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Comprendre le phénomène Trump, au-delà du chaos

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A Worthy Heir: Donald Trump, the Republican Party and Climate Change

Un digne héritier : Donald Trump, le Parti républicain et le changement climatique

Jean-Daniel Collomb

1 As Republicans gradually came to the realization that Donald Trump was a strong contender for their party's nomination, many members of the G.O.P. establishment began to repeat over and over that the real estate tycoon was no genuine conservative. On issues like entitlement reform and free trade, the validity of such a characterization could hardly have been denied, at least during the Presidential campaign. Likewise, Trump made more than a few isolationistic statements that put him at odds with several Republican articles of faith on the role of the United States in the world. His unabashed skepticism regarding the desirability of environmental regulations, however, is one policy position about which the new President is in full agreement with most elite Republicans.

2 The goal of this article will be to present and analyze the climate policy put in place by the Trump administration during its first year, by comparing it with those of his Republican predecessors since Ronald Reagan.[1] Putting recent developments in historical perspective will show that there exists a large measure of continuity in the way Republicans have been approaching environmental issues since the early 1980s. For all its disruptive and unusual characteristics and tendencies, the Trump presidency has proved an effective instrument for implementing key elements of the Republican agenda as defined by Republican elites and conservative and libertarian think tanks.

3 In order to assess the climate record of the Trump administration, the article looks at the statements and decisions made by President Trump and prominent members of his administration. It also draws on secondary sources about the environmental policies of previous Republican administrations and examines the statements and recommendations

made by major libertarian and conservative think tanks that have been supplying Republican lawmakers and officials with ideas and policy proposals since the 1970s.

4 Indeed, it seems impossible to make sense of the rationale that underpins the policies favored by Republicans without a thorough understanding of the political and ideological agenda of think tanks like the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute and the Competitive Enterprise Institute, if only because those institutions are tasked with formalizing and promoting this rationale. One of the defining traits of these conservative and libertarian think tanks is that they are not just content with producing ideas, but they also do their utmost to shape the decision-making process.[2] This has led Jason Stahl to describe them as "a site of political and cultural power" and "one of the central institutions of conservative political organizing."[3] Conservative and libertarian think tanks have distinguished themselves as one of the driving forces behind the formidable climate skeptic movement that emerged in the United States in the early 1990s.[4] Hence the need to register the convergences and divergences between their positions and the policies of the Trump administration since January 2017.

5 After a brief overview of the Republican Party's contribution to environmental protection in the United States, this article will attempt to underscore the high degree of convergence between the mainstream Republican agenda and the Trump administration regarding climate change. It will shed light on the Republican Party's hostility toward economic regulations and preference for market solutions, its rejection of climate multilateralism, its efforts to boost fossil fuel production on public lands, and its attempt to restrict access to climate data.

Republicans and environmental protection

6 In the 1960s and 1970s, Congress passed an impressive array of environmental laws that empowered the federal government to act as the environmental watchdog of the United States and regulate economic activities more thoroughly than ever before. Chief among these were the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act that set environmental standards by which US businesses and government agencies now have to abide. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), passed in 1969, mandates that environmental impact assessments be conducted before each new federal project is allowed to proceed. President Richard Nixon created the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1970. The role of this agency was to ensure that the new laws were being properly enforced.[5] The impressive environmental record of the 1960s and 1970s has formed the bedrock of the federal apparatus of environmental protection to this day.[6]

7 One of the countless consequences of this upsurge in norms and standards was that it imposed a wide range of regulations on US businesses. It was not long, therefore, before US politics witnessed a potent and well-organized backlash against new environmental norms. Central to this effort were conservative and libertarian think tanks financed by the foundations of billionaires *qua* libertarian advocates willing to "invest in ideology."[7] Since the 1970s, those institutions have frequently resorted to what Naomi Oreskes and Erick Conway have dubbed the "tobacco strategy" which consists in delaying legislation and regulations by hiring experts to cast doubt on the economically inconvenient results of scientific research on a whole range of problems, from the deleterious health effects of smoking to acid rain and climate change.[8] Since the late 1970s, the Republican Party has

been acting as a political vehicle of this free-market backlash against environmental regulations.

