

Politics and the Environment in the U.S.: An Introduction

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I'm going to start by talking about politics in general for a moment. I ran for Congress ten times, won nine times, and lost the last time. Then, as they say, "One door closes and another door opens." I became Secretary of the Department of Agriculture (USDA) with responsibility for farm programs, the Forest Service, the federal nutrition program, food stamps, school lunch, school breakfast, meat inspection, poultry inspection and all sorts of things. But my heart has always been in politics. I am now Director of the Institute of Politics at Harvard, a program that was established by the Kennedy family after John F. Kennedy died. The Institute aims to inspire young people – both at Harvard and around the country – to pursue politics and public service. We encourage people to understand that the political system is relevant to their lives. Whether they run for office or not, we want them to see that they can, in fact, have a role in changing the world, that it does make a difference, and that they should become engaged in the political process.

This upcoming presidential election will be very hard fought and will be very close. The country is split 50-50 – in terms of population, demographics, and the electoral college. So any issue – whether it's environment, health care, taxes, or foreign policy – may be critical in influencing this presidential election because it will be *that* close. The public is *that* divided. The Congress is *that* divided.

Today we're talking about an issue that the polls indicate is not the highest priority issue in people's minds. However, selectively and on a targeted basis, I believe that environmental issues will be very significant in certain key states and among certain constituencies.

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POLITICAL EXPERIENCES AT USDA

At USDA I had some involvement in environmental issues while running the Forest Service. I addressed issues such as farmland protection, private land conservation, and genetic engineering.

But during my tenure at the Department of Agriculture, I was the most assaulted member of the Clinton cabinet. In fact, I was probably the most assaulted member of any cabinet since the Second World War. Three incidents come to mind, and all of them involve environmental issues to some degree.

The first incident occurred while I was leading the American delegation at a World Food Summit in Rome. We were discussing international hunger, and genetically modified organisms (GMOs) had become a big issue. The Europeans were very much opposed to the use of GMOs, as was the rest of the world to some extent. I was on the podium at a news conference, and a whole group of people in the first two rows stripped naked and threw genetically modified soybeans at me and everybody else on the podium. On their bodies was written, “the naked truth” and “no ‘gene beans.’” Of course, I didn’t look. It was my first real experience observing the intensity of people regarding this particular issue. In a sense, it was kind of a “pre-globalization demonstration.”

Shortly thereafter, I was in Yellowstone National Park and we were discussing a disease called brucellosis, which affects buffalo and can affect cattle. The policies of the Park Service resulted in an excess of buffalo leaving the park and grazing in private grazing areas in Montana and Wyoming. Some of these animals had brucellosis. The cattle ranching community was concerned that the privately owned cattle could be contracting the disease themselves. USDA’s Animal Damage Control Unit was helping the states remove some of these diseased animals from circulation. We had a meeting with about 500 people who were upset about this treatment. I was there with the Governor of Montana, the two senators from Montana, and the two senators from Wyoming. All of a sudden, a woman came down from the audience carrying a big giant pot in her hands. I asked her, “What’s this?” She started yelling, “You’re killing my brothers! You’re killing my sisters!” I looked at Senator Burns from Montana, who is an old, crusty conservative (an ex-auctioneer), and asked, “What’s she talking

about?” He responded, “We’re in trouble. She thinks she’s related to the animals.” And the woman proceeded to throw brucellosis-infected bison guts at me and all the other federal officials on the podium. There were intestines all over our laps and everything else, and all I kept thinking was, “Why did I take this job?”

The final straw was at a National Nutrition Summit about a year later in Washington, DC. There were a thousand people in the room. We were talking about dietary guidelines, the food guide pyramid – issues that are very much in the news right now. A woman started coming up the center aisle toward the stage and she was carrying something that looked like a pizza. She was screaming, “Glickman, you’re nothing but a pimp for the meat industry.” She proceeded to throw a tofu cream pie at me – which grazed me as I turned my back, but landed in the lap of Donna Shalala, the Secretary of Health and Human Services. Bob Dole and George McGovern were both on the platform because they were very involved in nutrition issues. I didn’t know what to say. I turned to Dole and said, “Bob, I don’t think we’re in Kansas any longer.”

My point in all of this is not only that this was a dangerous line of work, but that the issues of food and agriculture – including the environmental consequences of these activities – have raised the blood pressure of many people in this country and throughout the world, and they will continue to do so.

