THE EFFECTS OF PARTISANSHIP ON LEGISLATIVE SUPPORT FOR ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES IN THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between political partisanship and support for environmental policies at the state level in the United States from the years 2017-2022. To do this, the study focused on two policy areas, water and land, for the average proposed, enacted, and failed bills for all 50 states in the timeframe, with the states categorized as Democratic, swing, or Republican based on the 2016 and 2020 elections. While the study did find that Democratic states were more likely to introduce environmental bills than Republican states, the study also found that there was no statistical difference in the enactment rate of environmental bills between Democratic and Republican states. The study also found that there was a significant gap in the number of water bills proposed compared to land bills across all three state categories, as well as a general increase in the introduction of water bills over time. The results

of this paper contribute to general discussions of political polarization and environmental legislation, suggesting an issue with the perceived difference in the importance of environmentalism in different political ideologies. This study also contributes to the larger conversation of the issues of value-based framing in politics and continued polarization within the United States. The findings of this study have a number of significant implications for policymakers, voters, researchers, and the general public in understanding how to best approach partisanship issues in the pursuit of environmental legislation.

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Introduction

Environmental Issues in the United States

Climate change has grown into one of the world's most urgent crises. Evidenced by rising sea levels, habitat loss, and rising greenhouse gas emissions, the environmental issues that the world faces are not an issue for future generations to figure out, but for the current population to resolve (NASA, 2023). Despite consistent and frequent warnings from experts on the dangers of climate change, governments across the world have not done enough to avoid the consequences of their inaction (UNFCCC, 2022). The United States plays no small part in this phenomenon, leading the world in carbon emissions and responsible for 20% of the world's total (Evans, 2021). Continued failures by governments, particularly in the United States, to address such issues could have catastrophic consequences, with many effects able to be seen at even relatively low levels of global warming (Kemp et al., 2022). Increased political polarization in the American government has resulted in a form of political gridlock, with the quantity of environmental legislation decreasing despite being more significant and crucial to the national and global well-being than ever before.

Framework as a Means to Progress

Despite facing an increasingly dire solution for effective and equitable environmental legislation in the United States, little progress has been made particularly at the national level. The few exceptions have primarily been a result in, at least a perception of, differences of policy preferences driven by partisan politics. More specifically, environmental policy has become seen as a partisan issue championed by the Democratic Party and resisted by the Republican Party

despite existing research that suggests the support is much more nuanced. Building upon this prior literature, I argue that the perception of a partisan divide between Republicans and Democrats on environmentally-related issues and policies is largely a result of value-based framing, not a reflection of genuine political attitudes. Specifically, I contend that Republican state legislatures are just as likely to introduce and enact environmental policies as Democratic state legislatures, particularly when the emphasis on partisan polarization in the national context is minimized. Although this would be difficult to see at the federal level, the fifty states with their own independent governments create an ideal context to be able to explore this theory. Long recognized as the "laboratories of democracy," state legislatures have historically been able to achieve more progress in prominent policy making issues while often remaining out of the national, partisan, spotlight. With less value-based framing absent the national attention, I expect the influence of partisan politics to be minimized such that Republican legislatures will be just as likely to create environmental policies as Democratic legislatures. To test this hypothesis, I developed an original dataset consisting of the number of water and land policies that were either failed or enacted in each state by year from 2017-2022 and examined the statistical relationship between party control in a state legislature and number of climate policies.

Significance of this Study

The significance of this study lies in its potential to shed light on a critical aspect of American policymaking: the relationship between partisanship and environmental policy, particularly at the state-level. Understanding this relationship is extremely important in a world that is currently struggling with many critical environmental challenges. By analyzing the influence of political ideologies and party affiliation on environmental decision-making, this

research can inform policymakers, scholars, and the general public about the drivers of environmental policy outcomes. Furthermore, the findings can serve as a basis for promoting cross-party collaboration, potentially leading to more effective and sustainable environmental policies that transcend partisan boundaries. Because this study is centered on the non-biased framing of environmental issues as a measure of environmental behaviors regardless of partisanship, it has the potential to inform alternative strategies to bolster bipartisan policy efforts while also offering insight into the current status of environmental legislation for several states.

