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April 2023

Environmental vs. Social Problems: American Perspectives in the 2020s

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Environmental vs. Social Problems: American Perspectives in the 2020s

By: Nick Eldridge
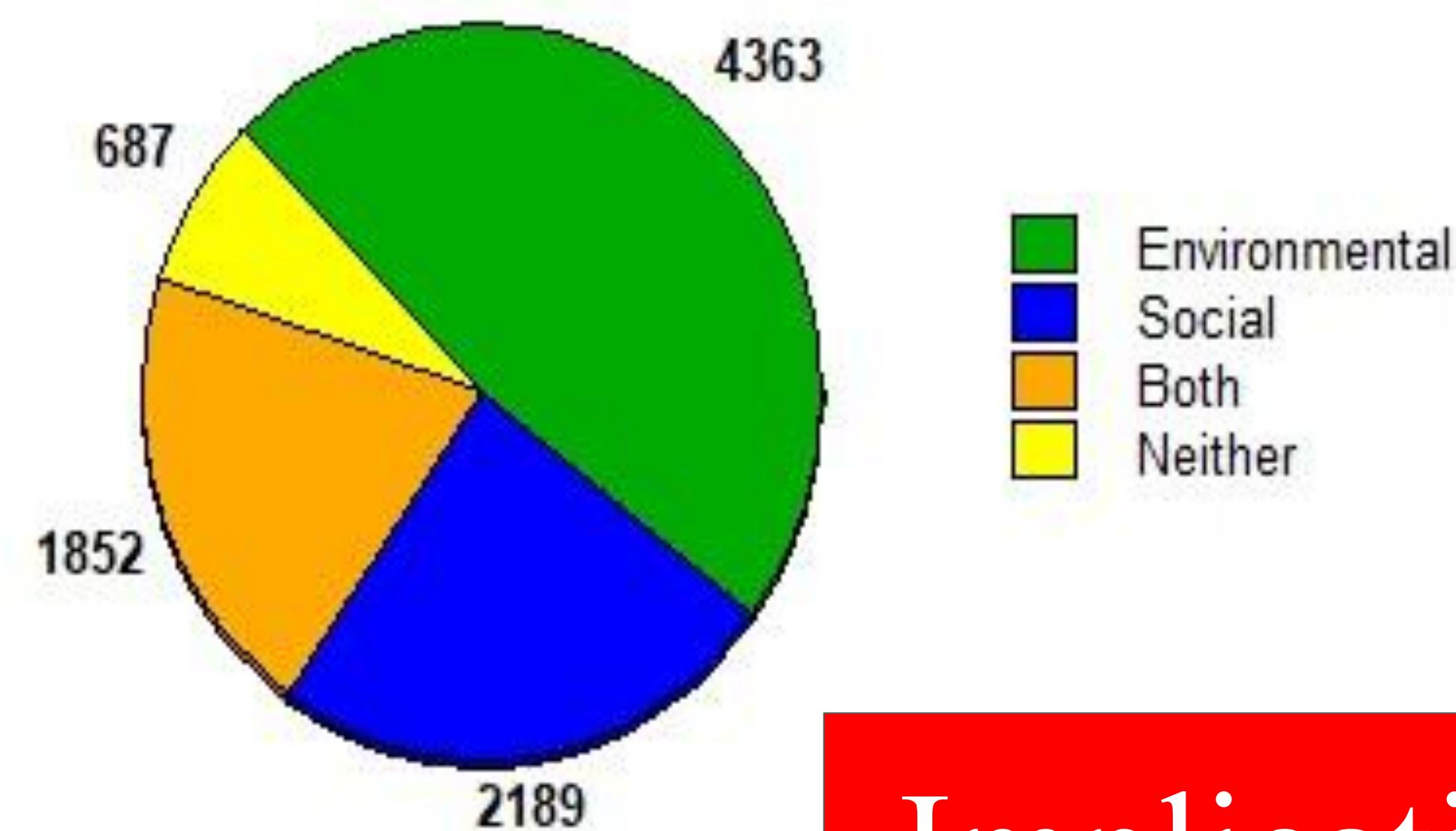Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Lara Zwarun, Department of Communication & Media

