

Strong Bipartisan Support For National Parks

Findings From A National Survey
Conducted On Behalf Of

**The National Parks Conservation Association and
National Park Hospitality Association**

By
By Hart Research Associates and
North Star Opinion Research

July 2012



Hart Research Associates and North Star Opinion Research

This report presents key findings of an online survey conducted by Hart Research Associates and North Star Opinion Research on behalf of the National Parks Conservation Association and National Park Hospitality Association. The interviews for this study were conducted from June 12 to 17, 2012, among a national sample of 1,004 registered voters.

Overview

National Parks represent a powerful symbol for voters. In their minds, National Parks embody the American experience, and voters want to see National Parks honored, cherished, and cared for, not left to crumble into disrepair.

Voters across the ideological spectrum see National Parks as a legitimate and important federal responsibility—nearly nine in 10 say it is extremely important (59%) or quite important (29%) for the federal government to protect and support National Parks. And even in these difficult fiscal circumstances, very few voters from either side of the political aisle say the federal government should be cutting back on funding for National Parks. Likewise, this same spirit of bipartisanship is exemplified by the large majority of voters who say that support for National Parks is an issue that can unite people across party lines.

Voters also associate National Parks with key priorities and important American values. Candidates who prioritize National Parks are seen by voters as:

- Caring about the environment
- Protecting our heritage for future generations
- A good steward of our nation's resources
- Forward looking
- Understanding what makes America special
- Patriotic

Support for National Parks is an issue that is personal for millions of Americans—more than four in five voters report having visited a National Park at some point in their lives, and nearly nine in 10 say they are interested in visiting in the future. The National Parks constituency is not only sizable, it is avid in its support for Parks and spans the political, ideological, and demographic spectrum.

National Parks are highly valued by voters, who see them as home to some of the most majestic, beautiful, and awe-inspiring places in the world. Yet few voters think National Parks are in good shape today, while many more express concern that funding shortages are damaging National Parks and marring visitors' park experiences.

In response, voters react favorably to numerous strategies designed to strengthen National Parks. Importantly, many voters say they want to be a part of this process: more than one-third say they would actively support—through volunteerism, donations, or both—a national campaign to protect and strengthen the National Parks.

Voters see the 2016 centennial as a great way to engage citizens on the value of National Parks, and voters say it is important for the next president to ensure that parks are fully restored and ready to serve and be relevant to this country for another hundred years.

Detailed Findings

1. Divided elsewhere, voters share a common experience in National Parks. Eighty-one percent of voters say they have visited an area in the National Park System at some point in their lives. About half (51%) of all voters report having visited a National Park in the past three years and 36% have visited a National Park several times during that period. Only 12% of voters say they have never visited a National Park.

As far as you know, have you ever visited an area in the National Park System? (IF YES:) When was the last time you visited an area in the National Park System?	
	<u>%</u>
Yes, Have Visited	81
Within the past year	26
1 to 3 years ago	25
4 to 5 years ago	10
More than 5 years ago	20
No, Have Never Visited	12
Not sure	7

Visiting National Parks is not just about the past. Nearly nine in 10 (86%) say they are very or fairly interested in visiting National Parks in the future, including 83% of Hispanic voters and 89% of voters under 30. While most of the interest is in day visits, 60% of voters express interest in staying overnight at a lodge, while another 39% express an interest in camping.

Each year, there are nearly 300 million visits to National Park units. Some visits are brief. Other visits involve overnight stays in campgrounds and park lodges. Please indicate how interested you are, personally, in the following kinds of park visits:

	<u>Very/Fairly Interested</u>	<u>Just Somewhat/Not Very/Not Interested At All</u>
	<u>%</u>	<u>%</u>
Total Visits Of Any Kind	86	14
Day use only	77	23
One or more nights in a park lodge	60	40
One or more nights in a campground	39	61

- 2. Voters say it is important for the federal government to protect and support National Parks.** When voters are asked to think about the major National Parks such as Yellowstone National Park, Grand Canyon National Park, and the Everglades National Park, nearly nine in 10 (88%) say it is extremely important (59%) or quite important (29%) for the federal government to protect and support those parks (see table on following page). In fact, in this survey of 1,004 voters, only four voters (less than 1%) say that protecting National Parks is not important at all.

