

Trends in Irish Environmental Attitudes between 1993 and 2002

First Report of National Survey Data

Summary Report

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First data analysis report of the *Research Programme on Environmental Attitudes, Values and Behaviour in Ireland*, currently being carried out by the Department of Sociology of University College Dublin; the Department of Sociology, Trinity College, Dublin and the Social Science Research Centre, UCD.

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Introduction

This summary note accompanies ***Trends in Irish Environmental Attitudes Between 1993 and 2002***, the first main data report from the Research Programme on Environmental Attitudes, Values and Behaviour in Ireland. The aim of the report is to present the results from the 2001/2002 fielding of a national survey on environmental attitudes developed by the International Social Science Programme (ISSP) and to compare these results with the data from the 1993 fielding of much the same set of questions. The analysis is based on a representative sample survey of 1257 adults interviewed between December 2001 and February 2002.

Despite the considerable turbulence and change in environmentalism between 1993 and 2002, particularly in terms of environmental politics, what is possibly most striking about the analysis of the environmental surveys is that change in response patterns is often quite small.

Political discourses about the environment have evolved significantly in the past ten years, particularly through the advent of the politics of sustainable development as embodied in the ecological modernisation paradigm. Sustainable development has become the dominant language of political talk about the environment, and is also a key influence on policy formation and institutional change. Sustainable development

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encapsulates the paradigm of ecological modernisation, in which environmental and economic goals are seen as aligned, and indeed environmental protection is seen as essential to continued economic growth. A question for this analysis is whether this change in political discourse is matched by changes in types of attitudes and concern expressed by respondents to a national survey.

Attitudes to the environment, science and nature

Certainly, there are discernible attitudinal shifts towards two components of the ecological modernisation discourse; faith in scientific decision making, and rejection of an environmental protection – economic growth dichotomy. Support for both of these themes is growing, as revealed in several related questions. However, in some cases those who do not see an environment/economy opposition might in fact simply be expressing a low regard for environmental prioritisation.

Personal efficacy and motivation

In 2002, more people accept that it is not too difficult for them to 'do something about the environment', and a majority (albeit slightly smaller than in 1993) claim to do what is right for the environment 'even when it costs more money or takes more time.'

There is also an increase in the number of people claiming willingness to pay for environmental protection, although it is notable that more people are willing to pay higher prices than are willing to pay higher taxes. This may be because of an aversion to tax generally and a preference to control payment for the environment through consumer choices. It may also reveal a tendency to respond more positively to questions about behaviour that is more remote or abstract, which is the case with unspecified higher prices as opposed to the more concrete question of higher tax. However, it is notable that between 1993 and 2002 there is more growth in positive responses to the willingness to pay higher tax item than the higher prices item.

Environmental and scientific knowledge

In both 1993 and 2002, responses to scientific knowledge questions reveal a generally low level of such knowledge. In addition, virtually no change in performance is observed over time. However, there is some indication from responses that people understand the important causal links between their own actions and the environmental impacts, which is obviously more important than an understanding of the scientific details. There is also evidence that some of the items are not taken as simple factual questions, but questions of personal values. Specifically, among those expressing formal religious beliefs, negative responses to the question about humans having evolved from animals are much higher.

Specific environmental concern

Among the environmental issues of concern to respondents, the impact of nuclear power plants remains the highest, followed by pollution of rivers and lakes and then industrial pollution. These three were the issues of highest overall concern in both 1993 and 2002. However, the most change is seen in items relating to global environmental impacts; concern about air pollution from cars 'for the environment' and the rise in the world's temperature (climate change) exhibit the most positive shifts over time.

There is a strong shift away from expressions of extreme concern between 1993 and 2002, but no change in the overall levels of concern, when moderate and extreme concern are examined together. Environmental concern, it seems, is becoming embedded in day to day life and normal politics, and is less in the domain of radical or extreme political views.

Analysis suggests that those with more knowledge of the issues tend to express greater environmental concern and commitment.

