

## ARTICLE

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# Placing it in Context: The Changing Climate of U.S. Environmental Policy

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### Abstract

*To many observers, President Trump's administration is a real environmental nightmare and represents a serious retrograde step for international cooperation on climate change. As this study argues, however, his zealous anti-environmentalist stance is not something new in American environmental history and can be regarded as the continuation of anti-environmentalist dynamics in U.S. politics since the 1980s. The study starts with a brief historical analysis of American environmentalism since the 1980s, then examines the battles on environmental protection and climate change during the Presidencies of Barack Obama and Donald Trump in order to shed light on the future direction of U.S. environmental policy. Its focus is on climate change as the indicative and most encompassing issue of the day. The intention of the study, which covers the related discussions until summer 2018, is to understand the background and rationale behind policy responses rather than to comprehensively list individual policy decisions.*

### Keywords

American environmentalism, anti-environmentalism, climate change sceptics, climate change, fracking.

### Introduction

While the question of whether and how the new U.S. government will come to terms with climate change still hangs in the air, international climate diplomacy is trying to find new ways to keep the Paris Agreement alive. This

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is not the first time that a government has decided to remove the U.S. from an international climate pact. The reason behind President Bush's rejection of the Kyoto Protocol in 2001 is almost the same as President Trump's reason for withdrawing from the Paris Agreement in 2017: it is unfair on the U.S.; China, India and other fast-growing economies should shoulder more of the burden in reducing their GHG emissions. Whether it be binding emission targets or flexible, voluntary targets, there is always something not quite right for the U.S. economy and competitiveness in the final form of the agreement. And the answer given to this claimed unfairness by the two administrations was also the same: until the burden is shared fairly worldwide, we will do our own thing.

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environmental commitment the U.S. government is challenging at the moment. This study argues that the environmental policy of the Trump administration is in many ways nothing new, but rather is in line with the legacy of Republican governments since the 1980s, which failed to appreciate the importance of environmental protection in responding to global challenges and disasters. Hence it is important to revisit specific controversies of the 1980s in order to understand current contentions at the federal level.

This study also espouses the view that anti-environmentalism in the U.S. is still alive and resilient – though deemed dead by many observers after the 1990s. It is well embedded in the political scepticism which has brought well-to-do outsiders to power. This might be very well the result of a deep-rooted faith in consumerism and growth in American political culture. It might also be a reaction to a lack of trust in experts, politicians and bureaucrats, given the scandalous events in the mid-1980s and 2000s – such as the mad cow disease scandal or “climategate.”<sup>1</sup> It might also be regarded as misreading U.S. economic competitiveness in the age of ecological crises. Clean energy investments are now vital indicators of global competitiveness. The International Environment Agency's (IEA) 2017 report states that energy generation from global renewables have become more competitive.<sup>2</sup> And American energy companies invested in

renewable energy in 2016 and the first half of 2017 despite the uncertainty and the activities of the fossil-fuel lobbies at federal level.<sup>3</sup> All in all, anti-environmentalism has, since 1980, rested its case on self-interest and cynicism and has so far benefited a great deal from miscommunication and the uncertainty factor in science.

The role and power of the federal government are also part of this conflict. Presidential missions and visions undoubtedly shape policies. Nevertheless, the complex landscape of the federal government complicates such initiatives. Looking back at how environmental scepticism started to insert itself into the intellectual and political setting is essential to the understanding of current events. After offering a historical prelude, the environmental legacies of President Obama and President Trump will be analysed with a view to creating a better understanding of environmental politics in the U.S. As Richard Elliot Benedick clearly stated over 30 years ago, environmental issues and the national and international negotiations required to solve them are “complex, sensitive and often emotionally charged,” and “the environment is now every much on the United States foreign policy agenda.”<sup>4</sup>

## Environmental History: Making Sense of U.S. Environmental Policy

Upon the publication of the *Draft Fourth National Climate Assessment* in 2017, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) chief Scott Pruitt stated that science was not something that should be thrown about to try to dictate policy, and claimed that the report should be peer-reviewed.<sup>5</sup> The report that he questioned had been prepared by researchers at various federal agencies and had already been peer-reviewed. His attitude to the accuracy of the report, however, did not create any fresh, face-palming surprise. Already well known as one of the greatest climate sceptics in the U.S., no one had great expectations of him when he became chief of the EPA. His earlier comments on the agenda of the EPA had also raised concerns about the future role of the agency in protecting the environment. The way he describes the priorities of the EPA – acting as the cleaning-up agency – demonstrates a failure to understand the full challenge of environmental policy. It is clearly at odds with at least two of the basic environmental principles – polluter pays and prevention – as well as its original mission.<sup>6</sup> However, the most shocking thing is not what he says but the fact that he has the platform as chief of the EPA to say it.