The importance for federal protection for National Parks is evident across party lines, with strong majorities of Democrats (92%), independents (90%), and Republicans (81%) saying it is extremely or quite important for the federal government to protect and support National Parks.

When you think about the major National Parks such as Yellowstone National Park, Grand Canyon National Park, and the Everglades National Park, how important do you think it is for the federal government to protect and support those parks?

	<u>All Voters</u>	<u>Democrats</u>	<u>Independents</u>	<u>Republicans</u>
	%	%	%	%
Extremely important	59	69	57	47
Quite important	29	23	33	34
Somewhat important	11	8	8	16
Not that important	1	-	1	2
Not important at all	-	-	1	1

Throughout the survey, we see some of the strongest support for National Parks among voters who are recent or frequent visitors to the Parks. On this item, for example, 70% of voters who report having visited a National Park (or Parks) in the past year say it is extremely important for the federal government to protect and support National Parks. Among voters who have visited National Parks several times in the past few years, this figure increases to 72%.

When you think about the major National Parks such as Yellowstone National Park, Grand Canyon National Park, and the Everglades National Park, how important do you think it is for the federal government to protect and support those parks?

	<u>All Voters</u>	<u>Visited In Past Year</u>	<u>Frequent Visitor</u>
	%	%	%
Extremely important	59	70	72
Quite important	29	21	20
Somewhat important	11	7	7
Not that important	1	2	1
Not important at all	-	-	-

3. **Voters wholeheartedly agree that protecting National Parks is an appropriate role for the federal government.** Americans frequently disagree (often vehemently) about the role of the federal government in issues like the economy, health care, and education. But when it comes to National Parks, agreement is nearly unanimous: 95% of voters agree that protecting and supporting National Parks is an appropriate role for the federal government today, and this sentiment is shared by Democrats (98%), independents (93%), and Republicans (91%). Notably, only 3% of Republican voters *strongly* disagree with this position.

There has been a lot of discussion lately about what the appropriate role of the federal government should be. Do you think protecting and supporting the National Parks is an appropriate role or not an appropriate role for the federal government today?

	<u>All Voters</u>	<u>Demo- crats</u>	<u>I ndepend- ents</u>	<u>Repub- licans</u>
	%	%	%	%
Is An Appropriate Role For The Federal Government	95	98	93	91
Feel strongly	60	71	62	47
Not strongly	35	27	31	44
Is NOT An Appropriate Role For The Federal Government	5	2	7	9
Not strongly	4	2	5	6
Feel strongly	1	-	2	3

Voters are in nearly universal agreement that protecting the Parks is an appropriate role for the federal government.

Protecting and supporting the National Parks is an appropriate role for the federal government



Protecting and supporting the National Parks is NOT an appropriate role for the federal government



Protecting Parks is Appropriate Role for Federal Government

Democrats	98%
Independents	93%
Republicans	91%

4. **National Parks are the rare issue that can unite people across party lines.** Unlike many issues in these polarized times, most voters agree that support for National Parks is the kind of issue that can unite people across party lines. This includes 78% of Democrats, 71% of independents, and 74% of Republicans.

Do you think support for the National Parks is the kind of issue that can unite people across party lines or the kind of issue that tends to divide people along party lines?

	<u>All Voters</u>	<u>Democrats</u>	<u>Independents</u>	<u>Republicans</u>
	%	%	%	%
National Parks are an issue that unites people across party lines	75	78	71	74
National Parks are an issue that divides people along party lines	25	22	29	26

5. **Voters ascribe very positive characteristics to a candidate who prioritizes National Parks.** Strong majorities of voters think it is very or fairly likely (89%) that a candidate who considers our National Parks to be important would be someone who cares about the environment, will protect our heritage for future generations (82%), is a good steward of our nation's resources (76%), is forward looking and thinks about the future (71%), understands what makes America special (67%), and is patriotic (67%). These associations are largely shared by Democrats, independents, and Republican voters alike.

