

Study reveals Americans' surprising response to government during great recession

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In response to past economic crises such as the Great Depression, Americans demanded government policy solutions to widespread unemployment and rising income insecurity. But a new study in the October issue of the *American Sociological Review* found that public support for government efforts to address social problems actually declined in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis.

"We found it surprising that as the Great Recession emerged, the American public moved quickly toward lower levels of support for [government](#) policy solutions to [social problems](#)," said Clem Brooks, lead author of the study and the Rudy Professor of Sociology at Indiana University. "This is not the outcome we expected based on a good deal of scholarship in sociology and political science. It also departs from much, if not most, journalistic and common-sense thinking as well."

Titled, "A Broken Public? Americans' Responses to the Great Recession," the study relies on data from the 1984-2010 waves of the nationally representative General Social Survey (GSS); the GSS 2006-2008-2010 panel, which tracked a group of people over several years; the 2001-2011 Gallup surveys; and the Evaluations of Government and Society Study surveys from 2011 and 2012.

According to Brooks, the decline in [public support](#) for government solutions to social problems during the Great Recession (2008-2010) was among the largest two-year changes during the 26-year-period (1984-2010) he and co-author Jeff Manza, a Professor of Sociology at

New York University, considered in their study.

So what caused the decline?

"The key is partisanship," said Brooks. "We found that it wasn't the public as a whole that moved away from support for government policy solutions. Self-identified Democrats actually became slightly more supportive of government solutions between 2008 and 2010. But self-identified Independents and especially Republicans experienced a large shift in the opposite direction."

Interestingly, from 2008-2010, support for government solutions among Republicans declined at over three times the rate of attitude change among Independents, Brooks said.

"For several decades now, the Democratic and Republican parties have become more and more distinct when it comes to the laws and policies that U.S. Senators, Representatives, and Presidents support," Brooks said. "This polarization is also asymmetric: Republican politicians have moved much faster to the right than Democratic politicians have moved to the left. These developments are the background to the importance of voter-level partisanship that we have unearthed during the recent recession."

While political party polarization was already apparent among the American public before the Great Recession, the researchers found that the economic downturn intensified the differences in policy attitudes of self-identified Republicans and Democrats.

"Self-identified Republicans experienced a more significant change in policy attitudes than did Democrats during the Great Recession," Brooks said.

Before concluding that it was partisanship that caused public support for [government policy](#) solutions to social problems to decline during the Great Recession, the researchers ruled out several other possibilities.

"In addition to the possibility that new government laws and policies implemented by the federal government during the recession—including the 2008 Wall Street bailout, the 2009 stimulus package, and the 2010 Affordable Care Act—caused the decrease in support, we also considered explanations focusing on racial attitudes and beliefs about individualism and markets," Brooks said. "Ultimately, our study provided evidence that it was partisanship rather than any other number of plausible biases and beliefs that led to the decline."

Provided by American Sociological Association

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