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Mapping the ‘Anthropocentric-Ecocentric’ Dualism in the History of American Presidency: the Good, the Bad, and the Ambivalent

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Abstract

This article examines the way that ‘anthropocentric-ecocentric’ dualism has affected the history of the American presidency since the turn of the century, with special focus on three presidents: Theodore Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan, and Barack Obama. With their contradictory environmental records, Theodore Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan are believed to stand for the two extremes on an ‘anthropocentrism-ecocentrism’ spectrum, while Barack Obama ambivalently oscillates between them. Coming to power with different agendas, Presidents Roosevelt, Reagan, and Obama each used the presidency as a bully pulpit to implement their ideological visions of nature, the environment, and economic growth in line with either ‘ecocentrism’ or ‘anthropocentrism.’ Focusing on their rhetoric and policies, this article highlights the three presidencies’ differences along the ‘anthropocentric-ecocentric’ continuum and discusses the divergence of their respective political and philosophical beliefs as well as implementation strategies. Ultimately, mapping the anthropocentric-ecocentric dualism in the history of American presidency provides a valuable insight into how this divide has been transferred from the philosophical realm to the political.

Keywords: American presidency, anthropocentrism, ecocentrism, Roosevelt, Reagan, Obama, environment, sustainability

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Introduction

It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the various attempts over recent years to initiate new approaches to development that reverse environmental degradation while catering to people's social and cultural needs worldwide. The 1960s and 1970s, in particular, witnessed a surge in public awareness of the negative environmental consequences of exponential economic growth and the high rates of consumption associated with the prevailing lifestyles in industrial countries. In addition, the last few decades of the 20th and the early 21st centuries have witnessed a steadily growing presence of the environmental issue on the global agenda. This follows important post-WWII geo-political changes, such as the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the communist bloc, which meant more room for cooperation between the two superpowers. While these transformations have been perceived as a promising inception and evolution of environmental politics based on international cooperation (Connelly & Smith, 1999; Rollin, 1988; Petesh, 1992), some observers believe that these geo-political changes have also meant some hard choices for the nation, as it struggles to keep its sovereignty intact (e.g., Sakamoto, 1994).

With the maturation and growth of the American environmental movement by the turn of the century, the concept of sustainability has gradually become the backbone of this movement's approach to ecological and developmental concerns. When conceptualizing sustainable development, however, I believe it is essential to point out that different disciplines and conflicting perspectives have resulted in diverse interpretations and many definitions of this concept. In economics, an important part of environment-development studies, for instance, human beings are seen as rational, self-interested individuals working to ensure their material well-being, and nature is considered an instrument to achieve this well-being. Definitions from this discipline, therefore, tend to place human beings as the core and nature as the periphery. By contrast, in ecology, which is also an integral part of sustainability studies, human beings are regarded simply as one species among many. In recent literature, this dualism has been referred to as the 'anthropocentrism-ecocentrism' divide (Elliott, 2000; Carter, 2007). As such, I believe that this dualism has significantly marked not only American political history, but also the perception of the environmental issue and sustainability in the American presidency. However, before discussing the evolution and effects of this divide in the presidency, I believe a brief survey of the growth of the concept of sustainability in American history is essential to thoroughly understand the intricacies of the 'anthropocentrism-ecocentrism' divide.

The Inception and Evolution of the Sustainability Discourse

Before discussing the different definitions of sustainable development, I would like to first examine the particular social, political and environmental circumstances in which the concept of sustainable development was forged, along with the array of issues that this concept addresses. Researchers (e.g., Dresner, 2002) point out that the beginning of the discourse on sustainable development dates back to 1974 when the concept of a ‘sustainable society’ was discussed at the Conference on Science and Technology for Human Development convened by the World Council of Churches¹ in Bucharest, from June 24th to July 2nd. At this conference, scientists, environmentalists, and politicians highlighted the importance of many factors deemed vital for a sound model of development such as the equitable distribution of resources, an opportunity for all to participate in social policies, the need for limiting the emission of pollutants, and the sound use of technological innovation in order to conserve non-renewable resources. The first mention of the concept of sustainability at this conference gave priority to social needs for equity, democracy, and the alleviation of poverty before even addressing environmental issues (Dresner, 2002).

A few years later, the term ‘sustainable development’ started to spread in public debates as early as 1980 when it was mentioned in a document entitled *World Conservation Strategy* published by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN)². This document stressed the necessity of achieving a new model of development through the conservation of natural resources and the promotion of ecological sustainability. Critics (e.g., Baker, 2006), however, point out that the focus of this report was largely limited to ecological concerns without linking sustainability to wider social and economic issues. Seven years later, the concept of ‘sustainable development’ gained momentum as the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) accentuated the links between the social, economic, and ecological dimensions of development in its famous report, *Our Common Future*, which gained widespread popularity. Taking its label from WCED

¹ In their website, this organization defines itself as “a worldwide fellowship of 349 churches seeking unity, a common witness and Christian service” (World Council of Churches, 2012).

² Established in 1948 in France, the IUCN (Union Internationale pour la Conservation de la Nature) is the world’s oldest global environmental network which has more than 1,000 member organizations including more than 80 States, more than 110 government agencies, and more than 800 non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

chairman Gro Harlem Brundtland, then Norwegian Prime Minister, this report is widely referred to as the *Brundtland Report*. At this conference, the participants stated their vision of the new model of development as follows: “We came to see it [i.e. development] not in its restricted context of economic growth in developing countries. We came to see that a new development path was required, one that sustained human progress not just in a few places for a few years, but for the entire planet into the distant future” (WCED, 1987, p. 8).

Combining the two concepts of ‘development’ and ‘environment’ that had been studied and examined separately for decades, the *Brundtland Report* signaled the beginning of sustainable development discourse in the last few decades of the 20th century. In this report, sustainable development is defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987, p. 43). According to many critics (e.g., Baker, 2006; McNeill, 2000; Schrijver, 2008), this definition of sustainable development has become the most widely accepted. It has gained authoritative status as it was adopted by many UN organizations, IGOs, NGOs, and international financial organizations such as the World Bank. Nico Schrijver (2008) further asserts that this concept of sustainable development has become a prominent issue in international law concerning global ecological problems, natural resources, energy, health, international trade, and security. Other critics (e.g., Dresner, 2002) contend, however, that the vision underpinning this definition of sustainable development echoes much of what was advocated by the World Council of Churches, especially regarding the combination of the developmental and environmental.

According to the *Brundtland Report*, sustainable development stands for a “new development path [...] that sustain[s] human progress not just in a few places for a few years, but for the entire planet into the distant future” (WCED, 1987, p. 4). This concept seems to have encapsulated some of the values and ethics that have been popularized by the New Social Movements (NSMs)³ since the 1970s. However, sustainability soon became an extremely controversial concept at the end of the 20th century. Jennifer A. Elliot (2000) argues that there are more than seventy definitions of sustainable development currently in circulation. These different definitions are certainly the outcome of different interpretations and perceptions of how economic growth and the protection of the environment can be combined in one model of development.

³ In the literature, a New Social Movement (NSM) is defined as “a loose-knit organization that seeks to influence public policy on an issue such as the environment, nuclear energy or peace, and which may use unconventional forms of political participation, including direct action, to achieve its aims” (Carter, 2007, p. 84).

