

Maryland Sea Grant

RESEARCH NOTES



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ATTITUDES OF PUBLIC OFFICIALS AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC ON CHESAPEAKE BAY ISSUES

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At the county, municipal, and state levels, public officials are asked to weigh environmental concerns along with concerns about energy production, industry, and transportation. To what extent do public officials reflect the views of the citizens they represent? In order to find out, Dr. Patricia Florestano and Dr. Patricia Rathbun canvassed some 600 citizens from around the state by telephone and over 100 public officials by mail. They found substantial disagreement--on specific issues such as dredging and private land use and on priorities as well. Moreover, county and municipal officials, their results indicated, are no nearer to their constituents' views than are state officials. A closer look at the results of their Sea Grant-sponsored research is presented here.

--The Editors

INTRODUCTION

This research compares the policies and preferences of county and municipal officials at the local level and legislators at the state level to the preferences of citizen users of Bay resources with regard to Chesapeake Bay issues. It is a follow-up to our 1979 study which examined the policies advocated by interest groups and compared them with the preferences of citizen users of the Bay's resources. By gathering data which compares the preferences and policies of public officials with the preferences of citizen users, this research is intended to contribute to the theory of local government representativeness, especially with regard to environmental and resource questions. The study provides government officials and analysts in federal and state agencies concerned with the use of Bay resources a better knowledge of the attitudes of local officials toward Bay-related issues, and indirectly of their perception of citizen demands. At the same time, local officials will benefit from the assessment of their preferences vis-a-vis those of their constituents. Project results will be available also to political scientists, sociologists, and others interested in local government, intergovernmental relations, and public opinion.

The political setting in the Chesapeake Bay area is complex, with decision making authority shared by the federal government, several states, and numerous local governments. Management decisions which affect the estuary and its surrounding areas are made by federal, state, and local officials often in response to the preferences of special interest groups and individual citizens. Because no single unit of government administers the Bay region, policy decisions affecting resource use are made at the state and local level in 12 Bay area counties and 37 or more Bay area municipalities.

While state government is acknowledged to be a powerful participant in the American federal system, the importance of local government actions and decision making is often underestimated. In the area of land and resource utilization, it would be difficult to overstate the importance of local decision making and administration. Responsibility of numerous public services that affect the quality of the Chesapeake Bay and its surrounding lands rests with counties, municipalities, and in some cases, special districts. Land use plans designed at the local level set the framework for zoning ordinances which authorize or limit specified uses of private land. Local planning and zoning commissions permit or reject requests to build new marinas in jurisdictions adjoining the Bay and its tributaries. Because water provision, accomplished through either municipal or county administration is tied closely to sewage treatment, local governments are not only responsible for supplying their residents with clean usable water, but must undertake also the task of treating waste water. Needless to say, both governmental activities have crucial implications for the condition of the Bay. Sanitation services, park management and recreation programs are all local government activities which are determined in part or in whole by local government actions. Collaboration by the local jurisdictions with the state and federal governments determines the direction of coastal land use management, environmental, and resource utilization programs. Often the localities initiate environmental policy decisions in these areas, leaving the state and federal governments only the option of taking reactive positions.

The "democratic" or Jacksonian strain that runs throughout our political system is shown in the desire to maximize political accountability at all levels of government. One measure of political accountability is the responsiveness of officials to public preferences.

METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

The methodological approach of this study was developed to provide comparative data on Chesapeake Bay issues from two distinct groups: public officials and individual citizens. This was accomplished through two surveys:

- A mail survey of state and local public officials in Maryland; and
- A telephone survey of a random sample of state residents to identify patterns of use and preferences regarding the Bay.

The data from each of these activities were obtained from instruments designed to elicit comparable responses, thus providing a profile of citizen versus public official priorities with respect to the issues involved. Each survey was made up of similar questions where appropriate, as well as a number of specialized questions applicable to one or the other group of respondents. The sampling strategies adopted for each segment were intended to maximize response rates, given the time and cost constraints of the study.

