

A Green Dictator?

Written by Rodger A Payne

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RODGER A PAYNE, SEP 11 2010

International relations scholars are self-described pessimists — at least the realists among us speak in this way. However, it would appear IR realists are not alone, at least on the question of international cooperation on climate change. Consider this letter-to-the-editor from the July-August 2010 issue of *Utne Reader* (“Feedback” section, p. 8):

To counteract global warming would involve universal action, and to do this, we’d need a world government with dictatorial powers — one that would force all humankind to drastically alter its lifestyle — and such a government is a pipe dream. People will not voluntarily give up their comforts and conveniences, not in the Third World and certainly not in the capitalistic world.

This was written by Herb Hain of Santa Monica, CA, who seems to be a retired journalist with diverse interests. *Utne Reader* stories are typically upbeat, emphasizing means by which individuals and society can overcome adversity and promote progressive change. The magazine monitors the alternative press and it is presumably aimed at readers who want to read about the prospects for change.

In any event, the gloomy ideas expressed in this letter harken back to a debate from the 1970s — people like William Ophuls and Robert Heilbroner argued that democratic freedoms might have to be curtailed dramatically in order to prevent ecological catastrophe.

More than 15 years ago, I wrote an article that challenged this view, proposing a thesis comparable to the democratic peace, but with little more than anecdotal evidence to support or test it. Democracies feature an open marketplace of ideas and individual liberty, which means people can openly demand cleaner air and water. They are more responsive to their public and can arguably learn from one another. Democracies are also more likely to cooperate to solve common problems in international institutional contexts and to develop markets for green products and services. Thanks to green consumerism and the potential to price externalities, such markets can help reduce pollution.

I haven’t really worked on the question directly for some time. In fact, I turned my attention to different problems in part because of poor cross-national and long-term data about environmental conditions.

However, over the years, many scholars have been turning their attention to this issue and churning out research testing the relevant hypotheses.

While the evidence does not all point in the same direction (see Midlarsky, for example), a fair number of scholars conducting empirical studies have found results supporting my thesis that democratic states better protect the environment.

Eric Neumayer, for instance, published an interesting piece in 2002 *J of Peace Research*:

Strong evidence is found that democracies sign and ratify more multilateral environmental agreements, participate in more environmental intergovernmental organizations, comply better with reporting requirements under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora, put a greater percentage of their land

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area under protections status, are more likely to have a National Council on Sustainable Development in their country and have more environmentally relevant information available than non-democracies. The findings suggest that a spread of democracy around the world will lead to enhanced environmental commitment worldwide.

Additional research by Neumayer and colleagues, as well as other scholars points in the same direction — though sometimes the researchers have added explanatory power by discussing additional causal mechanisms.

As it happens, by the way, a colleague in the University of Louisville Business School, Per G. Fredriksson is one of the leading scholars conducting research on the empirical evidence linking environment and democracy. I should probably have lunch with him sometime soon...

In any case, on this question, there's some room for optimism. We likely don't have to succumb to dictatorship to avert ecological catastrophe. Hard work through democratic means should ultimately lead to desired political results.

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