

Influences on Climate Politics in the Trump Administration

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Biologically, people find it difficult to comprehend threats of extreme scale when they are expected fairly distant in time. Harvard psychology professor Daniel Gilbert argues this allows people to disassociate from the harmful effects of climate change: “The problem is climate change doesn’t have a human face. It’s not somebody we can villainize” (NPR, 2006). Yet, the increase in temperatures that will occur if the world continues to emit greenhouse gasses along a “business as usual path” will transform the physical and human geography of our planet as we know it. The exact reasons we live where we do (deserts, coastlines, rain patterns, etc.) would be redrawn (Stern, 2015). Proper mitigation requires urgent global cooperation and initiative. But in 2017 when President Donald Trump withdrew from the Paris Climate Agreement, a treaty where nearly every nation agreed to reduce pollutant emissions, it was clear that the United States would not be participating in the global effort.

Many business groups, particularly from the energy sector, applauded this decision. The American Coal Council (ACC) reiterated the President’s estimated \$3 trillion cost to the economy that would result from participating in the agreement. The ACC also emphasized the treaty’s impracticality, pointing out the reduction in carbon emissions would likely be insignificant (Headley, 2017). Like-minded, conservative think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and American Council for Capital Formation (ACCF) also agreed with Trump’s reasoning and agenda. President Trump had definite plans to roll back regulations in pursuit of global energy dominance. The ACCF, responsible for the economic report that Trump used to justify withdrawing from the Paris Agreement, persists that regulatory measures are an inefficient way to achieve climate goals and are too costly to maintain long-term (ACCF, 2017).

But the burden of air pollution is not lingering in the future, nor is it shared evenly among Americans. The US has the seventh highest number of pollution-related deaths in the world,

disproportionately affecting nonwhite, low socioeconomic populations (American Lung Association, 2020). Specifically, Hispanic and black American populations are exposed to higher levels of ambient air pollution on average, leading to adverse health effects (EPA, 2019). Environmental advocates demand strengthened air quality standards, the protection of vulnerable communities, and the conservation of earth's natural resources. Following Trump's election, many large environmental groups like the Sierra Club and National Resources Defense Council (NRDC) saw increased enthusiasm and participation. As Trump made his deregulatory agenda clear from the start of his campaign, advocate groups had to "prepare a defense strategy" as NRDC President, Rhea Suh, stated. Suh wrote on their blog post that the NRDC "will be working with city authorities to advance protections regardless of the Trump EPA's agenda" (LaRoss, 2016).

While environmental advocates expressed growing concerns, several key industries reaped the benefits of deregulation. The role of the EPA is to protect citizen's health and the environment, but the extent to which business interests influence their decision-making process depends on many factors. Environmentalists and industry coalitions have used different strategies to influence both Congress and the White House on environmental policy decisions. Because many appointed cabinet members had industry ties, particularly to the energy sector, corporate interests established a significant amount of power in the executive branch. This allowed for a restructuring of the EPA, passing legislation that protected businesses and discredited climate science. Environmental groups used litigation and grassroots movements to promote climate change awareness and combat the EPA's roll back initiatives. Despite their efforts, environmental policy under Trump's administration was largely bias towards business and against environmental interests.

Literature Review

The role that interest groups play in American politics has been well recorded throughout history. However, the extent of power that interest groups have over legislation remains inconclusive. While some scholars claim the rise in climate change awareness and advocate groups have mitigated the powerful influence firms established in politics, others argue business groups remain the dominant players. Given the frequency at which large companies are the targets of environmental law, and the millions of dollars they spend on lobbying each year, little empirical research has been done regarding the amount of influence businesses have over policy. Sheldon Kamieniecki argues corporate interests have gained a significant amount of power and attributes it to the development of the American economy. Gradually, it has shifted from an agrarian economy characterized by trading and small firms to an economy dominated by extremely wealthy, diversified firms. In result, the role of the government has changed from passively promoting economic growth to aggressively advocating for selected sectors (Kamieniecki, 2006). These selected sectors can exercise immense power if not checked appropriately. The strengthening relationship between politics and economic interests has created a multitude of issues for environmentalists who rely on the government to hold polluting companies accountable.

