

FOR RELEASE MAY 16, 2017

Public Divides Over Environmental Regulation and Energy Policy

Americans lean toward regulations – not economic markets alone – as the most effective way to increase reliance on renewable energy, but they are evenly split on the question of whether fewer regulations can be used to protect air and water

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RECOMMENDED CITATION

Pew Research Center, May 2017, “Public Divides
Over Environmental Regulation and Energy
Policy”

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Public Divides Over Environmental Regulation and Energy Policy

Americans lean toward regulations – not economic markets alone – as the most effective way to increase reliance on renewable energy, but they are evenly split on the question of whether fewer regulations can be used to protect air and water

Amid major debates over energy and environmental policy changes, Americans tilt toward supporting government regulations as the best way to encourage renewable energy development, believe that reliance on solar and wind power are effective in minimizing pollution, and are less convinced that pro-coal and pro-oil policies are viable antipollution strategies.

A new Pew Research Center survey finds that 83% of Americans say increasing use of renewable energy sources is a top or important priority for the country's energy policies. This is one of several considerations the American public thinks should be a priority for the country's energy policies. A majority of U.S. adults (54%) agree that "Government regulations are necessary to encourage businesses and consumers to rely more on renewable energy sources." Meanwhile, 38% back the statement, "The private marketplace will ensure that businesses and consumers rely more on renewable energy sources, even without government regulations."

Americans lean toward supporting the importance of regulations to increase renewable energy use

% of U.S. adults who say the following will be the most effective way to increase reliance on renewable energy sources



% of U.S. adults who say ____ to cut back on environmental regulations and still effectively protect air and water quality in the U.S.



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.
Source: Survey conducted May 3-7, 2017.
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But the public is divided on the core question shaping the debates in the early period of the Trump administration: Is it possible to cut back environmental regulations and still effectively protect

water and air quality? Some 49% think it is possible to trim regulations and still protect air and water, while 47% believe it is not possible to protect those resources with fewer regulations. These views differ widely by political party.

The survey shows that 54% of U.S. adults believe the Trump administration is doing too little to protect the environment, while 30% think the administration is doing “about the right amount” and 5% believe it is doing too much.

One consistent theme in the public’s views about these issues is that Americans as a whole support giving priority to both environmental and economic dimensions of energy policy. For example, roughly half of Americans say each of the following should be a “top priority”:

- Protecting the environment from the effects of energy development and use (53% say it should be a “top priority”)
- Increasing reliance on renewable energy sources (52%)
- Creating jobs within the energy sector (49%)
- Keeping consumer energy prices low (49%)
- Reducing dependence on foreign energy sources (48%)

There are largely predictable partisan differences in the public’s answers on most of these energy and environment issues, but in some cases there are no divides between partisan groups or only modest ones.

The public is fairly united in believing that renewable energy sources are effective in minimizing air pollution:

- 88% say solar power is “very effective” (68%) or “somewhat effective” (20%) in minimizing air pollution.
- 84% think wind power is very (63%) or somewhat effective (21%) in minimizing pollution.

Americans are less confident about whether other energy sources are effective in minimizing air pollution: 28% say nuclear power is “very effective,” though more, at 55%, consider nuclear power at least “somewhat effective” in minimizing air pollution. Some 72% of adults believe natural gas is “very” (30%) or “somewhat effective” (42%) in minimizing air pollution. Minorities consider either oil (41%) or coal (34%) at least somewhat effective in minimizing air pollution.

These are some of the findings from a Pew Research Center survey conducted May 3-7, 2017, among a nationally representative sample of 1,012 adults ages 18 and older.

