

# Both conservatives and liberals can agree on action on climate change

October 16 2019, by Christian Elliott

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

We tend to assume that democracies, over the long arc of history, work towards progress and justice. But with an issue like climate change, we're running out of time.

It may come as a surprise, but at the moment, democracy may be an

obstacle to the rapid action we need on [climate change](#).

Democratic governments naturally swing back and forth between conservative and liberal control. But environmental issues are increasingly associated with liberal values exclusively in countries like Canada and the United States.

The transition from a liberal [government](#) to a conservative one often leads to a relapse of environmental policies, including [program cuts](#), [delays](#) and even outright [rejections or silencing of the science underlying climate change](#).

In Canada, the 2019 federal election is [tightly contested](#) between the Liberal and Conservative parties. There's no doubt that a government under Andrew Scheer's leadership would be, at best, significantly weaker on climate issues than left-leaning candidates. At worst, it risks a return to Stephen Harper-era environmental politics that could include cuts to essential science funding and withdrawal from multilateral agreements like the Paris Climate Agreement.

The links between liberalism and environmentalism are clear, but if we're going to be successful within the 12-year window outlined in the [IPCC's recent report](#) to keep global warming to 1.5C, we need to make progress despite the swings of democratic politics.

How do we design a big-tent coalition that will bring in conservative-leaning voters and politicians, and maintain momentum regardless of who's in power?

## **Is the problem in our heads?**

One place to start is with a re-evaluation at the individual level. Is there something in our psychological bedrock that marries environmentalism

and liberalism?

[Research in political psychology](#) has identified robust correlations between [political orientation](#) and personality traits: openness to new experiences and agreeableness for left-leaning voters, and conscientiousness for right-leaning voters.

[Yet a 2014 study of U.S. residents](#) found that openness (associated with left-leaning people) and conscientiousness (associated with right-leaning people) are both strong predictors of environmentally friendly behaviors. Many other studies have found the raw materials of conservatism in environmental behavior as well.

If political psychology is any indication, there's clearly an opportunity to bring conscientiously minded conservatives into the environmental movement.

## **Environmentalism as "big government"**

Others might attribute the polarization to a matter of political philosophy and divergent ideas about the appropriate role of government.

From a libertarian perspective, should governments protect fundamental rights so we can enjoy our personal liberties? Or, conversely, in a social democratic sense, should the government construct a bureaucratic apparatus that helps ensure the welfare of all citizens?

Environmentalism is often [cast by conservatives as a "regulatory science."](#) a project of big government. Yet any cursory scan of prominent policy ideas about climate run the gamut of the philosophical spectrum, from initiatives that rely on market innovation and dynamism to complex regulatory regimes, taxes and public sector transformations.

Environmentalism makes room for all sorts of diverse ideas about the role and participation of government. There's no necessary incompatibility with conservative political perspectives there.

Instead, some scholars have found the polarization of the issue stems from an intentional and maligned effort to frame environmentalism in a negative light. Fossil fuel companies have backed think tanks, industry associations and universities to mislead the public on the facts of climate change and efforts to reverse it [in Canada](#) and the [United States](#).

These efforts have positioned environmentalism in opposition to progress, prosperity and conservative values—and labeled it a movement of radicals and eccentrics. In addition, climate change denial has gone hand-in-hand with efforts to engineer skepticism of science and trust in public institutions, which [U.S. studies have shown](#) to disproportionately effect conservative-leaning voters.

## **A way forward**

Yet framing can be contested and stereotypes undone. A big-tent non-partisan environmental movement is clearly possible.

Appealing to the driving [political psychology](#) and ideology of both liberals and conservatives, highlighting common values, undermining stereotypes and being inclusive of intellectual difference are all ingredients to break down polarization and make climate change a persistent issue for both liberals and conservatives.

We have real world examples of this approach at play. Though by name the "Green New Deal" is associated with large-scale American public investment and thus "big government," it's also sensitive to the plight of citizens that might otherwise embody a conservative anti-environment sentiment.

Coal mine workers, oil rig operators and the towns that support them are subject to major contractions and layoffs as oil prices and fuel demands fluctuate. Creating good, stable jobs to help transition former fossil sector workers into renewable energy brings together a unifying vision of shared prosperity.

Indeed, a poll conducted in the U.S. found that [64 percent of Republicans supported the idea](#), and in [Canada about half of conservatives](#).

In the face of close federal elections, environmentalists may double down on their partisanship. But in the long term, environmental advocates should be thinking strategically about how to engage and build coalitions with voters on the other side of the spectrum, and how to combat and undermine negative stereotypes and frameworks generated by those who benefit from keeping conservatives out of the movement.

In this fight, we're going to need all the help we can get.

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