By the late 1990s, the term sustainable development had gained currency in many political and academic arenas in America, engendering endless debates among scholars and politicians who tried to conceptualize this new mode of human growth. As a new idea, sustainable development exposes and tackles weaknesses of the current political, economic and social systems, especially in industrialized countries. Politically, it aims at securing effective citizen participation in decision-making, and it tries at the same time to build an economic system that avoids tensions arising from unbalanced modes of growth at the expense of the environment and social issues (WCED 1987, p. 65). Socially, it aims at achieving both ‘inter-generational’ and ‘intra-generational’ social equity⁴ by securing a decent and environment-friendly way of life for different segments of society such as different generations, ethnic minorities, and races. The discourse on sustainable development has also generated a paradigm shift from what are usually considered “nationally demarcated environmental problems” over which the state would usually have control, to the idea of a global environmental and developmental crisis that can be managed only on an international scale (Hettne, 2008, p. xvi).

Though regarded by some scholars such as Ann Dale (2001) and Neil Carter (2007) as a sign of the richness of literature on sustainable development, the proliferation of definitions of such a recent concept is considered by many other critics (e.g., Blewitt, 2008; Robinson, 2004) as an indication of the prevailing vagueness of this project. This vagueness has indeed rendered sustainable development one of the most contested concepts over recent years. While asserting that “the idea of sustainable development is fraught with contradictions,” Michael Redclift admits that “like motherhood, and God, it is difficult not to approve of it” (1993, p. 3). Still, other critics such as Desmond McNeill contend that “the term sustainable development is only two-thirds complete, for the social dimension is not explicitly included” (2000, p. 117).

One of the most fertile sources of reflection for researchers today is the question of how far the objectives of sustainable development can be achieved within the prevailing socio-economic paradigm of development. Despite its worldwide popularity, the concept of sustainable development has been received with a lot of scepticism and suspicion ever since its inception. This scepticism has come from environmentalists, politicians, and economists alike. Suspicions have intensified even more in the last few decades, as the concept has become widely accepted and popularized among politicians and has been taken up

⁴ According to the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), “intra-generational equity refers to equity within our own generation” whereas “inter-generational equity refers to equity between generations” (1987, pp. 5-6).

as a slogan by many governments and NGOs. Many criticisms point out a hidden agenda behind the project of sustainable development. Allan Holland points out, for instance, that “development and growth, which are creatures of the market economy, are being offered, under the banner of sustainable development, as a cure for the very ecological crisis that they have served to bring about” (2000, p. 3). Sharing the same view, Susan Baker argues that “the discourse on sustainable development is seen to share characteristics of colonizing discourse, becoming another example of a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Third World” (2006, p. 160). Many scholars (e.g., Carter, 2007; Baker, 2006; Connelly & Smith, 1999) voice their suspicions that while sustainable development appears to be imposing constraints on businesses and the industrial sector, it, in fact, covers for and even supports industrial growth.

As a theory, sustainable development creates an unmistakable notion of fairness of access to basic natural resources and an equal right to decent living standards not only for all segments of society, but also for those generations yet to come. Despite its wide popularity among scholars, economists, and environmentalists, the concept of sustainable development seems to be excessively open to various, sometimes conflicting, interpretations. More broadly, this concept has become part and parcel of a bigger debate about development and growth which is laden with numerous controversies. Ultimately, the vagueness of the concept of sustainable development is in part a reflection of the controversy over the meaning of the broad notion of development and the best way to achieve it.

The ‘Anthropocentrism-Ecocentrism’ Dualism Marks the American Presidency

For over more than a century, American presidential rhetoric and policies have drawn upon various strategies to deal with the rising environmentalism across America and to accommodate the concomitant political, economic, national security, and social concerns. From Theodore Roosevelt to Barack Obama, American environmentalism has witnessed profound transformations, ranging from rise to regress, on presidential agendas. Throughout this, the philosophical and intellectual perception of Man and Nature has been at the heart of public policy and presidential decisions. In many respects, the concept of sustainability itself evolved as an outcome of a lingering philosophical and ethical tension between conflicting visions of the Man-Nature relationship. In fact, this tension is often echoed in American art, literature, and social theories as well as in the political and economic choices of the nation. For the most part, this tension persists between what is referred to as ‘immanence’ and

‘transcendence’ – a tension between the desire to live as an integral part of Nature and the drive to rise above being a part of Nature to being its absolute master, thus representing two frameworks of thought, namely ‘ecocentrism’ and ‘anthropocentrism’ (Martin & Huckle, 2001; Fox, 1990).

American political history seems to be significantly marked by an unrelenting clash between ‘ecocentrism,’ which “reflects immanence by basing ethics and politics on a friendly ‘nature’ that may be assumed to have value in its own right (intrinsic value)”, and ‘anthropocentrism’ or ‘technocentrism,’ which “reflects transcendence by basing ethics and politics on the virtues of exploiting ‘nature’ as a resource” (Martin & Huckle, 2001, p. 19). Put differently, ‘ecocentrics’ tend to regard humans as subject to the ecological laws of Nature because they constitute an integral component with the same degree of importance as other components such as animals, insects, rivers, mountains, and so on. On the other hand, regarding Man as the master of Nature, advocates of ‘anthropocentrism’ are fully committed to use Nature instrumentally to achieve more human well-being. Elaborating on this concept, Neil Carter writes:

Anthropocentrism regards only humans as having intrinsic value, a claim usually based on their capacity either to experience pleasure and pain or to reason, and, furthermore, that only humans have interests. The rest of nature is of instrumental value; it has value and deserves moral consideration only in so far as it enhances human well-being (2007, p.15)

Theoretically, ‘ecocentrism’, also referred to as ‘ecologism,’⁵ is an ideology that is based on two main tenets that differentiate it from other traditional ideologies: first, the need for a complete re-conceptualization of the human-nature relationship to place Man as an integral part of Nature rather than its master; and secondly, the need to set ‘limits to growth’ as a prerequisite to any growth strategy. According to ecologists (e.g., Dobson, 2000; Devall & Sessions, 2001; Fox, 1990; Orton; 1994), the contemporary environmental crisis has, for the most part, been caused by human arrogance towards the

⁵ This term is often used in the literature to refer to “a distinctive green political ideology encompassing those perspectives that hold that a sustainable society requires radical change in our relationship with the non-human natural world and our mode of economic, social and political life” (Carter, 2007, p. 6). It should be also noted that there exist a lot of divergences of approaches among the ‘ecologists’ family along a spectrum comprising two extremes, i.e., ‘deep’ and ‘shallow’ ecologists, but with various variations in the middle.

natural world, which has resulted in abusing Nature to satisfy human interests. Central to 'ecologism,' therefore, is the principle that Man is not necessarily placed at the top of an ethical hierarchy (Fox, 1990). Above all, this principle radically opposes 'anthropocentrism,' also referred to as 'technocentrism,' which only attaches intrinsic value to humans who are placed at the center of the universe whereas non-human entities are of mere instrumental value. According to 'anthropocentric' principles, therefore, Nature has value only in so far as it serves human needs and enhances human well-being (Carter, 2007).

