

The Public and Climate Change Policies

Robert E. O'Connor
Program Director: Decision, Risk and
Management Sciences
National Science Foundation

Outline

- Nature of public opinion about climate change
- Why should we care? Role of public opinion in the policy process
- Tipping point?

Environmental Attitudes

- Strong support for tougher regulations
- Lack of discounting (i.e., future generations matter)
- Women “greener,” but only if risk is involved
- Behavioral link on referenda voting
- Less strong link on behavior (e.g., 91 percent support mass transit for other people)

Interpretative Communities

- Naysayers (~7 percent)
- Ozone holers (~11 percent)
- Permissive majority (~71 percent)
- Alarmists (~11 percent)

Permissive Majority

- Willing to support sensible policies, if
 - Science is clear
 - Policies are fair
 - Policies are effective
- Willing to take voluntary actions, if
 - Not too inconvenient
 - Do not take away cars

More on Public Opinion

- “Do the right thing” – but looking for excuses as opinions not strongly held
- Partisan divide began with Kyoto Treaty debate
- People trust independent scientists

Policy Process

- Advocacy coalition framework
 - Punctuated equilibrium
 - Policy windows
 - Sources of change include scientific discoveries
- Public opinion
 - Demanding (e.g., after 9/11)
 - Permissive (e.g., RCRA)
 - Prohibiting (e.g., busing)

If everyone is “green,” why is Bush President?

- Nature of environmental issues:
 - some are difficult to understand intuitively (e.g., ppm)
 - Positions are easily obfuscated
 - Symbolic satisfactions easy to provide
- Salience (see *Race and the Transformation of American Politics*)

What Accounts for US Policy?

- Relative lack of integration of scientists into policy positions (compare with Japan)
- Economic-political structure (compare with Netherlands)
 - 23 American states are major coal producers
 - Bush I: pro-business, conservative
 - Bush II: pro-fossil fuel, conservative

Tipping point?

- End of media “twining?”
- New vivid images
 - Drowning polar bears
 - Katrina
- Increasing perceptions of economic opportunities