

AN AMERICAN PARADOX

DALE JAMIESON

*New York University, Steinhardt School, HMSS, 246 Greene Street, Suite 300,
New York, NY 10003-6677, USA
E-mail: Dwj3@nyu.edu*

Abstract. This paper explores the paradox that while Americans generally identify themselves as environmentalists, they show little willingness to voluntarily restrain their behavior or to support specific fiscal policies that would result in increased levels of environmental protection. I explore the role of values in the explanation of this paradox, and discuss some of the difficulties involved in studying values and their role in human behavior.

For students of environmental policy, the past several decades have been fascinating but confusing. The United States awoke to the environmental crisis in the 1960s, and in the 1970s passed landmark legislation that was unparalleled in the rest of the world. Europe stirred in the late 1970s and began to catch-up in the 1980s. While the road was sometimes bumpy, it appeared that the United States and Europe were on the way to convergence. There were tensions at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, with some Europeans favoring stronger action on climate change and biodiversity protection than the Americans, but to a great extent these could be construed as turning on differences of timing and tone rather than fundamental questions of principle. Since Rio, however, the Europeans and Americans have moved much further apart. Increasingly, they seem to inhabit different worlds with respect to environmental policy, especially in regard to global problems such as climate change and the relationship of these questions to global poverty and governance (Vig and Faure, 2004). This is symbolized by the fact that in a recent poll the citizens of the United Kingdom said that climate change is a greater concern to them than religion – a result that is unimaginable in the United States (<http://www.mori.com/polls/2001/pdf/unfpa.pdf>).

Despite the policy retreats since the signing of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, survey data suggest that most Americans:

- think of themselves as environmentalists;
- say they generally are willing to pay for green policies;
- believe that climate change is real and bad; and
- are willing to pay to mitigate it.

At the same time the data also show this about most Americans:

- their support for green policies flags as policies are more carefully specified and precise costs are associated with them;

- they especially dislike policies that are most favored by economists and policy experts (e.g., emissions trading rather than prohibitive policies, gasoline taxes rather than CAFE standards, incentives rather than sanctions); and
- they often vote for environmentally abusive candidates.¹

It is the apparent contradiction between these two sets of attitudes that I refer to as “an American Paradox.” In calling this an “American” Paradox I am not implying any sort of American exceptionalism. The gap between high-minded words and low-down behavior is hardly new, nor is it the sole provenance of any country. In a June, 2005 poll, 89% of the British public said that they were deeply concerned about climate change, yet majorities also opposed higher taxes on air travel or driving (<http://politics.guardian.co.uk/polls/story/0,11030,1511097,00.html>). However, majorities did express willingness to adopt energy conservation policies that would entail higher costs, and 83% of the respondents wanted their prime minister to challenge the American president on his lack of a meaningful climate change policy. Whatever may be the case in other countries, it is clear that the gap between attitude and action on this issue is very large in the United States, and its repercussions are of great consequence for the entire world. Americans seem to endorse environmentalism generally but not specifically, in theory but not in practice. As the eighteenth century philosopher, Immanuel Kant would have said, they “will the ends, but not the means.” What explains this American paradox?

Part of the explanation surely concerns cognitive deficiencies. The science of climate change is extremely complex, interdisciplinary, and rife with uncertainties. Ph.D. scientists often mischaracterize the issues or get the science wrong. When viewed as an environmental problem, climate change also involves enormous social and political complexity. Very few people are competent in, much less masters of, both kinds of material. Not many more are able to distinguish expertise in these fields from mere posturing.

There are also cognitive illusions involved in understanding climate change. An exceptionally cold summer day will in many people drive away the belief that the Earth is warming. A warm winter in Minneapolis may convince them that the warming is a good thing.²

In addition, while many people believe that climate change is occurring and that this is a bad thing, the issue isn’t as important to them as homeland security, jobs, or health care. In part this is because climate change lacks realism and vivacity for many people. It is a creeping problem with diffuse causes and effects that are remote in space and time. Moreover, climate change affects people only indirectly through rising sea levels, extreme events, and the social and economic responses to such effects. While climate change may kill millions, it will be on the death certificate of no one (Jamieson, 1991).

These are some of the factors that help explain this American Paradox, but there seems to be more at work as well. It is this “something more” that people gesture at when they talk about values. The idea is that there is something about