

AUSTRALIANS, AMERICANS AND CLIMATE CHANGE

PROFESSOR SIMON JACKMAN

Survey Brief | 20 November 2009

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The Copenhagen Climate Change Conference is a fortnight away, and climate change legislation is being considered by the national legislatures of both the United States and Australia, albeit with greater urgency in Australia. The United States Studies Centre recently commissioned a survey of Australian political attitudes on issues related to climate change. This survey brief compares the results of the Australian survey with similar data from the United States.

There are striking similarities — but also important differences — in public opinion on climate change in Australia and the United States. These patterns in public opinion help explain the political trajectory of climate change policy in both countries. But political context matters too. Australia and the United States have different political institutions and these also shape the way public opinion on climate change is affecting political action in each country.

Political strategy and climate change: the state of play

Like the United States, Australian elections are largely two-party contests. Electoral success is largely determined by winning the support of voters without strong ties to either party, who usually describe themselves as “middle of the road” in terms of their policy preferences. One way to accomplish this is through the introduction of “wedge issues”, issues on which one party’s position is preferred by voters in the middle of the political spectrum over that of the other, and in circumstances where it is difficult for the disadvantaged party to change its position.

Contemporary Australian politics provides two especially vivid examples. On asylum seekers and border security, many voters seem to view the Labor government as too weak. It will be important to monitor developments on this issue over the next week.

But climate change is also a wedge issue in Australia, and here the Labor government’s position is favoured by the majority of the electorate. This helps explain why the government is pushing so hard on its Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme (CPRS) legislation, in an effort to wedge its centre-right opponents.

The politics of climate change in the United States are quite different. Democrat and Republican voters are polarised on the issue in much the same way as Labor and Coalition supporters are in Australia. But climate change is a much less important issue in the United States, where double digit unemployment and the fate of the Obama administration’s health care reform proposals dominate public attention. Generally speaking, Americans are less convinced than Australians that action must be taken to fight climate change.

Public opinion thus provides a powerful explanation for why Australia may well pass the CPRS before the UN climate change summit at Copenhagen next month whereas serious consideration of American legislation will be pushed back well into 2010. The impact of these differences in public opinion is magnified by the different political institutions in the two countries. Australia's parliamentary system allows the Labor government to force the climate change issue whereas the Obama administration's leadership is weaker in the US given the power and independence of Congress.

Australian public opinion on climate change

The USSC commissioned a survey of Australian public opinion in September 2009.¹ The bulk of the survey focused on Australian attitudes towards the United States (as have previous surveys by the Centre in 2007 and 2008), but we also surveyed on issues relevant to ongoing policy debates in both countries.

As part of a series of questions about climate change policy, we asked respondents if they agreed with the proposition that "the world's climate is getting warmer". 83% of respondents agreed with the proposition, with a reasonable amount of variation by Federal voting intention: 90% of Labor voters agreed with the proposition, while 76% of Liberal Party voters and 67% of National Party voters agreed. Respondents who agreed that the world's climate is getting warmer were also asked if "human production of greenhouse gases is a leading cause of climate change". Most respondents agreed with this proposition, with 78% offering the "strongly agree" or "agree" response. This means that 67% or two-thirds of the respondents agreed that (a) the world's climate is warming and that this is (b) because of human activity (see Table 1).

However, the survey responses vary considerably across parties, with Labor voters considerably more likely to attribute a warming climate to human activity than Liberal voters. Of the 90% of Labor voters who agreed that the world's climate is warming, 83% attributed this to human activities, meaning that 78% of Labor voters accepted that global warming is anthropogenic. Among Liberal voters the corresponding figure was just less than one half, at 48%. The inter-party difference of 30 percentage points is quite large, a rather impressive division on perhaps *the* critical, factual proposition to do with climate change.

Of considerable political importance is the fact that Labor supporters were closer to the population as a whole, and to undecided voters. In summary, Liberal voters "lag" the population as a whole by 19 percentage points (48% to 67%) while Labor "leads" the population by 11 percentage points (78% to 67%). It is not only the relative percentages that matter here, but also their magnitudes. Liberal voters split 48-52 for/against on whether humans contribute to climate change. The extent of this gap shows that division within the Liberal Party is

¹ The survey field-work was conducted by Q&A Research in Brisbane, using a random-digit dialing to sample households. The youngest resident at home (aged 18 or older) was asked to participate in the survey. The sample size is 800. The data are weighted so as to be representative of the Australian population (by age/gender/state), according to the 2006 Census.

much more extreme than within the Labor Party. In fact roughly half of Liberal Party voters hold a view of the world accepted by only a third of the electorate as a whole.

