

BUILDING A PROGRESSIVE REGULATORY AGENDA

How a better cost-benefit
analysis process can be used
to tackle climate change

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January 2021

Introduction

Despite common political narratives that cast regulations in negative terms — describing them as burdensome red tape or confusing legalese — we find that likely voters are actually quite receptive to more assertive uses of regulations. Specifically, we find that likely voters are receptive to using regulations to limit pollution and tackle climate change.

As part of a January 2021 survey, Data for Progress polled 1,156 likely voters nationally to measure attitudes towards regulations broadly and, more narrowly, how the impacts of regulations are assessed through a unique tool called cost-benefit analysis. The poll gave particular attention to the intersection of regulations and climate change.

These results show that there is broad public support for a progressive climate agenda that relies heavily on regulatory action. They also show that the public disapproves of how the current cost-benefit analysis process is being used to stymie more assertive regulatory action on climate and other environmental issues. These results demonstrate public support for reforming this process to help advance progressive climate policy efforts.

The Biden-Harris administration has already signaled that reforming the cost-benefit analysis process will be one of its top priorities. Among the administration's Day One actions, President Biden issued a memorandum entitled “Modernizing Regulatory Review,” which directs relevant officials to overhaul the practice of cost-benefit analysis to better account for the wide range of benefits that regulations produce. These include protections for future generations and other benefits that are difficult to predict or that cannot be easily converted into dollars-and-cents terms, as required by cost-benefit analysis. In support of this reform effort, the memo cites many policy challenges the United States currently faces, including climate change.

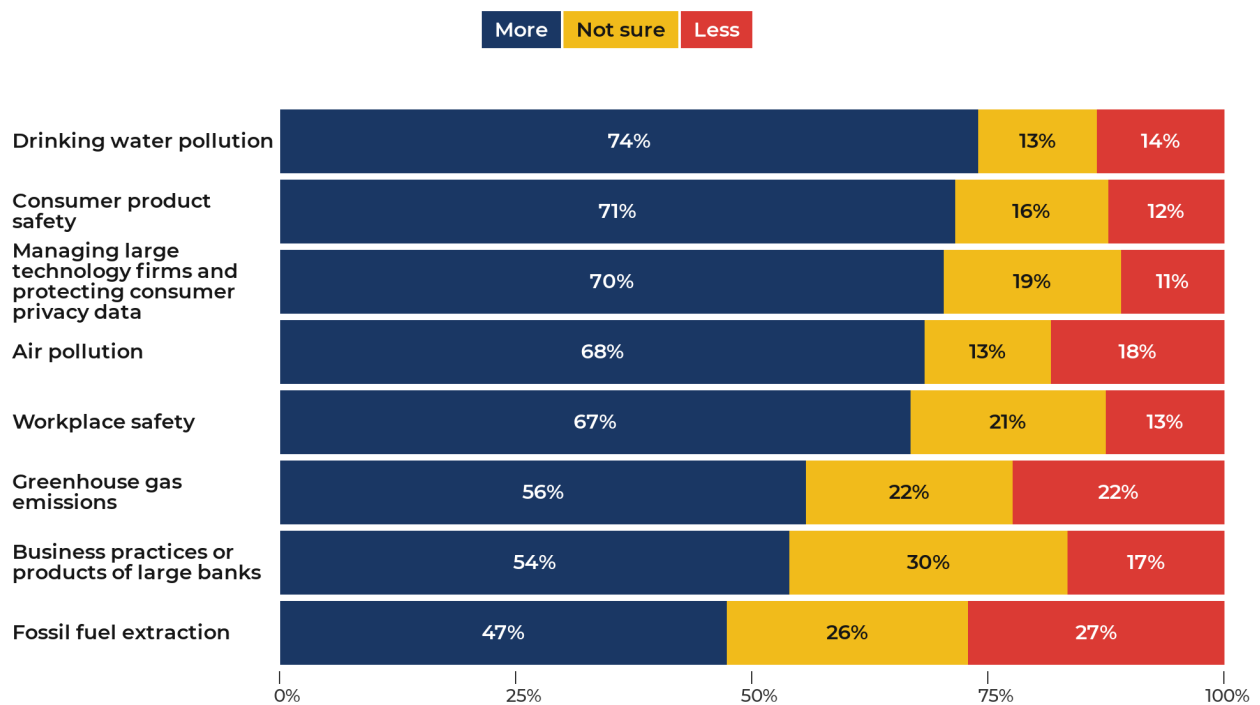
More broadly, the memorandum suggests the Biden-Harris administration intends to move away from a decades old approach in which economists take a leading role in shaping regulations. Such a move would entail a new form of analysis for evaluating regulations — one very different from the current practice of cost-benefit analysis. All in all, the results of Data for Progress' survey suggest the reforms called for in the recent memorandum would enjoy broad support across the political spectrum.

