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Hot Air About Heat-Trapping Gases: Causal Attributions and Global Warming Policy

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Abstract. This article examines the psychology of causal attributions concerning the merits of the United States Government signing the Kyoto Protocol and of two main operational mechanisms for controlling emissions of heat-trapping gases.

Stuart Eizenstat, the United States (US) Undersecretary of State for Economic Affairs, has stated that the US Government's signing of the Kyoto Protocol would likely have the consequences of increasing USG negotiating leverage for the many policy issues remaining to be worked out. However, many representatives of the U.S. coal and automobile and their U.S. Congressional supporters maintain that the signing will decrease USG leverage. Given that the signing has occurred, the lay scientist might well believe that time will tell, as to which opposing side will be right.

But, not so fast. If publicly advocated USG negotiating positions are frequently rejected, signing opponents will puff out their chests in the smug satisfaction of being right while signing supporters may assert that without the signing an even smaller number of negotiation positions would have been accepted. If publicly advocated positions are frequently accepted, signing supporters will exhibit the chest-puffing, while opponents may claim that the frequency accepted should have been much higher.

The rhetorical devices used to maintain one's initial public stance obfuscate the already complex task of attempting to discern cause and effect. This obfuscation is quite useful because the more significant source of conflict between the opposing sides has much less to do with the consequences of signing than the validity of global warming, the putative relationship between environmental initiative and economic health and development, and the attractiveness of internationalism versus nationalism.

Another environmental conflict comprises the relative merits of emissions trading versus clean development mechanisms as operational mechanisms for controlling emissions. The former entails a country or company achieving credit for emission reductions by buying reductions from another country or company that has reduced its emissions more than is required. The latter entails a country or company investing in emission-reduction projects in developing countries. In this case, both the investor and the recipient of the investment would share credit for the emissions reductions achieved.

The USG and its allies among the developed countries advocate no restrictions on emissions trading because such restrictions would attenuate the mechanism's cost-cutting value and attenuate the total amount of emissions worldwide. On the other hand, many developing countries term emissions trading a means for the USG and its allies to escape any negative economic consequences of environmental initiative. Instead, these developing countries prefer clean development mechanisms--even though the latter also allows the USG and its allies a similar escape. In fact, many developing countries may well prefer clean market mechanisms because such mechanisms allow these countries to escape negative economic consequences as well--more than the more moderate escape obtained through emissions trading. This last point is reinforced by the observation that--until very recently--virtually all developing countries refused to consider lowering their emissions until the developed countries actually attained suitable emissions reductions.

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The bottom line--for protocol signing and for operational mechanisms of emissions reductions--appears to be self-interest. If environmental initiative can be crafted to appeal to self-interest, the most resilient of ideological, economic, and political concerns may suddenly be viewed as manageable. The hot air of political dialogue will then go up in smoke. (See Cushman, J.H., Jr. (November 13, 1998). U.S. signs a pact to reduce gases tied to warming. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Gifford, R., & Hine, D.W. (1997). Toward cooperation in commons dilemmas. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science*, 29, 167-179; Goetze, D. (1994). Comparing prisoner's dilemma, commons dilemma, and public goods provision designs in laboratory experiments. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 38, 56-86; Hine, D.W., & Gifford, R. (1996). Attributions about self and others in commons dilemmas. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 26, 429-445; Kollock, P. (1998). Social dilemmas: the anatomy of cooperation. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24, 183-214; McCusker, C., & Carnevale, P.J. (1995). Framing in resource dilemmas: Loss aversion and the moderating effects of sanctions. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 61, 190-201; Stevens, W.K. (November 14, 1998). Key questions remain at global-warming talks. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>.) (Keywords: Clean Development Mechanism, Emissions Trading, Environment, Kyoto Protocol.)