Literature Review

Partisanship and the Environment: A Contextual Construct

There is a growing recognition among the United States public, legislators, and researchers regarding the increasing importance of understanding, advocating for, and educating on environmental policies. This trend is evidenced by a notable shift in public sentiment, with Americans increasingly prioritizing environmental protection and climate change mitigation (Tyson & Kennedy, 2020). Moreover, on a global scale, there has been a noticeable redirection of politicians' focus towards environmental policies and legislative initiatives, as highlighted by the substantial increase in environmental laws enacted since 1972, according to the United Nations' global assessment of environmental rule of law (UN Environment Programme, 2019). However, despite heightened public and political interest in the environment, polarization on the topic has also reached unprecedented levels (Fowler & Kettler, 2021). This polarization, coupled with the disparity between expressed concerns and actual actions, has spurred numerous studies

aimed at understanding the underlying dynamics driving environmental legislation. These studies often fall into one of three categories, each with varying levels of popularity among scholars and public perception. The first theory posits that Democrats exhibit greater environmental consciousness than their Republican counterparts, supported by both attitudes and the frequency of environmental legislation proposed. Conversely, a competing theory suggests that there is no correlation between party affiliation and tangible results in environmental policy. The theory that this study aligns with, however, attributes the perceived partisan perception of environmental issues to polarization and the framing of environmentalism.

Theory 1: Democrats as the Party for Environmentalists

The prevailing theory, widely accepted and popular among researchers, asserts that Democrats demonstrate greater environmental consciousness compared to Republicans. This trend is evident in measures such as attitudes towards the environment and the frequency of proposed environmental legislation. Despite growing concern over the state of the environment and perceived federal inaction, citizen unease regarding environmental protection has surged, now rivaling the public's prioritization of the economy (Pew Research Center, 2020). Notably, Democrats are significantly more likely than Republicans to consider addressing climate change a top priority, with a notable disparity between the two parties (Kennedy & Johnson, 2020).

This Democrat bias extends beyond levels of concern to partisan attitudes towards environmental policies, as observed in assessments like the National Environmental Scorecard conducted by the League of Conservation Voters. This comprehensive evaluation, spanning several decades, scores members of Congress based on their votes on key environmental issues. A long-term analysis of these scores reveals a consistent Democrat-Republican split since the

early 1990s (League of Conservation Voters, 2012; Yoest, 2018). Moreover, this anti-environment trend among Republicans is not confined to voting behavior but also extends to the enforcement of environmental regulations, budget prioritization, and overall attitudes towards the Environmental Movement (Dunlap et al., 2001). Despite the widespread acceptance of this theory, it is not universally endorsed, and dissenting perspectives exist within the academic community.

Theory 2: Nuances in Environmental Partisanship Research

Another theory on environmental partisanship challenges the notion of a Democrat bias perpetuated by past research methodologies. This theory suggests that while some studies consistently find a Democrat-leaning trend in environmental attitudes and behavior, alternative measurements often reveal minimal to no correlation between party affiliation and actions. Self-reported surveys of the American public, for instance, demonstrate a significant gap between stated environmental concerns and actual behavior, indicating a potential "all bark and no bite" phenomenon among liberals (Bravo & Farjam, 2023). Furthermore, doubts persist regarding the depth of commitment among Liberal Democrats to environmental sustainability, particularly evident in their local government environmental records (Burall, 2007).

Additionally, this theory highlights the presence of confounding variables that may skew study outcomes. Nuanced research identifies variations in environmental attitudes based on government infrastructure relations, demographic factors, and ideology preferences. For instance, certain environmental policy issues vary depending on the level of government handling them, rather than solely along party lines (Fowler & Kettler, 2021). Moreover, within the Republican party, variations in attitudes are observed based on age, gender, and geographical

location, with younger generations, women, and coastal residents exhibiting higher levels of environmental concern (Funk & Hefferon, 2019). The strength of one's party affiliation and alignment with Republican ideology also play significant roles, with moderate or liberal Republicans expressing greater dissatisfaction with federal efforts to address climate change compared to their conservative counterparts (Kennedy & Johnson, 2020). These nuanced studies provide a different perspective on environmental partisanship in the United States, suggesting the existence of a pathway toward bipartisan environmental legislation.

Theory 3: The Problem with Value-Based Framing

The two prevailing theories on environmental partisanship in the United States diverge significantly in their perspectives. The first theory contends that Democrats are inherently aligned with environmentalism, supported by evidence of increased Democratic concern and legislative action on environmental issues. In contrast, the second theory argues that such findings may be influenced by confounding variables, and there may be no inherent correlation between party affiliation and environmental behavior. This study operates under the premise that the framing of environmental issues has overemphasized their association with the Democratic Party while downplaying their significance within Republican ideology. This framing has fostered a public perception that Republicans are opposed to positive environmental legislation, hindering bipartisan solutions in the policy area.

Research suggests that the widening gap between Republicans and Democrats on environmental issues may be attributed to changes in voting patterns rather than shifts in attitudes. Historically, environmental issues received bipartisan support, but a negative correlation emerged between environmental legislation support and Republican-controlled

government, leading to a politicization of the environment (Gershtenson et al., 2006). This polarization has been exacerbated by the influence of interest groups, with environmental interest groups aligning predominantly with the Democratic Party, further deepening the partisan divide (Fowler & Kettler, 2021). However, historical analysis indicates that when negative and expressive partisanship is low, climate policy support is similar for both parties (Mayer and Smith, 2023).