8 Before the Reagan era, environmental protection had been a largely bipartisan issue. The first National Park (although it was not initially called a national park) was created in Yosemite, California, by the Republican Congress in 1864. More importantly, Theodore Roosevelt established himself as the first conservationist president in US history during the Progressive era. Gifford Pinchot, Roosevelt's right-hand man, went on to become the Republican governor of Pennsylvania in 1927.[9] What is more, it is hard to overestimate Richard Nixon's contribution to environmental protection. Sensing that large sections of the electorate wanted their elected representatives to do more to protect the environment and enhance public health, Nixon, who had not manifested any particular interest in those issues before, opportunistically used the bully pulpit and the power of the presidency to cast himself as a friend of the environment. He created the EPA and signed into law such major pieces of environmental regulation as NEPA, the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Water Act and a strengthened version of the Clean Air Act, most of which have become anathema to the contemporary Republican Party.[10]

9 Ever since the Reagan era, environmental protection has turned into a deeply partisan issue that pits the environmental movement, which actively supports the Democratic party, against the conservative and libertarian movements, which have thrown their lots in with the G.O.P. It is worth pointing out that the political showdown over environmental protection goes far beyond issues like regulation and economic growth. Indeed these controversies have become means by which each political side asserts its ideological identity in marked contrast to the other side. Hence the intractable nature of the political battle over human-made climate change in the US, which is increasingly referred to as the latest battleground in the so-called culture wars.[11] Researchers in social psychology have recently shown that our cognitive filters are conditioned by our cultural identity to a significant extent. In other words, on issues that are perceived by the general public as partisan, most people tend to say who they are and which group they belong to rather than what they know.[12] Such tendencies go a long way toward explaining why today's Republican Party have become so openly hostile to the environmental movement and to climate action, which are associated to the Left and progressive politics. Donald Trump's bizarre tweet to the effect that climate change is a hoax perpetrated by the Chinese is probably best understood in a political context that is so polarized that ridiculing the other side's policy priorities can be politically useful and effective. His election to the presidency has rendered the conflict between the Republican Party and the environmental movement even more inextricable than before. This being said, the environmental policies that his administration has put in place so far do not deviate from the record compiled by his Republican predecessors since Ronald Reagan.

10 Climate change entered the US political agenda in the late 1980s. From the outset, the Reagan administration was extremely reluctant to engage with the United Nations on this issue and invest in research.[13] George H.W. Bush, who took over from Reagan in 1989, adopted a more ambivalent approach. Environmental protection was one area in which he wanted to distinguish himself from Reagan, who had quickly become the *bête noire* of the environmental movement during his presidency. Norman J. Vig has likened George H.W. Bush to Richard Nixon, claiming they both proved to be opportunistic leaders on environmental issues, attuned to popular aspirations.[14] On further examination, however, George H.W. Bush's contribution to the fight against climate change seems somewhat

negative. Although he did sign the treaty that still provides the framework for international negotiations today (the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change), he was instrumental in making it weak and ineffective by ruling out specific timetables and binding commitments.[15]

11 Far from being moved by the growing scientific consensus on human-made climate change, many Republican officials became even more radical during the Clinton era under the influence of Newt Gingrich and the proponents of the Contract with America, who tended to view calls for climate action as a stealth tactic to undermine the free market system. After they seized the majority in the House of Representatives in 1994, they made the most of their control of the Committee on Science to call into question environmental regulations.[16] In 1997, Republicans joined forces with Democrats in the Senate to block the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol. With the election of George W. Bush in 2000, they found themselves in an even more favorable position to defeat any significant move to reduce US greenhouse gas emissions.

