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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 the 'anthropocentric-ecocentric' dualism has come to bear on the history of the American presidency since the turn of the century, with special focus on three American Presidents, namely Theodore Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan, and Barak Obama. The major argument in this paper is that this duality constitutes not only a philosophical divergence of views, but also a determinant factor that has guided the beliefs, decisions, and policies of American presidents over more than a century. On account of their contradictory environmental records, both Theodore Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan are believed to stand for the two extremes of an 'anthropocentrism-ecocentrism' spectrum while Barak Obama ambivalently oscillates in the middle. Coming to power with different, sometimes conflicting, agendas, Presidents Roosevelt, Reagan, and Obama used the presidency as a bully pulpit to implement their ideological vision of nature, the environment, and economic growth in line with either 'ecocentrism' or 'anthropocentrism.' Spotlighting both their rhetoric and policies, this article delineates the three presidents' differentiation along the 'anthropocentric-ecocentric' continuum and discusses the divergence of their respective political and philosophical beliefs as well as their concomitant 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 one.

Key words: presidency, anthropocentrism, ecocentrism, Roosevelt, Reagan, Obama, environment, sustainability.

1- Introduction:

It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the different attempts in recent years to establish new approaches to development that reverse environmental degradation while catering for 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 also witnessed a steadily growing presence of the environmental issue on the global agenda following 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 mainly on international cooperation (Connelly & Smith, 1999; Rollin, 1988; Petesh, 1992), some observers (e.g., Sakamoto, 1994) still believe these geo-political changes have also meant some hard choices for the nation-state, struggling to keep its sovereignty intact.

With the maturing and growth of the American environmental movement in its second phase 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 the concept of sustainable development, however, I believe it is essential to point out that the different disciplines and conflicting perspectives underlying the diverse interpretations of this concept have resulted in a large number of definitions. In economics, which is one important part of the environment-development studies, for instance, human beings are seen as rational self-interested individuals working to ensure their material well-being whereas nature is considered as 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 as one species, among many others, that make integral parts of nature. In recent literature, this dualism has been referred to as the 'anthropocentrism-ecocentrism' divide (Elliott, 2000; Carter, 2007). As such, I believe this dualism has significantly marked not only American political history, but also the perception of the environmental issue and sustainability in the American presidency, in particular. However, before discussing the evolution and effects of this divide in the history of American presidency, I believe a brief survey of the growth of the concept of sustainability in American history is essential to thoroughly fathom the intricacies of the 'anthropocentrism-ecocentrism' divide.

2- The Inception and Evolution of the Sustainability Discourse:

Before discussing the different definitions given to sustainable development, I would like first to reflectively examine the particular social, political and environmental circumstances in which the concept of sustainable development was forged, along with the array of issues 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

¹ On its 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).

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 speaking about environmental issues (Dresner, 2002).

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 promoting ecological sustainability. Critics (e.g., Baker, 2006), however, point out that the focus of this report was largely limited to pure 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 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).

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, 110 government agencies, and 800 non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Combining the two concepts of ‘development’ and ‘environment’ that had been studied and examined separately for decades, the *Brundtland Report* signaled the beginning of the 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 has become the most widely used definition of sustainable development and gained authoritative status as it was adopted by many UN organizations, IGOs, NGOs, and international financial organizations such as the World Bank. Scholar Nico Schrijver (2008) further asserts that the 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 in *Our Common Future* echoes much of what was advocated by the World Council of Churches especially regarding a new concern for a combination of the development and environmental concerns.

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). As such, 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 one of the most controversial concepts in the closing decades of the 20th century. Scholar Jennifer A. Elliot (2000) argues that there are more

³ In the development studies 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).

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.

By the late 1990s, the term sustainable development 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 concept, sustainable development exposes and tackles weaknesses of the current political, economic and social systems, especially in the 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, ethnic minorities, and races in the same society and between different generations. The discourse on sustainable development has also generated a paradigm shift from what is usually considered as "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 at a global 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

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).

