

## THE URBAN GROWTH ISSUE: PERCEPTIONS AND POSITIONS

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates urban residents positions on the issue of restrictive growth. The relationship between positions on this issue and support for the mere general issue of environmental quality is found to be weak. In addition, many of the variables that others have found to be related to support for environmental quality are not found to be related to support for restrictive growth. The only reasons for support that emerge from this study are economic.

### INTRODUCTION

Urban growth has, until recently, been assumed necessary for prosperity. This assumption is currently under attack. Many local governments are directing campaigns against urban growth [1]. They are adopting building and zoning policies to restrict the size of their communities.

There is considerable disagreement within the academic community concerning the consequences of restrictive growth policies [2]. Opponents of the policies argue that growth is necessary to maintain employment [3] and to maintain an adequate supply of reasonably priced housing [4, 5]. Advocates of the policies argue that current levels of urban growth will eventually destroy public service delivery and the quality of urban life [6].

The growth issue also has a political dimension. Residents of many urban communities are being asked to choose among local political candidates on the basis of the candidates' positions on the growth issue. The fact that the issue is being used by residents to make political choices, and the fact that resident perceptions are unlike academic perceptions [7], make the study of resident

perceptions important. What is the distribution of opinion among residents on the growth issue? What do residents feel will be the impact of a restrictive growth policy on the quality of urban life? What is the relationship between positions on this issue and positions on other issues? This paper addresses each of these questions.

## BACKGROUND

The recent and remarkable increase in public attention to the environmental quality issue—an issue with which the urban growth issue is often associated—has generated interest in examining the issue's sources of support. The initial assumption that support is universal has been the subject of numerous empirical studies. The studies have not validated the assumption. Most have found that support is related to demographic characteristics [8]. It occurs more frequently among the young and the educated. These same studies have not found consistent evidence on the relationship between support and political characteristics. Munton and Brady [9] and Dillman and Christenson [10] found party identification and support for environmental quality to be unrelated. Tognacci, et al. [11] and Constantini and Hanf [12] found the opposite. And, although Dunlap and Gale [13] found party identification and support for environmental quality to be unrelated, they did find political ideology and support to be related.

A number of other studies have tried to establish the dimensions of environmental quality [14, 15]. These studies are supposed to provide information that policy makers can use to maintain and improve environmental quality. They specify environmental characteristics that are used by residents to evaluate environmental quality.

Neither of these groups of studies investigates the formation of positions on the environmental quality issue. What trade-offs do residents perceive to be associated with the protection of environmental quality? What role do these perceptions play in the formation of issue positions? How important is the environmental quality issue relative to other issues? This study addresses these questions by focusing on growth.

## METHOD

The data presented in this study were obtained from telephone interviews with 455 randomly selected adults residing in the San Diego metropolitan area. The sample was weighted by age, sex, education, and ethnicity to represent the 1970 U.S. census of non-institutionalized adults residing in the San Diego Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA). The surveys were conducted in the spring of 1977.

Growth was a major issue in the last two local elections. The survey included a number of items about the issue and about the perceived impacts that a growth

restriction would have on various aspects of urban life. Respondents were asked whether they felt a growth restriction would worsen, have no effect, or improve aspects such as crime rate, employment, housing quality, tax rate, etc. Most of the items used in this study were presented to respondents in a Likert-type format.

## FINDINGS

Opinion on the growth issue is evenly split. 41.4 per cent of the respondents oppose the adoption of a restrictive growth policy and 43.8 per cent support it. Only 14.8 per cent of the respondents had not given any thought to the issue.

### Demographic Characteristics

The data fail to indicate a consistent relationship between demographic characteristics and support for a restrictive growth policy. The relationships between support and income, education, occupation, and age are given in Table 1 (a-d). Fewer than four percentage points separate levels of support in the three income categories and fewer than eight percentage points separate levels of support in the three education categories.

