

**The Correlation Between Political Affiliation and Conservation Hunting Beliefs in the
Willamette Valley**

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Abstract

This research project investigates the correlation between political affiliation and conservation hunting beliefs, focusing on the context of the Willamette Valley. Beliefs in conservation hunting, as a sustainability practice to manage wildlife populations, often intersect with an individual's political ideologies. Through a survey-based approach, this research project investigates if there is a relationship between political party affiliation and attitudes toward conservation hunting. This project considers factors such as intrinsic value perceptions, conservation practices, and funding preferences. The findings within this study reveal that while political affiliation plays a role in shaping conservation beliefs, it is not the sole determinant of attitudes towards conservation hunting. Overall political affiliations, there is broad support for the importance of wildlife conservation and a belief that hunting is a useful practice in population management. This research is helpful in providing insight into the potential support of conservation policies and leaves room for future investigation into a correlation between wildlife value orientations and political affiliation.

KEYWORDS: survey, conservation, wildlife conservation, conservation hunting, wildlife management policies, intrinsic value, political affiliation, political ideology.

Introduction

Political affiliation and conservation beliefs are generally believed to be associated closely with one another. This paper examines conservation hunting which can be defined as hunting that is used to balance ecosystems while maintaining sustainable use. Our research attempts to find if there is a correlation between political party affiliation and conservation hunting. We examine factors like conservation practices, funding, and hunting beliefs. Intrinsic

value, the worth that something inherently has, is also utilized in our research. Through a survey, we attempt to broach this topic among residents of the Willamette Valley.

Literature Review

Wildlife conservation and ecological stewardship have become increasingly important in our modern world. Unfortunately, this issue has become largely politicized in the United States. From an outsider's viewpoint, it seems that political identities play a huge role in a person's conservation beliefs, ranging from beliefs in the importance of conservation itself, the intrinsic value of animals, and practices of conservation.

The United States has many wildlife conservation issues that can be analyzed as case studies, one being the large overpopulation of White-Tailed Deer on the East Coast. Once at risk of extinction just a century ago, the White-Tailed deer has now reached a population so high that it has caused serious threats to ecosystems. This overpopulation can largely be blamed on increasing urbanization that has dramatically reduced the deer's main predators such as cougars, wolves, coyotes, bears, bobcats, and lynx (Williams, 2016). Deer tend to eat a wide variety of plants, most of them being younger and therefore softer, which can make it difficult for the vegetation to recover and mature (Fisher, 2023). Many different species suffer from this deer overpopulation, including humans. Deer also carry an abundance of ticks that can carry Lyme-disease bacteria to other wildlife, humans, and pets. The overpopulation of deer has also caused the deer to suffer themselves as they are starving from a lack of food. There are three current methods to the deer overpopulation problem: either increasing regulated hunting, reintroducing large predators, or reducing the habitat and food availability of the deer dramatically (Litvaitis, 2023). These three methods involve different approaches to conservation,

which in turn influence the policies that are created to respond. Just like in this scenario on the East Coast, differing conservation ideologies and the influence that they exert on our politics are of paramount importance. This is because a better understanding of how people align themselves and what factors might better predict their allegiance could lead to better policy outcomes for conservation and the protection of humans and wildlife.

Generally, predator conservation and management is a highly politicized topic. An example of this wildlife conservation issue in the US is the management of the Rocky Mountain Grey Wolf population. Currently, about 18,000 wolves live in the United States, with Alaska housing $\frac{2}{3}$ of that population (Cole, 2022). While wolf populations are currently increasing, they have a history of near extinction from human influence. Wolves have been a common threat to settlements that humans have tried to eliminate throughout history for centuries. Over time, this resulted in only about 300 wolves within the lower 48 US states. However, the introduction of the Endangered Species Act of 1974 allowed for the wolves' slow comeback with a steady increase in population, eventually leading to their reintroduction to Yellowstone National Park and Idaho (Cole, 2022). Almost immediately the benefits from the wolf reintroduction to Yellowstone appeared. The elk changed their feeding habits, which resulted in new vegetation, which benefited bears by providing more berries (Lampe, 2010). However, hunting groups pushed back as the wolves started to wean down game populations. This complex situation is a perfect example of the different effects and approaches that conservation can take. It proved to be unpopular with hunters who tend to view wolves more negatively than other individuals, and had unintended consequences. When examining this issue, it was discovered that preference for certain conservation methods strongly correlated with political affiliation. Researchers in 2021,

found that Democrats viewed wolves in a positive light, while conservatives tended to hold the wolves in less esteem (van Eeden et al., 2021).

Across the world, conservation is becoming more and more of a supported practice. However, the methods of conservation can cause friction between people who value wildlife differently. Conservation efforts can deny communities that use animals for recreation or as crucial financial and food resources, their much-beloved traditions. Held beliefs on the intrinsic value of wildlife, like the differences between utilitarian and mutualist views, are some of the best predictors of support for conservation. In a utilitarian view, wildlife is viewed as a resource that is managed for the benefit of the people. On the other hand, a mutualist view would see wildlife as the same value as a family member or friend that deserves proper care and rights. For instance, researchers have surveyed opinions of the intrinsic value of wolves and conservation, and the average answers they received back were nearly identical (Lute et al., 2016). Several key groups had positive and negative leans towards either direction, with hunters holding the least supportive viewpoint and animal rights advocates having the most positive. Why the animal is valued is of critical importance when predicting conservation support amongst citizens. How people value an animal is a good predictor of how they will value different conservation practices. Those who value animals more intrinsically tend to avoid conservation practices that are built to benefit humans and favor alternative methods that do not harm the animal (Marvier & Wong, 2012).

