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;

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- 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

people's values, in addition to the other factors that I have mentioned, that prevent Americans' pro-environmental attitudes from being expressed in action.

It is difficult to be precise about the role of values in the production of behavior because the relevant literature is both fragmented and underdeveloped. There is a large and sophisticated philosophical literature that centers on conceptual clarity, but with little regard for empirical tractability. This literature has largely been ignored by those working in psychology and the social sciences. Although a few heavily cited works have been produced in these fields (e.g., Rokeach, 1973), generally values research in the social sciences has been relatively sparse and disappointing. This is due in part to the dominance of positivism and behaviorism for much of the twentieth century. Their commitment to reductionist methodologies and value-neutrality had the effect of driving concerns about values to the margins of these disciplines. The result is that, while the landscape is changing, there is little that one can currently regard as settled about the nature and role of values in the production of human behavior.[3]

In light of this, it should not be surprising that many people in the scientific and policy communities are leery of talk of values. They often subscribe to a theory that idealizes the separation of facts and values. On this view, the world is constituted by facts which are value-neutral, and when our cognitive machinery is in good working order, these facts are reflected in our beliefs. Values, on the other hand, are projected by people on to the world. They reflect our desires rather than the facts. Rather than being neutral, they motivate people to change the way the world is. On this sort of view, fact-seeking activities such as science and policy analysis should not be contaminated by the unruly desires that are the basis of people's values.

Whatever one may think of this as an ideal, when it comes to real people (even scientists and policy analysts), facts and values are often entwined. This is especially so in dynamic areas far from matters about which people have settled beliefs and commitments. In these areas shifts in beliefs about the world may affect desires about what one wants to be the case, and shifts in desires may affect beliefs.

An example can be drawn from the recent discussion of "the two Americas," the polarization between the so-called "red" states of the South and West, and the "blue" states of the coasts and north central Midwest. It is sometimes claimed that this geographical division, which maps differences in voting behavior, also marks an epistemological divide. On all sorts of important matters people in the red states have different beliefs than people in the blue states. What is sometimes suggested is that if people from different regions could be brought to agree on a single set of facts, then their divergent values would also come into alignment. However, I think that it is just as likely that people in these regions have different beliefs because they have different values than that they have different values because they have different beliefs. Consider an example. Many people who voted for Bush in the election of 2004 believed that Saddam Hussein was involved with Osama Bin Laden in planning the 2001 attack on the World Trade Towers. I think that it is as likely that many of these people had this belief because they supported Bush, as that they supported Bush because they had this belief.

If I am right about this, then it is follows that our psychologies are holistic. There are no laws of nature that can tell us how to move people predictably from one set of behaviors to another simply by pressing on some part of the cognitive or affective system. Behavioral outputs can remain invariant even when new information is provided or new desires are formed, because the psychological system can always be internally adjusted in a way that buffers the behavior from the intervention. What this suggests is that providing new information or changing people's desires is unlikely to be sufficient for making environmentalism behaviorally salient. What is needed is for an entire psychological system to change its state, rather than for particular elements in that system to change. To put the point plainly, moving from an American-style paradoxical environmentalism to one in which environmentalism determines one's thought and practice requires some kind of large-scale personal transformation. Forming a few new beliefs or joining the Sierra Club is not enough.

It is this insight that leads some people to talk about environmentalism as a "brand" or as a religion (Dunlap, 2004). However, neither model works very well. Active environmentalism is too complex to be a brand. It demands more thought and action than is involved simply in "consuming" appropriately-branded items. Nor is the religious model a good one for environmentalism. At its best, environmentalism is evidence-based rather than faith-based. If the model of environmental transformation is not Saul on the road to Damascus nor the Pepsi-drinker turned Coke-drinker, what is it?

Part of the answer, I think, is that overcoming this American Paradox requires a level of self-consciousness and an ability to plan the development of one's own character that is quite unusual (Jamieson, 2002, In press a, b). One has to be able to reflectively examine one's own psychological states and commitments, and to imagine how changing one's life situation would affect future habits and behaviors.

