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Eurydice S. Pentz

Western Washington University, pentze@wwu.edu

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Skin Deep Green:

Environmentalism in Contemporary America

Eurydice S. Pentz

Americans today wear a thin, green cloak of environmentalism, evidenced by our recycling efforts, energy conservation attempts, and sporadic forays into “green consumerism.” We spend time carefully sorting our discarded paper, plastic, and glass, turn off the lights whenever we leave rooms, and make product choices based on a company’s environmental reputation, or a product’s purported “sustainability” or “eco-friendliness.” Professor Magali Delmas of the UCLA Institute of the Environment and Sustainability has been studying the motivations behind these environmentally beneficial, “green” behaviors over the last decade and has found that considerations of health, higher product quality, functionality, convenience, and status weigh more

heavily in consumers’ decision-making than concern for the environment (Hewitt 2015). The revelation that environmentally supportive behaviors are easily attributable to other motivating factors is not, however, proof that American environmental public opinion lacks depth and strength of conviction. For that, one only needs to examine the polling data.

For more than 30 years, the nonpartisan and data-driven news organization Gallup has been asking Americans whether environmental protection should be prioritized “even at the risk of curbing economic growth” (Swift 2014). The majority of Americans, over the course of those decades, have answered yes. In 1984 61% of Americans agreed that environmental protection should be given priority over economic

growth and, although support peaked at 71% percent in 1990 and has slowly declined since, the environment remained a priority though 2014 except during several years of economic downturn (Swift 2014). In light of this data, one might presume a translation to the voting booth in support of both environmental issues and pro-environment candidates, but there is a punchline that precludes that prediction: Americans also do not list environmental protection among their top political issues.

Polling data, summarized from 1990 to 2010, reveals a decline in general concern for environmental problems; from 2007 to 2010, concern for global warming decreased specifically (Guber 2013). A Gallup-compiled summary from 2001 to 2016 reveals an American public that, in 9 out of 15 years, was most concerned about the economy over all other problems; the environment never made our self-identified “top four problems” list during that timeframe (Smith 2016). Moving into the 2016 Presidential election, climate change remained a below average concern for the majority of Americans, Democrats and Republicans alike (Newport 2016).

Given the responsiveness of most politicians to public opinion, and Americans’ confusing and conflicting poll responses, it is no surprise that little progress has been made in the last 30 years at the federal level to address climate change and curb the primary culprit, carbon dioxide emissions (Houghton 1996). However, in light of the fact that anthropogenic climate change is arguably the most pressing environmental issue at hand today—in terms of our health, safety, and national security—it is surprising that such negligible progress does not cause greater concern (Presidential Memorandum 2016; US EPA 2017). The United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) initially warned of the potential dangers of the greenhouse effect in 1990, it declared that global warming was “unequivocal” in 2007 (Rosenthal and Revkin 2007), and it has generated successive reports that provide increasing corroboration of human causation, as well as extrapolation of “potentially disastrous climatic changes later in the century” (Gillis 2014). Countries the world over have taken heed and purposeful steps to reduce their atmospheric greenhouse gas contributions. The United States, however, has recently gone backwards.

Certain clues as to why this contemporary, shallow affect has permeated American environmentalism can be extrapolated from both our superficial green behaviors and our confusing poll responses.

In spite of our individual dedication to recycling, energy conservation, and green product purchasing, how Americans vote sends a direct message that the environment is not our top priority. In March 2016, Americans’ concern about global warming peaked; 64% of Americans reported being worried, ranging from “a great deal” to “a fair amount” (Saad and Jones 2016). Just months later, in November 2016, Americans elected climate change skeptic Donald J. Trump as President of the United States. Clearly, tertiary “green” behaviors and environmentally supportive polling responses should not be used to predict elections. Just as clearly, American environmentalism is sorely shallow—a skin deep cloak, insufficient to convince politicians of the urgent need to act on climate change.

Certain clues as to why this contemporary, shallow affect has permeated American environmentalism can be extrapolated from both our superficial green behaviors and our confusing poll responses. As well, climate change—and its unique characteristics as a “third generation” environmental issue—deserves

some of the blame; it is an expansive problem that lacks a visceral, immediate presence. Both first and second generation environmental issues—comprising the limited contaminations of air and/or water leading up to the 1960s, and “cross-media” (but still spatially limited) hazardous and toxic waste pollution in the 1970s, respectively—were comparatively easy to target and address. Third generation issues like acid rain, ozone depletion, and climate change, in contrast, have the potential to cause adverse effects at regional or even global scales, with origins much more complex and equivocal (Ringquist 1993). Finally, politicians and policymakers own another portion of the blame. American environmentalism is only skin deep, not because we lack the information necessary to understand and address environmental problems today, but because we are subject to cognitive limitations and the increasingly partisan identification of environmental issues.

EVERY LITTLE BIT HELPS?

One aspect of our surface-level environmentalism could be the reinforcement of shallowness in a negative feedback loop. Our superficial green behaviors may serve to discourage us from greater, more meaningful actions on behalf of environmental causes in a phenomenon known as single action bias. Coined by Elke Weber, Professor of Psychology and Public Affairs at Princeton University, this term describes a cognitive limitation whereby a single action (e.g., choosing to

Climate change is a complex environmental issue that provides sparse signals, or attributes, to most people around the world.

walk to the store rather than drive, composting food waste at home, or buying an energy efficient appliance) serves to satisfy our perceived worry about the environment even as we perform an action we believe to be mitigating. Single action bias theory suggests that people are much less likely to take additional steps or prolonged actions that would result in incremental protection from future harm (Weber 2006).