Many current studies on environmental behaviors and attitudes rely on similar measurements, such as survey questions on climate change or votes for renewable energy proposals. These measurements may be biased toward leftist ideologies, leading to a misrepresentation of environmental support among political parties. Research suggests that conservative opposition to environmental agendas may stem from social identity motivations rather than ideological differences, highlighting the importance of reframing how environmental support is perceived (Wolsko, 2017). Thus, the issue may not lie in the party's support for environmentalism but rather in how that support is framed and interpreted.

Methodology

Data Collection

This paper explores the potential relationship between environmental policy and partisanship in the United States. To study this relationship, I conducted an inductive content analysis of environment and natural resource bills introduced in legislative sessions from 2017-2022 for all 50 states. The Environment and Natural Resources State Bill Tracking Database Archive from the National Conference of State Legislatures was used to extract the data for this

study, an organization that "...tracks environment and natural resources bills that have been introduced in the 50 states, territories and Washington, D.C. Environment and natural resources legislation broadly addresses air quality, disaster mitigation, environmental cleanup, land, wildlife, water, waste and recycling" (Environment and Natural Resources State Bill Tracking Database Archive). I used two search terms to extract a sample size from the database to test the hypothesis: water and land. The National Conference of State Legislatures does not provide a definition for water but does provide a definition for what bills are considered land as defined as "Legislation related to the use and management of land…" (Environment and Natural Resources State Bill Tracking Database Archive). To compile the dataset, I counted the total number of bills proposed in each of the 50 states for each year and noted the status of the legislation, particularly whether the bill was enacted or failed. The database has options for further filtration beyond enacted and failed; however, for the purpose of this research, any legislation status beyond of the status of passed or failed was simply included within the total number of bills proposed. Each of these three statuses could signal different patterns in the results which warrants their separation in the dataset – notably, states are able to propose an infinite number of policies with no guarantee of passing any, but proposing legislation does not necessarily end in failure either.

These policy areas of water and land were chosen based on two of the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): "Goal 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all" and "Goal 15: Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss" (United Nations, n.d.). These two

goals were selected due to their relevance to the regions within the United States across geographic or cultural barriers as well as the recent statement from the White House that "…the United States and leaders… to recommit to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs" (The White House, 2023). This national commitment to these goals informs agenda-setting prioritization within the states, verifying the validity of these two policy areas as variables in this study. For the purpose of this research, the terms 'water' and 'land' were also chosen due to the lack of political context or bias in regards to policy analysis, as they are not politically charged.

I also categorized each state separately by partisan status. To code a state as Democrat, swing, or Republican, I utilized the 2016 and 2020 presidential election results by state, as reported by The New York Times. For each state, a majority vote for the Republican candidate was coded as 2, while a majority vote for the Democrat candidate was coded as 1. The sum of these two numbers was then used for the coding of the party identification of the state, with a score of 2 representing a Democrat state, a score of 3 representing a swing state, and a score of 4 representing a Republican state.

Analysis

In order to analyze the dataset, I first sorted the states by party identification, then calculated the sum for each variable (water total, water enacted, water failed, land total, land enacted, land failed) as well as an average. From the average, I created a set of graphs to allow for a visual comparison of the data. The averages were used to account for the varying sample sizes of the three state categories. Additionally, I conducted a series of statistical tests utilizing ANOVA and t-tests.

Results

As a reminder, to examine the relationship between political partisanship and environmental support, I analyzed the data of water and land bills proposed in all 50 states within the United States from the years 2017-2022. These states were categorized as Democrat, swing, or Republican based on their voting patterns in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. An analysis of the data resulted in several notable patterns. However, an important observation of the data to note is that for the year 2017, there were no proposed water or land bills for *any* of the 50 states. Thus, in the subsequent analysis of the data, the 2017 data was removed from the data as it was an outlier and not indicative of the overall patterns of policymaking in the remainder of the timeframe.

As shown in Figures 1-5, Democratic states on average introduced a higher number of water and land bills each year than the Republican states within the same time period. Democratic states proposed an average of 13.3 water bills per year, whereas Republicans proposed an average of 5.62 per year. A similar trend was seen for proposed land bills, with Democratic states proposing an average of 4.19 bills and Republican states proposing an average of 0.92 per year. As for swing states, they fell into the middle of the data with an average of 11.72 proposed water bills per year and 2.4 proposed land bills per year. This trend was consistent for the entirety of the timeframe of the dataset, with the largest partisan divide in 2021 with an average of 15.95 water bills for Democratic states and 8.84 for Republican states. The difference between states by political party in the number of policies proposed is statistically significant for both types of policy as well. Democratic states were statistically more likely to

propose water policies than Republican states ($F = 14.56$, $p < 0.001$), as well as propose the most land policies ($F = 11.36$, $p < 0.001$).