Counterbalancing the 'anthropocentric' or 'technocentric' approach is an 'ecocentric' (also referred to as 'non-anthropocentric') approach that opposes what ecologists see as the 'human chauvinism' of 'anthropocentrism' and stresses the intrinsic value of non-human entities (Dobson, 2000; Devall & Sessions, 2001, 1985; Fox, 1990; Orton; 1994). According to this approach, non-human entities like animals, trees, plants and other species, and even inanimate objects like rivers and mountains have their own intrinsic value. Ecologists such as the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss (1995, 1989), Bill Devall and George Sessions (2001, 1985) reject the Enlightenment view that Man and Nature are separate entities. Instead of being its master, Man is considered as an integral part of Nature. The concept of 'ecological consciousness' that aims at altering people's current view of Nature is highly celebrated in these writings. David Pepper (1998), for example, emphasizes the holistic aspect of 'ecologism' and highlights the close interdependence of ecosystems as an important tool to reappraise the human-nature relationship and Man's ethical duties towards Nature.

Historically, 'ecocentrism' has always posed an ideological challenge to the American political system at the levels of ideas, policies, and implementation despite the far-reaching effects of seminal writings by important ecologists such as John Muir, Gifford Pinchot, and Aldo Leopold in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Despite this divergence, the modern sustainability discourse (e.g. in the WCED, 1987; Earth Charter) claims that it draws upon familiar concepts such as participatory democracy and social justice, which are borrowed from other ideologies, to serve sustainability. "Green politics has drawn on other political traditions, notably socialism, for its critique of capitalism, and from anarchism for its suspicion of the state," maintains Neil Carter (2007, p. 354). These principles now seem to play a crucial role in raising ecological consciousness and fostering greener political and economic policies. According to some (e.g., Carter, 2007; Elliott, 2000; Baker, 2006), the discourse of sustainability has been significantly informed by both 'ecocentrism' and 'anthropocentrism.' Advocates of sustainable development claim that this new project strikes the right balance between economic growth and environmental protection, between using natural resources and preserving Nature, and ultimately between

‘anthropocentrism’ and ‘ecocentrism’ (WCED, 1987). Jennifer Elliott (2000) notes that the ‘ecocentrics,’ who have little faith in technology and progress associated with modern societies, tend to accentuate spirituality and advocate environment-friendly self-sufficiency, whereas ‘anthropocentrics’ have a strong belief in modern science’s ability to solve social and environmental problems and are fully committed to ongoing economic growth and the exploitation of natural resources. By and large, I believe that these two trends have always had a bearing on American presidential policies and the tension between them underlies much of divergence between different American presidents’ approaches to nature, the environment, and sustainability.

In current development debates, scholars from both schools of thought fiercely defend their viewpoints. According to the ‘ecocentric’ approach, the predominant capitalist model of development is considered a major threat to the natural base for future development. Observers (e.g., Moghadam, 2007; Kütting, 2004; Shiva, 2008) note that the capitalist commitment to economic growth and material advancement is no longer an asset in the new paradigm. On the contrary, making economic growth a nation’s paramount priority is, to environmentalists, a serious flaw, and even more so if this priority is maintained at the expense of social equity and environmental protection. Other critics (e.g., Lubchenco, 2003; Thomas, 1992) cite problems such as biodiversity loss, climate change, ozone layer depletion, deforestation, and soil desertification as global threats caused mainly by the untrammelled economic growth in the second half of the 20th century and onwards. In fact, the sustainability discourse not only opposes certain practices of mass production and consumption in capitalism, but it constitutes the absolute antithesis of this model of development. Spotlighting this contradiction, James Connelly and Graham Smith write: “Contemporary capitalism primarily requires governments to protect private capital and to ensure continued economic growth. Under such conditions, environmental considerations will never be given priority where they conflict with capital accumulation. Sustainable development is at odds with the logic of capitalism” (1999, p. 60).

From a social point of view, the sustainability discourse deems it futile to think of development in isolation from its ecological and social consequences, given that deteriorating environmental conditions often result in serious social dislocations. In fact, this new discourse rejects the idea of equating human progress with the domination of Nature, and decries its instrumental use for the sake of creating more wealth and material well-being for humans. According to this new discourse, consumption is no longer the most important aspect of human welfare, and unfettered economic growth is no longer the backbone of development (Carter, 2007). Ultimately, there is a whole new lifestyle and a sustainable model of development being advocated as an alternative: “By

showing that the model of development pursued by the Western industrial societies cannot be carried into the future, either in its present forms or at its present pace,” argues Susan Baker, “environmentalism makes it imperative for society to construct a new development model” (2006, p. 212). This new discourse is unorthodox by nature.

The divergence of individualistic or collective approaches to America’s welfare and human well-being has also been part of the ‘ecocentric-anthropocentric’ duality. Advocates of sustainability (e.g., Edwards, 2008; Speth, 2008; Kütting, 2004) point out that the current socio-economic paradigm of growth overtly celebrates the individualistic drive for more consumption and the ethics of achieving more material well-being mostly at the expense of the environment. Accordingly, the ‘ecocentric’ discourse deplors the culture of mass consumption and the individualistic ethics of material self-realization. It aims rather at achieving social solidarity by including all segments of society in the process of development and by attaching great importance to the protection of the environment which is the shared wealth of the whole community (WCED, 1987). Structurally, it is clearly underscored in the Earth Charter⁶ that sustainable development adopts a bottom-up process of building a partnership between different sectors such as industry, education, services, and governmental environmental management. This seems revolutionary: “the sustainable development model thus challenges conceptions of development that prioritize individual self-advancement” and “holds that the promotion of the common good takes precedence over the encroachment on the commons by the few” (Baker, 2006, p. 213).

Significantly marking modern American history, the ecocentric-anthropocentric dualism has so far impacted presidents’ approaches toward the economy, nature, and society. A very important part of the American political system, the presidency has been used in different ways to serve different ends. While some American ‘ecocentric’ presidents strove to harness the presidential powers to protect nature, safeguard the environment, and ultimately boost sustainability, ‘anthropocentric’ presidents tried to give ultimate priority to economic growth even at the expense of the environment, used the executive power to curb or reverse the environmental

⁶ “The Earth Charter was created by the independent Earth Charter Commission, which was convened as a follow-up to the 1992 Earth Summit in order to produce a global consensus statement of values and principles for a sustainable future. The document was developed over nearly a decade through an extensive process of international consultation, to which over five thousand people contributed. The Charter has been formally endorsed by thousands of organizations, including UNESCO and the IUCN (World Conservation Union)” (Earth Charter Commission). For more information, visit www.EarthCharter.org

regulations, and ultimately obstructed efforts to boost sustainability in America. In the American presidency, the ‘anthropocentrism-ecocentrism’ divide constitutes not only a philosophical divergence of views, but also a determinant factor that has guided the beliefs, options, and policies of American presidents for over more than a century. Because the scope of this paper does not allow examination of all American presidents’ records, only three presidents who stand for unique landmarks in the ‘anthropocentrism-ecocentrism’ continuum are chosen as case-studies.