(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 the recent years as I will demonstrate in the following section. While asserting that “the idea of sustainable development is fraught with contradictions,” scholar 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). The controversy over the concept of sustainable development will be dealt with in depth in the following section.

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 when the concept was widely accepted and popularized among politicians and was taken up as a slogan by many governments and NGOs during the last few decades. Many criticisms have been voiced in the literature about the hidden agenda behind the project of sustainable development. Scholar 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, scholar Susan Baker pointedly argue 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). As a matter of fact, many scholars (e.g., Carter, 2007; Baker, 2006; Connelly & Smith, 1999) voice also their suspicion that while sustainable development appears to be

imposing constraints on business and industrial sector, it, in fact, covers for and even supports industrial growth.

As a theoretical concept, sustainable development subsumes 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 generations living now and those 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. Eventually, 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.

3- A Conceptualization of the 'Anthropocentric-ecocentric' Dualism:

Over more than a century, American presidential rhetoric and policies have drawn upon various strategies to deal with the rising environmentalism across America and 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 priorities agendas. Over more than a century of American environmentalism, the philosophical and intellectual perception of Man and Nature has been to the heart of public policy, and presidential decisions, in particular. In many respects, the concept of sustainability itself evolved as an outcome of a lingering philosophical and ethical tension between conflicting visions of Man-Nature relationship. In fact, this tension is often echoed in American art, literature, social theories as well as in political and economic choices of the nation. For the most part, this tension persists between what is referred to as 'immanence' and 'transcendence' – the 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).

As I see it, the 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

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 exists a lot of divergences of approaches among the 'ecologists' family

need for a complete re-conceptualization of the human-nature relationship so as to place Man as an integral part of Nature rather than its master; and secondly, the need to set the 'limits to growth' principle 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 natural world, which has resulted in abusing Nature to satisfy human craving for more material wealth. 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, therefore, highly celebrated in the

along a spectrum comprising two extremes, i.e., 'deep' and 'shallow' ecologists, but with various variations in the middle.

writings of these ecologists. Scholar 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, Adlo Leopold, among others, 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 are now seen as playing a very crucial role in raising ecological consciousness and fostering greener political and economic policies. According to some scholars (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). Scholar 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,' who have a strong belief in modern science's ability to solve social and environmental problems are fully committed to on-going economic growth and the exploitation of natural resources. By and large, I believe 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 ultimately to 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) contend 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, in the view of 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 global threats 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, scholars 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 new discourse of sustainability 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. This new discourse, therefore, rejects the idea of equating human progress with the

domination of Nature, thus decriing its instrumental use for the sake of creating more wealth and material well-being for humans. According to the tenets of sustainability, consumption is no longer the most important aspect of human welfare, and therefore unfettered economic growth is no longer the backbone of development as such (Carter, 2007). Ultimately, there is a new sustainable model of development being advocated as an alternative to the conventional one: "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, therefore, is unorthodox by nature.

To my way of thinking, the divergence of individualistic or collective approaches to the American nation's welfare and human well-being has also been part of the 'anthropocentric-ecocentric' duality that has impacted on the American presidency. 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 deplores 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

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

sustainable development adopts a bottom-up process of building a partnership between different sectors such as industry, education, services, and governmental environmental management. Revolutionary as such, “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 the modern American history, the ‘anthropocentric-ecocentric’ dualism has so far impacted on presidents’ approaches toward the economy, nature, and society. As an essential part of the American political system, the presidency, therefore, has been used in different ways to serve different ends. Thus, while ‘ecocentric’ presidents strived 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 regulations, and ultimately obstructed efforts to boost sustainability in America. Within the American presidency, the ‘anthropocentrism-ecocentrism’ divide constitutes, therefore, not only a philosophical divergence of views, but also a determinant factor that has guided the beliefs, options, and policies of American presidents over more than a century. Because the scope of this paper does not allow for the examination of all American presidents’ environmental records, only three presidents who stand for unique landmarks in the ‘anthropocentrism-ecocentrism’ continuum have been significantly chosen as case-studies.