Voters Want More Regulations

Likely voters showed enthusiastic support about the prospect of the government using regulations to limit water and air pollution, protect consumer safety, and ensure the privacy of personal data — a result that contrasts with the conventional wisdom that “regulation” carries negative connotations with the public. For instance, just 14 percent of those polled want less regulation of drinking water pollution, while 74 percent want more regulation. In fact, the number of respondents who answered that they want more regulation of a host of environmental issues was almost always higher than the combined number of respondents who wanted either less regulation or were unsure.

Voters Want More Regulations On A Number Of Issues

Do you think we need more or less regulations for each of the following issues:



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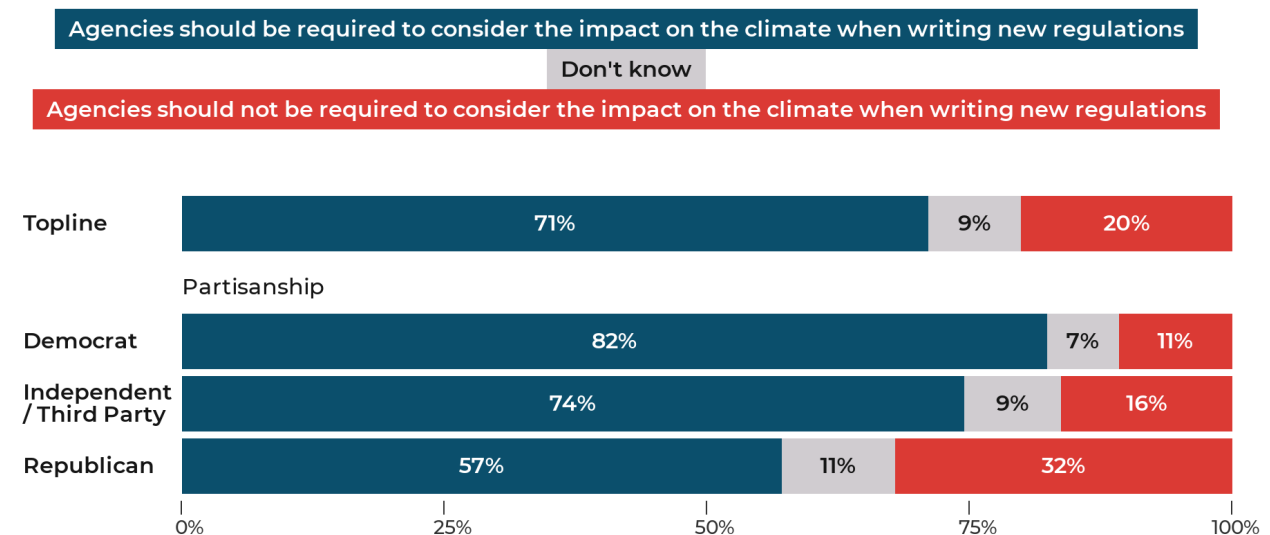
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Voters Want Regulatory Process Reform to Tackle Climate Change

We asked likely voters if they want climate change to be taken into account when regulations are written. By a 51-point margin, likely voters want climate taken into account (71 percent favor considering climate impacts, 20 percent do not favor considering climate impacts). Both a majority of Democrats and Republicans want climate impacts taken into account, by margins of 71-points and 25-points, respectively. Importantly, this is a change the President Joe Biden could enact through executive action without having to deal with Congress.

Voters Back Considerations On Climate When Writing Regulations

Some people are proposing that when new regulations are written, government agencies be required to consider how this rule would impact the climate.
When thinking about this proposal, which statement comes closer to your view, even if neither is exactly right?



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Climate change requires urgent action and likely voters are supportive of expediting the review process of regulations related to climate change. By a 31-point margin, likely voters want the review process sped up. By wide margins, both Democrats and Independents also support this, backing it by a margin of 69-points and 33-points, respectively. Republicans are more divided on this: 48 percent favor leaving the regulatory process unchanged while 38 percent support modifying it.