Partisans differ over how much priority to place on environmental protections, increasing use of renewable sources in energy policies

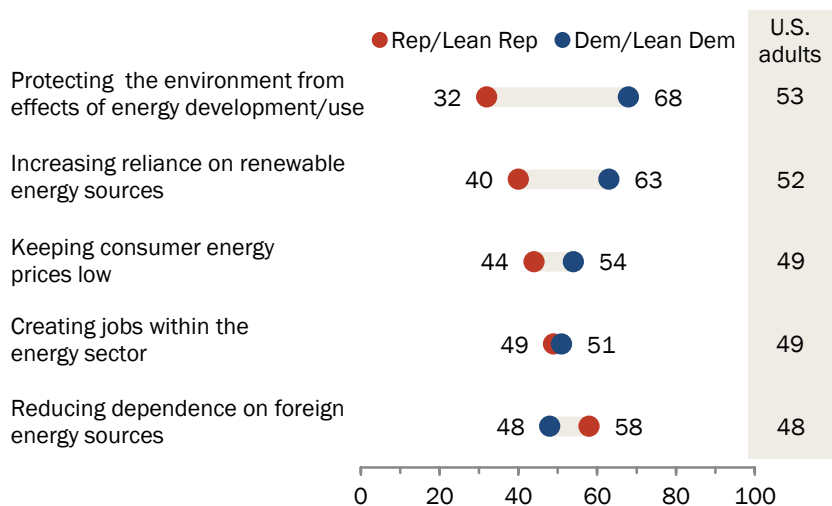
There are wide partisan differences when it comes to prioritizing environmental protections and reliance on renewable energy sources, but only modest or no differences between political groups when it comes to economic considerations. For example, Democrats and independents who lean to the Democratic Party are about twice as likely as Republicans and Republican-leaning independents to want to ensure that energy development efforts are designed to prioritize environmental protection (68% vs. 32%). But when it comes to making sure the energy sector is creating jobs, Republicans and Democrats

are hardly distinguishable in their views (about half in each group say this should be a top priority). Similarly, 54% of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents say that consumer cost considerations should be a top priority for energy policies, as do 44% of Republicans and Republican leaners. And about half or more of both party groups say reducing foreign energy dependence should be a top priority.

There are also some differences in energy policy priorities across generations. Adults younger than 50 are especially likely to believe that protecting the environment and increasing reliance on renewable energy sources should be top priorities for America's energy policies. Similarly, a January 2017 [Pew Research Center survey](#) found adults younger than 30 placed a higher priority on the then-new administration protecting the environment.

Partisans agree on the importance of energy sector jobs, divided on prioritizing environmental effects of energy sources

% of U.S. adults who rate each of the following as a top priority for America's energy policies



Note: Respondents who gave other responses or no answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted May 3-7, 2017.

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As expected, those with family incomes under \$30,000 are especially likely to prioritize keeping consumer energy prices low (59% call it a top priority) but so, too, does a sizable share of those with a family income of \$75,000 and higher (41%).

Younger Americans put higher policy priority on the impact of energy sources on environment

% of U.S. adults who rate each of the following as a top priority for America's energy policies

	Ages 18-29	30-49	50-64	65+	Young-Old diff.
Protecting the environment from the effects of energy development and use	59	58	49	43	+16
Increasing reliance on renewable energy sources	56	56	47	45	+11
Creating jobs within the energy sector	54	45	49	52	+2
Keeping consumer energy prices low	42	45	62	48	-6
Reducing dependence on foreign energy sources	35	49	54	54	-19

Note: Respondents who gave other responses or no answer are not shown. Significant differences in **bold**.

Source: Survey conducted May 3-7, 2017.

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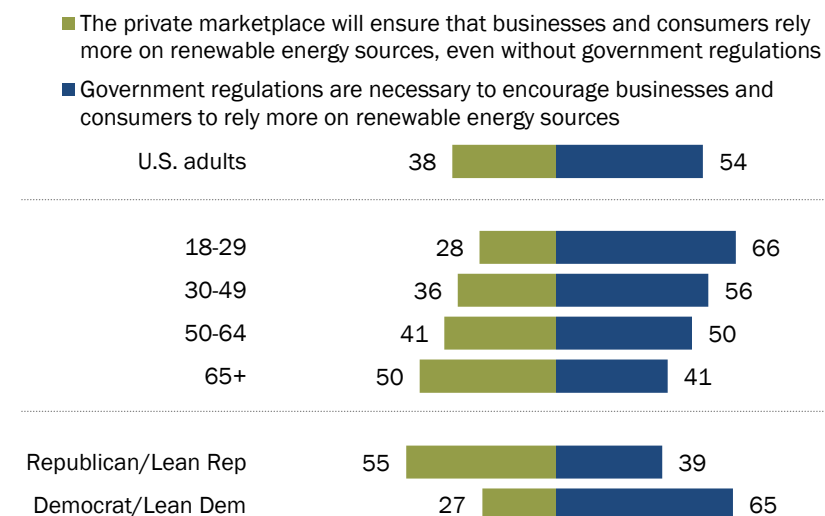
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A 54% majority of Americans see government regulations as necessary to encourage business and consumer use of renewable energy sources

