To Carol and Sandy,
For their love and support

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"High Hopes and Bitter Disappointment"

Public Discourse and the Limits of the Environmental Movement in Climate Change Politics

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It *had* been a year of improbable events. In 2007, after languishing for decades on the back burner of American politics, the issue of global warming was thrust into the mainstream at last by a low-budget documentary that in cinematic terms amounted to little more than "a man, a message, and a scary slide show."[1] Within months, those associated with the film *An Inconvenient Truth*, including its narrator—former presidential candidate Al Gore—had earned, in some combination or another, a Grammy nomination, an Emmy award, and two Oscars.[2] When it was announced later that year that Gore would share a Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts, alongside the experts who had labored long on the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the environmental movement, its chief scientists, and its most prominent champion suddenly found themselves elevated to the ranks of Mother Theresa, Nelson Mandela, and the Dalai Lama.

If Gore's transition from "presidential loser into Saint Al, the earnest, impassioned, pointer-wielding Cassandra of the environmental movement" was a surprise to some, the public conversion of his political nemesis, George W. Bush, was no less dramatic.[3] Ever since Bush's inauguration in 2001, the League of Conservation Voters had branded him "the most anti-environmental president in our nation's history" for his efforts to weaken the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act and his persistent demands to drill for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR).[4] The Bush administration had long been reticent on the subject of global warming, but when the IPCC's work was finalized in early 2007, its rhetoric—if not its policies—abruptly changed course.[5] The White House heralded the study as a "landmark" report that reflected a "sizeable and robust body of knowledge regarding the physical science of climate change," including the finding that "the Earth is warming" and that human activities are "very likely" the dominant cause.[6] In a speech on energy security delivered at the State Department in early autumn, even Bush had to concede that our understanding of the issue had "come a long way."[7]

When the president caught up with his former rival at a White House reception for Nobel laureates shortly after Thanksgiving 2007, and the two fell into a private conversation about global warming that was described afterward as "very nice" and "very cordial," the peculiar event further underscored the obvious.[8] It may have been a bad year for the environment and for melting

polar ice caps in particular, but for activists who had spent the better part of twenty years pressing the issue onto the public stage, 2007 had been a very good year, indeed.[9]

Scientists use the term *tipping point* to refer to the threshold at which a system's state is irretrievably altered. Regarding global warming, some observers believe that moment will come with the destruction of the Amazon rainforests, the collapse of monsoon season, or the loss of sea ice in summer.[10] For scholars who study the politics of problem definition, the concept seems to work equally well.[11] In fact, since the publication in 2000 of Malcolm Gladwell's book of the same name, the term has become part of the vernacular of politics, applied not just to the environment but to situations as diverse as the war in Iraq, genocide in Darfur, consumer confidence in the economy, and candidate momentum during presidential campaigns.[12] Based on that collection of experiences, the phrase can be taken to mean any (or all) of the following:

- The point at which awareness and understanding of an issue reaches critical mass[13]
- The point at which an issue's opponents "throw in the towel" and accept the inevitable[14]
- The point at which urgency forces lawmakers to take decisive action[15]

With those standards in mind, the year 2007—with its unlikely fusion of science, politics, and old-fashioned Hollywood glamour—had seemed to mark a long-awaited tipping point for climate change. The IPCC report confirming that evidence of warming was "unequivocal" forced all but the most diehard skeptics to acknowledge scientific consensus on the nature of the problem, if not its precise solution.[16] For some observers, that gave reason to hope that two major and related barriers to action would likewise be relieved, at least over time: the media's stubborn professional commitment to a narrowly construed "norm of balance" in their coverage of global warming, on the one hand, and the public's persistent belief that the science remains unsettled, on the other.[17]

The shift from science to politics also brought an even more advantageous and unexpected twist. In January 2007, on the eve of the annual State of the Union address, the CEOs of ten major corporations urged President Bush to set a mandatory ceiling on greenhouse gas emissions.[18] By November, in what one columnist called "an unprecedented show of solidarity," the leaders of 150 global companies, including Coca-Cola, General Electric, Nike, and Shell, were calling for a "legally binding framework" in which they could invest wisely in low-carbon technologies, without the fear of placing themselves and their stockholders at a competitive disadvantage in the marketplace.[19] Corporate America, its fingers firmly on the public's pulse, apparently wanted government to take the lead.[20] At least on the surface, some of global warming's most powerful adversaries seemed poised to become its allies.

Finally, in perhaps the most significant development of 2007, environmentalists had reason to celebrate policy success at last—not in Washington,

perhaps, but in a multitude of initiatives passed at regional, state, and local levels (see Chapters 2 and 12).[21] Thirty-six states had "climate action plans" in place or under development that year, led by California and its Republican governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, while the mayors of 522 cities had agreed to abide by the standards of the Kyoto Protocol despite the reluctance of national lawmakers to do the same.[22]

Building on a string of successes and determined to exploit a perceived window of opportunity, much of the mainstream national environmental community organized around a landmark cap-and-trade bill to address global climate change. By early 2009, environmental groups had agreed on a pragmatic and exhaustively analyzed strategy called "Design to Win."[23] Their Clean Energy Works coalition reached broadly to include major industrial and energy producing firms like Ford Motor Company and British Petroleum, as well as industrial labor unions like the United Auto Workers. They had money—by some estimates spending nearly $100 million on the effort—and, with such funds, the organizational strength to hire professional staff, Washington lobbyists, and grassroots organizers.[24] They had a supportive president. They had generalized mass public acceptance of the need for action. They even had the votes in Congress, with some otherwise conservative Republican senators signaling support for what most saw as a pragmatic, market-oriented approach that balanced economic development, technological innovation, and environmental values.