In general, there was an overall increase in the total number of proposed water bills for all states, however the number of enacted water bills did not show any consistent trend of increasing or decreasing across the five year span. As for land bills, there less of a stable increase of proposed bills, with the highest numbers proposed in 2018 and 2020, showing no positive or negative trend. Relative to water policies, legislatures were much less likely to enact land policies with the average never surpassing 1.15 bills per year. The failure rates of water and land bills were relatively low and stable compared to the other variables within the study, with averages of failed water bills having in an range of 0.36 to 1.58 and 0 to 0.54 for land bills, implying an overall low failure rate for bills in both policy areas. There was also a trend in election years, with higher numbers of bills being proposed in 2018 and 2020 then in non-election years.

In terms of policy enactment, Democratic states enacted slightly more water and land bills of the ones proposed per year than the Republican states. Democratic states had an average of 2.95 water bills per year and an average of 2.03 water bills per year for Republican states. Indeed, there was no statistical difference between states by partisanship in the number of water bills pass a year ($F = 1.91$, $p = 0.15$). The same was true for enacted land policies with an average of water bills per year enacted by Democratic states at 0.56 and 0.29 for Republican states. There was again no difference between states by party in how many land policies were enacted ($F = 2.40$, $p = .09$).

Discussion

Hypothesis-Specific

The findings of this study contribute to the overall conversation of the relationship between political partisanship and support for environmental policies and serve as the basis for several significant implications for the real-world application of the discussions within this paper. Through the examination of support of water and land policies at a state-level from 2017-2022 based on political partisanship, we can better understand not only the need for certain policy recommendations, but also for the more general applications of such implications for how environmental policies are viewed in regard to partisanship efforts.

One of the most notable trends of the results in regard to the hypothesis was that Republican states are just as likely to introduce and enact environmental policies as Democratic states. From the results of the study, it was found that on average, Democratic states propose more land and water bills on average per year compared to the Republican states within the same timeframe. This trend, while not supporting this initial hypothesis of this paper, does go to support the more conventional and popular literature on the subject, that Democrats are more proactive in their support for environmental policies than their Republican counterparts (Yoest, 2018). Such a divide of proposal rates between the parties points to a few potential explanations for such a trend. One is that the Democratic states are making efforts to signal to their voters what policies are most significant to them as a reflection of the policy priorities of their voter base. Such a practice also serves to benefit candidates if they choose to run for reelection, in that they are able to incorporate higher rates of bill proposals into their stated policy agendas and to convince voters to support their run for office.

It can also be indicative of a political strategy of the party, in a version of what is colloquially referred to as ‘throwing spaghetti at the wall and seeing what sticks’. This is to mean in a political context, the Democratic states are proposing a greater number of bills in an effort to push something through, rather than being more intentional or careful with the policies they choose. In turn, the Republican states could potentially have higher standards for what environmental bills they propose, whether it be a party-wide technique for all policies or more refined to the policy area due to the perceived divide between party identification and environmental support. A third possible explanation for such a trend is that in proposing an environmental bill, it can streamline the process for that bill being added on or combined with another bill of its type that is more likely to be passed in the legislature.

While the original hypothesis was in part not supported by the rates of introduction of environmental bills, the secondary portion of the hypothesis, in regard to the enactment rates of environmental policies, was supported by the results of the study. Democratic states did enact slightly higher averages of water and land bills per year but were found to be not statistically significant in the results of an ANOVA test. This finding implies that there is a disconnect between the perceived support for environmental policies and the actionable measures within state legislatures. The aforementioned finding of a notable difference in the number of introduced bills helps provide context for the enactment rates and suggests that there is perhaps a varied approach in strategy between the parties. Such a margin may be due to Republicans being much more selective in their environmental policies and not depending on voter signaling for environmental policies at least. This finding also, as previously stated, supports the original hypothesis and leads to several important implications. One is that the perceived gap that is

prevalent in much of the literature might be perceived as bias towards Democrats more in that they are standing by the ideology of environmentalism. This is to say that the bias is only perceived, as the actions of the parties seem to differ much less than initially believed. Furthermore, this also indicates that there are varied agenda setting patterns within the parties, and that Democratic states are more willing to propose environmental bills, whether that be to the common perception of environmental bills or due to another factor.

