

The Interplay between Climate Change Skepticism and Anti-Environmentalism in United States: A Critical Analysis of Trump's Era

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Abstract

Climate change is a global security threat as emphasized by climate scientists and revealed by climate-related disasters all over the world. However, in the United States, right-wing political leadership along with contrarian scientists, conservative think-tanks as well as media powered by the fossil fuel industries propagate climate change skepticism. This study demonstrates how climate skeptic machinery in the US has gained strength over time in the backdrop of growing anti-environmentalism. It particularly focuses on Trump's era; marking how the Trump administration and its policies clearly denied the existence of climate crises. It lays emphasis on Trump's speeches and policies against climate change including the appointment of anti-environmentalists to key positions, weakening the environmental laws, initiating environmentally damaging projects, withdrawing the US from the Paris Agreement, cutting NASA's climate monitoring program, and dropping climate change as a national security threat.

Keywords: Climate Change, skepticism, United States, Trump, fossil fuel, Paris Agreement.

Introduction

The notion of climate change being a conspiracy or a hoax has given rise to a concept of climate change skepticism in the United States. As per the facts of Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, nearly 20 percent of Americans are climate change skeptics; half of them apparently dismiss climate change and the remaining half are doubtful about its existence (Goldberg, et al., 2020). The era of President Trump's administration has further emboldened this skeptic approach. It is marked by certain policies and measures that have contributed to promoting it. Interestingly, Trump

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himself is a denier. According to his tweet, climate change is merely propaganda created by and for the Chinese which is promoted for making US manufacturing non-competitive (Kramer, 2020). Fossil fuel companies with the help of climate skeptics aim to continue such manufacturing practices proving to be a threat to the overall environment.

The origin and evolution of this anti-environmentalism have a long history in United States. In response to environmentalism and rising awareness regarding environmental protection which was made possible due to the publication of a landmark environmental book *Silent Spring* in 1962, antienvironmentalism came to the fore. It was also fueled by certain progressions such as 1963's Clean Air Act, the promulgation of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in 1969, and the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1970. Not only that, the findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPPC) in 1988 brought environmental concerns to the fore. In response, antienvironmentalists formed the climate skeptic machinery in US which was funded by the fossil fuel industries. Passing through decades of fossil industry agenda, funding conservative think tanks, partisan policy-shaping, and incorporating climate skeptics in prominent political positions, the US climate change skepticism has evolved. A number of actions taken by Trump led US to withdraw from the Paris agreement, appoint antienvironmentalists to key positions, initiate projects which were hazardous to the environment, cut NASA's climate monitoring program, and drop climate change from the list of national security threats. All speak of the prevalent skepticism that existed during Trump's era.

Without an iota of doubt, climate change threat remains to be the foremost world concern. It is not only a matter of national security but a threat to the whole planet. The situation is alarming as the world faces a climate crisis due to delayed climate action and partial implementation of climate-related legislation. As suggested by the Paris Climate Agreement, if the world's average temperature is not maintained below 2 degrees Celsius, Earth won't be suitable for habitation. In order to prevent the possibilities of extremely hot weather, frequently observed forest fires, droughts, floods, and hurricanes of excessive intensity followed by heat waves, elevated sea levels, water scarcity, conflicts, mass displacement, and pandemics collapsing our planet Earth, this issue must be taken into an account. Being the current influential global player, USA ought to take this global threat seriously and the climate skeptics should be countered at all costs.

Research Methodology

For the topic under study, exploratory and descriptive research approaches have been chosen to gain better familiarity with the problem at hand. Altogether, they focus on an in-depth study by emphasizing on what, how, when, and why questions. The overall research design is qualitative. As far as sources of data collection are concerned, secondary sources have been employed by the researchers. These include books, research journals, newspapers, think-tank reports, official documents, magazines, speeches, and broadcast interviews on YouTube. In order to minimize biases of the researchers, writings, and broadcast interviews of opponents as well as proponents of climate change have been consulted.

Literature Review

According to the opinion of Clark and York, climate change skepticism prevails because of the economic urge for the sake of defending the western order constructed over industrial capitalism. It gains its strength from the fossil fuel industry. In case of any change in a prevailing capitalist system, the financial and social status of opponents of climate science and policies would be jeopardized (Clack & York, 2005).

