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Frequently Asked Questions

Who are your clients and what do you do for them?

American Environics brings cutting edge social values, political psychology and cognitive science research to inform social change strategies. Our clients are philanthropies, nonprofits, and political campaigns. We help them to understand how the culture is changing, where there are opportunities for progressive change, and how to harness emerging values and worldviews.

Why do social values matter?

Whether you are running for president, lobbying on global warming, or selling beauty products to men, you have to understand a person's underlying motivations. You have to understand *why* they believe what they believe, not just what they believe.

How is your approach different from other polling?

The American Values Survey is one of the largest longitudinal in-home values surveys conducted in North America. The AVS has tracked non-consumer motivations since 1992 in the U.S. (since 1982 in Canada) to understand consumer and political behavior, and these motivations offer far stronger predictions of political behavior than consumer information alone. The team of scientists and demographers at American Environics and Environics Canada bring more than three decades of experience making values research useful to corporate and government clients.

Anything can be called "values research." The questions that should be asked of anyone, including American Environics, are: How deep and extensive is the values analysis? What experience do you have in using the values research to solve real world problems? What is the clear, provable relationship between the social values and other psychological factors tracked, on the one hand, and political behavior and opinion, on the other?

The American Environics approach differs from other polling and values research by being psychographically segmented, by integrating cognitive science, and by micro-targeting.

In addition, most polls are done over the phone and last 15 to 20 minutes, and are thus extremely limited in the number of questions they can ask. As a result, one isn't able to see the correlations and relationships between various factors,

from religion to sexuality to politics to media consumption. Conventional polling tends to focus on a person's position on a set of political issues, or a preference for a particular candidate or public official. This approach is effective at describing public opinion, but it is not particularly suited to explain why those hold those opinions or providing insights about how to change public opinion.

Are you saying that other polling is no longer useful?

Not at all. Telephone surveys will always play a critical role in opinion research. American Environics regularly uses polling, often in partnership with established pollsters.

We have had very good success combining the social values research with traditional polling. The way it works is that we attach a battery of carefully chosen values questions to the end of a conventional poll that allow us to put respondents into different psychographic categories which then can help us to understand *why* people believe what they believe.

What does "psychographic" mean?

Psychographic simply means identifying target audiences, or "segments," based on values, attitudes, personality, and lifestyle, rather than on demographic factors, such as age, race, sex, or income. Psychographic segments, as in the case of our AVS, also can include demographic variables. For instance, a group with a similar set of values may be mostly made up of young black women, but we may also find that there are many older white women in this group.

Demography has long been the currency of political polling, which is why you still hear commentators talk about "the Latino vote," "white, working-class men," or "unmarried women." Some demographic categories offer a high degree of predictive accuracy (e.g., most black voters vote Democratic). But this is increasingly less the case. Latinos are a case in point: Mexican Americans are very different from Cuban Americans, and fourth generation Mexican Americans hold very different values than first generation Mexican Americans.

In our psychographic segments, we find *both* great demographic diversity *and* demographic conformity. All in all, demographic targeting has increasingly become too blunt an instrument, especially for reaching Americans under the age of 40.

How do you use to values data to create your "Road Map" target segments?

Utilizing the large size and breadth of the AVS, we either create a customized, client-driven segmentation set, or draw upon our stable political segmentation system that can work for any entity working in the progressive space. Our sophisticated latent class modeling techniques have been honed specifically for the AVS, producing a robust, manageable and highly differentiated "Road Map" of value segments. By projecting these segments onto a perceptual map of the American public, we can determine which segments offer the best strategic

opportunities. We then analyze the reasoning patterns and worldviews of these key segments to build applicable and persuasive policy initiatives or communications platforms.

What exactly do you mean by “social values”?

We define social values as those core and largely unconscious beliefs that affect what we care about, how we reason, and how we experience the world. Social values are largely set by adolescence, but they do evolve slowly over a single lifetime through major life events, such as greater education, changes in income, marriage, the birth of a child, and the death of a parent. Society-wide values shifts tend to occur across rather than within generations—think, for instance, of the difference between the values of the “greatest generation” and their children, the baby boomers.

The main thing to remember is that values are more deeply held, strongly felt, and harder to change than political or consumer attitudes. A person is more likely to change her opinion toward the war in Iraq, for example, than her opinion on the role of the father in the family.

What are examples of social values?

Social values are not what people think of in terms of values such as “fairness” or “justice.” While “fairness” is certainly a value, it’s not one that we track as a social value. That’s because if you ask 100 people whether they agree or disagree with the statement, “The American government should treat its citizens fairly,” almost all of them will strongly agree. Such a question doesn’t reveal what people mean by “fairness” or “justice.”

We track a value called Just Deserts, which comes from a social psychological index called, “Theory of a just world.” It tracks whether or not you believe the world is a fair place, and that people generally get what they deserve, for good or bad. If you hold the value Just Deserts* strongly, you tend to be a conservative. It is a good example of how different people can interpret the same events differently—and thus hold a different political orientation.