Although the hypothesis does point to similar enactment rates, this paper is not making the argument that there is no value and significance in Democratic states proposing higher rates of legislation than their Republican counterparts, as that is a gap that does need to be addressed and kept in mind. Overall, these findings point to a need for continued focus on the actual framework of studies and discussions of the relationship between environmental policies and partisanship. The initial biases that were presented in the literature are ultimately harmful in the pursuit of effective, bipartisan legislation as it assigns a party identification to environmental bills, which further polarizes the issue and often leads to gridlock or the demonization of the issue priorities of the other side. does leave much more room for interpretation and a need for the reevaluation of how the issue is viewed by voters and policymakers alike.

General Observations

Outside of the initial analysis through the lens of the hypothesis and argument of the paper, there were several other interesting results from the dataset. There was a significant discrepancy in the numbers of bills introduced and enacted or failed for all independent variables in the dataset. This is likely due to the complex process of the passing of a bill compared to the relatively simpler proposal and introduction process in the state legislature. There are also few

downsides politically for representatives to pursue the introduction of bills, whereas there are potential benefits as listed and theorized earlier in the paper. Another implication is that there seems to be relatively low failure rates, indicating general bipartisan support for such bills when they are proposed.

Another interesting trend in the data is that there were far fewer land policies than water policies in the dataset. While there is no clear reasoning for the trend, there is a possible explanation on the difference in complexity of land and water policies. For the most part, water in the United States is a federal or state-level issue, with the private ownership of water usually only extending as far as small lakes and ponds. More significant bodies of water are operated and under the jurisdiction of larger bodies of government, meaning that there is much less consensus and stakeholders needed in the changing of bills. The same cannot be said for land bills, which is spread across tens of millions of people in the United States, creating many potential roadblocks and obstacles for state-level land policies.

As for temporal-based patterns in the data, there were two significant findings. First, there seems to be an increase in introduced legislation during election years. Such a pattern suggests a potential desire for the sitting representatives to push out as much of their preferred legislation as possible, especially if there are concerns over their party losing the majority of the state's legislature in the upcoming election. A major push for legislation when nearing an election could also be indicative of the aforementioned voter signaling strategy, as politicians attempt to cushion their accolades while in office. Another more unexpected and relatively unexplainable occurrence was the lack of data for 2017. Despite further research into the subject, no major conclusions for such an occurrence were found.

Summary and Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to explore the potential effect of political partisanship on support for environmental policies. To study this, an analysis of two policy areas, water and land, were conducted over all 50 states. The states were coded for party identification based on the 2016 and 2020 election in order to measure partisanship. An analysis of the dataset found several notable findings, both in relation to the hypothesis as well as more general observations. First was that Democratic states were found to introduce higher rates of both water and land bills than Republican states on average each year, with swing states lying in the middle of the two categories. Such a finding has a few possible explanations, with the most probably being the Democratic states using a strategy of virtue signaling through the increased proposals of bills without much concern for whether the bills passed or not. Despite the sizable margin between the party identifications with proposal rates, the enactment rates were similar, ultimately supporting the hypothesis of the paper and indicating a larger issue within the politicalization of the environment. Such a misconception of the parties and their attitude towards environmental legislation is harmful to the pursuit of bipartisan and effective policies, which are needed now more than ever in the face of the ongoing issues of climate change.

While there are several important implications of the data within this paper, there are also several limitations of the study to be acknowledged. One limitation is that of the dataset, as the methodology provided within the National Conference of State Legislatures database is limited and does not provide much context for what constitutes a water or land policy. Another limitation of the methodology is that the counts of the data were done by myself as the researcher, leaving room for human error despite the steps taken to limit miscounts. Regardless,

any miscounting would most likely be statistically insignificant due to the larger sample size, but is still important to note. The research is also potentially limited in regard to the measurements of partisanship, as presidential elections are only one way to determine party identification and a varied measurement might change the coding of certain states.

As for future research there are several avenues for which this study could be expanded upon. One suggested study would be to evaluate whether the trend of this study holds true in other policy areas, across other timeframes, and in other levels of government. This study could also be expanded to different measurements of partisanship and environmental support to eliminate the previously stated limitations of the current methodology of the study. Another suggestion for future research would be to further examine the more general trends of the study (the gap in land and water bills, the divide of proposal rates, etc.). In general, the findings and implications of this study not only contribute to the general discussions on the topic, but indicate a need for further research on how value-based framing can lead to limiting views and perceptions of environmental legislation.