As per the opinion of Greg Garrard et al., traces of climate change skepticism are usually found in the right-wing politics of America. As per them, environmental concerns are perceived by conservatives as being exploited by the corrupt elite for maintaining their status quo. Climate change proponents aim to elevate governmental regulations in all the societal spheres which are detrimental to conservative lobbies (Cranston, 2019).

In the book "Merchants of Doubt", Naomi Oreskes highlights the ignorant attitude of the masses regarding climate change even though scientific evidence supports it. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has reported a number of times that the climate is deteriorating for real and the greenhouse effect along with global warming is a result of anthropogenic factors. However, a large percentage of Americans including some politicians continue to deny climate change. Also, this is due to American right-wing conservatism which has led the US towards not ratifying Kyoto Protocol (Oreskes & Conway, 2011).

In James Goodell's 'Big Coal', the disastrous impacts of economic prosperity powered by the fossil fuel industry have been emphasized.

According to Goodell, this vicious cycle has a drastic impact on overall environmental health. Industries are the prime source of greenhouse gas emissions. The most prominent contributing corporations are ExxonMobil, American Petroleum Institute, Western Fuels Association, Edison Electric Institute along with many others. They ensure the provision of finance meant to fund the contrarian scientists along with the conservative think tanks being the promoters and proponents of climate change skepticism. These corporations have also succeeded to maintain good ties with rightwing politicians for the sake of lobbying against climate-related policies in US Congress (Goodell, 2006).

McCright and Dunlap have revealed that Republican Party has a skeptical approach toward climate change. They stated that Republican politicians have a greater chance of becoming climate change deniers for being a conservative party. As a matter of fact, James Inhofe, a Republican Senator regarded global warming to be the biggest lie. Being the Chair, Inhofe turned the Committee of Environment and Public Works into a skeptical machinery and made it a hub for contrarian scientists where they could testify against climate change during the hearings of the Committee. Moreover, George. W. Bush, being elected as a Republican US President further paved way for skepticism (Dryzek, Norgaard, & Schlosberg, 2011).

The withdrawal of United States from Paris Agreement by Donald Trump reflects the influence which big corporations along with right-wing political lobbies exercise on the White House. Due to being elected from a Republican platform, Trump excessively relied on strategies to portray elites as the 'others.' It is a significant tool for far-rightists for gaining support in the election. Coal miners and the working class employed in fossil fuel industries are considered as 'pure' as compared to the corrupt elites. Hence, right-wing politicians are more concerned about climate policies as they may impact their economic or financial status (Roberts, 2018).

Jeffery Mazo has contributed to determining the stages of climate change skepticism. He unveiled ignorant behaviors and skeptical propaganda encircling statements such as it's not happening, it's not bad and it's too hard to fix (Mazo, 2013). Paul Matthews has analyzed different types of climate change skeptics and categorized them into three kinds. First are the trend skeptics who don't believe in the phenomenon of global warming. The second one is the attribution skeptics who don't attribute global warming to be caused by anthropogenic activities. The third one is the impact of skeptics. They believe global warming to be true but deny the fact of it is hazardous to humans by any means (Matthews, 2015).

Robert A. Huber highlighted the connection between right-wing populism and climate change skepticism. Right-wing populism divides the masses into 'us' vs 'them' debate; portraying elites to be 'others' and ignorant towards the concerns of the common man. Thus, the climate change concerns seem to be elite-driven to secure their interests ignoring common men and their needs. The right-wing populists are also ultranationalists generally and are of the view that climate policy may erode the sovereignty of the nation. This trend can be visualized in US among the Republican Party and Tea Party members (Huber, 2020).

Interplay between Climate Sceptic Machinery and Anti-Environmentalism in the United States

Anti-Environmentalism and Conservative Think-Tanks: Conservative think-tanks (CTTs) inclined towards a free-market economy, limited government, and unrestricted economic growth play a significant role in the climate skeptic machinery. They spread skeptical material, carry out conferences and propagate on social media platforms for this cause. Being alternate academia, CTTs also manipulate policymakers (Lahsen, 2008). US witnessed an influx of CTTs in the 1980s which received funding from industrialists. Examples of such conservative think tanks include the Heartland Institute and George. C. Marshall Institute is funded by industries such as ExxonMobil. These think tanks were instrumental in paving way for the Non-governmental International Panel on Climate Change (NIPCC) – a forum created to dispute the findings of the IPCC (Plehwe, 2014).

