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Earth Day: 50 Years of Continuity and Change in Environmentalism

Thomas Dietz1,*

1Department of Sociology and Environmental Science and Policy Program, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48864, USA
*Correspondence: tdietz@msu.edu
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In April 1970, the first Earth Day engaged millions of people in thousands of events around the US. Those events reflected the emergence of a new form of environmentalism. Many of the themes present 50 years ago persist, but in the US environmental issues have become more politically polarized, and it is unclear whether such value conflicts will persist in the future.

The spring of 1970 was a turbulent and difficult time in US politics. October and November 1969 had seen large demonstrations against the Vietnam war. The following year, on April 30, the Republican Nixon administration announced that US and South Vietnamese troops would invade neutral Cambodia. Three days later, Ohio National Guard troops fired on protestors at Kent State University, killing four and wounding nine.1 This was followed on May 15 by police firing on students at Jackson State University, killing two and wounding 12. Over 500 campuses closed, and there were other forms of protest at hundreds more. The country was deeply polarized between those who supported the war and those who opposed it, a polarization that foreshadowed splits in contemporary US politics. The first Earth Day took place on April 22 in the midst of this instability, and its campaigns and the environmental movement it birthed were inevitably influenced by the politics of the time.

The first Earth Day might very well have been the largest series of coordinated political activities in the history of the US. The organizers reported that 2,000 campuses, 2,000 communities, and 10,000 high schools held events.2 It engaged millions and garnered extensive media coverage.3 US Democratic Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin initiated Earth Day to draw attention to the growing concern with environmental issues. Nelson and his staff, with advice and support from prominent environmental scientists and environmental organization leaders and the labor movement, led the creation of the non-profit Environmental Teach-In.3 Many of the national organizers had experience in the civil rights and anti-war movements, whereas financial support for the national office came from mainstream politicians and labor unions. The idea of a “teach-in” resonated with many campus events designed to educate students, faculty, and the public about the war in Vietnam during the 1960s. The goal of Earth Day was much the same: to create grassroots-based events across the country.

An Environmental Convergence

Although the event was heavily influenced by the US politics of the time, from an environmental perspective Earth Day crystallized the convergence of several themes that would define environmentalism for the decades that followed. Since the turn of the 20th century, a conservation movement concerned with what would today be considered biodiversity had remained distinct from concerns about environmental health and exposure to toxins. But in 1962 Rachel Carson’s pathbreaking Silent Spring brought these two streams of concern together through highlighting the detrimental effect that the widely used pesticide DDT (dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane) was having on both environmental and, by extension, human well-being. At the time, diverse approaches were being offered to address environmental and other social problems. The traditional conservation and environmental health movements had focused on legislation and policy. The pacifist, counterculture, and women’s movements saw politics in daily life and promoted lifestyle and behavioral change. Some in the civil rights movements and especially the anti-war movement felt that reform and individual action could not solve societal problems and called for transformational change. Scientists were politically active and central to environmental discussions because they were able to draw on experience in mobilizing against nuclear fallout and against nuclear war, which many scientists saw as potentially catastrophic. In making their arguments to the public, many scientists assumed an “information-deficit” model—that if people understood the facts, they would take action. But importantly, there were also calls for changes in values and ethics.4

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the environmentalism of the 1960s and early 1970s was that it seemed to span the otherwise deep political divisions in the country. Republicans supported the environmental policy initiatives of the time, even as they had supported the conservation movement throughout the 20th century.5,6 Because of this bipartisanship, more environmental laws were passed in the late 1960s and early 1970s than in any other period of US history.7 The Environmental Protection Agency was created by executive order in December 1970. From 1969 to 1980, the cornerstones of US environmental policy became law, including the Endangered Species Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, and a dozen laws or amendments to laws to address pollution and toxins in the environment.

Earth Day reflected these themes. Earth Day speeches highlighted environmental justice and called for government and personal action. Critiques of population and economic growth, capitalism, consumerism, and militarism were all
prominent. Science was invoked in nearly every talk, and most events featured scientists as speakers. Many speakers invoked the idea of a looming catastrophe, and artwork produced for Earth Day often displayed severe environmental degradation or a devastated world.

Environmentalism Evolves
Although the first Earth Day might have seeded the environmental movement, the developments during the 50 years since have shifted the scope of what we consider environmentalism. As early as 1973, the global oil embargo focused attention on energy, presaging current concerns with global issues, such as greenhouse gas emissions and climate change. It was increasingly realized that regional impacts could have a global effect. Environmental concerns sparked the examination of local issues in the context of global processes, leading to an increased emphasis on teleconnections that link ecological and human systems across the planet. In 1972, the widely publicized Limits to Growth report questioned the sustainability of population and economic growth, and by the 1980s the idea of sustainability was invoked in several international calls to combine efforts to improve human well-being with efforts to reduce human stress on the environment, most notably by Our Common Future, also known as the Brundtland Report (1987). And although images of catastrophe persist, especially around climate change, starting in the 1980s many environmental problems were framed in terms of risk in an attempt to acknowledge that decisions must be made in the face of uncertainty.