Table 1. Position on the Restrictive Growth Issue by  
Income, Education, Occupation and Age

<i>(a) INCOME</i>					
<i>Position</i>	<i>Less Than \$10,000</i>	<i>\$10,000- \$20,000</i>	<i>More Than \$20,000</i>		
Against	46.1%	49.5%	46.7%	gamma = .01 N.S.	
For	53.9	50.5	53.3		
(N)	91	113	90		
<i>(b) EDUCATION</i>					
<i>Position</i>	<i>High School</i>	<i>Some College</i>	<i>College Graduate</i>		
Against	48.0%	53.7%	45.8%	gamma = .03 N.S.	
For	52.0	46.3	54.2		
(N)	233	80	48		
<i>(c) OCCUPATION</i>					
<i>Position</i>	<i>White Collar</i>	<i>Blue Collar</i>	<i>Retired</i>		
Against	47.1%	48.3%	57.1%		
For	52.9	51.7	42.9		
(N)	153	118	70		
<i>(d) AGE</i>					
<i>Position</i>	<i>18-29</i>	<i>30-44</i>	<i>45-54</i>	<i>55-64</i>	<i>65+</i>
Against	52.0%	38.1%	40.0%	55.8%	52.1%
For	48.0	61.9	60.0	44.2	47.9
(N)	125	97	35	52	48

The only difference in levels of support in the occupational categories is between those who are employed and those who are retired. Retired people are less likely than employed people to support a restrictive growth policy. The difference in levels of support among white and blue collar workers is negligible.

The relationship between age and support is curvilinear. Young and elderly are less likely than middle-aged people to support a restrictive growth policy. The low level of support among the elderly is predictable from the low level of support among retired people. The low level of support among the young may reflect their difficulty in entering an inflated housing market.

There are discrepancies between these and other findings on the impact that demographic characteristics have on environmental issue. In other studies, income and education were found to be related to concern for the environment [10, 16]. And, concern among the young has been found to be stronger than among other age groups [16]. These discrepancies may be due to differences in local environments or they may be due to the fact that the growth issue is not viewed by urban residents as an environmental issue. The possibility that the discrepancies are the result of differences in local environments could account for other previously noted discrepancies [17] between the findings of large [9] and localized studies [11].

**Political Characteristics**

There is a moderate relationship between political party affiliation and level of support for a restrictive growth policy. Table 2a indicates that level of support is higher among Democrats (55.6%) than among Republicans (43.4%). However, this relation does not extend to political ideology. Table 2b indicates that conservatives and liberals exhibit about the same level of support (52.8% and 54.5%) for restrictive growth policies.

Table 2. Position on the Restrictive Growth Issue by Political Party Affiliation and Political Ideology

<i>(a) Party Affiliation</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Republican</i>	<i>Independent</i>	<i>Democrat</i>	
	Against	56.6%	46.1%	44.4%	gamma = .16 p < .05
	For	43.4	53.9	55.6	
	(N)	113	88	123	
<i>(b) Political Ideology</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Conservative</i>	<i>Middle</i>	<i>Liberal</i>	
	Against	47.2%	51.3%	45.5%	gamma = .01 N.S.
	For	52.8	48.7	54.5	
	(N)	106	122	66	

## Perceptions of Impacts

Few respondents were unable to answer an open-ended question about the benefits of a restrictive growth policy. 89.4 per cent of those who support adoption and 81.7 per cent of those who oppose adoption were able to come up with a reason in favor of adoption. These findings are described in Table 3a. Respondents found it more difficult to answer an open-ended question about the liabilities of a restrictive growth policy. As Table 3b indicates, only 61.8 per cent of those who oppose adoption and only 35.8 per cent of those who support adoption were able to come up with a reason against adoption. These findings suggest that those who support a restrictive growth policy are less likely than their opponents to see the merits of the other position.

Respondents were also asked about the effects of a restrictive growth policy on a number of specific aspects of urban life. They were asked if they felt the adoption of a policy would improve, have no effect, or worsen employment opportunities, crime rate, tax rate, housing quality, and air quality. Responses concerning effects on three of these aspects—crime rate, tax rate and housing quality—were found to be related to respondents' positions on the growth issue. Those who felt that restrictive growth would improve these aspects were much more likely than those who did not to favor a restrictive growth policy (see Table 4 (a-c)). Perceptions of the effect of restrictive growth on air quality and employment opportunities were not as closely related to respondents' positions on the issue (see Tables 4 (d, e)).

It should be noted that there was little disagreement among respondents about the effects of restrictive growth on air quality and crime rate. Only 12.2 per cent of the respondents feel that restrictive growth will worsen air quality and only 17.8 per cent feel it will worsen the crime rate. This fact make crime rate less important in determining positions on growth than the above results would indicate. Reduced crime and improved air quality are generally conceded to be among the benefits of a restrictive growth policy. However, recognition of these and other similar benefits does not appear to be sufficient for policy support. Many policy opponents recognize these benefits.