An ever-increasing environmental scepticism – and particularly climate scepticism – has long been observed within the Republican Party. The nonpartisan environmentalism of the 1960s and 1970s in the U.S. seemed to come to an end in the 1980s.<sup>7</sup> Growing environmental scepticism among Republicans started to cause significant polarization in Congress.<sup>8</sup> The latest election has demonstrated that this tendency has peaked; climate scepticism is rampant not only among the ruling elite but also among supporters of

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Republican Party at large. According to research conducted by Yale University, mapping the attitudes of the American public toward climate change

reveals six distinct groups, ranging from alarmed to dismissive. Results of this survey showed that while 64% of the alarmed tended to vote for Clinton, 61% of the dismissive preferred Trump.<sup>9</sup> And even though most Republican candidates were worryingly silent if not sceptical on climate change during their campaigns, it was Trump's candidacy and then presidency which paved the way for environmental sceptics to enhance their positions firmly in the public space. Undoubtedly, Trump was not the first president to take an anti-environmentalist stance in the history of U.S. Even though some senior Republican politicians and the majority of their voters support climate action, it is not possible to talk about any positive change in the Republican Party position on climate change.<sup>10</sup> Some even argue that the Republican Party is, itself, the main cause of resistance to climate action.<sup>11</sup>

In the first two years of his presidency, Ronald Reagan's actions created a big uproar, and not only among Democrats. Many important figures in the Republican Party felt extremely uncomfortable about his policies. Believing that environmentalism had already gone too far, that it had been killing the competitiveness of the U.S. economy and limiting individual land-use rights, Reagan appointed very controversial figures (some of whom were very publicly anti-environmental) to important federal positions and took an openly resentful if not almost hostile attitude towards existing environmental legislation.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, in the longer term Reagan was not able to maintain his attacks on environmental legislation, and was forced to take a more respectful and cautious position towards the environment and to fire those controversial figures.<sup>13</sup> Against this backdrop, in 1987 Reagan signed the

Global Climate Protection Act, and his successor George H. W. Bush felt the need, during his campaign, to emphasize that he would be an environmental president. Even so, Bush himself could not seize the opportunities to lead climate change negotiations.<sup>14</sup> The seeds of scepticism that prevented the Bush administration from taking more action on environmental protection were well planted both before and during the Reagan era.

At this point, it is important to examine why President Reagan and his supporters were so critical about environmental legislation and did not follow his predecessor Carter's steps in promoting climate change science. Discussing the former point also requires asking how and when U.S. environmental policy lost its momentum and how the environment became such a contentious issue in American politics. According to some environmental historians, while preventing pollution had constituted the backbone of contemporary bipartisan environmentalism in the 1960s, a strong counter-environmentalism movement had started to develop in the 1980s. Complaining about environmental bureaucracy, questioning the rationale behind many environmental policies and legislation, framing environmentalism as a 'white collar middle class' privileged, elite movement can be considered as the key characteristics of this movement.<sup>15</sup> This counter-environmentalism movement was also part of the New Right movement in which anti-communism and a passion for economic growth took centre stage.<sup>16</sup> Counter-environmentalists have environmental concerns, but they believe that (on balance) progress is good for well-being, and that environmental problems can be managed through science and technology. They clearly loathe the pessimistic assessments of early environmentalists and believe that nature can adapt itself to changing conditions: human intervention is not new, nature recovers from instabilities, and we have better living standards.<sup>17</sup> Hence, there is no reason to believe and act on the basis of catastrophic assessments.

Nevertheless, according to another environmental historian, American environmental history "is the history of a disaster."<sup>18</sup> Disasters and related pessimism have great significance in the making of environmental policies all over the world. The Torrey Canyon disaster, the infamous London smog of the 1950s, and the fate of the Exxon Valdez are only a few to name in this respect. In order to prevent similar catastrophic events in the future, countries have started to employ more precautionary measures.