12 The former Texas governor had affirmed his desire to address the problem during the 2000 campaign but officially withdrew from the Kyoto Protocol negotiations just two months after being sworn in.[17] In a move reminiscent of the "tobacco strategy", administration officials claimed that no conclusive scientific consensus had yet been reached and that it was therefore ill-advised for the US economy to embark on a grand experiment in climate mitigation. Instead, the Bush administration called for more research and offered token support for voluntary programs.[18] However, in its 2007 *Massachusetts vs EPA* decision, the Supreme Court ruled that, under the terms of the Clean Air Act, George W. Bush's EPA was under the obligation to regulate carbon emissions because of their negative environmental and health repercussions. In response to this potentially transformational decision, the Bush administration chose to procrastinate further.[19] In addition to continued funding for climate research, George W. Bush's main contribution to the fight against climate change also occurred in 2007 when he signed into law the Energy Independence and Security Act which increased the national Corporate Average Fuel Economy standards for vehicles, which no Congress had done for more than 30 years.[20] These measures fell spectacularly short of what would have been required to make a difference. Republican hostility to climate action deepened even further after the advent of the Tea Party movement during the Obama administration, which is one of the key reasons why Congress failed to pass a cap-and-trade bill that would have created incentives to decrease greenhouse gas emissions.

13 Climate skepticism has taken different forms, from outright denial[21] to more subtle justification for inaction. Consider for example the highly ambivalent attitude regarding climate action adopted by most free-market think tanks recently, which boils down to recognizing that human-made climate change is actually happening but that its negative repercussions are overestimated thanks to unreliable climate models. Oren Cass of the Manhattan Institute acknowledges that climate change poses a serious threat to the world's economic prosperity and geopolitical stability while insisting that we should not create mechanisms, like a carbon tax, that would incentivize economic players to turn away from fossil fuels because it would cripple economic growth. Wealth creation, Cass argues, will allow future generations to adapt to the repercussions of a damaged climate by enabling them to build more resilient infrastructures or resort to geoengineering.[22] In 2016, the Cato Institute's Patrick J. Michaels and Paul C. Knappenberger coined the word "lukewarmers" so as to refer to those, like themselves, who do concede that human-made

climate change is a reality but also believe that the negative forecasts put forward by the proponents of strong climate action are strongly overblown.[23]

14 Nevertheless, it should be noted that dissenting voices do exist in the Republican Party and the conservative movement. For instance, in February 2018, 35 Republican House members belonged to the Climate Solutions Caucus, a forum to conduct bipartisan discussions and bridge the gap between the two parties on climate change. In February 2017, the Climate Leadership Council, a conservative international think tank, published a report signed by major conservative figures like James Baker and Henry Paulson, to call on the Republican-controlled Congress to pass a carbon tax. This document was explicitly targeted at Republicans and free-market conservatives. The authors of the report claim that their version of the carbon tax would allow free-marketers to bring about a significant drop in greenhouse gas emissions without violating the principles of free-market economics.[24] In spite of their efforts, the conservative proponents of this view appear to wield almost no influence with most Republican officials. Indeed, only 3 months after the report was published, president Trump announced his decision to withdraw the US from the Paris accord framework by 2020.

15 For years Donald Trump has repeatedly cast doubt on the reality of human-made climate change. Consider this statement he made in a tweet in the winter of 2013: "Ice storm from Texas to Tennessee. I'm in Los Angeles and it's freezing. Global warming is a total, and very expensive, hoax."[25] Since he won the presidency, he has reiterated this stance several times. On December 29, 2017, he tweeted: "In the East, it could be the COLDEST New Year's Eve on record. Perhaps we could use a little bit of that good old Global Warming that our Country, but no other countries, was going to pay TRILLIONS OF DOLLARS to protect against. Bundle up."[26] On June 1, 2017, he had officially announced that the US would cease to participate to the Paris Accord by 2020 although it was reported that Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Donald Trump's son-in-law and top adviser Jared Kushner had lobbied him not to do so.[27] In his speech, the president vindicated his choice in the name of US competitiveness. He added that the scheme was doomed to fail and that it would unfairly redound to the competitive advantage of countries like China and India.[28]