Table 3. Willingness to Express Reasons For and Against Restrictive Growth by Position on the Issue

	<i>Position</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>(N)</i>	
(a) Reason For	Against	18.3%	81.7%	181	gamma = .19 p < .05
	For	10.6	89.4	191	
(b) Reason Against	Against	38.2%	61.8%	181	gamma = .30 p < .05
	For	64.2	35.8	191	

Table 4. Position on the Restrictive Growth Issue by Perception of Impact on Crime Rate, Tax Rate, Housing Quality, Employment Opportunity, and Air Quality

	<i>Position</i>	<i>Better</i>	<i>No Effect</i>	<i>Worse</i>	
(a) Crime Rate	Against	40.0%	57.3%	64.3%	gamma = .35 p < .05
	For	60.0	42.7	35.7	
	(N)	174	94	58	
(b) Tax Rate	Against	46.2	35.5	63.6	gamma = .25 p < .05
	For	53.8	64.5	36.4	
	(N)	104	98	118	
(c) Housing Quality	Against	43.1	47.9	57.8	gamma = .21 P < .05
	For	56.9	52.1	42.2	
	(N)	144	78	110	
(d) Air Quality	Against	46.0	67.2	43.4	gamma = .16 N.S.
	For	54.0	32.8	56.6	
	(N)	241	62	42	
(e) Employment Opportunity	Against	46.3	39.2	55.2	gamma = .12 N.S.
	For	53.7	60.8	44.8	
	(N)	153	55	125	

### A MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS

Because there are moderate relationships between a number of the variables studied and position on the restrictive growth issue, a final attempt will be made to explain positions in terms of a combination of variables. The attempt employs a discriminant analysis. This technique, described in Nie, et al. [18] and in Aldrich and Cnudde [19], is designed for problems involving categorical independent variables. It is used in this study to discriminate between those who support and those who oppose a restrictive growth policy.

Two independent variables are used in this analysis: political party affiliation and an effect index. The effect index is additive. Each respondent's score on the index is determined by the number of urban life aspects that a restrictive growth policy is perceived to worsen. The five aspects described in the previous section are the basis for the index. Respondents' scores on the index range from zero to five.

The results of the discriminant analysis suggest that neither party affiliation nor perception of the effects of a restrictive growth policy on the five aspects studied is influential in shaping respondents' opinions on the restrictive growth

issue. The canonical correlation for the derived function is only .23, and Wilks' lambda is .95. The square of a canonical correlation can be interpreted in much the same way as the square of a multiple regression coefficient [18]. Accordingly, the discriminant function determined by the "most discriminating" linear combination of the effect index and party identification cannot account for position on the restrictive growth issue. Wilks' lambda varies from zero to one, and is an inverse measure of the discriminating power of the two independent variables. Thus, neither of the variables has much of an impact on respondents' position on restrictive growth.

Another indication that the relationships between the independent variables and position on growth are weak can be found in the classification predictions derived from the discriminant analysis. On the basis of the discriminant function, respondents are classified as members of the support group or as members of the opponents. The results of these predictions can then be compared with actual memberships to measure the power of the function. The comparisons are made in Table 5. The function predicted correctly for only 61.4 per cent of the respondents. At best, this is only a marginal improvement over random prediction. Thus, it must be concluded that the variables are not very important in determining respondents' positions on the growth issue.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study analyzed the political dimension of an issue that is often associated with environmental quality—restrictive growth. The analysis raises some doubts as to whether urban residents actually perceive the growth issue as an environmental issue. First, demographic and political characteristics were found to be related to positions on the growth issue in different ways than they have been found by others to be related to positions on the more general issue of environmental quality. Second, respondents' perceptions about the impact that a restrictive growth policy would have on a specific aspect of environmental

Table 5. Relationship Between Actual Position on the Restrictive Growth Issue and Position Predicted by the Discriminant Analysis

		<i>Predicted Position</i>		
		<i>Oppose</i>	<i>Support</i>	<i>(N)</i>
Actual	Oppose	58.6%	41.4%	153
Position	Support	35.8	64.2	158
		correct predictions as percentage of total 61.4%		

quality (air quality) were not found to be related to their positions on the growth issue. Although most respondents (70%) realize that air quality would improve under a restrictive growth policy, they do not consider this to be important enough for them to support such a policy.

Positions on the growth issue's political dimension do not appear to be based on support for environmental quality. The fact that positions on the issue are more closely related to perceived effects on tax rate and housing quality suggests that growth is perceived by urban residents as an economic issue rather than an environmental issue. However, any conclusions as to the nature of the growth issue's political dimension must be made with caution. The results of the multivariate analysis indicate that most of the variation in position is unexplainable in terms of the variables considered.

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