

Numerous commentators have blasted Obama for abandoning his pledge to tighten the National Ambient Air Quality Standard for ozone despite the recommendation of a scientific advisory board that a new standard would deliver large public health benefits. The commentary has been loud and vociferous. For two compelling examples see Georgetown Law Professor Lisa Heinzerling's [post](#) at Grist.com and NRDC President Francis Beinecke's post [here](#).

On Legal Planet, Dan has [addressed](#) the legality of the Obama decision. Eric has [speculated](#) that perhaps the Environmental Protection Agency — which administers the standards — actually wants to get sued to force newer and tougher standards. Both also argue, as has virtually every other environmental commentator, that the decision is bad policy. But I have yet another question about the Obama decision: why on earth does the President think it's good politics to block tougher air pollution standards?

Presumably, at a time of stubbornly high unemployment, the President wants to look like he's sensitive to the charge that environmental regulations hurt business. And presumably, he thinks that he's once again reaching across the aisle to look like the responsible grownup in the room, meeting his critics part way by making concessions in an attempt to appease them. Let's take each argument in turn.

While it is true that the American public is more concerned with the economy than the environment right now, that concern doesn't translate into support for cutting back on environmental protection. To the contrary. Even for "main street" Republicans. In a May, 2011 [poll](#), for example, only 22 percent of Main St. Republicans (Pew's term) agreed that "environmental laws cost too many jobs and hurt the economy." A majority of those polled agree that "environmental laws/regulations are worth the cost." The Yale Project on Climate Change Communication has even more impressive data from its May, 2011 [poll](#) about public support for environmental protection: when asked "Do you believe that protecting the environment hurts the economy and costs jobs, has no effect, or actually improves the economy and increases jobs?" 82 percent of those surveyed agreed either that environmental protection has no effect or actually improves the economy. So what am I missing? My sense is that if the environment matters at all in the upcoming election season it's the Republicans who risk the wrath of voters: Newt Gingrich's proposal to eliminate the EPA is not a political winner. And — again if it matters — being a climate denier may be good politics in the Republican primaries but hardly seems like a victorious political strategy for a candidate seeking independent votes in the general election. In fact the same Yale poll shows that 71 percent of those polled think that doing something about global warming should be a high priority for the President, and 66 percent of independents think so.

And about the compromising President, I'm hardly the only one to wonder why he thinks appearing to be reasonable will ever induce a reciprocal response from his opponents. Will the [Koch brothers](#) back down and stop funding conservative think tanks and Obama's political opponents? Will the House Republicans drop their efforts to gut the Environmental Protection Agency? Or to prevent the EPA from regulating greenhouse gas emissions under the Clean Air Act? Will the U.S. Chamber of Commerce suddenly start channelling PAC money to the President's election campaign? Really, what's the political gain here? I'm not seeing it.