Theodore Roosevelt’s Presidency: Sowing the Early Seeds of Sustainability

As a president, Theodore Roosevelt put it in no equivocal terms that “there can be no greater issue than that of conservation in this country” (as cited in Theodore Roosevelt Association). Most historians believe that President Theodore Roosevelt was exceptional in boosting conservationism by developing and strengthening the executive authority, independent of external pressure (Sheffield 2010; Daynes & Sussman, 2001; Miller, 1992). Above all, Roosevelt’s love for Nature and the American wilderness was unmistakable, which ultimately led him to actively pursue an agenda of conservation and to set a precedent for presidential endorsement of the environmental issue. Historically, observers note that “conservation was largely unknown to the presidents before Roosevelt, but it became pertinent to the presidential agendas that followed” (Izatt, 2004, p. 83). President Theodore Roosevelt was a very good example of an ‘ecocentric’ president who can, in fact, be termed the ‘father’ of modern sustainability.

It is not my intention here to rehash Theodore Roosevelt’s efforts, decisions, and accomplishments that boosted American environmentalism because they have already been documented, analyzed, and discussed thoroughly elsewhere. Instead, it is my aim to focus on the challenging commitments that Theodore Roosevelt had undertaken, and how these dramatically shaped the American presidency by setting an example of an ‘ecocentrist’ president who constitutes a great source of inspiration. Before analyzing the various aspects of ‘ecocentrism’ in Theodore’s approach, I believe it is vital to mention that for a few ‘deep ecologists’⁷ like Eckersley (1992) and

⁷ ‘Deep ecologists’ are staunch defenders of ‘deep ecology,’ which is one of the most radical approaches to Nature, based on a few claims such as attaching purely intrinsic value to nature independently of human purposes or uses, denying humans any right to use nature instrumentally in a way that affects its diversity and richness, and condemning the present excessive human interference with the non-human world which should be protected and kept intact (Devall & Sessions, 1985; Naess, 1989; Devall, 1990).

Oelschaefer (1991), both the 'preservationism' and 'conservationism' that marked Theodore's era remain essentially 'anthropocentric' as they do not protect Nature from human interference and abuse.

Even within the environmental family, there were some criticisms of Roosevelt's unmistakable endorsement of conservation at the expense of preservation. Despite his great admiration of John Muir's environmental vision following Roosevelt's Western tour, which included Yosemite, Yellowstone, and the Grand Canyon, Roosevelt still favoured conservatism over 'conservationism' in most of his policies (Sheffield, 2010; Oravec, 1984; Nash, 1967). However, I still believe that 'preservationism' and 'conservationism' significantly overlap with 'ecocentrism,' which makes of activists on both parts (such as Theodore Roosevelt) rather 'ecocentrist,' especially as they held fast to their 'ecocentric' beliefs despite an overwhelming 'anthropocentric' drive brought to early 20th century America by intensifying waves of urbanization, industrialization, and exponential economic growth.

One of the most distinctive features of Roosevelt as an 'ecocentrist,' in my view, was his sagacious and efficient use of the executive role to boost the environmentalist agenda despite some bureaucratic impediments and political challenges at the turn of the century. As a President, Roosevelt was no doubt a staunch 'ecocentrist,' who strongly believed in the need to preserve nature from human abuses. Right from the beginning, he relied on strong executive powers to expand the presidential role in defending the environment and boosting a conservationist agenda. When Roosevelt took office, for instance, he unabashedly devoted a significant part of his inaugural address to talking about the environment, asserting that: "they [the American founders] did their work; they left us the splendid heritage we now enjoy. We in our turn have an assured confidence that we shall be able to leave this heritage unwasted and enlarged to our children and our children's children" (Theodore Roosevelt, 1905, para. 5).

To further back up his 'conservationist' agenda, Roosevelt's first tactic was a very effective use of the appointment power in the American Presidency. Roosevelt's appointment of his long-time friend and leading conservationist Gifford Pinchot as chief of the Division of Forestry was one of the biggest steps he took to ensure wider support for his agenda (Theodore Roosevelt Association, *The Conservationist*). Sharing the same ideas of conservation and sustainability with the president, Pinchot shared Roosevelt's conviction that conservation was a politically pertinent issue. Unsurprisingly, Pinchot's appointment began a strong commitment to policies defending the conservation of the environment as both Roosevelt and Pinchot exerted all their influence to pass legislation that would transfer the nation's forest reserves to the Department of Agriculture in 1905 (Izatt, 2004).

As ‘ecocentrism’ started to colour the American presidency, President Roosevelt used Pinchot’s experience in, and commitment to, conservation issues to sow the seeds of what is referred to today as sustainability. In fact, “Pinchot was a significant force in Roosevelt’s organization and instigation of numerous additional commissions and conferences such as the Conference of Governors, at which Roosevelt, acting on Pinchot’s advice, sought to provide a ‘catalyst’ for the compilation of various state laws and viewpoints into a single unified structure” (Izatt, 2004, p. 86). Significantly, the guests at this conference included members of Congress, members of the Supreme Court, representatives of major conservation and scientific groups, along with prominent figures in the U.S. industry and commerce (Redekop, 2012). The 1908 Conference of Governors holds special importance in the history of environmentalism, for it not only dealt with a wide range of environmental issues, but also signalled Roosevelt’s ‘expansionary nature’ by including more than simply governors.

Another important sign of Roosevelt’s early vision of sustainability was his declared policy that conservation efforts should not only be endorsed at the federal level, but they should also be embraced at all governmental levels for them to be soundly accomplished (Roosevelt, 1908). As a matter of fact, Roosevelt’s ‘ecocentric’ vision exceeded even the federal level with his unrelenting efforts to organize the North American Conservation Conference whose main object was to address the issue of conservation on a larger international scale (Redekop, 2012). After he realized that Congressional cooperation could not be obtained, Roosevelt used his executive powers to independently convene the North American Conservation Conference in 1909 without congressional support, in an act revealing his staunch ‘ecocentric’ commitment to serve the environment.

In addition to his effective use of the presidency as a bully pulpit, Roosevelt was also adamant in boosting a robust legislative agenda to serve the environment. Historians note, for instance, that one of the most significant pieces of legislation that Roosevelt passed through Congress was the Newlands Reclamation Act of 1902, which granted the federal government huge control of irrigation of arid lands, thus founding a solid federal irrigation project. This act allowed 100,000,000 acres of arid lands to be reclaimed for storage purposes and “marked the beginning of governmental concern with the environment in terms of legislation” (Izatt, 2004, p. 90). One more example of Roosevelt’s success as a legislative leader was the American Antiquities Act of 1906, granting the president unparalleled power for the preservation of historic and scientific sites. Unequivocally following his commitment to disseminating conservation and sowing the early seeds of sustainability, President Roosevelt succeeded in doubling the number of national parks and preserving the ones already in existence (Redekop, 2012).

Roosevelt's visionary awareness of the most salient tenets of sustainability started to surface as early as his seventh State of the Union Address in 1907. In this speech, he stated that "optimism is a good characteristic, but if carried to an excess, it becomes foolishness. We are prone to speak of the resources of this country as inexhaustible; this is not so" (as cited in Theodore Roosevelt Association, *Quotations*). One equally important foresight was Roosevelt's insistence on keeping environmental conservation out of the private sector, using an executive veto to block any initiative to do so. On several occasions, Roosevelt declared his distrust of private sector's greedy entrepreneurs who could wreak havoc on America's natural resources with their selfishness in seeking benefits (Roosevelt, 1910). A clear example of this will was Roosevelt's veto in 1903 to a bill that would have allowed a private power firm to build a large-scale dam on the Tennessee River in Muscle Shoals, Alabama. Likewise, Roosevelt showed unabashed sympathy to other pieces of legislation preventing the private sector from controlling the environment such as his endorsement of the General Dam Act of 1906, which specified the regulations for hydroelectric dam construction on a federal level.