However, while I think these observations may provide some important clues about what it would take to overcome the American Paradox, the fact is that no one has a fully adequate account and I do not claim to have one either. By way of emphasizing the tentative nature of these remarks and the incomplete state of our knowledge, I want to close with two comments on the methodology of studying the American Paradox that are relevant to some of the papers in this issue.

First, in recent years there has been a welcome growth of interest in "deliberative democracy" and "deliberative polling" (e.g., Tichy and Krosnick, 2001a). It is clear that the distinction between a "naïve" versus an "educated" respondent is an important one, and has the potential to contribute significantly to our understanding of public attitudes. However, in an area such as climate change in which the focus is on long-term thinking and behavior change, and much of the basic structure and framing of the problem is contested and dynamic, it is difficult to be precise about exactly what information-provision is appropriate when educating a respondent.

For example, in one survey, respondents are provided with the comparative costs of various forms of electricity (Tichy and Krosnick, 2001b). But exactly how one computes theses costs depends on exactly what one takes into account. For

example, nuclear power appears relatively cheap if the largely unknown costs of waste disposal and the largely indeterminate costs of an elevated risk of terrorism are ignored. The price of oil increases if the fraction of the military budget devoted to protecting supplies is attributed, and the cost of coal skyrockets if the value of ravaged landscapes, clean air, and stable climate are taken into account.

Second, when surveying public attitudes a great deal of energy is devoted to interrogating people's attitudes towards various fairly specific policy options (Tichy and Krosnick, 2001a). I am skeptical about what we can learn from such responses. Consider an analogy. People want to know how long it takes to get to Dallas and what they have to do to get there. It might be possible to drag opinions out of them about how jet engines work, but most people will not be very attached to what they say and it is unclear what of any significance such dragooned opinions would reveal. Similarly, people have strong opinions about clean air, but know very little about "cap and trade" regimes or "prohibitive policies," though they might have strong reactions to these terms when prompted. But why should they know or care about such mechanisms? Citizens elect officials who create procedures for setting performance standards in various domains. It is unreasonable to expect most citizens to have very credible or firm beliefs about, or attitudes towards, the various ways the government might go about satisfying these performance standards.

One problem in the environmental area broadly and with the climate change issue in particular is that there is very little by way of clear, uncontested, benchmarks for when these performance standards are satisfied. For example, the numbers of species listed as endangered or threatened are cited both by critics and defenders of the Endangered Species Act as marks of success or failure, depending on their point of view. What is needed are clear, understandable standards of success to which we can hold ourselves and others responsible. What is required is some way of asking and answering questions like this: "Are you (or future generations, or nature) better off today than you were four years ago?" The movement to establish "green indicators" is in part a response to this need (Atkinson and Hamilton, 1996).

The work that has been done thus far on the environmental attitudes of Americans is interesting and suggestive, but we are very far from having deep insights into this American Paradox. We must be clearer about the questions that are asked, why we think the answers matter, and what we think they might reveal. More work must also be done to respect the diversity of opinion and culture in the United States. In the meantime we should be grateful for the insights that have been produced, but cautious about what we think they might show.

Notes

[1]These claims are supported by a wide range of survey data. See, surveys by Roper (http://www.neetf.org/roper/roper2001-a.htm) and most recently (October 13, 2005) by Harris (http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris__11_poll/ index.asp?PID=607), as well as surveys sponsored by the Yale

University School of Forestry and Environmental Studies (www.yale.edu/envirocenter/poll2key.prn.pdf, www.yale.edu/forestry/ downloads/yale__11_poll__11_0globalwarming.pdf). See also Tichy, M. and Krosnick, J: 2001a & b; Guber 2003; and Leiserowitz in press.

[2]There is a vast literature on what I am calling "cognitive deficiencies and illusions;" for a good introduction for climate scientists, see Nichols 1999.

[3]For overviews of the philosophical literature see such reference works as the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* or the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/value-intrinsic-extrinsic/). For overviews of the psychological and social scientific literatures see Stern 2000, and Dietz et al., 2005. See also Jamieson and VanderWerf 1993.

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