For decades, the conversation between environmentalists and industrialists largely remains unchanged. Eco-enthusiasts assert that corporate giants impede in the creation of clean air and water standards: Ranchers have successfully fought endangered species protection, energy utilities have opposed energy conservation measures, and chemical companies have fought legislation intended to control harmful pesticides. Corporate leaders maintain that present laws and regulations are too costly and only result in modest, if any, improvements in

environmental quality. Furthermore, Kamieniecki identifies general strategies the two groups adopt to further pursue their agendas. Corporations tend to rely on financial capital, investing in lobbying practices and funding think tank's scientific research. Think tanks can produce compelling publications that diminish the severity of climate change. They do this by undermining "alarming" emissions models, insisting that the scientific evidence supporting these models is not "complete". Public opinion can be largely persuaded by these reports criticizing the scientific integrity of climate science. Environmentalists tend to counter with litigation and scientific reports revealing the true costs of pollution (Kamieniecki, 2006). However, this is a gross oversimplification of the strategies environmentalists and industrialists have implemented in the last decade and does not account for party affiliation.

Tasked with preserving the strength of our nation's economy while conserving its natural resources, Donald Trump put much of his energy into promoting domestic businesses. Presidents are mindful of the promises they make while campaigning, and political scientists agree that presidents have better success in getting programs passed during a unified government (Gelman, Wilkenfeld, & Adler, 2015). Trump was adamant on rolling back air and water quality standards, and the Republican party controlling both Senate and Congress allowed Trump to do exactly as promised. In comparisons drawn between past presidents, the American Journal of Public Health demonstrated how Trump's administration combined Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush's strategies to weaken the EPA. Reagan deregulated the EPA while cutting their budget and staff, while Bush adopted a subtler approach by undermining science-based policy. During Trump's administration, increasing political polarization caused the environment to become a partisan issue and science to be distrusted. A combination of these factors enabled the administration to redesign the EPA and adjust enforcement in favor business interests (Fredrickson et al., 2018).

While the analysis includes how party control plays a pivotal role, it fails to acknowledge specific corporate groups that heavily influenced environmental policy under President Trump. Further, it neglects the many successes environmentalists experienced against the administration throughout his term.

The Powerful Voices of Corporate Interests

Since 2017, Trump's EPA has deregulated environmental quality standards to promote American energy independence. But near the end of his term in 2019, even corporate giants who had benefitted from the business-friendly policy were dissatisfied with recent environmental standards. CEOs from huge energy corporations, including BP and Shell, sought partnership with environmentalists to urge Congress for improved climate legislation. The CEO Climate Dialogue is a group of 22 companies and four leading environmental nonprofit organizations. Together, they lobbied congress for market-based policy solutions to climate change, such as carbon tax credits as an incentive limit pollutant emissions (CCD, 2019). Some eco-activist groups argue tax credits are merely an attempt for utilities to operate more profitably. Yale Environment labeled carbon capture a weak attempt at a climate change remedy (2018). Regardless of ulterior motive, the call to action was clear: without greater mitigation efforts, the effects of climate change will cause substantial damage to our environment and economy (US Global Change Research Program, 2018).

Corporate interests, particularly from the energy sector, gained influence in the executive branch. From the start, Trump was heavily influenced by wealthy, conservative think tanks and industry coalitions. The Heritage Foundation, one of the most powerful conservative think tanks in America, emerged as the major influence shaping the President-elect's transition team. Over 66 Heritage employees and alumni joined the administration. Advocating for domestic energy

production, the foundation expressed strong opposition to the overbearing regulations set in place by former President Obama (Mahler, 2018). Trump's appointed cabinet further demonstrated his loyalty to the industries that support him. Myron Ebell, director of the Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI), led the transition team and was the driving force behind Scott Pruitt's appointment to head the EPA (Rosner, 2017). The CEI is a libertarian advocacy group financed in part by the fossil fuel industry and has fought against climate "alarmism" for decades. As a former coal lobbyist with years of industry experience, Pruitt seemed perfect for the job. However, this appointment invoked substantial backlash. Environmental groups including the Sierra Club and the League of Conservation Voters ran online petitions urging Senate to reject Pruitt's nomination. In collaborative publicity efforts, they exposed fourteen lawsuits that Pruitt had made *against* the EPA while he served as Oklahoma's attorney general (Hestres and Nisbet, 2018). While the petitions proved unsuccessful in preventing Pruitt's appointment, he ended up resigning two years into his term amid several ethical federal investigations.