Thus it was, for a fleeting moment, that American environmentalism stood at a crossroads, burning with the momentum needed to enact change in U.S. energy and climate policies. And, yet, two short years later, the pendulum swung back with stunning speed and brutal force, leaving environmentalists to scratch their heads in wonder and ask "what just happened?" As David Roberts writes, with the benefit of hindsight, the events of 2007 "now read less like a breakthrough than a breaking wave in the tidal cycle of high hopes and bitter disappointment that have characterized climate change advocacy for decades."[25]

By 2011, the cap-and-trade bill once seen as certain legislation lay dead—possibly for good—victim to a convergence of forces largely beyond environmentalists' control. Sharp partisan and ideological disagreements over the role of government in addressing a lingering economic recession and the agenda-dominating debate over health care reform derailed opportunities for compromise on a range of environmental policy areas—including long-sought reforms of the Toxic Substances Control Act, changes in energy policy, and, of course, cap-and-trade. Even searing images of oil spills caused by the *Deepwater Horizon* explosion in April 2010, nearly forty years from the day of the first Earth Day, had no impact.[26] Already limited by immediate concerns about the economy and jobs, and possibly affected by media coverage of the so-called "Climategate" episode in late 2009, public support for action on climate change had eroded sufficiently to give well-funded opponents the leverage to stall progress until the window of opportunity effectively closed as the 2010 congressional elections neared.

Those elections had consequences. Resurgent conservatives, united in opposition to President Obama and fueled by passion and money, swept the electoral field and gave Republicans effective control over Congress. By summer 2011, environmentalists were fighting desperate rear guard actions to stave off conservative attempts to gut existing climate change initiatives and a range of other environmental programs, to the point of echoing calls by most Republican presidential candidates to get rid of the EPA entirely.[27] It did not help matters that within a single week in late August 2011, a beleaguered Obama administration gave preliminary approval to a controversial pipeline to move Canadian tar sands oil across country, and the president overturned his own EPA administrator on a long promised tougher standard for ground-level ozone, arguing that the recession was an inopportune time to impose new burdens on business.[28] For longtime environmental politics watchers who recalled the early Clinton presidency and the Newt Gingrich-led Republican counterattacks of 1995–96, it was like déjà vu all over again.

This chapter revisits the recent past and uses the politics of climate change as a vehicle for understanding the opportunities and constraints shaping environmental advocacy in the United States. In doing so, we look to the vagaries of public opinion, the difficulty of translating broad public support into policy outcomes, and the role of organized environmentalism in linking mass attitudes to government action. If the window of opportunity for major policy change opened dramatically with the election of President Obama and the enlargement of Democratic majorities in both chambers of Congress following the 2008 election, it shut remarkably fast, reminding us that environmental politics can only be understood within broader ideological and partisan contexts. As such, the efforts by competing sides in the climate change debate to shape public opinion, to mobilize allies in support of their positions, and to control the venues of formal decision making are reflections of a broader struggle over the very purpose of government. How that fundamental struggle plays out will define whether the failure of the climate change bill was a momentary bump in the road or a harbinger of a fundamental reordering of priorities and policies.

Motivating the Public on Global Warming

Few Americans had heard or read anything about *global warming* or *the greenhouse effect* before those terms emerged from the pages of scientific journals and congressional hearing rooms during the famously hot summer of 1988. By 2006, when most major polling organizations had stopped asking the question altogether, 91 percent of those interviewed by the Pew Research Center said that they were familiar with these terms.[29] Other key indicators also show signs of progress over time. In 1992, when asked how well they understood global warming, 22 percent of those interviewed by the Gallup Organization said "not at all."[30] By the spring of 2010, that number had fallen to just 3 percent.[31] After decades of political debate, public relations campaigns, media attention, and popular culture (where the message of global

warming was related through best-selling novels and mass-marketed movies, from Michael Crichton's *State of Fear* [2004], to *The Day After Tomorrow* [2004], and *Happy Feet* [2006]) most people felt that they knew the issue either "fairly well" (56 percent) or "very well" (26 percent).[32]

It came, then, as a disappointment—if not quite a surprise—when the headline announcing the results of Gallup's annual survey in spring 2010 drew attention to an altogether different and more troubling trend. It read: AMERICANS' GLOBAL WARMING CONCERNS CONTINUE TO DROP.[33] In one tantalizing fragment of a sentence, Gallup had confirmed what many observers already suspected. The more people knew about global warming, the *less they seemed to care.*

Since 1989, Gallup has used the same question to gauge public concern for a variety of environmental problems, the bundle of which shifts slightly from one year to the next. When asked in March 2010 how much they personally worried about eight different issues, the responses participants gave placed global warming in last place, well below various forms of air and water pollution, soil contamination, and the extinction of plant and animal species. Just 28 percent of those polled said that they worried "a great deal" about global warming, which amounted to a decline of 13 percentage points over the previous three years.[34]

Yet Gallup's headline did more than put a single statistic into stark relief. Mired in a long and painful economic recession, perhaps it was understandable that Americans had grown weary of global warming with so much else on "their worry plate," as Bob Deans of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) put it.[35] Nevertheless, it was disconcerting to see that by early 2010 people were more likely to believe that the seriousness of the issue was "generally exaggerated." They were *less* likely to think that the effects of global warming had "already begun," *less* likely to believe that "human activities" were the dominant cause, *less* likely to fear its threat to their way of life within their own lifetimes, and *less* convinced that there was consensus among scientists on the matter.[36] Where once scholars had observed a positive "sea change" in public attitudes toward global warming, it was now obvious to Gallup editor-in-chief Frank Newport that those same attitudes were in retreat, and oddly out of step with "what one might have expected given the high level of publicity on the topic."[37]

Today, even with an increase in general awareness about climate change and the immediacy of its effects, relatively few Americans feel a heightened sense of anxiety or alarm, despite the concerted efforts of Gore and others in "making climate hot."[38] When asked by Gallup in March 2011 how much they personally worried about each of a dozen different environmental problems, respondents placed "the greenhouse effect" in last place, a result that has changed little in the past twenty years.[39] More telling, the Pew Research Center found that disinterest in global warming sets the United States apart from other countries. Among twenty-five nations surveyed worldwide in 2009, a survey sample that included citizens from Western Europe, India, Russia, Nigeria, and

Pakistan, concern was comparatively low in the United States. The only other countries with lower scores were Russia, Poland, and China—all, not surprisingly, also leading producers of greenhouse gases.[40]