Anti-Environmentalism and Contrarian Scientists: The contrarian scientists published a number of books that denied climate change. Patrick Michaels, a climatologist from US is one of them. He is a part of the Cato Institute – a conservative think tank. He regarded climate change to be beneficial rather than harmful in his book 'Sound and Fury: The Science and Politics of Global Warming. Similarly, Roy Spencer is also a contrarian scientist and meteorologist associated with NASA (Dunlap & Jacques, 2013). He served as a member of the Board of Directors at George. C Marshall Institute. His prominent book denying climate change is 'The Climate Confusion'. Another name, Fred Singer is to be included in the list. He was an environmental studies professor at the University of Virginia and

founded Science and Environmental Policy Project (SEPP) to challenge the scientific claims on climate change. Fred was also associated with Sun Oil Company and ExxonMobil. His prominent books are '*Global Effects of Environmental Pollution, 'Global Climate Change' and 'The Greenhouse Debate Continued'* (Gelbspan, 1997). He is referred to as 'the godfather of global warming denial'.

Anti-Environmentalism and Front Groups: The impacts of front groups on US policymaking are elaborated in Ross Gelbspan's '*The Heat is on*'. Global Climate Coalition (GCC) is one of those front groups created by the National Association of Manufacturers in response to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to create doubts regarding climate change (Gelbspan, 1997). GCC successfully lobbied against Kyoto Protocol ratification during Bush administration and gained support from right-wing Republican congressmen. It also effectively created climate change uncertainty through its documentary '*The Greening of Planet Earth*' in multiple states. Surprisingly, the documentary received \$250,000 in funding from the Western Fuel Association (Gelbspan, 1997).

Anti-Environmentalism and Conservative Media: Conservative media has shared a part in spreading skepticism as emphasized by Naomi Oreskes. For instance, climate denial claims take up approximately 80 percent of Fox News's climate-related segments. Such segments brainwash people. Sean Hanity, Bill O'Reilly, and Glenn Beck are some media personnel who criticize climate science using this platform. Moreover, they have created their own YouTube channels to manipulate the masses. This conservative media also created controversies like 'Climategate' which was constructed due to misinterpretation of hacked emails of climate scientists of the University of East Anglia (Jamieson & Cappella, 2010).

Anti-Environmentalism and Right-wing Politics: During the election of Ronald Reagan as US President through the Republican platform in 1981, the anti-environmentalist struggle culminated. Reagan appointed Anne M. Burford, who was an anti-environmentalist as head of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) (Kraft & Vig, 1984). He also followed the environmental deregulation model and reduced the EPA budget by 30 percent along with cutting the number of employees and opening land for the benefit of the fossil fuel industry. Reagan was also in favor of the free market. Prominently, Republican Senator James Inhofe regarded global warming as the 'biggest lie'. He himself was a denier of climate change and contributed a lot to strengthening this climate skeptic machinery.

The achievements of the Clinton Administration positively impacted global environmentalism. However, environmentalism and its domino effect suffered after George W. Bush became President in 2000 over the proenvironmentalist Al-Gore. Being a businessman and founder of Arbusto Energy, Bush was indifferent toward environmental crises and had good relations with other oil and fossil fuel companies. Thus, Bush pulled US out of Kyoto Protocol. It was mostly due to pressure from the aforementioned corporations i.e., ExxonMobil as per the facts of US State Department papers. Bush also restricted media to raise environmental concerns aiming to suppress the dangers of global warming (Dunlap & Jacques, 2013).

Donald Trump's Policies and Climate Change Skepticism

The election of Donald Trump as the US President from the Republican platform was a watershed moment globally for the skeptic machinery. He took a range of measures including pulling the United States out of Paris Agreement, appointing anti-environmentalists to key positions, abolishing various environmental laws, and initiating projects which would deteriorate the environment. All such policies revealed that Trump himself is a skeptic and denier of climate change.