(World Conservation Union)” (Earth Charter Commission). For more information, visit www.EarthCharter.org

4- Theodore Roosevelt's Presidency: Sowing the Early Seeds of Sustainability

Right from the beginning, Theodore Roosevelt, as a president, 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). In the literature, most historians believe that President Theodore Roosevelt was exceptional in boosting conservationism by developing and strengthening the executive authority as independent of outside pressure (Daynes & Sussman, 2001; Miller, 1992). Above all, Roosevelt's love for Nature and the American wilderness was, to all intents and purposes, unmistakable, which ultimately led him to actively pursue an agenda of conservationism and set a precedent for presidency's 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). As such, President Theodore Roosevelt represented a very good example of an 'ecocentric' president who can be termed the 'father' of modern sustainability.

To start with, it is not my intention here to rehash Theodore Roosevelt's efforts, decisions, and accomplishments that boosted American environmentalism as they have already been documented, analyzed, and discussed thoroughly in the literature. Instead, it is my aim to rather focus on the challenging commitments that Theodore Roosevelt had undertaken in a way that dramatically shaped the American presidency by setting an example of an 'ecocentrist' president who has been a hard act to follow but still constituted a great source of inspiration in the overall American history. 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 Oelschaeger

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

(1991), both 'preservationism' and 'conservationism' that marked Theodore's era remain essentially 'anthropocentric' for not protecting Nature from human interference and abuse. However, I still believe that 'preservationism' and 'conservationism' significantly overlap with 'ecocentrism' both theoretically and factually, which makes of activists on both parts (such as Theodore Roosevelt) rather 'ecocentrists' in nature. The mere fact that these activists held fast to their 'ecocentric' beliefs in front of the an overwhelming 'anthropocentric' drive brought to early 20th century America by intensifying waves of urbanization, industrialization, and exponential economic growth reveals much about their staunch 'ecocentrism.'

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 environmental agenda despite some bureaucratic impediments and political challenges at the turn of the century. Right from the onset, he relied on strong executive powers to expand 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 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

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).

the same principles of conservationism and sustainability with the president, Pinchot consolidated Roosevelt's conviction that conservation was a politically pertinent issue. Unsurprisingly, Pinchot's appointment started to yield a strong commitment to policies defending the conservation of the environment as both Roosevelt and Pinchot exerted all their influence to pass a legislative act 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 the words of scholar Hilary Izatt, "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" (2004, p. 86). As I see it, the 1908 Conference of Governors had a special importance in the history of American 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. Significantly, the invited guests to 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.

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. Even after he realized that Congressional

cooperation could not be obtained, Roosevelt once more used his executive powers to independently convene the North American Conservation Conference in 1909 without congressional support, in an act revealing much of his staunch 'ecocentric' commitment to serve the environment despite political setbacks.

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 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 that have had a very optimal impact on the development of the American nation. As a consequence, this act allowed for 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 disseminate conservation and sowing the early seeds of sustainability, President Roosevelt succeeded also in doubling the number of national parks and preserving the ones already in existence.

To my way of thinking, 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 of Roosevelt that should not go unnoticed, in my view, was Roosevelt's insistence to keep environmental conservation out of the private sector, noticeably using an executive veto to block any initiative to do so. In a similar vein, Roosevelt also declared on several other occasions 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 be 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 (Izatt, 2004).

As a politician, Roosevelt took the presidency upon President McKinley's assassination, which basically 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 the party's support. Roosevelt's dissent from his party on a few occasions to uphold his 'ecocentric' beliefs has, in my view, 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 but without genuinely showing the kind of the 'ecocentric' commitment that Roosevelt had shown.