Wills underlines that the deep-rooted fear of the landscape in American environmental history has also shaped a “colonial mindset” which aimed to control wilderness and resources.<sup>19</sup> This colonial mindset regarded nature in the new continent as wild and dangerous and as something which needed to be tamed. Traditional acceptance of natural abundance and unlimited progress also made things more complicated when modern, industrial and urban America was born. The continuous “downward spiral of nature” ends with the rise of artificial nature which was created for and by the entertainment industry and the media.<sup>20</sup> Nature then became an image and some other times an external threat to cope with. Briefly, over time most people have become alienated and disconnected from nature.<sup>21</sup>

Republicanism as a governance approach and ideology focuses on environmental issues only when they are perceived as challenging the liberty of its citizens. It has an anthropocentric motivation, but does not find it difficult to intervene in case of environmental pollution.<sup>22</sup> It is against arbitrary intervention. Yet, ecological degradation can be regarded as a form of domination by some groups. In such cases public regulation might be deemed

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necessary to promote the public good.<sup>23</sup> Earlier conservationist Republican presidents might have followed this way of thinking. President Reagan’s position in this context was regarded as anti-environmentalist and it was

believed even by his own party that such an attitude could not be (and was not) tolerated and had disappeared for good.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, the New Right movement which brought Reagan to power radically transformed the political landscape for environmentalism in U.S. Ironically, counter-environmentalists who flourished in this movement regarded themselves as outsiders, not establishment figures. They had great concerns over the suitability of applying uniform federal laws in widely different geographical regions.<sup>25</sup> Historically, the Republican Party never considered itself as neoliberal. Nevertheless, current developments show that its stubborn emphasis on individuals’ pursuit of self-interest as well as on the norm of non-interference increasingly strengthens its links with strong versions of capitalism which pose great difficulties in addressing environmental change.

Whether one counts the founding of the Sierra Club (1892) or the establishment of Yellowstone National Park (1872) as the beginning of American environmentalism, two themes constituted the basic concerns in this movement: protection of wild life and creation of public land free from the threat of development.<sup>26</sup> The urban bases of modern environmentalism tried to understand the interaction between nature and modern life.<sup>27</sup> The intellectual roots of environmentalism embraced the idea of progress but also showed their concerns about its direction.<sup>28</sup> Despite its spiritual and intellectual roots, modern environmentalism turned out to be a form of legal, scientific and administrative expertise.<sup>29</sup> Some also argue that the domestic focus of American environmentalism has not truly evolved in line with global challenges, and that rather than drawing attention to overconsumption, environmental organizations have underlined technological and regulatory measures to stop environmental problems.<sup>30</sup> Besides, unlike many of its European counterparts, the environmental movement in the U.S. could not establish strong links with other social movements.<sup>31</sup> The environmental justice movement can be regarded as the only exception in this respect.<sup>32</sup>

In many ways, global environmental change challenged the local sense of environmentalism. Certainly, the idea of a fragile earth has always been part of American environmentalism.<sup>33</sup> However, environmental identity in this vast country very much rests on locality. What is more, since domestic issues have more and more confronted global economic and environmental challenges, the U.S. position towards multinational environmental agreements has become lukewarm if not negative. Climate change requires in this respect full attention, since both adaptation and mitigation policies force societies to reconsider their life styles, economic development models and energy investments.

According to Paterson, the rivalry between low carbon future initiatives and carbon-based capitalism also makes it difficult for the U.S. to accept a level playing field with other economies.<sup>34</sup> He argues that despite growing support for wind and solar energy, there has been no significant constraint on growth depending on cheap fossil fuel use in U.S.<sup>35</sup> This can be partly explained by the U.S. position towards ecological modernization which was usually welcomed in many European countries as a way to achieve the third wave of industrialization – a non-carbon economy – to mitigate climate

change.<sup>36</sup> While the “wise use” movement and free market environmentalism have found wide acceptance in U.S., ecological modernization seems to have limited influence in political and economic circles.