As a politician, Roosevelt took the presidency upon President McKinley's assassination, which meant he was not bound by any specific election promises as most presidents would normally be during their first term. As a consequence, Roosevelt's conservationist agenda was mostly independent of the Republican Party's official platform. Despite its undesired political consequences, Roosevelt's dissent from his party's platform proved beyond any doubt that a president's strong commitment to a cause could lead to success even without party support. Roosevelt's dissent from his party on a few occasions to uphold his 'ecocentric' beliefs has unmistakably differentiated him from his successors and predecessors, thus setting him as the epitome of 'ecocentrism' in the history of American presidency thus far. For Roosevelt, his 'ecocentric' vision was certainly so prioritized that it permeated all facets of his presidency – a feature which is lacking in many other presidents' profiles who claim to hold an environmental agenda without genuinely showing the kind of the 'ecocentric' commitment that Roosevelt did.

Holding fast to 'ecocentrism,' Roosevelt expanded the presidential power to include everything not explicitly limited by the constitution. Historians note, for instance, that not until president Franklin D. Roosevelt – Theodore Roosevelt's distant cousin – did the environment become an important issue in the American presidency (Izatt, 2004). Historically, President Theodore Roosevelt has constituted a very rich source of inspiration for environmentalists in general, and for some of his successors in particular (Bricker, 2010). In a visionary statement that set the stage for today's tenets of sustainability such as intra-generational and inter-generational equity, Roosevelt asserted as early as 1916 that:

Our duty to the whole, including the unborn generations, bids us restrain an unprincipled present-day minority from wasting the heritage of these unborn generations. The movements for the conservation of wild life and the larger movement for the conservation of all our natural resources are essentially democratic in spirit, purpose, and method (as cited in Theodore Roosevelt Association, *Quotations*).

Stirred by a staunch ‘ecocentrist’ drive, Theodore Roosevelt’s instigation of the conservation cause blossomed into recurrent presidential interests in conservation, the environment, and ultimately modern sustainability as it stands today. Without the seeds Theodore Roosevelt had sown more than a century ago, the issue of environmental sustainability might not be nearly as significant in modern politics as it is today. However, the history of American presidency has also been marked by other presidents from across the ‘anthropocentrism-ecocentrism’ spectrum, coming to power with a vision of society, nature, and the environment that is very different from Roosevelt’s. Ronald Reagan is one of the American presidents who stood at the other end of this spectrum.

Ronald Reagan’s Presidency: The Turbulent Years of Environmentalism

By the summer of 1980, most Americans were deeply concerned about the sluggish economy. With intensifying stagflation, unemployment rates reaching 8 percent, a growing energy crisis, and persistent budget deficits, many Americans believed that the growing conservative movement could bring hope and boost the nation’s economy again (Rossinow, 2015). Upheld by the New Right⁸ and defended by Presidential candidate Ronald Reagan, the economic conservative agenda was based on new measures such as reducing the size of the federal government, decreasing taxes and spending on social welfare programmes, and restoring the nation’s economic

⁸ Politically this term is defined as a “grassroots coalition of American conservatives that collectively led what scholars often refer to as the ‘conservative ascendancy’ or ‘Republican ascendancy’ of the late 20th century. Dubbed the New Right partly in contrast to the New Left counterculture of the 1960s, the New Right consisted of conservative activists who voiced opposition on a variety of issues, including abortion, homosexuality, the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), the Panama Canal Treaty, affirmative action, and most forms of taxation” (Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed on 10 June 2015 at <http://www.britannica.com/topic/New-Right>).

strength and global prestige (Rossinow, 2015; Kaye, 1987 McGarity, 1986). Michael E. Kraft and Norman J. Vig write that:

The Reagan presidency brought to the federal government a markedly different environmental policy agenda. Virtually all environmental protection and resource policies enacted during the 1970s were reevaluated in light of the president's desire to reduce the scope of government regulation, shift responsibilities to the states, and rely more on the private sector. (2010, p. 13).

Domestically, Ronald Reagan was one of the few presidents who not only did not boost the environmental agenda, but fiercely opposed the environmental movement. His administration's 'anti-environmental' deregulation policies were mainly driven by market-based incentives to reinvigorate the economy. Right from the beginning of his presidential campaign, candidate Ronald Reagan used the term "albatross" to describe the burden of environmental regulations on American industry. With "deregulation" - the reduction of the number and scope of federal rules affecting the private economy - as his major goal, President Reagan launched a fierce attack on new environmental initiatives as well as old laws and regulations (National Wildlife Federation, 1982). Just like Theodore Roosevelt, President Ronald Reagan drew heavily on the presidency appointment power, but only to implement his 'anthropocentric' policies. In fact, President Reagan appointed two contentious figures, James Watt and Anne Gorsuch, as the head to the Department of the Interior and the director of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), respectively. They fought to curtail environmental regulations and funding along the same lines as Reagan's 'anthropocentrism.' Anne Gorsuch even urged for a direct reduction in the Agency budget from \$1.4 billion to \$950 million for fiscal year 1983. "Never has America seen two more intensely controversial and blatantly anti-environmental political appointees than Watt and Gorsuch," commented Greg Wetstone, director of advocacy at the Natural Resources Defense Council (as cited in Staff, 2004, para. 10).

Led by anti-environmental figures like James Watt and Anne Gorsuch, the Reagan administration succeeded in reducing the EPA's budgets for water quality and air quality enforcement by 59 percent and 31 percent, respectively, between 1981 and 1984 (Rossinow, 2015, p. 44). Given the evident hostility to environmentalism that marked Reagan's policies, many critics disapproved of an infamous 'list of [environmental] rollbacks' that this administration tried to implement at every level, including attempts to "gut the Clean Air Act with proposals to weaken pollution standards on everything from automobiles to furniture manufacturers — efforts which took Congress two years to defeat" (Staff, 2004, para. 11). Other

observers (e.g., Rosenbaum, 1998) equally condemn the fact that Anne Gorsuch precipitated many of President Carter's appointees into resignation, thus reducing the size of the EPA's staff. This move made available key administrative roles for lawyers and lobbyists from big corporations such as General Motors, Exxon, and the American Paper Institute. Walter A Rosenbaum described this atmosphere:

The environmental movement regarded the Reagan administration as the most environmentally hostile in a half century and the president's regulatory reforms as the cutting edge of a massive administrative assault on the institutional foundations of federal environmental law. (1998, pp. 11-12).

Despite its hostility to the environment, President Reagan's campaign based on deregulation and regulatory reform struck a chord with many American voters who were promised a stronger economy, free of the growing 'burden' of social and environmental programmes that had crippled economic growth during the previous decades (Kaye, 1987). In essence, governmental regulatory policies under the Reagan Administration were significantly different from those preceding; they focused on 'deregulation' in two specific areas – the environmental and civil-rights issues (McGarity, 1986; Lovell, 1983). More alarming than these anti-environmental policies, in my view, were Reagan's administration's relentless efforts to break the blue-green alliance⁹ and his systematic refusal to enforce occupational safety and health laws for American workers. Ironically, as the election of Ronald Reagan steadily "pushed unions back toward their erstwhile allies [i.e., environmentalists]," many workers' loyalty and anti-environmental cooperation was only rewarded with further layoffs and job outsourcing in developing countries where environmental regulations were usually lax or non-existent (Dewey, 1998, p. 59.)