Rationale

Given the widespread concern of the climate crisis, as well as growing concern over equality, justice, and rights, getting data such as this seemed very important.
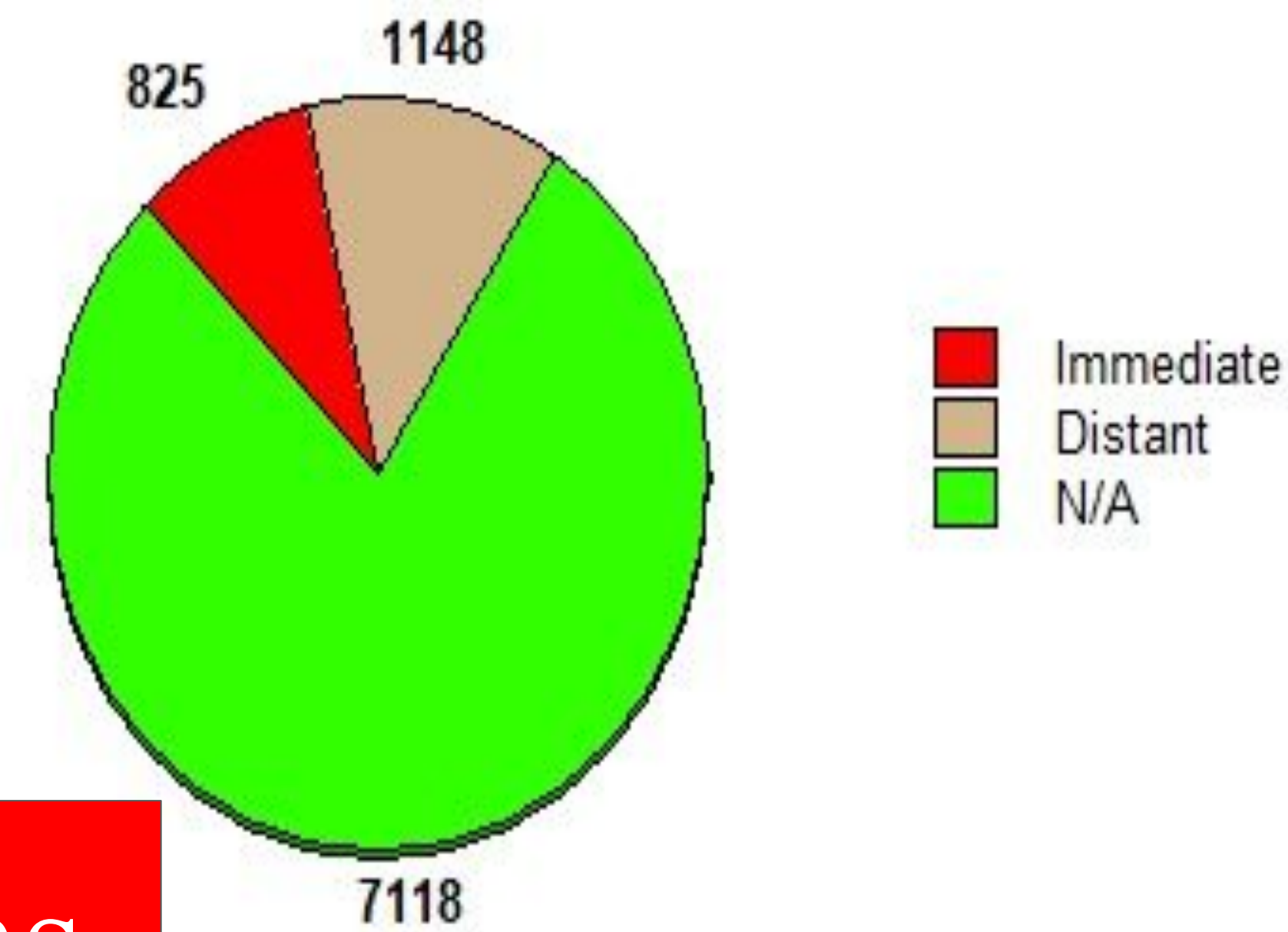
By exploring open-ended responses, we gain insight into the complex reasons behind people's prioritization of environmental or social issues

Method

Using data from an open-ended survey with ~10,000 responses to the question "Do you view social or environmental issues as more important?", I coded the responses based on seven main variables.