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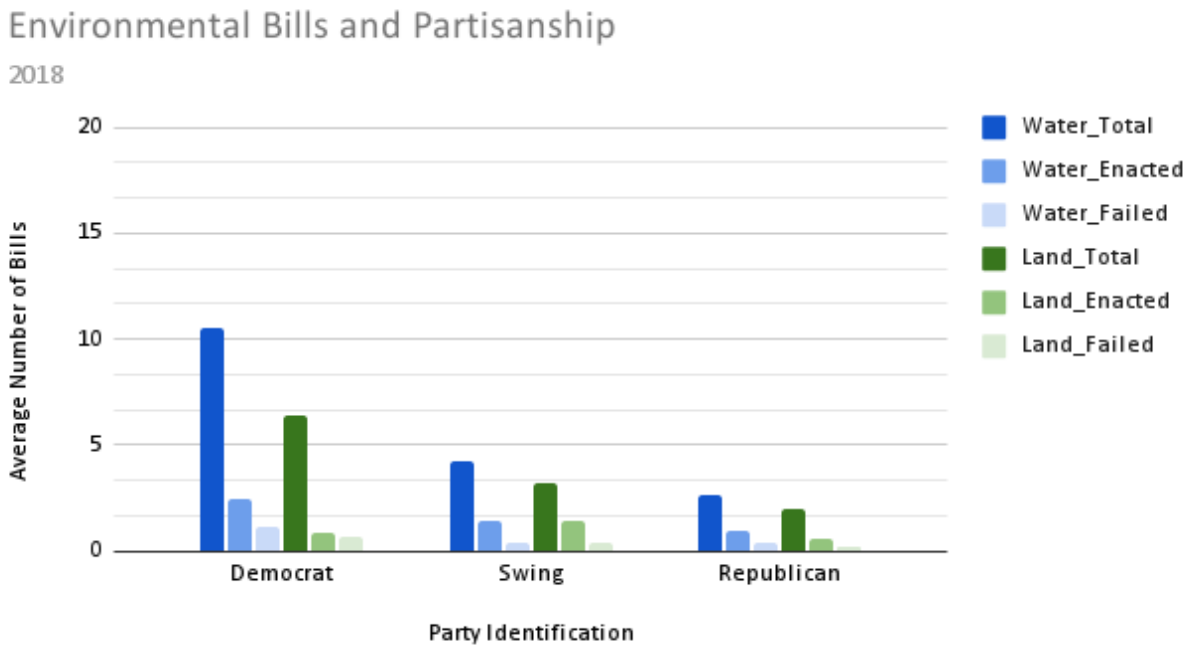
Figure 1

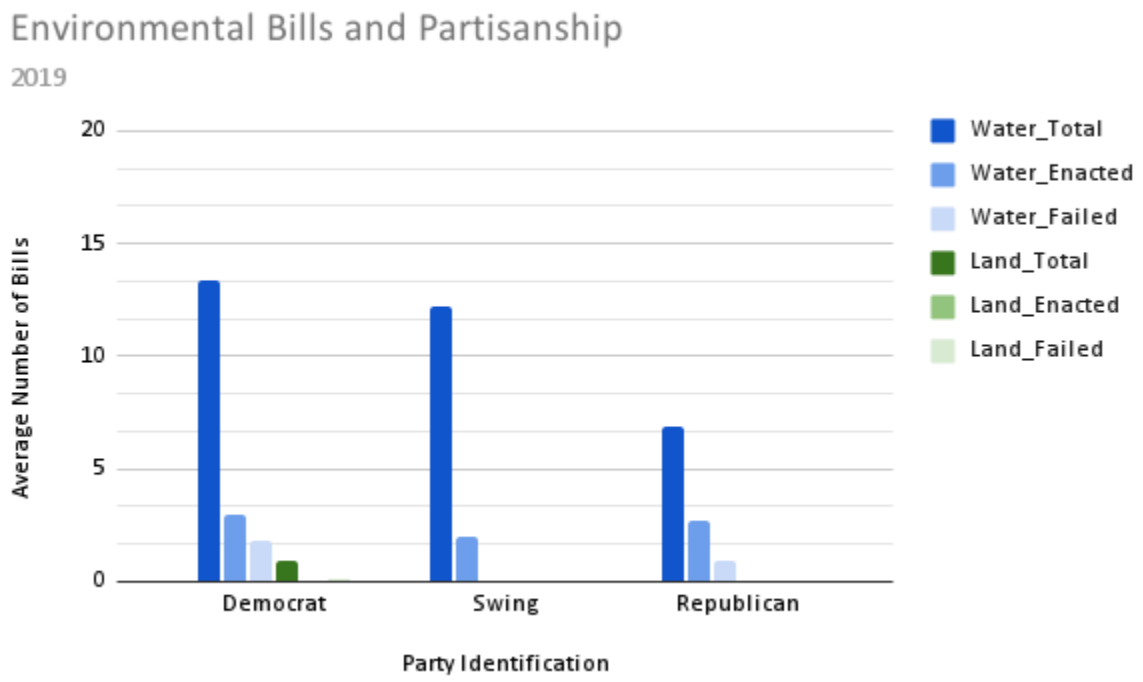
Average Number of Environmental Bill per State by Party Identification



Note. This figure displays the average number of environmental bills (represented by a sampling of water and land bills), proposed, enacted, and failed per state in 2018. The states are categorized by the party identification of each state.