Rejecting environmental multilateralism

16 In deciding to exit the Paris Accord, Donald Trump was in line with his Republican predecessors since Ronald Reagan, with the partial exception of George H.W. Bush. The adversarial attitude of Republicans with regards to environmental multilateralism originated in the Reagan administration, which favored market mechanisms over international regulations and was loath to make contributions to international funds that might benefit countries hostile to the US. Before the Reagan era, the US government had been actively involved in the creation and development of the UN Environmental Program (UNEP) in 1972, and had ratified several treaties intent on promoting environmental protection on a global scale. The Reagan era marked a departure from US policy in the 1970s as the new administration refused to sign a new version of the Convention on the Law of the Sea and made drastic cuts in its financial contribution to UNEP and the Man and the Biosphere Program.[29] Although it is undeniably true that the administration of George H.W. Bush adopted a more conciliatory attitude toward multilateral initiatives, its record is mixed. It was instrumental in securing the successful

implementation of the Montreal Protocol (reluctantly signed by Ronald Reagan in 1987) that helped remedy ozone depletion in the stratosphere, but it also undermined the effectiveness of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change established at the Rio summit of 1992. Furthermore, George H.W. Bush declined to sign the Convention on Biological Diversity because he was worried that the economic viability and the property rights of US companies might be jeopardized.[30] In the 2000s, George W. Bush made it clear that he had no intention of playing an active role in the international framework put in place to tackle climate change.

17 The substance of Donald Trump's indictment of the Paris Accord closely aligns with the condemnation that experts from the conservative and libertarian think tanks had expressed after President Obama had signed a deal that they dismissed as detrimental to the competitiveness of the US economy. Marlo Lewis Jr. of the Competitive Enterprise Institute wrote that the Accord was a treaty in disguise that required the formal approval of the Senate and that, were it to be ratified, the US would lose power to "foreign leaders, multilateral bureaucrats, international pressure groups, and their media allies."[31] After pointing out that the Accord was too weak to substantially reduce greenhouse gas emissions, Patrick J. Michaels and Paul C. Knappenberger expressed concerns as to whether China and India would act in good faith.[32]

Undermining environmental regulations

18 From the very beginning of his presidency, Donald Trump has been doing his utmost to further the environmental agenda laid out by those think tanks by adopting several measures aimed at dismantling Barack Obama's climate legacy. Its centerpiece was the Clean Power Plan, which President Obama put forward after it had become obvious that the Republican-controlled Congress would not act. Invoking the 2007 Massachusetts vs EPA decision, he used his authority under the Clean Air Act to impose a rule mandating lower carbon emissions in US electricity production. The scheme sought to reduce carbon pollution from US power plants by 32% below 2005 levels by 2030. In effect, it would have crippled the ability of coal to compete with natural gas and renewable energies. Through this initiative, President Obama was making the most of his administrative power to circumvent legislative opposition, which led to a flurry of litigation. In 2015, the rule was put on hold by a court and its implementation was still pending when Donald Trump entered the White House. The new president lost no time in signing an executive order to eliminate it and his Justice Department stopped defending it in court.[33] Here again, many conservative and libertarian experts had taken exception to President Obama's use of administrative discretion to try to remold the US energy mix over the objection of the Republican majorities in Congress. The Competitive Enterprise Institute had portrayed the plan as "an unlawful power grab" that deprived Congress of its constitutional prerogative while the Heritage Foundation had bemoaned the nefarious consequences of a scheme that would have imposed "higher energy costs on American families and businesses for meaningless climate benefits."[34]

19 Very early on, Donald Trump also took steps to alleviate the fears that conservative and libertarian experts had been voicing for years about the social cost of carbon. Mechanisms aimed at bringing about a drop in carbon emissions, like a cap-and-trade system or a carbon tax, would necessarily hinge on an agreed upon price of carbon. Put simply, the social cost of carbon is meant to reflect the negative externalities of fossil fuel

production by anticipating the damages that climate change will cause in the future.[35] Throughout the Obama era, most conservative and libertarian experts were steadfast in their opposition to a government-sanctioned social cost of carbon. As far as the Heritage Foundation was concerned, it would quickly degenerate into an instrument to micromanage the US energy market.[36] In the end, the environmental experts of the Cato Institute argued, the social cost of carbon was nothing but an instrument to empower politically-motivated bureaucrats.[37] Just two months into his presidency, Donald Trump issued an executive order that downgraded the device created by Barack Obama's EPA to calculate the social cost of carbon and instructed federal agencies not to take climate change into consideration when drafting their environmental impact statements for new projects.[38]

