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MEDIA RELEASE

AUSTRALIANS, AMERICANS AND CLIMATE CHANGE

A major survey on Australian attitudes to climate change released today by the United States Studies Centre (USSC) at the University of Sydney mirrors recent polling among Americans.

Professor Simon Jackman, Visiting Professor at the USSC and Professor of Political Science at Stanford University in California, conducted the survey ***“Australians, Americans and Climate Change”*** comparing attitudes of Australians with those of Americans.

Professor Jackman said the survey results showed that climate change is a “wedge” issue in both countries, but the Rudd government has bigger incentives than the Obama administration to pass legislation because Australians are on average greener than Americans.

“The partisan divide on climate change is big in Australia but even bigger in the US”, said Professor Jackman. He added “The centre-right hold views on climate change that are at odds with mainstream opinion in both countries, but Americans are just less committed to fighting climate change than Australians”.

Professor Geoffrey Garrett, chief executive of the US Studies Centre, said that the survey results explain why climate change legislation is closer to becoming law in Australia than the US.

“Barack Obama and Kevin Rudd both know that good policy must also be good politics. In Australia, pushing hard on climate change is good policy and good politics, but this is still not the case in the US”, said Professor Garrett.

Based on 800 telephone interviews conducted in Australia in late September, the survey found that climate change is much higher on the agenda in Australia than the US. Strong majorities of the Australian public concur that (a) the planet is warming (83%); (b) climate change is caused by human activity (67%); and (c) Australia should take actions to reduce its production of greenhouse gas emissions even if this costs jobs and reduces living standards (59%).

The mission of the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney is to increase understanding of the United States in Australia. Spanning the study of politics and policy, economics and business, culture and society, the core activities of the Centre include postgraduate degrees and undergraduate teaching; academic research and research training; policy analysis and commentary; business leadership forums; and public education and community outreach.

Conversely, data from recent polling in the US show that climate change remains well down the list of “important issues” for Americans with the most recent Gallup poll reporting that only 4% of respondents rated climate change the “most important” issue, far behind their top two concerns of the economy (46%) and health care (13%).

A recent YouGov/Polimetrix survey in the US shows that only 57% of Americans believe humans contribute to climate change (the comparable figure is 67% in Australia) and that Americans are less willing than Australians to take action if climate change initiatives will cost them money.

The surveys show considerable partisan polarisation on climate change in both countries, but the partisan divide is more pronounced in the US.

Among Australian respondents, Labor voters were 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 is 48%, an inter-party difference of 30 percentage points. Not surprisingly, Green party supporters believe even more strongly in human induced climate than Labor voters, whereas National party voters are about as skeptical as Liberal voters.

In the US, 74% of Democrats report that human activities are a source of global warming, a belief reported by only 28% of Republican identifiers. This gives a partisan split on this issue of 46 percentage points.

The stronger polarisation of this issue in the US was again highlighted in questions related to measures to limit greenhouse gas emissions. In Australia 70% of Labor supporters and 44% of Liberal supporters said they favoured “steps to reduce its [Australia’s] production of greenhouse gases, even if it means fewer jobs and a reduction in living standards...”

In the US, 62% of respondents support legislation setting emissions targets, but there was a partisan gulf on this question: 84% of Democrat voters support such legislation, but only 31% of Republican voters - a gap of 53 percentage points between the two parties.

“The USSC survey shows that in both Australia and the US, supporters of the centre-right opposition parties are considerably more skeptical about climate change than the general population”, Professor Garrett said. He added “But our data also show that Australia is a greener country than the US”.

“This helps explain why climate change is on a much slower track in the US than it is in Australia, even though President Obama is much greener than George W. Bush”.

A survey report brief is available on the US Studies Centre website: www.ussc.edu.au

The second part of the US Studies Centre’s 2009 survey dealing with Australian and American attitudes on a range of other political and cultural issues will be released next year.

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