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Ever since Cleveland's filthy Cuyahoga river spontaneously burst into flames three decades ago, Americans have proclaimed themselves as greener-than-green to pollsters. With widespread popular support, federal agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and big federal schemes such as Superfund have aggressively used regulation and litigation for force dirty firms and individuals to clean up. The results have been dramatic: on almost any measure, America's water and air are far cleaner today than they were three decades ago.

Yet, While Americans may say they want a cleaner environment, they are often unwilling to pay for it. Companies have discovered that Americans, unlike Scandinavians or Germans refuse to pay even a tiny premium for such innovations as electricity made from renewable energy, biodegradable plastics or cleaner petrol. Neither will they pay a premium for "organic" food, grown without the use of chemicals or genetic fiddling. The angry protests going on in Europe over GM food find no echo in the United States: Americans would rather have cheap food.

Here lies the heart of the dilemma for American greens as well as for the presidential candidates. Americans cherish the environmental gains achieved so far by government action, but think of their wallets first.

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