⁹ The term 'blue-green' refers mainly to the alliance between labour unions and the environmental movement groups in the United States which has evolved into a coalition since the late 1990s when it orchestrated strong protests against the policies of the WTO during its meetings in Seattle in November 1999, and against IMF and World Bank policies in 2000. This alliance was declared by the United Nations Global Impact, which is a document signed in 2000 by 50 multinational corporations and 12 environmental and labour groups. Globally, this alliance established a network of almost 2000 companies such as Bayer, DaimlerChrysler, Nike, and the Royal Dutch Shell in over 70 countries, all working in partnership to better address human rights, labour rights, and environmental issues (Edwards, 2008, pp. 137-138).

Just like President Theodore Roosevelt, President Ronald Reagan sought to expand the executive power of the presidency, but for opposite reasons. While Teddy Roosevelt expanded the president's executive power to boost the conservationist agenda and sow the early seeds of modern sustainability, President Ronald Reagan capitalized on expanding the role of the Chief Executive's OMB¹⁰ to curb environmental programmes. "By executive order," observers note, "the President placed unprecedented coordination and implementation authority in the OMB, which now works in tandem with the President's Task Force on Regulatory Relief. The OMB approval mechanism is one important way through which the Administration exerts its ideological influence over the functional agencies" (Lovell, 1983, p. 275).

Embodying Reagan's 'anthropocentric' vision of sound economic growth, deregulation policies were based on strengthening the executive control of the government's functional agencies to implement its policies. The Reagan administration used the OMB's rule-review process, for instance, to cast an executive hegemony over rule-making in the different agencies working on environmental and civil-rights issues. This role was backed by the Task Force on Regulatory Relief,¹¹ chaired by Vice President George Bush, which during its first two years of operation, claimed that over 100 existing regulations needed to be changed (Lovell, 1983). Although regulations and laws in both the civil-rights and environmental policy arenas remained the same under the Reagan administration as they were in the previous administrations, their implementation changed

¹⁰ The OMB is defined as an executive agency under the federal government that works closely with the President to provide recommendations with regards to budgetary matters such as the preparation of the budget that will be reviewed by the congress. The development of fiscal programs is also undertaken by the OMB in close partnership with other federal agencies (The Law Dictionary, accessed on 12 July 2015 at <http://thelawdictionary.org/office-of-management-and-budget-omb/>).

¹¹ The Task Force on Regulatory Relief is a regulatory body established by President Ronald Reagan on 22 January 1981. Chaired by the Vice President, this body includes also other members such as the Secretary of Treasury, the Attorney General, the Secretary of Commerce, the Secretary of Labor, the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, the Assistant to the President for Policy Development, and the Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers. The job of this Task Force is basically to review major regulatory proposals by executive branch agencies, assess executive branch regulations, oversee the development of legislative proposals, and make recommendations to the President on regulatory personnel and legislative changes (The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 1981, pp.1-2).

dramatically (Rossinow, 2015). Thus, for the most part, Reagan's administration did not aim at affecting fundamental changes in environmental laws, but planned to focus on what they considered as "the mistaken interpretations of environmental laws" which resulted in "unwarranted extension of authority, rigidity in administration, and costly delays" (Lovell, 1983, p. 276). Thus, with a fast-expanding scope of responsibilities, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was one of the Reagan's administration's top targets in its 'regulatory reform' agenda (Mosher, 1981; Cohen, 1986). Responsible for interpreting and enforcing twelve different environmental regulations about air, water, pesticides, and waste, the Reagan administration's became concerned about the EPA's alleged negative impact on the economy and on individual businesses.

Contrary to Roosevelt's efforts to strengthen the federal powers to serve conservationism, the Reagan Administration was driven by one major objective, namely to launch a profound shift of power from Washington to the states. Supposedly, this shift of power would lead to a more efficient system of environmental protection at a much lower cost (Mosher, 1982). However, this shift would also mean the weakening or destruction of the EPA, "with no guarantees that the states can or will pick up the pieces or that the states will meet what should have been federal standards" (Lovell, 1983, p. 279). While the Reagan administration saw it as a success to have reduced the 'burdens' of environmental protection on the economy, environmentalists argued that the administrative agencies were seriously hindered from doing the job that the environmental protection laws require. This stalemate came as a result of the alteration in scope and content of new environmental regulations and the weakening enforcement of existing legislature. Studies show, for example, that during the first two years of the Reagan Administration, existing clean air requirements were relaxed and new regulations in a number of other areas were obstructed. In fact, the EPA itself withdrew power from the states over the Clean Air Act program to meet health standards in polluted areas which had previously depended on state review (Lovell, 1983, p. 277).

Disapproving of this 'raid' on American environmentalism, major American environmental organizations such as Friends of the Earth, Natural Resources Defense Council, the Wilderness Society, Sierra Club, National Audubon Society, and the Environmental Defense Fund, among others, condemned the policies that exempted most new polluting industrial installations from state reviews (Friends of the Earth, et al., 1982). The EPA weakened, for instance, heavy truck emission standards, automobile emission standards for hydrocarbons, particulate emission standards for diesel automobiles, and announced a two-year delay for the development of standards for dangerous fine particulates from diesel trucks, and industrial boilers. The EPA also issued rules which allowed increased use of lead in gasoline (Lovell, 1983). Taming the EPA to work in line with

Reagan's pro-corporate and anti-environmental policies is a clear sign that Reagan's presidency went even beyond the conventional limits of 'anthropocentrism' to embrace a whole new era of 'corporatism.'

Financially, the Reagan administration cut the budget for monitoring air programs by 40 percent, while the budget for grants and technical assistance to states to assist with monitoring and enforcement was cut by 30 percent (Lovell, 1983, p. 278). This wave of deregulation also impacted water quality regulations: when the EPA proposed passing more responsibility for water quality to the states, regulations were adopted to relax water treatment requirements for municipalities. In addition, the national pretreatment program to curtail toxic discharges by industries into municipal treatment plans was suspended at the same time as the secondary treatment requirements for municipalities were relaxed. As a result, statistics show that following this series of sharp budget cuts and agency reorganizations with further reduction and weakening of the enforcement units in the EPA, the cases filed in federal court against supposed polluters declined by 75 percent while certain key cases were dropped altogether (National Wildlife Federation, 1982).

At the budgetary level, statistics show that in the 1983 fiscal year, budget states received about 20 percent less money for environmental protection programmes from the federal government than in 1982 (Jubak, 1982). Describing the side effects of the Reaganomics' wave of deregulation, Michael E. Kraft and Norman J. Vig wrote:

Budget cuts and loss of capacity in environmental institutions took a serious toll during the 1980s, [...] the determined efforts of a popular president (namely Ronald Reagan) could not halt the advance of environmental policy. Public support for environmental improvement, the driving force for policy development in the 1970s, increased markedly during Reagan's presidency and represented the public's stunning rejection of the president's agenda. (2010, p. 14).