POLLING DATA

I’d like to start addressing these critical environmental issues here by focusing on polling data. In the 2004 Iowa caucus, environmental issues were either not mentioned by people in the exit polls or were ranked very low. However, there is a real difference of opinion among voters on these issues – and those opinions vary in different parts of the country. I don’t think that the environment necessarily plays as a monumental national issue. But it does play as a very significant and divisive wedge issue regionally and with certain groups of voters. For example, in certain swing states like Washington, Oregon, and Florida (and there are many, many others) – whether the issue is mining, timbering, sugar issues, or the Everglades – environmental issues can be significant.

Where there are specific environmental issues in a particular area that motivate voters, these issues may become very powerful wedges between the pro-environment community and, for example, the industrial or the agricultural community.

One example is in Washington State, where the U.S. Senate race between Maria Cantwell, a Democrat, and Slade Gordon was largely decided on Cantwell's hammering Senator Gordon, a Republican, on mining issues and timbering issues. While the State of Washington tends to be more liberal and pro-environment on many national issues, it recently has elected both Democrats and Republicans to Congress. Cantwell was able to capitalize on environmental issues in a swing state and attract many middle-of-the-road and moderate Republican and suburban voters.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN DEMOCRATS AND REPUBLICANS

Environmental issues expose some of the most striking differences between Democrats and Republicans. The impression persists that Republicans are assisting corporate interests on a variety of issues, including clean air, clean water, the Artic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), rollbacks on clean water protections through a voluntary self-regulatory approach, rollbacks on administrative protections on land, and support for the timber industry. The Bush administration typically is perceived as aligning itself with lawsuits filed by industry, and this certainly has been the case with regard to the Forest Service. The administration is viewed by its critics as using the courts to dismantle environmental protections – sometimes under the radar.

These are issues that separate the Republicans from the Democrats in the minds of many citizens and certainly in the eyes of the political activists. These issues will be presented in this campaign as evidence of the Republicans knuckling under to the power of special interests, economic interests, and powerful interests of the status quo. Another example of this, of course, is the Kyoto climate change treaty and the Bush administration's unilateral decision not to comply. The Republicans have been very sensitive to this.

Frank Luntz, who is a very famous Republican pollster and former Fellow at the Institute of Politics, wrote a memo for the Republican Party that addresses the core of the Democratic argument on the environment. In this memo, he asserts that Democrats believe that “Washington regulations represent the best way to protect the environment. We don’t agree.” Then he proceeds to offer an argument for how Republicans can articulate the position that they aren’t the “anti” party to the environment – that they are, in fact, the party of balance and the party of science. He asserts that the Republican Party needs to support the preservation and application of good science. The memo is extremely interesting because it is defensive. It recognizes that Republicans are susceptible to losing a fairly significant number of targeted suburban Republican voters who care about environmental issues.

Quite frankly, I have to give the Republicans kudos. I think the Luntz memo is better than a lot of material that the Democrats have put out on the other side. Democrats tend to lash out, almost capriciously, by lumping all Republicans together as anti-environmentalists and captives of special interests without carefully articulating their own position.

I raise this point because it is part of a broader theme that the Democrats are likely to use during this presidential election year to show that the Republicans are broadly beholden to special interests. Democrats seem intent on using environmental issues and the Republicans’ anti-environmental extremism as a way to focus on swing voters, particularly in higher-income, suburban districts. The Democrats aim to sway these voters by demonstrating that on these issues, the Republican Party is extreme, it’s on the edge, and it doesn’t represent the mainstream. As this strategy plays out, perhaps Democrats can siphon off enough voters in those areas to make a difference in the electoral votes of that particular state.

You can already see some of this happening on the Congressional level. For example, there do still exist some Republicans in this country who categorize themselves as pro-environment. Jennifer Dunn, a Washington State Republican, is an interesting person to watch.

Congresswoman Dunn is a suburban Republican and part of the Republican leadership in the House. She has repeatedly been pressured by her constituents to take a pro-environment stance on issues where the rest of the Republican leadership has encouraged her to vote the other direction. Senator Norm Coleman (R-MN), who was elected to succeed Senator Paul Wellstone, also equivocated for a while on ANWR before the environmental community in Minnesota and around the country reminded him of the pledges that he previously made on that issue.

ENVIRONMENT AS A WEDGE ISSUE

Despite the overall Democratic strength on environmental issues, these subjects can also be a trap for some Democrats. This is particularly the case in individual states. For example, the Clean Air Act debate over emission levels is an issue that tends to drive a wedge between the steel community and the environmental community. As such, clean air is an issue that bears watching in states like West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. These are states where manufacturing jobs are being lost at a very rapid rate for other reasons (such as “going offshore” to reduce labor costs).