While Pruitt's appointment may have received the most publicized backlash, he was far from the only cabinet member appointed with industry ties. Rex Tillerson, a former chairman and CEO of Exxon Mobil (the world's largest oil company), was appointed to Secretary of State. As Secretary of Interior, Trump appointed former Republican Senator, Ryan Zinke. He was a particularly outspoken advocate for a controversial oil pipeline, the Keystone Project, previously vetoed by Obama (Kim, 2016). Joining the cabinet included Richard Perry and Jefferson Sessions, each with histories of overt climate change denial. In an interview with CNBC, Secretary of Energy Richard Perry contested top scientists' conclusion that carbon emissions from human activities are a primary source of climate change. Rather, he said, "the primary

control knob is the ocean” (DiChristopher, 2017). As cabinet positions with substantial leverage in environmental policy were taken by industry enthusiasts doubtful of climate change science, it became clear that business interests would be heavily valued throughout the policy-making process.

Environmental Policy Under Trump’s EPA

The administration was frequently successful in rolling back air quality regulations, benefitting key industries. For example, the Clean Power Plan was replaced with a weaker version that reduced regulations on airborne emissions and coal ash disposal. This was an attempt to revive the coal industry. To further promote energy independence, the administration intervened several times to hasten the permitting of fossil fuel infrastructure. Most notably, Trump attempted to issue permits for both the Keystone and Dakota Access projects (Gross, 2020). These pipelines were widely protested by Native American communities as the infrastructure invaded ancestral land and ignored treaty rights (Native American Rights Fund, 2021). To many, Trump’s permitting of these projects was a blatant attempt at prioritizing financial interests over public safety and native tribe’s authority.

The energy sector wasn’t the only industry reaping benefits. In 2017, Scott Pruitt announced that chlorpyrifos, a pesticide linked to neurotoxicity risks, would remain available on the market. This occurred after agency scientists recommended the pesticide be banned, but Pruitt stated the science behind the health risks “remains unresolved” (EPA, 2019). The decision may have had a latent function: the largest American manufacturer of chlorpyrifos, Corteva (formerly Dow Chemical), generates around \$1 billion in revenue and reportedly donated \$1 million to Trump’s inauguration fund (USC, 2017). Further, chlorpyrifos is mainly used to increase corn yield, and according to Statista, America is by far the largest producer of corn

globally (Shahbandeh, 2021). Clearly, the corporate interests of the chemical and agricultural sectors were being protected.

In addition to direct policy reform, key departments also censored information regarding climate change. Throughout 2017, the Department of Interior (DOI) and EPA gradually removed information surrounding climate change from their official websites (EDGI et al., 2019). A survey conducted by the Union of Concerned Scientists found that 47 percent and 35 percent of National Park Service and EPA respondents, respectively, had been asked to omit the phrase “climate change” from their work. Results also shows that 81 percent of EPA respondents agreed that “political influence were a hindrance to science-based decisions” (UCS, 2018). But some industry coalitions didn’t seem to mind the changes. President of the Institute for Energy Research, Thomas Pyle, dismissed concerns about the deletion of climate information, stating, “Apparently it seems the ‘enviros’ still don’t understand that elections have consequences” (Friedman, 2018). Although the EPA never admitted to explicitly removing information about climate science, associate administrator J.P. Friere stated that website changes reflected the views of the agency’s leadership. Friere clarified the changes aimed to tweak “outdated language” and unconfirmed claims about climate science (Mooney & Eilprin, 2019).

Environmentalists Fight Back

The attempt to undermine climate change research did not go unnoticed by the scientific community. After the EPA announced their plans to restrict the types of data that can be used in their legislative process, nearly 1,000 scientists (many of whom used to work at the EPA) wrote Scott Pruitt and urged him to abandon the proposal. They argued the restriction would impair the EPA’s authority (2018). Yet, this is exactly what Trump aimed to do. A study conducted by the Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) found that criminal prosecutions

under Trump's EPA had been the lowest in 30 years. The report attributes this sharp decline in enforcement to a policy reform that lets offenders avoid prosecution by merely *agreeing* to suspend their violations (PEER, 2019). Advocates seeking a higher standard of ethics, like PEER, depend on the EPA to regulate polluting industries for the sake of our health, regardless of prospective profits. The fossil fuel industry pollutes water and is implicated in the 429,000 asthma-related trips to U.S. emergency rooms each year (Schleeter, 2020). By reducing their prosecutions against polluting companies, this enabled the EPA to subtly scale back their authority without passing large policy changes.

But environmental advocates fought back. By taking matters into court, many groups have been successful in defending against specific regulation rollbacks. The Center for Biological Diversity, for example, filed 266 lawsuits against the Trump administration, winning 90% of the resolved cases (CBD, 2021). Similarly, the environmental law nonprofit, Earthjustice, committed to fighting deregulation efforts by filing nearly 200 federal lawsuits. Alongside the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), Earthjustice led a series of litigation efforts urging the EPA to ban chlorpyrifos. In agreement with the scientific community, Earthjustice strongly opposed the pesticide's use. Several studies show that chlorpyrifos can cause adolescent brain damage over time. Although the administration twice refused, after ongoing pressure from environmental and health communities, Corteva announced it would stop manufacturing chlorpyrifos in 2021 (Earthjustice, 2020). For many groups, litigation proved to be a successful tool in defending against Trump's deregulation efforts and protecting environmental interests.