Responsibility and action

Respondents' views on responsibility and regulation, especially regarding the role of business, are strongly at odds with the ecological modernisation discourse of self-regulation and a pro-business stance. Respondents see 'people in general' as doing most to protect the environment, followed by government and then lastly by business and industry. This pattern is also seen in the very low level of support for business to 'decide for themselves' about environmental protection, and very high support for a regulatory approach. Laws are also supported for 'ordinary people', although not to quite the same extent. For both groups, support for voluntary approaches has fallen over time.

Similar patterns of perceived trustworthiness are seen in responses about who to trust as sources of information on the environment. Universities fare best, business is seen as least trustworthy, followed by newspapers and then government departments.

Environmental behaviour

One area where changing context has had the most impact on the survey results is that of recycling behaviour. There is a dramatic increase in reported recycling, particular away from those reporting that it is not an option for them, as would be expected from the increased availability of facilities over the past decade. However, a similar trend is not seen in relation to cutting back on driving 'for environmental reasons', despite the raised profile of car usage and its impacts in recent years. In terms of political behaviour, formal activism of any kind remains rare.

Socio-demographic patterns

All of these response patterns for both attitudinal and behavioural questions can be examined in terms of the influence of socio-demographic variables, such as age, gender, income and social class. Overall, there is some explanatory power in the set of socio-demographic variables. Both concern and commitment levels generally rise with education levels. Patterns by age are more complex, with the highest expressed concern and commitment occurring in the mid-range categories, and with the youngest age group (18-25) exhibiting among the lowest levels of interest in the issues. Social class is significantly related to many responses, as is respondents' occupational category. In particular, professionals tend to score significantly higher than average in environmental concern and commitment measures and generally higher social classes express more environmental commitment. However, a caveat here is that some measures such as willingness to pay or recycling habits depend on structural factors such as income or access to facilities. The importance of identity related socio-demographic variables, such as occupation type, class and education, suggests that there is a significant cultural, or self-identity related dimension to environmental attitudes.

Conclusions

There is some evidence to suggest that environmentalism is becoming a more mainstream, modern and normal paradigm of concern in Ireland. Certainly, in the 2002 responses there is less extreme environmental concern than in 1993, and less challenge to dominant economic or scientific paradigms. However, people are certainly concerned about the environment, and are strongly supportive of government led responses, through regulation and even through higher prices or taxes where necessary. There is much less support for the perceived polarity between economic growth and environmental protection as political imperatives. The danger remains, however, that if concern becomes more normal and less extreme, that some of the urgency will be lost.

Those that do express willingness to act environmentally tend to be richer and more educated. However, expressed concern does not entirely follow the same pattern, suggesting that environmentalism is not only the domain of more empowered and richer sections of society, rather that certain environmental responses, controlled by say easy access to recycling facilities or high levels of personal mobility or disposable income, are not equally available to all.

Detailed scientific knowledge does not seem to be a significant barrier to environmental support or behaviour. While knowledge of the scientific details of environmental issues is often weak, people seem to understand the implications of their actions and their own personal place in the causality. There is, however, possibly a tendency to express general, abstract, environmental concern or support that does not necessarily translate into real personal motivation.

The data analysed here suggests that very many people have a strong interest in and commitment to environmental protection. However, questions on knowledge, priorities and specific concerns suggest that people have many different understandings of what the environment means. Also, socio-demographic analysis indicates that these responses are influenced by factors such as education level and occupation type. Thus it is clear that there are cultural and social dimensions to how people see the environment and their place in it. An approach to environmental management that relied on a more subtle and flexible definition of people and their environmental motivation could only improve the connection between people's attitudes and behaviour and their wider environmental impacts. Such an approach must start from a better understanding of these issues than is currently present. These themes are the subject of further research, both qualitative and quantitative, as part of the Research Programme on Environmental Attitudes Values and Behaviour in Ireland (2002 – 2004).

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