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). Observers also note that 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 near the beginning of the twentieth century 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 perhaps one of the American presidents who stood at the other end of this spectrum.

5- Ronald Reagan's Presidency: The Turbulent Years of Environmentalism

By the summer of 1980, most Americans were deeply concerned about the sluggish economy and its subsequent financial and social dislocation. With intensifying stagflation, unemployment rates reaching 8 percent, a growing energy crisis, and persistent budget deficits, many Americans believed that the growing economic

conservative movement could bring glimpses of 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, as well as restoring the nation's economic strength and global prestige (Rossinow, 2015; Kaye, 1987; McGarity, 1986). Further depicting Reagan's agenda, scholars Michael E. Kraft and Norman J. Vig write:

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 represented also one of fiercest opponents of the environmental movement. More to the point, 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,

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>).

candidate Roland Reagan used the term “albatross” to describe the burden of environmental regulations on the American industry. Setting “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 the new environmental initiatives as well as the 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, namely James Watt and Anne Gorsuch, as respectively the head to the Department of Interior and the director of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), who fought to curtail environmental regulations and cut down on governmental funding along the same lines of Reagan’s ‘anthropocentrism.’ Ironically, 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 this evident hostility to environmentalism that marked Reagan’s policies, many critics disapproved of an infamous ‘list of [environmental] rollbacks’ that this administration tried implement at every governmental 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 President Carter’s appointees into resignation, thus reducing the size

of the Agency's staff only to give key administrative roles in the EPA to lawyers and lobbyists from big corporations such as General Motors, Exxon, and the American Paper Institute. Given this intensifying antagonism towards American environmentalism, "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" (Rosenbaum, 1998, pp. 11-12).

Despite its hostility to the environment, President Reagan's campaign calling for 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 under preceding administrations and focused essentially 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 the Reagan administration's relentless efforts to break the blue-green alliance⁹ and systematically refusing to enforce occupational safety and health laws for American workers. Ironically, as the election of Ronald

⁹ The term 'blue-green' alliance 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).

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 jobs outsourcing in developing countries where environmental regulations were usually lax or non-existent (Dewey, 1998, p. 59.)

Just like President Theodore Roosevelt, President Ronald Reagan sought to expand the executive power of the presidency, but exactly for opposite reasons. Hence, 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 aimed at strengthening the executive control of the government’s functional agencies to implement its policies. The Reagan administration used 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

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/>).

backed up by the Task Force on Regulatory Relief,¹¹ chaired by Vice President George Bush, which during its first two years of operation, designated over 100 existing regulations as being in need of change (Lovell, 1983, p. 276). 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 dramatically (Rossinow, 2015). Thus, for the most part, the Reagan administration did not aim at effecting 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 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, EPA aroused the Reagan administration’s concern about these regulations’ alleged negative impact on the economy and private business.

Contrary to Roosevelt’s efforts to strengthen the federal powers to serve conservationism, the Reagan administration’s environmental policy was driven by one

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).

major objective, that is to launch a profound shift of power from Washington to the states. The declared goal that this administration was aiming at was that this shift of power would certainly lead to a more efficient system of environmental protection at much less 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. As I see it, this stalemate came as a result of the alteration in the scope and content of the new environmental regulations and the weakening of the enforcement of the existing ones. 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 previously depended on the states' review (Lovell, 1983, p. 277).

Financially, the Reagan administration cut the budget for monitoring air programs by 40 per cent while the budget for grants and technical assistance devoted to states to assist with monitoring and enforcement of environmental regulations was cut by 30 per cent (Lovell, 1983, p. 278). At the budgetary level, statistics also reveal that in the fiscal year 1983 budget, states received about 20 per cent less money for environmental protection programmes from the federal government than in fiscal year 1982 (Jubak, 1982). This wave of deregulation touched also the water quality regulations in the USA, for 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 while 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 reducing and weakening of the enforcement units in EPA, the cases filed in federal court against supposed polluters declined by 75 per cent while certain key cases were dropped altogether (National Wildlife Federation, 1982).

