

Public Opinion Research Synthesis

Appalachian Views and Values

OVERVIEW

Resource Media consulted several opinion research reports to understand the views, values and beliefs of Appalachian voters—especially when it comes to coal and the region’s economic future.

RESEARCH SOURCES

We consulted the following documents:

- *Banners from a Survey of 407 Likely General Election Voters in West Virginia*, prepared by Lake Research Partners. Conducted for the Union of Concerned Scientists, June 12-16, 2013. (Referred to as the “West Virginia research” in the document).
- *Findings from a Survey of 804 Registered Voters living in Rural Communities and Small Towns*, prepared by Lake Research Partners and The Tarrance Group for the Center for Rural Affairs. May 28 – June 3, 2013. (Referred to as the “rural America” research in the document).
- *Green Economy and Infrastructure*, by Lake Research Partners. We reviewed Appalachian crosstabs from this 1000-person poll conducted for the Surdna Foundation in September 2012. Total Appalachian respondents = 81. (Referred to as the “Surdna research” in the document).
- *Kentucky Quad Poll – Phases I, II and III*, prepared by PPP and Third Eye Strategies. We reviewed three rounds of surveys of 504, 528 and 692 active voters in Kentucky between April and September 2012. (Referred to as the “Kentucky research” in the document).
- *Mountaintop Removal Mining Research, Appalachia Region*, prepared by Gerstein Agne Strategic Communications. A poll of 914 likely voters in West Virginia and portions of Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia, prepared for Appalachian Voices in May 2008. (Referred to as the “MTR research” in the document).

FINDINGS

Resource Media sifted through the research to identify the core values and priorities that inform views and values on a range of issues among Appalachian and rural voters. Our observations should be considered in light of the limitations of an analysis of this nature. An examination of results from different surveys conducted in different states for different purposes over a range of 5 years can in no way substitute for a tailored research process designed to answer specific questions important to blue moon

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fund and its grantees. But, the existing research provides a decent glimpse into public opinion in the region and a baseline against which we can examine other research findings.

Appalachia core values

Values are the beliefs behind the survey numbers; they guide actions, attitudes and judgments, and as such are the bedrock of public opinion. The research points to a distinct set of core values that inform how Appalachian voters think about energy and economic development in Appalachia; the role of government in their lives; their responsibilities to family and community and their attitudes about the future.

- *Family/Security* – Appalachians have a strong sense of duty to family and community, which translates into a desire to ensure good economic opportunities for future generations and a deep anxiety about the region’s economic slump. The commitment to community and shared responsibility is worth exploring. The Kentucky research found that people are more apt to agree that people are responsible for their families and their communities versus just themselves and their own families (54 to 40 percent), and that “cooperating with others and compromising produces the best outcomes for all,” versus “competition and sticking with your beliefs produces the best outcome for all” (50 to 37 percent). The Surdna research found that framing a variety of initiatives (improved transportation systems, energy and water efficiency) as a “next generation approach” resulted in strong (90 percent) support.¹ The rural America results, meanwhile, found that rural Americans “respond to positive, aspirational language,” and that they want to invest in the future of rural America and to develop a strong rural economy for their children and grandchildren.”²
- *Freedom/independence* – This sense of shared responsibility and commitment to community is coupled with a strong thread of independence and populism³, which informs the pervasive anxiety about big government and regulations and the power of big business. Appalachians feel a distinct lack of control over their economic fates; the federal government has become a convenient target for the resentment they feel about their economic woes. Coal companies and politicians adeptly exploit this sentiment.
- *Pride* – Appalachians have a strong sense of pride in their rural cultural identity, which they see as being characterized by valuable skills, strong values and a commitment to community.⁴ This is accompanied by a very strong sense of patriotism and belief in American innovation and leadership. The Appalachian results echo the rural America survey findings, which found that the “top-tier value for rural Americans in terms of intensity and reach is that they believe in their way of life and believe it is worth fighting for.”

Views on the economy and energy

The Surdna research confirmed that for Appalachians, creating jobs and economic growth is the most important priority for elected officials – more important than energy independence, education, infrastructure development and protecting the environment.⁵ And when it comes to energy and economic

development, Appalachians are an “all of the above” crowd. They resist being forced to choose between good and bad sources of energy and economic development.

West Virginians, for example, like the idea of renewables and clean energy, but they equally like the idea of clean coal and natural gas.⁶ When asked to choose between coal and solar or natural gas drilling and wind, public opinion splits down the middle.⁷ When a proposal is not framed as a choice between one form of energy/economic development and another, support for renewables runs higher.⁸

The research shows slightly more support for language around energy innovation, energy leadership and new energy sources than for simply for “renewables.” And, it shows that Appalachians are far more likely to support a strategy designed to diversify the economy and create jobs than they are an effort to transition from coal to wind or solar energy.⁹

For example, while West Virginians resist choosing between wind and coal, they are very supportive of job training programs in the renewable energy sector (73 out of 100 mean score)—more so than support tax incentives for wind and solar companies (61 out of 100 mean score). They think offering tax incentives to encourage small business and innovation is very important (75 out of 100), along with investing in infrastructure like roads and schools (82) and investing in the tourism industry.¹⁰

In general, the research indicates that when a proposal is framed as a way to encourage economic development and create jobs, it’s likely to earn a solid margin of support. When it’s framed as a way to encourage one form of development over another, support drops.