Ironically, Reagan's extreme 'anthropocentrism,' which gradually mounted up to anti-environmental 'corporatism,' did actually strengthen environmentalism in the USA. In many respects, Reagan's administration's lax enforcement of pollution regulations and pro-business resource policies seemed to have strengthened even further the environmentalist *raison d'être*, boosting environmentalism throughout the nation. "These (environmental) groups," argue Michael E. Kraft and Norman J. Vig, "appealed successfully to a public that was increasingly disturbed by the health and environmental risks of industrial society and by threats to ecological

stability” (2010, p. 14). As a result, membership in national environmental groups soared and new grassroots organizations appeared, creating further political incentives for environmental activism at all levels of government (Kraft & Vig, 2010, p. 14). Thus, despite the turbulent years of Reaganomics, the American environmental movement successfully outlived President Reagan’s presidency. Ultimately, if President Theodore Roosevelt is the epitome of ‘ecocentrism,’ President Ronald Reagan would certainly be the embodiment of ‘anthropocentrism’ in the history of the American presidency. Between these two extremes of the ‘anthropocentric-ecocentric’ continuum, however, a few other presidencies are certainly worth studying.

Barack Obama’s Presidency: the Age of Ambivalence

On November 4th, 2008 Barack Obama was elected mainly on ‘a mandate of change.’ As a presidential candidate, he was widely thought of as the hope for a significant transformation from the previous eight years of the second George W. Bush presidency (Bomberg & Super, 2009). Soon, President Obama’s inauguration filled environmentalists with the “hope of new beginnings” as “the environmental community [became] especially excited about a new path” (Chameides, 2009, para. 1). Observers (e.g., Smith, 2013) note that this change was particularly promising to ‘green groups’ and NGOs defending environmental sustainability. The day following the election, for instance, Sierra Club issued a statement proclaiming that the environmental future of the country is in “very capable hands” while the president of Environmental Defense asserted that “this election offers us the greatest opportunity we have ever had to change course on global warming” (as cited in Bricker, 2010, p. 3).

Before coming to power, Barack Obama started sending positive messages to environmentalists when he stated in his book that his environmental policy would “signal to the world the U.S. commitment to climate change leadership by implementing an aggressive domestic cap-and-trade program” (2008, p. 74). This message was duly consolidated on other occasions by Mr. Obama when he used the presidency as a bully pulpit to reiterate his commitment to the environmental agenda from his address on clean energy development at Southern Illinois – Carbondale’s first Agricultural Industry Day in April 2005, to his Oval Office address on the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill (BP oil spill) in June 2010. Obama’s electoral pledges led environmentalists to great expectations about the upcoming changes and the future of sustainability in America (Smith, 2013; Bomberg & Super, 2009; Chameides, 2009).

As a president, however, Obama encountered different challenges and obstacles brought about by the various political and economic exigencies. In the face of a deep ideological polarization on how the government should respond to environmental problems,

Obama's environmental policy was hard to define and his ambivalence towards whether to adopt an 'ecocentric' or an 'anthropocentric' environmental agenda started to surface. Criticism from the media that "there [was] no visible sign of a coherent strategy" was directed at Obama's environmental policies even before he completed his first term (The New York Times, 2013, para. 4). As early as 2010, critics also pointedly argued that "not only is there a political divide about the role of government in protecting the environment, there is also a clear lack of consensus as to whether there is an environmental problem at all – especially in the case of global warming" (Bricker, 2010, p. 8). Perhaps one of the fiercest environmental debates in Obama's first term was the one about global warming. Despite compelling scientific evidence asserting that global warming is a real, human-induced threat (Inslee & Hendricks, 2010), most Republican leaders still questioned these scientific findings and dismissed their urgency. Faced with these challenges and his advisors' recommendations, President Obama resorted to appealing to economic and security concerns to defend his environmental policies.

One of the most salient signs of Obama's ambivalence towards the environmental issue and sustainability is his main focus on appealing primarily to 'economic competitiveness' and 'job creation' rather than to safeguarding the environment per se in his rhetorical strategy, in an attempt to win over the large segment of the American public who were concerned about the rising rates of unemployment and the consequences of the economic recession. While he did address the benefits of sustainability, such as creating green jobs, economic prosperity, and boosting green energy, concerns for national security through the appeals to the war on terrorism, weaning the United States off oil dependence, and promoting effective military readiness were paramount in Obama's speeches. In an address to the Department of Energy on February 5th 2009, for instance, Obama's focus on economic prosperity and competitiveness was unmistakable while his concerns for sustainability were almost non-existent (Obama, 2009). In the face of rising unemployment in the United States, on another occasion, President Obama capitalized mainly on job creation as a benefit to gain from clean energy policy, and even when the BP Spill offered a chance to tie his environmental agenda to a visible environmental cause, "Obama instead chose to frame the issue in the same manner as the fifteen months of his presidency," stressing economic competitiveness as a major cause in his suggested policies (Bricker, 2010, p. 69).

Obama's ambivalence towards a genuine commitment to sustainability can also be traced through recurrent words and expressions in his speeches. Statistics show, for example, that in the eighteen months of his first mandate, he gave forty speeches with over 63,000 words without once using the phrase 'global warming' in

public address, despite it being a matter of urgency (Bricker, 2010, p. 69). This ambivalence was further displayed when President Obama (2010) avoided the discussion of the almost worldwide scientific consensus on the human-induced causes of global warming in his 2010 State of the Union address. Similarly, Obama did not discuss harms to the environment, biodiversity, or species posed by the current model of economic growth. Further unveiling Obama's 'anthropocentrism' was his huge focus on economic and national security benefits as independent benefits, instead of as associated with environmental policies, when using the presidential bully pulpit.

At the policy level, Obama's ambivalence towards sustainability and environmentalism is evidenced by his hesitation to adopt new major environmental regulations in his first term despite the promises he made to the American public before and during his presidential campaign. "After pushing through some of the most sweeping and contentious environmental measures in years," contends the Washington Post journalist Juliet Eliperin, "the Obama administration has slowed action on several policies as it calculates what it should undertake before the end of the term" (2012, para. 1). Reneging on most of the President's promises, Obama's administration put on hold some important rules aimed at curbing emissions from cars and light trucks by not giving the green light to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to review them. Critics also point out that Obama's administration was hesitant mainly because these environmental regulations "could impose new costs on consumers and certain sectors of the economy, which has sparked opposition and complicated the administration's political calculus" (Eliperin, 2012, para. 3). Head of government relations unit at the law firm Hunton & Williams, Joe Stanko, put it succinctly: "Behind the scenes, [the Environmental Protection Agency] is pressing to get rules out before the administration pulls up the drawbridge and goes into campaign mode" (as cited in Eliperin, 2012, para. 4).

Implementing strong environmental policies and maximizing his chances of winning a second term in the forthcoming elections seem to have constituted two irreconcilable variables in Obama's political calculations in the closing years of his first term. As the 2012 presidential election drew nearer, Obama's 'anthropocentrism' grew all the more evident as his administration systematically delayed or blocked enacting a series of rules on the environment, worker safety, and health care for fear of raising contention before going to the polls. In fact, Obama's administration was even accused of instructing some environmental agencies to refrain from submitting any proposals to the White House for up to a year so that they would not be issued before elections, which meant that these rules were either postponed or never issued (Eliperin, 2013). Some of these stalled regulations included important provisions of the Affordable Care Act, pollution controls for industrial boilers, and limits on

dangerous silica exposure in the workplace. Although Obama's administration insisted that the delays of these rules until after the election were 'coincidental' and were not motivated by any political cause, a few administration officials disclosed to the press "that the motives behind many of the delays were clearly political, as Obama's top aides focused on avoiding controversy before his reelection" (as cited in Eilperin, 2013, para. 4). Later, a report from the Administrative Conference of the United States (ACUS), an independent agency that advises the federal government on regulatory issues, further substantiated the claims that the Obama administration had deliberately postponed or obstructed those regulations (Copeland, 2013).