Table 1: “Human production of greenhouse gases is a leading cause of climate change”. This proposition was only put to the 83% of respondent who agreed with the proposition that “the world’s climate is getting warmer”. Responses are cross-tabulated by Federal voting intention.

	Federal voting intention					
	All	Labor	Liberal	National	Greens	Other/DK
Strongly agree	28	33	17	8	43	25
Agree	50	54	46	69	41	54
Disagree	13	6	21	14	16	11
Strongly disagree	3	1	6	8	0	4
Not sure	6	5	11	0	0	6
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
% respondents agreeing that climate change is occurring and is due to human activity: ²	67	78	48	52	74	65

A similar result holds for the proposition that “Australia should take steps to reduce its production of greenhouse gases, even if it means fewer jobs and a reduction in living standards for Australians”. 59% of respondents agreed with this proposition; 70% of Labor voters agreed, but just 44% of Liberal voters agreed, a split of 26 percentage points across major party supporters. Again, the rate of agreement among Labor supporters outpaces agreement in the population at large by 11 percentage points (70% to 59%), while Liberal party supporters lag the general population by 15 percentage points (44% to 59%).

With a view to the upcoming Copenhagen conference — and to the controversy currently at the centre of Australian political debate — we also asked respondents if “Australia should delay any steps towards reducing greenhouse gas emissions until it is clear what countries like the United States and China will do on this issue.” 46% of respondents agreed that Australia should delay a decision, less than a majority of the electorate. 40% of Labor supporters agree, but nearly two-thirds (64%) of Liberal voters support delaying a decision on emissions reductions. Again, the partisan differential is large, some 24 percentage points. Importantly, there is a pronounced asymmetry between the two sets of partisans, with very little difference between Labor supporters and the general population on this question (just 6 percentage points), but with substantially more Liberal supporters opting for the “delay” option than we see in the general population (a difference of 18 percentage points).

² E.g., the 67% figure for “All” respondents is equal to taking the 28% who “strongly agree” and the 50% who “agree” that human activity is a leading cause of climate change, expressed as a percentage of the 83% of respondents who agree that the “world’s climate is getting warmer”; i.e., $.83 \times (.28 + .50) = .67$, to two decimal places.

Table 2. “Australia should delay any steps towards reducing greenhouse gas emissions until it is clear what countries like the United States and China will do on this issue.” Responses are cross-tabulated by voting intention.

	Federal Voting Intention					
	All	Labor (39%)	Liberal (31%)	National (5%)	Greens (13%)	Other/DK (11%)
Strongly agree	15	12	23	27	3	15
Agree	31	28	41	27	22	27
Disagree	34	40	23	38	41	33
Strongly disagree	17	19	9	7	33	18
Not sure	3	1	5	0	2	6
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

This evidence underlines how climate change has operated as a “wedge issue” in recent Australian politics. On the four climate change questions reviewed here, Australian public opinion is reasonably clear, with majorities of the Australian public reporting that (a) global warming is happening (83%); (b) it is caused by human activity (67%); (c) Australia should take costly actions to reduce its production of greenhouse gas emissions (59%); and (d) sooner rather than later (51%). Moreover, averaging over this set of survey items, Liberal party supporters appear to hold views more at odds with prevailing sentiment in the electorate at large than do Labor supporters. Without offering a judgment as to the utility of the ETS scheme proposed by the Labor government, it is reasonably clear that Labor has a compelling political incentive to keep the climate change issue salient.

Public Opinion in the United States

Even a casual survey of American politics reveals that climate change is garnering far less attention than in Australia. Systematic surveys of public opinion confirm this. Asked to rate the “most important problem” facing the United States on a recent Gallup poll, no issue related to the environment made it into the top 10 most important problems mentioned by respondents.³ Indeed, so little attention is being paid to climate change, global warming and legislative proposals for a “cap-and-trade” system that there is a dearth of available polling data. Our discussion here relies on data from a survey of the American adult population fielded in late June 2009⁴, that contained a number of items similar to those in our September survey of the Australian population.

Like the November 2009 Gallup poll, this earlier American poll found “the environment” well down the list of “important issues”. While 51% of

³ [Gallup Poll of Nov 5-8, 2009](#). “The economy” was the most frequently mentioned Most Important Problem (31%), followed by healthcare (22%), unemployment/jobs (20%) and “wars” (8%).

