

Building an American political consensus behind environmental sustainability

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When environmental protection was a barely noticed issue on the political agenda, it was able to achieve massive support from the American public. The air pollution, water pollution, solid and toxic waste programs of the 1970s and 1980s were not partisan issues. In 1972 the

Water Act was enacted over then-President Nixon's veto. Public support for these laws was well over 70%, and the laws were crafted by a bipartisan coalition of committed legislators. What happened?

Part of what happened was the anti-regulatory ideology of the Reagan era and the rhetoric of "job killing regulations." But even President Reagan had to walk back anti-regulation moves in the EPA. EPA Administrator Anne Gorsuch-Buford (yes, the mother of the Supreme Court Justice Gorsuch) and her Associate Administrator for Hazardous waste, Rita Lavelle, were sent packing, and the first EPA Administrator, Bill Ruckelshaus was brought back to steer EPA back to its politically moderate moorings.

EPA regulation was serious, and enforcement was real, but industry was given plenty of time to comply with rules, and generally speaking only businesses that were marginal to begin with were harmed by environmental rules. But the growing role of money in politics and fierce lobbying by ideologues and industry began to paint environmental rules as anti-freedom and anti-capitalist. In response to the [climate issue](#), the fossil fuel industry intensified its lobbying and propaganda onslaught with a ferocity not seen since the tobacco propaganda wars of the late 20th century. In both cases, those industries understood the dangers their products posed and that they were in an existential battle for survival. By the 21st century, [environmental protection](#) had become an ideological political issue, particularly once the [climate](#) issue began to dominate.

In the early days of climate politics, the issue had little political salience because it was very different from traditional environmental politics. Despite the machinations of politicians in Washington, broad, grassroots support for a clean environment persisted. This was because air and [water pollution](#) can be seen smelled, causes and effects were local and impossible to ignore. In addition, rural people who hunted and fished understood that the natural resources they loved were in danger. In

contrast, in the early days of climate politics, we saw no local climate impacts. Scientists told us that climate change was created everywhere, and its impact was in the future. We had to place our trust in, of all things, academic climate modelers and earth system scientists.

But while climate policy proved problematic, other trends actually reinforced the importance of environmental policy. People began to focus on wellness, their diet, exercise, and overall health, particularly when it came to children. Parenting had become a verb (as opposed to the status of being a parent). The not in my backyard syndrome (NIMBY) developed, in part, as a way of trying to prevent further real estate development and maintain local environmental quality. And then, over the past decade, [extreme weather events](#) began to accelerate and intensify, and the early climate models proved to be true. All the impacts that early climate models predicted were happening on our warming planet. In recent years, young conservatives have begun to accept the science of climate change while still rejecting the solutions proposed by progressive climate activists.

We live on a planet far more crowded than the one we saw when EPA was created in 1970. Back then, the global population was about four billion; today it is about eight billion. The political pressure to maintain wealth in the developed world and to build wealth in the developing world is fierce. The best way to ensure that is done is to modernize our economies in the developed world and move toward a circular, renewable resource-based economy. To do that, we need to develop and implement new sources of renewable energy and make our [electric grid](#) capable of sending and receiving energy and operating at higher levels of efficiency. We also need to develop systems to automatically separate garbage and mine it for resources that can be reprocessed. Sewage treatment must also advance so that sewage sludge can be recycled. These high-tech solutions require additional research and development and also require massive investments in public infrastructure.

But they hold the promise of a more productive and lower-cost economy. Energy is a growing household expense that can be reduced by lower-priced and more efficient solar cells and batteries. Electric vehicles are already demonstrating their high-tech appeal. Cities like New York are spending billions of dollars to remove garbage and send it away. What if our garbage could actually generate revenue by providing raw materials for remanufacture? What if those resources were lower priced than raw materials mined from the planet? We are already seeing this in one industry. J.B. Straubel, a co-founder, of Tesla recently started Redwood, a company that makes electric car batteries, in part, from recycled materials. While his company will need to mine raw materials to meet his production targets, according to Tom Randall in [*Fortune* magazine](#):

"The company's target of 100 GWh in 2025 means it can no longer rely on recycled materials alone. Unlike some consumer electronics, there's a long lag between when electric cars are made and when their batteries are ready to be recycled. The reuse of packs in secondary applications can delay that further. Today, electric cars account for less than 10% of Redwood's recycling stock. "We're going to push the recycled percent as high as possible, but that is really going to be dependent on the availability of recycled materials," Straubel said. "If we end up consuming 50% or more of virgin raw materials, that's fine." In the decades to come, Straubel is confident that recycled materials will be used for "close to 100%" of the world's battery production. Recycling is already profitable, he said, and eventually companies that don't integrate recycling with refining and production won't be able to compete on cost."

In other words, some raw materials are so valuable, recycling makes economic sense. What is needed to build a broad-based consensus behind environmental sustainability politics is the basic idea pioneered by Mike Bloomberg when as New York City's Mayor, he led the

development of the city's first sustainability plan: PlaNYC2030. That plan tied environmental sustainability to economic development. In some measure we are seeing the same impulse in the environmental elements of Joe Biden's infrastructure and build back better plans. It's an effort to modernize the economy. A focus on building the economy, increasing employment, and developing cleaner, less expensive energy has broad, non-ideological appeal. The popularity of elements of Biden's plan stands in contrast to the bitter partisanship in Washington, which is now reflected in many communities where all politics has become a zero-sum game. Political opponents are now seen as bad and evil people. If Biden gets something approved, even if it's something everyone favors, it's seen as a loss politically by his opponents.

Trumpian extreme right-wing political warfare delegitimizes the political center and any form of political consensus. Any congressional Republicans negotiating compromises risk being primaried by Trumpian extreme ideologues. On the left, we see environmentalists branding industry as evil and arguing that the only solution to climate change is to tax carbon and to live without some forms of consumption that the public values. Politics seems to be moving toward increased polarization.

Politics seems unreal, but reality is still reality. The [forest fires](#) in the west, droughts, tornadoes and floods in the Midwest, and extreme weather everywhere remind us: the issues of environmental sustainability are real. We all breathe the same air. We drink the same water. The food we eat comes from the same system of industrial agriculture. The facts of our environmental condition are not based on beliefs or values but objective conditions we all experience. We are also in a global economy in a competition with organizations from many nations. The argument that we need to ensure that our energy and transportation systems are up-to-date is a strong one when based on the need to remain competitive. Therefore, the seeds of consensus can be found in our objective environmental and economic conditions. We don't need foreign [raw](#)

[materials](#) if we can mine them from garbage. Renewable energy can prevent climate change, but it also can be delivered cheaper than fossil fuel-sources energy. Electric cars are fast becoming fashionable. Economic modernization centered in the private sector but subsidized by government-funded infrastructure and scientific research is as American as apple pie. Economic modernization is how we can and hopefully will build an American political consensus behind environmental sustainability.

Provided by State of the Planet

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