Knowing More, Caring Less

Why do Americans not feel a greater sense of urgency about global warming, especially given their belief that it is a real phenomenon with serious consequences? Experts on public opinion point to several explanations. For one thing, "creeping" threats that occur gradually over time are less visible to the untrained eye.[41] Also, voters and taxpayers tend to give priority to immediate problems over long-term uncertainties, and climate change may be too far removed from personal experience in both time and space to motivate action.[42] For instance, although many of those polled by Gallup believed that warming trends had "already begun," 67 percent of respondents thought it would not pose a "serious threat" to their way of life within their own lifetimes.[43] For similar reasons, another recent study found that those who live far away from seacoasts and flood plains were less likely to associate global warming—and the rising tides it will bring—with an acute sense of physical vulnerability.[44]

Still others argue that the magnitude of the issue and its technical complexity are to blame. As John Immerwahr notes, what the public is most skeptical about is not the existence of global warming *per se,* but rather their ability to address the problem effectively as citizens and consumers.[45] This may help to explain why scholars at Texas A&M University found that the more respondents knew about global warming, the *less* concern they seemed to feel, in part because awareness of the gravity of the problem diminished their own sense of efficacy and personal responsibility. "Global warming is an extreme collective action dilemma," wrote the authors, "with the actions of one person having a negligible effect in the aggregate. Informed persons appear to realize this objective fact."[46]

Finally, even though Americans express confidence in their knowledge about global warming, evidence suggests that misunderstandings abound. In an update to its occasional "report card" published in 2005, the National Environmental Education Foundation in Washington, D.C. found that only one-third of U.S. adults were capable of passing a "relatively simple knowledge quiz" that focused on a range of environmental concepts, including biodiversity, renewable energy, and solid waste.[47] When challenged specifically on the science of climate change, the results are often far worse. In an innovative experiment at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), one team of researchers found that even highly educated graduate students had a poor grasp of global warming and that the intuitive or common sense approaches they took in selecting trajectories were frequently wrong.[48]

Major polling organizations have struggled with the issue for years. In 1997, when the Pew Research Center asked its respondents how they would describe the "greenhouse effect," based on what they had heard or read, if

anything, more than a third of those polled (38 percent) could not define the concept even in the vaguest of terms, identifying it instead, when presented with a closed-ended list of options, as either a "new advance in agriculture" or a "new architectural style" rather than as an "environmental danger."[49] A similarly discouraging result was found in the 2000 General Social Survey, when more than half of those polled (54 percent) believed—incorrectly—that the greenhouse effect was caused by a hole in the earth's atmosphere.[50]

For environmental activists and climate scientists, correcting such errors is no easy task. For one thing, those in the professional environmental advocacy community seem to have a deep faith in the kind of rational decision making that motivates both Gore and the IPCC. As Bryan Walsh, a journalist for *Time* magazine explains: "It's the idea that if we simply marshal enough facts, enough data, enough PowerPoint slides, and present them to the world, the will to solve the problem will follow as simple as 2 + 2 = 4."[51] Instead, surveys and other experiments routinely show the opposite, leading observers to suspect that knowledge about global warming does not translate automatically—or even easily—into popular concern or increased salience, let alone policy preferences.[52]

Americans place genuine value on environmental quality. Yet they also support a strong economy, lower crime rates, and better public schools—among a host of other goals—many of which surpass the environment as immediate national priorities. In short, climate change faces competition for room on a crowded political agenda. As a result, its prominence and relative importance remain low in the minds of average citizens. To borrow a phrase from one of the common measures of issue salience used by pollsters, climate change does not yet generate the power needed to push into the top tier of the nation's "most important problems." If that continues to be the case, well-intentioned efforts to raise awareness and to convey information, in and of themselves, will continue to fall short in creating a tangible sense of urgency, particularly if other issues—such as the lingering global economic crisis—seem more immediate.[53]

In the end, beliefs about global warming are shaped less by factual knowledge than by a variety of other factors: by elite opinion leaders, media narratives, and political rhetoric, but also by personal experience and assorted "real-world cues," each of which provides a frame of reference with the power to filter and mislead.[54] For instance, a persistent problem is that people tend to conflate global warming with natural weather cycles, a specious connection often encouraged in poorly constructed polls.[55] In July 2008, 43 percent of those interviewed by ABC News said that weather patterns in their area had been "more unstable" over the past three years, while 58 percent thought that "average temperatures around the world" had inched higher.[56] They were also asked about a number of specific incidents, including "flooding in the Midwest" and "severe storms in Southeast Asia." Roughly half of those surveyed believed that these, too, were a consequence of climate change.[57]

If average citizens are likely to estimate the dangers of global warming by reference to anecdotal changes in the weather, it becomes easy to dismiss

the issue as nonurgent, or at least intractable. Based on intuition alone, people tend to accept that weather events—even extreme ones, such as Hurricane Katrina or lingering drought in the American southwest—are uncontrollable.[58] They are considered natural disasters, or even acts of God. A different "causal story" is required for the issue to generate public concern, and for that concern to move onto the policy agenda. As Deborah Stone argues, a bad condition does not become a problem until it can be seen, not as accident or fate, but as something "caused by human actions and amenable to human intervention."[59]

Shooting the Messenger

Unfortunately for the environmental advocates and scientists attempting to define global warming in precisely those terms, the very process of problem definition is easily manipulated, not only by actors with competing political arguments but also by the news media itself. As scholars increasingly point out, journalists no longer pursue the difficult goal of objectivity but instead settle for a "norm of balance," whereby both sides of an issue are presented without respect to the quality and weight of the evidence.[60]

The effects of such media coverage are instructive. A team of researchers led by Jon Krosnick used President Clinton's campaign to build support for the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 as a natural experiment on opinion formation by administering two national surveys, one before the fall debate and one immediately after. They found that while the salience of the issue rose temporarily, the distribution of opinions did not change, nor did respondents feel more knowledgeable on the subject in the end, in part because of the confusing array of viewpoints expressed in the press.[61] Mainstream media commitment to this norm of "balanced" coverage had encouraged people to see climate change as an unsettled area of conflict and confusion rather than as scientific consensus.[62]