Speeches against Climate Change: Climate change has never been considered a reality or threat by Trump. In his speeches, tweets, and policies, Trump often targeted climate science. In his conversation with MSNBC, Trump opposed climate science by saying,

"I think one of the dumbest statements I have ever heard in politics, in the history of politics as I know it was Obama's statement that our number one problem is global warming...We are practically not allowed to use coal anymore. What do we do with our coal then? We ship to China and they spew it in the air" (Washington Post, 2020).

In another speech given by Donald Trump at Davos Climate Summit Awareness hosted by World Economic Forum, he indirectly pointed mainstream climate scientists by stating that it's time to be optimistic rather than pessimist regarding the future. The predictions of climate destruction on behalf of socialists should be rejected as they have always been predicting such stuff to acquire dominance and take the charge. They are not fortune tellers or prophets of doom alarmed about the future. Thus, they should not be allowed to destroy the economy and wreck the country by eradicating people's liberty (The Economic Times, 2020). His words clearly reveal that he is a climate change denier and shares a significant part in strengthening the climate skeptic machinery in the United States.

Appointment of Anti-Environmentalists: During Trump's administration, key positions were given to anti-environmentalists. Scott Pruitt was appointed as the head of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Scott too denied climate change. His appointment was aimed to reverse Obama's Clean Power Plan (Milman, 2016). Moreover, the successor of Scott Pruitt as an EPA administrator was Andrew Wheeler who was another anti-environmentalist. He also served as a coal as well as energy lobbyist and chief counsel for Senator James Inhofe for fifteen years.

Along with them, David Bernhardt was inducted as Interior Secretary into the Federal Cabinet and given authority for the conservation and management of natural resources and US federal lands. He was associated with agribusiness, oil, and gas clients as a lobbyist via his law firm. Environmentalists criticized him for loosening restrictions on the fossil industry, assisting oil companies, and weakening the Endangered Species Act. Along with all this, Rex Tillerson who was former ExxonMobil's CEO was appointed as the Secretary of State having the liberty of overseeing US Foreign Policy encircling the global climate change negotiations. Lastly, appointing Rick Perry as Secretary of Energy Donald Trump also played the same part (Kahn, 2016). Rick has often denied climate science and regarded the climate projects to be useless and a money-making initiative. He has written a book 'Fed Up!' regarding climate change where he termed it as a 'contrived phony mess.' Rick also benefited from the fossil industry; benefitting from \$11.4 million in his election campaign. Thus, in light of all these appointments, the majority of Trump's cabinet members are deniers of climate change as well as beneficiaries of the fossil fuel industry.

Weakening the Environmental Laws: Donald Trump rolled back and weakened certain environmental laws. First, he replaced Obama's Clean Power Plan (CPP) 2014 which emphasized reduced greenhouse emissions from the electricity sector. Under Scott Pruitt's administration of EPA, Trump regarded this project to be burdening the coal industry and requested to review the project (Baker, 2020). In an interview to Fox News, Scott Pruitt stated that a promise was made to the US citizens by the President

that EPA won't be picking losers and winners as it generates electricity, the past administration started a 'war on coal' which has been over now (Fox News, 2017).

Under Trump administration, the Mercury and Air Toxic Standards (MATS) were also regarded to be inappropriate. In 2020, He rolled back Obama's Auto Emission Standards. Thus, Trump reversed all environmental policies formulated in Obama's era and revamped the institutions for promoting and boosting his anti-environmental policies.

Withdrawal from Paris Agreement: Under Trump Administration US withdrawal from Paris Agreement came into effect. The Paris Climate Agreement is an international climate change treaty opted for by 196 states having the goal of making efforts for keeping the average global temperature below 2 degrees Celsius. During the final Presidential Debate of 2020, Donald Trump explained why he pulled United States out of the Paris Climate Agreement. He stated that US had to be pulled out of this agreement due to unfair treatment towards it; the country had to sacrifice its businesses, jobs, and companies while China and India take advantage of it (NBC News, 2020).

