

The Boundaries and Contours of American Environmental Activism

Christopher J. Bosso and Deborah Lynn Guber

On September 11, 2001, the *New York Times* reported that a study to be released by the National Academy of Sciences would validate a Clinton administration standard on arsenic in drinking water that George W. Bush's administration had suspended the previous March. So sharp were public criticisms of this suspension that even the Republican-led House voted to uphold the Clinton standard, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) sought to defuse the controversy by commissioning the National Academy study. Environmental activists got considerable political mileage out of the issue, and several groups announced a \$100,000 campaign to air arsenic-related television ads in localities where Republicans were seen as vulnerable on environmental issues.¹

On September 12, nobody cared much about arsenic.

Shifting Terrain

This is, by necessity, the tale of the shifting national political terrain now confronting American environmentalists. Before September 11, they seemed to be gaining headway against a Bush administration that had proven surprisingly ideological on environmental and energy issues. Few observers had believed that a president who entered office under such unique circumstances—and one with the narrowest of congressional majorities—would feel free to pursue a divisive domestic policy agenda. Even left-wing journalist Alexander Cockburn, a critic of mainstream American environmentalism, suggested that the administration might seek to embellish its green credentials as a way to establish Bush's legitimacy as president.² Yet, save for the appointment of Christine Todd Whitman to head the EPA, the administration soon disabused environmental advocates of any such notions.

Not that they had faith in Bush to begin with. Whatever their complaints about the Clinton administration (see chapter 5), leaders of the nation's major environmental organizations rallied behind Al Gore in 2000, especially as it became clear that a Green Party challenge headed by Ralph Nader might affect the outcome. Gore's loss was particularly sobering because apparently broad public support for environmental values never seemed to translate into votes for the candidate supported by the environmental establishment. Worse, Nader's candidacy exposed visible fissures among environmentalists themselves.

Even so, by September 2001, environmentalists and congressional Democrats, aided by media criticism of the president's actions, had been modestly successful in forcing the administration onto the defensive on a range of environmental and energy initiatives. For its part, the administration seemed to be trying to avoid repeating the mistakes made in the first Reagan administration and during the 104th Congress (1995–1997). Each time, as Kraft notes in chapter 6, Republican efforts to “deregulate” environmental policy faltered in the face of crystallizing public opposition to a perceived weakening in environmental protection. Similar concerns about early actions by the Bush administration, coupled with the Democratic takeover of the Senate in the wake of the defection of Vermont Senator James Jeffords, threatened to derail much of the president's agenda.

Democrats also saw the environment as a key issue in their drive to take over Congress in the 2002 elections. Moderate Republicans such as Theodore Roosevelt IV, the great grandson of his namesake and chairman of the League of Conservation Voters, agreed, warning, “The environment is such a key issue, and he's got such a very small margin in Congress. If the administration is consistently anti-environment, I can almost guarantee that he will lose a majority in both the House and the Senate.”³ The announced advertising campaign to link Republicans to the arsenic controversy reflected such perceptions that the environment would matter at the voting booth.

After September 11, the political terrain became more uncertain. Two months after the terrorist attacks in New York City, at the Pentagon (near Washington, D.C.), and in Pennsylvania amidst the U.S. military effort in Afghanistan, public support for the president floated at levels not seen since those for his father during the Persian Gulf War. Environmentalists hoped that the younger Bush's popularity was equally evanescent—his father lost to Clinton in 1992, after all—but they were not counting on George W. to make the same mistakes. For one thing, the “war on terrorism” profoundly altered the national political agenda. As one Democratic pollster put it, “For the moment, at least, the electorate is on a war footing and everything else about politics flows from that fact. The voters ask themselves on every issue the fundamental question: How does it relate to defeating terrorism and making the country more secure?”⁴ Unlike the Gulf War, such concerns may resonate for years.

Moreover, an economy showing signs of softening before September 11 fell into real recession. Layoffs spread, consumer confidence dropped, and government at all levels saw sudden losses in revenue just as public officials faced dramatic increases in costs for security. Democrats stopped talking confidently about taking over Congress in 2002, and activists wondered how to criticize the president's policies without appearing to attack him directly. Environmentalists shelved the advertising campaign against Republicans on the arsenic issue, and groups even deleted criticisms of the president from their Web sites. Finally, the torrent of public financial support for victims of the terrorist attacks threatened to siphon funds away from other causes, including environmental ones.⁵

The political terrain after September 11 is the most difficult for environmentalists since the Gulf War and economic recession of 1990–1991

shifted national priorities to defense and fiscal matters, softened public support for environmental initiatives, and sapped environmental group resources.⁶ In fact, the disruption of the nation's priorities and finances after September 11 may have created the most daunting political challenge for environmentalists in the contemporary environmental era.

Our task here is to make some sense of the boundaries and contours of this political terrain. By *boundaries* we mean the range of opportunities for and limits on activists imposed by mass public opinion on the environment. By *contours* we mean the variegated topography of environmental activism itself, ranging from national organizations to grassroots groups, as well as the fissures among these diverse elements. Finally, we conclude with thoughts about the immediate challenge to environmental activism in the United States.

The Hazy Boundaries of Public Opinion

The controversies of the president's early months led to widespread perceptions that his environmental views were out of touch with mainstream America.⁷ These perceptions had surface validity insofar as public opinion polls routinely showed majority support for more—not less—environmental protection. In an April 2001 Gallup Poll, not only was there little support for the president's decisions on specific environmental issues, but 68 percent of those polled said they were either active in, or sympathetic to, the environmental movement. Fifty-seven percent thought that environmental protection should be given priority, “even at the risk of curbing economic growth.” Most important, despite traditional concerns about the size and scope of government, 55 percent believed that the federal government was doing “too little” to address environmental problems, whereas just 11 percent said it was doing “too much.”⁸ Such percentages were consistent with long-term tendencies in public attitudes on the environment.⁹ With those numbers in mind, newspaper editorials warned that the president had a “tin ear” when it came to the environment.¹⁰

But was the new administration really that tone deaf? We examine that claim within the broader context of an ongoing debate about government responsiveness to public opinion by exploring the range of attitudes on two issues—global climate change and energy—that underpin several of Bush's proposals. We then consider the degree to which his policy agenda might do political harm to the president and his party. The picture is far more complicated than poll data or news accounts suggest.

