Recycling Increases in Red States, but Blue States Still Recycle More

Linda K. Breggin is a senior attorney in ELI's Center for State and Local Environmental Programs. She can be reached at breggin@eli.org.

What does a decade of survey data tell us about household recycling trends? Nationally, recycling rates increased by seven percentage points from 2005 to 2014 for households that recycle plastic, paper, cans, and glass.

Researchers Kip Viscusi, Joel Huber, and Jason Bell, who mined data collected from over 170,000 households in an effort to understand the factors that influence recycling behavior, were surprised by the upward trend. They reasoned that states did not enact major changes to their laws that could account for the increased recycling rates during the decade studied. Furthermore, economic factors such as the 2008 recession reduced Chinese demand for recycled materials, and reductions in the cost of producing new plastic (due to increased fracking) all limited states' financial capacity to support recycling.

Despite these impediments, the analysis shows that recycling behavior did increase overall, although rates varied based on the type of material and geographic region. For example, can recycling rates were the highest (74 percent in 2014), but plastics recycling rates increased the most (11 percent). The researchers explain that the relative rates are affected by numerous factors, such as how often a household uses the material, the effort required to recycle, and whether local policies support recycling of specific materials. They also identified market factors that affected variations, such as the increased popularity of plastic water bottles.

The Northeast achieved the highest recycling rates — followed, in order, by the West, Midwest, and South. But despite leading the pack, rates in the northeastern and western states were fairly stable, whereas rates in the Midwest and South grew substantially. Several factors influenced these regional variations including, but not limited to, the type of state legal regime and political party control.

For example, even though most states have some type of recycling law — almost all of which were enacted before 2005 — the stringency of the statutory requirements affected rates. The seven states with mandatory recycling laws, Connecticut, District of Columbia, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Wisconsin, had the highest recycling rates — 67 percent on average. In contrast, the 21 states that either have no recycling laws — or laws that specify a goal but neither impose a mandate nor require plans or recycling amenities — had much lower rates. These states, which are located in all regions of the country and include Wyoming, Indiana, Delaware, and Montana, had an average recycling rate of 41 percent. The researchers report that the greatest rate increases were in states with the least stringent laws, even though the overall rates were highest in states with the most stringent laws.

Political party control is associated with factors that in turn affect recycling rates

In addition, states in which both the governorship and the legislature were controlled by Democrats recycled 30 percent more than in states controlled by Republicans. According to the researchers, political party control is associated with several factors that in turn affect recycling rates, such as the "prevalence of pro-environmental attitudes, population density, and state government spending levels." The researchers conclude that their finding "is consistent with the emphasis by Democrats on government actions to further policy goals, contrasting with Republicans who value reliance on individual responsibility." And, although Democratic states had the highest recycling rates, Republican states had the greatest increase in rates.

In what ways can these historical trends inform recycling efforts moving forward? According to Viscusi, the data indicate that amendments to state laws are unnecessary, as the statutes are broad enough to allow for program and policy changes that can make household recycling easier, such as curbside pickup and convenient drop-off locations. He further suggests that efforts should focus on states that do not have high enough levels of recycling, such as those in the South, which he concludes "have not hit a plateau" and have the "greatest opportunities for gains." But, is increasing recycling rates in the South easier said than done?

Viscusi offers an approach: "Totally ignore the environmental benefits and focus on the economics." The Viscusi team's prior research found that "sometimes recycling programs pass the cost-benefit test and sometimes they don't," but in many cases recycling can be a "money maker." He also queries whether corporations may appreciate robust recycling programs that may reduce the growing pressure to reduce or ban the use of plastics altogether.

Policymakers and stakeholders will undoubtedly rely on this study in shaping future recycling initiatives. The research's value highlights the need for more empirical and longitudinal studies to inform a range of state and local environmental policies.