Amid an administration biased to the industries that heads formerly worked in, environmentalists had to find external support. Alongside other social groups also disappointed

with Trump's legislation, or lack thereof, environmental advocates rallied in grassroots movements. For example, the Women's March on Washington that took place the day after Trump's inauguration illustrated a collection of public grievances. These including Trump's treatment of women, minorities, and his beliefs about climate science. As nearly half a million people marched together in solidarity, the diversity among participants embodied the concept of *intersectionality*. Intersectionality is the notion that multiple identities intersect to create a whole that is different from its constituent parts (Hestres and Nisbet, 2018). As Sierra Club's Wendy Bechtold put it, "Marchers were not just marching for women's rights, racial equality, or environmental justice. They were marching for all three, because they lived the struggle for each (2017).

Intersectionality is a common strategy that smaller interest groups have used to promote awareness and create momentum for their cause. Dozens of environmental advocacy groups partnered with major scientific organizations during the March for Science, which took place in Washington, D.C., on April 22, 2017 - Earth Day. One week later, the People's Climate March drew over 200,000 people to the streets of the nation's capital, rallying under the banner of climate action and justice. This march was led by a diverse committee of over 50 organizations including well-established environmental groups like the NRDC and Sierra Club, smaller climate-focused groups, like 350.org, and non-environmental groups such as Public Citizen and the American Postal Workers Union (Hestres and Nisbet, 2018). These three marches epitomize the idea that an effective movement towards a climate conscious nation requires addressing the populations most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. According to the Intersectional Environmentalist (IE) Foundation's website, bringing social justice to the forefront of environmental dialogue gives a voice to historically silenced minorities, including the Black

community (2020). The IE Foundation promotes an inclusive version of climate consciousness through social media, events, and art. Gaining momentum with the Black Lives Matter movement, a new network of groups committed to addressing both climate change and social inequalities emerged.

Encompassing an intersectional perspective on environmental justice has attracted a more diversified support group. Environmental groups saw a surge in monthly donations following collaborative demonstrations in the past few years. The Sierra Club and League of Conservation Voters, for example, received record breaking donation contributions throughout 2019. These groups have spent up to seven figures on advertisements accusing Trump and his administration for denying climate change, failing to support clean energy, and taking contributions from the oil and gas industry (Yu, 2019). Raising awareness of these concerns through organized events and advertisements has proved successful. The Sierra Club's chief advancement officer, Mary Nemerov, pointed out that increased monthly support indicates "commitment to the cause over time, something truly unprecedented." (Mathiesen, 2016). Finding strength in numbers and diversity, intersectionality helped amplify the urgency for policy that better protects our people and planet.

Conclusion

Although efforts to combat deregulation were cohesive and persistent, business interests had significant power in legislation. Trump's cabinet was largely designed by conservative think tanks, most notably the Heritage Foundation, and Congress was heavily lobbied by corporate giants. This allowed for a restructuring of environmental policy that benefited key industries rather than protected our environment. By easing greenhouse gas restrictions and undermining

climate science, the administration created an EPA that supported rather than prosecuted accountable, polluting industries.

William Ruckelshaus, first administrator of the EPA in 1970, stated the goal of the EPA is, “In short, at the same time attend to what is urgent while doing our best to foresee and respond to what is ahead” (Ruckelshaus, 1971). Through litigation, scientific publications, and community outreach, environmental advocates have tried to prove that climate change *is* urgent. The greater scientific and health communities partnered with them in many of these efforts. Further, in collaboration with other social groups such as the black community, several massive demonstrations embodied the concept of intersectionality, a togetherness of separate parts. Intersectionality has proved to be a new and successful strategy that smaller interest groups can use to gain external support for their cause. Unfortunately, efforts of environmental advocates were only partially rewarded. With the help of Republican majorities in Congress, until 2019 in both chambers and since then in the Senate alone, the Trump administration has favored industry over environment. According to Reibstein (2017), the purpose of the democratic system is to find the balance of interests, rights and perspectives that can inspire public trust. Cronyism and lobbying, however, induce distrust, such as environmentalists’ distrust of the Trump administration.

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