Global Climate Change

Since the late 1980s the issue of global climate change has been “firmly—if not deeply—embedded in public consciousness.”¹¹ By 2001, with the mainstream scientific community in consensus on the causes and scope of the problem, most Americans believed that global warming is real, that it is caused largely by human activity, and that it has serious long-term effects.

For example, in the April 2001 Gallup study 30 percent of those polled held that the threat of global warming was “exaggerated,” but nearly two thirds combined in their belief that news of the problem was either “generally correct” (34 percent) or “underestimated” (32 percent). Indeed, 54 percent agreed that warming trends had “already begun.”¹²

However, that acknowledgment is often paired in polls with a parallel set of responses that reveals considerable public confusion and even ambivalence about this issue. Americans may be aware of the prospective dangers of global warming, but few seem to be alarmed about it. When asked by pollsters how much they personally worried about each of thirteen environmental problems listed, respondents ranked the greenhouse effect second to last, well below various forms of air and water pollution, soil contamination, and loss of wildlife habitat. Moreover, this result has changed little since Gallup began asking the question in 1989.¹³ In the language of the polling profession, public opinion on climate change illustrates a deep disconnect between diffuse issue *support* and crystallized issue *concern*.

This relative lack of immediate public concern about global climate change can be explained in three ways. First, so-called third-generation threats like global warming are relatively invisible compared to older forms of air or water pollution. Average citizens tend to rank immediate threats over long-term uncertainties, and the potential effects of global warming may be too far removed from personal experience to motivate awareness.¹⁴ For instance, nearly two thirds of those polled by Gallup (66 percent) did not believe that global warming would pose a “serious threat” to their ways of life within their lifetimes.¹⁵ Second, the intractability of global environmental problems, when compared to more localized ones (for example, arsenic in drinking water), may push people into cognitive brick walls. Public opinion scholar John Immerwahr notes, “What the public is most skeptical about is not the existence of problems but our ability to solve them.”¹⁶ In the face of an issue of monumental scope and importance, where the causes may be irreversible and the solutions few, Americans may be both impatient for solutions and uncertain about what is to be done. They thus resign themselves to a wait-and-see attitude rather than commit resources to a possibly painful corrective course of action.

Finally, given the scientific complexities of global climate change, attitudes toward the issue are shaped to no small extent by an informational vacuum. In a 1997 Pew Research Center survey, researchers asked respondents, based on what they had heard or read (if anything), how they would describe the greenhouse effect. More than a third of those polled (38 percent) could not define the concept even in the vaguest of terms, identifying it instead, when presented with a closed-ended list of options, as either a “new advance in agriculture” or a “new architectural style,” rather than an “environmental danger.”¹⁷ Such uncertainty is partly due to relatively low issue attention. When respondents were offered a list of eleven major news topics for the year, 76 percent indicated that they closely followed Iraq’s opposition to allowing Americans to participate in weapons inspections and

65 percent followed the murder trial of British au pair Louise Woodward. Majorities also paid attention to fluctuations in the stock market (61 percent) and the flooding produced by the weather phenomenon El Niño (62 percent). By contrast, only a third followed the debate over global warming, which placed lowest on the list despite a new round of media attention in the months preceding the Kyoto Protocol.¹⁸

It is no surprise that Americans flounder when asked about the pace—and cost—of efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Witness the contradictory polling results in 1997, as the Kyoto accord was being drafted. On one hand, a World Wildlife Fund survey found that 56 percent of those polled wanted President Clinton to “take action on global warming now.” On the other hand, virtually the same proportion (59 percent) in an NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll believed that “more research is necessary before we take action.” On one hand, 81 percent of respondents in a CBS/*New York Times* poll agreed that steps to counter the effects of global warming should be taken “right away.” On the other hand, 78 percent in a Charlton Research Company survey thought that the United States should “wait to make any treaty commitments” and pursue “voluntary programs” instead.¹⁹

What is going on here? As public opinion analyst Karlyn Bowman points out, contradictory positions on a policy do not mean that Americans have changed their minds. The contradictions instead reflect the difficulties average citizens have in answering complex, policy-driven questions that overreach their own knowledge and life experiences. Because most people “never had solid opinions on the subject to begin with,” any polling results on the subject were, and continue to be, unstable and sensitive to the way in which the issue is framed, whether in a polling questionnaire or the broader arena of politics.²⁰

Energy and the Environment

Such confusion and uncertainty extend to the broader subject of energy. Just before Bush’s rejection of the Kyoto Protocol and the release of the administration’s energy plan, respondents in a March 2001 Gallup survey were asked with which statement about energy and the environment they most agreed:

Protection of the environment should be given priority, even at the risk of limiting the amount of energy supplies—such as oil, gas and coal—which the United States produces.

or

Development of U.S. energy supplies—such as oil, gas, and coal—should be given priority, even if the environment suffers to some extent.