One more example reflecting Obama's administration's ambivalence towards sustainability is the way his administration dealt with attempts to curb emissions from cars and light trucks within a federal programme, widely known as "Tier 3." Aiming at slashing the amount of sulfur in U.S. gasoline by two thirds and imposing nationwide pollution limits on new vehicles, this initiative was zealously defended by the EPA. However, "Tier 3" was obstructed by Obama's administration and the whole initiative was put on hold. As a matter of fact, the battle to enact these rules began well before the Obama administration came to power when a federal court invalidated regulations proposed under President George W. Bush. Mounting criticism came from different activists such as Earth Justice Attorney Paul Cort, who voiced his frustration about the obstruction of these rules, which could prevent at least 10,500 premature deaths each year (Eilperin, 2012). Attorneys general from 11 states, led by New York, also sued the EPA in an effort to compel it to update the standard, proclaiming that "[they] are trying to get EPA off the dime here to do something," in Paul Cort's words (as cited in Eilperin, 2012, para. 15).

As the end of Obama's presidency draws near, the debate about his environmental record has intensified. Some observers such as Richard Revesz, Dean Emeritus at New York University School of Law, point out, for instance, that Obama's record on environmental issues has been marked with courageous steps towards sustainability such as "the Clean Power Plan, CAFE standards, methane regulation, and other actions, [which] has created the first-ever framework for the United States to achieve long-term emissions reductions" (As cited in Peak, 2015, para. 12). Likewise, others (e.g., Chait, 2013; Bomberg & Super, 2009; Peak, 2015) regard Obama's record on the environment and sustainability as a success and point to the lack of Congressional support as a major obstacle for further achievements. However, a lot of evidence suggests otherwise, as President Obama's ambivalence towards sustainability has become more evident. This ambivalence could, in my view, explain the growing dissatisfaction with Obama's environmental policies among a large segment of the American society so far. Commenting on this ambivalence, former

vice-president Al Gore asserted that “if he [i.e., Obama]’s serious about it [i.e., protecting the environment], he needs to get a team in place and he needs to present a plan, he needs to use the bully pulpit, he needs to be a vigorous advocate” (as cited in Guillén & Goode, 2013). Obama’s ambivalence towards the environment and sustainability has also been criticized by many environmental NGO leaders, like the director of Greenpeace, Annie Leonard, who put it as follows:

While President Obama has taken significant steps to address climate change — establishing the first-ever carbon emissions limits for power plants and new fuel economy standards for cars — his administration continues to lease massive amounts of publicly-owned fossil fuels...It’s clear that President Obama is serious about cementing his climate legacy, but until he takes steps to ensure the vast majority of fossil fuels remain in the ground, his legacy is as vulnerable as an Arctic ice sheet. (As cited in Peak, 2015, para. 4).

All in all, notwithstanding his zealous environmental rhetoric, President Obama’s recurrent focus on economic growth, national security, and job creation reveals his ambivalent oscillation over the ‘anthropocentrism-ecocentrism’ spectrum. In fact, a closer look at his policies reveals that despite his rhetorical capitalization on a ‘mandate of change,’ his overall policies were quite conservative when it came to defending the environment and sustainability. The unmistakable primacy his administration has given to economic competitiveness, job creation, and national security justifications for environmental policy shows clearly the conservatism of Obama’s policies. By dodging any firm commitment to sustainability and shrouding most of his environmental policies with economic and national security, Obama can hardly be termed an environmental president in the way Theodore Roosevelt was. He can at best be regarded as an ambivalent president. With Congress once again dominated by not-very-environmentally-friendly Republicans and the surprising victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential election, Obama’s presidency will be remembered as a rather wasted opportunity to boost sustainability in the US and abroad – an opportunity that was very much marred by presidential ambivalence and indecision.

Conclusion

By tracing the bearing of the ‘anthropocentrism-ecocentrism’ dualism on the American presidency over more than one century, a

whole spectrum – where on the one side Roosevelt stands for the ‘good,’ and on the opposite side, Reagan stands for the ‘bad,’ while Obama stands in between as the ‘ambivalent’ – is adequately substantiated. Far from being a ‘moral’ judgement, this spectrum unveils different techniques, policies, and tactics that American president have used to defend and implement either their ‘anthropocentric’ or ‘ecocentric’ approach to the environment. Ultimately, such mapping of the anthropocentric-ecocentric dualism in the history of American presidency provides an insight into how this divide has been transferred from the philosophical realm to the political one.

Theodore Roosevelt’s ‘ecocentrism’ is anchored in his pioneering of the American environmental movement with its two broad branches of ‘conservationism’ and ‘preservationism’. Not only did he introduce these concepts to American politics, but he also defied Congress and his own party to implement policies and strategies serving environmental conservation. As a president, Roosevelt’s decisions and policies seem to have been guided by his ‘ecocentrist’ vision despite the various political challenges he faced. In addition to an effective use of the presidency as a bully pulpit, Roosevelt harnessed almost all presidential authority- such as appointment power as well executive prerogatives- to implement his agenda. When compared to both his predecessors and successors, it is evident that Roosevelt chose ‘ecocentrism’ not only as a philosophical and political concept, but as a way of life.

While President Theodore Roosevelt harnessed the presidency to disseminate ‘ecocentrism’ and sow the early seeds of sustainability as we know it today, President Ronald Reagan made use of the American presidency to serve opposite causes, namely deregulation, open market, and the obstruction of environmentalism in America. Accordingly, Reagan was so committed to a combination of ‘neo-liberal capitalism’ and ‘anthropocentrism’ that he used his executive power to implement this agenda. Like Roosevelt, President Reagan made good use of his appointment power, but only to obstruct and reverse major federal environmental policies in America, thus going beyond the conventional principles of ‘anthropocentrism’ to represent the early stages of ‘corporatism.’ At this extreme of the ‘anthropocentric-ecocentric’ spectrum, Reagan was also a source of inspiration for like-minded presidents such as Presidents George Bush and George W. Bush.

Amid the two opposite ends of the ‘anthropocentrism-ecocentrism’ spectrum stands President Obama, whose major environmental policies unveil a great deal of ambivalence towards a genuine commitment to sustainability despite proclaiming himself an environmentalist president. With a highly contentious environmental record, Obama’s rhetoric and policies as a president seem to belie most of the zealous promises he made during his presidential campaign. Now that Donald Trump has won the 2016 presidential

election and the Republicans have the majority in the Congress, Obama's ambivalence acquires even worse connotation, for his presidency was certainly a valuable opportunity to boost sustainability that was not adequately seized. While Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan stand uniquely at the opposite ends of the 'anthropocentrism-ecocentrism' spectrum, Barack Obama is certainly not the only 'ambivalent' president in the history of American presidency, but his ambivalence happens to be more conspicuous than others.

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