Figure 2

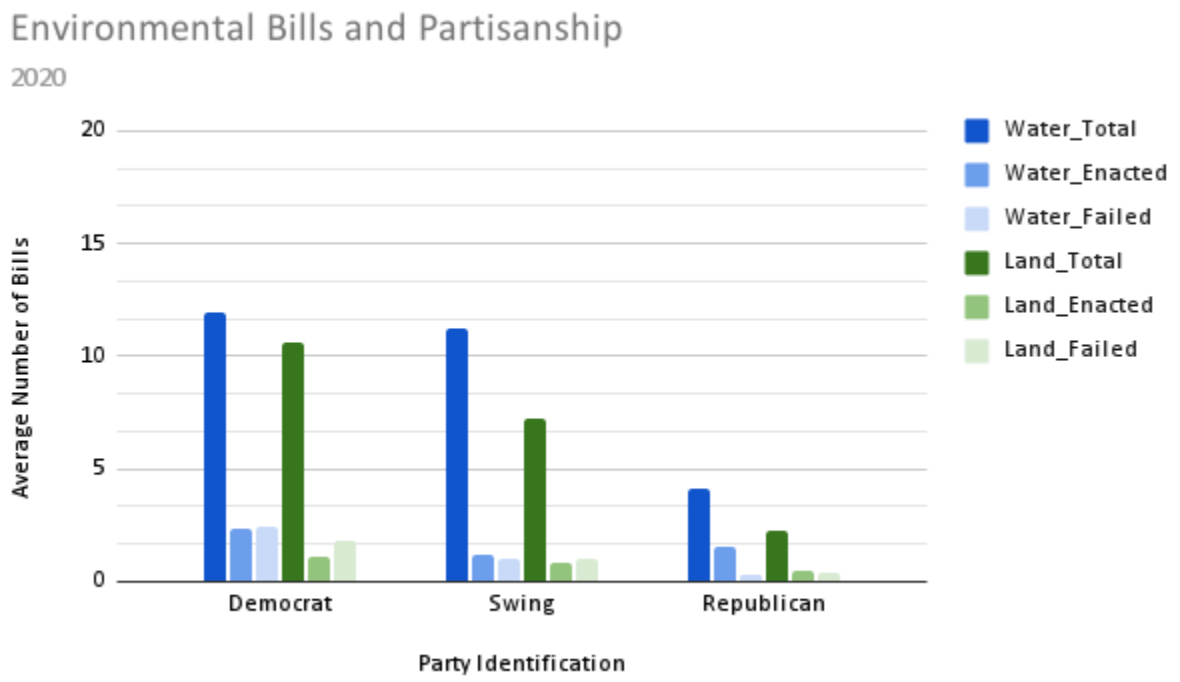
Average Number of Environmental Bill per State by Party Identification



Note. This figure displays the average number of environmental bills (represented by a sampling of water and land bills), proposed, enacted, and failed per state in 2019. The states are categorized by the party identification of each state.