Such a paired-comparison or trade-off approach is designed to examine the ease with which people are influenced by counterarguments and opposing goals, all of which force respondents to consider the apparent costs associated

with environmental protection.²¹ In this case, the results seemed notable: When pressed, 52 percent of those responding gave priority to environmental protection, whereas 36 percent favored the development of energy supplies.²²

Upon close inspection, however, that choice is neither static nor indisputable. With the news media permeated with talk of impending recession and White House warnings of an energy crisis, respondents by late spring 2001 were inclined to believe that the energy situation had become “very serious”—more serious, according to poll trends, than at any time since 1977.²³ By May, although a steady majority (57 percent) in the Gallup study continued to oppose oil exploration in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), 63 percent also supported the broader goals of “drilling for natural gas on public lands” and 64 percent agreed with “investing in more gas pipelines.” More than half of those surveyed (53 percent) were willing to offer tax incentives to oil and gas companies to encourage drilling.²⁴ In the end, despite an expressed belief in the value of energy efficiency and conservation, a combined 70 percent warned Gallup that it was either “very important” or “extremely important” that the president and Congress increase energy production.²⁵

The public’s mixed signals can be explained in two ways. First, experiments in question wording, format, and design show that if respondents are presented with a trade-off between environmental protection and some form of economic prosperity that allows for the possibility of attaining both, most understandably gravitate to the convenience and comfort of that option.²⁶ In that case, argues political scientist C. Everett Ladd, such questions are misleading because they offer “forced choices where the alternatives are nothing more than differing pieces of one basic value that the public wants, and believes it possible to attain.”²⁷ Thus a Bush administration argument that drilling in the ANWR is good energy policy *and* safe for the environment will fall on receptive ears if environmentalists fail to pose effective counterarguments. Given heightened demands for U.S. energy independence since September 11—led by those promoting development of the ANWR—that task is even tougher.

Public opinion is also often compartmentalized. When measured in surveys, for example, policy preferences on taxation tend to be unrelated to demands for increased spending, creating a something-for-nothing paradox because respondents weigh the merits of each independently without regard to logical constraints.²⁸ Everybody wants a free lunch. A similar tendency shows up on attitudes about the environment, with Gallup Poll participants worrying a great deal about the “quality of the environment” (42 percent) and “the availability and affordability of energy” (46 percent), despite the natural, if unspoken, tensions that rise between them.

Whose Political Disconnect?

Thus, despite rumblings of public disapproval, Bush’s actions on the environment did little apparent harm to his overall image. Indeed, the April

2001 Gallup Poll found that 48 percent of those surveyed felt the president would “improve the quality of the environment” while in office, a level six percentage points higher than at his inauguration.²⁹ Even after more months of sustained criticism, 50 percent of respondents in an early September *Washington Post/ABC News* poll still approved of the way the president was handling environmental issues, although they believed (by a 51–42 percent margin) that congressional Democrats might do better.³⁰ Despite intense criticism of the administration’s environmental and energy policy directions, the general public’s reaction remained subdued.

The president also was able to dodge more acute public concern about his environmental agenda because relatively few Americans knew what he was doing. As Table 4-1 shows, only 28 percent of those polled knew that the president had supposedly reneged on a campaign promise to impose limits on carbon dioxide emissions from power plants. Fewer still were aware that he delayed tighter standards on arsenic in drinking water, or that he opposed the Kyoto Protocol. More telling, all were largely unpopular decisions when presented to respondents. Despite the supposed power of the news media in shaping mass opinion, the continued low salience of environmental issues allowed the Bush administration to fly under the public’s radar on these matters, despite their importance to activists and opinion leaders.³¹

Such low public issue salience, in the words of political scientist V. O. Key, creates a “permissive consensus” in which the absence of obvious pop-

Table 4-1 Public Awareness and Approval of the President’s Environmental Decisions (in percent)

Decision	Respondents Aware of Each Decision	Respondents Approving of Each Decision
Not to place limits on carbon dioxide emissions from power plants	28%	21%
To make new regulations on the amount of arsenic allowed in drinking water less stringent	20%	32%
To withdraw U.S. support of the Kyoto Protocol	20%	25%
To impose stricter regulations on manufacturers who release lead into the environment	19%	80%

Source: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. News Interest Index Poll [datafile], April 18–22, 2001 ($n = 1,202$).

Note: Question wording works as follows: “Do you happen to know whether George W. Bush has decided to place limits on carbon dioxide emissions from power plants, or has he decided not to do this?” [Q17F1]. “As you may know, George W. Bush has decided not to place limits on carbon dioxide emissions from power plants. Do you approve or disapprove of this decision?” [Q25F1].

ular dissent or electoral reprisal gives political leaders wide latitude to design policies.³² If few of those polled approved of the president's decision to withdraw U.S. support for the Kyoto Protocol, fewer still knew much about Kyoto anyway. General public indecision about dealing with global warming supported by default the administration's wait-and-see strategy, and in some instances respondents sympathized with the president's concerns about the agreement. For example, although 55 percent felt the United States should "join other countries" in setting international standards for greenhouse gas emissions, 67 percent sided with Bush in insisting that all nations—rich and poor alike—"should make the same changes." The latter view, framed as an issue of basic fairness, was one reason why Bush considered the treaty to be "fatally flawed" in the first place.³³

The Gallup Organization found similar inconsistencies on the subject of energy. On the surface, 81 percent of respondents seemed at odds with the president's decision on carbon dioxide by favoring "higher emissions and pollution standards for business and industry." More than half (56 percent) also opposed "opening up the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for oil exploration." Yet as one journalist was quick to point out, we would all "just as soon have clean air and water" than not.³⁴ When given the opportunity to speak to a wider array of issues, most Americans expressed a concurrent worry about energy shortages and escalating prices.³⁵ To argue, then, that the president has ignored the public will in dealing with energy and the environment is to fail to recognize that more than one "public" often operates at the same time.