More than a decade later, and despite the unambiguous language of the IPCC report, a majority of Americans continue to believe that substantial disagreement exists among scientists on the subject. The National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago found in its General Social Survey that respondents were far likelier to believe that scientists understood the causes of global warming well, at least compared to elected officials and business leaders. Within the same comparative context, they also thought—by a wide margin—that scientists should have the most influence in deciding what to do about global warming, perhaps because they were the group most likely "to support what is best for the country as a whole versus what serves their own narrow self-interests." And yet, when asked about the extent to which environmental scientists "agree among themselves about the existence and causes of global warming," the survey's respondents wavered. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 meant "near complete agreement" and 5 meant "no agreement at all," the mean response fell precisely to the center of the scale.[63] Five years later, researchers at Yale and George Mason University decided to

explore the topic more precisely and asked respondents to say, to the best of their knowledge, "what proportion of climate scientists think that global warming is happening." Well over half selected a figure of 60 percent or less, and fewer than one in five thought the number exceeded eighty percent.[64]

However, as Naomi Oreskes points out in *Science* magazine, these perceptions are clearly at odds with the facts. After examining nearly one thousand abstracts published in peer-reviewed journals between 1993 and 2003, she found *none* that disagreed with the consensus position on climate change.[65] In discussing the issue of climate change with focus groups, Immerwahr may have been convinced that people were waiting for "credible signals from the scientific community."[66] Yet the inertia of attitudes on the subject suggests that the public's understanding of global warming is not just a function of science but also—if not more so—of the credibility of the participants and of how the issue is framed by opponents and presented in the press. To put it another way, in politics the messenger always matters.

A Growing Partisan Divide

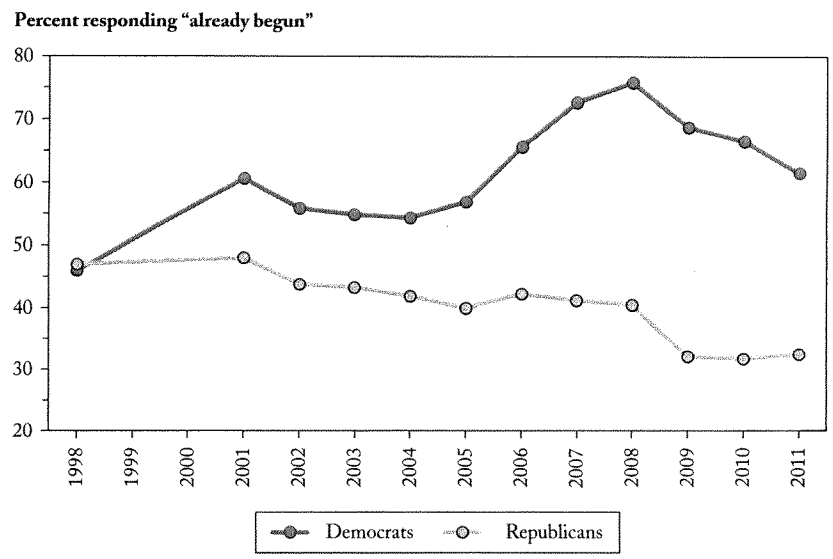
In following the debate over the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, Krosnick and his colleagues found that opinions changed little overall, but that "beneath this apparently calm surface" was the hint of a partisan divide, caused by citizens who took their cues largely from the elites they trusted most—an effect that was most pronounced among those who had little knowledge of global warming to begin with.[67] At the time, this was an important observation and a relatively new one, at that. Roll call votes in Congress on environmental issues had always split strongly along party lines, but the divide among average Americans was generally more subtle, and connected as much to ideological considerations as to the issue itself.[68]

In recent years, however, party polarization on the environment has deepened at every level, to an extreme not observed elsewhere in the world.[69] Between 1997 and 2011, the percentage of Democrats who told Gallup that global warming had "already begun" increased by 16 percentage points, from 46 percent to 62 percent. Meanwhile, the number of Republicans who thought the same *fell* by fifteen percentage points, from 47 percent to 32 percent.[70] Over time, Republicans have also been increasingly inclined to believe that the seriousness of global warming is "exaggerated" by the media, and that warming trends are the result of natural causes rather than human activity.[71] In fact, in 2011 the Pew Research Center found that since the release of *An Inconvenient Truth*, the number of Americans who believe that there is "solid evidence" of global warming has declined from 77 to 58 percent overall, mainly due to the increased skepticism of "staunch conservatives" and "Main Street Republicans."[72]

For environmentalists, such fundamental differences pose vexing problems for their capacity to connect across the mass public and, by extension, build bipartisan support for policy initiatives. As Riley Dunlap and Aaron McCright point out in a careful study of Gallup data, "Partisan polarization is more pronounced among those individuals reporting greater understanding of

Figure 3-1 A Widening Partisan Divide on Global Warming

"Which of the following statements reflects your view of when the effects of global warming will begin to happen—they have already begun to happen; they will start happening within a few years; they will start happening within your lifetime; they will not happen within your lifetime, but they will affect future generations; or they will never happen?"



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global warming."[73] Indeed, among respondents who said they understood the issue either "fairly well" or "very well," the correlations between party affiliation and five different beliefs about global warming increased steadily by year between 1997 and 2008. Those same measures were weaker and more stable across the board for those who said they knew little about climate change.

Not only does information about global warming influence partisans in different ways, so too does their level of education. In 2008 the Pew Research Center found that Democrats with college degrees were far more likely to believe that global warming was the result of human activity (75 percent), relative to Democrats who did not graduate from college (52 percent). On the other hand, Republicans who attended college were *less* likely than their counterparts to think the same, by a margin of 19 to 31 percent.[74] While that gap may well reflect differences in media consumption and the effects of people taking cues from the leaders they trust most, it might also be the direct result of elite discourse. In short, it is possible that messengers like Gore have politicized the issue of climate change in unintended and truly unhelpful ways.[75]

In writing *The Tipping Point* (2000), Malcolm Gladwell expressed faith in those who are considered "influentials," "legitimizers," or "opinion leaders."[76]

They are "people with a particular and rare set of social skills," he said, with the power to connect, inform, and persuade others.[77] Yet, as scholars of public opinion have long known and environmentalists repeatedly discovered to their frustration, convincing ordinary citizens to *act* on their beliefs is far more difficult than Gladwell imagined.