When discussing wildlife conservation and conservation hunting as a practice, it is important to discuss the relevance of hunting in the United States. Wildlife management agencies often use hunting regulation (whether increasing or decreasing the number of tags sold) as a common management practice in wildlife species populations. 8.4% (25.87 million) of

Americans participated in hunting in 2021 (VanDerLaan, 2023). Additionally, 525,000 jobs are supported by hunting, and \$8.7 billion is collected in tax revenue (VanDerLaan, 2023). However, the amount of hunters in the US has declined by almost half of what it used to be fifty years ago. The revenue from hunting goes directly to support 60% of the funds for wildlife management agencies (Rott, 2018). With a decrease in hunting, there is a significant loss in funds available to wildlife management, leaving many conservation jobs left unfulfilled. If we do not change this system and fail to provide funding, many more species will become endangered (Rott, 2018). This study provides valuable insight into how hunters are a critical part of the conservation efforts that they seemingly are not in favor of. This provides powerful reasoning as to why public policies need better information on the actual opinions of hunting and non-hunting individuals to create palatable policies for both groups.

Across the United States, a cultural shift toward belief in mutualism has been occurring. Hunters and other people who tend to hold more utilitarian values, where animals are resources, sometimes feel at odds with this shift and have reacted by distrusting their government's conservation efforts through its agencies. This distrust is amplified in states that are more mutualist, for instance in Oregon where mutualism is common, barely 60% of domination-oriented people stated that they commonly trust their state wildlife agency (Manfredo et al., 2017). This is seen again in another study done by Schroeder et al. (2021), which again found stakeholder groups that are more likely to follow the domination belief were very distrustful of their state wildlife management agency. Beliefs tended to be correlated with political parties, with utilitarians (domination) tending to favor conservative views. However, throughout both studies, there are indications that there are healthy populations of both liberal and conservative hunters who harbor this distrust. The Theodore Roosevelt Conservation

Partnership surveyed 1,000 hunters and anglers about their standing on conservation and what political ideology they aligned with. Between the two groups, there was little difference in anthropocentric conservation beliefs regardless of political affiliation (Brady, 2017). This meant that the respondents found conserving wilderness or animals for the sake of human use to be completely agreeable which points to hunters leaning towards more utilitarian values. It is not unreasonable to assume that most hunters identify with this more anthropocentric view and both of these journals indicate that it may be worldviews that divide conservation beliefs instead of political parties.

It is evident that the United States faces several pressing conservation issues that require urgent change. Given the politicization of environmental matters and our political systems fund the vast majority of conservation efforts, it is crucial to understand the intersection between these issues and political dynamics. As an example of the importance of American policy and its effect on conservation, the federal government in 2014 funded nearly 90% of all conservation efforts alone (Smith & Molde, 2014). Therefore, understanding how political affiliation may influence opinion on public policy is essential. Political affiliation could be a strong indicator of different conservation beliefs and environmental worldviews (Czech & Borkhataria, 2001). Or alternatively, there may be less of a gap between moderate Americans when it comes to conservation, with only the extremes being commonly polarized (Casola et al., 2022). Again, worldview might be the deciding factor when it comes to observation beliefs. Gaining insight into what residents of the Willamette Valley actually believe will help to better understand how polarized conservation actually is, and that will translate into better prediction of constituency support. Regardless of the outcome of the true correlation between political affiliation and

wildlife conservation beliefs, research in this area will provide policymakers with insightful guidance.

The background research can seem contradictory, but when cross-examined it provides valuable information on how different populations align themselves in regards to conservation and political affiliation. In some instances, people are closely aligned with political and conservation beliefs. However, in many others, political affiliation holds less sway. Discovering what holds true for the residents of the Willamette Valley will provide a valuable window into potential policy decisions that can make all the difference for conservation. Not only will these results have tangible benefits with the decisions that can be made from them, but our research will add to a field that is in need of more research. Conservation hunting or its less direct alternatives provide the perfect tool to examine conservation in order to better understand the complexities of general conservation beliefs. This study will add and inspire others to use conservation hunting as a catalyst for complex conservational research.

Research Question

In this research project, we address the question “In the Willamette Valley, is political affiliation a predictor of conservation hunting beliefs?” This question will examine if there is a correlation between an individual’s political affiliation and belief in hunting as a conservation management practice.

Methods

The data gathered for this project was collected through a Google Forms survey, which was sent out on April 1, 2024, and closed on April 12, 2024. The survey included 17 questions that would take the respondent approximately 5 minutes to answer. To see the questions and

answer options, see Table 1 below. Responses were collected through a convenience sample from Salem, Dallas, and students at Willamette University. These responses were also collected strategically to capture even political affiliation demographics properly. The survey was anonymous so that respondents felt that they could answer the questions truthfully. Participants were informed that the data collected in this survey, not individual responses, would be shared through a class presentation and paper. The survey title, “Conservation Hunting Beliefs in the Willamette Valley”, omitted details about the research objective of correlating political affiliation with conservation hunting beliefs to prevent bias in respondents’ answers. Political affiliation and ideology questions were listed at the end of the survey to prevent the same bias.