- Social, Environmental, Both, or Neither

- Immediate effects vs Distant effects

- Intrinsic motivation vs Extrinsic motivation

- Solvable vs Unsolvable issues

- Social & Environmental problems are connected

- An appeal to future generations of humanity

- Conspiratory viewpoints/denial of issues

Using these as a filter, I was able to analyze the textual data to identify patterns, themes, and insights. This process transforms the raw, varied answers into structured data that can be interpreted and used to draw conclusions about the survey population's attitudes, beliefs, and priorities.

Results

Environmental vs. Social Concerns

4363 — Environmental
687
1852 — Both
2189 — Social
Neither

Immediate vs Distant

1148 — Distant
825 — Immediate
7118 — N/A

Implications

Significant divide between people focused on the here and now and those looking down the road:
- ~2% of people who chose social did so for the sake of future generations, whereas over 10% of people who chose environmental did so for future generations.
- ~6% of people who chose social were motivated by immediate effects, but less than 1% of them were motivated by distant.
- ~9% of people who chose environment were motivated by future effects, but only 2% were motivated by immediate.

This implies that people who are more focused on current times put a larger focus on social issues, whereas people who are more focused on what's in the future care more about environmental issues. It was often expressed that we have to have a living planet on which to have social issues; if we let the earth die around us, our problems won't matter anymore.

Lots of people who chose "both" thought that by solving one of these issues, the other would become significantly easier. Typically, people thought that if we were to solve social, environmental issues would be easily fixed.

Many individuals mentioned that if they weren't suffering from various social issues, they would be more inclined to care about the environment, but when you can barely feed your family, the whole world seems completely out of your reach. Many who picked neither did so because simply surviving was all they were able to accomplish.

Note that the variables besides Social/Environmental were not always present, they were only marked as applicable. Many answers on the survey were brief and contained few, if any additional variables.

Social: 2189 (24%) vs Env: 4363(48%) vs Both: 1852(20%) vs Neither: 687(8%)

Immediate: 825(9%) vs Distant: 1148(13%)

Intrinsic: 1171(12.9%) vs Extrinsic: 1183(13%)

Solvable: 864(10%) vs Unsolvable: 177(2%)

Soc & Env are connected: 1022(11%)

Appeal to future generations: 633(7%)

Conspiracy/denial: 200(2%)

Personal Takeaways

- I gained insights into the complexities of survey design and analysis with open-ended responses.
- I observed the difficult balance between free expression and analytical clarity in survey structure.
- I experienced the detailed process of categorizing wide ranging opinions into meaningful data.
- I now truly recognize the subjective nature of data interpretation, highlighting the nuanced nature of human perspectives.
- I gained a new respect for people/institutions who genuinely try to use surveys to gain useful knowledge; almost 1/10 people who take the surveys leave it blank or give a nonsensical answer

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Rationale

Given the widespread concern of the climate crisis, as well as growing concern over equality, justice, and rights, getting data such as this seemed very important.

By exploring open-ended responses, we gain insight into the complex reasons behind people's prioritization of environmental or social issues

Method

Online survey administered by professional marketing research firm, N = 9,091 respondents, demographically diverse, from all 50 states. Data collected in 2021 amid climate crisis, Covid pandemic, and racial/social tensions following the death of George Floyd.

- Step 1: Code for if most important issue is Social, Environmental, Both, or Neither
- Step 2: Further analyze textual data to identify patterns, themes, and insights to develop additional coding categories.
- Step 3: Convert raw, varied answers into structured data to draw conclusions about the sample's attitudes, beliefs, and priorities.