Finally, the president avoided sharper public disapproval of his environmental policies because he was relatively successful in defining the terms of debate. In this respect, the administration seemed to learn from earlier instances when Republicans had to retreat from aggressive efforts to restructure environmental policy in the face of crystallized voter concern about reducing environmental protection. The Bush administration, by contrast, avoided major overt efforts to reverse existing policy and instead worked to shift public attention to its preferred set of concerns by continual reference to a sagging economy and an emerging energy crisis. Momentary spikes in gasoline prices and the much-publicized electricity blackouts in California provided defensible ground for at least some rollback of the Clinton administration's environmental regulations. As columnist William Saletan reasoned in May 2001,

Right now, most Americans oppose drilling in ANWR. But the more we discuss that idea in terms of energy rather than the environment, the more the political equation changes. Economic considerations enumerated by Bush and Cheney—"sharp increases in fuel prices from home heating oil to gasoline," electrical threats to "the high-tech industry," strangled economic growth and layoffs—add weight to the pro-drilling side of the equation. National security concerns—the dependence on foreign oil that, in Cheney's words, makes it "easy for a regime such as Iraq to hold us hostage"—enter the debate, as well.³⁶

Critics dismissed the president's strategy as little more than misdirection—in the words of one pundit, "smoke and mirrors"—but such issue framing can powerfully shape public opinion.³⁷

Thus, given problem complexity, low issue salience, and a president's institutional capacity to define the agenda, the task for environmentalists was to crystallize *and* mobilize public concern about the administration's decisions. However, save for the politically inept decision to suspend the Clinton standard on arsenic, the president rarely gave his critics an easy target. As if to underscore the point, on October 31, 2001, the EPA announced that, having reviewed the National Academy study, it would adopt the Clinton standard on arsenic after all.³⁸ If Bush were to be painted as out of touch on the environment, he wasn't about to supply his critics with the brushes.

Issue Voting and the Environment

Even so, some observers still believed that Bush's environmental record would become a liability for Republicans in the 2002 congressional elections. "For some reason deeply seated in the party's psyche," argues journalist Gregg Easterbrook, "Republicans keep failing to come to terms with environmental sentiment. Environmentalism is to Republicans what defense is to Democrats: the issue they just don't know how to deal with and really, really wish would go away."³⁹ Such an assessment is not new: poll watchers in the media have been predicting for years that the environment would be a potent electoral weapon for Democrats, a wedge issue that could split younger and socially moderate voters away from the Republican party.⁴⁰

Any willingness by voters to cast ballots on the basis of candidates' environmental records and positions is crucial to Democrats and to those who place faith in public opinion as the driving force behind representative government.⁴¹ Yet, from election to election, at least on the national level, the link between opinion and policy fails to materialize convincingly when it comes to the environment, particularly when compared to such hot-button issues as abortion or gun control. Indeed, signs of environmental voting have been so weak in national campaigns that many seemed ready to dismiss it as a political paper tiger, long on talk, but short on action.⁴²

Such doubts about the ability of Democrats to capitalize on any of their advantages on environmental issues stem from three factors: the aforementioned low salience of environmental issues, narrow differences in the perceived policy positions of major party candidates, and the weight of partisan loyalty.⁴³

Issue Salience. Poll after poll indicates that Americans place genuine value and priority on environmental quality. Yet they also support lower crime rates, better public schools, and a strong economy—among other goals—any one of which usually surpasses the environment as a priority. Facing competition for room on a crowded political agenda—and barring an agenda-setting disaster such as the meltdown at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in 1986—the environment as an issue rarely generates the power and immediacy needed to push it into the top tier of voting preferences.

Cross-pressured in so many ways, voters rarely view national elections as a referendum on the president's environmental agenda.

Perceiving Policy Positions. Even with higher issue salience, voting "green" hinges on the ability of citizens to distinguish between the policy positions of competing candidates, without which voters are left by default to decide based on other considerations.⁴⁴ But as political scientist James Q. Wilson observes, "It is hard . . . to make a campaign issue out of a matter when voters tend to be in agreement. No candidate is going to say that he favors dirty air and polluted water, wants to see more dolphins killed, or hopes to build a Wal-Mart in the middle of Yosemite."⁴⁵ Candidates of all stripes now routinely embrace the environment as an issue, making it difficult for average citizens to distinguish between allies and adversaries. Given elections that invite symbolism and, indeed, the so-called green-washing of records, pro-environmental candidates do not necessarily become pro-environmental officials because being pro-environment is itself such a malleable concept.⁴⁶

Partisanship. The power of partisanship limits the influence of environmental concern at the ballot box. Survey data suggest that because environmental preferences are filtered through existing values, ideology tends to condition which party voters see as better at handling environmental problems. Moreover, judgments about a candidate's record on the environment tend to change slowly in response to new information or are constrained by long-standing party loyalties.⁴⁷ Voting green may demand that conservatives in particular cross ideological and party lines to vote for liberal candidates or more government regulation, a journey such voters may be psychologically reluctant to make. Indeed, most gains touted by environmentalists in recent congressional elections have come in districts or states where moderate Republicans were vacating seats that tended to lean toward Democrats.

Environmentalists thus face major challenges in translating diffuse public support into effective backing for their proposals and preferred candidates. Nowhere was this as true as in the 2000 election, the aftermath of which revealed both the ambiguity of public support for environmental values and, more telling, cleavages within the environmental community itself.

To Be, or Not to Be, a Green?

It is an understatement to say Ralph Nader is unwelcome in the offices of the nation's mainstream environmental organizations, or that many of his long-time liberal allies refuse to return his calls—if he bothers to make them. It is another to say that environmentalists in the United States are as divided over goals, strategies, and tactics as at any time in the contemporary environmental era.

One need only look at the 2000 election to understand this. Leaders of virtually every major environmental organization—including Friends of the Earth, which backed Bill Bradley in the primaries—supported Al Gore, who brought to the general election the strongest environmental credentials of any major party nominee. Whatever their disappointments with the Clinton administration, they nonetheless backed Gore as the only credible alternative

to Republican nominee Bush. Indeed, by 2000 many environmentalists saw the White House as their only bulwark against a Republican Congress that for six years had displayed open hostility to their values.⁴⁸ To them, the choice in 2000 was clear.