20 More broadly, the Trump administration's actions in its first year have been a rejection of the Massachusetts vs EPA decision. Barack Obama's Clean Power Plan had been an attempt to act on the decision. The notion of an endangerment finding lies at the heart of the 2007 decision: if it is established that carbon emissions are posing a threat to human health, then the Clean Air Act mandates that the EPA regulate them. Barack Obama's EPA had established this endangerment finding in 2009 so that it could lay the path for administrative action. Conservative and libertarian think tanks immediately protested that Obama's move relied on a skewed interpretation of the EPA's mandate under the Clean Air Act and called for a reversal of the decision.[39] So far, the Trump administration has favored the administrative route to achieving this goal by downplaying or ignoring climate change in the way its agencies are instructed to conduct their operations. For instance, the climate change chapter of the Department of the Interior manual was expunged and climate change was absent from President Trump's "national security strategy" statement.[40]

Prioritizing fossil fuel production on public lands

21 In contradiction with the effort to reduce the dependence of the US economy on fossil fuels, the Trump administration has been trying to boost the production of coal, oil, and gas on the public lands it administers, which dovetails with Republican policy since Ronald Reagan. For example, under Reagan, the number of oil and gas drilling permits on public lands rose by 30% compared with the last 2 years of the Carter administration, and would probably have increased even more had energy prices been higher.[41] During the presidency of George W. Bush, commodity exploitation undeniably took precedence over biodiversity preservation on public lands: oil and gas development increased on BLM and Forest Service lands. From 1999 to 2004, the number of drilling permits delivered by the federal government tripled.[42] Vice-President Dick Cheney was tasked with supervising the National Energy Implementation Plan which aimed to speed up the process through which leases were awarded on public lands but paid scant attention to environmental standards.[43] The last 2 years of the George H.W. Bush presidency had witnessed a similar pattern.[44]

22 The Trump administration has predicated its approach to public lands on the quest for "energy dominance". On June 29, 2017, President Trump devoted a speech to energy dominance at the Unleashing American Energy Event, in which he signaled his intention to spur US domestic energy production. The goal was to lessen the dependence of the US on unstable regimes abroad and to produce so much energy that not only would the US

become self-sufficient, but it would export vast amounts of fossils fuels and shape energy markets across the world. In order to reach these objectives, the president hoped to cash in on the shale gas revolution while reviving the coal industry.[45] Similarly, in his case for energy dominance, the Heritage Foundation's Nicolas Loris takes stock of the upsurge in US natural gas and petroleum production over the last decade, but goes on to claim that President Trump's efforts to deregulate fossil fuel production on public lands will further enhance the ability of the US energy sector to shape global energy outcomes.[46]

23 In practical terms, Donald Trump's quest for energy dominance means carrying on the policies of his recent Republican predecessors and trying to implement at least part of the recommendations made by conservative and libertarian think tanks. The newly-elected president almost immediately cleared the way for the construction of the Keystone XL Pipeline and the Dakota Access Pipeline.[47] He quickly went on to take several measures to open access to energy production on public lands. In March 2017, he ended an Obama-era moratorium on coal leases on public lands.[48] In December 2017, the Interior Department rescinded a 2015 rule that limited fracking on BLM lands.[49] In January 2018, Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke initiated a process to make 90% of the Outer Continental Shelf available for oil and gas leases as part of an America-First Offshore Energy Strategy. This initiative has already sparked significant protest and will not be finalized before a long consultation process.[50] Were it to come to fruition, it would amount to a major victory for free-market advocates who have been advocating such a move for years.[51]