	Question	Response Options
1	Have you ever hunted or are interested in hunting?	Yes No
2	What are your general attitudes towards hunting?	Very positive Mostly positive Neutral Mostly negative Very negative
3	Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements(s). Humans have more intrinsic value than animals. <i>Intrinsic value:</i> the value of something’s worth in itself on its own, not the value of its usefulness.	Strongly agree Agree Somewhat agree Neutral Somewhat disagree Disagree Strongly disagree
4	There are some species of animals that have more intrinsic value than other species of animals. <i>Intrinsic value:</i> the value of	Strongly agree Agree Somewhat agree Neutral Somewhat disagree

	something's worth in itself on its own, not the value of its usefulness.	Disagree Strongly disagree
5	Animals should have the same rights as humans.	Strongly agree Agree Somewhat agree Neutral Somewhat disagree Disagree Strongly disagree
6	Hunting, when done in proper and skilled practice to minimize pain felt by the animal, is humane.	Strongly agree Agree Somewhat agree Neutral Somewhat disagree Disagree Strongly disagree
7	If a predator was threatening the lives of a farmer's/rancher's livestock, the farmer/rancher has the right to hunt the predator.	Strongly agree Agree Somewhat agree Neutral Somewhat disagree Disagree Strongly disagree
8	I believe that wildlife conservation is important.	Strongly agree Agree Somewhat agree Neutral Somewhat disagree Disagree Strongly disagree
9	I believe that hunting for sport is acceptable.	Strongly agree Agree Somewhat agree Neutral Somewhat disagree Disagree Strongly disagree
10	I believe that hunting for food is acceptable.	Strongly agree Agree Somewhat agree Neutral

		Somewhat disagree Disagree Strongly disagree
11	I believe that hunting for conservation is acceptable.	Strongly agree Agree Somewhat agree Neutral Somewhat disagree Disagree Strongly disagree
12	Suppose wolves were overpopulated and threatening the survival of a deer population. Which of the following is the best option?	Hunting the wolves to protect the deer. Paying an additional fee to create an alternative removal option for the wolves. Leaving the ecosystem alone to let nature sort it out.
13	Suppose an invasive species was threatening the lives of native species. Which of the following is the best option?	Hunting the invasive species to protect the native species. Paying an additional fee to create an alternative removal option for the invasive species.
14	Suppose there was an animal species that was overpopulated and starving. Which of the following is the best option?	Hunting some of the population to protect the rest of the population. Paying an additional fee to create an alternative removal option for a section of the population. Leaving the ecosystem alone to let nature sort it out.
15	How would you rate your political ideology?	Very conservative Conservative Somewhat conservative Moderate/middle of the road Somewhat liberal Liberal Very liberal
16	What political affiliation do you identify with?	Republicans Democrat

		Independent Libertarian Other
17	Please rate your level of agreement with the following statement(s). I consider myself an environmentalist.	Strongly agree Agree Somewhat agree Neutral Somewhat disagree Disagree Strongly disagree

Table 1: Questions used in the survey and the answer options that respondents were asked to choose from.

After the survey closed, the responses were then exported into a CSV file in Excel. Certain questions were then selected to be used to analyze our research question specifically. The survey contained numerous questions, enabling specific questions to be chosen for in-depth analysis. The filtered data was then used in the software R to generate graphs. Through this process, questions that prompted an answer with a level of agreement from strongly agree to strongly disagree (see Table 1 above) were simplified to “agree”, “disagree”, or “neutral”, except for one question. Each question was filtered and analyzed through political affiliation. The graphs for this research include count data, instead of percentages, to analyze the results in terms of the small sample size of Willamette Valley citizens that was collected. After a graph was created for each question, the results of each graph were interpreted visually. These interpretations were used to answer the research question.

Results

The survey collected 39 responses. These 39 respondents from Salem, Willamette University, and Dallas had a mostly even distribution of political parties, which was important to capture for our research purposes. The survey respondents included eleven Republicans, eight Democrats, ten Independents, one Libertarian, and nine participants that selected “other”. Our

results also included one Libertarian. See Figure 1 below for a pie chart of political affiliation demographics collected in this study. For the purposes of this research study, the majority of focus will be on Republicans and Democrats.

Political Affiliation Demographics of Survey Respondents

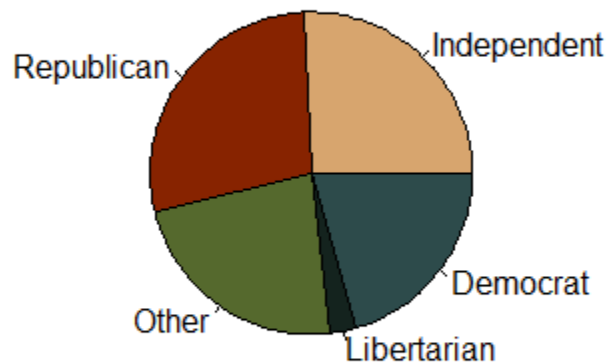


Figure 1: A pie chart of political affiliation demographics collected in the survey data.

The first question that was selected to be used was “I believe that wildlife conservation was important.” where participants were prompted to answer with a scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree (see Table 1 above for the agreement scale). See Figure 2 below for the graph for this question. Every single participant in this survey agreed with this statement. For this reason, the results of this question were left with the original “strongly agree”, “agree”, and “somewhat agree” answers. In every party, the most popular belief was “strongly agree”. Relatively, Democrats had the largest strong agreement with seven responses for “strongly agree” and one response for “agree”. Republicans had eight responses for “strongly agree” and three responses for “agree”. Independents had the closest count between these two responses, with five responses for “strongly agree” and four responses for “agree”. The Independent party

also had the only response which answered with “somewhat agree”. Participants who identified with other political parties counted six responses in “strongly agree” and three responses in “agree”. The one Libertarian response answered with “strongly agree”.