What Now? Mobilizing Concern into Action

They spent like $100 million and they weren't able to get a single Republican convert on the bill.

Obama administration official, July 2010[78]

In October 2004, two young activists published a blistering indictment of mainstream environmental advocacy under the provocative title "The Death of Environmentalism." In it, they criticized the movement's continued reliance on a long established strategic framework: first, define the problem publicly, usually in terms that were narrow and easily recognized as "environmental"; second, craft a technical remedy; and, third, sell the plan to lawmakers through conventional means, such as letter-writing campaigns and direct lobbying. On the subject of global warming, that strategy might involve forging coalitions with business leaders, encouraging Congress to adopt cap-and-trade programs, or pushing consumers to embrace fluorescent light bulbs and hybrid cars. But first and foremost, it meant communicating the urgency of the problem to a public ill-equipped to understand the weight of scientific evidence. To the essay's authors, Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, that essential link had become one of the movement's great failings. In their view, tactics that had once worked to address even second-generation problems such as air pollution or acid rain could not mobilize meaningful public support in the fight against global warming.[79]

In April 2011, communications scholar Matthew Nisbet sparked a dustup among environmentalists not dissimilar to the intramural spat provoked by Shellenberger and Nordhaus seven years earlier. In this instance, Nisbet analyzed the failure to pass the cap-and-trade bill in Congress and put the blame less on corporate lobbying, spending by conservative activists, skewed media coverage, or apathetic citizens than on the prosaic inability of environmentalists to convert their opportunities into votes. Indeed, Nisbet argued, national environmental groups had gone into the effort to enact cap-and-trade during the 111th Congress (2009–10) extraordinarily well organized and well funded, if not, as he suggested, "the best-financed political cause in American history."[80] Despite it all, Nisbet concluded, environmentalists failed because they continued "to define climate change in conventional terms, as an environmental problem that required only the mobilization of market incentives and public will."[81] That definition, he concluded, failed to energize a base of citizens sufficient to overcome the organized and intense opposition of conservative Republicans and their allies in the coal and oil industries.

It was a suspiciously familiar argument, and Nisbet's analysis provoked some critical responses among environmental commentators, particularly over whether environmental groups had indeed out-spent their rivals and whether Nisbet had understated the role of conservative-leaning Fox News in perpetuating uncertainty in the science about global warming. Yet, overall, the response came nowhere close to matching the intensity surrounding "The Death of Environmentalism."[82] One suspects that the comparatively muted nature of the response reflected general, if grudging, agreement on Nisbet's basic point.

The political scientist E. E. Schattschneider once defined democracy as "a political system in which the people have a choice among the alternatives created by competing political organizations and leaders."[83] In the U.S. context, the challenges of framing environmental problems and promoting their solutions to that public fall squarely on the shoulders of the diverse advocacy organizations that make up the U.S. environmental "movement."[84] The eventual failure to enact cap-and-trade in 2010, despite the apparent convergence of opportunities, once again prompts one to ask why, whatever its other successes, the environmental community in the United States cannot translate generalized public support for environmental goals into the only currency that counts: actual votes, whether in elections for president or Congress, or in Congress for environmental policies. As experienced advocacy organizations, they had spent the previous decade fighting the Bush administration, and through their concerted efforts played no small role in staving off even worse harms than could have occurred. But these were by necessity defensive strategies, just as they were when Ronald Reagan occupied the White House or when the Newt Gingrich-led House Republicans sought to repeal or rein in what they saw as misguided environmental laws and regulations. And just as with Bill Clinton, environmentalists hoped that the Obama administration would offer them an opportunity to break the environmental policy stalemate that seemed to define the preceding three decades.[85] Yet, once again, they are left disappointed, left to wonder about their capacity to push through policy change or, even to get their putative allies in elective office to put environmental priorities on top of the agenda of action.

To ponder these challenges, we point to two broad functions that U.S. interest groups theoretically provide: (1) they aggregate and mobilize like-minded citizens and (2) represent aggregated interests in government.[86] We then ask how environmental groups generally fare in both instances. To guide our inquiry we will hearken back to Schattschneider's insights about political conflict, the organization of power, and democratic choice. While he made these observations before the emergence of the contemporary environmental age, they remain useful in helping us to understand the possibilities and limitations of organized environmentalism.

Building an Effective Green Coalition

As those who have tried, and failed, to build a viable national Green Party can attest, American politics is defined by constitutional rules that produce a

structural bias toward two-party dominance of elections for president and Congress. This bias has potent impacts. "Once a two-party system is firmly established," Schattschneider notes, "the major parties automatically have a monopoly on elections: they monopolize the single greatest channel to power in the entire regime."[87] Even so, as generations of pluralist scholars might respond, the American political landscape is fertile with tens of thousands of organized interests, each seeking to educate, organize, and mobilize into action respective sectors of the mass public.[88] In their view, interest groups are quasi-parties, providing all but the last elemental functions of parties in parliamentary systems—organizing and running government.

Yet, groups are *not* parties. Groups neither seek votes nor compete against one another in elections to win seats in government. That fundamental difference powerfully shapes political representation and the very nature of political conflict. "The parties lack many of the qualities of small organizations," Schattschneider observed, "but they have one overwhelming asset of their own. *They are the only organizations that can win elections.*"[89]

So the parties dominate the electoral pathways to representation. "If there are twenty thousand pressure groups and two parties," Schattschneider continues, "who has the favorable bargaining position?"[90] The answer is clear, and interest groups of all kinds are left to try to mobilize their supporters to influence the parties during elections or, after, by reaching out to individual office holders. The capacity of organized interests to do either at all, or well, varies by sector, issue, and the extent to which the composition of the group in question aligns with other structural realities of the U.S. constitutional system. In this regard, groups growing out of and aligned with geographically defined and economically based constituencies, such as corn growers and coal miners, are able to speak to, aggregate, and mobilize their supporters in a more sustained and targeted fashion than are groups whose adherents are more dispersed or whose causes are more diffuse.[91] Moreover, the topography of representation of farmers, unionized industrial workers, and employees in extractive industries like coal, oil, or timber aligns with the geographically based system of electoral representation, most notably in the two chambers of Congress.