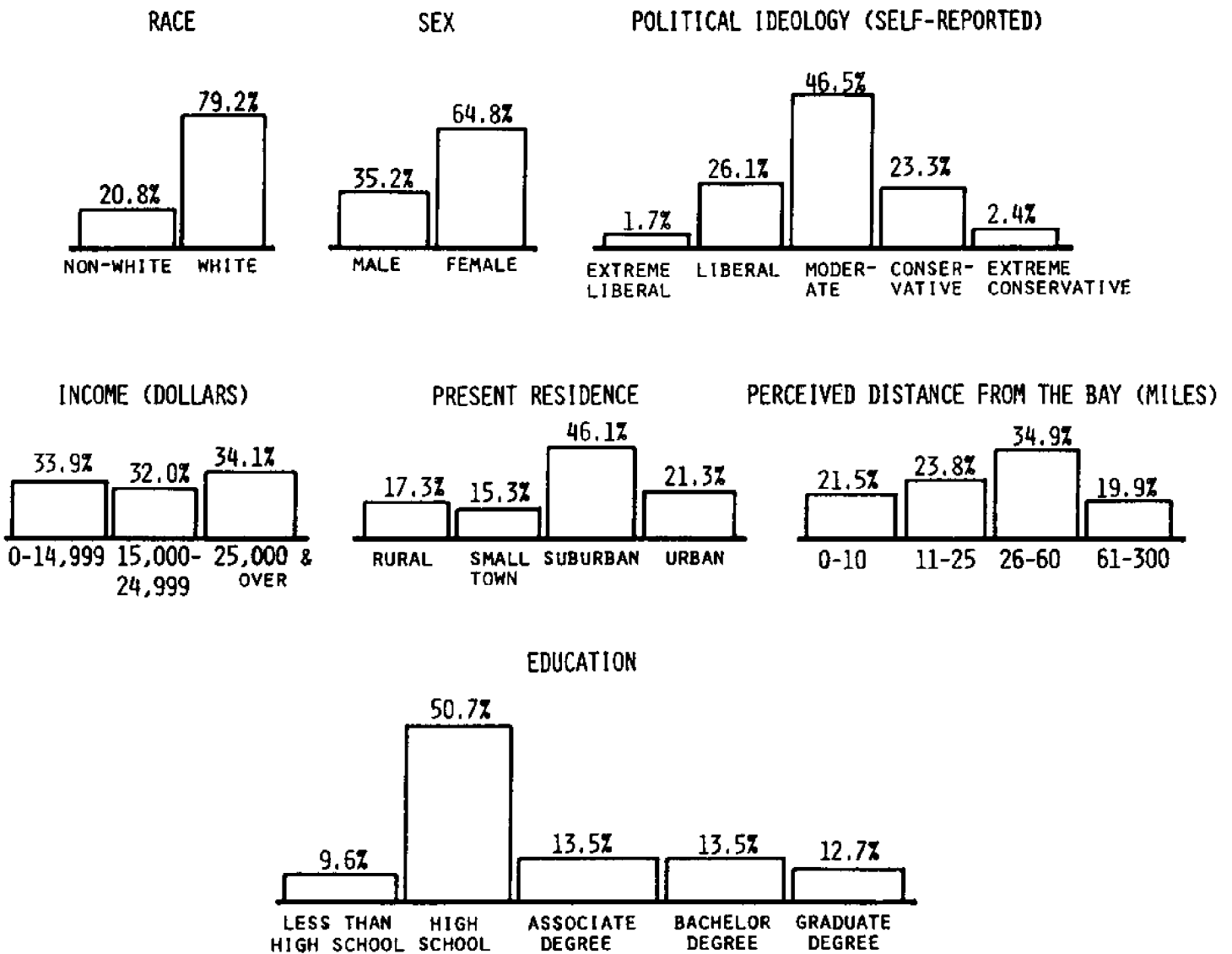
Characteristics of Public Officials

Status. Elected officials composed 57% of the total of 136 respondents. Thirty-six percent of the respondents were elected officials serving in local governments; 21%, in the state legislature. Of the local elected officials, only 3% were executives; the remainder were from councils or commissions. Among the local officials, 34% were elected and 55% were appointed officials; state legislators composed 30% of the total. Twenty-five percent of the appointed local officials who responded were Directors of Recreation and Parks, Public Works, and Planning; Town Managers; and Chairs of Zoning and Planning Commissions.