This step contributed a lot towards environmental degradation as US being the second largest emitter of greenhouse gases. US should have taken the lead to inspire other states over environmental concerns (McGrath, 2020). Hence, the withdrawal of United States from Paris Agreement tends to be the biggest evidence of Trump's policies being inclined toward climate change skepticism.

Starting Environmentally Damaging Projects: During his tenure, Trump initiated a couple of environmentally unfriendly projects. For instance, in 2017, he granted Presidential permission for Keystone XL Pipeline which was halted by Obama for years for being damaging to the environment. Trump veiled this action by emphasizing that this project will create about 42000 jobs and will also contribute to making US less dependent on the Middle East for energy (Denchak & Lindwall, 2022). However, environmentalists and researchers have different views regarding it.

While signing the Presidential order for the permit, Donald Trump stated that the government has often failed companies and citizens when this \$8 billion investment in US energy was delayed, but now we have started to make things right by putting the economic security of people along with the

security of jobs and wages of US citizens first (Denchak & Lindwall, 2022). Trump along with this also approved the plan of opening an Arctic Wildlife Refuge in Northern Alaska for drilling for oil which would deteriorate the environment (K. & JR., 2021).

Dropping Climate Change from the National Security Threat: In 2017, Trump announced his National Security Strategy from which climate change was removed as a national security threat. Months before this step (Chemnick & ClimateWire, 2017), Al-Gore explained why climate change is a national security threat in an interview with CBS News. He stated that Pentagon has termed climate change as a national security threat. They issued a warning regarding the refugee influx destabilizing Europe from the Middle East to North Africa as they face high temperatures. Scientists link it to the Syrian civil war where the drought destroyed 60 percent of farms, and 80 percent of livestock and drove 1.5 million refugees. It is alarming as it threats food and water security overall (CBS Mornings, 2017).

Thus, it is clear that Trump was never ready to indulge in a fight against climate change. His administration seemed to be inclined towards the climate denial machinery to make good ties with the fossil industry.

Cutting Nasa Climate Monitoring Program: Trump administration cut NASA's carbon monitoring system funding. This project funded a number of programs for the cause of improving and strengthening global carbon emission monitoring. It was formed with a \$10 million budget per annum in 2010 (Voosen, 2018). NASA's carbon monitoring program aided the verification of countries fulfilling the pledges of Paris Climate Agreement and monitoring of carbon emission ratio. This step straightaway revealed the government's attacks on environmental protection initiatives, programs, and treaties.

Conclusion

It is concluded that climate change skepticism in United States is a result of climate skeptic machinery and its countless efforts. This machinery was constructed to counter the wave of rising environmentalism during the 1960s. Environmentalism was first manifested by the passage of 1963's Clean Air Act. Furthermore, in 1969 the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) was passed and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) came into being in 1970. All these environmental initiatives rose awareness among the masses regarding environmental concerns. Thus, in

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order to counter the rising wave of environmentalism, antienvironmentalism started to surface. Firstly, it resulted in the rightlibertarian or conservative think tanks which received massive funding from the fossil industry and corporations. Their goal was to ensure a freemarket economy and a limited government. Such think tanks produced anti-environmentalist literature and published tons of relative periodicals, research, and books. As time passed, this climate skeptic machinery expanded and became more organized. It had new allies including rightwing politicians, front groups, conservative media, and contrarian scientists.

In addition to all this, right-wing politicians played their part to promote this skeptical machinery. Transiting from Ronal Reagan's era to the Trump administration, the anti-environmental sentiments gained popularity. An insight into Trump's administration revealed that he is personally inclined toward anti-environmentalism. Furthermore, the steps he took such as reducing the budget of EPA, rolling back Obama-era environmental laws along with appointing well-known antienvironmentalists to key positions proved to be detrimental to environmental sustainability. Trump often denied climate change in his official speeches and passed a number of presidential permits for antienvironmental projects.

Following the measure of Bush on the rejection of Kyoto Protocol, Trump pulled the United States out of Paris Agreement which reflected antienvironmentalism in US political outlook and policy making. Such politicians have always remained on the payroll of the fossil fuel industry. Hence, it remains a fact that climate change skepticism is an effective tool in the hands of climate skeptic machinery in the United States. The Republican political leadership contributed a lot to strengthening this hazardous machinery which was further strengthened during Trump's era.

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