Figure 3

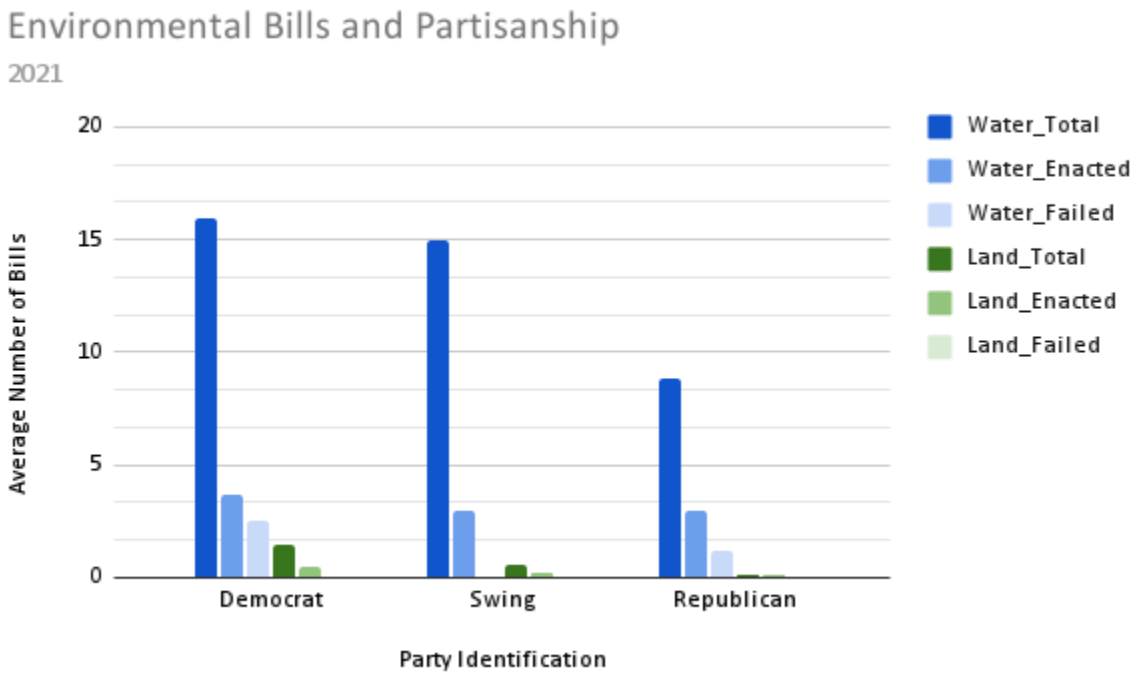
Average Number of Environmental Bill per State by Party Identification



Note. This figure displays the average number of environmental bills (represented by a sampling of water and land bills), proposed, enacted, and failed per state in 2020. The states are categorized by the party identification of each state.

Figure 4

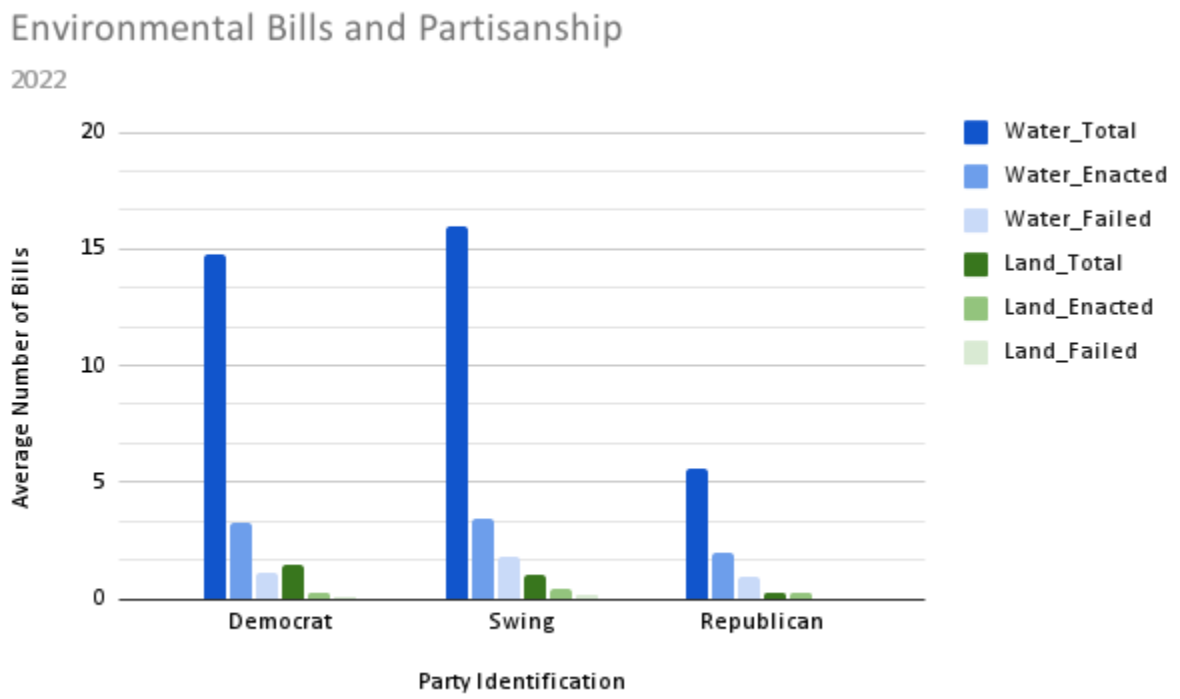
Average Number of Environmental Bill per State by Party Identification



Note. This figure displays the average number of environmental bills (represented by a sampling of water and land bills), proposed, enacted, and failed per state in 2021. The states are categorized by the party identification of each state.

Figure 5

Average Number of Environmental Bill per State by Party Identification



Note. This figure displays the average number of environmental bills (represented by a sampling of water and land bills), proposed, enacted, and failed per state in 2022. The states are categorized by the party identification of each state.