

LETTER OPEN ACCESS

Support for the US Endangered Species Act Is High and Steady Over the Past Three Decades

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ABSTRACT

Conservation professionals expect increased attempts to weaken the US Endangered Species Act (ESA) during the second Trump administration. As such, it is important to understand Americans' level of support for the ESA. Prior research indicates that support for the ESA remained consistently strong across four studies conducted over a two-decade period, 1996–2015. The research presented here extends those observations to six studies conducted over a three-decade period, 1996–2025. We find that support of the ESA over that period has remained consistently high, at about 84%, and opposition has remained consistently low, at about 12%. We also report on other trends and patterns in support for the ESA, highlighting high and growing support for the ESA among politically conservative people and the absence of any rural–urban divide in support for the ESA.

1 | Introduction

The US Endangered Species Act (ESA) is the United States' primary legal instrument for combatting the biodiversity crisis, which is manifest as dramatically increased rates and risks of extinction and extirpation of native species at regional and global scales (Vucetich et al. 2023). Efforts to weaken the ESA are a perennial concern (Bruskotter et al. 2018), but conservation professionals expect increased attempts to weaken the US ESA during the second Trump administration (e.g., Heidt 2025; Magill 2025). That expectation may already be being realized as the US Congress is considering a bill that would delist gray wolves throughout the lower 48 and do so without the prospect for judicial review (Longwell 2025). The US executive branch proposed a

rule that would weaken the ESA by redefining the legal meaning of “harm” to an endangered species (Friedman 2025), and the executive branch reduced and threatened further reductions of staff to the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Those reductions are likely to adversely impact administration of the ESA.

Threats to the ESA are concerning for several reasons. First, the biodiversity crisis is not only extreme, but also worsening (Butchart et al. 2025). Second, these anthropogenic losses have grave consequences for our humanity and well-being (Cardinale et al. 2012; Pörtner et al. 2023). Third, the United States has disproportionately contributed to worsening the biodiversity crisis compared with many other nations (Rodrigues et al. 2014). Furthermore, the United States is more able—due to its wealth—than

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many other nations to mitigate the crisis. Nevertheless, the United States contributes less than its fair share to combatting biodiversity loss (Lindsey et al. 2017). These circumstances are especially concerning given the appropriateness of fairly allocating the burden of mitigating the crisis (Sun et al. 2022).

While these concerns seem sufficient for US leaders to support the ESA, the Trump administration's executive order "Declaring a National Energy Emergency" (January 20, 2025) includes directing a committee to "identify obstacles to domestic energy infrastructure specifically deriving from implementation of the ESA..." This appears a thinly veiled attempt to use the declaration of an emergency to weaken the ESA. These actions are also similarly oriented to those taken during the prior Trump administration (Colon 2021; Hartl and Owley 2021).

Ongoing attempts to weaken the ESA through legislative and regulatory processes raise the question about the motivation behind such efforts. Has the general public in the United States become less supportive of the law? Prior research indicates that support for the US ESA remained consistently strong (with roughly four in five expressing support for the law) across four studies conducted over a two-decade period, 1996–2015 (Bruskotter et al. 2018). This research extends those observations to six studies conducted over a three-decade period, 1996–2025, and examines other trends and patterns in public attitude toward the ESA.

2 | Methods

2.1 | Compiling Data

In this analysis, we used data from four surveys compiled by Bruskotter et al. (2018) and data from two additional surveys published since that time (Table 1). One study is described in Offer-Westort et al. (2020). Another study, conducted in 2025, is described below.

We searched the literature for papers reporting attitudes on the ESA in general samples of the American public. The details of this search were identical to that conducted in Bruskotter et al. (2018) and further described in the [Supporting Information](#). These searches identified several papers assessing attitudes about the ESA, but the samples were all drawn from small populations, for example, a few counties in the southeastern United States (Rodgers and Willcox 2018) or students enrolled in a particular educational program (Bright and Tarrant 2002). Because our aim was to assess attitudes from US residents, we excluded papers with samples drawn from smaller populations within the United States. If these papers (listed in the [Supporting Information](#)) were included, they would offer no reason to alter the conclusions drawn in this study.