As a result, for all their capacity to educate citizens, publicize problems, and maintain a watchful eye on policymakers, environmental organizations—like any group seeking to represent some indivisible "public interest"—still struggle to build and sustain the kinds of geographically based political coalitions that can win elections or match the potency of extractive industries in lobbying members of Congress or even the president. For one thing, environmental goods typically are perceived as diffuse, long-term, and intangible. Jobs are not. By default, then, those defending the economic and lifestyle *status quo* have the far easier task, particularly when the costs of policy change are up front, tangible, and seem to sit disproportionately on those whose livelihoods are at stake. Climate change policy options, even market friendly ones like cap-and-trade, are burdened by such asymmetries in perceived benefits and costs.[92]

Second, partly as a result of the transboundary nature of environmental problems and partly as an accident of history, few national environmental groups maintain viable local or state chapters—old-line groups like Sierra Club, National Audubon Society, and the National Wildlife Federation being notable exceptions—so they are easily caricatured by foes (and even some friends) as outsiders with few local connections and little legitimacy. Compounding this outsider image is the reality that many major environmental groups find it difficult to reach beyond the educated white middle class that historically contributes the bulk of their political, ideological, and financial support.[93] Battles over issues such as automobile mileage standards (Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE), the feasibility or desirability of "clean coal" technologies, and oil exploration in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) too easily feed into an overarching narrative that environmentalism is anti-jobs, if not anti-worker, an imagery of elitism and class warfare adroitly manipulated by self-interested corporations and free-market ideologues.[94] It was no surprise, for example, that the Bush administration used such "pro-jobs" arguments in its fights with environmentalists over the Kyoto Treaty, ANWR, and CAFE standards, or that it could count on several of the nation's major industrial unions as allies in these battles, despite the administration's overall record on labor issues.

In some ways, the efforts on cap-and-trade legislation offered environmentalists an unparalleled opportunity to reframe that overarching narrative and, in doing so, forge new and more politically effective coalitions with previously unlikely potential allies, labor unions in particular. For decades, organized labor, especially those unions rooted in industrial sectors like automobiles and steel, clashed with environmentalists over the impacts of environmental and energy regulations on their industries, their jobs, and their communities. The two sides, whose divisions frequently were exacerbated by class, educational, and lifestyle differences, rarely found common ground. However by the early 2000s, the wrenching economic changes wrought by global competition, wildly fluctuating energy prices, and dramatic economic dislocation had pushed shrinking industrial unions to seek new allies even as environmentalists looked to make inroads among working-class voters in areas where they might share common goals, including an antipathy toward conservatives on issues such as free trade and labor relations.

Such recognition of shared goals—and common enemies—led to the formation of several so-called "blue-green" coalitions during the early 2000s. The Apollo Alliance, founded in 2003, joined old-line environmental groups such as the Sierra Club and National Wildlife Federation and major industrial unions such as the United Auto Workers, United Mine Workers, and United Steelworkers into a national effort to create more "green" American manufacturing jobs—in particular, in "clean coal" technologies, hybrid automobiles, and transportation infrastructure—and to form a united effort to promote global "fair trade."[95] The BlueGreen Alliance between the Sierra Club and Natural Resources Defense Council, on one side, and United Steelworkers and Communications Workers of America, on the other, claimed to

represent some four million people in a partnership designed to promote job-creating solutions to global warming. This coalition, formed in 2006, focused its attention on building grassroots alliances in key union states such as Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Washington, and Wisconsin. That Barack Obama won each of these states in 2008 lent credence to the strategic validity of this effort.

It is notable that the groups involved in these respective efforts range from the ideologically center-right (National Wildlife Federation) to center-left (Sierra Club)—as opposed to critics of free-market capitalism such as Friends of the Earth or Greenpeace—and that they shy away from debates over consumer culture and materialism that tend to alienate working-class Americans. They instead focus on promoting "progressive" trade policies and investing in new generations of "green jobs," themes likelier to appeal to their labor union partners.[96] In doing so, they seek to reframe the broader issue of climate change away from a problem demanding individual sacrifice and raising the specter of lowered living standards into an *opportunity* for a national investment in science and technology, new jobs, and the promise of a prosperous and more environmentally sustainable future. So it was no surprise that the 2008 Obama campaign framed its entire environment and energy platform under the rubric of a "New Energy for America" agenda—or that Obama announced this agenda in Lansing, Michigan.[97]

After the election, the Apollo Alliance was credited with helping Obama and the Democrats push through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, the so-called "stimulus package" that contained billions of dollars in spending for transportation, energy, and infrastructure projects supported by environmentalists and labor unions alike. However, its activism and its links to Democratic officials and liberal activists put the Alliance squarely in the sights of conservative critics, who portrayed its agenda as little more than the latest variant of "socialist" central planning, and its leaders as little more than agents for the Democrats in power. In one telling skirmish, conservative activists led by Fox News commentator Glenn Beck attacked Obama's "green jobs" advisor, Van Jones as a self-declared communist with ties to "radical" groups—a category into which they also tossed the Apollo Alliance. Their sustained fusillade eventually prompted Jones to resign from the administration. Of particular note, Phil Kerpen, of the conservative advocacy group Americans for Prosperity, used Beck's show to label the Alliance as part of the "green jobs radical network," and attacked cap-and-trade, regarded by most observers as a market-oriented approach to dealing with greenhouse gases, as a "watermelon" policy—"green on the outside but Communist red to the core."[98] Left unremarked was the fact that Americans for Prosperity enjoyed considerable financial support from oil, coal, and natural gas industries, including Koch Industries, whose billionaire owners would finance much of the "Tea Party" movement that enabled Republicans to sweep the field in the 2010 elections.[99]

