is a large disparity between the effect of the opinions held by white Americans on congressional action and the effect of the opinions of minority Americans. Whatever the source of the discrepancy, the fact that such a discrepancy exists is a significant finding, deserving of future research attention.

The second major implication of this research is that these findings do seem consistent with the theory that public opinion does stimulate congressional action, but only action in the form of the introduction of bills, not the passage of new laws. This fact implies that Congress does notice when Americans become concerned about an issue, but the fact that little major legislation comes from the increased number of bills introduced suggests that the introduction of these bills could be just lip service. It will be important for researchers in future studies to use these results to lead to a deeper understanding of the role the views of the public play versus the role of special interests in producing, or more likely limiting, legislation. The results of this study are quite disturbing as they regard the political efficacy of the average American.

This lack of efficacy is an especially important finding given the topic of the environment. Environmental issues are one area of American politics where individual

citizens and corporations are nearly always at odds. The fact that so little major legislation has been passed (20 laws since 1973 and none since 1990) and that citizens are obviously concerned given poll data begs the question of whether, or more realistically how, special interests are thwarting the democratic process.



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**Table 1: GSS, Public Attitudes Toward Spending on Environmental Policy; Correlation between Percent who Believe Too Little Spent on Environmental Protection and Number of Environmental Bills Proposed in 10 Areas, 1977-2002\*\*\***

		Pollution Average N = 33	Climate Average N = 4	Wildlife Average N = 29	Forests Average N = 9	Land Conservation Average N = 5	Toxic Hazardou s Average N = 31	Garbage Trash Average N = 48	Energy Conservatio n Average N = 8	Environment al Protection Average N = 19	Water Conservatio n Average N = 8	Total Bills Avg N = 194
Entire Sample, Too Little Spent Average N = 980	Pearson's R											
		-.050	.345	.632*	.248	.074	.701**	.630*	.234	.016	.597*	.659**
	Sig. #	.859	.209	.012	.373	.793	.004	.012	.402	.955	.019	.008
White, Too Little Spent Average N = 559	Pearson's R											
		-.068	.344	.620*	.411	-.005	.729**	.618*	.327	-.051	.602*	.992**
	Sig. #	.818	.228	.018	.144	.987	.003	.018	.254	.864	.023	.000
Minority, Too Little Spent Average N = 116	Pearson's R											
		-.107	-.002	.400	.066	.255	.178	.298	-.360	-.114	.267	.629*
	Sig. #	.716	.995	.157	.824	.379	.543	.301	.206	.698	.356	.016
Upper Class, Too Little Spent Average N = 30	Pearson' R											
		-.425	.121	.352	.288	-.230	.551*	.346	.251	-.162	.314	.704**
	Sig. #	.114	.668	.199	.298	.410	.033	.206	.366	.563	.255	.003

Middle Class, Too Little Spent Average N = 437	Pearson's R											
		-.067	.242	.559*	.173	.040	.670**	.574*	.117	-.074	.578*	.979**
	Sig. #	.814	.385	.030	.537	.888	.006	.025	.678	.792	.024	.000
Working Class, Too Little Spent Average N = 464	Pearson's R											
		-.066	.435	.647**	.269	.126	.656**	.589*	.329	.114	.515*	.947**
	Sig. #	.816	.105	.009	.332	.654	.008	.021	.231	.687	.049	.000
Lower Class, Too Little Spent Average N = 48	Pearson's R											
		.510	.409	.533*	.230	.338	.342	.647**	.255	.352	.580*	.387
	Sig. #	.052	.130	.041	.410	.218	.212	.009	.359	.198	.023	.154

Table 1 continued

# Two tailed test

\* Correlation is significant at .05 level

\*\* Correlation is significant at .001 level

\*\*\* Number of years included in table is 15. Poll was not conducted every year after 1992

**Table 2: GSS, Public Attitudes Toward Spending on Environmental Policy; Correlation between Percent who Believe About the Right Amount is being Spent on Environmental Protection and Number of Environmental Bills Proposed in 10 Areas, 1977-2002\*\*\***

		Pollution Average N = 33	Climate Average N = 4	Wildlife Average N = 29	Forests Average N = 9	Land Conservation Average N = 5	Toxic Hazardous Average N = 31	Garbage Trash Average N = 48	Energy Conservation Average N = 8	Environment al Protection Average N = 19	Water Conservation Average N = 8	Total bills Avg N = 194
Entire Sample, About Right Being Spent Average N = 680	Pearson's R											
		-.080	-.415	<b>-.708**</b>	-.254	-.060	<b>-.597*</b>	<b>-.643**</b>	-.126	-.089	<b>-.608*</b>	<b>-.927**</b>
	Sig. #	.777	.124	.003	.360	.831	.019	.010	.654	.753	.016	.000
White, About Right Being Spent Average N = 295	Pearson's R											
		-.090	-.418	<b>-.727**</b>	-.458	-.013	<b>-.631*</b>	<b>-.643*</b>	-.213	-.027	<b>-.638*</b>	<b>-.941**</b>
	Sig. #	.760	.137	.003	.100	.964	.016	.013	.464	.927	.014	.000
Minority, About Right Being Spent Average N = 46	Pearson's R											
		.157	-.030	-.403	-.183	-.104	.001	-.185	.237	.061	-.208	-.526
	Sig. #	.593	.918	.153	.530	.724	.998	.527	.415	.836	.474	.054
Upper Class, About Right Being Spent Average N = 11	Pearson's R											
		.364	-.168	-.310	-.247	.233	<b>-.561*</b>	-.298	-.152	.187	-.267	<b>-.650**</b>

	Sig. #	.182	.548	.260	.374	.403	.030	.281	.589	.504	.337	.009
Middle Class, About Right Being Spent Average N = 154	Pearson's R											
		-0.10	-.238	-.550*	-.111	.044	-.556*	-.602*	.050	.079	-.542*	-.893**
	Sig. #	.972	.393	.034	.694	.876	.031	.018	.859	.779	.037	.000
Working Class, About Right Being Spent Average N = 142	Pearson's R											
		-.097	-.546*	-.767**	-.376	-.170	-.516*	-.517*	-.354	-.300	-.509	-.838**
	Sig. #	.731	.035	.001	.168	.545	.049	.049	.195	.277	.052	.000
Lower Class, About Right Being Spent Average N = 16	Pearson's R											
		-.514*	-.448	-.425	-.168	-.347	-.311	-.524*	-.274	-.392	-.437	-.230
	Sig. #	.050	.094	.114	.548	.205	.258	.045	.323	.148	.103	.409

Table 2 continued

# Two tailed test

\* Correlation is significant at .05 level

\*\* Correlation is significant at .001 level

\*\*\* Number of years included in table is 15. Poll was not conducted every year after 1992