

PUBLIC OPINION: People care less about the environment as unemployment rises – study

Debra Kahn – ClimateWire – August 3, 2010

Confirming conventional wisdom, a new study from the University of California has found that as unemployment rises, interest in the environment, and climate change in particular, drops.

The study [subscription required] authors, Matthew Kahn of the University of California, Los Angeles, and Matthew Kotchen of the University of California, Santa Barbara, used three independent data sets: Google searches from 2004 to 2010, Public Policy Institute of California polls taken monthly from 2008 to 2009, and two national surveys conducted by the Yale Project on Climate Change from 2008 to 2010.

By comparing Google searches to unemployment rates in each state, Kahn and Kotchen found that when unemployment increases by 1 percent, people reduce their Googling for "global warming" by 5.2 percent, while upping their searches for "unemployment" by 6 percent.

The decline in climate-related searches is even more pronounced in states that lean Democratic, as measured by support for John Kerry in the 2004 presidential election. "One possible explanation is that Republican concern about climate change is simply lower and less variable," the researchers wrote.

By merging polling data with unemployment data, the researchers also were able to drill down to the individual county level in California. As the unemployment rate in California rose from 8.8 to 12 percent, respondents in the PPIC poll listed environment as their top priority half as often -- from 1.4 percent to 0.7 percent. (Greater unemployment rates also decrease interest in all other issues, except taxes.)

And for the Yale studies, which saw an increase in unemployment from 6.3 to 9.9 percent, the researchers found a high negative correlation between unemployment and confidence in climate change. A 1 percent increase in unemployment is associated with a 3.4 percent decrease in the probability that a respondent will think global warming is happening. An increase in unemployment also decreases confidence in those who stick to their belief in global warming.

"The general pattern is clear: higher unemployment rates -- at least when levels reach those observed during the recent recession -- erode public concern about the environment," Kahn and Kotchen wrote. "It is well known that public opinion affects which public policies ultimately pass and how they are funded and implemented. With this in mind, the results of this paper suggest that effective environmental policy in general and climate-change policy in particular is more likely during economic booms."

In California, a ballot initiative slated for the November election is tapping economic frustrations by making a blunt connection between climate change and jobs. Proposition 23 would delay the state's landmark global warming law, A.B. 32, until unemployment reaches 5.5 percent for four consecutive quarters. A recent PPIC poll found 71 percent of Californians in support of the law,

but 54 percent were unaware of the cap-and-trade market that is key to achieving emissions reductions under it (ClimateWire, July 29).

Kahn said in an interview that while he couldn't determine whether California's current unemployment rate of 12.2 percent would spell success or failure for Prop. 23, the initiative's message jibes with his findings. "Our work affirms how politically shrewd the proponents of Prop. 23 have been," he said. "I oppose Prop. 23 ... but in terms of our research, the proponents did strike at the right time."