Objective

To gain insight into the complex reasons behind people's perceptions of environmental and social issues.

Open-ended survey question: "In general, would you say that environmental problems or social issues are more important to you? Please briefly explain why you place more importance on this."

Results

- **Step 1: Environmental (48%), Social (24%), Both (20%), Neither (8%)**
- Step 2: Categories further developed
  - Worried about immediate concerns (9%) vs distant concerns (13%). Ex. "Social issues are more important because it affects how people feel right now"
  - Focus on personal/familial concerns (12.9%) vs community/global concerns (13.0%). Ex. "Environmental issues are more important to me because they effect everyone regardless of race, age or location"
  - Views issues as solvable (10%) vs unsolvable (2%). Ex. "As long as we do our part. things can be changed"
  - Perceives a connection between social & environmental (11%). Ex. "They go hand in hand. The issues affect each other in a lot of different ways"
  - Appeal to future generations of humanity (7%). Ex. "Environmental problems are important to me. we need to care for our planet so future generations can enjoy it"
  - Complete denial of issues/attribution to conspiracy theories (2%). Ex. "Neither. This is programing used on the younger generations. I am immune to these particular manipulations"

Implications

Insights from Step 3:
- "Environment" answers more likely to mention concern for future generations than those "social" ones
- Many noted we need a living planet to have social issues; if we let the earth die, social problems are moot.
- "Both" answers often said solving one issue would make solving the other easier
- Significant divide between those focused on current times and those focused on the future; forward thinkers more likely to choose environmental, current thinkers more likely to choose social

Potential steps for future research:
Test for significant relationships between demographics and other variables measured in survey and the variables I developed and coded for.

Personal Takeaways

- The complexities of survey design
  - Balancing respondents' free expression with analytical clarity
- The painstaking process of analyzing open-ended responses
  - Categorizing the nuanced nature of human perspectives into meaningful data through subjective data interpretation
- The challenge for those who conduct survey research
  - Significant % of respondents left question blank or gave nonsensical answer