## From Obama to Trump: Climate Change and Global Environment

Climate change lies at the sensitive intersection of environmental protection and energy, so it is a hugely divisive issue.<sup>37</sup> Apart from that, climate change is always about the division of competencies and responsibilities between the states and the federal government, and about the “distribution of benefits.”<sup>38</sup> Hence, there is always the risk of polarization which might hinder federal government efforts to address domestic and international environmental issues.<sup>39</sup>

Climate warming first emerged as an issue for the Domestic Policy Council in 1976. President Reagan signed the first federal climate change legislation: the Global Climate Protection Act in 1987. With this act, the State department was asked to develop an approach to address global warming and to establish an intergovernmental task force to develop a national strategy.<sup>40</sup> The U.S. enthusiastically joined in scientific and political debates and international cooperative efforts towards finding a solution to global warming. However, fault lines among the U.S. governing elite and between the U.S. and other industrialized countries had already started to emerge about the nature of international cooperation, especially regarding approaches, targets and timetables.

Even though the Kyoto Protocol was regarded as economically and environmentally sound by President Clinton in 1997, it was never approved by the Senate. In 2001, the George W. Bush administration announced its intention not to do anything with the Kyoto Protocol. In its view it would harm the U.S. economy, leading to higher energy prices and destroying economic competitiveness because developing countries did not have emissions targets. The administration regarded the protocol as unfair and feared that complying with it would cause turmoil in the energy sector. Some European partners considered this action as another sign of U.S. reluctance on multilateralism.<sup>41</sup> Although the Kyoto Protocol had many flaws from the very beginning, it symbolized good will and a starting point for those who were willing to



proceed collectively in the years to come. After Bush's announcement, the Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate was formed with a technological cooperation focus.<sup>42</sup> It seems that the Bush administration did not want to look as though it were pursuing an inflexible and externally directed foreign policy approach in responding to the problem, but wanted to proceed in their own good way.

Prior to 1990, the U.S. had often acted as a leader in negotiating and ratifying international environmental agreements and protocols. Some argue that it was easy for the U.S. to act as a leading force since its environmental laws were more advanced than those of many other industrialized countries. This certainly made the U.S. comfortable in pushing international cooperation while evading domestic debates for treaty implementation and mostly enjoying large majority support in both congressional chambers.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, as the U.S. lost its momentum in environment protection, international commitments have seemed more burdensome on the economy. Every environmental legislation creates winners and losers if nature is regarded simply as a resource (as a "standing reserve" in Heidegger's phrase) and if there is not much emphasis on public good. It gets even more complicated when different states negotiate their needs and interests. Hence strong opposition in congressional chambers become inevitable when there are geographical differences in public opinion about a global challenge.<sup>44</sup> Socio-economic impacts – in different U.S. states – of an international environmental agreement on climate change further complicate the situation.

When Obama won the 2008 election, environmentalists were more optimistic. With the Obama administration, U.S. climate policy gained a more energetic voice on climate change.<sup>45</sup> In his first term, President Obama focused mainly on energy efficiency, renewable energy projects, good fuel efficiency standards on vehicles and green jobs. Notwithstanding the poor climate change legislation, the U.S. under his new presidency constructively engaged in establishing a common ground for post-Kyoto negotiations at the COP15, 2009 Copenhagen Climate Conference.<sup>46</sup> President Obama's main attempt was to transform climate change rhetoric. He proposed a new 'green deal' to reframe discussions around climate change – focusing on benefits and opportunities rather than on the costs of climate action.<sup>47</sup> However, the Obama administration's various plans, including a cap and trade system, faced severe opposition in Congress.<sup>48</sup> In order to overcome these obstacles, President

Obama started using executive orders to proceed with climate legislation. The executive order on Federal Leadership on Environmental, Energy and Economic Performance was one of the most important executive orders that helped to reduce GHG emissions.<sup>49</sup> With this order, federal agencies were asked to reduce their emissions.<sup>50</sup> The Obama administration also began to develop an administrative approach to climate change, enabling the EPA and related agencies to take the lead in the development of a federal climate policy.<sup>51</sup> These attempts were, however, not welcomed by the opponents of the Obama administration and instigated immense legal and political disagreements.

In his second term, President Obama seemed to be more determined to strengthen climate change legislation and action. In his State of the Union speech in January 2013, he sounded more confident and adamant about

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taking necessary measures in combating climate change. In March, the Climate Action Plan, which involved a leadership vision as well as mitigation and adaptation targets, was announced.<sup>52</sup> The Clean Power Plan (CPP) was the backbone of this plan.

