

## The Presidency and the Environment

### Introduction

Environmental policy is one of the most partisan issues in the United States today and many people associate environmentalism with Democrats, Prius-drivers, and vegans. One turning point for when environmental policy became so divisive is the 2000 presidential election when Vice President Al Gore promoted extending environmental policy to encompass a response to climate change and Governor George W. Bush promoted expanding oil and gas production. Yet, the history of environmental policy in the United States is quite different from recent partisan disagreements over whether human activity contributes to climate change. And, like foreign policy, environmental policy is intimately wrapped up in the powers and personality of the presidency. In addition, environmental policy is often a classic federalism issue with the White House doing something that the states disagree with.

### Theodore Roosevelt

Environmental policy began as conservationism, which was typically embraced by Republican presidents in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century such as Benjamin Harrison and William McKinley. Conservationism was concerned with the preservation of forests and other natural beauty. The true beginning of environmentalism in American politics, however, begins with Theodore Roosevelt, who succeeded to the presidency after McKinley's assassination. From an early age, Teddy was obsessed with animals, nature, and conservationism. He grew up in the 1860s and 1870s so he was inspired by the Romantic view of nature associated with Henry David Thoreau and the naturalism of Charles Darwin. Roosevelt read Darwin as a teenager and became a life-long disciple, believing whole-heartedly that man evolved over time. Teddy was a sportsman who loved to hunt, but he was also a passionate animal rights activist who was enraged at the site of animal mistreatment. Members of his family were founders of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA). Teddy believed firmly that animals could feel pain and that some animals had emotions and intelligence similar to humans.

His dream was to become a naturalist like Darwin, a scientist and researcher. He ended up having a career in politics and everywhere he went he pushed his conservationist agenda. He was a Republican, but he was also a progressive which meant two things: 1) he was willing to stand up to big business and industry in the defense of Nature, 2) he was willing to use the federal government's power to override the states. As President, Roosevelt justified using executive action to preserve wildlife in nationalistic terms. The objections of a particular state were unconvincing when compared to the national interest. One of his conservationist friends summarized Theodore's view in utilitarian terms: conservation "means the greatest good to the greatest number for the longest time." Teddy was also motivated by egalitarianism and defended his actions as compatible with democracy. National parks and monuments were a symbol of democracy because they were open to everyone and for the people as a whole. One of Teddy's goals was to change American attitudes about Nature, the most important one being the notion that American abundance allowed for unlimited development and industry. Roosevelt worked tirelessly to undermine the view that American industry could develop without any long-term negative consequences. Roosevelt was, in fact, that originator of the famous "Frontier Thesis"

popularized by Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893. The point of the argument that settlement of the West had been completed was that the federal government needed to begin regulating and preserving the natural resources of the West. Roosevelt preached Emersonian self-reliance, but he also had a populist desire to regulate industry in the name of preserving those things that individuals needed to thrive. As a progressive and conservationist, Roosevelt had no qualms challenging, regulating, and taxing industry in the name of preserving individual freedom to enjoy Nature. As president, he was instrumental in preserving the Grand Canyon and Crater Lake in Oregon. His most significant legislative accomplishment was the Antiquities Act of 1906, which allows the president to designate sites as historical landmarks in need of preservation. It is this piece of legislation that begins to locate enormous power in the office of the presidency to advance environmental concerns.

### Franklin Roosevelt

Conservationism continued under another progressive, Woodrow Wilson. It was under Wilson that the National Park Service was created in 1916. Other conservation measures continued in the 1920s, but the Coolidge and Hoover administrations were less concerned with defending Nature from industry. Franklin Roosevelt dramatically altered the status quo when he was elected president in 1932. FDR's passion for the environment was more emotional than Teddy's. Whereas TR was a naturalist who could spend all day in a science museum, Franklin simply believed that Nature influenced a person's health, social behavior, and mood for the better. He identified with Nature on an aesthetic level rather than on a purely scientific level. Franklin grew up on the Hudson River in New York and it remained his reference point for natural beauty all his life. He grew up very wealthy and was taught to honor trees as the noblest of all living organisms and to take the ethics of land stewardship seriously. Because FDR grew up with the privilege of enjoying the outdoors, as an adult he was a tireless supporter of the Boy Scouts of America, particularly for urban youth.

Franklin idolized his "Uncle Theodore" and took up his passion for conservation. He learned that TR had become president upon returning from a trip to Norway, Germany, and France. It was his experiences in Germany that had the most profound impact on his ideas for conservation and land improvement: the Germans considered forests to be a sacred possession of the community and FDR brought that sentiment to New York when he became governor. He saw a link between history tourism, recreation, and conservationism. As governor, he championed legislation in New York that empowered the state government to regulate privately-owned forests. He was criticized for interfering with free-market capitalism, but Franklin insisted (like his uncle) that private industry could not be trusted to make long-term decisions for the benefit of the entire community. In his speeches he regularly championed the "liberty of the community" over the "liberty of the individual" when it came to conservation issues. In his heart, Franklin was a Jeffersonian agrarian who worried that industrialization would destroy the countryside and deplete natural resources for short-term gain. He was often accused by industrialists as being a "traitor to his class." The progressive movement was sustained in New York under FDR while laissez-faire, pro-industry policies were promoted at the federal level by the Coolidge and Hoover administrations.