Jurisdictions Represented. Fifty-four percent of the respondents worked within counties, 25% within municipalities, and 21% in the state legislature. These figures represent 46% of the county officials receiving a questionnaire, 39% of the municipal officials, and 30% of the state officials. Every county and municipality which was included in the survey produced at least one respondent. The highest response rate, 62%, was that of appointed county officials, while the lowest, 30%, was that of elected state officials.

Characteristics of Citizens Surveyed

The following distributions present a demographic profile of the 603 Maryland residents sampled.



DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In general, the findings indicate that the policies supported by local elected and appointed officials and state elected officials are significantly different from the preferences expressed by the citizens as a whole regarding Chesapeake Bay-related issues. Both groups agreed that the Bay is not in good condition. On the sixteen other issue statements, there was a statistically significant difference in the responses of the two groups (Table 1).

The strongest disagreements were apparent on the following issues: the impact of waterfront industry on the environment, the use of Hart and Miller Islands as a containment facility for dredged waste, the determination of the use of privately owned land, and expansion of the Baltimore Port. On three of these issues the citizens took what could be interpreted as a more pronounced environmental stand--more strongly opposed to the use of Hart and Miller Islands, more strongly concerned with the effect of industry on air and water quality, and more strongly opposed to the expansion of the Baltimore Port. However, by contrast, the citizens strongly supported the determination of the use of private land by the owner.

One possible explanation of the significant differences between the responses of the officials and those of the citizens can be seen through further examination of these attitudes from the perspective of the "environmentalist" viewpoint. When we define this viewpoint as one which shows overriding concern for the condition of the environment--air and water quality, preservation of resources, conservation of land, etc.--as opposed to other issues such as increased development, business, or recreation--we find that the citizens have taken what could be termed a pro-environmental stand on ten of the seventeen: additional nuclear facilities, additional waterfront industry, public reaction to oil spills, condition of the Bay, use of a commission on toxic substances, preferential treatment of the seafood industry, dredging the Bay channel, use of Hart and Miller Islands, and expansion of Baltimore, Crisfield, and Cambridge Ports. On seven of the same sixteen, the public officials took a stand that could be identified as more pro-business, industry, and development: public reaction to oil spills, preferential treatment of the seafood industry, dredging of the channel, use of Hart and Miller, and expansion of the ports.

There are, however, some divergencies in this pattern. For example, public officials were more strongly in support of general protection of the seafood industry by the state than were citizens. This could be interpreted to mean that the citizens are supportive of the general idea of protection but are less supportive of the specific suggestion of preferential treatment over industry or recreation.

On the last six issue questions which deal directly with government regulation to protect the environment, the officials were more strongly in support of such activity on five of the six than were the citizens. In the trade-off question of heavy industry which increases jobs but hurts the environment, the officials disagreed with such an activity at the same rate as the citizens, but had a much higher rate of non-response.

An explanation for this pattern very likely lies in the fact that while citizens and public officials both may give generalized support to environmental concerns, such support on the part of public officials is softer because of the pressures on these officials to balance such concerns with the need to deal with taxes, revenue, and the problems of industry, business, and employment. These findings may also result from the fact that citizens would tend to be less in favor of regulation than the regulators. It is also worthy of note that the citizens' generalized support for environmental issues disappeared rapidly on an issue which seemed to affect them directly, such as private

Table 1. A Comparison of Public Officials and Citizens Positions on Bay-Related Issues (In Percent)

<u>STATEMENT</u>	<u>AGREE</u>		<u>DISAGREE</u>		<u>DK/NO ANSWER/NA</u>	
	Citizen	Official	Citizen	Official	Citizen	Official
The Chesapeake Bay is in good environmental condition.	24.3	29.4	55.9	61.1	19.8	9.5
Additional nuclear energy facilities should be permitted in the Bay area.*	30.2	42.0	65.2	44.8	4.6	13.2
The public tends to over-react to oil spills.*	25.8	33.8	69.8	59.5	4.4	6.7
A legally constituted commission should be set up to keep track of all toxic or potentially dangerous substances dumped into the Bay.*	92.3	75.7	6.1	14.0	1.5	10.3
Increasing waterfront industry in the Bay area will contribute to the decline of area air and water quality.*	77.2	47.8	16.0	44.4	6.6	7.8
Baltimore area port facilities should be expanded.*	46.4	69.9	23.4	11.8	30.3	18.3
Port facilities should be expanded in Cambridge and Crisfield.*	39.7	55.8	17.8	17.7	42.6	26.5
The existing channel that runs the length of the Bay should be dredged deeper in order to increase shipping business and allow use of the new deep-draft vessels being used in commercial shipping.*	44.8	61.7	36.5	23.5	18.8	14.8
Hart and Miller Islands near the mouth of the Baltimore Harbor should be used as a containment facility for dredged waste.*	15.9	62.5	49.4	15.0	34.6	22.5

*Findings are statistically significant at the .05 level.