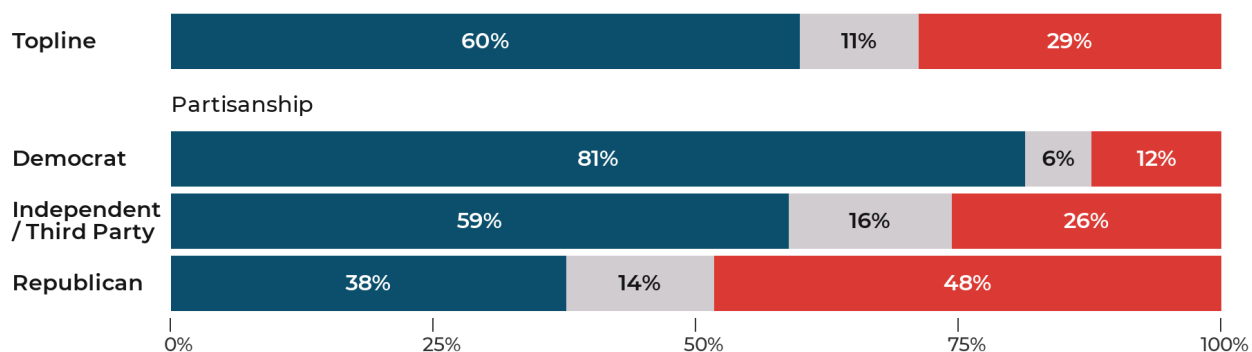
Voters Favor Expediting The Review Process Of New Climate Change Related Regulations

Which statement comes closer to your view, even if neither is exactly right?

The government should speed up the review process of new regulations related to climate change because it's important we take action quickly to protect our environment.

Don't know

We should leave the existing review process of new regulations unchanged because it is working well now and doesn't need fixing.



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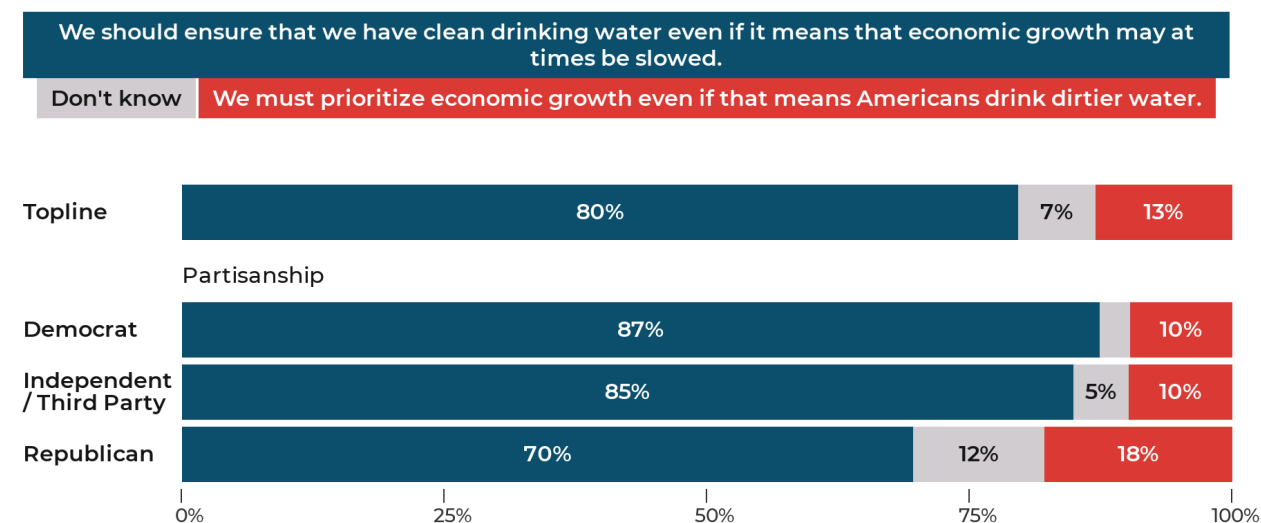
Voters Prioritize the Environment Over Economic Growth

We also posed likely voters with two “extremes,” forcing them to choose between cleaner air and water or economic growth as a priority. We should note that these two priorities are not inherently opposed; for example, investing in renewable energy and environmental protection has numerous economic benefits. Nevertheless, the common misconception that people favor economic growth over protecting the environment is not reflected in our poll. By decisive margins, we find that likely voters want to see a regulatory agenda that prioritizes clean air and water, even at the expense of a slower rate of economic growth.

