

Abstract of the paper:

Public Views on the Growth Debate: Results from a Questionnaire-Based Survey

Summary:

There is a long-standing and recently revived academic and public debate about economic growth and its relation to environmental quality and well-being. Given that public opinion influences public policy, it makes sense to examine how people think about these relationships. Prior research on public opinion has studied this issue, but in a rather simple and incomplete way. Here we present the results of an in-depth study of public opinion on a wide range of aspects related to economic growth. We conducted a web survey resulting in a large random sample (n=1008) of Spanish citizens. The results show that many people seem to have a continued desire for growth but are simultaneously doubtful about the possibility to achieve this due to several limits. We identify segments of the population with distinct views about growth and control our results for various individual characteristics such as personal values.

Extended abstract:

There is a long-standing academic debate about economic growth and its relation with environmental quality and social well-being. This debate reached a large audience through the publication of the “Limits to Growth” report for the Club of Rome in 1972 by Meadows et al. At about the same time, Easterlin (1974) reported that increased incomes and subjective well-being are not significantly correlated over time in the US, while Hirsch (1976) wrote about the “The Social Limits to Growth” and Scitovsky (1976) about “The Joyless Economy”. Meanwhile, Daly (1977) proposed to change our focus to “Steady-State Economics”. Research on these questions gained new momentum in recent years and the topic is again featured in mass media and broader public discussions. This raises the question how the general public may view the possibility and desirability of continued economic growth in rich industrialized countries. Given that public opinion influences public policy making, it is important to understand what lay people know, believe and favor regarding economic growth.

Past studies of public opinion have addressed the relationship between growth and the environment in an overly simple way and given little or no attention to the many subtleties of

the growth debate. In various longitudinal and cross-country opinion polls like the European and World Values Survey, the growth-environment relationship is usually displayed in a dichotomous choice format in which respondents express a preference either for growth or environmental protection. A recent study by Kaplowitz et al. (2011) tried to go beyond this forced dichotomous choice and offered a third option, namely the compatibility of growth and environmental sustainability (recently called 'green growth'). But also this study is limited.

This research takes a broader approach in examining public opinion of the wider growth debate. It intends to explore the structure of beliefs and attitudes among the general public towards different dimensions of the growth debate. In July 2014, we conducted a web survey of a large country-wide random sample (n=1008) of Spanish citizens. The survey assessed people's views on environmental, social, and economic aspects of growth. We further included measures such as public concern, self-reported and assessed knowledge, media use, personal values, life satisfaction, working status, political ideology and common socio-demographic characteristics.

Some preliminary results are as follows. The two most widespread beliefs are that growth is necessary to create employment and is essential to improve life satisfaction. However, almost half of the respondents also think that a 'good life' without growth is possible or that the GDP is a flawed indicator of social welfare. Close to half of the respondents believe in an end to growth due to resource or environmental constraints and about the same proportion agree that rich countries may have to give up some of their growth to assure a fairer standard of living in poor countries.

In a second step of the analysis, we use principal component analysis to identify four components underlying the responses to the large number of growth-related questions. The first corresponds to desirable aspects of growth such as job creation or economic stability. The second component relates to environmental limits and impacts, while the third component points to the excessive attention given by public policy and media to GDP and its growth. The fourth component may be labeled as growth optimism. We further perform a complementary cluster analysis which allows us to also identify segments of the population with clearly different views on growth. This is related to and inspired by more theoretical assessments of the growth debate which may involve perspectives such as 'immaterialist,' 'pessimist,' 'technocrat,' 'optimist,' and 'skepticist' (Mooij and van den Bergh 2002). The identified segments are subsequently characterized in terms of personal values, concern, knowledge, media use and socio-demographic characteristics. Finally, we can compare and relate these outcomes of the factor and cluster analysis with the responses to a direct question on which of

four different growth positions people favor: 'growth-at-all-costs' (4%), 'green growth' (60%), 'agrowth' (21%) and 'degrowth' (15%).

A preliminary conclusion is that a notable proportion of people have skeptical and/or critical views on some aspects of growth, and think that other issues should be given more attention than growth. Nevertheless, a majority of people seem to have a continued desire for growth, although many individuals appear to be doubtful about the possibility to achieve this in light of environmental and other limits.

References

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