How likely do you think it is that a candidate who considers our National Parks to be important would be someone who...

	Proportion who say very or fairly likely			
	<u>All Voters</u>	<u>Democrat</u>	<u>Independent</u>	<u>Republican</u>
	%	%	%	%
Cares about the environment	89	93	88	85
Will protect our heritage for future generations	82	88	78	77
Is a good steward for our nation's resources	76	83	72	70
Is forward looking and thinks about the future	71	81	65	63
Understands what makes America special	67	77	57	59
Is patriotic	67	73	59	65

6. **In voters' own words: National Parks provide important benefits to America.** When voters are provided an opportunity to express the value and benefits of National Parks, three major themes emerge: National Parks 1) protect the environment and wildlife; 2) provide an opportunity for Americans to experience nature and have fun; and preserve these invaluable areas for future generations. Note that voters' open-ended comments vary little by partisan differences.

When you think about the value of our National Parks to people in America, and how the National Park System benefits the country, what are the main things that come to mind?

	<u>All Voters</u>	<u>Democrats</u>	<u>Independents</u>	<u>Republicans</u>
	%	%	%	%
1. Important to protect the environment/natural habitats/plants/wildlife, keep our air and water clean/free from pollution	28	33	27	25
2. Allows people to explore nature/the outdoors/natural beauty of National Parks	23	22	25	23
3. Important to preserve these areas for future generations, shouldn't allow them to be overdeveloped/exploited	21	23	19	18
4. Good vacation/recreation locations, nice places to visit as a family/to take your kids	17	15	15	21
5. Allows people to explore our history/heritage/important landmarks	14	15	10	15
6. Instill a sense of pride/patriotism/national unity	5	5	4	6

7. Voters describe National Parks in glowing terms. In the minds of voters, National Parks possess many valuable attributes. Foremost among them is that National Parks are home to some of the most majestic, beautiful, and awe-inspiring places in the world, and that they preserve America's natural wonders for future generations—61% of voters say those phrases *definitely* describe National Parks. In addition, the majority of voters (52%) definitely see National Parks as places where people can have fun, be physically active, and enjoy themselves. Note that many of the other phrases shown below mirror descriptions offered by voters on their own.

How well does each phrase describe our National Parks and the places that are part of the National Park System?

	<u>Mean Score*</u>	<u>Definitely Describes National Parks (7)</u>
	#	%
They are home to some of the most majestic, beautiful, and awe-inspiring places in the world	6.3	61
They preserve America's natural wonders for future generations	6.3	61
They are places where people can have fun, be physically active, and enjoy themselves	6.2	52
They preserve historic places and provide an opportunity to learn about American history	6.0	49
They are an important source of pride for America	5.9	48
They offer a place where families can go for affordable and memorable vacations	5.9	46

*On a seven-point scale, on which a "7" means definitely describes National Parks and "1" means definitely does NOT describe National Parks.

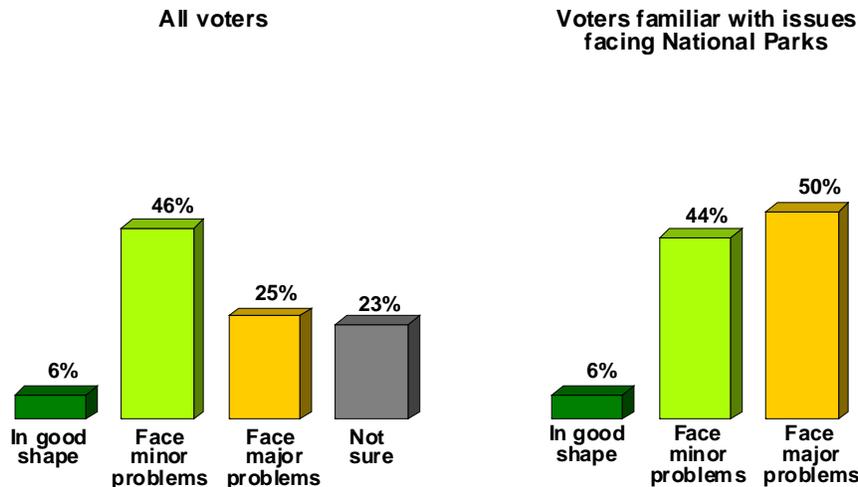
8. **Yet few voters think National Parks are in good shape.** Only 6% of voters think National Parks are generally in good shape, a view held by similar proportions of Democrats, independents, and Republicans. By contrast, the vast majority of voters think National Parks face minor (46%) or major (25%) problems.