In my judgment, if the Republicans are smart, they will try to use the cost of environmental regulation as an issue and as an antidote to the job loss argument that is likely to be made by some Democrats. That strategy will deflect criticism made by the Democrats that these job losses are due to the mistakes of George Bush’s economic policy.

The auto industry also poses significant challenges for politicians attempting to weigh industry and environmental concerns. One of the biggest and strongest Congressional opponents of increased fuel economy standards is John Dingell of Michigan. John Dingell is the senior member of the House of Representatives and a progressive member of Congress who has generally been one of the strongest opponents of President Bush’s economic programs. But he is from Detroit. He and the auto companies – and to some extent the United

Auto Workers – have joined forces in fighting what they believe are, at times, unreasonable fuel economy standards. Similar conflicts erupt in the states of Missouri, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and, to some extent, California. These states have lost an enormous number of jobs in the auto industry over the past several years. Democrats who champion higher fuel economy standards must realize there is a conflict. There is a controversy of principles.

The fuel economy controversy is not impossible to deal with, but the environmental community must realize that some of these issues, if not articulated in a proper way, can feed into the belief system that Democrats, progressives, and environmentalists are not interested in preserving a strong industrial workforce in this country.

In the area of agriculture, I dealt with this all the time. There's probably no community in America that is, in its "gut," more suspicious of the environmental community than farmers. Part of this has to do with the fact that farmers are very suspect of government generally – even though they do receive many resources from the government in the form of farm subsidy payments. But there's a feeling that when Uncle Sam comes in to tell them what to do, the government representatives are uninformed, have never spent a day of their life on a farm, and don't understand the difficulties of farming and agriculture. What you find is that large farm organizations tend to fight pesticide policies, reasonable water use, and related issues. As Secretary of Agriculture, I tried to do my best to see if the Department could balance these issues and provide a means to reduce conflict – not to make everybody happy, but to make everybody believe that we were acting reasonably.

We've lost almost three million jobs since President Bush has been in office. Most of these are manufacturing jobs. My gut tells me that the Bush administration does not have a lot of evidence that what they're doing is necessarily working very

well in curbing the loss of jobs. So, the best defense is a good offense – and my guess is that they will go on the offensive by saying that these jobs were lost because of clean air standards and other environmental requirements.

LOCAL INITIATIVES

There are some other environmental issues I think are worth discussing. They include protecting farmland, curbing urban sprawl, and trying to maintain a rural and agricultural resource base. It's interesting that local conservation initiatives – open space initiatives, anti-sprawl initiatives, and farmland protection ballot initiatives – have been approved all over the country. On November 4th of this last year, there were 64 ballot initiatives protecting parks and open space approved by voters, committing about a billion and a half dollars. These 64 successful initiatives were out of a pool of 77 initiatives nationwide, which is a success rate of about 83 percent. So, at the local level, there is no reluctance to spend money where necessary to protect open space and to protect parks and farmland. This is a major policy issue around the country, and it's something I think federal policymakers should be aware of.

While the Congress has been reluctant to approve new wilderness, new parks, and related initiatives, county commissioners, state governors, and local units of government have aggressively gone ahead and approved these particular measures. Maybe we can learn something from how those local farmland protection measures are done.

AGRICULTURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

There are several areas in agriculture and the environment that are interesting to discuss for their political implications.

One is factory farming. I use that term because much of agriculture today is industrialized agriculture. Virtually all livestock production is industrial today. Most beef is produced in large “hotels” for cows, sometimes 100,000 cattle in one place. This number of cows produces a lot of waste – both manure as well as water waste. This is one of many implications of the consolidation and centralization of agriculture in America and around the world today. The government has taken some action to try to help reduce the environmental implications of factory farming. However, in certain states (for example, Iowa and North Carolina) where there is a lot of poultry and dairy production, these issues still need to be addressed and considered from a public policy perspective.

Another issue is sugar. I will mention it briefly because it involves only one or two states. Some of you have followed closely the environmental issues affecting the Everglades. This was a big topic for Vice President Gore in the last presidential election, and it’s an issue that Governor Bush in Florida has dealt with in a way that is akin to trying to “cut the baby in half,” so to speak. Our sugar policy in America protects the sugar producers by giving them high prices and restricting imports of low-cost foreign sugar. This encourages the production of sugar at home that wouldn’t otherwise be produced here – it would be produced in the Caribbean or in Africa or other parts of the world. Sugar production has significant environmental impacts and needs to be addressed by policymakers. For this reason, it is an issue that may be a big concern in Florida and perhaps Louisiana in the next presidential election.

