A little under 15 years ago (Sept. 21, 1996) President Clinton signed the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which prohibited same-sex marriage for federal purposes. Just over a year later, global negotiators agreed to the Kyoto Protocol to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, which was intended to create an international framework to control greenhouse gases. However, the US has yet to ratify the Protocol, and domestic legislation to implement cap-and-trade regulation on greenhouse gases died with the end of the last Congress.

Marriage equality and drastic reductions in greenhouse gases are both policy positions that I support. But I'm pretty sure that we'll see the repeal of DOMA before we see the development of an economy-wide system to control greenhouse gases in the United States. Why is that?

If you look at the state level, it seems like both gay marriage and greenhouse gas reductions are making significant headway. A significant number of states now recognize gay marriage or same-sex civil unions; a significant number of states have some sort of policy commitment to reduce greenhouse gases.

But if you look at public opinion, the landscape is very different. Public opinion has shifted dramatically in favor of gay marriage over the past few years, but it appears more or less frozen (as it were) in the context of climate change. The future trajectory for policy change in the two areas presents a dramatic contrast.

Gallup polling data on US attitudes towards gay marriage

Gallup polling data on attitudes towards climate change

There are a lot of reasons for the difference. For instance, changes in personal opinions about gay marriage are often connected with having personal connections to individuals who are publicly gay. Perhaps this makes the issue personal, and makes it harder to demonize the other side in the debate. But personal interactions with climate change are much more difficult: Many of the impacts are subtle, and even the ones that are not (such as increased risks of severe storms) are only probabilities; it is difficult or impossible to connect any one event with climate change.

However, I want to highlight one reason here, and it builds on a point I made in a recent post. Changing your mind on gay marriage (generally speaking) doesn't require you to change your personal behavior, particularly if you're straight. But

changing your mind on climate change would require you to reconsider large chunks of your everyday activities: Driving a car; heating or air conditioning your house; taking airplane trips; eating meat; etc., etc. These are all activities that are deeply ingrained in our lives, and there are significant practical and psychological obstacles to making changes. As I noted before, there is good reason to believe that we have built-in resistance to changing patterns of behavior that we have become accustomed to. It's hard to see how you dramatically shift public opinion given this dynamic.

None of this is to diminish the tremendous obstacles facing the fight for marriage equality. But it only emphasizes the tremendous challenges we face in trying to create sensible climate change policy.