



American environmental politics in historical perspective: introduction to the symposium

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Environmental history, one of the major contributors to the field of environmental studies, demonstrates its value most clearly when we are faced with sudden, unexpected change. We routinely turn to history for its ability to integrate insights from multiple fields into a compelling narrative. But, in times of turmoil, we appreciate more acutely its ability to problematize our received narratives, find alternative perspectives from which to view events, and open up new ways of conceptualizing our present-day challenges.

That is why, in the wake of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, I put out a call for environmental historians to help us understand the significance of this political moment for environmental policy. This symposium is the result of that call.

The election was a humbling moment for political science (my own disciplinary background). It revealed vividly the limits of political scientists' predictive models and explanatory frameworks. Many aspects of the Trump campaign defied conventional wisdom in the field. The election *felt* like an outlier, something that the American political system was designed to prevent. But, I knew from my own research into American political history that a longer perspective might reveal patterns and dynamics that political scientists often have difficulty seeing.

Historical scholarship has several features that contribute to its explanatory power, particularly for scholars in environmental studies and sciences. First, historians are acutely sensitive to issues of temporal scale. Periodization—how one breaks up the flow of time—is a central problem in the field. An event that seems surprising in light of the past decade might look quite typical from the perspective of a century. Second, historians move easily among different geographic scales. Geographic context can have a dramatic impact on interpretation: What looks like a major political change in the USA

might appear to be a very moderate shift when one takes a broader perspective, considering the wider range of political opinion across a larger group of nations. Similarly, what looks like a period of stability at the national level might turn out to be a time of rapid change or conflict when we focus on local communities. Third, historians begin their inquiries with the understanding that any given event can be part of many different narratives. Most disciplines focus on a particular aspect of the natural or social world, explaining an event as part of a story about politics, or economics, or cultural change, or geological or ecological dynamics. Historians, in contrast, must choose their focus, considering how that focus will bring to light systems or forces that conventional narratives obscure.

History is not the only discipline that attends to scale and perspective in these ways, but it is one of the oldest and effective. The articles in the symposium illustrate these strengths.

We begin with Jessica Hejny's research on the partisan divide in American environmental politics. Hejny shows that the Trump administration's approach to environmental policy shares considerable continuity with the past, representing an intensification rather than a break with previous Republican administrations. Indeed, drawing on her research into the development of American political party platforms, Hejny shows that the Trump administration's approach to environmental policy has deep roots in Republican anti-environmental ideology.

Sarah Mittlefehldt's article shifts our temporal perspective and reframes contemporary energy politics by revisiting the energy politics of the 1970s. Mittlefehldt reminds us that a central argument for renewable energy technologies in the 1970s focused on their scale and their ability to provide the social and political benefits of decentralizing power generation. This broader ideological and political debate helps to explain the nation's fateful choice, in the 1980s, to pursue the "hard path"—Amory Lovins' term for a centralized, large-scale, fossil fuel-based energy system.

Picking up a different thread in the same story, Megan Chew takes us to the Ohio Valley in the 1970s—the same region that candidate Trump wooed in the 2016 campaign

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with promises of coal jobs. Chew examines how national-level energy policies and politics played out in what would become a key electoral region. This local focus allows her to reveal the complicated ways in which the rural communities in this region became economically dependent on large-scale coal-fired power plants—and their resulting vulnerability to shifts in our energy regime. Her narrative helps to explain why, even in a region where no one expects the return of coal-mining jobs, President Trump’s promise to protect coal as an energy resource still resonates.

Finally, I have included in this symposium a historically informed policy analysis by Erin Pischke, Barry Solomon, and Adam Wellstead. This article reminded me that there are methodological tools common in other fields that history could make better use of—and one of those tools is quantification. For example, much of our scholarly (and public) dis-

cussion of American environmental policy laments the failure of the USA to take action on climate change. Erin Pischke and her colleagues put that “failure” in a useful geographic and temporal perspective. Using data and methods that have been developed by the field of policy studies, the article considers how the USA compares to four other nations (Canada, Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil) in its climate policy making from 2000 to 2016. The analysis, by categorizing different kinds of policy responses and simply counting them, should help us move beyond the simplistic “failure” narrative and identify what kind of policy responses we are looking for as we look forward.

Taken together, I hope these articles help to make sense of the current moment in American environmental politics. But, I also hope to prompt reflection on the value of environmental history and the environmental humanities more generally.