Another cognitive limitation that contributes to our shallow environmental outlook is attribute substitution (Li, Johnson, and Zaval 2011). This theory suggests that people tend to rely heavily on personal experiences when deciding how to perceive and interpret the surrounding world, while also forming layman’s opinions regarding correlation and causation. Climate change is a complex environmental issue that provides sparse signals, or attributes, to most people around the world. However, daily and seasonal temperature variations are readily and easily substituted—problematically—as evidence for, or against, climate change.

A Columbia University study exemplifies such attribute substitution, revealing a positive correlation between fluctuation in local temperature and reassessment of beliefs about global warming, especially among those with less education and weak attachment to political parties (Egan and Mullin 2012). It is unlikely that incidental weather events, especially daily temperature changes, could be signals of anthropogenic

climate change. Still, this cognitive limitation is evidenced by formal studies, casual conversations, and the media, promoting a wavering and uncertain support for issues like climate change on the basis of what is, effectively, illusion. By revisiting past environmental movements, we can gain understanding of the power that personal experience commands over our response to environmental problems.

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE...

In the decade leading up to the first Earth Day—April 22, 1970—it was increasingly evident that the environment was in trouble. Americans were outraged by disturbing news reports of the killer smog event on Thanksgiving Day 1966 in New York City, responsible for the deaths of at least 169 people, the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill off the coast of California—which fouled miles of beaches and killed thousands of seabirds and marine mammals—and the burning of the severely polluted Cuyahoga River in Ohio that same year. These environmental disasters were widely publicized, including visceral details and powerful, complementary photography. When coupled with the first image of the Earth from space in 1968, these events arguably gave birth, in large part, to the environmental movement (MacDonald 2003).

An examination of cognitive risk assessment methods helps explain why we were moved to action on environmental issues in the 70s, and why the so-called “salience slope” has been increasingly steeper since; those early issues created “smoke” we could smell, whether by personal experience or by well-documented and vividly descriptive reporting and imagery. This evoked our primitive risk response, motivating us to take steps to put out the environmental “fires” across the country, like passing the National Environmental Policy Act and establishing the Environmental Protection Agency, both in 1970. In contrast, today’s primary environmental issue, climate change, is left to our analytical risk response, in which costs and benefits are considered very carefully (Weber and Stern 2011). Global warming represents “a creeping problem . . . remote in space and time” (Jamieson 2006). As such, Americans are wont to give prece-

dence to more pressing problems—the economy, education, crime, health care—all prioritized as concerns above the environment over the course of decades of poll responses (Swift 2014).

GREEN MEANS BLUE

As we look back at the pioneers of the 1970s environmental movement, we can remember that partisan politics mattered little to the general American public when compared with such real and present threats of environmental degradation. While politicians then and now have consistently voted along party lines on environmental issues, for many years polling data revealed only a modest effect of political ideology and partisanship on voters and their support for environmental causes. That has changed in the last decade. Political ideology and partisanship have now become increasingly relevant determinants of a general environmental concern, or lack thereof. As well, this polarization of voters coincides with the declining concern for environmental causes generally and for global warming specifically (Guber 2013).

Leaders in the environmental movement take some of the blame for this increasing polarization and accompanying diffusion of environmental support into something much shallower than its initial form. The framing of the “environment” as a separate thing to be saved, and the taking up of the cause by progressives, to the exclusion of those holding more conservative values, has left moderate

Americans with little to do but make their political choices based on other factors. In their seminal 2004 essay “The Death of Environmentalism,” Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus exhort fellow progressives for their continued narrow and inflexible definition of environmentalism as a special interest. As such, they suggest, the environmental cause should die, in order to be reframed as an American value, tasked with solving human—and not “environmental”—problems.

AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH

In light of the IPCC reports in 1990, 1992, 1995, and 2001, climate policy advocates presumed that lack of support for climate change response and legislation was due to an information gap suffered by the American public during this time frame (Guber and Bosso 2013). Former Vice President and unsuccessful presidential candidate, Al Gore, was the self-nominated educator. His presentations, and especially his 2006 documentary movie *An Inconvenient Truth* on the topic of anthropogenic global warming, have been credited with raising knowledge about the issue of climate change worldwide. Surprisingly, American concern about global warming began to drop soon after its release. The presumption was precisely wrong, that an increase of information about global warming and its mechanisms was all that was necessary to push public opinion to a tipping point on the issue. Instead, detailed information about global warming and climate change may be a contributor to skin deep environmentalism. Guber and Bosso put the situation succinctly in their 2013 review of the rise and fall of climate change policy hopes post-2006: the American public, knowing more than ever about climate change, also cared less. This seems to be another case of our cognitive limitations at work. The higher our awareness of the gravity and complexity of a situation the less power we feel we have to address it, and therefore we take less responsibility for the solution. It is inconvenient, but true, that a lack of information or depth of understanding on the topic of climate change is not a contributing factor to our less-than-deep environmental support; what we know is simply not provocative enough to make us want to change.

THE WIND IS BLOWING

Our cognitive limitations and increasingly polarized stance on environmental issues leaves America sweating under our thin green cloak of environmentalism. As a nation, our support for the environment is broad but shallow, not directly cognizant of where the danger is coming from but aware of its basic premise. Nevertheless, we perfunctorily perform superficially green behaviors, easing our heavy concerns, with mostly ineffectual actions. We can be hopeful that further research into our cognitive limitations and the psychology of risk response will inform environmental policy advocates and climate change scientists alike of the best ways to present messages that we can fully receive and respond to in a deeper, more meaningful way. If not, the winds of climate change threaten to blow off the cloak and leave us suddenly exposed to a clear and present danger that we can no longer ignore.

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Department of Environmental Studies
Western Washington University
Professor: Dr. Troy D. Abel

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