We observe similar patterns across both air and water regulations. Likely voters see clean water as more important than economic growth by a 67-point margin (80 percent clean water, 13 percent economic growth). These attitudes are generally consistent across partisanship: by a 77-point margin and a 52-point margin, Democrats and Republicans, respectively, both identify clean water as something to be prioritized ahead of economic growth.

Voters Overwhelmingly Favor Prioritizing Clean Drinking Water Over Economic Growth

When thinking about how regulations are written, which statement comes closer to your view, even if neither is exactly right?



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We then asked a similar question, this time focusing squarely on climate change. We find that likely voters favor passing down a livable planet to our children and grandchildren over economic growth by a 57-point margin (73 percent prioritize climate, 16 percent prioritize economic growth). Democrats identify safeguarding the climate as more important than economic growth by a 72-point margin. Republicans, meanwhile, still see climate change as more important than economic growth by a 39-point margin.

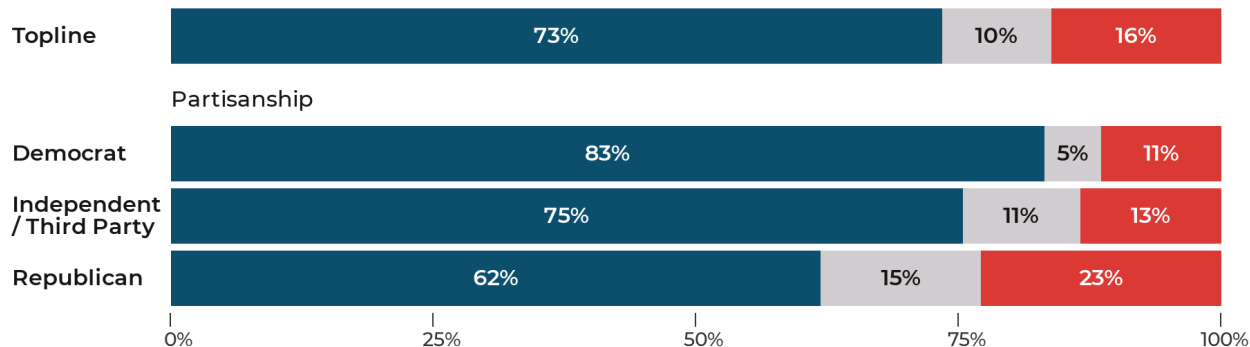
Voters Overwhelmingly Favor Prioritizing Our Planet's Future Over Economic Growth

When thinking about how regulations are written, which statement comes closer to your view, even if neither is exactly right?

We should ensure that we have a planet that we can pass down to our children and grandchildren and take action to fight climate change even if it means that economic growth may be slower at times.

Don't know

We must prioritize economic growth even if that means Americans breathe dirtier air and drink polluted water.



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Towards a Progressive Regulatory Regime

In a similar vein, we asked likely voters a question to gauge general attitudes about the role of regulations in our economy and society. We find that a majority of likely voters (58 percent) believe regulations are important and should be designed to prioritize protecting people's health and safety over economic growth. The belief that safeguarding people's health and wellbeing should come first extends across party lines. By margins of 29-points and 17-points, respectively, Democrats and Republicans see regulations as more important than economic growth.

One way to reorient the regulatory process and make it more amenable to advancing progressive priorities, particularly with regard to climate, is to better account for the benefits new rules would provide future generations. The current practice of cost-benefit analysis is to heavily discount any benefits future generations may derive from regulations, giving the present generation priority. We asked likely voters their opinion on altering this.

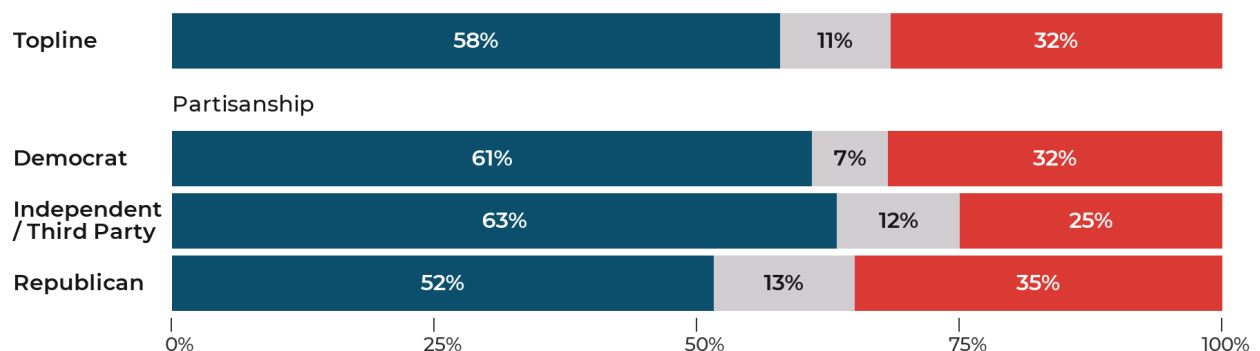
A Majority Of Voters Back Stronger Health and Safety Regulations, Even If It Means Less Economic Growth

When thinking about how regulations are written, which statement comes closer to your view, even if neither is exactly right?