Do you think the National Parks are generally in good shape, face minor problems, or face serious problems?				
	All Voters	Democrats	Independents	Republicans
	%	%	%	%
National Parks are in good shape	6	6	5	6
National Parks face minor problems	46	44	49	48
National Parks face serious problems	25	28	23	24
Not sure	23	22	23	22

Notably, the 12% of voters who report knowing a great deal or quite a bit about National Park issues are far more likely to think the Parks are in poor shape, with fully 50% of these voters saying the National Parks face serious problems.

Few voters think our National Parks are in good shape.

Overall Evaluation of Condition of National Parks



9. **Voters are concerned that funding shortages are damaging parks and marring visitors' park experience.** Voters are troubled when they learn about the many problems facing National Parks as a result of budget cuts. They are particularly concerned, for example, when they read that insufficient funding has resulted in closed or unprotected parks and historic sites (this concerns 80% of voters overall; 46% of voters a great deal). Other troubling problems are inadequate guest services and amenities (76% overall; 40% a great deal), historic buildings and cultural resources in disrepair (74% overall; 37% a great deal), and a maintenance backlog that exceeds several billion dollars (74% overall; 35% a great deal).

Hart Research Associates and North Star Opinion Research

People have identified various problems facing the National Parks. Please indicate how much each of the following problems concerns you.

	<u>Concerns A Great Deal</u> %	<u>Concerns A Fair Amount</u> %
There's less and less funding available to ensure that rangers are present in the parks to serve visitors and protect resources. Some parks and historic sites have been closed because of inadequate funding for staff	46	34
Basic guest services in many National Parks have suffered due to lack of funding. In too many parks, trails are not adequately maintained, interpretive signs are out of date or missing altogether, and restrooms are no longer consistently clean or available	40	36
Not enough money is being spent to keep historic buildings and other cultural resources from deteriorating. Sixty percent of the 27,000 historic structures in the national park system need repair	37	37
Inadequate funding for park maintenance projects has resulted in a backlog of maintenance and preservation needs that exceeds several billion dollars	35	39

10. **Almost no one thinks we are spending too much money on National Parks.** Only 4% of voters overall, and 7% of Republicans, think the federal government is spending too much on National Parks. By contrast more than a third (35%) suspect we are spending too little, 23% say we are spend the right amount, and a plurality (38%) do not know enough to say.

From what you may know, do you think the federal government is spending too much money, too little money, or about the right amount of money on protecting and supporting the National Parks?

	<u>%</u>
Spending too much on National Parks	4
Spending too little on National Parks	35
Spending the right amount on National Parks	23
Do not know enough to say	38

