The seventh annual bipartisan 2017 Conservation in the West poll was released in April by Colorado College’s State of the Rockies Project, a signature program of the college, according to President Jill Tiefenthaler.

Public Opinion Strategies, a market research company, conducted this year’s poll of 2,800 registered voters living in the West, along with Dave Metz, Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates.

Lori Weigel, a partner in the Colorado office of Public Opinion Strategies, spoke about the results during a speakers’ series, “Our Natural Economy: Capitalizing on Colorado’s Unique Place in the Rockies,” held April 12 at Colorado College.

El Pomar Foundation’s Pikes Peak Heritage Series co-sponsored the event.

Also addressing the large crowd was Ray Rasker, executive director of Headwaters Economics, a nongovernmental organization he co-founded in 2005 in Bozeman, Montana, to study Western land topics.

Rasker argues that changes in the global and national economies have transformed vast open spaces of the American West from a liability to a primary economic driver that should be preserved.

The Conservation in the West poll annually gauges public opinion on conservation and the environment, energy development, the role of government and citizens’ priorities.

This year’s results show a significant increase in Westerners who self-identify as conservationists, which Weigel said is a new and interesting development.
In 2016, 63 percent of respondents in all seven states said they were conservationists. The number grew to 70 percent this year. Among Colorado respondents, 65 percent identified as conservationists in 2016, and 74 percent this year.

Also of note, 97 percent of all respondents said they visited national public lands last year.

By a greater than a 3-to-1 margin, voters would rather have the Trump administration emphasize conservation instead of energy production.

In Colorado, 69 percent of respondents say they want public lands protected, while 22 percent favor energy production.

Throughout the West, tourism and recreation are viewed as positive economic contributors, with nearly three-fourths of all respondents considering those sectors as helping the economy.

Western counties that have protected national parks, wilderness and monuments are doing better economically than those without such amenities, he said.

Also, communities show more economic growth after obtaining national monument designation than before.

Public opinion can and should influence politics, he said, noting that in February, outcry from hunters, anglers and other outdoor enthusiasts led Utah Republican Rep. Jason Chaffetz to withdraw a bill ordering the Interior Secretary to sell or dispose of more than 3.3 million acres of public land.

And organizers of the Outdoor Retailer trade show, the world’s largest outdoor gear exhibition that has produced $45 million annually for Salt Lake City, announced in February they would seek a different city for the event, citing Utah’s debate over public lands as the reason.

When businesses talk, people often listen, he said, adding that he hopes more companies bring a voice to the table.

Outdoor recreation, along with culture and heritage industries generate 1.9 million jobs and some $646 billion in retail sales, Rasker said, while only 5 percent of income in the West is earned from mining, oil, gas and timber production.

And only one-quarter of federal land is used for conservation; three-fourths are open for resource development.
But resource development won’t become an economic mainstay, Rasker said, because economic development is primarily occurring in metropolitan areas.

Seventy-five percent of all jobs in the West are located in cities, he said, and 92 percent of Western residents live in the metro areas.

“The advantage of cities is the social network,” Rasker said. “Airports are where economic activity occurs because it’s the opportunity to visit people face-to-face. And human capital is critical today.”

He said he’s concerned about possible cuts in federal subsidies for airlines, which would further isolate and stagnate economic diversity in rural communities.

Weigel said the three things people care about most in protecting public lands are: water, the wildlife and ecosystem, and evoking something about our way of life, such as recreation.

“That’s why people want to preserve any place,” she said.

Asked from an audience member whether the pursuit and dissemination of public opinion is phooey, Weigel said no, the information holds great value.

“Part of the use of public opinion is to provide a broader perspective,” she said.

Colorado College sophomore Nate Goodman agrees.

“It’s a multi-faceted look at what’s important, valuable and ecologically significant,” he said after the presentation. “It can be really informative and powerful to create a larger perspective.”

Colorado Springs resident Donna Tanner said she enjoyed seeing all the different economic factors that come into play with public lands.

But, “Unfortunately, even though the data is there, people forget or ignore these kinds of things and it might not make much of a difference because of the emotional investment,” she said. “I believe there are some things you have to do on a national basis because it benefits the entire population. We are all part of this together.”

Susan Davies, executive director of the Trails and Open Space Coalition in Colorado Springs, said it’s encouraging to see that people from all kinds of backgrounds and walks of life see the value of public spaces for recreation and economic benefits.

“They’re increasing our income and improving our wellbeing,” she said. “I’m very hopeful.”