However, it caused great controversy over the role and authority of the federal government. It is important to note there are many differences and sometimes conflicts of interest with regard to economic, social and energy-related conditions among the states. Besides, at the federal governance level, Republicans in the Congress favour fossil fuel incentives since they often represent those states whose economy heavily depends on those industries.<sup>53</sup> In 2016, the Plan faced a judicial challenge and the case was brought to the Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit. The Court gave the EPA 60 days to review its position in August 2017.

In last days of his presidency, Obama rushed to provide conservation safeguards for public lands, cancelled a significant number of mining leases, as well as oil and gas leases in certain areas, and banned drilling in the Arctic ocean of Alaska.<sup>54</sup> Despite his committed engagement with environmental issues, however, President Obama's image as an environmental leader was shaken by his support for fracking.<sup>55</sup> Hydraulic fracturing of shale oil and gas (fracking) is a drilling technology used to extract natural gas from deep shale and coalbed methane deposits.<sup>56</sup> The mixture of water and chemicals used in the process alarms environmental groups and neighbourhood communities. The process

uses significant amounts of water and nearby aquifers face pollution from the chemicals used. It has been heavily opposed by environmentalists on the grounds of its ecological impacts and health related problems. From exploration to production and after, impacts such as lorry trafficking for transportation, contamination of groundwater supplies, the wastewater problem, land use, noise and air quality, fracking represents a real environmental nightmare for many people.<sup>57</sup> Supporters, however, underline the reliability of new technologies and argue for the importance of energy independence.<sup>58</sup>

Some argue that the global economic crisis, energy insecurity and commitment for clean energy economy against old polluting coal plants forced the Obama administration to pursue a more pragmatic approach.<sup>59</sup> Fracking created jobs after the economic crash and seemed to be cleaner and to emit fewer pollutants than burning coal.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, the government planned to slash GHG emissions significantly between 2007 and 2013. And after the Fukushima nuclear accident which was caused by the tsunami following a big earthquake in 2011, fracking increased its popularity as the only reliable option for energy security. Thus, for many, fracking transformed the U.S. oil and gas sector and provided some kind of energy independence for the U.S. Some even argue that fracking has indirectly affected U.S. foreign policy and enabled the Obama administration to impose strong sanctions on the oil industry.<sup>61</sup> Energy security is an indispensable priority for foreign policies all around the world. In this sense, self-sufficiency is important. Yet, this quick fix to reduce GHGs and energy security relies on U.S. dependence on consumption of energy and belief in the abundance of resources at home.

At this point, it is worth mentioning that other parts of the world still rely on imported fossil fuel. Even though reduced U.S. demand for such sources challenges the dynamics of the petro-geopolitics (reducing OPEC's power for instance) in certain regions, unexpected sources of conflict or turmoil might take place in other places. Such unrest might very well happen because of declining oil prices (as in the case of Venezuela) or threats to oil routes.<sup>62</sup> However, it is also argued that Saudi Arabia is not willing to lose its swing power, thus trying to manipulate oil markets to make fracking unprofitable for the U.S. and to limit Iran's influence.<sup>63</sup> Hence focusing on international cooperation to reduce fossil fuels seems more important than reaching self-sufficiency on unconventional gas. Moreover, leakage of methane and other GHGs disturbed this equation very quickly. New federal rules to curb methane

emissions became necessary. These rules were released in May 2016. This was the missing part of Obama's climate strategy.<sup>64</sup>

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Then again, it is noteworthy to add that declining U.S. emissions might be the result of economic recession rather than shale gas and also that the U.S. still imports huge amounts of oil and oil products despite its shale gas

adventure.<sup>65</sup> According to the EIA (U.S. Energy Information Administration), in 2017, the U.S. imported around 10.14 million barrels per day of petroleum (79 % of it, crude oil), while exported about 6.38 million barrels per day.<sup>66</sup>

## Framing the Environmental Debate and the Trump Presidency

The emergence of the New Right and the constant 'impending disaster' themes of some environmentalist groups have tarnished the image of environmentalism. Environmental activists, organizations and even ordinary citizens with high environmental concerns have increasingly found it necessary to defend themselves against the charges of being overly pessimistic, anti-growth, and political extremists. Nevertheless, American environmentalism is not the only one suffering from the depressing nature of environmental news. All around the world, environmental groups, activists and scientists have been facing a backlash from mainstream environmental miscommunication.

