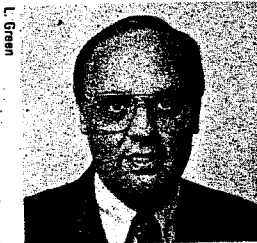




Risk in Perspective

Does the Public Support Risk Analysis?

"It is ironic that the issue with the most public consensus, the reporting of benefits and costs, appears to be the major source of contention in the congressional debates about elevation of EPA to Cabinet status!"



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Until recently the topic of risk analysis aroused little interest on Capitol Hill. During floor debate in the United States Senate about a proposal to elevate the Environmental Protection Agency to Cabinet status, Senator Bennett Johnston (D-LA) offered an amendment calling for systematic use of risk analysis in EPA rulemakings. The amendment passed the Senate by a vote of 95-3.

In the House of Representatives, which is now considering whether EPA should be elevated to Cabinet status, questions have been raised about the proper role of risk analysis. One concern is that, in a democracy, environmental priorities should be set by public opinion, not scientists. A related concern is that the public may not be interested in the technical analyses of risks, benefits, and costs required by the Johnston Amendment. The House is expected to debate the risk analysis issue in 1994. The debate may extend beyond the specifics of the Johnston Amendment and include other proposals to expand or restrict the role of risk analysis in environmental policy.

In order to discern public attitudes toward risk analysis and related questions of environmental policy, HCRA commissioned the survey research firm, Market Facts, Inc. of Cambridge, Massachusetts, to interview 1,000 Americans by telephone. This issue of RISK IN PERSPECTIVE summarizes the results of this survey, which we believe is one of the first to measure public attitudes about risk analysis.

Nuts and Bolts

The survey employed a random digit-dial sampling technique to obtain a representative sample of households in the United States. The interviews were conducted over the weekend of November 5-7, 1993.

The seven statements and the overall numerical results of the survey are displayed on the reverse side of this page.

Basic Results

Like most previous opinion surveys, HCRA's sur-

vey found public attitudes to be broadly sympathetic to the need for more governmental activity to protect the public from pollution. Of particular interest to the current Congressional debate are the following findings:

1. A majority of respondents supports elevation of EPA to Cabinet status.
2. A majority of respondents agrees with a core position of the "environmental equity" movement, that more priority should be given to addressing pollution problems that harm low-income and minority groups.
3. A majority of respondents agrees that the government should use risk analysis when setting priorities for environmental spending.
4. A majority of respondents believes that the EPA should inform the public of the benefits and costs of environmental regulations, a key provision of the Johnston Amendment.

HCRA was surprised about the breadth of public support for risk analysis. It is ironic that the issue with the most public consensus, the reporting of benefits and costs, appears to be the major source of contention in the congressional debates about elevation of EPA to Cabinet status!

Qualifiers

As previous surveys have indicated, the intensity with which the public holds particular viewpoints on environmental policy is not always great. The fraction of respondents who held a viewpoint "strongly" was relatively small on all seven statements. Many respondents probably do not have well-formulated opinions on these issues. This suggests that respondents might indicate a different viewpoint if they were provided more information about these issues.

This initial public opinion survey provides useful baseline information about public attitudes toward the use of risk analysis in environmental policy. As this analytical tool becomes more familiar to citizens in the future, it will be interesting to observe whether public attitudes change.

