

## PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF HARMFUL ALGAL BLOOMS IN FLORIDA

*Christopher Cuevas and David Kaplan*

University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA

Florida's freshwater and saltwater ecosystems are vulnerable to blooms of cyanobacteria and *Karenia brevis*, popularly known as blue-green algae and red tide, and together referred to as harmful algal blooms (HABs). Recent HABs of both species have resulted in negative environmental, public health, and economic impacts throughout the state. Florida is a state notable for its economic and sociocultural diversity, which poses major challenges for consensus-building on complex public policy issues. In an effort to assess the attitudes of Florida voters on HAB issues, a poll was conducted in December 2018 through the University of Florida's Bureau for Economic and Business Research. A sample of 421 Floridians were polled about their voting record during the 2018 election cycle and their opinions on Florida's HAB issues. While only 15% of respondents indicated that they or their families were directly impacted by the 2018 blooms, nearly 80% of respondents across racial, economic, political, and geographic spectrums were concerned or very concerned about the issue, and 50% believed that the environment was a major election issue. When asked to assign assess whether each of several groups were "responsible" for the crises, respondents identified agricultural producers (listed by 60% of respondents), followed by Florida's state government (53%), and local governments (40%), however Democrats and Independents were 87% and 42% more likely than Republicans, respectively, to perceive the state government as responsible. These results show that most Floridians were concerned about the HABs of 2018 yet felt uninformed on the issue. There were substantial differences among respondents about who bears responsibility—especially when it comes to Florida's state government—and these differences were strongly associated with political affiliation. This study indicates that finding politically feasible solutions to HABs in Florida may remain challenging despite a consensus on the importance of addressing this issue.

**PRESENTER BIO:** Mr. Cuevas is a senior undergraduate student pursuing dual degrees in environmental engineering and political science. His research interests include harmful algal blooms, environmental policy, and science communication. In the future, he intends to pursue a Master's in Public Administration degree with a concentration in environmental policy.