

Green Materialism

New Findings on Public Environmental Concern in Developing Countries

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Abstract

According to the logic behind the development of post-materialist political cleavages, environmental awareness is part of a general change in fundamental values that occurs when societies develop. When countries reach higher levels of affluence, citizens become less preoccupied with basic economic survival and are free to pursue post-materialistic goals, such as political freedom, individual self-fulfillment, and other non-economic political agendas. Because concerns about the environment depend on reasonable levels of sustenance, the post-materialist argument suggests that citizens from developing countries are unlikely to demonstrate awareness of environmental problems, and that such green considerations will not influence their policy preferences. We question whether the post-materialist logic about environmental politics is relevant in developing countries today for two reasons. First, premature deindustrialization in emerging markets mean that the poor are much less likely to see their livelihoods associated with dirty industries. Second, the high salience of environmental problems observed today has removed concern for environmental quality as a luxury of the middle class, and has placed its value on par with other basic needs, such as access to food and shelter. We test our concerns against the post-materialist predictions using a conjoint survey design on 14,000 citizens in Vietnam. We find that citizens at various income levels weigh environmental concerns heavily in their preferences regarding future investment in their localities.