However, such pragmatism was not shared by a much smaller but hardly insignificant percentage of environmentalists on the ideological left. To them, the two major parties were but pale images of one another, unresponsive behemoths that shared an orthodox belief in corporate capitalism, private property, and unfettered global trade. For greens who fought against the North American Free Trade Agreement, marched in Seattle with other critics of the World Trade Organization, and boycotted Shell Oil for its support of the military regime in Nigeria, it was no consolation that Democrats had a better record on environmental protection. They saw Clinton and Gore as little but shills for their corporate campaign donors, and Democrats always seemed willing to make compromises to enact legislative half-measures or implement regulations that still favored corporate interests. Such discontent found a repository in Nader, consumer activist and good government icon, whose decision to act as the candidate of the Association of State Green Parties reflected his own belief that only a third party could force a profound change in the terms of national discourse. To Nader, the Democratic Party itself was the problem, the Green Party the solution.⁴⁹

Thus resumed an old argument: Should environmentalists work in the Democratic Party—the Republican Party was not seen as an option—even if doing so required compromises for the sake of party unity and electoral victory, or should they form a third party even if doing so took away votes from Democrats? Those who propounded the latter view believed that only a Green Party could properly represent ecological values. Those who advocated working within the Democratic Party pointed to the structural realities of the American electoral system and, more important, a history littered with third parties that faded away after an election or two.⁵⁰

It was an old argument, but its effects in 2000 were significant. For one thing, a firestorm exists over whether Nader cost Gore the election. To be sure, Gore won the national popular vote and Nader's 3-percent showing failed to pass the 5-percent threshold needed for the Green Party to gain federal funding for 2004. However, as everyone now knows, presidential elections are amalgamations of state elections, with the candidate who wins a state's popular vote getting its slate of electoral votes.⁵¹ As Nader pointed out, any argument that votes for him in Florida or New Hampshire cost Gore those states must also consider that Gore lost where he should have won—his home state of Tennessee, for example. Yet any analysis of the election must conclude that the Nader vote in at least those two states contributed to Gore's defeat. Given exit polling data showing that most Nader voters would have voted for Gore had Nader not run, it strains credulity to conclude that 97,000 votes for Nader in Florida had no bearing on the outcome.

One also can argue that votes for Green Party candidates cost Democrats a few House seats—no small consequence given the historically narrow margin

of Republican dominance in that chamber. Candidates carrying Green Party labels ran in forty House races, getting on average 2.3 percent of the total vote in contests that included candidates from both major parties. In most cases the presence of a Green Party candidate did not affect the outcome, but in at least three instances observers suggested that it benefited a Republican candidate with a poor record on the environment. In Michigan's Eighth District, previously held by Democrats, the Green Party candidate's 3,400 votes far exceeded the 150-vote margin that gave victory to the Republican. A similar impact on the outcome occurred in New Jersey's Seventh District, where a Green Party candidate's 2.8 percent of the vote exceeded the Republican's 2.4 percent margin of victory. In New Mexico's First District the Republican incumbent enjoyed a 1.4 percent margin of victory over the Democratic challenger even as a Green Party candidate took 7.5 percent of the vote, a virtual repeat of the outcome in 1998.⁵² More telling, in New Jersey's Twelfth District the Democratic incumbent had the backing of the Sierra Club and local environmental groups yet barely eked out a 600-vote victory in the face of a 5,600-vote showing by a Green Party candidate.⁵³

To be sure, environmentalists could claim that their votes and financial backing helped Democrats in a number of races. The political action committees (PACs) affiliated with Friends of the Earth, the League of Conservation Voters, and the Sierra Club combined made nearly \$2.2 million in direct contributions to dozens of candidates, mostly Democrats, and spent millions more on "independent" advertisements that criticized environmentally suspect candidates. Such support made a difference in Representative Debbie Stabenow's narrow victory over incumbent Republican senator Spencer Abraham in Michigan, which helped Democrats to claim a 50-50 tie in the upper chamber.⁵⁴ Yet, given the six-seat majority by which Republicans held onto the House as Congress convened in 2001, it is no wonder that Democrats and their allies in the environmental community are bitter about the Green Party challenge.

Even with Nader's candidacy, environmental issues played only modest roles in the election's overall debate. Environmental groups may have spent record amounts to support favored candidates, but this amount was miniscule compared to the \$159 million spent by corporate PACs or the \$129 million spent by labor unions.⁵⁵ Poll after poll showed that voters cared more about economic and social issues than about the environment or energy, even with the Republican slate's links to the oil and coal industries. To his credit, Bush finessed any differences between the parties and candidates on environmental issues when they did come up in debate, a fact to which Nader always pointed in his critiques of the major party candidates.

Green Paper Tiger?

If the election underscored the limited potency of the environmental vote, the first eight months of the new Bush presidency underscored the degree to which environmentalists depend on sympathetic office holders. Having lost a lot of access to and leverage in Congress when Republicans

took over both chambers in 1995, environmentalists now found themselves also facing a hostile executive branch. Indeed, they seemed to be on the outside looking in throughout the federal government—even, to some extent, in a federal judiciary still dominated by Reagan and George Bush appointees. The hopes stirred by the Democratic takeover of the Senate that summer only emphasized environmentalists' dependency.

The reason for this state of affairs is simple: despite groups' occasional contributions to Republican candidates or their efforts to include Republicans on their boards of directors, Democrats in Congress know that environmentalists have nowhere else to turn. For their part, as political scientists Charles Shipan and William Lowry observe, Republicans increasingly espouse ideological views antithetical to even mainstream environmentalists because they hail from conservative constituencies that oppose key elements of the national environmental agenda.⁵⁶ Moreover, unlike single-issue cause groups like the National Rifle Association or constituency organizations like labor unions, environmental groups rarely cause fear among candidates or office holders, and most Democrats and Republicans know that environmentalists have little independent effect on their electoral fortunes. The ideological polarization of the two parties—Nader's view notwithstanding—means that only a dwindling handful of moderate Republicans need to fear the environmental lobby. If support for a Green Party ignores the realities of the election and party systems, the limited degree to which environmentalists can influence the two major parties makes dreams of a third option understandable.