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Examples

Immediate: "Social issues are more important because it affects how people feel right now"
Global Concern: "Environmental issues are more important to me because they effect everyone regardless of race, age or location"
Solvable: "As long as we do our part. things can be changed"
Interconnected: "They go hand in hand. The issues affect each other in a lot of different ways"
Future Generations: "Environmental problems are important to me. we need to care for our planet so future generations can enjoy it"
Denial/Conspiracy: "Neither. This is programing used on the younger generations. I am immune to these particular manipulations"
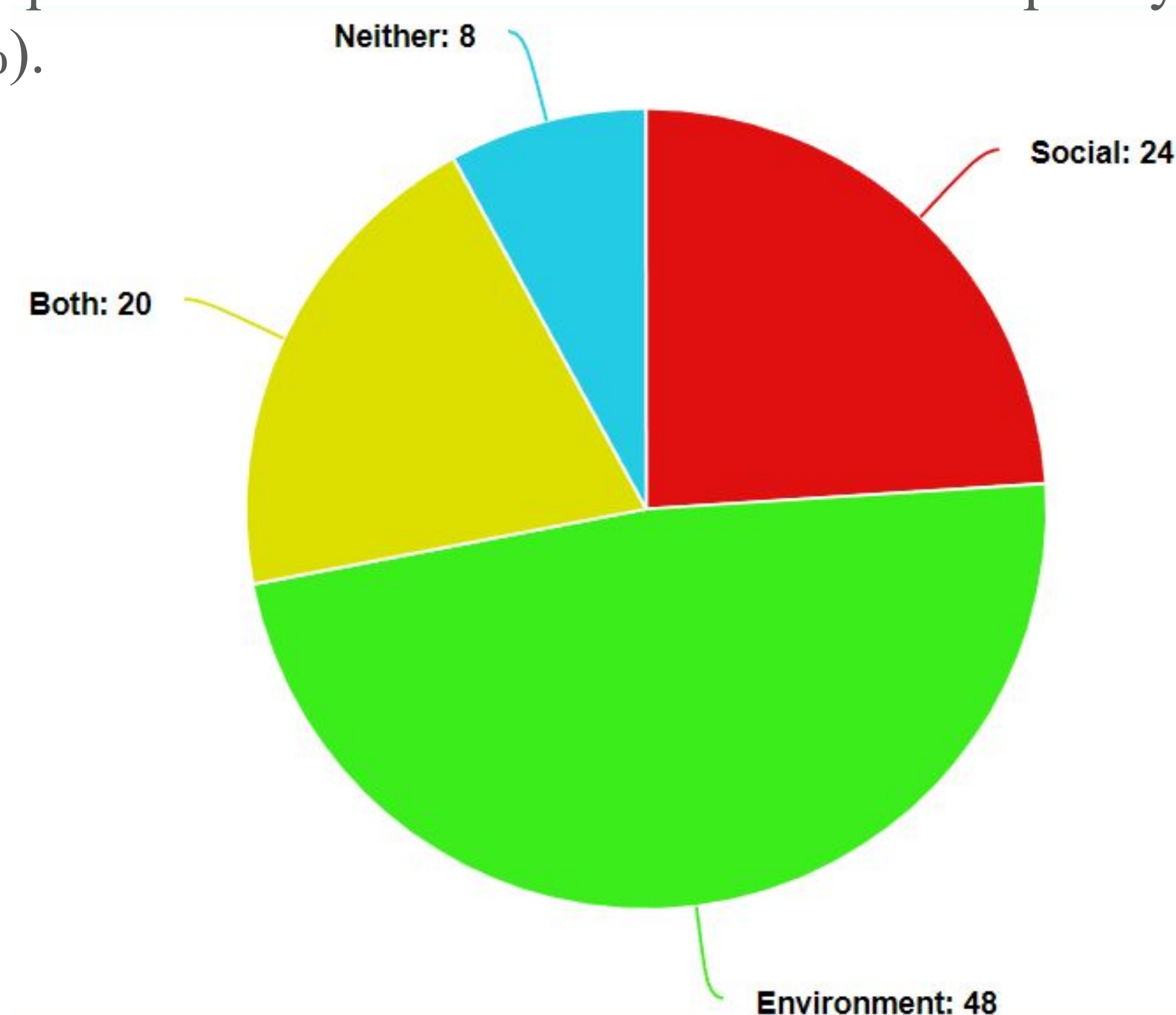
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To gain insight into the complex reasons behind people's perceptions of environmental and social issues.

Open-ended survey question: "In general, would you say that environmental problems or social issues are more important to you? Please briefly explain why you place more importance on this."

Results

- **Step 1: Environmental (48%), Social (24%), Both (20%), Neither (8%)**
- Step 2: Categories from further analysis
  - Worried about immediate concerns (9%) vs distant concerns (13%).
  - Focus on personal/familial concerns (12.9%) vs community/global concerns (13.0%).
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  - Perceives a connection between social & environmental (11%).
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Neither: 8
Social: 24
Both: 20
Environment: 48