What other values do you track?

We track over 100 independent values. Other values we track include Acknowledgement of Racism, Active Government, American Dream, American Exceptionalism, Aversion to Complexity, Civic Engagement, Community Involvement, Death Anxiety, Duty, Ecological Concern, Faith in Science, Flexible Families, Flexible Gender Identity, Global Consciousness, Gratitude, National Pride, Obedience to Authority, Personal Control, Sexism, Technology Anxiety, and Xenophobia.

Are you trying to change values?

Our focus is on helping our partners and clients to understand and speak to core values and motivations to enable lasting social change. It is our view that values evolve slowly due to very large society circumstances in society having to do with rising material wealth and declining financial security. We tend to think that advertising, marketing, and politics *reflect* more than *shape* social values. To that end, we are focused on helping social change strategists understand which emerging values and worldviews offer opportunities to advance a progressive agenda and politics.

But doesn't having a social change mission require changing social values?

It does. The question is, "How do you change social values?" While values are not something that can ordinarily be changed overnight, we can help clients understand social values to better serve their organizational mission. We believe that people have a hierarchy of needs and lower-level needs must be satisfied in order for people to feel inspired, altruistic, compassionate, and expansive in their thinking. People who are feeling insecure have a very difficult time helping others. We believe that for social values to orient more toward fulfillment and less toward survival, we need, for example, a new social contract that provides people with a greater sense of security than they feel today. Once people are feeling more secure, they tend to be more optimistic about the future and expansive and progressive in their politics, and the next generation tends to adopt more progressive social values.

How do you figure out why people believe what they believe?

American Environics uses various techniques, the first being our in-home survey. It contains more than 500 questions about your values attitudes around everything from God to sex to race to cars. The idea is to discover what values and attitudes are related to which opinions and self-reported behaviors. A second way is through the cognitive sciences. Through content analysis, focus groups, and individual interviews, we go beyond a literal assessment of responses to identify patterns of reasoning that are not obvious and are largely hidden from view. Finally, we are increasingly looking to social and political psychology, both for existing findings and for experimental methods, to understand underlying motivations for behavior, beliefs, and attitudes.

How do you use the cognitive sciences?

The cognitive sciences, including linguistics and psychology, offer some very powerful methodologies for understanding what motivates people and how different people reason about the world in different circumstances. There are a number of tools we borrow from linguistics, such as narrative analysis and frame analysis, that have proven quite useful for understanding dominant narratives and opportunities for new narratives. In addition, psychology offers a range of concepts around everything from personality to fear to power that help us to

understand and even predict how different psychographic segments will respond to different initiatives.

What is “micro-targeting”?

American Environics offers psychographic micro-targeting down to the neighborhood and household level. This level of microtargeting is a way to save valuable philanthropic, political, and communications dollars that would otherwise be wasted by communicating to less relevant segments.

Most political and advocacy communications miss their target audience, largely because people aren't clear or specific enough about the cares, concerns, and values of the people they are trying to reach. Marketers tend to make the mistake of overgeneralizing because, let's face it, complexity is difficult to manage. It is far easier to aim the same advertisement or direct mail piece at everyone.

America is more complex than it has ever been. People experience the world in radically different ways from each other. We have to understand—and speak to—these different worldviews if we are to make a rich connection.

Why do you conduct the survey in home rather than by phone?

We conduct an in-home survey for two reasons. The first is because the survey is so large it takes an average of 90 – 120 minutes to complete. Most pollsters have a hard time keeping people on the phone for 20 minutes, and thus the need for an in-home format.

The second reason we conduct the survey in-home is to avoid the social desirability bias—the tendency of respondents to tell interviewers what they believe they want to hear rather than what they honestly believe. There is always the risk that, for example, some female respondents may not feel comfortable agreeing with the statement “Women are naturally superior to men” if asked by a male questioner (or by a female questioner, for that matter). Similarly, we ask questions about attitudes toward different racial groups that people are more likely to answer truthfully while taking the survey alone in the privacy of their own homes.

What is American Environics Strategies?

American Environics Strategies (AES) is American Environics' campaign division based in Washington, DC. Directed by experienced political strategist Jeff Navin, AES provides political campaigns, progressive organizations, and party committees with strategic political consulting services and a set of tools that enable campaigns to use the American Environics research to develop messages, target voters, and win elections. In races where every vote counts, American Environics Strategies provides our clients unique insights into how voters think about political choices. Additionally, our experience in the political, public

policy, and advocacy arenas enable us to help craft winning strategies for our political clients.

* * People often try to correct our spelling of this value, suggesting that it should be “Just Desserts” not “Just Deserts.” But the word “deserts” doesn’t just refer to arid places like the Sahara or the American Southwest. It also means, “that which is deserved” — an admittedly older, if still correct, usage.