The Contours of Contemporary Environmentalism

The contours of contemporary environmentalism are so variegated that the term *movement* is inadequate to describe a topography of activism characterized by thousands of organizations of all types, sizes, and goal orientations as well as by a range of values that produces distinct ideological wings within it. Perhaps the most important contour is that which distinguishes the major national organizations—the environmental establishment, as it were—from a rather inchoate, hard-to-measure grassroots.

Environment, Incorporated

One gets some sense of the challenges confronting environmentalism in an April 2001 investigative series by *Sacramento Bee* reporter Tom Knudson, entitled "Environment, Inc." In it, Knudson describes some of the less pleasant aspects of public interest advocacy, among them the constant fundraising, the bureaucratic tendencies of large organizations with professional staff and well-paid executives, and conflicts between national environmental groups and local activists. Knudson's summation is damning:

Put the pieces together and you find a movement estranged from its past, one that has come to resemble the commercial

Although environmental organizations have accomplished many stirring and important victories over the years, today groups prosper while the land does not. Competition for money and members is keen. Litigation is a blood sport. Crisis, real or not, is a commodity. And slogans and sound bites masquerade as scientific fact. "National environmental organizations, I fear, have grown away from the grass roots to mirror the foxes they had been chasing," said environmental author Michael Frome. "They seem to me to have turned tame, corporate and compromising."⁵⁷

Knudson is a bit unfair. After all, the foes that environmentalists face often are better financed, are aligned with huge corporations, and don't hesitate to create "front" organizations with environment-friendly names, nor do they shy away from using lawsuits or junk science to get their way. Moreover, he glosses over the need for environmentalists to maintain an active presence at the national level, where the laws and regulations are made. Nevertheless, the *Sacramento Bee* series spread over the Internet, with predictable results. Newspaper editorialists across the country used it to rap environmental groups on the knuckles, whereas friendlier critics worried about a movement gone astray. More telling, conservative western Republicans with ties to extractive industries such as mining and timber latched onto the series to demand an investigation into the fund-raising practices and salaries paid to executives of the national groups.⁵⁸

Whatever their merits, the issues Knudson raised highlight the challenges facing major environmental organizations. Most of all, the problem is one of money: how to get it, how to spend it, and how getting and spending affect the organization itself. The need for money in order to pose credible challenges to governments and major corporations is certain, but the pressure to generate it often makes the groups look bad and creates the impression they have compromised on their ideals in the process.⁵⁹

What is the alternative? After all, expecting environmental organizations to take vows of poverty is tantamount to asking them to practice unilateral disarmament. For the major groups, a constant tension exists between organizational maintenance and pursuit of goals, a conflict that always breeds internal dissent, leadership turnover, and member defections to newer and more ideologically pristine (albeit poorer) groups. Groups such as the National Audubon Society and the Sierra Club struggle to balance the practical need to play a forceful role in national politics with the idealism essential to motivating their most dedicated members. The "Environment, Inc." tag hung on them hits close to home insofar as they rely on direct mail and other tools to maintain the huge memberships and big budgets needed to play the conventional lobbying game (Table 4-2). Doing so naturally pressures the organizations to weigh the budgetary effects of issue positions and tactics, and, to some degree, to stay respectable so that their middle-class supporters feel that annual dues are wisely spent. Size also creates pressures toward efficiency and rational decision making, organizational virtues that conflict with environmentalism's core values of decentralization and democratic governance.⁶⁰

Table 4-2 Membership Trends of Selected National Environmental Organizations

Group	Website	Year Founded	Year				Budget (in millions)
			1970	1980	1990	2000	
Sierra Club	www.sierraclub.org	1892	113,000	181,000	630,000	642,000	\$69.3
National Audubon Society	www.audubon.org	1905	148,000	400,000	600,000	550,000	\$58.4
National Parks Conservation Assoc.	www.npca.org	1919	45,000	31,000	100,000	450,000	\$16.6
Izaak Walton League	www.iwla.org	1922	54,000	52,000	50,000	50,000	\$3.5
Wilderness Society	www.tws.org	1935	54,000	45,000	350,000	200,000	\$14.3
National Wildlife Federation ^a	www.nwf.org	1936	3,100,000	4,000,000	5,800,000	4,000,000	\$114.8
Defenders of Wildlife	www.defenders.org	1947	13,000	50,000	80,000	425,000	\$17.1
Nature Conservancy	www.tnc.org	1951	22,000	80,000	600,000	1,029,000	\$88.5
World Wildlife Fund—U.S. ^b	www.worldwildlife.org	1961	n/a	n/a	940,000	1,200,000	\$89.7
Environmental Defense (Fund)	www.edf.org	1967	11,000	46,000	200,000	300,000	\$32.2
Friends of the Earth	www.foc.org	1969	6,000	25,000	9,000	10,000	\$4.3
Environmental Action ^c		1970	10,000	20,000	23,000	0	0
League of Conservation Voters	www.lcv.org	1970	n/a	35,000	25,000	40,000	\$3.1
Natural Resources Defense Council	www.nrdc.org	1970	n/a	40,000	150,000	400,000	\$33.7
Greenpeace USA	www.greenpeaceusa.org	1971	n/a	250,000	2,350,000	350,000	\$13.5

Source: Annual reports; *Guidestar.org*; Ronald Shaiko, *Voices and Echoes for the Environment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999): 40–43; Tom Knudsen, "Environment, Inc." *Sacramento Bee*, April 22, 2001; *Public Interest Profiles* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press); *Encyclopedia of Associations* (Detroit: Gale Research).
 Note: Membership figures are rounded and are best-guess approximations based on conflicting data, nonuniform reporting dates, and rather elastic definitions as to what constitutes a "member" or regular contributor. Budget data are for operating expenses for the most recent fiscal year available. n/a = not available.
^aUntil the mid-1990s the NWF made a distinction between "regular" dues-paying members (around 997,000 in 1990) and "associate" members, mostly millions of school-children enrolled in NWF educational programs. It now conflates the two, but based on past ratios there are probably around 900,000 regular dues-paying members in 2000, maybe fewer.
^bThe World Wildlife Fund did not begin to actively recruit dues-paying members until the early 1980s. It had 175,000 members in 1985.
^cEnvironmental Action ceased operations in 1996.