⁴ The survey was fielded by YouGov/Polimetrix, a Palo Alto based market research firm, on June 28-30, 2009, with a sample of 1,000 respondents, representative of the adult, non-institutionalized population of the United States. Note that the Waxman-Markey Bill (the American Clean Energy and Security Act) passed the US House of Representatives on June 26.

respondents said the environment was a “very important” issue and another 34% said it was “somewhat important”, just 4% of respondents rated it the “most important” issue, behind the economy (46%), health care (13%), social security (9%), the budget deficit (7%), terrorism (6%), education (5%) and immigration (5%), but just ahead of gay rights (3%) and the war in Iraq (3%). The low priority given to environmental issues is in spite of the fact that 50% of American respondents reported that the environment has “gotten worse in recent years” and 69% reported that global warming is either a “very serious” problem (41%) or a “somewhat serious” problem (28%). Although the question in our Australian survey isn’t identical, we note that 83% of our Australian respondents reported that the “world’s climate is getting warmer”, considerably more than the 50% of American respondents who said the environment has gotten worse.

Table 3. “Do you think global warming has been caused by pollution from human activities (such as emissions from cars and factories) or by natural causes?” 1,000 US respondents to the YouGov/Polimetrix survey, fielded June 28-30, 2009. Responses are cross-tabulated by party identification.

	Party Identification			
	All	Democrats (34%)	Republicans (26%)	Independents (29%)
Pollution from human activities	57	74	28	57
Natural causes not related to human activities	26	12	56	27
Not sure	17	14	16	16
Totals	100	100	100	100

Table 3 summarises responses to the question “Do you think global warming has been caused by pollution from human activities ... or by natural causes?” This item is similar to the item fielded in our Australian data (see Table 1), where 67% of respondents agreed that global warming is anthropogenic. Only 57% of American respondents accepted the anthropogenic hypothesis, with a much more pronounced partisan split than we find in the Australian data. 74% of Democrats report that human activities are a source of global warming, a belief reported by only 28% of Republican identifiers. Recall that 78% of Labor supporters and 48% of Liberal supporters agreed that human activity is a source of climate change. This indicates that the Republicans count proportionally many more “climate change skeptics” among their ranks than Liberals in Australia. The partisan split on this issue — some 46 percentage points — exceeds the 30 percentage point split on this issue between Labor and Liberal supporters in the Australian survey (see Table 1). It would seem that there is more partisan polarisation with respect to beliefs about the causes of global warming in the United States than in Australia.

There is considerable support for legislation limiting greenhouse gas emissions in the United States, at least in the abstract. Table 4 shows that 62% of respondents support legislation setting emissions targets (top row), although there is a massive partisan divide on this score: 84% of Democrats support such legislation, but only 31% of Republicans, a gap of 53 percentage points between the two camps of partisans. Earlier we noted that 70% of Labor supporters in

Australia and 44% of Liberal voters supported “steps to reduce its [Australia’s] production of greenhouse gases, even if it means fewer jobs and a reduction in living standards...” Again, it would seem that there is substantially more partisan polarisation on this issue in public opinion in America than in Australia.

Table 4. Cell entries are rates of agreement (percentages) over two items: (1) “Congress is considering a climate bill that would put limits on pollution linked to global warming. The bill would require US companies to reduce carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions by 17% by 2020 and by 80% by 2050. Do you favor or oppose requiring US companies to reduce carbon emissions by these amounts?”; (2) “The climate bill is expected to raise energy prices, though the cost depends upon the provisions of the bill. Please tell us whether you would support or oppose the bill if the average annual cost per household were the amounts shown below.”

	Party Identification			
	All	Democrats	Republicans	Independents
Unconditional	62	84	31	61
\$80/year	52	68	30	53
\$175/year	29	44	11	31
\$770/year	7	11	1	7

Table 4 also presents some extremely interesting data on how willing Americans are to pay for climate change. The data suggest that once costs enter the picture, the appetite for limiting greenhouse gas emissions diminishes. At an average cost of \$80 per year per household, support for legislation limiting greenhouse gas emissions falls 10 percentage points to 52%, and to 29% if the average cost is \$175 per year per household; at this price level, even less than a majority of Democrats (44%) support climate change legislation. At an average cost of \$770 per year per household, a mere 7% of Americans support climate change legislation.

Canberra is not Washington

This brief comparison of public opinion suggests that majorities in both Australian and the United States support action on climate change, at least in a broad sense. Moreover, there is considerable partisan polarisation on issues to do with climate change in both countries, but this polarisation is considerably more pronounced in the United States. Supporters of conservative parties in both countries are considerably more skeptical about climate change and less supportive of government action than the respective populations-at-large. Skepticism/opposition runs deepest amongst Republican voters who are considerably more negative on the issue of climate change than their Liberal party counterparts in Australia.