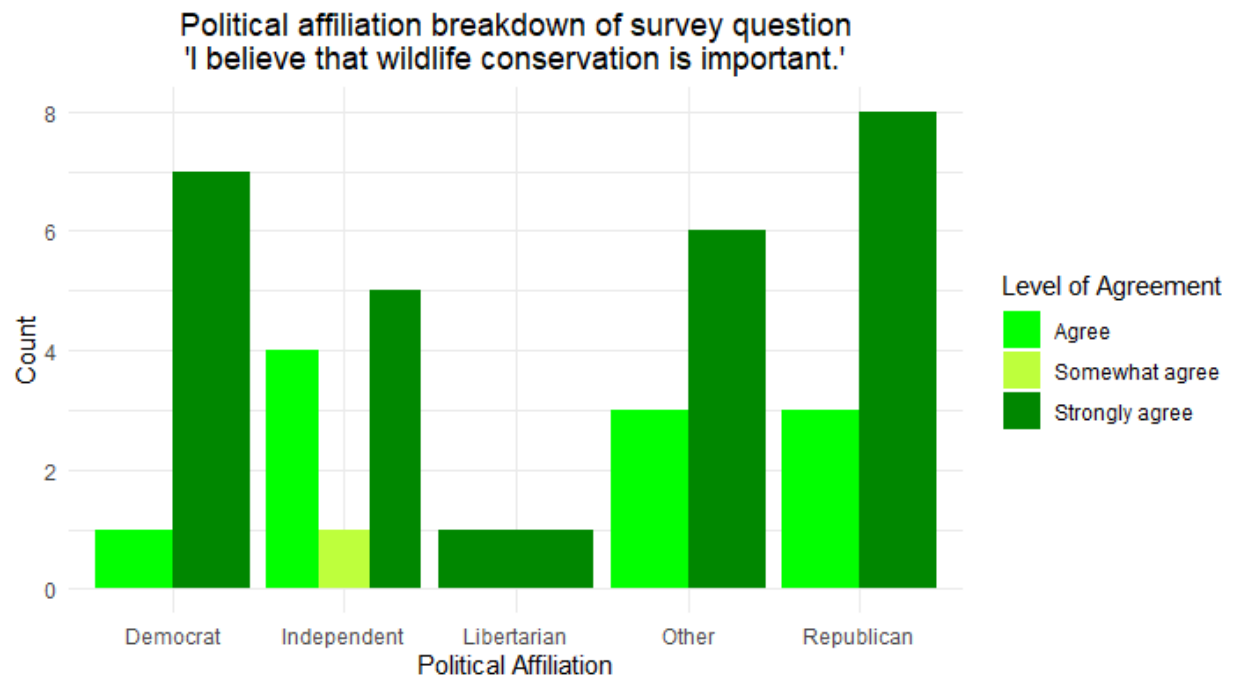


Figure 2: A bar chart displaying the responses gathered when a participant was asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement “I believe that wildlife conservation is important”. These responses are filtered through political affiliation.

The second question chosen was another question where survey participants were prompted with the same agreement scale with the statement “Hunting, when done in proper and skilled practice to minimize pain felt by the animal, is humane.” See Figure 3 below for a graph of responses for this question. These responses to this question were simplified to “agree”, “disagree”, or “neutral”. Overall, there was a large agreement among participants. All eleven responses from the Republican party agreed with the statement. Democrats had six responses that agreed, one response that disagreed, and one response that was neutral. Independents had nine responses that agreed with one response that disagreed. Respondents from other parties counted

seven responses that agreed and two responses that disagreed. The one Libertarian response also agreed with the statement.