Deploring the Reagan administration's 'raid' on environmentalism, major American environmental organizations such as Friends of the Earth, Natural Resources Defense Council, the Wilderness Society, Sierra Club, National Audubon Society, Environmental Defense Fund, among others, condemned the EPA policies that exempted most new polluting industrial installations from state reviews (Friends of the Earth, et al., 1982). They saw in the EPA's weakening of heavy truck emission standards, automobile emission standards for hydrocarbons, and particulate emission standards for diesel automobiles an alarming sign of this administration's anti-environmental plans (Lovell, 1983). Looking at the big picture, I believe that taming the EPA to work in line with Reagan's pro-corporate and anti-environmental policies constitutes also another clear sign that Reagan's presidency went even beyond the conventional limits of 'anthropocentrism' to embrace a whole new era of 'corporatism.'

Ironically, Reagan's extreme 'anthropocentrism,' which gradually metamorphosed over his presidency into anti-environmental 'corporatism,' did actually strengthen environmentalism in the USA. In many respects, the Reagan administration's lax enforcement of pollution regulations and pro-business resource policies seemed to have inadvertently boosted the environmentalist *raison d'être* and popularized mainstream environmentalism even further among the younger generations of the Americans 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 stands for the epitome of ‘ecocentrism’ in the history of American presidency, President Ronald Reagan would certainly be the epitome of ‘anthropocentrism’. Between these two extremes of the ‘anthropocentric-ecocentric’ continuum, however, a few other presidencies are certainly worth studying.

6- 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).

Even before coming to power, Barak Obama started sending positive messages to environmentalists when he stated in the book he authored 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). As a matter

of fact, this message was duly consolidated on different other occasions by President 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. As a consequence, Obama’s electoral pledges led environmentalists to have 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 during his mandate. In the face of a deep ideological polarization on the issue of how the government should respond to environmental problems, for instance, 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” started to be directed at Obama’s environmental policies before even he completed his first term at the White House (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 that was flaring during Obama’s first term was the one about global warming, in that, despite compelling scientific evidence from recent scientific studies asserting that global warming is a real human-induced threat to planet earth (Inslee & Hendricks, 2010), most of Republican leaders still question these scientific findings and dismiss their urgency. Faced with these challenges, and based on his advisors’ recommendations, President Obama

resorted to appealing to the public's economic and security concerns to defend his environmental policies.

To begin with, one of the most salient signs of Obama's ambivalence towards the environmental issue and sustainability that he claims to defend, in my view, is his main rhetorical strategy to motivate American environmentalists by appealing primarily to 'economic competitiveness' and 'job creation' rather than to safeguarding the environment *per se*. More to the point, Obama's ambivalent stance on the environment and sustainability has been reflected on different occasions in his use of the presidency as a bully pulpit to communicate his thoughts and policies to the American public. While his focus was on 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 in the diction and recurrent 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 using the phrase 'global warming' in public address even once despite it being a matter of urgency (Bricker, 2010, p. 69). This ambivalence was

further consolidated 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 shunned any focus on the current harms to the environment, biodiversity or species posed by the current model of economic growth. Further unveiling Obama's 'anthropocentrism,' in my opinion, was his huge focus on economic and national security benefits as independent benefits that are not associated with the environmental policies in the US.

At the policy level, Obama's ambivalence towards sustainability and environmentalism can also be sensed in his hesitation and sluggishness to adopt new major environmental regulations in his first term despite all the promises he gave 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 Eilperin, "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, the Obama 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 the Obama 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" (Eilperin, 2012, para. 3). Head of government relations unit at the law firm Hunton & Williams, Joe Stanko, pointedly asserted that: "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 Eilperin, 2012, para. 4).