In a consumption-based global society, no social movement – regardless of its underlying philosophy – is immune to scepticism. And when environmental scepticism becomes (or is conflated with) cynicism, every single discontent or uncertainty within the scientific community and among environmentalist groups might be seen as hypocrisy. Yet, the political landscape of a vast geography and global economic challenges as well as overwhelming (almost survivalist) faith in growth as part of the American dream have made everything more difficult for American environmentalists. The anti-environmentalist ideological language of the 1980s has set the tone for environmental politics and policies in the U.S. It is very difficult to defy the wide scale and deep impacts of such ideological infiltration at all levels of governance. President

Obama might have not been as successful an environmental leader as he would have liked. However, he made an effort to reframe the climate change and environment rhetoric around benefits and cooperation not costs or burdens.

Ironically, shortly after President Trump signed an infrastructure order which also reversed an executive order introduced by President Obama about risk-management standards in flood-prone areas in case of rising sea levels based on climate models, Hurricane Harvey hit the U.S. mainland in late August 2017.<sup>67</sup> Then, Trump underlined the necessity of speeding up infrastructure projects in response to decaying infrastructure, and complained about bureaucracy and regulations hindering efficiency, although he added that environmental safeguards would still be applied to projects.<sup>68</sup> At this point many started to ask about the extent to which climate change has triggered or intensified stronger hurricanes. Although identifying particular effects of climate change in specific incidents is difficult, nonetheless, scientists agree that rising ocean heat is likely to cause more intense and stronger storms.<sup>69</sup>

Again, many ask whether extreme meteorological events can change individual or societal attitudes toward climate change. When Hurricane Irma hit Florida, Republican senator John McCain remarked that the climate might be changing and they had to take measures without harming the American people.<sup>70</sup> Tomas Regalado, Mayor of Miami, also called President Trump to talk about climate change.<sup>71</sup> The president of the EPA, on the other hand, expressed the view that a discussion of the link between climate change and hurricanes was insensitive at such a time.<sup>72</sup> According to recent research, public perception of climate and weather is usually conflated; moreover, climate change is usually regarded as identical with global warming. Thus, if there are record high temperatures, the public is more likely to believe that the climate is changing.<sup>73</sup> At this point, it is important to question to what extent politicians and bureaucrats who are responsible for taking decisions and shaping policies with far-reaching implications can distance themselves from such short-sighted perceptions.

Despite dissident voices, the issue of climate change is still a hot potato in the Republican Party. It seems that few Republicans are willing to publicly accept and announce the impacts and anthropogenic causes of climate change. Homeland security adviser, Tom Bossert, stated in a Monday briefing in 2017 that they would continue to take climate change seriously – not the cause of

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it, but the things that they observed.<sup>74</sup> He also stressed that it was too early to establish a causal link between climate change and hurricanes.<sup>75</sup> Not only non-discussions on the attributions to climate change but also proposed policies how to deal with causes of climate change pose serious questions. McCain, for instance, was not denying climate change, but underlined the significance of nuclear power as the cleanest source of power.<sup>76</sup> This comment in a broader perspective relies on the traditional consumption and production culture as well as a long-held suspicion about the reliability and high costs of renewable energies. To illustrate, famous arguments against renewable energies such as “the wind does not always blow and the sun does not always shine” not only reveal the lack of trust in the possibilities for storage of renewable energies, but also a reluctance to consume less energy.

Consumerism, which affects land use, raw materials, and water use is at the heart of climate change. For instance, household consumption of processed foods requires both energy and water intensive processes. How cities are designed (pedestrian friendly cities, interconnected intercity transport systems or car-led cities and urban sprawl) also affect energy supply and demand processes. According to a relatively new study, richer countries have higher consumption rates and the U.S. is the worst in terms of per capita GHG emissions.<sup>77</sup> There is no ‘one size fits all’ solution.

Renewable energy is a dynamic sector which can provide a reliable source of energy in different geographies according to different needs and demands. In recent years, renewables have become more competitive and efficient due to innovative technologies. However, when renewables are being framed as alternative energy sources which would and should meet ever increasing demand for excessive energy use, then the point has been missed: renewables should operate in tandem with reduced use and not be used as an excuse for a failure or refusal to change behaviour.

