

Climate Change as Symbolic Politics in the United States

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Political debate is replete with of political symbols. Cobb and Elder (1983) define a symbol as: “any object used by human beings to index meanings that are not inherent in, nor discernible from, the object itself. Literally anything can be a symbol: a word or a phrase, a gesture or an event, a person, a place, or a thing. An object becomes a symbol when people endow it with meaning value or significance.” Consequently, political symbols play an important role in politics: defined as bargaining, negotiation and compromise in pursuit of shared interests -- and also in policy: the securing of a commitment to a course of action. Social science has a long tradition of research into the social and political context of collective action. Gunnell (1968) argued that one purpose of such research is “illuminating the symbolic context that gives meaning to social action.”

Political debate over climate policy has long been characterized by a rich symbolic context. In this essay, I discuss the symbolic politics of climate change in the United States, with particular attention to the symbolism wielded by President Donald J. Trump. I argue that advocates for action on climate policy need to become more sensitized to the symbolic elements of climate politics in order to become more effective in securing effective policy action.

In political discourse symbols can be referential and/or condensational (Sapir 1934). Referential symbols are “economical devices for purposes of reference.” They are primarily tools of communication. So each of the following are examples of a referential symbol -- %, X, Sushi, etc. The second type of symbol distinguished by Sapir, condensational, holds “emotional tension in conscious or unconscious form.” Examples of such symbols would include a national flag and the name of a favoured athlete, such as Leo Messi. These symbols communicate far more than a simple referent, but carry with them emotional meaning. One cannot help but have emotions triggered upon encountering a condensational symbol, such as a raised middle finger or a swastika. Symbols matter.

In some respects, public opinion on climate change in the United States has changed little over the past 30 years. For instance, in 1989 according to Gallup, a leading polling organization, 63% of Americans expressed a great deal or fair amount of personal worry about climate change.¹ In 2017 this number was 66%, or just about the same. In this long time series, the proportion of Americans worried about climate change has gone up and down at various times, but offers no trend. From this

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¹ The question specifically posed is: “how much do you personally worry about Global Warming or Climate Change?” [http://www.gallup.com/file/poll/206036/170314_ClimateChange%20\(Trends\).pdf](http://www.gallup.com/file/poll/206036/170314_ClimateChange%20(Trends).pdf)

perspective, the long battle over climate change hasn't had much effect in the United States, at least in terms of this particular measure of public opinion.

There has however been one significant change in US public opinion on climate change over recent decades: The issue has become highly partisan, and increasingly so. In 2000, according to Gallup, a partisan gap had already opened up between Republicans and Democrats, with 46% of Democrats reporting that they, and just 29% of Republicans. That 17% gap had widened to 48% by 2017 – 66% Democrats and 18% Republicans worrying a “great deal” about global warming or climate change. Even as overall levels of worry showed no trend, that data hides the fact that the issue has become much more polarized along partisan lines.

Dan Kahan (2013) offers an explanation of the underlying dynamics: “The striking convergence of items measuring perceptions of global warming risk and like facts, on the one hand, and ones measuring political outlooks, on the other, suggests they are all indicators of a single latent variable. The established status of political outlooks as indicators of cultural identity supports the inference that that is exactly what that latent variable is. . . In sum, whether people “believe in” climate change, like whether they “believe in” evolution, expresses who they are.” In short, “climate change” has become a potent political symbol in American politics, reflecting partisan commitments and cultural affinities that serves to obscure and complicate debate over policy alternatives.

Donald Trump has arguably exploited the symbols of the climate issue to his political advantage. For instance, in March 2017 at the headquarters of the US Environmental Protection Agency – the federal government body responsible for regulating carbon dioxide – President Trump held a ceremony recognizing coal miners as he signed an Executive Order.² In his remarks he stated:

“I want to acknowledge the truly amazing people behind me on this stage: our incredible coal miners. (Applause.) We love our coal miners. Great people. . . The miners told me about the attacks on their jobs and their livelihoods. They told me about the efforts to shut down their mines, their communities, and their very way of life. I made them this promise: We will put our miners back to work.”