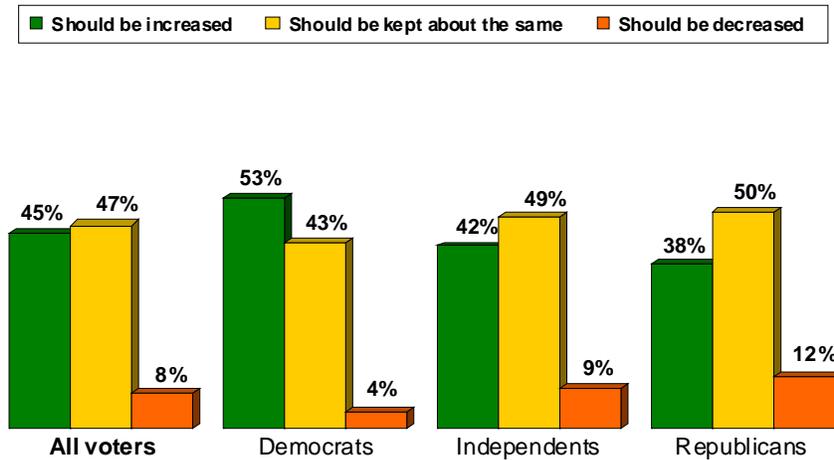
11. **When given the actual budget figures, nearly half say the amount should be increased.** Upon learning that federal spending on National Parks is 1/13th of 1% of the federal budget—roughly \$3 billion per year—92% of voters overall think that amount should be increased (45%) or kept about the same (47%). Only 8% of voters think the budgeted amount should be decreased, a number that rises only slightly to 12% among Republicans.

Federal spending on National Parks is 1/13th of 1% of the federal budget—roughly \$3 billion per year. With this in mind, do you think federal spending on the National Parks should be increased, decreased, or kept about the same?

	<u>All Voters</u>	<u>Democrats</u>	<u>Independents</u>	<u>Republicans</u>
	%	%	%	%
Increased	45	53	42	38
Decreased	8	4	9	12
Kept about the same	47	43	49	50

When given budget figures, nearly half of voters want the amount increased.

Federal spending on National Parks is 1/13th of 1% of the federal budget, roughly \$3 billion per year. Federal spending on National Parks:



Hart Research Associates and North Star Opinion Research

12. Voters react favorably to ways parks can be strengthened. Voters embrace numerous proposals to help protect National Parks. In particular, voters are attracted to the idea of expanding citizen volunteerism and youth conservation corps in the parks (86% favorable; 55% very favorable).

	<u>Total Favorable</u>	<u>Very Favorable</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Unfavorable</u>
	%	%	%	%
Expand the use of citizen volunteerism and youth conservation corps in the parks	86	55	13	1
Make sure that historical sites that are a part of the National Parks, such as the Statue of Liberty and Gettysburg National Military Park, are adequately staffed so schools and students can experience our nation's history for themselves	80	49	17	3
Make sure that adequate funding is available for park maintenance so that small projects will not be put off and become large, expensive problems	77	43	20	3
Promote the National Parks as an attraction for visitors from other countries, as a key pillar in efforts to boost international tourism to the United States	76	42	20	4
Develop partnerships that bring together private landowners, municipalities, commercial landowners, local and state parks, and others to voluntarily take actions on their lands and waterways that could help protect the wildlife in parks for people to enjoy	79	41	17	4
Encourage contributions from citizens, businesses, and foundations by offering to match their contributions dollar for dollar with federal funds	73	41	22	5

13. Many voters say they want to be a part of the process. Thirty-six percent of voters say they would actively support a national campaign—either volunteering their time or contributing money—to build support for policies to protect and strengthen National Parks. Such a campaign, they are told, would recruit volunteers to participate in grassroots efforts to promote the importance of this issue and would ask presidential candidates from both parties to commit to protecting the parks and providing them with their needed funding. Another 59% say they agree with the goals of the campaign but would not take any action, while a mere 5% disagree with the goals of the campaign altogether. Importantly, the results are quite consistent across party lines (see chart on page nine). Among the 36% who say they would actively support the campaign, 40% say they are more likely to volunteer their time, 36% say they are more likely to contribute money, and 24% say they would likely do both.

Realistically speaking, how likely would you be to get involved with this campaign--would you say you would most likely (A) actively support the campaign, either volunteering your time or contributing money, (B) agree with the goals of the campaign but not take any action, or (C) disagree with the goals of the campaign?