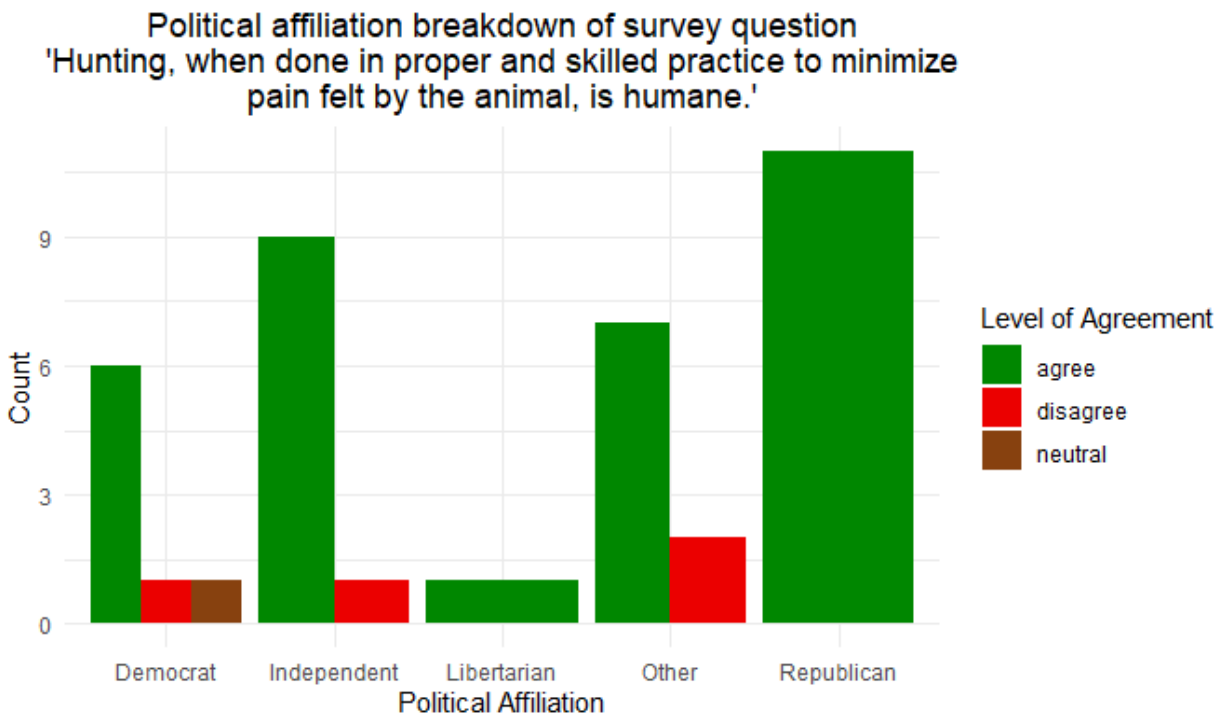


Figure 3: A bar chart displaying the responses gathered when a participant was asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement “Hunting, when done in proper and skilled practice to minimize pain felt by the animal, is humane”. These responses are filtered through political affiliation.

The third question chosen for this research was another statement with an agreement scale. This question collected the level of agreement with the statement “I believe that hunting for conservation is acceptable”. See Figure 4 below. Similarly to the previous question, all parties generally agree with the statement. The only response for disagreement was from a response from the “other” political affiliation category and two responses from Democrats answered with “neutral”.

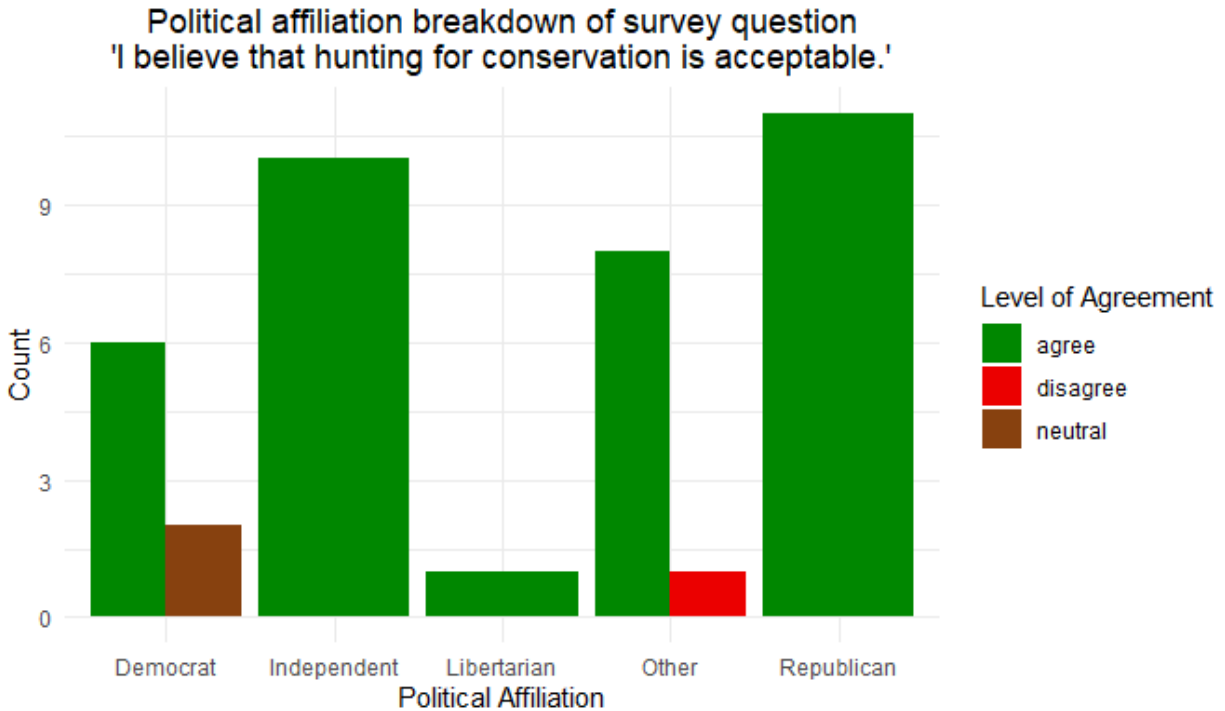


Figure 4: A bar chart displaying the responses gathered when a participant was asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement “I believe that hunting for conservation is acceptable”. These responses are filtered through political affiliation.

The next question chosen for analysis was “Suppose wolves were overpopulated and threatening the survival of a deer population. Which of the following is the best option?”. See Figure 5 below. Among every political party, except for Republicans, the most popular answer was “Paying an additional fee to create an alternative removal option for the wolves”. Of these parties, few responses answered with the solution “Hunting the wolves to protect the deer” or “Leaving the ecosystem alone to let nature sort it out”. Democrats had six responses for paying an additional fee for an alternative, one response for hunting the wolves, and one response for leaving the ecosystem alone. Independents had six responses for paying an additional fee and two responses each for hunting the wolves and leaving the ecosystem alone. Participants from other political parties counted five responses for paying an additional fee and two responses each for hunting and leaving the ecosystem alone. The one Libertarian response chose the additional

fee option as well. For the Republican party, the survey data collected the opposite reaction where hunting the wolves to protect the deer was the most popular answer. Seven participants answered that hunting the wolves, three respondents said paying an additional fee, and one participant answered that leaving the ecosystem alone.