This suggests that the very nature of the transition conversation – explicitly talking about moving beyond coal to something else – will be more divisive than simply talking about economic development and jobs.

The rural America poll found that rural Americans are entrepreneurial and strongly identify the American Dream with owning a small business or farm: “Many want to own their own small businesses. They want government structured to help small businesses and first-time farms get started.” None of the other research products we examined tested this theme, so it’s unclear whether the findings are equally relevant in Appalachia.

The environment

Appalachians by and large don’t self-identify as environmentalists, and when an issue is posed as a choice between jobs and the environment, jobs win. For example, in the Surdna research, respondents indicated economic growth should be given a priority over the environment.¹¹ People are inclined to believe environmental protection will harm the economy and jobs in the context of coal mining. For example, three out of four West Virginians indicated that increased environmental protections represent a threat to coal mining jobs, with half saying it is a serious threat.

At the same time, people are open to arguments that it's possible to have a clean environment and strong economy. The MTR research is fairly outdated, but it found that two to one, people believe we can “protect the environment without sacrificing jobs or hurting our economy” versus “protecting the environment usually requires some trade-off in terms of jobs and economic growth.” And in the Surdna research, 94 percent agreed “We should pursue economic growth that uses resources to meet human needs while protecting our air, water and land, both now and for future generations.”

Appalachians do care about clean water and think clean water protection laws should be enforced. Strengthening protections for West Virginia's streams and rivers earned high marks among voters, with a mean score of 82 (out of 100), and four percent of voters giving it a score of 100). It's worth noting that while West Virginians tend to think the economy is in poor condition, they think the quality of the environment has stayed about the same or gotten better.¹² Thus while addressing the region's economic woes is seen as a pressing problem, there is less urgency around environmental issues.

Coal

Coal mining, coal companies and the phrase “clean coal” are seen very favorably by West Virginia voters.¹³ Mountaintop mining garners less support and more opposition. Among West Virginia voters, about the same number of people think ending MTR is ‘very important’ as believe ending it is ‘not important.’ In the Kentucky poll, between 36 and 41 percent of respondents (depending on which phase) supported “Ending the practice of mountaintop removal mining, emphasizing instead traditional underground mining,” compared to between 26 and 28 percent who opposed that statement and 32 to 37 percent who weren't sure. The MTR poll (again, somewhat outdated) found weak opposition to mountaintop removal (47 percent somewhat/strongly oppose compared to 37 percent strongly/somewhat support), and voters were split on whether MTR has a positive impact on the economy (44 percent) or an unacceptable cost for their respective state (44 percent).

The recent UCS poll found strong support (between 68 and 69 percent support depending on the wording) for raising taxes paid by coal companies by 1 percent and using the money for economic development, infrastructure, education and worker training programs. To continue the “it's the economy,” theme, the most compelling arguments against raising coal taxes to support community development center on budget issues.

Government

The research yields interesting insights into how Appalachians view the role and influence of both government and companies/ industries on resource development in the region.

The rural America poll showed that rural Americans are divided on the role of government—a finding borne out in Appalachia-specific research. While people are attracted to lower taxes, smaller government

and fewer regulations, they are also supportive of more job training, increased investment in infrastructure and more technology—all of which require government investment. As noted in the rural America poll:

Rural Americans tip toward supporting government involvement in some areas when the language is based on values. They tend to tip against government solutions when it goes to spending, and particularly taxes....They respond to positive, aspirational language more than negative statements. They want to invest in the future of rural America and to develop a strong rural economy for their children and grandchildren.

The Surdna research showed that Appalachians tend to see a role for government in incentivizing innovative industries that can create jobs. 46 percent of respondents selected “The government should provide incentives for new innovative industries that can create jobs,” compared to 32 percent who selected “the government should let free market forces decide which industries to grow or decline.”

The rural America poll showed strong support for “more efficient and effective” government and indicated that people apply the core value of fairness to their views of public policy, reflecting a perception among rural Americans that they have not received fair treatment when it comes to public policy.

We detected a definitive anti-government waste/corruption thread in the Surdna research. For example, 59 percent of respondents said the following message was very convincing: “We need to stop wasting billions of taxpayer dollars on failed social experiments and handpicked companies and industries with political connections.”

Rural Americans—and we can imagine this holds true in Appalachia—do not feel as though they have a lot of control over their own economic situation. “This lack of control...combined with their sense that the government has forgotten about them begins to lay the groundwork for their populist beliefs around a lack of faith in big institutions, from government to mega-farms, to Wall Street and banks.”¹⁴

A battery of questions in the Surdna green jobs poll tested how respondents viewed a variety of factors that might prevent an approach to economic growth that uses resources to meet human needs while protecting air, water and land now and for future generations (essentially sustainable growth). The top vote getters for Appalachian voters were 1. Companies and industries that benefit from how things are now will fight against any changes; and 2. This is all big government spending and regulations which we cannot afford right now.