Requirements for quantitative risk analysis were incorporated into many laws and regulations in the US and around the world. In the US, this shifting environmental landscape was influenced by an undercurrent of politics, and the most troubling change was a clear polarization of environmental politics. With the Reagan election in 1980, a sharp split between the left and right began to shape environmentalism. After the energy crisis, efficiency and renewables were promoted, but so was the increased use of nuclear power and fossil fuel production, initiating an initial fissure in the bipartisan alliance on environment. Advocates of deregulation and unfettered markets, the “neo-conservatives,” had a growing influence on Republican thinking.

This polarization persists today and is clearly reflected in public opinion. A substantial body of literature documents that in the US, beliefs in and concern about climate change are driven primarily by political ideology and that conservative rejection of climate change has intensified over the last few decades. Public opinion on the environment over time seems to reflect power shifts between Republicans and Democrats. A careful analysis of public opinion from 1973 to 2014 shows that having a Republican as president increases public support for the environment in what might be an expression of concern about actions that could be taken by the administrative branch. And since the 1970s, environmental legislation has been more likely during periods with a Republican as president and with Democrats in control of both houses of Congress, again apparently a defensive stance.

Worryingly, such polarization has the power to subdue the effects of massive environmental campaigns such as Earth Day. Take the “baby boom” generation (or cohort) for example. The baby boom cohort (those born 1946–1960) were mostly in college or high school in 1970 and thus experienced Earth Day activities at a crucial time in their personal development. Yet overall, this cohort is no more pro-environmental than earlier or later cohorts. However, Democrats and Independents among the baby boom cohort are notably more pro-environmental than other cohorts, whereas Republicans are not. Earth Day had an impact on baby boomers, but it was divided by political ideology.

This polarization has been driven by an active movement to resist government regulation with support from some major corporations, think tanks, and conservative billionaires. For a century, those opposing regulatory action—first on the use of lead in gasoline and then on smoking, acid precipitation, ozone depletion, and most recently climate change—have repeatedly deployed an argument that the science is too uncertain to warrant policy action. These arguments have been resonant with conservative intellectuals, politicians, and voters and have facilitated polarization. Concern for the environment is tightly linked to values and personal identity. Since Earth Day, political campaigns have sought to mobilize identity to garner support, especially by using the “us-versus-them” strategy deployed by Nixon and Reagan. This has undoubtedly facilitated the ideological split on environmentalism. So even as the scope of environmental concerns has broadened and the scientific basis for taking action has improved, the politics in the US have become increasingly difficult. In the case of climate change, although the proportion of the public who are concerned has increased over the last decade, a strong ideological split between Democrats and Republicans persists.

Environmental science has grown increasingly sophisticated in assessing critical facts and in characterizing the uncertainty in our understanding. There has also been some progress in recognizing that diverse values are in play and in finding ways to incorporate them into decision making. In particular, processes to establish a dialog between researchers and the public—those interested in or affected by a decision—are routinely advocated as an effective tool. Such processes of linked analysis and deliberation inform the science, help shape public views, and can reduce polarization. We have learned how to conduct such processes at the local level, where many environmental conflicts unfold; the challenge is to have effective dialog at the national and global levels, where the effects of polarization are so evident.

Reflecting on the Last 50 Years and the Future
Many aspects of the environmentalism that emerged around Earth Day persist today. Environmentalism and environmental research will continue to strive toward broad, integrative interdisciplinary perspectives and toward analysis that accounts for teleconnections across the globe in coupled human and natural systems. A major change has been the growing, albeit slow and incomplete, recognition that social science must be engaged. After all, it is human action that drives environmental problems and human consequences that motivate most of our concerns. Since 1970, the environmental social sciences have flourished, but the struggle to fully incorporate them...
into the environmental discourse continues to be a major and debilitating challenge.

Environmental justice and the search for ways to better integrate diverse values with scientific analysis in decision making will continue to be matters of deep concern, more so now than ever before. There is growing appreciation of the importance of indigenous and local knowledge. The information-deficit model of decision making is finally being displaced by an awareness of the need to address diverse values and the utility of linking analysis with public deliberation.

It is difficult to know whether the conservative resistance to environmental policy in the US will be a phenomenon restricted to the last half-century or whether it will persist and continue to derail these efforts. There is growing awareness that, although some corporations actively resist any action on the environment, others can instantiate substantial reforms, and those actions might lessen conservative resistance to environmental action.17 The increasing diversity of the US electorate might also dilute opposition to environmental policy given that groups whose political engagement is growing are quite pro-environmental.18 Finally, the strong response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic offers some hope about our ability to respond to scientific assessments of risk. But the ideological split on environmentalism came from well-orchestrated campaigns to shape opinion and policy, and we have not yet seen that kind of pushback around the current pandemic. So, it is hard to know whether decision making based on scientific assessment of pandemic risks will persist or whether the approach will gain traction in other domains, such as climate change.

Continuing the successes of environmentalism—an integration of science, a concern with human well-being and justice, and a recognition of the need to consider facts, values, and uncertainty—is crucial for dealing with climate and other global environmental challenges. Moreover, environmentalism can teach us important lessons as we engage the new challenges that will certainly emerge from the impacts and potentials of bio-, info-, nano-, and neuro-technologies. Research can help us understand the obstacles we face in decision making and suggest ways forward. Thus, as in 1970, we need to find ways to link scientific analysis to political action and overcome the polarization that has shaped and defined environmentalism in the US for the past half-century.

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