Outside the confined of that search, we were also made aware of another poll conducted in 2023 by the NGO, Defenders of Wildlife, and the polling agency, RealClear Politics. The report describing that poll concludes that survey participants ($n = 1000$ registered voters) exhibited a level of support for the ESA (84%) that is similar to those reported in Figure 1 (Defenders of Wildlife 2023). We did not include the results of that poll in Table 1 or Figure 1 because the report did not include key details, such as

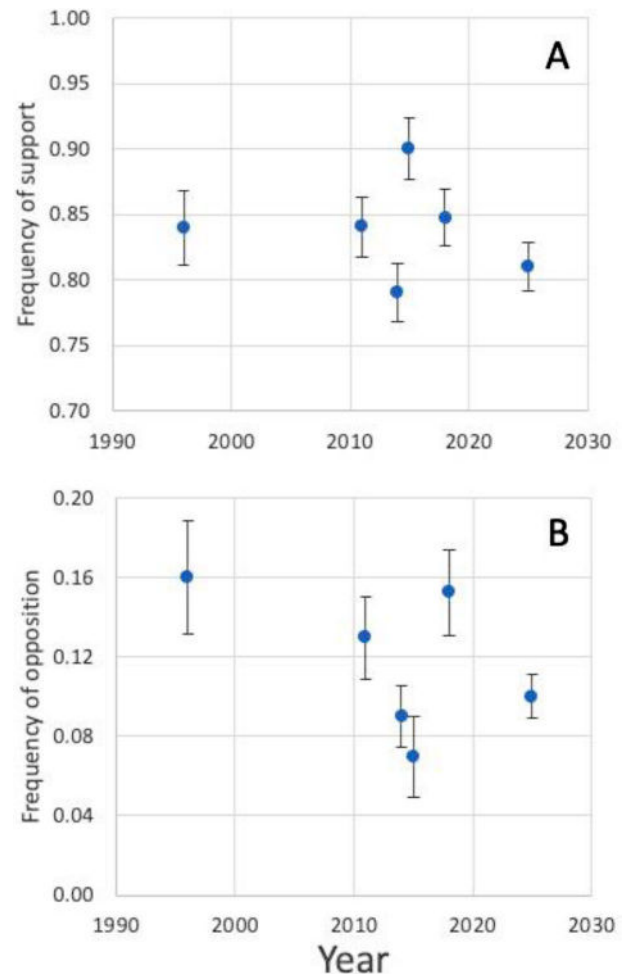


FIGURE 1 | Support for and opposition against the US Endangered Species Act for six studies conducted over a 29-year period. Vertical lines are 95% confidence intervals. The studies are described in Table 1. p value for trends in panels (A) and (B) are 0.87 and 0.27, respectively.

the survey item and response set that was used to draw that conclusion.

The error bars depicted in the figures of this study and the \pm values given in parentheses throughout Section 3 are 95% confidence intervals (CI), calculated as the normal approximation to the binomial formula for confidence intervals:

$$\text{mean} \pm Z_{\alpha}(\sqrt{x(N-x)/N^3}), \quad (1)$$

where mean equals x/N , x is the number of cases expressing agreement, N is the sample size, and Z_{α} is the standard normal deviate for a 95% CI (i.e., 1.96).

2.2 | 2025 Survey Details

We administered an online survey using the Qualtrics platform (Qualtrics, Provo, UT) in January 2025, that is, between the most recent US presidential election and inauguration. The survey participants consisted of 1434 Qualtrics panelists who were residents of the United States and 18 years of age or older. The research protocol for this project was reviewed and approved by the

TABLE 1 | Summary of data sources used in Figure 1.

Year	N	Source	Survey item	Response set
1996	644	Czech and Krausman 1999	In the best interests of the nation, the Endangered Species Act should be ...	“Revoked,” “weakened to provide less protection to species,” “remain unchanged,” “strengthened to provide more protection to species”
2011	1009	Endangered Species Coalition*	As you may know, the Endangered Species Act is an environmental law established to protect all wildlife, plants, and fish that are in danger of extinction. Based on what you know, would you say that you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose the Endangered Species Act?	Strongly oppose to strongly support (five-point scale)
2014	1287	Defenders of Wildlife and Earthjustice*		
2015	600	Bruskotter et al. 2018		
2018	1049	Offer-Westort et al. 2020	Are you supportive of the Endangered Species Act?	Strongly opposed to strongly supportive (six-point scale)
2025	1434	This study		Strongly opposed to strongly supportive (seven-point scale)

*The 2011 and 2014 reports may be found at: https://defenders.org/publications/endangered_species_act_poll.pdf and https://defenders.org/publications/Defenders-of-Wildlife-National-ESA-Survey.pdf?_ga=2.22473211.1728325639.1515607330-339637882.1515607330.