To my way of thinking, 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, the Obama 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 (Eilperin, 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 the Obama 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 on, a report from the Administrative Conference of the United States (ACUS), which is an independent agency that advises the federal government on regulatory issues, further substantiated the claims that the Obama administration deliberately postponed or obstructed those regulations (Copeland, 2013). Based on anonymous interviews with more than a dozen senior agency officials who worked for the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA), which oversees the implementation of federal rules, the report states:

Several of the senior agency employees indicated that OIRA reviews took longer in 2011 and 2012 because of concerns about the agencies issuing costly or controversial rules prior to the November 2012 election. The employees said their agencies were instructed that such rules were not to be issued unless deemed absolutely necessary (e.g., a judicial deadline) or

if it could be shown they were not controversial (e.g., clear net benefits). They said those instructions were not in writing, but shortly after their agency's political leaders went to meetings with certain EOP officials, agency staff were told that all sensitive rules would have to be pre-approved by OIRA before being sent to OIRA for review. (Copeland, 2013, p. 42)

One more example reflecting the Obama 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 EAP. However, 'Tier 3' was again obstructed by the Obama administration and the whole initiative was put on hold. Many American activists and environmentalists were even more dismayed at the obstruction of rules that would regulate fine particulate matter. 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 as early as 2009. This proposal was once again delayed by the Obama administration, thus sparking a backlash among environmentalists 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). As a result, attorneys general from 11 states, led by New York, 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 Obama's presidency draws near its end, 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 distinguishable 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). In a similar vein, a few other observers (e.g., Chait, 2013; Bomberg & Super, 2009; Peak, 2015) look at Obama’s record on the environment and sustainability as a success and point to the lack of Congress’s support as a major obstacle to further achievements. However, a lot of evidence points to the other direction, too, as President Obama’s ambivalence towards sustainability has become all the 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 NGOs’ leaders, like the director of Green Peace, 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 purely economic growth concerns, national security, and

more job creation reveals his ambivalent oscillation over the 'anthropocentrism-ecocentrism.' 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 comes 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 that Obama's policies has not been really far from the conservative approach. By dodging any firm commitment to sustainability and shrouding most of his environmental policies with economic and national security frames, Obama can hardly be termed an environmental president in the way Theodore Roosevelt was, but can at best be termed the ambivalent president.

7- Conclusions

By tracing the bearing of the 'anthropocentrism-ecocentrism' dualism on the American presidency over more than a 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 these American presidents have used to defend and implement either their 'anthropocentric' or 'ecocentric' approach to the environment and society. Accordingly, 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 shown to have been so anchored in his pioneering of the American environmental movement with special focus on 'conservationism' that he not only introduced into American politics, but also defied the Congress and his own party to implement policies and strategies that ensured its

continuity . As a president, Theodore's decisions and policies seem to have always been guided by his 'ecocentrist' vision despite the various political challenges he faced both as a politician and a president. In addition to his effective use of the presidency as a bully pulpit, Roosevelt harnessed almost all presidential authority such as the appointment power as well as other executive prerogatives to implement his conservationist 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 also 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 just to serve opposite causes, namely deregulation, open market economics, and the obstruction of environmentalism in America. Accordingly, Reagan was so committed to a combination of 'neo-liberal capitalism' and 'anthropocentrism' that he used all the executive powers to implement his liberal, pro-corporate 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 even beyond the conventional principles of 'anthropocentrism' to usher in the early stages of 'corporatism.' Being at the edge of the 'anthropocentric-ecocentric' spectrum, Reagan has also been a source of inspiration for like-minded presidents such as George Bush and his son 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 before and during his presidential campaign. However, while Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan stand uniquely at the opposite ends

of the 'anthropocentrism-ecocentrism' spectrum, Barak Obama is certainly not the only 'ambivalent' president in the history of American presidency, but his ambivalence just happens to be more conspicuous than others'.

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