These tensions are all the more acute because of growing perceptions about the environmental lobby's limited success in recent years. Part of this unease is due to the more intractable nature of third-generation problems such as global warming, but part of it relates to the expectations put on environmental groups themselves. Defenders of Wildlife, for example, can mobilize supporters to stop anti-environmental riders in Congress (see chapter 6), just as the Sierra Club deploys its lawyers to fight off new "takings" claims in the courts (see chapter 7). Yet can either prove its multimillion-dollar budget and hundreds of staff produced meaningful environmental gains? For all its media-savvy protest tactics, can Greenpeace show it has made the world a better place given a widespread belief—fostered by environmentalists themselves—that things are getting worse? In short, the national groups are struggling to show supporters that they are getting a good return on their investment.

This sense of unease is all the more telling because the mainstream environmental lobby is established, respected (if not necessarily feared), and sophisticated. The once-scruffy vanguard of a movement has matured into professional advocacy, as it always does.⁶¹ However, as environmental journalist Mark Dowie argues, the image of insider clout belies a reality that environmentalists continue to be outgunned by industry lobbyists and by the millions in campaign contributions that flow into Congress from corporate PACs.⁶² Add to this the frustration of playing a constant game of defense in federal government venues increasingly controlled by their foes, and one gets a sense of the source of the current round of self-examination.

Yet such critiques miss an important point about pressure politics in the United States. The national groups are environmentalism's flagships, organizations with the resources and expertise necessary to stand up to governments; go toe-to-toe with entrenched economic interests; pursue complex lawsuits in the courts; and offer financial and technical assistance to activists in local, state, and, increasingly, international arenas. Somebody has to play these roles because, whether the purists like it or not, that is the way the system works.⁶³ Warts and all, the major national groups are essential to environmental advocacy.

For their part, the major organizations operate within a political context that forces them to grow and be more professional, or die. They are the key players in what has become, to use a term coined by political scientists Grant Jordan and William Maloney, the American environmental "protest business," the organizational infrastructure that is the heir to the "movement" of old.⁶⁴ As such they can be like the Sierra Club and juggle idealism with a need to be a major player in the political game, or like Environmental Action, the perpetually underfunded organizer of the first Earth Day that refused to alter its ideals or ways of operating. The Sierra Club thrives despite endless internal bickering over its mission and organizational style; Environmental Action folded in 1996.⁶⁵

Without dismissing the points raised by Knudson, it is also clear that organizations like the Sierra Club or the National Audubon Society are always going to be found wanting. Because they promote social values that clash with

the core tenets of American orthodoxy, in particular unfettered private property rights and free-market capitalism, they are open to attack from conservatives and their well-heeled allies in industry and private property rights groups. At the same time, the pressures of organizational maintenance and the need to participate in regular politics leave the groups open to critique from their most ardent activists, many of whom profess deeper shades of green values than the organization's leaders are comfortable selling to their middle-class donors.

In this regard, it is instructive that environmentalism's fastest growing sector is dedicated less to changing the national landscape than to buying it.⁶⁶ Groups such as the Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited, and Conservation International—as well as state-level conservancies such as the 30,000-member Trustees of Reservations in Massachusetts—usually purchase the land or the development rights to it on the open market, so that their actions do not confront core societal values. Moreover, it is easier to show success: dollars donated translate into acres purchased or otherwise saved through conservation restrictions. Not surprisingly, these groups have greater access to corporate and foundation support, tend to have lower overhead costs, and are relatively uncontroversial. The Nature Conservancy alone reaped \$445 million in donations in fiscal year 2000, putting it in the top ten of all nonprofit recipients of private support.⁶⁷

This fact reminds us about the real differences among environmental organizations. Centrist organizations such as the Nature Conservancy will thrive even in tough times because their agendas do not directly threaten core values, whereas so-called science-and-law organizations such as Environmental Defense can still promote their ability to work with corporations to achieve common goals. Neither is likely to discomfort their middle-class donors, and they are even likely to find favor with free-market conservatives. By contrast, left-leaning groups such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth are likelier to be buffeted by political and economic waves because they challenge the status quo. More intriguing, amidst collaboration against common foes there is competition—even conflict—over goals, tactics, and, of course, money, belying the carefully cultivated image of a unified environmental establishment. If there is no longer a movement in the classic sense of the term, there are plenty of established advocates for environmental values. They are not alike, and they don't always agree with one another. Nobody should find this at all surprising or alarming. Problems aside, the mere existence of a wide array of well-supported national organizations is evidence of the health of environmental advocacy in the United States.

Which Grassroots?

When talking about the purported failures of the environmental establishment, critics of all stripes invariably use as a contrast the grassroots, a supposedly purer, more local, and less bureaucratic face of environmentalism. To judge from media and scholarly accounts, there seems tremendous vibrancy at the local level.⁶⁸

However, one is left wondering, Is there really a there, there? Political scientist Robert Putnam, in his magisterial assessment of the health of social capital in the United States, characterizes the major national organizations—what he terms social movement organizations—as comprising a “defensive light air force, not a massed infantry for change.”⁶⁹ What is missing, Putnam argues, is a deep, active, and growing environmental grassroots. In fact, he concludes, “The only systematic evidence I have found on trends in conservation and environmental organizations at the state and local level and on environmental activism tends to suggest a *decline* over the last several decades.”⁷⁰ Bosso, in earlier versions of this chapter, has argued that the environmental grassroots is both active and growing. However, based on a reexamination of the literature (and having discussed the matter with Putnam), evidence on the scope and potency of grassroots environmentalism does seem less than systematic. There is, to be sure, an environmental grassroots worthy of the name, but its dimensions and impacts are less well understood.