The network of agencies and institutions which predicted the points of landfall and intensity of the latest hurricanes and storms clearly benefited from climate studies.<sup>78</sup> However, scientific staff and research capabilities which issued warnings are now under huge threat due to budget cuts which might jeopardize U.S. leadership global science.<sup>79</sup>

When President Trump in June 2017 announced the intention of the U.S. government to withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement, there was a worldwide reaction. Nevertheless, this decision was not unexpected, given the rhetoric of the presidential campaign and the presence of his campaign chief (later White House strategist and senior advisor), Stephen Bannon, who is known for his support for alt-right movement and climate deniers. However, President Trump's transition team's request to name employees of the Energy Department who were involved in international climate meetings over the past five years caused a big shock to many.<sup>80</sup> In January 2017, the Trump administration issued an order banning the EPA from communicating with the public through any means of social media and press releases.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, the word 'science' disappeared from EPA's Office of Science and Technology mission statement.<sup>82</sup>

Trump also signed orders to back two pipeline projects, Keystone XL and Dakota Access, both of which had been halted due to huge protests in 2015 and 2016 during the Obama Presidency, and to terminate regulation aiming to protect waterways from coal waste. President Trump also proposed a budget cut in the National Parks Service and favoured more gas and oil extraction on public lands. In March 2017, he signed 'the Energy Independence Executive Order' which calls for reviewing the Clean Power Plan and reversing the moratorium on new coal mining leases on federal lands.<sup>83</sup> This order is clearly an attempt to weaken the clean energy and climate change initiatives of the Obama era.

When Pruitt asked what true environmentalism was, responses varied. Republicans drew attention to conservative ideas that pioneered environmentalism in the U.S., while others thought his attempt was only an act of political manipulation. His idea of using natural resources (including fossil fuels) to their full potential stirred once again the discussions of clean coal.<sup>84</sup> And at his State of the Union speech, President Trump claimed that his administration had ended the war against clean coal; he talked about the meteorological disasters that the country faced in 2017, but not climate change.<sup>85</sup>

The current way of thinking in the Trump administration puts certain areas of wilderness in danger. For instance, the President's decision to withdraw federal protection from 2 million acres in Utah (The Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-

Escalante National Monuments) to allow hard rock mining in the area was regarded by some as a good investment for the future while others (mainly conservation groups and Democrats) saw it as a threat to cultural and natural heritage.<sup>86</sup> President Trump based his decision on a very old law (1872) and accused previous Presidents of overreaching federal powers for designating these areas containing rare flora and fauna as protected lands under the Antiquities Act. Now the land is open to claims from private companies and citizens to extract minerals. The Bears Ears is known for its uranium deposits. However, the low demand for and low price of uranium made this decision already economically futile.<sup>87</sup> The Grand Staircase-Escalante is, on the other hand, known for its coal reserves.<sup>88</sup>

The idea of stewardship, through which Pruitt is trying to reframe or redefine environmentalism in the U.S., has a different meaning for environmentalists. It recalls a holistic approach as well as collective responsibility and action. The contrast between stewardship and viewing the natural world as simply a 'standing reserve' arises out of the interpretation of the injunction in the Bible for human beings to 'have dominion over the earth.' The dominant trend in contemporary Christian thinking on the environment, as in contemporary secular thinking on the environment, is that human beings should act as stewards, tending and caring for the earth. This view, in Christian circles, was forcibly expressed in the Papal Encyclical *Laudato Si'* (2015).<sup>89</sup> Both religious and secular views would unite in common opposition to any attempt to redefine stewardship as an injunction to open all areas of the sea and land to unrestrained exploitation.

## Conclusion

Although Stephen Bannon is no longer President Trump's chief strategist, and Rex Tillerson is no longer the Secretary of State, no one can claim that climate sceptics have lost their battle. In the age of political mistrust, climate scepticism has significantly enjoyed and exploited the political culture in the U.S. Whether political or environmental, scepticism is certainly not a new phenomenon in politics. In last decade all over the world scepticism about politicians, bureaucrats, experts and scientists as well as social movements and activists has risen and in many cases resulted in a broad range of cynicism about the motives of scientists, experts and environmentalists. Ideological differences might also play an important role in how one sees the environment.