	<u>All Voters</u> %	<u>Democrats</u> %	<u>Independents</u> %	<u>Republicans</u> %
(A) Actively support	36	41	38	30
(B) Agree with the goals but not take any action	59	57	57	63
(C) Disagree with the goals	5	2	5	7

Would you be more likely to volunteer your time or contribute money to support a pro-parks campaign? *

	<u>%</u>
More likely to volunteer time	40
More likely to contribute money	36
Likely to do both	24

*Asked only of respondents who said they would actively support the campaign.

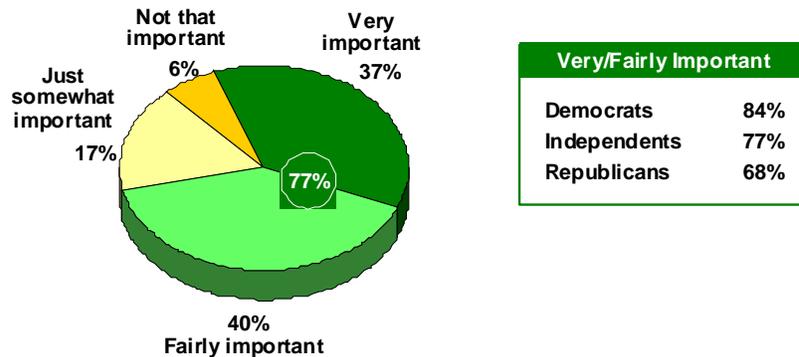
14. **Voters say preparing National Parks for the 2016 centennial is important.** More than three in four (77%) voters say it is very or fairly important for the next president to ensure that parks are fully restored and ready to serve and be relevant to this country for another hundred years. The importance of this goal is evident among a large majority of Democratic (84%), independent (77%), and Republican voters (68%).

Our National Park System will be 100 years old in 2016, just four years from now. How important a goal is it for the next president to ensure that parks are fully restored and ready to serve and be relevant to this country for another hundred years by the National Park Service's centennial in 2016?

	<u>All Voters</u>	<u>Democrats</u>	<u>Independents</u>	<u>Republicans</u>
	%	%	%	%
Very important goal	37	42	37	30
Fairly important goal	40	42	40	38
Just somewhat important goal	17	12	19	23
Not that important a goal	6	4	4	9

The centennial is an important goal.

How important a goal is it for the next president to ensure that parks are fully restored and ready to serve the country for another 100 years by the National Park System's centennial in 2016?



15. **Voters see the centennial as a great way to engage citizens on the value of National Parks.** Voters support a wide variety of proposals for the years leading up to the centennial celebration. In particular, 71% of voters rate as extremely important (37%) or quite important (34%) the idea of connecting National Parks to America's classrooms to excite students about learning science, math, civics, and other topics, and help them see how what they learn applies to the real world. Voters also like the idea of creating a Veterans Corps to help veterans build job skills as they restore parks and help prepare the parks for the next century (69% say it is extremely or quite important), creating a National Parks endowment fund to which average citizens, businesses, and the federal government can contribute to help fund

Hart Research Associates and North Star Opinion Research

long-term education and heritage protection efforts (66% extremely/quite important), and creating an “Urban Youth in Urban Parks” service corps to build job skills for urban youth as they restore parks and help prepare the parks for the next century (65% extremely/quite important).

Listed below are some things people have proposed doing in the years leading up to the centennial celebration. Please rate how important each idea would be as a way to encourage Americans to renew and reconnect with their National Parks.

	<u>Extremely Important</u> %	<u>Quite Important</u> %
Connect National Parks to America’s classrooms to excite students about learning science, math, civics, and other topics, and help them see how what they learn applies to the real world	37	34
Create a Veterans Corps to help veterans build job skills as they restore parks and help prepare the parks for the next century	34	35
Create a National Parks endowment fund to which average citizens, businesses, and the federal government can contribute to help fund long-term education and heritage protection efforts	34	32
Create an “Urban Youth in Urban Parks” service corps to build job skills for urban youth as they restore parks and help prepare the parks for the next century	32	33