Most Americans consider increasing reliance on renewable energy sources either a top priority (52%) or an important, but lower, priority for the nation (32%). But there are narrower divides over how best to encourage greater reliance on renewable energy sources. The survey finds 54% of Americans believe government regulations are needed to effectively increase reliance on renewable energy sources, while 38% believe the private marketplace will ensure greater reliance on renewable energy sources, even without government regulations.

Political and age divides over whether the free market alone can increase use of renewable energy sources

% of U.S. adults who say ...



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted May 3-7, 2017.

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Democrats and Republicans take fairly different positions on this issue. About two-thirds of Democrats and independents who lean Democratic (65%) believe that government regulations are needed to effectively encourage more use of renewable energy sources; liberal Democrats are especially likely to hold this view (74%). By contrast, among Republicans and independents who lean to the GOP, 55% say the private marketplace can be effective at increasing reliance on renewable energy sources, while 39% say government regulations are necessary.

There are also sizable differences in views about this issue by age, with younger adults ages 18 to 29 especially likely (66%) to see government regulations as necessary. Seniors 65 and older, however, think the private marketplace is the most effective way to increase reliance on renewable energy sources by a 50%-41% margin. Differences by age hold even when accounting for the tendency of older adults to identify with the GOP.

Americans see renewable energy sources as effective in minimizing air pollution, but fewer see nuclear power, natural gas in this way

Supporters of increased reliance on renewable energy sources – energy generated from natural resources such as sunlight and wind – argue that a shift in this direction will reduce air pollution and will help address global climate change. The amount of air pollution emitted from the use of different energy sources varies widely. [Solar power](#) and [wind power](#) emit no air pollutants and result in no carbon emissions. [Nuclear energy](#), while not a renewable energy, also emits no air pollutants. [Natural gas](#) emits smaller quantities of air pollutants than either coal or oil and results in less carbon emissions.

Public perceptions of the connection between renewable energy sources and air pollution show that most Americans see both solar and wind energy as effective at minimizing air pollution. Fewer Americans see nuclear power as effective at minimizing air pollution. About half or more consider oil and coal not effective or not too effective at minimizing air pollution. Views of natural gas are in the middle.

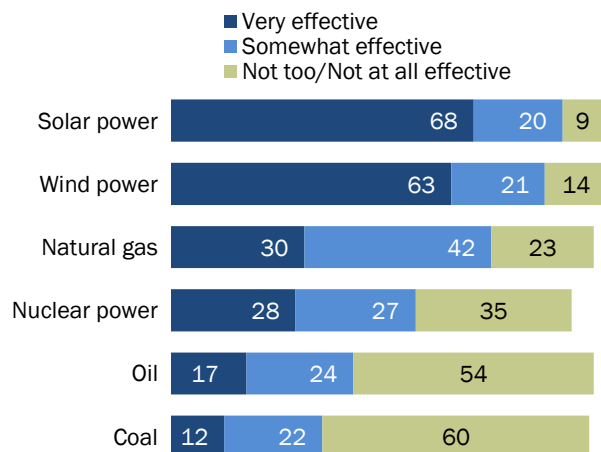
Some 68% of Americans say using solar power is very effective at minimizing air pollution; 63% say wind power is very effective in minimizing air pollution.

By comparison, a minority of the public says that either oil (17%) or coal (12%) is very effective at minimizing air pollution. Six-in-ten Americans say the use of coal is not at all (36%) or not too effective (24%) at minimizing air pollution. About half of the public thinks oil is not too (26%) or not at all effective at reducing air pollution (27%).