It is essential to distinguish between two types of grassroots. The first is organized and maintained by the major national organizations, traditionally by geographic chapter. Indeed, the most active sector of the environmental grassroots may be its most conservative: hunters and anglers who join local chapters of the national sportsman or wildlife organizations such as the Izaak Walton League, or bird watchers who still comprise the active mass of most National Audubon Society chapters.

Other nationally organized grassroots exist mostly in cyberspace. The Rainforest Action Network (RAN), for example, was originally a virtual organization that used electronic campaigns to generate faxes to corporate leaders as it targeted the brand images of companies whose actions or products harmed the environment. RAN purportedly deployed more than 3,500 electronic activists in 2000, but the probability that these individuals forwarded copies of RAN’s e-mail messages to friends and fellow activists magnifies the group’s outreach—and impact—beyond what numbers alone imply.⁷¹ RAN used one such campaign to organize protests (both online and physical) against Home Depot, the nation’s largest home-improvement chain, until it agreed to stop selling lumber harvested from endangered forests in the United States and abroad.⁷²

A more typical virtual grassroots is organized by Environmental Defense, which for most of its history relied on lawsuits, cost-benefit analyses, and negotiated settlements with corporations, not local activism. With the Internet, however, Environmental Defense has developed its own grassroots. Its Scorecard Web site (www.scorecard.org) pairs databases with mapping technology to enable residents to find out about local pollution threats, a right-to-know element essential for energizing local action.⁷³ Scorecard also provides a mechanism by which Environmental Defense can send e-mail alerts, and its Action Network purportedly has enrolled thousands of supporters to contact policymakers on fast-breaking issues.⁷⁴ Scorecard also offers moderated discussion boards, directories of local environmental groups, and an interface that enables local groups to set up their

own gateways to the tools available on the Web site. Environmental Defense is not going to develop local chapters any time soon, but with the Internet it can mobilize supporters in a political context when doing so is necessary to claim any clout with policymakers.⁷⁵

Beyond these nationally organized grassroots the picture is less clear. Local preservation groups and land trusteeships seem to be thriving for the same reasons as the Nature Conservancy, as are local and regional outdoors groups such as the Appalachian Mountain Club, but their orientations fall short of the mantle of social transformation usually placed on grassroots activism. And certainly there is a fair degree of activity at the true grassroots, whether we mean activists protesting against logging in California’s old-growth forests, a neighborhood watch group fighting illegal dumping, or a home-grown Web site dedicated to reintroducing wolves into the forests of northern New England. Even anecdotal evidence suggests that thousands of Americans are organized into hundreds of organizations of varying size, structure, and longevity around causes such as environmental justice (see chapter 11), animal rights, and environmentally sound agriculture.

Such activism reflects deeply held values, and these activists made up the core of the Green Party vote in 2000. They are important not so much for their numbers, which are difficult to pinpoint, but because of their beliefs and willingness to act. This is the original movement’s legacy. If the environmental establishment is important to safeguarding existing progress, the more inchoate grassroots is critical to pushing the envelope, for seeking new rights and more progress. Out of their activism new movements emerge.

So what are we to make of the grassroots? In some respects it exists as a duality. Its largest and most structured part, organized and maintained by the national organizations, is largely a passive resource to be called upon as part of an overall lobbying strategy. The other part—less organized, even atomistic—contains much of the zeal that drives environmentalism onward. There is, furthermore, synergy at work: the national organizations provide needed resources and expertise; the local activists supply the foot soldiers. Heeding Putnam’s call, more systematic study is needed to understand the contours of these grassroots.

The Uncertain Road Ahead

Before September 11, environmentalists struggled to ward off unwelcome changes in national environmental policy. To be sure, a Republican Congress and Bush presidency, not to mention the prospect of additional conservative administrative and judicial appointments, probably helped environmental organizations recruit new supporters and beef up fund-raising. However, lack of control over the national agenda and the loss of sympathetic ears throughout much of the federal establishment raise serious questions about the efficacy of the Washington strategy. Yet there is no choice. Otherwise, the environmental community would lose much of its capacity to keep tabs on the national and state governments, pursue independent

research or legal action, or simply raise hell. Conventional politics cannot transform, but it is still necessary.

This said, the aftermath of September 11 has emphasized the need for environmentalists to shape the agenda of public discourse at all levels, local to international. Their opponents have not hesitated to use the tragedy to promote their own ends; hence, environmentalists need to transform it into stronger arguments about the importance of greener values across the board. Because the average citizen, if the data presented above are any indication, is willing to be convinced, environmentalists need to press their arguments more forcefully and artfully than ever. Within challenge, there is opportunity.

Moreover, the national environmental groups will need to expand their already substantial efforts to create, cultivate, and mobilize their grassroots. If some major organizations can be criticized for considering supporters as little more than passive check-writers, the clout and resiliency of their opponents underscores the degree to which the environmental establishment needs to reach down to and shape the debate at the most local of all levels. It is hard work, but it is necessary to create the kind of effective ground force that gives advocacy its ultimate punch.

How much or for how long the effects of September 11 will shift the political terrain is anyone's guess. Its effects may be as momentary as those of the Gulf War and economic recession of the early 1990s, but the evidence to date suggests that its impact is likely to be more profound, more lasting. Americans awoke to a changed political landscape on September 12, and environmentalists will have to more effectively promote their values within it.

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