Institutional Review Board of Michigan Technological University (protocol IRB-2025-28). For details on socio-demographic properties and weighting of the sample, see [Supporting Information](#). The purpose of the survey was to understand people’s attitudes about the ESA and continuing ESA protections for grizzly bears. The results pertaining to grizzly bears are reported in Vucetich and Bruskotter (2025).

3 | Results

Support of the ESA across six studies conducted over the past three decades, 1996–2025, has remained consistently high, at about 84%, without showing an indication of temporal trend over that period (Figure 1A). Opposition to the ESA has also remained low over the past three decades, averaging about 12% (Figure 1B). Another observation from Figure 1B is worth attention. Namely, the levels of opposition in 1996 and 2018 are higher than the other values. The response sets for the survey items associated with those observations did not include a response for “neutral.” Those observations are at least plausibly higher than the others because some of the people who indicated opposition to the ESA would have selected “neutral” had that option been available—as it had been available in other surveys depicted in Figure 1.

In addition, data from 2025 indicate that 58% ($\pm 2.5\%$) of 1438 people surveyed reported that the ESA should be more protective of species than is currently the case (Figure 2A). About 65% ($\pm 2.5\%$) of these 1438 people also believe that species should be protected in perpetuity, if need be (Figure 2B).

Participants were also asked, “How should the effort to protect endangered species be allocated when there is not enough

funding to protect all endangered species?” To this question, 78% ($\pm 2.1\%$) indicated it is more appropriate to “provide minimal protection to all endangered species by making it illegal to kill or harm them, and provide additional protections as can be afforded,” as opposed to “fully protect some endangered species and provide no protection to others.”

Another notable trend is a lessening of differences between liberals and conservatives in attitudes about the ESA over the past decade, 2014–2025. During this time period, differences between liberals and conservatives declined for levels of support (Figure 3A) and opposition (Figure 3B). The change seems mostly driven by conservatives expressing more support and less opposition for the ESA over time. In particular, the rate of opposition among conservatives seems to have declined by more than 50%, from 15.1% to 6.4% during the period 2014–2025 (Figure 3B). Even the 5.6% of the 1434 people who describe themselves as “extremely conservative” support the ESA at a rate of 76% ($\pm 9\%$).

4 | Discussion

Overall support for the US ESA has been consistently high, at 84%, for the past three decades (Figure 1A). During that same period, opposition to the ESA has been consistently low, at about 12% (Figure 1B). According to 2025 data, for every person who expresses opposition to the ESA, there are about seven people who express support.

Furthermore, data from 2025 indicate that most Americans believe the ESA should be more protective of species than is currently the case (Figure 2A) and that most Americans believe

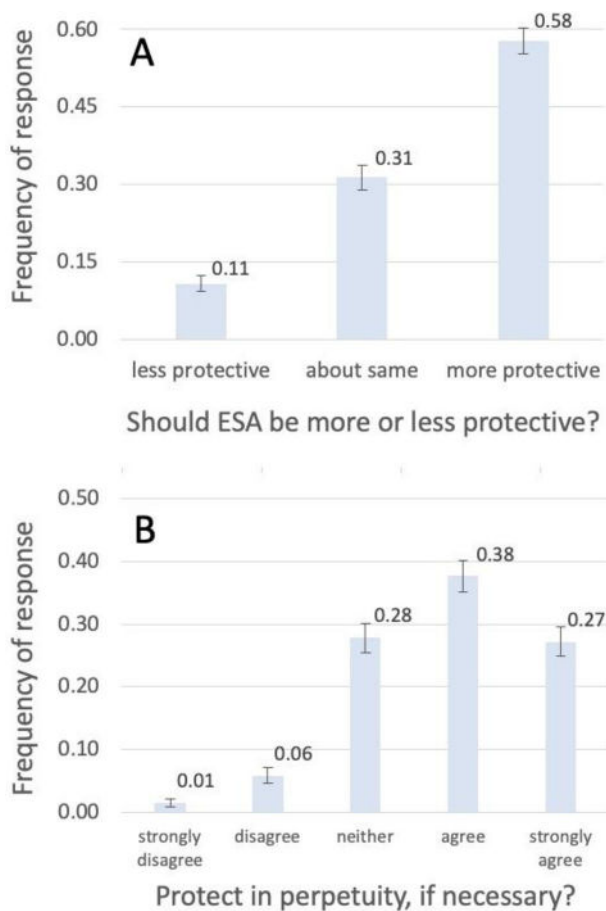


FIGURE 2 | Frequency of responses to the question, “I think the Endangered Species Act should be:,” where the response set was a seven-point scale from “far less protective” to “far more protective” (panel A). Frequency of responses to the question, “If a species benefits from protections of the Endangered Species Act, but is unlikely to ever be completely recovered, it is ok for such species to receive such protections in perpetuity?” (panel B). Data were collected in 2025.