Perceptions of both natural gas and nuclear power fall in between. Three-in-ten Americans see natural gas (30%) as very effective at minimizing air pollution, 42% say natural gas is somewhat effective in minimizing air pollution, and 23% say natural gas is not at all or not too effective. Views of nuclear power are

Most Americans see wind, solar power as effective in minimizing air pollution

% of U.S. adults who say the use of each of the following energy sources is ___ in minimizing air pollution



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted May 3-7, 2017.

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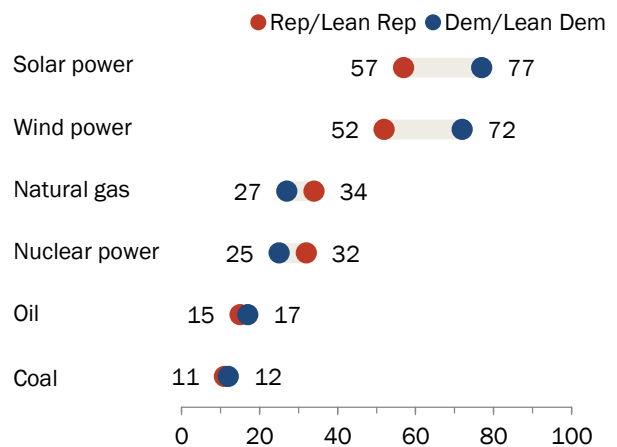
mixed, with 28% saying the use of nuclear energy is very effective, 27% saying it is somewhat effective and 35% saying it is not too or not at all effective in minimizing air pollution.

Democrats and independents who lean to the Democratic Party are modestly more inclined than Republicans and Republican-leaning independents to say the use of solar or wind power is very effective in minimizing air pollution. Large majorities of Democratic leaners see solar power (77%) or wind power (72%) as very effective. About half or more of Republicans and Republican leaners think solar power (57%) or wind power (52%) is very effective at minimizing air pollution. [A 2016 Pew Research Center survey](#) found that large majorities of both political party groups favor expanding solar panel and wind turbine farms.

While [a 2017 Center survey](#) found wide partisan differences over prioritizing fossil fuel exploration over alternative energy sources, the current survey suggests this is not because they have a different understanding of the relative levels of air pollution each method entails. Republicans and Democrats are about equally likely to say the use of natural gas, oil and coal is very effective in minimizing air pollution. Further, the two political party groups have roughly similar perceptions of how nuclear power impacts air pollution.

Political groups are broadly similar in their views of how energy sources connect with air pollution

*% of U.S. adults who say the use of each of the following is **very effective** in minimizing air pollution*



Note: Respondents who gave other responses or no answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted May 3-7, 2017.

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Republicans and Democrats differ widely over Trump administration's handling of the environment

Some of President Donald Trump's first actions in office included the promise of a shift in government regulatory policy on energy and the environment. The Trump administration has already implemented several changes to environmental regulations, including [revoking a restriction on coal plants](#) prohibiting dumping of wastewater into public waterways and ending the freeze on new leases for coal mining on public land. Trump's [proposed budget cuts to the Environmental Protection Agency](#) suggest more changes could be still to come.

Overall, 54% of Americans say the Trump administration is doing too little to protect the environment, 30% say it is doing the right amount and 5% say it is doing too much.

Political groups have starkly different reactions to the Trump administration's actions on the environment. Among Republicans and those who lean Republican, about two-thirds (65%) say the Trump administration is doing the right amount, while only one-in-five (20%) say the administration is doing too little.

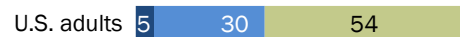
But among Democrats and Democratic leaners, the balance of opinion is the opposite: Only 8% believe the Trump administration is doing the right amount to protect the environment, while 78% say the administration is doing too little.

When considering the broader question of whether it is possible to reduce environmental regulations while protecting the environment, there is a strong divide in public opinion. About half (49%) of the public says it is possible to cut back on environmental regulations and still effectively protect air and water quality, while a similar share (47%) says this is not possible.

Large majority of Democrats think the Trump administration is doing too little to protect the environment

% of U.S. adults who say the Trump administration is doing ___ to protect the environment

■ Too much ■ About the right amount ■ Too little



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted May 3-7, 2017.