The Trump Presidency and climate data

24 This account of Donald Trump's climate policy would be incomplete without mentioning the sustained effort on the part of his administration to restrict the amount of and access to climate data produced by the federal government. The availability of sound and reliable information, needless to say, is key to anticipating future climate damage and devise policy responses accordingly. The first budget drafted by the Trump administration included severe cuts to the appropriations of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and its National Environmental Satellite, Data, and Information Service, two entities that supply the US government and the rest of the world with crucial climate data.[52] Meanwhile a substantial amount of climate-related information was removed from the websites of several federal agencies.[53] Here again, the Trump administration's handling of inconvenient scientific data seems to echo some of the practices put in place by the Reagan administration in the 1980s when several EPA programs that produced useful data for environmental protection were discontinued.[54] Donald Trump's initiatives also come as a result of the systematic onslaught launched by conservative and libertarian think tanks against the credibility of climate scientists and climate models.[55] The goal of such a strategy is, to quote Leah Ceccarelli, "to initiate an epistemological filibuster that delays policy change".[56] It should be noted, however, that so far those attempts to suppress information have been partly unsuccessful since, in 2017, the US Global Change Research Program released a report which unambiguously corroborated the scientific consensus on human-made climate change.[57]

Conclusion

25 One should not be fooled by Donald Trump's unorthodox and unusually abrasive communication strategy. His environmental policies, this article suggests, have been a continuation of the Republican agenda going back to the Reagan revolution of the 1980s. With the partial exception of George H.W. Bush, all Republican presidents since Ronald Reagan have taken an unmistakably anti-environmentalist stance which translated into administrative policies aimed at rolling back environmental regulations imposed on US businesses. So far President Trump has shown no sign that he might soften his stance during the rest of his term in office. In the end, however, his environmental record will be as vulnerable as his predecessor's because what a Chief Executive has achieved can be called into question by their successor. In addition, one should not forget that, at the municipal and state levels, there has been a lot opposition to the initiatives of the Trump administration on climate change. Just how effective this opposition will turn out to be will be decisive in shaping Donald Trump's environmental record.[58]

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NOTES

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ABSTRACTS

The aim of this article is to demonstrate that Donald Trump's commitment to climate skepticism and his hostility toward the very idea of a proactive federal apparatus of environmental regulation do not mark a departure from Republican and conservative orthodoxy but, rather, signal his adherence to positions developed and refined by the libertarian and free-market conservative think tanks that have been supplying the Republican Party with ideas and policy proposals since the 1970s. The article underscores the high degree of continuity between President Trump's approach to climate change and the environmental policies implemented by his Republican predecessors since Ronald Reagan, which have revolved around a preference for market solutions over government regulations, deep mistrust of environmental multilateralism, efforts to increase fossil fuel production on public lands, and attempts to restrict access to environmental and climate data.

Cet article a pour but de démontrer que, loin de l'éloigner du Parti républicain et du mouvement conservateur contemporains, le climato-scepticisme de Donald Trump et son hostilité à l'égard d'un appareil fédéral de régulation environnementale puissant soulignent l'adhésion du nouveau président américain aux idées et propositions que les think tanks conservateurs et libertariens américains fournissent au Parti républicain depuis les années 1970. L'article souligne la forte continuité entre la politique climatique de Donald Trump et les politiques environnementales que ses prédécesseurs républicains ont mis en place depuis Ronald Reagan. Ces politiques s'appuient sur une priorité donnée aux mécanismes du marché au détriment des régulations étatiques, une méfiance à l'égard du multilatéralisme environnemental ainsi qu'une volonté de soutenir la production d'énergies fossiles dans le domaine public fédéral et de restreindre l'accès aux données climatiques.

INDEX

Mots-clés: climat, climato-scepticisme, conservatisme, dérégulation, libertarianisme, Parti républicain, think tanks
Keywords: climate, climate skepticism, conservatism, deregulation, libertarianism, Republican Party, think tanks

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