an endangered species should be protected in perpetuity, if need be (Figure 2B). When asked how to allocate protection when funding is limited, most Americans also think it is more appropriate to provide minimal protection to all endangered species, by at least making it illegal to kill or harm them, as opposed to provide full protection to some species, but provide no protection to others. These particular results are pertinent to the administration of the ESA when agencies charged with the conservation of endangered species conclude that a species’ listing is “warranted, but precluded”—a conclusion that allows the agency to avoid listing a species while it works on presumably higher priority species (Smith 2010). These results are also pertinent to considerations about conservation-reliant species (Rohlf et al. 2014) and conservation triage (Vucetich et al. 2017).

Attitudinal researchers commonly report that people with different political orientations tend to differ in their views on environmental issues (Wolsko 2017). We found such a difference here (Figure 3) but clear majority support for ESA protections among all ideological groups. In addition, differences between liberals and conservatives on support for and opposition to the ESA lessened considerably between 2014 and 2025. That pattern

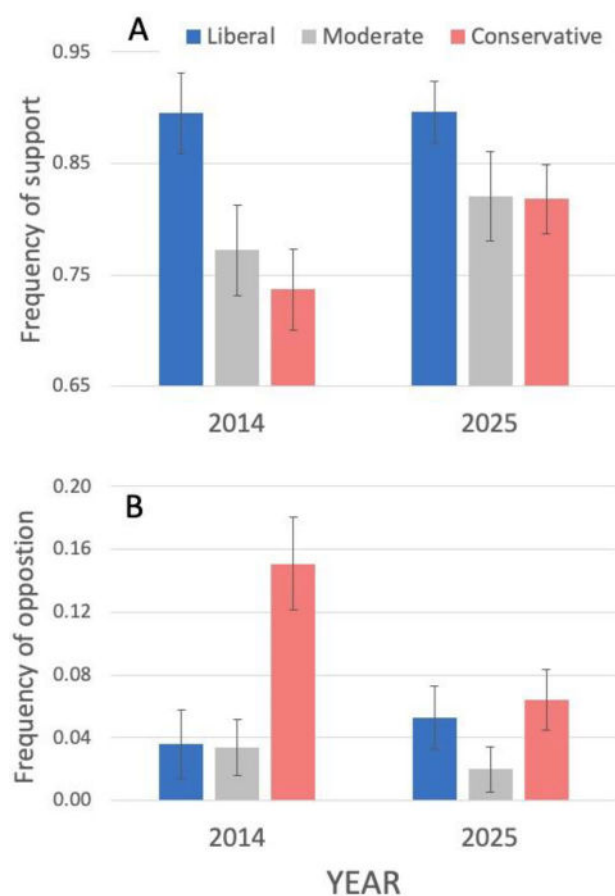


FIGURE 3 | Differences in support (A) and opposition (B) for the ESA across political orientations (blue, gray, red) at two points in time separated by a decade.

could be part of a broader possible trend toward increasingly pro-environmental attitudes being taken by those with conservative political orientations (Jones 2025). Moreover, the decrease in partisan differences appears an outlier of sorts, at a time when the US electorate is more partisan than any time during the past seven decades (American National Election Studies 2022).

American politics are also often portrayed as being sharply divided between those who reside in urban versus rural areas (Gimpel et al. 2020), including attitudes about the environment (e.g., Sarvilinna et al. 2018; Zscheischler and Friedrich 2022). We found no evidence that support for the ESA varies among people living in urban, suburban, or rural environments (Figure 4). This is important because many imperiled species occur primarily within rural settings, and thus ESA administration arguably disproportionately impacts rural communities. For context, the concern for animal welfare (e.g., farmed animal welfare) is also similar among people living in urban, suburban, and rural areas (Feltz and Dillard 2025).