Implications

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Ex. "They go hand in hand. The issues affect each other in a lot of different ways"
Ex. "Environmental problems are important to me. we need to care for our planet so future generations can enjoy it"
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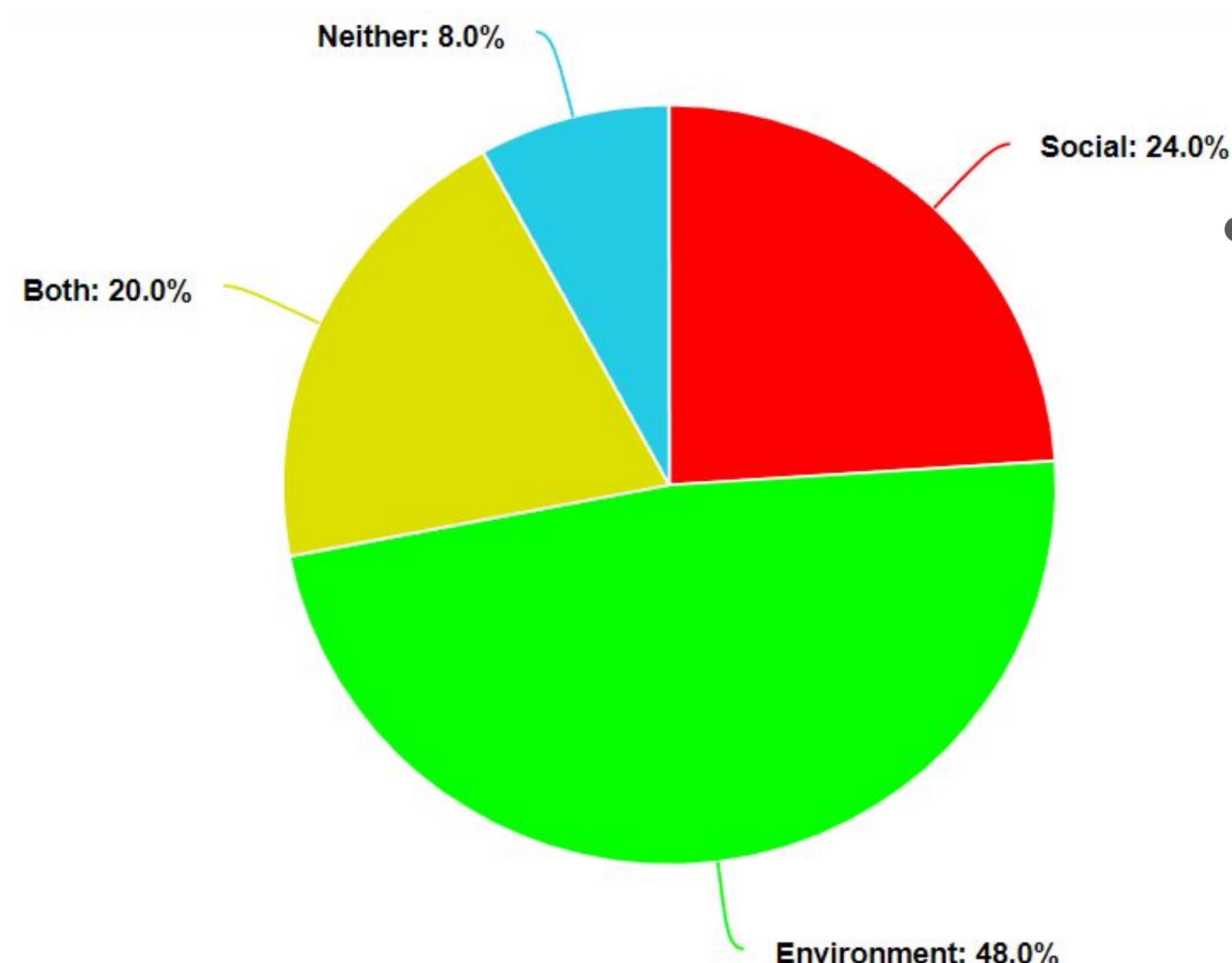
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Step 1 Results:

Neither: 8.0%
Social: 24.0%
Both: 20.0%
Environment: 48.0%

Objective

To gain insight into the complex reasons behind people's perceptions of environmental and social issues. Open-ended survey question: "In general, would you say that environmental problems or social issues are more important to you? Please briefly explain why you place more importance on this."

Results

- Step 2: Categories that emerged from further analysis
  - Worried about immediate concerns vs distant concerns
  - Focus on personal/familial concerns vs community/global concerns
  - Views issues as solvable vs unsolvable
  - Perceives a connection between social & environmental
  - Appeal to future generations of humanity
  - Complete denial of issues/attribution to conspiracy theories

- Insights from Step 3:
  - "Environment" answers more likely to mention concern for future generations than those "social" ones
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Future Generations: "*Environmental problems are important to me. we need to care for our planet so future generations can enjoy it*"
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Future Research

Test for significant relationships between demographics and other variables measured in survey and the variables I developed and coded for.

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