Another big issue is water, generally. Almost 90 percent of the water in the world is used for agriculture. Only 10 to 15 percent of the water is potable (used for drinking). Virtually all the water that’s used anywhere in the world is used to grow crops. In our country, we have seen water tables – particularly in the vast heartland area of America – fall rather rapidly. This area is where most of the corn is grown in this country and industrialized agriculture relies on water very heavily for irrigation. This is a tremendous public policy issue that, for the first time, will pit urban and consumer interests against agriculture

interests. I don't know if these water issues are going to play a big part in the next presidential election or not, but they may be significant in California, New Mexico, Texas, and states that are concerned about water usage issues.

The last issue I will briefly address is the environmental consequences of genetically modified foods and the new technologies of producing food. There is not as much of a debate in this country on the genetically modified organism (GMO) issue as there is in Europe. In this country, by and large, the public believes its food supply is safe. And, by and large, citizens trust their government, in its regulatory role, to maintain food safety. In the rest of the world, there are many people who believe that making genetic modifications to foods is inherently unsafe or may cause significant environmental consequences. I think this is going to grow as an issue – how we regulate and how the government is involved in legislating food production. I doubt that this will become a big issue in the next presidential election, but it may be, on a selected basis, an issue that affects some Congressional districts around the country.

CONCLUSION

In summary, I think that the environment will have some impact on the 2004 election. It will have some impact regionally with certain demographic groups, such as younger voters and suburban voters. And it may be used – in fact, it probably will be used – by the Democrats to show that the Republicans are captive to economic special interests. The danger on the Democratic side is to remain pro-environment without making it appear that Democrats are willing to risk manufacturing jobs and employment in the process.

Q & A

Q: What environmental issue do you think the American populace cares about the most?

A: I personally think that voters care a lot about clean water. I've always felt that water holds a special place in family life and anything that is done to jeopardize the safety of clean water is something that really gets people in their gut.

From an organizing perspective, clearly if you look at what the Democrats in Congress have done, ANWR has been one of the things that's been used as a rallying cry because you can combine the pristine nature of Alaska with the need to find alternative sources of energy. You've got to figure out what specific subset of issues really motivates people, and most of these are more regional than national.

Q: Do you think that some of the anti-globalization efforts and some of the coalition building that's being done between labor and environmentalists is going to help mobilize younger voters?

A: The anti-globalization movement is one of the few areas I've seen recently that's inspired young people to take political action. At Harvard, we even sent young students down to the Free Trade of the Americas Conference in Miami to teach them about political engagement. Unfortunately some of them got arrested.

Q: Why does environment rank so low in the spectrum of political priorities in this country?

A: One reason is that we've had some success over the last 50 years. The fact of the matter is that the air is better, the water's cleaner, and it's in the public mind now, so I think that's minimized it as a crisis problem. Success breeds some inaction. When Congressmen and Senators have town hall meetings, environmental issues are rarely raised. Issues in this country don't just happen, they happen because they percolate up from the public. So, the question should be, "Is there much percolating on the environment?" I suspect not a lot. I suspect that there's very little serious advocacy targeted to Senators and Congressmen in their districts. I don't know how many of you have ever gone to a town hall meeting, but if you haven't, you should. They need to hear these messages repetitively. Congressmen and Senators get so many emails and letters these days that you really need to communicate with them directly so they're listening to you. The squeaky wheel really does get the grease, and I don't think there's much squeaking on the environment anymore.

Next, I think a lot of the national environmental groups have gotten lazy, fat, and comfortable. When I was first elected to Congress, and the Sierra Club or the League of Conservation Voters ranked me, I used to get intimidated. I liked to get those 100 percent ratings, and I would therefore watch what the environmental votes were and I

would listen to what the voters were saying on those issues. I just don't think they have the clout they once did.

I also think that after nearly ten years of a Republican Congress, and perhaps a Democratic administration that didn't have this as a high priority, maybe some of them have been worn down by the whole thing.

Hamilton and de Tocqueville were talking 220 years ago and de Tocqueville asked Hamilton what made America unique. Hamilton said: "Here, sir, the people govern." The fact of the matter is that people have to start governing, and organizing, and speaking out on this issue.