Efforts by the legislative and executive branches to weaken the ESA are as longstanding as public support for the ESA (Pang and Greenwald 2015). Furthermore, efforts to weaken the ESA do not seem justified by the attitudes of rank-and-file members of certain interest groups, such as advocates for properties rights, because

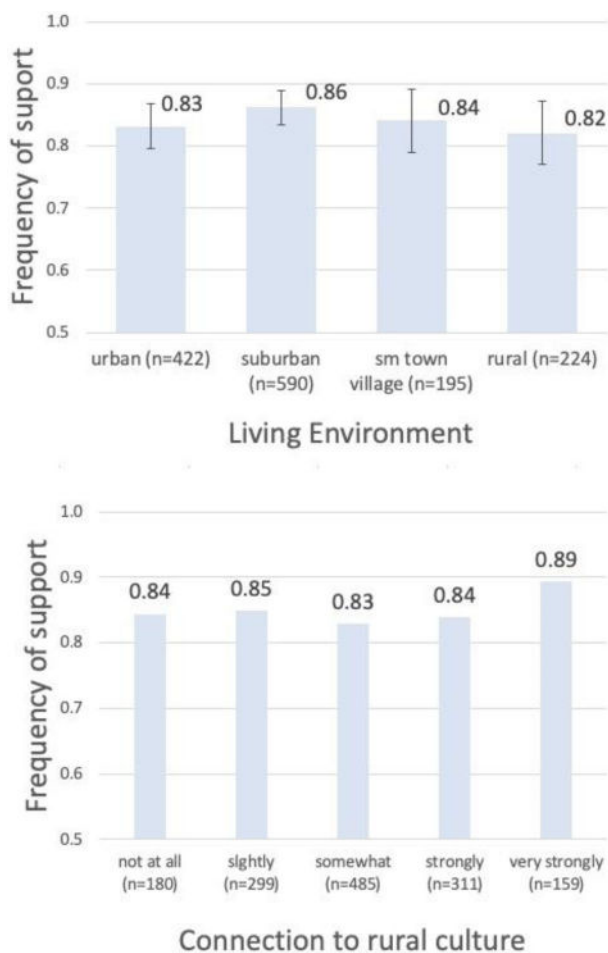


FIGURE 4 | Frequency of support for the ESA in relationship to survey participants' responses to two survey items. The x-axis of the upper panel represents responses to the question, "What best describes where you live?" The lower panel represented responses to the question, "To what extent do you personally identify with rural communities and culture?" For context, the correlation of responses to those two items is 0.22.

majorities of the individuals who identify with such groups are supportive of the ESA (Bruskotter et al. 2018).

The explanation for these efforts to weaken the ESA may be attributed to various possible circumstances. Three possible circumstances include: First, leaders of interest groups tend to hold more extreme positions than the constituents they represent (Nilsen et al. 2007). Second, analysis of nearly 1800 policy issues in the United States led to the conclusion that "economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on US government policy, while average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence" (Gilens and Page 2014, 564). That conclusion is similar to the conclusion that opposition to the ESA may stem from conspiracy between elites who benefit from pork-barrel projects and individual congresspersons who "gain power, votes, and campaign contributions by bringing infusions of federal taxpayer dollars into their local districts" (Plater 2004, 302). Third, and related to the second observation, US Congresspersons tend to vote against pro-environmental policies to the extent that

they receive campaign donations from businesses at odds with pro-environmental legislation (Ard et al. 2017).

These observations, combined with widespread and ongoing support for the ESA, suggest that policies pertaining to the environment—with the weakening of the ESA being an exemplar—are driven by wealthy elites with extremely narrow financial interests, who stand to benefit from less protective environmental policy. These circumstances are consistent with what political scientists refer to as corruption, which involves "the exploitation of public office for private gain, [often involving] an exchange between a public official and a private citizen..." (Golden and Fisman 2017, 24). Overcoming the circumstances described here might be better enabled by more freely referring to these circumstances as corruption. While the adverse effects of corruption on environmental policy are commonly associated with developing nations (Tacconi and Williams 2020), the circumstances described here pertain to the wealthiest nation on Earth.

Ethics Statement

The research protocol for this project was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Michigan Technological University (protocol IRB-2025-28).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data newly described in this study will be made available with the Supporting Information at the time of publication.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.

Supporting Material: conl13111-sup-0001-SuppMat.docx