Those elections exposed the limits of the blue-green coalitions—and of environmentalists generally—in electoral politics. In particular, while it was clear to all observers that Democratic losses would seriously affect the prospects for any movement on environmental priorities, disappointment with Obama and the Democrats over the failure of cap-and-trade had eroded environmentalists' enthusiasm even as energy interests were helping to assemble an effective and well-financed coalition of support for conservative Republican candidates. The blue-green coalition that seemed to help in 2008 failed to gel in 2010, particularly in the nation's industrial belt, where Republicans picked up Senate seats in Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, and Pennsylvania. "They promised to support candidates who took a tough vote for climate change," said one Democratic Party official. "Where are they? Where's the cavalry?"[100] These asymmetries in mobilization were nowhere more telling than in Wisconsin where, despite support from environmental groups and labor unions, incumbent Senator Russ Feingold lost to Republican challenger Russ Johnson, a business owner, Tea Party adherent, and avowed climate skeptic.[101]

The 2010 election also put into full display a structural dilemma long facing environmentalists: what to do with Democrats who are inconsistently or insufficiently loyal to the cause yet whose partisan alignments might decide the allocation of power in Congress. Take the case of Senator Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas, a generally moderate Democrat representing a state in which she never got more than 56 percent of the statewide vote. In 2009, sensing electoral danger, she angered national environmentalists by abandoning her earlier support for cap-and-trade and, worse, backing an amendment by Senator Lisa Murkowski, a Republican from Alaska (facing strong attacks from her own right), that would strip EPA of the authority to regulate greenhouse gas emissions under the Clean Air Act. Lincoln's "betrayal" led the League of Conservation Voters to add her to its "Dirty Dozen" list of members of Congress it hoped to defeat, the only Democrat so targeted.[102] Following a bruising Democratic primary against a challenger supported by a range of national liberal groups, including many environmental ones, Lincoln went down to a decisive defeat in the general election to Republican John Boozman, a House member who also had voted against cap-and-trade. More important, Boozman's election contributed to the shift of enough Senate seats to give the Republicans an effective veto on climate change, or any other environmental issue for that matter.

The 2010 elections and their subsequent effects on the political opportunity structure bring us back to Schattschneider's observation about the difference between parties and groups. If the blue-green coalitions were essential to helping environmentalists and labor unions bridge some of their differences and pursue common goals, their ultimate shared success is linked inextricably to the electoral fortunes of the Democratic Party and, to some extent, vice versa. Like it or not, and despite concerted

efforts over decades to make the environment nonpartisan, even nonideological environmentalists have become part of the Democratic Party coalition in large part because environmentalism as a value system is now so clearly refracted through the broader narrative about the role of government. As the Republican Party became more libertarian, anti-regulation, and anti-government since the environmental "golden age" of the early 1970s, it also became more hostile to addressing third-generation environmental problems like climate change or toxic substances, since doing so required, at some level, an active role for government. Environmentalists' apparent inability to help Democrats in 2010 underscores their subordinate role in a more overarching ideological and partisan discourse, and makes the president's subsequent inaction on the environment in 2011 that more explainable. He may need environmentalists' votes come 2012, but they need him more.

In May 2011, the Apollo Alliance merged with the BlueGreen Alliance. The expressed goal of the "invigorated organization" is to "build a stronger movement to create good jobs that protect the environment for the next generation."[103] Left unstated was its need to play a more central role in shaping the Democratic Party's agenda.

Mobilization in Government

Another major function of interest groups is to represent their constituencies *in* government to effect policy change or, if necessary, defend the status quo. Their capacity to do so is particularly critical given the structural control of the two major parties over the election system. As a result, U.S. environmental groups have developed a wide range of independent organizational capacities—lobbyists to lawyers, as it were—to cover the breadth of available access points at whatever level of government is involved. However, their opportunity to get access is spread neither equally nor consistently. Changes in the political opportunity structure, the broader structural and societal contexts of the moment, have potent impacts on who gets access, under what conditions, and to what effect.[104]

The 2008 election offered a dramatic reshuffling of the political opportunity structure with which environmentalists had to contend during the Bush administration. For most of those eight years, they had confronted an ideologically hostile presidency whose overall policy agenda ran contrary to almost everything they believed; an enfeebled Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) with little political clout; a Congress dominated by a Republican Party increasingly defined by its most conservative wing; and, as a result of a judicial appointment process dominated by Republican presidents going back to Reagan, a federal judiciary that increasingly came to elevate property rights over environmental goods and backed executive branch discretion over public access to—or even its right to know about—information

relating to presidential decision making on energy and environmental policy. In short, environmentalists in the Bush era had been outsiders looking in, a status affecting their capacity to represent their interests in government and in turn, requiring the use of a range of "outsider" strategies aimed at reframing issues, providing novel solutions, and building new coalitions, all in the hopes of situating their values more centrally within the broader discourse.[105]

The election of Obama promised much to environmentalists, and yet by the end of 2011 had seemed to deliver so little. Of course, having a generally supportive president made for an executive branch whose key officials tended to offer access to, if not overtly favor, environmental group representatives and their agendas. And, certainly more than a few environmentalists found positions in the new administration, not unlike the situation with the Clinton administration fifteen year earlier. Similarly, a Congress more solidly in the hands of Democrats in 2009–10 guaranteed that congressional committees with jurisdiction over environmental and energy issues were in friendlier hands, greatly improving the likelihood of agenda-influencing congressional hearings on environmental issues and, for environmental group lobbyists, greater access to the legislative process.[106] With Obama's election also came a more accessible federal establishment beyond the White House itself—the EPA, Department of Energy, and the Office of Management and Budget, in particular—and the appointment of federal judges with views less overtly hostile to environmentalist claims. In many respects, environmentalists had not encountered such favorable political conditions in over three decades.[107]

However, despite having millions of dollars in revenues and tens of thousands of supporters (see Table 3-1), the nation's major environmental groups were unable to capitalize on this opportunity, and in the end failed to mobilize support in Congress sufficient to push through cap-and-trade or even long-sought changes in existing environmental statutes (e.g., the Toxic Substances Control Act). In some ways the problem for environmentalists was as it always has been: an apparent inability to convert dollars into votes. Part of the problem, of course, was the effects of a poor economy on how citizens viewed environmental issues. Another was the president's own choice of top priorities, a list on which climate change and other environmental problems never really seemed to reside, at least not without being framed in economic terms. And environmentalists were unable to do much to pressure him to act.