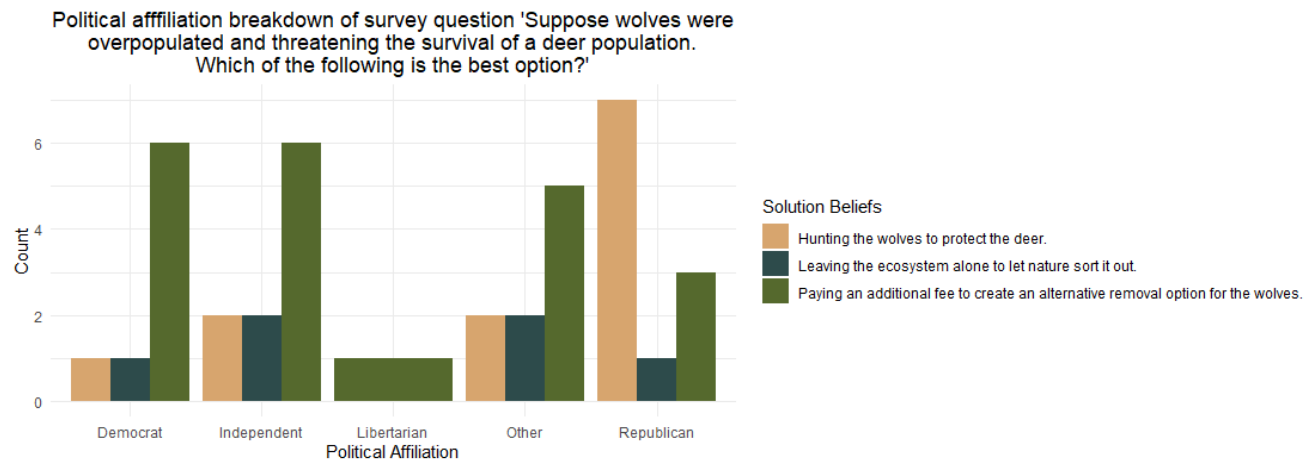


Figure 5: A bar chart displaying the responses gathered when a participant was asked to answer the question “Suppose wolves were overpopulated and threatening the survival of a deer population. Which of the following is the best option?”. These responses are filtered through political affiliation.

The fifth question chosen for analysis was “Suppose an invasive species was threatening the lives of native species. Which of the following is the best option?”. See Figure 6 below.

Among all political parties, there was an increase in answers that stated that “Hunting the invasive species to protect the native species” was the best option. However, all political parties also had mixed beliefs. Democrats had an even split between hunting the invasive species and paying an additional fee to create an alternative removal option for the native species (four responses each). Independents had seven responses for hunting the invasive species, two responses for paying a fee to create an alternative method, and one response for leaving the ecosystem alone. Survey participants had four responses for hunting, three for paying an additional fee, and two for leaving the ecosystem alone. Republicans had eight answers in favor

of hunting and three for paying an additional fee. The Libertarian response answered in favor of hunting the invasive species as well.

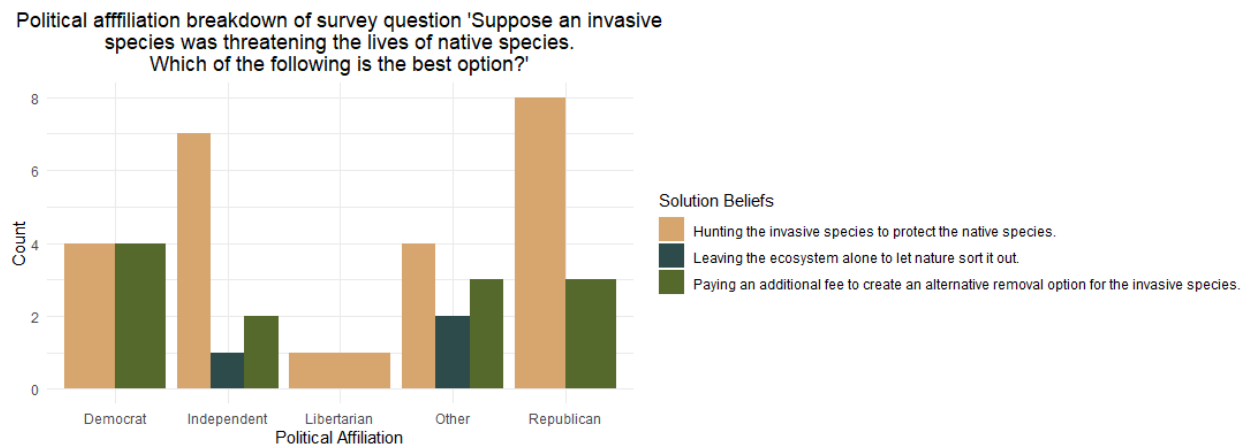


Figure 6: A bar chart displaying the responses gathered when a participant was asked to answer the question “Suppose an invasive species was threatening the lives of native species. Which of the following is the best option?”. These responses are filtered through political affiliation.