This stands in stark contrast to the language used by Hillary Clinton during the 2016 campaign in which she promised to focus on creating a clean energy economy, and in a televised debate said:

“we’re going to put a lot of coal miners and coal companies out of business. . . And we’re going to make it clear that we don’t want to forget those people. Those people labored in those mines for generations, losing their health, often losing their lives to turn on our lights and power our factories. Now we’ve got to move away from coal and all the other fossil fuels, but I don’t want to move away from the people who did the best they could to produce the energy that we

² <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/03/28/remarks-president-trump-signing-executive-order-create-energy>

relied on.”³

There is a clear symbolic difference between Trump referring to “our coal miners” who he “loves” and Clinton’s reference to “those people” who “did the best they could.” The difference could not be more profound.

Clinton’s characterization no doubt appealed to rich, urban voters already concerned more about climate change and far from coal mining country, whereas Trump’s would be more appealing to the working class (and not just coal miners), particularly in rural areas, and those already predisposed against climate change. In this way, both of these politicians exploited the climate issue to serve political purposes, appealing to their constituencies. The use of the climate change in this fashion reinforced the symbolic significance of the topic as a “wedge issue” in American politics, so named because it serves as a “wedge” used to divide groups against one another.

Consider another example. The figure below is a “word cloud” created from the remarks given by President Obama in the White House Rose Garden on October 15, 2016 announcing that the United States had formally joined the Paris Climate Agreement.⁴



Aside from Paris and Agreement, the three most common words used by president Obama were World, Carbon and Climate.

Let’s contrast this with a “word cloud” created from President Trump’s June 1, 2017 remarks announcing his intention for the United States to withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement.⁵

³ <http://cnnpressroom.blogs.cnn.com/2016/03/13/full-rush-transcript-hillary-clinton-partcnn-tv-one-democratic-presidential-town-hall/>

⁴ <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/10/05/remarks-president-paris-agreement>
The Word Cloud was created with WordItOut.com.

⁵ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/06/01/statement-president-trump-paris-climate-accord>
The Word Cloud was created with WordItOut.com.



The three most common words used by President Trump (after Paris and Agreement) were United, States, and America.

Looking at the two “word clouds,” the two presidents would seem to be talking about different issues, instead of the exact same policy. The reason for this stark difference is that the issue of climate change is a powerful political symbol, and each President was characterizing the Paris Agreement using very different symbols. Words used by Trump but not by Obama included jobs and economic/economy. In contrast, Obama used World and Nations, but Trump did not. Here as well, the climate issue was used by these politicians to appeal to a subset of Americans. Very little effort it seems is expended in the debate to build a coalition of support across party lines. As such, the climate issue in the United States has come to be a tool of politics, rather than politics serving as the process through which the issue is addressed via policy.

The lessons here are clear. United States’ climate policy is highly uncertain, mainly because it is a partisan issue and US political situation is fluid. A return to Democratic leadership in the White House might see the Trump approach similarly overturned, as with the Obama approach. At the same time, because of the focus on political symbolism over policy substance, there is a real possibility that Trump Administration ultimately does not matter much for U.S. climate policies. Instead, larger trends likely to continue to dominate (e.g., markets, prices, technology, etc.).

The question for those interested in policy to accelerate decarbonization of the US and global economies is similarly clear: Can the issue be de-politicized for 2020 and beyond in order to better focus on policy over politics? Or is climate change to remain primarily a political symbol?

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Writer's Profile

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He served as Director of the Center for Science and Technology Policy Research at the University of Colorado Boulder from 2001 to 2007 and from 2013 to 2016. He was a visiting scholar at Oxford University's Saïd Business School in the 2007-2008 academic year. His interests include understanding the politicization of science; decision making under uncertainty; policy education for scientists in areas such as climate change, disaster mitigation, and world trade; and professional sports.