In October 2011, five environmental organizations announced their intent to sue the Environmental Protection Agency over the Obama administration's refusal to enact stricter standards on ozone pollution than proposed in 2008 by the outgoing Bush administration.[108] The bitter irony for environmentalists was that Obama essentially ratified Bush's decision to overturn the recommendation made by an EPA scientific advisory panel in the final months of his presidency.

Table 3-1 Characteristics of Selected National Environmental Organizations

Organization	*Website*	*Supporters**	*2010 Revenue (in millions)†*
Sierra Club	sierraclub.org	1,400,000	$97.0
National Audubon Society	audubon.org	600,000	$80.0
National Parks Conservation Association	npca.org	325,000	$38.9
Izaak Walton League	iwla.org	38,000	$4.0
The Wilderness Society	tws.org	500,000	$23.0
National Wildlife Federation	nwf.org	4,000,000	$98.4
Ducks Unlimited	ducks.org	715,000	$153.9
Defenders of Wildlife	defenders.org	1,000,000	$32.6
The Nature Conservancy	nature.org	1,000,000	$925.8
World Wildlife Fund—U.S.	worldwildlife.org	1,200,000	$177.7
Environmental Defense Fund	www.edf.org	500,000	$54.9
Friends of the Earth	foe.org	26,000	$4.5
Natural Resources Defense Council	nrdc.org	1,300,000	$96.9
League of Conservation Voters	lcv.org	40,000	$14.3
Earthjustice	earthjustice.org	140,000	$33.8
Clean Water Action	cleanwateraction.org	1,200,000	$8.9
Greenpeace USA	greenpeaceusa.org	250,000	$26.0
Trust for Public Land	tpl.org	45,000	$127.7
Ocean Conservancy	oceanconservancy.org	500,000	*$11.5*
American Rivers	amrivers.org	65,000	$12.1
Earth Island Institute	earthisland.org	10,000	$10.6
Conservation Fund	conservationfund.org	16,000	$171.2
Conservation International	conservation.org	70,000	$63.6
Environmental Working Group	ewg.org/	n/a	$3.5

Sources: Annual reports and IRS Form 990.

*"Supporters" is an expansive term that includes donors, dues-paying members, and other "supporters" as claimed by the organization in 2010-11 or where possible to estimate from published sources.

†Gross revenues for fiscal or tax years, the use of which varies among organizations.

Note: FY2010 revenues for the Ocean Conservancy are for 9 months only due to a change in its fiscal year.

What Role for Organized Environmentalism?

In the previous version of this chapter, completed just after the 2008 election, we wondered whether the economic crisis that helped to usher in the Obama administration also marked a turning point in the decades-long dominance of late-twentieth-century ideological and partisan arrangements. We also wondered whether we were beginning to see evidence of a more twenty-first century form of environmentalism, one in which the major advocacy groups that had defined the environmental community for nearly four decades were once again adapting themselves to a new generation of supporters and moving beyond long established modes of interest representation. Indeed, we thought, perhaps American environmental politics and policymaking overall had reached a "tipping point," an opportunity for fundamental policy change.

At risk of saying "never mind," we think the years 2009–2011 serve as a reminder of two basic realities of American politics. First, as we underscored in the first part of this chapter, environmentalists can never assume that public opinion on its own ever drives significant changes in environmental policy. In this regard we are reminded of V. O. Key's observation that "[p]ublic opinion does not emerge like a cyclone and push obstacles before it. Rather, it develops under leadership."[109] The calculated unwillingness of Obama to invest much political capital into pushing cap-and-trade programs left environmentalists facing a leadership vacuum on a complex issue with up front economic costs and little in the way of immediate political benefits for its proponents. No amount of inside the Beltway advertising, direct lobbying, or even public scolding by a former vice president could alter that equation.[110] Opponents, aided by the structural barriers to major change embedded in the political system, needed only to reinforce a sense of uncertainty and warn of dire economic impacts.

Second, we are reminded that environmental groups have never been, and may never be in a position to define American politics in ways that perhaps too many observers and activists think they should, or can. Perhaps, in comparing more recent failures to push major policy change with the "golden era" of environmental policy formation in the early 1970s, many environmentalists (and their critics) forgot that those tectonic changes came about in large part through highly visible competition between political leaders and their parties—more specifically, Republican Richard Nixon dueling with congressional Democrats—each side determined to be the best on the environment *because they thought that their own political futures depended on it*.[111] In many ways, insofar as environmental politics is concerned, that moment in time came closest to Schattschneider's definition of democracy as a "a political system in which the people have a choice among the alternatives created by competing political organizations and leaders."[112]

The intervening four decades have not seen such clarity of choice, perhaps because no Republican president has really made a public frontal

assault on the core foundations of national environmental policy. Instead, as Klyza and Sousa observe, they only tried to trim its dimensions. By comparison, the current and highly salient ideological competition between Democrats and Republicans over the fundamental meaning of government offers voters a rather clear choice of directions. The aggregate outcome of their individual choices could well define the fundamental role of government for decades to come.[113] The question that haunts organized environmentalism is whether it will help to define that choice, or will simply be defined by it.

Suggested Websites

Americans for Prosperity (www.americansforprosperity.org) An advocacy organization that promotes values of "free markets" and "limited government." It is credited with helping to organize and mobilize the "Tea Party" activists whose votes enabled Republicans to dominate the 2010 congressional elections. Critics point to AFP's links to and funding from energy industries as proof that it is little more than a front organization for climate deniers and extractive industries defending the status quo.

BlueGreen Alliance (www.bluegreenalliance.org) A coalition of labor unions and environmental groups that works at the grassroots on issues of global warming and clean energy, fair trade, and reducing toxic chemical exposure to workers and residents. In 2011, it merged with the Apollo Alliance, a coalition of labor unions, environmental organizations, businesses, and community leaders that focuses on creating "green jobs" and promoting energy independence through investments in alternative forms of energy.

The Gallup Organization (www.gallup.com) A leading provider of polling data on energy and the environment, as well as a host of other economic, social, and political issues.

Notes

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11. See B. Dan Wood and Alesha Doan, "The Politics of Problem Definition: Applying and Testing Threshold Models," *American Journal of Political Science* 47 (2003): 640–53.
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Part II

Federal Institutions and Policy Change