While I don't expect regulations to prevent all harms, I do think we should do the best we can to protect people's health and safety, even if that means we should give up some economic growth. I don't think money can substitute for individual well-being.

Don't know

We must prioritize economic growth and that means accepting that there will be additional deaths or illnesses that might otherwise have been prevented through stronger regulations. If there is additional economic growth by limiting regulations, it would be worth the trade-off.



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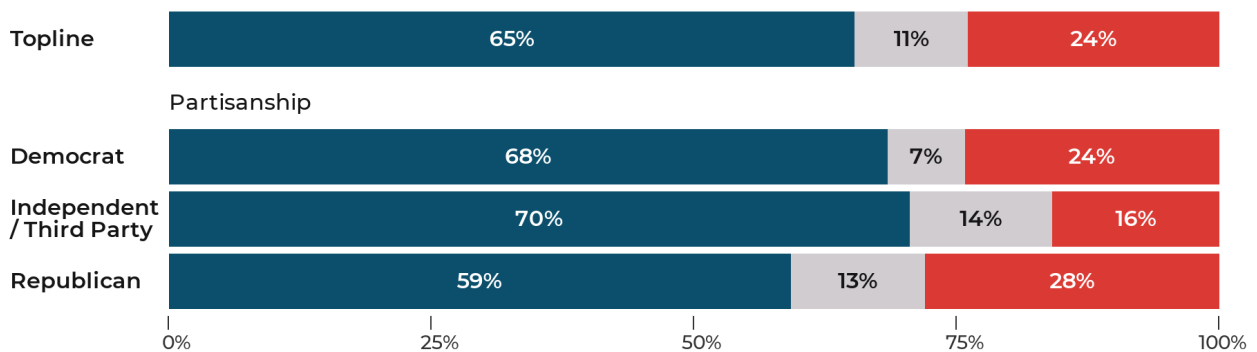
Voters Want Regulations To Equally Benefit Present And Future Generations

When thinking about how the government writes regulations, which statement comes closer to your view, even if neither is exactly right?

Regulators should weigh the value of a regulation's benefits for future generations the same as for present generations. For instance, the value of protecting air and water should be the same for people living now as well as for generations to come.

Don't know

Regulators should place a greater value on benefits that can be delivered right now to people currently alive, and place less value on benefits for future generations.



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We find that likely voters are staunchly opposed to treating impacts on future Americans differently in this way in cost-benefit analyses of regulations. By a 41-percentage-point margin, likely voters want future generations to be assigned the same value as present generations when the costs and benefits of regulations are assessed. This belief is shared by likely voters that identify as Democrats, Independent / Third Party, and Republicans by overwhelming margins — specifically, 44-points, 54-points, and 31-points, respectively.

Conclusion

This polling suggests that likely voters are quite supportive of robust use of regulations to address an array of issues, especially as it pertains to the environment. When it comes to climate change, these results point to a different way politicians and activists can talk about the policy space, one that emphasizes pollution and impacts on future generations.

A majority of the electorate agrees that regulations are a legitimate tool for keeping people safe. With this knowledge, federal officials in the executive branch should operate with bold optimism, working to make full use of the statutory authorities that Congress has provided them to them to keep workers safe, tackle climate change, prevent pollution, and protect future generations.

The Biden-Harris administration has already launched a process to reform long-standing cost-benefit analysis practices. By better accounting for regulatory benefits, these reforms would help strengthen the policy justification for stronger regulations to address a wide variety of issues, including climate change. The results of this polling suggest the public would strongly favor these reforms and the stronger regulations they would contribute to.

Methodology

From January 6 to January 7, 2021, Data for Progress conducted a survey of 1,156 likely voters nationally using web-panel respondents. The sample was weighted to be representative of likely voters by age, gender, education, race, and voting history. The survey was conducted in English. The margin of error is ± 2.9 percentage points.