"Public Divides Over Environmental Regulation and Energy Policy"

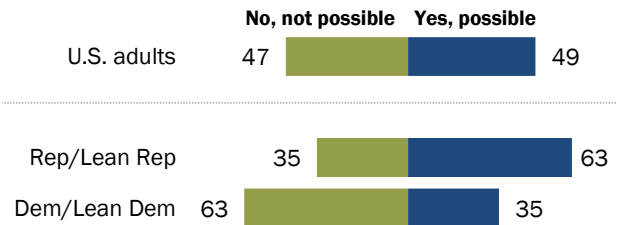
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There are large partisan divides on this issue. By a 63%-35% margin, most Republicans and Republican leaners hold that it is possible to cut back on environmental regulations and still effectively protect air and water quality in the U.S.

Most Democrats and those who lean Democratic hold the reverse view: 63% say it is *not* possible to cut back on environmental regulations and still effectively protect air and water quality in the U.S., while 35% this is possible.

Most Republicans say it is possible to cut environmental regulations and still protect air and water quality

% of U.S. adults who say it is possible/not possible to cut back on environmental regulations and still effectively protect air and water quality in the U.S.



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted May 3-7, 2017.

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Acknowledgments

This report is made possible by The Pew Charitable Trusts. This report is a collaborative effort based on the input and analysis of the following individuals. Find related reports online at:

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Methodology

The analysis in this report is based on telephone interviews conducted May 3-7, 2017, among a national sample of 1,012 adults, 18 years of age or older, living in the continental United States (602 were interviewed via cellphone and 410 were interviewed on a landline telephone). The margin of error for the full sample is plus or minus 3.7 percentage points.

The survey was conducted under the direction of Social Science Research Solutions (SSRS). A combination of landline and cellphone random-digit-dial samples were used; both samples were provided by Marketing Systems Group. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish.

The combined landline and cellphone sample is weighted using an iterative technique that matches gender, age, education, race, Hispanic origin and nativity, marital status and region to parameters from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2016 Current Population Survey and population density to parameters from the 2010 decennial census. The sample also is weighted to match current patterns of telephone status (landline only, cellphone only, or both landline and cellphone), based on extrapolations from the 2016 National Health Interview Survey. The weighting procedure also accounts for the fact that respondents with both landline and cellphones have a greater probability of being included in the combined sample and adjusts for household size among respondents with a landline phone. The margins of error reported and statistical tests of significance are adjusted to account for the survey's design effect, a measure of how much efficiency is lost from the weighting procedures.

The following table shows the unweighted sample sizes and the error attributable to sampling that would be expected at the 95% level of confidence for different groups in the survey:

Group	Unweighted sample size	Plus or minus ...
Total sample	1,012	3.7 percentage points
18-29	156	9.4 percentage points
30-49	263	7.2 percentage points
50-64	289	6.9 percentage points
65+	304	6.7 percentage points
Republican/Lean Rep.	377	6.0 percentage points
Democrat/Lean Dem.	456	5.5 percentage points

Sample sizes and sampling errors for other subgroups are available upon request.

In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

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MAY 3-7, 2017 OMNIBUS
FINAL TOPLINE¹
N= 1,012

ASK ALL:

On another topic

PEW1 Right now, how would you rate each of the following priorities for America's energy policies? First, do you think **[INSERT ITEM; RANDOMIZE]** should be a top priority, important but lower priority, not too important, or should it not be done? **[NEXT ITEM]**? **[IF NECESSARY: Do you think [ITEM] should be a top priority for America's energy policies, important but lower priority, not too important, or should it not be done?**

- a. Reducing our dependence on foreign energy sources

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48	Top priority
32	Important but lower priority
10	Not too important
6	Should not be done
4	No answer

- b. Creating jobs within the energy sector

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2017

49	Top priority
36	Important but lower priority
7	Not too important
3	Should not be done
5	No answer

- c. Protecting the environment from the effects of energy development and use

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2017

53	Top priority
33	Important but lower priority
8	Not too important
3	Should not be done
3	No answer

- d. Keeping consumer energy prices low

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2017

49	Top priority
39	Important but lower priority
6	Not too important
3	Should not be done
1	No answer

¹ No answer responses include those who volunteered don't know.