The last question used was another statement with an agreement scale. This question collected the level of agreement with the statement “Humans have more intrinsic value than animals”. See Figure 7 below. This question resulted in a large polarization between Republicans and Democrats. All eleven Republican responses agreed with this statement, while six of the Democrat responses disagreed and the other two responses were neutral. Independents had eight responses that agreed, one response that disagreed, and one was neutral. Respondents from other political parties counted included five responses that disagreed and four responses that agreed. The one Libertarian participant answered in agreement with the question statement.

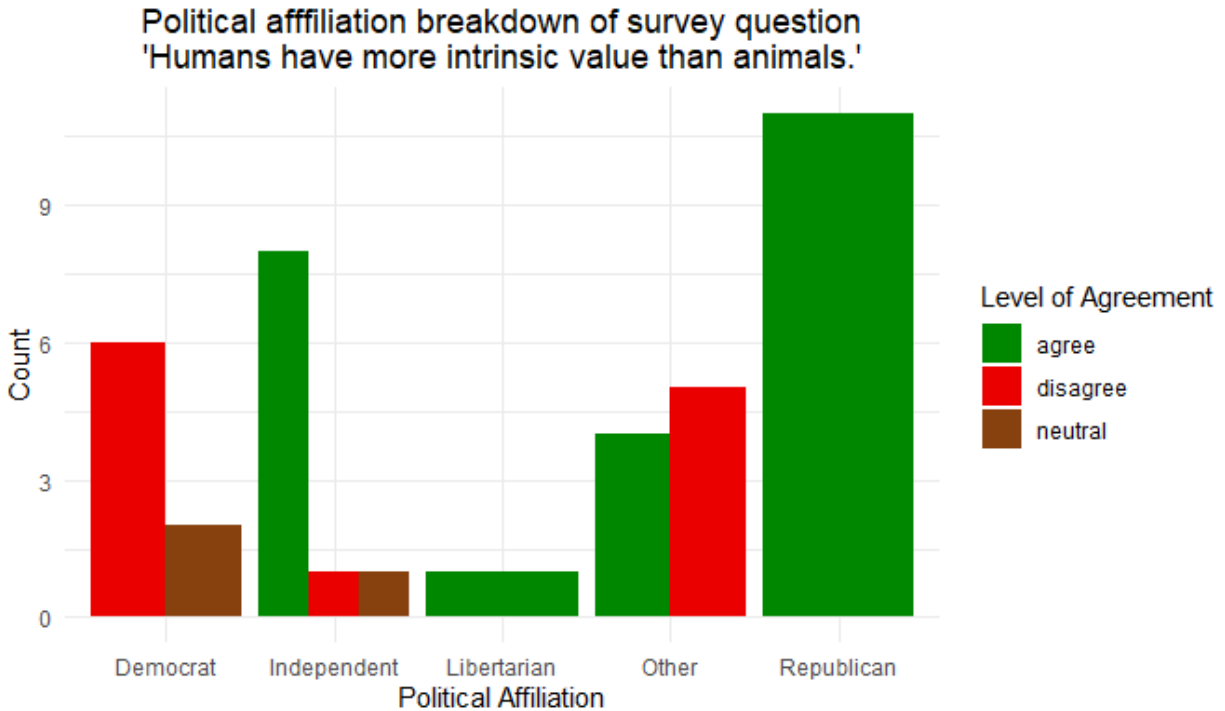


Figure 7: A bar chart displaying the responses gathered when a participant was asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement “Humans have more intrinsic value than animals”. These responses are filtered through political affiliation.

Discussion

Our study answers our research question and finds several additional correlations between political affiliation and conservation related beliefs. We found that respondents of all political parties widely agreed on a host of different issues and their importance. Conservation generally is unanimously supported as important by all respondents—none were in disagreement. Belief in humane hunting is similarly supported across the parties with a small minority disagreeing. Conservation hunting, the focus of our research, is broadly discovered to be supported by most parties and individuals. Republicans, Independents, and Libertarians all unanimously support the use of conservation hunting. Even among the parties who did not have complete agreement, there was only one disagreement response with conservation hunting. These results answer our research question and correlate with Casola et al. (2022)’s findings on

the polarization of conservation only occurring in the extremes. With the assumption that our respondents are not political extremists, our research supports this finding because of the wide agreement between parties. This adds to existing research by providing a viewpoint on how conservation hunting follows the general trends of conservation. Throughout our findings, political affiliation alone is a weak predictor of conservation beliefs. This can be seen in our survey data through the lack of significant differences between parties regardless of the issue. It is our belief that political affiliation does not necessarily capture all of a person's ideologies. We believe conservation hunting and wildlife conservation beliefs are influenced by other, deeper values than political ideology, which is why we do not see a significant difference between parties and their responses.

Additionally, we gathered information on different forms of conservation and support given by different political parties. According to our survey, Democrats, Libertarians, Independents, and participants who selected "other" as their political affiliation significantly favored paying additional funds for non-lethal conservation methods. Throughout our survey, Republicans consistently voted in favor of hunting and hunting conservation whenever possible. This is an example of a potential correlation between Manfredo et al. (2017) and Schroeder et al. (2022)'s research that Republicans harbor distrust in their government-managed conservation. Conservation hunting tends to involve less government interference as it is managed by individual hunters and is less institutionalized. Versus what an alternative fee would involve which would be government intervention, as most conservation is funded and managed by the government. Since Republicans tend to distrust government-managed conservation, we believe this could be a reason why Republicans tend to favor hunting as a wildlife conservation practice.