While they are not especially enamored with “government,” Appalachians are patriotic and very responsive to messages about American leadership. The most compelling argument for clean energy and energy efficiency in the West Virginia poll, for example, led with “When it comes to energy, it’s time for

America to lead once again. We must restore our proud tradition of innovation and leadership, starting with pioneering energy solutions like wind and solar right here in West Virginia.”

Local food and energy efficiency

Only one of the surveys we reviewed included questions about energy efficiency and local food. The Surdna research found strong support for buying local food as a way to create economic growth.¹⁵ It found far less enthusiasm for requiring businesses to retrofit existing buildings to make them more energy efficient (14 percent).

QUESTIONS

The research provides a good baseline for the views and values of Appalachian voters, but it also raises an interesting set of questions about how Appalachians view their role in economic development and job creation. The data illuminate Appalachians’ views toward the role of government in incentivizing economic development and the deleterious impact of regulations. But, none of the surveys explore how Appalachians see their respective roles in generating jobs and economic activity.

Do Appalachians see themselves as holding a particular responsibility when it comes to generating economic activity? Or, have the years of dominance by the coal industry and perceived power of the federal government sapped the region’s sense of empowerment and initiative?

The rural America poll found that rural Americans associate owning a business or a farm with the American dream and that they strongly value entrepreneurialism, but it’s unclear to what extent that holds true in Appalachia. Do Appalachians value entrepreneurialism? If so, how does that translate in the Appalachian context? Is it associated with owning or starting a business or running a farm? Are there other activities that embody the values linked to entrepreneurialism – i.e. creativity, self-sufficiency, a can-do attitude and hard-headed determination?

Better understanding the Appalachian mythology and iconography around the American Dream (as a shorthand for securing a better life for one’s children), the region’s contribution toward it and the role of individual citizens in making it happen could help inform a communications strategy for the region. Given the dominant narrative unearthed in the media audit – the deep anxiety over coal’s demise – a powerful narrative is needed to capture the imagination of the region’s citizens and marshal their best thinking and energy toward a brighter future.

¹ 90 percent strongly (39 percent) or somewhat (51 percent) agreed with this approach: “A next generation approach to economic growth focuses on improving our transportation systems, making buildings more energy-efficient and finding ways to use water more efficiently.” The survey tested several ways of framing the same basic initiatives, and the “next generation” language garnered the most support among Appalachian respondents.

² Rural America Survey, PPT page 9.

³ The Rural America survey found that “Rural Americans remain populist Americans. They have distrust for big farms, big cities, big banks and big government....They believe their way of life is fading because these groups are getting ahead and they are not” (PPT page 8). In the Kentucky research, between 59 and 62 percent agreed that “freedom means not having other people and the government interfere in my life.”

⁴ The rural America survey found that the strongest messages speak to small government and traditional values: “Rural and small-town America is a big and important part of what makes America go. We are hard-working, patriotic, faithful and skilled. Making sure our families, our small business owners and our workers have the same choices as everyone else is fair and smart. That means supporting policies like investing more in helping our small businesses get started and bringing technology to our areas so we can be connected to the new economy.”

⁵ Mean score of 9.2 out of 10, and the highest rated priority in the survey.

⁶ Favorability ratings from the West Virginia poll: clean coal = 79 percent; natural gas = 89 percent; wind power = 76 percent; coal companies = 70 percent; renewable energy = 79 percent; clean energy like wind and solar = 78 percent.

⁷ The question asked “When it comes to West Virginia’s energy future, which of the following statements comes closer to your view? West Virginia should emphasize the development of renewable energy, such as wind and solar power; or West Virginia should emphasize production of more oil, gas and coal supplies.” 42 percent selected renewable energy and 48 percent selected fossil fuels.

⁸ The question asked “When it comes to West Virginia’s economic future, which of the following statements comes closer to your view? West Virginia should begin the transition into a more diversified energy economy that relies less on coal jobs; Coal production should continue to play the central role in West Virginia’s economy for many years to come.” 55 percent selected diversified economy and 39 percent selected coal economy.

⁹ 54 percent agreed that “West Virginia should begin the transition into a more diversified economy that relies less on coal jobs” compared to 41 percent who agreed that “Coal production should continue to play the central role in West Virginia’s economy for many years to come.”

¹⁰ West Virginia poll.

¹¹ 44 percent selected “Economic growth should be given priority, even if the environment suffers to some extent versus 19 percent who selected “Protection of the environment should be given priority even at the risk of curbing economic growth.”

¹² 65 percent of West Virginians rate the economy as “fair” or “poor,” compared to 79 percent who indicate the quality of the environment has “gotten better” or “stayed about the same.”

¹³ Coal companies = 70 percent favorable versus 20 percent unfavorable; clean coal = 79 percent favorable versus 12 percent unfavorable; coal industry = 80 percent favorable versus 14 percent unfavorable.

¹⁴ Rural America survey PPT page 7.

¹⁵ 93 percent of respondents agreed that “It’s better to buy local food because it creates local economic growth,” and 79 percent agreed “we should make it easier to get food from local farms to the closest markets.”