PEW1 CONTINUED...

- e. Increasing reliance on renewable energy sources
- May 3-7
2017
- | | |
|----|------------------------------|
| 52 | Top priority |
| 32 | Important but lower priority |
| 9 | Not too important |
| 3 | Should not be done |
| 4 | No answer |

ASK ALL:

- PEW2 Which of these statements come closest to your own view about the MOST EFFECTIVE WAY to increase reliance on renewable energy sources, even if neither is exactly right?
[READ AND RANDOMIZE RESPONSE OPTIONS 1 AND 2]

- May 3-7
2017
- | | |
|----|--|
| 54 | Government regulations are necessary to encourage businesses and consumers to rely more on renewable energy sources |
| | The private marketplace will ensure that businesses and consumers rely more on renewable energy sources, even without government regulations |
| 38 | regulations |
| 8 | No answer |

ASK ALL:

- PEW3 As you think about energy sources, do you think of the use of each of the following energy sources is very effective in minimizing air pollution, somewhat effective, not too effective, or not at all effective in minimizing air pollution? First, **[INSERT ITEM; RANDOMIZE]? [NEXT ITEM]? [IF NECESSARY: Is the use of [ITEM] very effective in minimizing air pollution, somewhat effective, not too effective, or not at all effective?]**

- a. Natural gas
- May 3-7
2017
- | | |
|----|--|
| 30 | Very effective in minimizing air pollution |
| 42 | Somewhat effective |
| 15 | Not too effective |
| 9 | Not at all effective in minimizing air pollution |
| 5 | No answer |

PEW3 CONTINUED...

- b. Coal
 May 3-7
2017
 12 Very effective in minimizing air pollution
 22 Somewhat effective
 24 Not too effective
 36 Not at all effective in minimizing air pollution
 6 No answer
- c. Solar power
 May 3-7
2017
 68 Very effective in minimizing air pollution
 20 Somewhat effective
 4 Not too effective
 5 Not at all effective in minimizing air pollution
 3 No answer
- d. Wind power
 May 3-7
2017
 63 Very effective in minimizing air pollution
 21 Somewhat effective
 7 Not too effective
 7 Not at all effective in minimizing air pollution
 2 No answer
- e. Nuclear power
 May 3-7
2017
 28 Very effective in minimizing air pollution
 27 Somewhat effective
 17 Not too effective
 18 Not at all effective in minimizing air pollution
 10 No answer
- f. Oil
 May 3-7
2017
 17 Very effective in minimizing air pollution
 24 Somewhat effective
 26 Not too effective
 27 Not at all effective in minimizing air pollution
 6 No answer

ASK ALL:

PEW4

Do you think it is possible to cut back on environmental regulations and still effectively protect air and water quality in the U.S. or do you think it's not possible to do this with fewer regulations?

May 3-7
2017

49	Yes, possible to cut back on environmental regulations and still effectively protect air and water quality
47	No, not possible to do this with fewer regulations
4	No answer

ASK ALL:

PEW5

Do you think the Trump Administration is doing too much, too little, or about the right amount to protect the environment?

May 3-7
2017

5	Too much
54	Too little
30	About the right amount
11	No answer

ASK ALL:

Z-11PARTY

Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as...? **[READ; ROTATE OPTIONS 1-2]** NOTE: If respondent gives answer such as: "conservative, liberal, vote for best man" Probe: Would that be Republican, Democrat or Independent?

ASK IF INDEP/NO PREF/OTHER/DK/REF (PARTY=3,8,9):

Z-11PARTYLN As of today do you lean more to the Republican Party or more to the Democratic Party?

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2017

23	A Republican
29	A Democrat
38	An Independent
2	Other party (VOL.)
8	No answer (VOL.)
11	Lean Republican
14	Lean Democrat
22	Refused to lean

ASK ALL:

D3IDEO

Generally speaking, would you describe your political views as ...? [**READ LIST; ROTATE
OPTIONS 1-5/5-1**]

May 3-7

2017

14	Very conservative
22	Somewhat conservative
30	Moderate
16	Somewhat liberal
11	Very liberal
7	No answer