In addition to conservation policies aimed at protecting the forests of New York, FDR also pioneered the first comprehensive unemployment relief program as governor. The relief program provided jobs in conservation: mainly in planting trees. The program was very successful at shielding many New Yorkers from the worst of the Great Depression. In 1932, delivering his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention he promoted a national version of the program that would become the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). It has often been overlooked how intimately connected FDR's New Deal proposals were to his conservationism. In many ways, it was a "green" New Deal. Millions of young men were paid by the federal government to plant trees, construct roads, parks, and achieve other beautification and conservation efforts. The CCC had unintended benefits as well: Americans from different ethnic, religious and class backgrounds found themselves working together and discovering a common American identity. The CCC came to an end in 1942 because funding had to shift towards the war effort, but one out of six men who fought in World War II had been members of the CCC.

As president, FDR aggressively used the Antiquities Act to expand the number of national parks, national monuments, and wildlife refuges. He helped preserve the Florida Everglades, the Smoky Mountains in Tennessee, Big Bend in Texas, Jackson Hole Wyoming, and Olympic forest outside Seattle, Washington. FDR, like his uncle, often clashed with local and state interests. Private industry in a given state or town would want to develop an area, either through logging, drilling, or residential construction, and the president would simply sign an executive order preserving the site, often for recreational purposes. The Historic Sites Act of 1935 enabled the National Park Service to preserve the heritage of American presidents and FDR established the first presidential library at his home in Hyde Park, New York.

Both Teddy and Franklin used executive power to unilaterally preserve Nature in opposition to industry. Then, as now, people accused the president of executive overreach and stifling economic growth. The short-term interest of for-profit companies was overruled by the long-term vision of a distant president. Not only was the executive branch perceived as too powerful by critics, but the federal government in general was seen as needlessly interfering in state matters. It is easy to take the National Park Service for granted, to assume that all of these wonderful places should be preserved and available for enjoyment, but at every turn there was opposition from industry to doing so.

## Richard Nixon

After World War II, human population growth exploded and increased at a faster rate than ever before in the history of the species. The human population quadrupled in one century. The production and consumption of fossil fuels also exploded. The amount of coal and oil being consumed was simply unprecedented. Fossil fuels then enabled the use and development of more advanced technologies that accelerated economic growth and the process of globalization, which produced enormous amounts of air and water pollution, deforestation, and loss of biodiversity. Long before climate change was an issue, the environmental movement organized to address these issues. Historians generally argue that environmental movement began in the 1960s as an outgrowth of the conservation movement and credit Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* published in 1962 as a catalyst for political activism. In 1970, President Richard Nixon, a Republican, issued an executive order to create the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and

environmentalists won passage of legislation such as the Clean Air Act in 1970 and the Clean Water Act in 1972. In 1990, President George H.W. Bush, another Republican, updated the Clean Air Act to deal with acid rain and ozone depletion. All of these legislative actions were successful in addressing the problems and environmental policy remained a bi-partisan effort. The tension between industry and regulatory agencies remained, but there wasn't a sharp party divide over whether we should have clean air and water. The issue of climate change severely divided the Republicans and Democrats beginning in the 1990s. Democrats promoted regulations to reduce CO2 emissions to address the "greenhouse effect" while Republicans rejected such proposals as anti-business. The United States has historically been the world's largest emitter of CO2 (recently replaced by China) and the international community has looked to the U.S. to lead on the issue of climate change as a result. Such leadership was lacking in the 2000s and environmental policy remained a divisive issue in the 2008 election. Yet, both John McCain and Barack Obama accepted the scientific consensus that human activity is causing climate change and both supported a cap-and-trade system to reduce CO2 emissions.

### Barack Obama

Obama hoped to use the large Democratic majorities in Congress to pass comprehensive climate change legislation, but the fossil fuel industry successfully lobbied the Senate to block passage of a cap-and-trade bill. Massive misinformation campaigns then began to promote doubt about the scientific consensus on the issue and Republicans increasingly accepted that human activity was not contributing to climate change or that the entire phenomenon was a liberal conspiracy to justify expanding government power and regulations. Obama, faced with partisan opposition and climate denialism from Congress, proceeded to do what previous presidents had done: enacted new environmental policies through executive order. He used the Antiquities Act to create more national monuments than any previous president, surpassing even Teddy and Franklin Roosevelt. The most comprehensive action was the Clean Power Plan, which required the states to reduce their CO2 emissions by 30% within 25 years. The states have lots of flexibility to achieve the goal, but many states immediately challenged the executive order in court as unconstitutional federal overreach. The importance of the Clean Power Plan was twofold: 1) it signaled to the rest of the world that the U.S. was finally serious about reducing its CO2 emissions, which is what garnered international support for the 2015 Paris Climate Accord; 2) it was the only means for the U.S. to achieve the stated goals of the Paris Climate Accord.

Donald Trump ran for president denying the scientific consensus that human activity is causing climate change, promising to revive the dying coal industry, vowing to withdraw the U.S. from the Paris Climate Accord, and cancel the Clean Power Plan. The current leader of the Environmental Protection Agency, Scott Pruitt, does not believe that CO2 emissions are causing climate change. Ironically, the fossil fuel industry now accepts that CO2 emissions are causing climate change and support a carbon tax to reduce emissions. The current Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who is also the former CEO of Exxon/Mobil, is trying to convince President Trump to not withdraw the U.S. from the Paris Climate Accord.