

Political interest in environmental issues persisted despite economic recession

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Water pollution is an environmental issue that affects many water bodies. This photograph shows foam on the New River as it enters the United States from Mexico. Credit: Photo in the public domain

Despite success in recent decades of the environmental political movement, many had speculated the 2008 Great Recession would put many environmental issues on the back burner.

"To our surprise, we found that interest in environmental issues is well and alive," said Robert Rohrschneider, the Sir Robert Worcester Distinguished Professor of Political Science at the University of Kansas. "People are just as concerned with ecological issues as they were in 2000 and even in 1993 when the movement was by all accounts quite vibrant."

Rohrschneider co-edited a special issue of the Environmental Politics

journal titled "Environmental concerns during a time of duress," in which researchers examined public opinion polling surrounding environmental issues.

Contributors to the issue used new evidence on environmental opinions from the International Social Survey Program to address public support for environmental values, participation in environmental activity over time, and how changing domestic economic conditions influenced the way citizens and political parties view the importance of environmentalism.

The survey included data from 1993, 2000 and 2010 from respondents in many countries across the world. Researchers used data from the most recent year to gauge significance of environmental issues not far removed from economic stress of the recession, especially in Western Europe and the United States, which both have relatively strong environmental movements.

Rohrschneider said at past points in history economic hard times caused environmental policy to become less of a priority to citizens and policymakers. As part of his broader research portfolio, Rohrschneider has studied how the environmental movement has become more institutionalized in recent decades.

"Initially the environmental movement was a protest movement of the 1970s, because all the major established policymakers didn't care too much about it," he said. "Back then, environmental advocates could only make inroads into the system after economic issues were taken care of."

However, in the 1980s and 1990s, as economies in advanced democracies stabilized, more and more green parties emerged in Europe and, to a lesser extent, in the United States, giving them either seats at drafting policy or becoming influential interest groups. As environmental

issues persist in Europe and the United States, the political landscape does tend to offer a clear choice for voters interested in them.

This has likely contributed to the present political climate, which did not see interest diminish in environmental issues despite the economic crisis.

"There's an infrastructure in place that actually sustains interest in these issues beyond ephemeral public attitudes, and that seems to help the environmental movement now," Rohrschneider said.

Another factor that seems to have kept [environmental issues](#) on the front burner has been news stories and exposure to environmental problems, such as drought, climate change and melting glaciers, for example.

"Everyone has heard about a drought here and there, but once you hear it 10 times over a period of 15 to 20 years, one begins to wonder as an ordinary citizen," Rohrschneider said. "The same is true about rising sea levels. There seems to be in the news environment a constant reminder in the air that shows people this is a really pressing issue."

Provided by University of Kansas

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