<u>STATEMENT</u>	<u>AGREE</u>		<u>DISAGREE</u>		<u>DK/NO ANSWER/NA</u>	
	Citizen	Official	Citizen	Official	Citizen	Official
The seafood industry should be protected by the State.*	73.8	82.3	18.7	13.3	7.5	4.4
The seafood industry should be given preferential treatment over industrial and recreational interests.*	71.1	55.9	23.4	36.0	5.5	8.1
The use of land should be determined primarily by the person who owns it.*	66.7	25.8	30.3	68.4	3.0	5.8
Governmental regulations should limit waterfront construction.*	51.6	67.0	41.9	27.2	6.5	5.8
Governmental regulations should limit increased recreational boating.*	28.9	37.5	62.4	58.8	8.8	3.9
Governmental regulations should limit new marina construction.*	45.1	59.6	43.6	34.5	11.3	5.9
Suppose that heavy industry were moving into your area. If you knew that this industry would result in increased jobs for your area, but would have an adverse impact on Bay ecology, would you be in favor of the industry?*	20.4	11.8	72.1	72.8	7.5	15.4
A Bay area city has an unemployment problem. A major manufacturer wants to build a new plant on a marsh it owns which could employ 1,000 people, but conservationists claim this will destroy land used by a rare bird. Do you agree that this plant should be built even if it endangers the bird species?*	34.0	44.1	54.9	30.1	11.1	25.8

*Findings are statistically significant at the .05 level.

ownership's determination of land use, or governmental regulation of recreational boating.

There were also significant differences (Table 2) between the views of officials and citizens on the importance of various uses of the Bay. Public officials said that the seafood industry, the fish and wildlife habitat, recreational boating, and sport fishing were the most important uses of the Bay. Citizens ranked only fish and wildlife habitat and the seafood industry as very important uses. The biggest divergence lies in recreational boating and sport fishing which were given much lower ranking by citizens than by officials. We are uncertain as to the explanation for this finding at the present time. It is conceivable that it reflects the small proportion of Bay area population that is actually involved in either activity.

Although the issue of "environmentalism" undoubtedly affected the outcome of this study, the differential response pattern exhibited by the citizen respondents according to the variables of sex, age, and education also played an important role in our inability to find agreement between the preferences of the two groups. These diversities among the respondents according to sex, income, and level of education, commonly recognized by sociologists, in all likelihood, are one of the major explanations of the divergence between the attitudes of public officials and the general public. In a sense, there is no "general public"; rather individuals possess discrete attitudes, beliefs, and values.

Table 2. A Comparison of Public Officials and Citizens on Bay Priorities

STATEMENT	VERY IMPORTANT		IMPORTANT		NOT IMPORTANT		DK/NO ANSWER/NA	
	Citizen	Official	Citizen	Official	Citizen	Official	Citizen	Official
a. Industrial development*	7.1	27.2	45.4	36.8	44.4	29.4	3.0	6.6
b. Fish/Wildlife habitat*	55.1	53.7	37.0	34.6	6.0	6.6	2.0	5.1
c. Seafood industry*	42.5	59.6	48.9	28.7	7.0	7.4	1.7	4.3
d. Commercial shipping*	20.9	35.3	57.9	21.3	17.6	35.3	3.6	8.1
e. Energy production	17.6	19.9	54.1	40.4	22.7	31.6	5.6	8.1
f. Residential development*	6.5	25.7	40.5	49.3	49.3	19.1	3.8	5.9
g. Recreational boating*	11.1	50.0	57.9	42.6	28.4	2.9	2.7	4.5
h. Sport fishing*	11.8	50.0	52.2	42.6	34.7	2.9	1.3	4.5

*Findings are statistically significant at the .05 level.

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