An interesting caveat about conservation methods is that most parties support conservation hunting of animals if they are invasive. The most drastic change is seen in the Independent category with the vast majority now supporting hunting, whereas the opposite is seen in the previous survey question about non-invasive wolves. Political affiliation turns out to be a strong and reliable predictor of support for certain conservation management practices. This is of extreme importance for conservation because policymakers could use this data to create more popular policies. Policy is the most significant method of conservation as the government funds the vast majority, further enhancing the value of understanding policy support.

The final category examined by our research is the link between belief in the intrinsic value of animals and political affiliation. Democrats and individuals who selected “other” as their political affiliation, had the highest intrinsic value ratings while Republicans and Independents favored anthropocentric views. Intrinsic value of animals directly relates to two different wildlife value orientations, those being Mutualist and Utilitarian. In turn, we can see a potential correlation between wildlife value orientations and support for conservation hunting. The word potential is used intentionally because while there could be a correlation, we do not have the necessary data to support causation. This directly ties into valuable future research, which should include investigating the link between wildlife value orientations and conservation beliefs directly. Another area of future research is investigating the relationship between wildlife value orientations and conservation management policy support. Such research could reveal whether wildlife value orientations are accurate predictors of conservation hunting and wildlife conservation beliefs. This could allow policy makers to accurately predict support for conservation policies. With knowledge into policy support, environmental policies would likely

have more success and conservation efforts would be more effective. For a visualization of all of our research findings, see Figure 8 below.

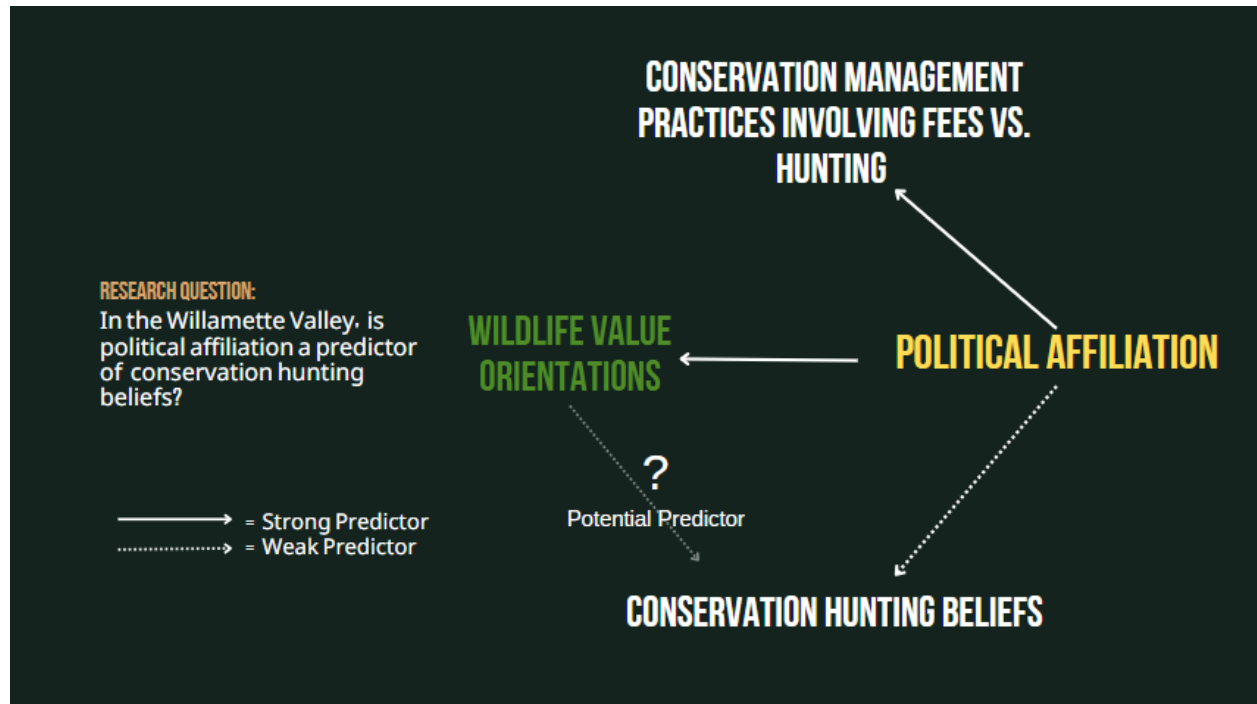


Figure 7: This image displays a visualization of the implications of this research project.

An obvious limitation of our research would be the small sample size. Since our survey only collected 39 responses, our research had a limited ability to truly capture the beliefs of people in the Willamette Valley and therefore has low generalizability. The survey also only included participants from two locations, Salem and Dallas. This presents another constraint within the boundaries of our research. Another limitation is that our survey responses were simplified from the original agreement scale range (see Table 1) to “agree”, “disagree” and neutral. While this method of analyzing made our data simpler to interpret, the results of our data therefore do not grasp the complexity of degree of concordance that respondents had with the survey question statements.

Conclusion

Conservation hunting is not a politically polarized issue in the Willamette Valley. Some people have differing opinions on conservation hunting, but they cannot be accurately predicted by political affiliation. The majority supports the use of conservation hunting where they believe it to be warranted. Political affiliation does have a direct connection to preferred methods of conservation and the funding for said methods. While the general idea of conservation hunting is supported across all parties, future research should address ties between wildlife value orientations and preference for conservation hunting. This could show how political affiliation links to conservation hunting beliefs because political affiliation is a strong predictor of wildlife value orientations. The more accurate data that is gathered on how constituency support can be better understood, the more comprehensive government policies could become, better improving conservation for all.

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