This polarisation in the US would seem to give the Obama administration and Democrats in Congress an incentive to push hard on climate change issues, so as to highlight that Republicans are “out of touch” with mainstream public opinion on this issue. This could well be part of the political narrative in the United States leading into the 2010 mid-term elections, and climate change is likely to be the next big-ticket item on the US domestic policy agenda if and when the health care reform debate winds down. The interesting question is why has

Rudd made climate change legislation such a priority, but Obama and Congressional Democrats have not?

In answering this question, we note that while there are many similarities between American and Australian public opinion on climate change, there are some politically consequential differences. First, only 57% of Americans believe that global warming is generated by human activity; the corresponding figure is 67% in our Australian data. Moreover, 57% is hardly an overwhelming majority. And unlike the Australian case, where compulsory voting ensures that all of that 67% is required to enroll and vote, the 57% level of support in the United States almost surely translates into less-than-majority support once we subset down to the segment of the American population likely to turn out in the 2010 mid-term elections. A reasonable guess based on historical experience is that no more than 40% of the eligible population will vote in the 2010 midterm elections, down from the 62% turnout recorded in the 2008 presidential elections.⁵

Second — and this cannot be overlooked — the depth of the economic recession in the United States is hardly whetting the appetite for the costs and upheaval widely thought to accompany any transition to a greener American economy. The findings reported in Table 4 are quite striking on this score, showing that support for initiatives limiting greenhouse gas emissions evaporate in the face of even moderate hikes in energy costs.

Institutional differences between the two countries also play a critical role. We have already mentioned compulsory voting versus voluntary registration and turnout. But perhaps more important is the fact that Australia is a parliamentary democracy, in which the executive is drawn from the parliament. In such a system, the executive enjoys a near-monopoly over the parliament's agenda, virtually by definition (i.e., as leaders of the party commanding a majority in the legislature). Oppositions are almost powerless to shape the content of the agenda in parliamentary democracies like Australia, characterized by strong executive control of the government party room, the bureaucracy and the parliament.

Contrast the American system of national government. The president has limited formal power over the content of the Congressional agenda. One consequence of the formal separation of powers embodied in the American constitution is that party discipline is considerably weaker in the Congress than in a Westminster-style parliament. The US Senate has numerous procedural rules granting individual senators the ability to slow down the conduct of business, and of course the only way to place a time limit on debate in the Senate is via cloture, requiring a super-majority of 60 votes. Note that the US Senate is yet to have any floor debates on either the American Clean Energy and Security Act (the Waxman-Markey bill) or the health care bill that have passed the House of Representatives. Meanwhile climate change is currently working its way through the Australian parliament because the Prime Minister and cabinet deem

⁵ See the [turnout figures](#) compiled by Professor Michael McDonald at George Mason University.

it appropriate to do so, as a matter of policy, and as a matter of political strategy. For Obama to do the same would be a much more difficult proposition.

Obama did lay out a number of ambitious domestic policy goals when addressing the Congress on February 24, 2009, shortly after taking office. “Greening” the American economy was one of those goals. Like Kevin Rudd, Obama sees greater use of renewable energy and lowering greenhouse gas emissions as desirable and it would seem that public opinion in both countries is behind the two leaders, at least for the most part.

But Rudd has opportunities that Obama does not. Australians seem more concerned by climate change than Americans, and they are certainly less distracted by economic woes and other issues (i.e., health care reform). Rudd — as the Prime Minister in a parliamentary democracy — has the ability to keep climate change on the national agenda and other issues off the agenda, in a way that American presidents must sometimes envy. And should the Australian Senate fail to pass the climate change legislation a second time, Rudd has the option of calling a double dissolution; the American president has no such leverage over the Congress. To be sure, the presidential veto is a powerful option at a president’s disposal. But American demand for national action on climate change is not so great that Obama could credibly threaten to veto other important legislation until the Congress acted; indeed, with Democrats controlling Congress, the threat to hold other legislation hostage until Congress acted on climate change would be self-defeating.

In sum, public opinion is a big part of why Australia is moving on climate change now and the United States isn’t. But institutional differences also play an important part. Health care is unlikely to move through the Congress until the new year, the US economy is still struggling to create jobs, and mid-term elections are looming. These factors, combined with institutional impediments, make it unlikely that the United States will take action on climate change anytime soon.

Professor Simon Jackman is a Visiting Professor at the United States Studies Centre, University of Sydney and Professor of Political Science, Stanford University, California.

United States Studies Centre

John Woolley Building (A20)

The University of Sydney NSW 2006

T: +61 2 9351 7249 | F: +61 2 9351 6877 | E: info@ussc.usyd.edu.au

www.ussc.edu.au