Such differences are usually more visible in party elites. A study conducted in 2001, however, displays how ideological attitudes in the public might affect environmental orientations too.<sup>90</sup> Results of the study might have been used as a case study on how support for environmentalism among the public has started to lose its non-partisan, all inclusive-embracing feature, and turned into something 'political.'<sup>91</sup>

Of course, environmental issues have always been political. They raise issues of justice, equality, rights and responsibilities, and our daily choices and future concerns. But they are also closely related with scientific expertise. Scientific evidence demonstrates how and why our lives are affected by any change in our relation with the environment. However, the uncertainty in which science finds the best place to flourish, has favoured the sceptics' position. Debates about the reality of climate change sit uncomfortably in the middle of this political environment, and claims that experts have exaggerated climate change for their own interests are very popular, particularly among neoliberal conservatives.

Climate sceptics have gained power in the media too. According to research examining climate scepticism in the print media in six countries; Brazil, China, France, India, the UK and the U.S. in 2007 and 2009/2010, the UK and the U.S. seemed to have the most climate-sceptic media in comparison with other countries.<sup>92</sup> Recent studies also point out not only ongoing scepticism and denial in the U.S. media but also misinformation.<sup>93</sup> If an issue is in dispute, it seems that climate sceptics and even denialists gain more media coverage. Given that scientific knowledge on climate change has constantly improved, those contrarian attitudes or ignorance of climate/environment related news in the mainstream media are sources of great concern for the environmentalists.

One explanation for the popularity of climate scepticism might be that the public prefers to hear optimistic views about their future. It is a kind of reassurance against the possible worst-case scenarios. No one can argue that the communication of climate change to the wider public has been a success story. Some argue that we do not need more information, but rather interactive learning models which enable people to work with scenarios and develop their understanding.<sup>94</sup> However, this line of reasoning rests on the belief that public eschewing of climate change data is based on mutual miscommunication which can be reversed. Another explanation for the persistence and popularity

of the climate scepticism in the case of the U.S. might lie in the fact that well-organized, small think tanks, organizations and groups who are partly results of 1980s anti and/or counter environmentalist movement constantly fight to challenge environmental concerns.<sup>95</sup> Given the significant difference between the attitude of the U.S. mainstream media and its counterparts in other industrialized countries, this explanation seems very plausible. Yet, this explanation again emphasizes a false or manipulated collective attempt to affect public opinion and continue with business-as-usual scenarios in the age of climate risks.

Against this backdrop, President Trump has seemed to fuel a new wave of environmentalism in the U.S. since his inauguration. Environmentalists and environmentalism have managed to survive previous historical backlashes, not only in the U.S. but all over the world. At this point, environmental justice might be the key theme for the wake-up call for mainstream environmentalists in the U.S. All in all, Hurricanes Harvey and Irma showed that Trump's attitude towards the environment and existing environmental legislation is not in line with daily realities. Environmental policies and in particular climate change policies depend on political actions.

One might argue that current environmental issues and risks might force the Trump administration to change its attitude. Even if this will be the case, responses might only include a pack of technological fixes and short-term commitment to international efforts. A set of deeper normative issues have been challenging the U.S. energy, environment and climate change policies for a long time. Justice, equality and futurity are the key subjects at the core of these issues. However, a thorough discussion of them is beyond the limits of this short analysis. Without a proper response to those issues, the U.S. government's commitments to any multinational environmental agreement, but particularly, to climate change might be only *ad hoc* depending on the composition of Congress and the willpower of the President. It has become clear that the U.S. would have to explore and reinvent its conception of the common good in order to develop a coherent environmental policy.<sup>96</sup>

Degradation of land, water contamination, and air pollution all threaten the survival and the quality of life on earth. Environmental change is a threat to the natural environment and human well-being, prosperity and security. Whether there ever was, now there certainly cannot be a sharp policy

distinction between environmental, economic, domestic and international domains. As Benedick points out, foreign policies are not anymore solely about borders but also transboundary issues.<sup>97</sup> And international cooperation on environmental issues can only be reached through coordination of foreign policies. The demand for energy and its supply plays an important role here. Throughout history, new energy sources have challenged the rules of the game in world politics. Now new energy landscapes require reformulation of foreign policies, new alliances and power structures. Sticking to the old geopolitical narratives and polluting industries would only deepen the isolationist trends in U.S. foreign policy. Once the pioneer for environmental legislation and a world leader, the U.S. is now acting as an environmental laggard, abandoning international accords and refusing to negotiate until other parties come up with better solutions. The 'America first' mindset might cost the U.S. dearly, not only in terms of global economic competitiveness and political leadership, but also in contributing to huge and irreversible human loss and environmental degradation and disasters and their attendant economic costs.

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